Thesis

on

Life and Works of George Eliot

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Marian Evans was born in Warwickshire, Nov. 22, 1819. Her father, of Welsh descent, was originally a carpenter, but through his honesty and ability, he became land agent to Sir Roger Newdigate of Aubury Hall. It was he with his sterling qualities who furnished the model for Adam Bede.

In the year 1820, the Evanses moved to Griff, a beautiful home on the Aubury estate, and here Marian spent the first twenty-one years of her life. She was not considered a precocious child; but at the age of five years she was sent to school, and a love for reading developed which gradually grew into a passion. From that time on, she was looked upon as a sort of prodigy and was allowed every opportunity required to receive the best education possible, until in the year 1836 when her mother passed away, leaving Marian to undertake the charge of her father's household. Soon after, she and her father moved to Coventry. It was here that Mr. Evan's death occurred in 1849. Marian remained as faithful nurse until the end.

About this time she became acquainted with George Lewes, one of the most profound reasoners, and one of the most brilliant literary celebrities of the time. Due to trouble of some sort, Lewes and his wife had separated, though legal divorce could not be granted. It was then that George Eliot (as she dubbed herself in her first book) committed that offense that will always leave a blot upon her name. She formed a union with Lewes which was illegal but which she declared was justifiable. For many years they lived happily together each deeming it his or her greatest delight to help the other.

It was during these years of happiness that she began her life as a novelist. Her first attempt was
a short story entitled, "The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton." She herself considered it poor, but Mr. Lewes was so impressed with it that he encouraged her to attempt more. Accordingly, a few months after the appearance of this story, "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story" and "Janet's Repentance" appeared. Then followed "Scenes of Clerical Life", "Adam Bede", "The Mill on the Floss", "Silas Marner", "Romola", "Felix Holt", "The Spanish Gypsy", "Middlemarch" and "Daniel Deronda".

In the year 1878, Lewes' health began to fail; he died on Nov. 28, and George Eliot was left, prostrated with grief. Through parallel sorrows, she and John Walter Cross were brought together and were married in the spring of 1880. They travelled for a time, but returned home in July, when her health, which had been at a low ebb, seemed greatly improved, but she was seized suddenly with a fresh attack and died Dec. 22, 1880.
"Women are both clearer in intellect and more generous in affection than men. They love Truth more because they know her better, and trust Humanity in a diviner spirit because they find more that is divine in it."

The women of the past ages have made little progress in literature, and many are those who have ascribed it to lack of talent which is evident in the gentler sex; but more agree with Eliza W. Farnham when she says, "I will yield to none in the grateful admiration of those pioneer struggles whose fruits we are now enjoying, in the partial emancipation of Women from the legal and social disabilities under which the sex has labored from the beginning. If the wife of the dissolute husband can hold in her right the means of saving her children from starvation and ignorance; if the ranks of self-supporting women find new and more remunerative fields open to them; if the Wronged Woman breathes a more human atmosphere of compassion, tenderness, and respect – healers, all, of the hurt she has suffered; if the society of our day realizes in its high need, the more fluent power of Woman to purify, inspire, and uplift it to higher motives and better regulated action; if the diviner tenderness of the feminine life is taking more distinct forms of potentiality over the selfishness and ferocity of former ages, we have to thank more than any other party or organization, the brave Women of our generation who have persistently striven for these objects, bearing meanwhile the inevitable reproach and contempt of such a reform, but never abandoning it."
To such a degree have the women of past ages been occupied in uplifting humanity generally, that only a few of the stars were able to shed their light broadcast over the land; but these few, who were destined by their example, to show the possibilities of the feminine mind, have left such works as will ever remain as monuments to their memories.
The Mill on the Floss.

The Floss is a beautiful river flowing through a country village, and the "Mill on the Floss" was owned by a well-to-do, though somewhat vulgar family of this community.

This small, though intensely interesting, book, endeavors to teach "the conflict of duty with passion and the inexorable fate which pursues the sinner."

It is the study of the life of a girl who has been raised in a home where culture is wanting and where little thought was given to the training of girls, they being considered of minor importance. Therefore, should one expect to find in her a girl who would be likely to take a definite stand in regard to the more serious questions which face young people? While visiting her cousin, Maggie, our heroine, meets the young man who has pledged himself to this cousin for life. All goes well till a passion, akin to love, springs up between him and Maggie. Maggie resists all his attentions for a time; but finally "passion overcomes reason" and she begins to drift. Here George Eliot adopts a new method of rescue, and the knot is finally cut by "the waves of the Floss".

