
Contemporary Literature of George Eliot (1819-1880)

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“There is no sense of ease likes the ease we felt in those scenes where we were born, where objects became dear to us before we had known the labor of choice,” the attentive attitude of George Eliot toward change also relates to her attachment to the past when she writes these lines in ‘The Mill on the Floss’. George Eliot helped define realism, a movement that was all about holding a mirror up to life and recording everything. It was a rising genre in the 19th century, both in Britain and abroad. But Eliot's narrator doesn't stop at just recording everything she can see from the outside. She also has a tricky way of delving into how characters' minds work and analyzing the best and worst parts of them. Even when we see the most shameful and unlikable parts of a character, Eliot's still not done: *now* she wants us to imagine sympathizing with them—even with the characters we love to hate. George Eliot is one of the greatest novelists of the Victorian age.

Eliot in the Victorian Era:

George Eliot was an important name of the period, the pseudonym of *Mary Ann Evans*, who wished to write novels which would be taken seriously rather than the romances

which women of the time were supposed or instructed to write. The Victorians, on the whole, were instructive and they wrote what they wanted to write according to their thoughts. Eliot, on the other hand, was an intellectual and she wrote what she should have written. She is known as the first intellectual novelist. Her novels are the embodiment of her ideas. The main charm of the Victorians lies in the individual expression, whereas, in Eliot, our interest is kept up in the way she analyses and diagnoses problems. Eliot rejects dogma and wants to analyze the causes of every problem she comes across. She stands firmly at the gateway between the old novel and the new. She is defined as a worthy heir of Thackeray and Dickens and a worthy forerunner of Hardy and Henry James. She was essentially a novelist of intellectual life and her psychological insight into human motives and spring of action is deep and profound. Eliot had done nothing more than to describe common English life there would have been small excuse for her work.

Victorian era forms a link and transition between the writers of the Romantic Period and the very different literature of the 20th century. She was questioning her Christian faith and forming her own opinions of Victorian Society. Eliot began her career with all sorts of obstacles in her way: she was not rich; she was not pretty; she had no pedigree or social standing. Her soul searching resulted in her deciding not to attend church anymore, which strained relations with her brother and father and scandalized her society by choosing to live with a married man, George Henry Lewes. Another world of purpose and comfort had opened to her; her social circle widened as she was welcomed into Coventry's intellectual circle. She wrote and developed as a writer even at a time when women were discouraged from intellectual work. The 19th century is often regarded as high point in British literature as well as in other countries such as France, the United States and Russia.

Adam Bede (1859) was her first full-length complete novel. It was immediate success, but attracted fervent public

gossip as to who the real author was. When it was discovered that Eliot was Mrs. Marian Evans Lewes, many castigated her but she was also lauded by friends, fellow authors, and feminists. The dedication in *Adam Bede* read:

“To my dear husband, George Henry Lewes, I give the manuscript of a work which would never have been written but for the happiness which his love has conferred on my life.”

‘*Adam Bede*’ was a great success and triggered suspense in the readers and was published in 1859. People wanted to know about this George Eliot who writes with bitter and cunning intellect. There were many imposters who claimed to be the author; however in the end Marry Anne Evan stepped forward and declared herself as George Eliot. She later said that she did not want her reputation to precede her work and thus chose a male pen name. After the success of ‘*Adam Bede*’ she continued publishing many successful novels for next fifteen years. Her readers praised her illustration of rural society; this also became one of the reasons for her instant success as her readers could relate their lives with Eliot’s writings. George Eliot was a moralist at heart and the tone of her novels is one of moral earnestness, and at times, in her later work, of an austere grimness. Her novels are so many sermons for a vast congregation of readers who could not subscribe to Christian Codes. She was a sort of Moses to the Victorian Age, leading it to the Promised Land of full intellectual, moral and political freedom, even though the results of its entering upon that inheritance have been similar to those that overtook the Jews after entering into Jordan.” (*Church*) As a moralist, George Eliot laid great emphasis on the performance of one’s duty and on leading a life of virtue and righteousness. If a person failed to stick to these paths and deviated from the track of righteousness, he was likely to be swallowed up by the swirling waves of moral turpitude leading to his utter ruin, as in the case with Hetty in *Adam Bede*. A slip in conduct is likely to lead to serious

consequences. Violation of moral laws brings utter ruin to her characters.

She did more, touched that life with genius, made it blossom into beauty, and gave to it deep moral meanings. George Eliot's work has been subject to a wide range of critical questioning, most of which relates her substantially to a Victorian context and intellectual framework. Delia Da Sousa Correa explores musical reference in George Eliot's work and investigates contexts that George Eliot was passionate about music and her writing is steeped in musical allusion. This book explores musical reference in her work and investigates contexts such as Eliot's friendship with Wagner, the legacy of Romanticism, music's role in scientific theory, and the ambivalent status of female musicality. The book establishes how intensely Eliot's musical allusions are informed by her contemporary culture and offers a fresh view of the experimental writing through which she took literary realism into previously uncharted regions. Her book examines the ways in which her work anticipates significant aspects of writing in the twentieth and indeed twenty first century in regard to both art and philosophy. Comic verse abounded in the Victorian era, fueled by an insatiable demand for content from literary magazines. Punch and Fun like famous magazines were teemed with humorous invention and were aimed at a well-educated readership. The most famous collection of Victorian comic verse is the Bab Ballads.

The Role of Morals:

As assumed by Robert Huntington with words in History of English Literature that the supremacy of moral law may fairly be called the general theme of all her works; to demonstrating it her scientific method is really in the main auxiliary; and in spite of her accuracy it makes of her more an idealist than a realist. With unswerving logic she traces the sequence of act and consequence, showing how apparently trifling words and

deeds reveal the springs of character and how careless choices and seemingly insignificant self-indulgences may altogether determine the issues of life. The couplet from Aeschylus which she prefixed to one of the chapters of 'Felix Holt' might stand at the outset of all her work:

'Tis law as steadfast as the throne of Zeus--
Our days are heritors of days gone by.

Her conviction, or at least her purpose, is optimistic, to show that by honest effort the sincere and high-minded man or woman may win happiness in the face of all difficulties and disappointments; but her own actual judgment of life was somber, not altogether different from that which Carlyle repudiated in 'The Everlasting Yea'; so that the final effect of her books, though stimulating, is subdued rather than cheerful. "To be a poet is to have a soul so quick to discern, that no shade of quality escapes it, and so quick to feel, that discernment is but a hand playing with finely-ordered variety on the chords of emotions; a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge." Eliot had a deep regard for poets; one of her close acquaintances was none other than Ralph Waldo Emerson. In this quote Eliot describes the disposition of poets and what it takes to be a real poet. To be true poet, one must possess the gift of discernment and be able to translate knowledge into feelings. They must be able to take pure feeling and heart and translate that into beautiful words and poetry. Like so many of her contemporaries, Eliot tried to make significant literary contributions in more than one genre; her poems—both narrative and lyric—deal, however, with some of the same themes which inform her novels and short stories. Her poems are less accomplished than her prose fiction—only one poem, "O May I Join the Choir Invisible," has achieved any lasting fame—but they do stand as an informative window on to her life as a writer. Eliot's interest in the interior life of human beings, moral problems and strains, anticipated the narrative

methods of modern literature. D.H. Lawrence once wrote: "It was really George Eliot who started it all. It was she started putting action inside."