George Eliot - New Work in Literature.

by

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George Eliot's Birth

Childhood

Parents

Early deeds

Nature

Appearance

Character

Religion

Early occupation

Marriage with Mr. Lewis

Works - Characteristics of

Reference to some of her principal works

Her death envisaged into life

Object of her writings

Expression of noted writers in regard to her works
Far away in England, in one of those rural districts where the quiet roads are bordered with hedgerows, and stately elms cast their shadows; where busy men, well kept farms, the red-brick school-house, and the broad pastures speak of thrift and prosperity; and all suggests sweet repose alike to mind and eye, Marian Evans was born, Nov. 22, 1819. She was destined to become the great English author, known to the world as George Eliot.

In thinking of her childhood days spent on a quiet farm, playing as all children play, away from the excitement of the world with nothing to break the monotony of each day, except the passing of the daily coach, for which she watched most eagerly, we have no thought of the wonderful future that was in store for her.

Born of respectable parents with a comfortable income, she was brought up accordingly. At an early age she was left motherless and was soon compelled to undertake the care of her father's household. She had always been a very serious child, not particularly bright in her studies but very thoughtful, always demanding a reason for everything.

Perhaps we can give you no better idea of her as a child than to quote her own words used
vi. describing Maggie in "The Mill on the Floss", which was no doubt a picture of herself: a creature full of eager passion and longings for all that was glad and beautiful; thirsty for all knowledge; with an ear strained after dreamy music that died away and would not come to her; with a blind unconscious yearning for some thing that would make life and give her soul a sense of home in it."

With such longings we do not wonder that she gained a world-wide reputation and won a place in the hearts of so many people. Her father gave her a good education. She knew how to improve her opportunities, and studied and worked hard. Her efforts resulted in a wider culture than that attained by any other English woman.

Her's was a nature full of love, one that continually craved love from those about her, and was subject to deep impressions. In her writing it is seen how forcibly the scenes of her childhood were impressed on her mind. Their influences remained with her during life.

In all her earlier days, duty and civilization drew her in directly opposite directions, and her soul became worn and chafed by the perpetual struggle.
The chief interest in regard to her life is the records of her mind, for the outward events of her life were few.

She was not what one would call a pretty woman, that is, her features were not beautiful, but there was a beauty in her face born of power and spirituality. Her great soul shone out on her face and softened the harsh outlines, giving it a peculiar sweetness of expression. Think of her as described by me:

"A head, grand and massive, brow straight, nose shapely, jaw square, lips stern and under-control but made beautiful by sweet smile and eye," and you have the picture of George Eliot of whom such few portraits have been produced. She possessed a frail body but her large head with its masses of brown wavy hair attracted the attention immediately, and you wondered how such a small body could carry such a large head.

In studying her character it seems to me we could not find another more earnest, noble, strong, loving, sweetly deep yearning for truth, knowledge, and a desire to be useful in the world with an absolute forgetfulness of self. Her one great desire seemed to be to help man-kind, and her
Shy'ming love for the suffering was almost Christ-like in its tenderness.

It seems that during her younger days she felt that she was little understood by those about her, and that her great energy was repressed. Thus reproduced she refers to an after-life as follows: "You may try but you can never imagine what it is to have a man's force of genius in you and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl." Yet during all her life, with her masculine intellect she was the most womanly of women.

Very early in life she became possessed with the idea that she would be a great personage, and she tells how she used to play in the garden, in which she did not know one note, to impress the servants with the notion of her accomplishments. She was never content with only a daint idea of things, she must understand them perfectly; what ever she studied, it was with her whole heart.

In her younger days she was deeply religious. She thought it very wrong to go to theaters and to read novels. She then had a very keen opinion of that class of literature in which she in after years gained such distinction. She
did not want to be only an ordinary Christian. She desired to be sanctified wholly. She always loved to read the Bible and to feel the deep glow of feeling that came from devotion which belonged to her nature. She was a woman who would not merely take the opinions of others on any subject, but she must know by her own experience if possible. Her ideas in regard to religion seemed to have entirely changed in after years. Though she was always religious, in her later years she left the doctrines and creeds of her earlier life. She was influenced by such of her friends as MacKay, Lewis, and Herbert Spencer. The books reveal the fact that she passed through deep religious troubles.

It is difficult to determine from her writings what her religious faith was, for she entered so deeply into the religious emotions of her characters that at one time it would seem that she might have been Roman Catholic, and at another a Protestant. The general idea of her readers is that she was the latter. What ever may have been her religion, we know that her idea of life was the highest and noblest. Her idea of a true life was to forget self and live
for those about her. It was said that she was
powerfully impressed with the principle of self-
forgetfulness for the good of others, and the ob-
ligation of duty. She was not a woman who
could "take things as they came," without feeling
greatly her own responsibility. In youth she
was much weighed down with the idea of sin
about her.

Her life, before her marriage, and after her
father's death, was spent in traveling for the
purpose of study and for a time she was em-
ployed as assistant editor of Westminster
Review. Of the time named she was a writer
of reviews, translations, and also wrote some
poetry.