The characters, as a rule, are of the monotonous, uneducated class of people who talk a great deal but have little to say. But her principal actors are children, and many of their ideas and habits bring to mind our own childhood days. So long as they remain children, they are as true to life as one could possibly picture them; but it has been said that "she was too thoroughly feminine to be quite at home in the psychology of the male animal, though her women are unerringly drawn".

"Mill on the Floss" is a novel founded on the
principles of psychology, which teaches the power of mind over matter. Many books have been written with this end in view, but few have been as successful as this.

Some of her descriptions are beautiful, one especially, being, "we could never have loved earth so well if we'd had no childhood in it- if it were not the earth where the same flowers come up again every spring that we used to gather with our tiny fingers as we sat lisping to ourselves on the grass- the same hips and haws on the autumn hedge-rows- the same hedge-rows- the same red-breasts that we used to call "God's birds" because they did no harm to the precious crops. What novelty is worth that sweet monotony where every thing is known, and loved because it is known?"

Her poetic impulses are often interrupted by a prose element which, with certain authors would destroy the beauty of the former inspirations- but not so with George Eliot. She weaves it in with such force and humor that no one is surprised at the actual attractiveness of a bit of prose.
Adam Bede is the hero of the story, and a noble hero he is, well worthy of the honor.

No major lesson is taught, the thread of which could be followed throughout; but myriads of minor lessons which in the end no doubt would bring as good results as one fully defined lesson, are woven into the text. For instance, Adam Bede shows by his example the wonderful power of brotherly affection. By following the life of one beautiful girl, we see the folly of pride, and through the life of another we feel, with renewed vigor, the joy of living.

Adam lived with his mother, father, and one brother, Seth. For a number of years he had been deeply in love with a handsome girl of Hayslope, but the most influential man in the surrounding country ruined her; and when, a few months later, she was sentenced to death on the grounds of child murder, Adam's heart was broken. But by degrees the wound was healed and he clung the closer to earthly ties, and also heavenly, in order to fill the gap which had been so ruthlessly torn open, Thus it was that a few years later he came to love a young Christian girl. They were happily married and the gap was filled.

It is certainly possible for such a plot to have taken place, and, sad as it may seem, no doubt just such a drama is being acted every day somewhere in the world.

The characters are numerous, and some of them speak a dialect peculiar to that part of the country. It is simply the story of a country town and the happenings there.
This novel, for such it is, brings out its details, not through the conversations of the characters, but by lengthy, yet interesting descriptions. The story would appeal to some readers more strongly through certain comparisons. The girl whom Adam finally married was entirely the opposite of his first love. The members of one family were wretchedly ignorant, while those of another were well educated and refined.

Leslie Stephens says, "George Eliot possessed a vein of humor which it is little to say is incomparably superior in depth if not in delicacy, to that of any feminine writer." One cannot help being impressed with the rustic intelligence of Mrs. Poyser who is continually making humorous applications; and yet on the other hand, George Eliot will, with her pathos, bring tears to the eyes of the most hard hearted person.

Parts of the novel are extremely tedious, for, as John Lord says "there was no great plot and no grand characters; nothing heroic; no rapidity of movement; nothing to keep me from laying the book down when the dinner-bell rang or when the time came to go to bed." But by degrees it becomes very interesting and fascinating, and one finally learns to love the peculiar speeches of Mrs. Poyser, and the strange dialect of the country people.

QUOTATIONS.

"There is no hour that has not its births of gladness and despair; no morning brightness that does not bring new sickness to desolation as well as new forces to genius and love. There are so many of us, and our lots are so different; what wonder that Nature's mood is often
in harsh contrast with the great crisis of our lives? We are the children of a large family and must learn, as such children do, not to expect that our hurts will be made much of— to be content and help each other the more."

"As long as ye can stir hand and foot the men think ye're hearty."

"However strong a man's resolution may be, it costs him something to carry it out."

"Perhaps there is no time in a summer day more cheering, than when the warmth of the sun is just beginning to triumph over the freshness of the morning."

"We look at the one little woman's face that we love, as we look at the face of Mother earth and see all sorts of answers to our yearnings."
The plot of this story was laid in a town of England by the name of Middlemarch, hence the name of the book.

