

"George Eliot as a Realist"

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Among the great English novelists of the nineteenth century, who were moving forces in the great world of that of that time, George Eliot occupies a foremost place as representative of the realistic type of literature. And not only of that time was she a moving force: her influence today is as strong as it was then, and will continue so to be, because of the permanency and universality of her works; permanent, in that they express feelings which are common to people of all times, and universal, because no country is free from such characters as she deals with. Rarely do we find an intellect so perfectly confined in its sphere, as hers, in its exponent of human life. - of human life as found among the weak, the uneducated, and the unpolished. An English writer ranks her next to Shakespeare in her power to picture the tragedy underlying such life by artfully analyzing character and unravelling the web of complex human motives. After reading one of her best works illustrative of this power, we feel that we have witnessed the life of a man of the world, and not of an imaginary being who exists only in a book. With her, we visit the homes of these common-place people, busy in the workshop, on the farm; we go with the solitary outcast from place to place, see the evils, the French Factions.

and the distress prevalent among the middle classes, and the outward influences active upon their lives, just as today influences are present upon similar lives, making them better or worse.

The realistic element of her genius finds its source both in birth and association. Born in the rural district of Warwickshire, England, amid the simpler and less educated classes, her sympathies were naturally with them, and the thirty years or more following, being there spent, but bound her to them closer. She cared little for higher society; - in fact, she rather avoided it. She found a pleasure in associating with those about her, because by her power of penetration and her deep human sympathy, she was able to see beneath the mere external, and view within a hidden meaning, unrevealed to many - even about in many of a higher class. Her power to show this meaning to the public, however, was not exercised until many years later, when her provincial home had been exchanged for that of London. Then her genius brought forth those works which are so truly pictures of real life, impressed upon her in her early days. She hoped, by these representations, to cause the world to turn a less cold, less stern eye upon their actions and instead of crushing

them still lower, to lift them to a higher plane.

The qualities for which Miss Eliot is classed as a realist, are apparent, on a study of such of her works as *Adam Bede*, *Silas Marner*, *Mell on the Tross*. The first is the most typical work of this kind. Thruout the story, we realize the innumerable points of coincidence with lives of many a person today. In the opening chapter we are made to feel the power of her descriptive ability, as she paints the word picture of that scene in the English workshop:

"The afternoon sun was warm on the five workmen there, busy upon doors, and window frames, and wainscoting. A scent of pine-wood from a butt-file of planks outside the open door mingled itself with the scent of the elder bushes which were spreading their summer snow close to the open window. Opposite, the slanting sunbeams shone thru the transparent shavings that flew before the steady plane, and lit up the fine grain of the oak paneling which stood propped against the wall. On a heap of those soft shavings, a rough, gray, shepherd dog had made himself a pleasant bed, and was lying with his nose between his fore-paws occasionally wrinkling his brows to cast a glance at the tallest of the five workmen."

We can see that tall workman - the stalwart Saxon, Adam Bede - and hear him singing in a strong baritone as he works, his voice subsiding into a low whistle when his work requires concentrated attention, then breaking out again into his full voice, and with renewed vigor.

Again, in "Silas Marner" is set forth the lonely life of a poor weaver in his cottage on the moorlands - in Raveloe, that "village where many of the old echoes lingered, undrowned by new voices" - "echoes of the old demon-worship among the gray-haired peasantry."

Only one who is fully acquainted with the life of the farm, could have pictured such a scene as that in the Poyser farm-yard one Sunday morning:

"You might have known it was Sunday if you had only waked up in the farm-yard. The cocks and hens seemed to know it, and made only crooning, subdued noises; the sunshine seemed to call all things to rest and not to labor; it was as sleep itself on the moss-grown cow-shed; on the group of white ducks nesting together with their bills tucked under their wings; on the old black sow stretched languidly on the straw, while her largest sow-suckle found an excellent shavings bed on

his mother's fat ribs."