Perhaps the great mistake of her life was
her marriage with Mr. George Lewis, an act
in which she defied the law. From what can
be gathered from her letters and journal,
her conscience was perfectly at ease in re-
gard to it, nor did she seem to care what the
public might say or think. However, it is most
probable that she would have remained the
brilliant reviewer or accurate translator
had it not been for the helpful sympathy of
Mr. Lewis during their married life. Strange to
say, with all her force of genius and strength of mind, she had little self-confidence in regard to her literary work. She was always most fearful of the results, and was very easily discouraged. She was much given to fits of despondency, especially after the completion of a book. Perhaps this may have been due largely to her ill health. She had a weak constitution, and was much troubled with headaches, rheumatism, and depression. She was seldom free from headaches, and in reading her books one feels they are following the life of an invalid. But it was her noble soul that broke through all these difficulties and overcame them. She might have done like many of her weak sisters, lived a life of idleness, fearing always that any activity would bring on some of her troubles.

She possessed a serene, somewhat sombre nature, which needed to be in contact with a bright and pleasant one. Much of what can be gathered from her letters and journals. However, she had a strong arm to lean on in the business of life which she was physically unable to perform alone, and her serious
nature received cheerfulness from his vivacity and cheer.

During all their life together he shielded her carefully from the cruel criticisms of her work that appeared in print, allowing her to see only those that he knew would not discourage her.

Living as she did, very much away from public life because of her ill health and a natural shrinking from the public eye, she had no way of judging the world's opinions of her work excepting through the public press and private letters.

She always read her manuscripts to Mr. Sewell before they were sent to print, and his criticism was passed and received on them; doubtless her best books would never have been written without his counsel and encouragement, which was always given in the most loving manner.

From her journals their life together was one long dream of happiness, love, and devotion. She loved his children, of whom he had two, and for several years she labored with them to support his former wife, which he was compelled to do.

Her character received a stability from her's,
which it lacked, and she made a home for him in which he could pursue his literary work better than before. So we cannot judge how great a mistake this step may have been, or if it was not best as it was. On his death she made this entry in her diary, 'Here I and sorrow sit alone.'

As was said before, she was noted principally as a novelist. We would class her novels among the socialistic. She possessed the combination of a deep speculative power with a great and realistic imagination. She observed life as it really existed among a natural straightforward people, and exhibits a very broad range in her observation of life.

One characteristic of her works is their completeness. While one reads he is not suspended in a dream while his brain is asleep, but his heart beats with passion and he is thoroughly aware of the great scenes of life and death. As one has said, 'The granite-like foundation of the whole is the conscious moral perception and moral will. Other writers of fiction center our enjoyment and pain in the happiness and unhappiness of the chief actors.'

It is said that in reading her books the child...
acter we admire most is her second self. They reveal a noble character, strength and breadth of mind, and a nature that has gone through strife and content, compassion, behind them all. Some cannot say with confidence that her creations are a projection of herself; she has put herself in their place, felt her characters, and made their experiences and feelings her own so that they seem but a reflection of herself.

She feels deeply the joys and sorrows of others and enters deeply into their emotions, thus making the reader feel with her. Her books reach the hearts of people because they are so true to nature. One feels that there are just such people with just such experiences in the world, living day by day.

Her first book, 'Adam Bede,' was published in 1856, which took the world by storm, but which discouraged herself. After the completion of each book she felt great disappointment and depression, feeling that she could never again give anything worth reading to the public. For its successor she drew her early life and its surroundings.

In 'Middle March,' Dorothea and Celia show the relationship between herself and her sister, with all probability.
Romolo was the novel which most taxed her energies, both of mind and body. She said she began it as a young woman and finished it an old one.

She looked far beyond the external joys and sorrows. Death to her was always tragic, but it was something more than the cessation of breath and pulse, it was the extinction of a soul. The marriage joys were dear to her, but she saw something higher than the highest happiness of lovers. In "Adam Bede" she said of Adam and Dinah as they stood with clasped hands, "What greater thing is there for two human souls than to feel that they are found for life to strengthen each other in all sorrow, to minister to each other in all pain, to be one with each other in silent unspokenable memories at the moment of last parting?"

The great desire in her heart and the object of her writing was expressed in the following words on reading a criticism on one of her stories, "Classical Scents." I wonder how I shall feel about these little details ten years from hence if I am living. At present I value them as grounds for hoping that my writing may succeed and so give value to my life; as in-
decisions that I can touch the hearts of my fellow men and so sprinkle some precious graces as the result of the long years in which I have been rising and suffering. But at present fear and trembling still prevail over hope."

Among others, she had a copy of "Scenes of Clerical Life" sent to Dickens and Trollope. Their delight was almost beyond expression. But suppressing from the name of the author, George Eliot, they wrote to a gentleman, they addressed her as "Dear Sir." Dickens, however, was not fully assured as to the sex of the author, and asked in his reply that having observed traces of such womanly grace in it, if they originated with no woman no man ever before had the art of making himself mentally so like a woman.

Others thought the author must be a churchman or a layman. Mrs. Carlyle said, "It is a book written out of the heart of a living man, not merely out of the brain of a living author." Others declared it could not have been written by a woman.

Although George Eliot wrote with continued fear and trembling, success was hers. With the intense desire to make the world better,
stronger, and nobler, with a strong mind, always intent on doing her very best she could not help but succeed, and through George Eliot's fiction found its true place in literature.