In character delineation, George Eliot excels. With her gift of natural insight she has penetrated to the inmost souls of the most common-place and insignificant of lives, and revealed their actions, their joys, sorrows, and sufferings, in the common light of day. What a picture does she portray in the group of characters in *Adam Bede* - the head-strong, noble, worldly young carpenter, vigorously contented in his work, intolerant of "dreamers", full of early love for the non-deserving, pretty little Hetty, - the sympathetic, absent-minded, self-sacrificing, Seth, - the thoughtless, impulsive, shallow little dairymaid, conscious of her beauty, always longing for pleasure and afraid of pain, - the saintly factory-girl, Dinah, - the pleasant, tho weak, self-deceiving and self-defensive Arthur, - the loving and complaining Lillaith, - the plain, bold Mrs. Poyser - These form a picture attesting to their author's power in this sphere of her art. She shows us the struggles of human beings against the evils of life, and their helplessness to resist it oftentimes. Arthur & Dinah Thorne in *Adam Bede* and Godfrey Cass in *Silas Marner* are good illustrations of this. Both having weak, indecisive characters, they

are led astray despite their good resolutions when meditating on past actions and the consequences. Miss Eliot's works are a true representative of the common people in that so many of her characters are of the uneducated class. In the night school described in "Adam Bede" with its cheerful, bachelor instructor, Parson Massey, it is a sight to awaken pity in anyone to see those three grown men studiously struggling with their lessons, endeavoring to make out such sentences as "The grass is green," "The sticks are dry", and to learn what such words as "day" spells. To them the letters seemed "so uncommon alike, there was no telling in one from another" and they were not used to taking into account such small differences as "a letter with its tail turned up, and a letter with its tail turned down." In the monotonous life of the Tullivers and Dodsons, with their selfishness, their worldliness, their ignorance, having no purpose in life but each to enjoy his own, regardless of the distress of a brother or sister, - in them we see a typical example of the same class. Bob Jakin, a poor, wandering, tricky packman, with his fellow-traveller, "Mumps" represents another type of humanity; a type frequently seen in these times. A number of her most unobtrusive characters are taken directly from real

life: in Maggie Tulliver, she represents her own early struggles and yearnings; in Seth and Adam Bede, her two brothers, and in "Garth" of "Middlemarch" and Mr. Burge of "Adam Bede," her father, whose death was as represented in the latter.

George Eliot increases the seeming realities of her pictures of life by keeping the narrative element within its proper bounds. She never loses sight of her characters in the unfolding plot, but the reader is kept aware of their daily activities as much as he is of the plot. The two move together, as it were.

In yet another sense is George Eliot a realist. Her works have a life-like ending. Her most important characters do not come out in the way the idealistic novel would have them. Upon her readers is often left a sense of sadness at the tragic ending of the life of one we have loved, admired, or pitied, so that we feel that we would have had it otherwise had we had the power, but she was consistent in her books, and did not commit the mistake in the eyes of the realist, of making all things have a happy ending. In *Pretty Sorrell* this is well illustrated. She, intent only on her own pleasures, and unconscious of danger, "flutters to her ruin like a moth into the candle." The future

of her life grows darker and darker. True, she escapes from the execution to which she is condemned, but is it not to suffer a greater agony in that living death banished from home and friends? Take again the example in "The Mill on the Floss," where the Maggie whom we learned to love despite her many failings, with Tom, whose manliness we admired, are swept into the swift currents of the River Floss, and the sister and brother thus meet death locked in a last embrace. Their sad death impresses one with a painful feeling of incompleteness and a realization of how hopeless often is that we most long for. In "Middlemarch," this element is also present. As we read the record of those two typical marriages with their sad results, we cannot but feel that many such are realities.

George Eliot's writings are criticized by a number of literary men because of this realistic element in them, but their criticisms seem to have but little effect on the people, no doubt because the latter realize it is the "right current to swim in." By making use of it, has she not given us a much deeper insight into the prose of life, and thus helped us to realize its power and beauty with a greater meaning? She has revealed to us elements in the most ordinary people well worth striving

ing for. It is in such subjects that the depths of the human nature are best seen, for they, because of the indifference shown them, suppress none of their feelings, or thoughts, as do those of higher life. It is not the special qualities of individuals that are of decisive importance, but it is the common qualities lying much deeper, and of which each has a share. These help us to understand such people as live in her books, and that we do understand them is necessary, because, constituting as they do such a large percent of the human race, their relations to people of other classes will be close. George Eliot would have closed the breach entirely by a bond of human feeling and sympathy. The educational force of her works are great. He who is well-acquainted with his surroundings, has a much better preparation for life than one who has studied idealistic novels the most of his life and obtained a perverted view of it, by thinking it is all pleasure and no pain. To be able to discriminate in affairs of practical value, is no small matter.

It is true, that the woman to whom was given this great power, is dead, yet her works remain and make her name immortal. The relation between her and us is but an interruption, - the endless story continues, - and she must still live "to bless and to resume her bond to us."