Uncultivated, ignorant people lived here, and with these the more cultivated and refined must constantly intermingle. The purpose of the book is to show that it is possible for a person to come in contact with this class of people daily, come out unscathed and unchanged, and yet have such an influence upon those around them that those individuals are raised to a higher plane of living.

Someone has said that an applicable second title for Middlemarch would be "A Study of English Provincial Life", for though George Eliot is famous for her wonderful pictures of country life through all her books, this delves into it more deeply and more successfully than any of her others. Another peculiarity is in the fact that in compiling this book, she has apparently woven three different love stories together making one complete story. Many argue that this is contrary to the established rules of art; but by this means she has developed a story which is intensely interesting to the reader, holding the mind in suspense by delayed disclosures. That this is the ultimate aim of every author cannot be denied, therefore the fact that it is successful remains.

The characters are gathered from the high and the lowly, the rich and the poor, the educated and the illiterate; in fact, from almost from every class of people which could possibly exist in a small country town. The woman who plays the leading rôle in the book is a woman of unblemished character, whose ambition is to give to
the world the best she has. In her first attempt she is unsuccessful, but she finally succeeds in realizing her highest ambitions.

Though a novel in reality, Middlemarch contains certain qualities necessary to other forms of classification, and the sense of observation becomes the keener through this discovery.

Should a person leave description out of Middlemarch or any other of George Eliot's books, he must omit about two thirds of the book. This is the most valuable portion to a person who is reading for the benefits to be derived from it in a literary sense, for she has some beautiful descriptions which are invaluable to the student.

Just as in Adam Bede, there are certain girl characters who are complete opposites in makeup, so it is in Middlemarch, and yet the story is rendered more spicy through this contrast.

George Eliot is more inclined to humor than to pathos, but occasionally a bit of real pathos bursts out. At other times certain passages appeal to one as pathetic and yet likely were not meant to be so at all.

One peculiarity in this book is in connection with the families in their respective homes. One who has not yet entered the holy bonds of wedlock is prone to believe that in that state all is happiness and bliss. But George Eliot does not picture it so. Of the various people represented, no two seem perfectly matched, either the husband misunderstanding the wife or the latter misinterpreting words and actions of the former. We cannot understand how George Eliot can speak of her happiness in married life and then make such miserable failures of the marriages which occur in her
writings, except on the supposition that she is depicting and telling of conditions in real life.

"Destiny stands by sarcastic with our dramatis personae folded in her hand".

"Beauty is of very little consequence in reality".

"Time, like money, is measured by our needs".

"Our vanities differ as our noses do".
In the latter part of the fifteenth century, there lived in Florence, Italy, a blind scholar by the name of Bardo de Bardi, and his daughter Romola. Since Romola plays the most important part in this book, it has received her name.

Tito, the man who ultimately became the husband of Romola, was very shrewd and was rapidly becoming one of the most wealthy men in Florence through his wicked and ingenious devices. For years he was able to answer all attacks made upon him but his petty schemes were finally discovered, and the motto, "Be sure your sins will find you out", was proven.

So many characters with such odd names are found in Romola that one is at a loss at times to know just "who is who"; but we soon become so well acquainted with the principal actors that we are delighted when reference is again made to them. Two or three women play active parts; but it is the men who take the lead in most of the affairs, for it has been George Eliot's intention to weave into one book a combination of history and romance, thus giving to her readers a little valuable knowledge as well as recreation.

In many respects this novel might be called successful but in other respects the author has only proven her inability to combine two forms of books into one extremely interesting one. One method employed by her and which detracts largely from the interest of the book is, that through her long descriptions the reader loses the individuality of certain characters, and must remember them only through their actions as detailed by the author herself.
One must admit, however, that Romola fulfills a certain longing even though the book as a whole does, at times, disappoint us. Certain literary men attribute it to the fact that George Eliot was a woman, but when we take into consideration the complete success of previous works, we will not own it as a just complaint.
Many of George Eliot's characteristics have been suggested in the reviews of her books, but a few general statements will not be inappropriate.

Men do not hesitate sometimes, in introducing a little indecency or profanity into the plot if, by doing so, it becomes more humorous to the vulgar minded; not so with George Eliot. Her stories are bubbling over with wit and humor, which, however, never degenerates into the offensive kind.

George Eliot was a student in every sense of the word, and many of her books are especially instructive, do to certain philosophical views taken by her. "Mill on the Floss" has long been regarded as "a study in psychology".

No author has ever pictured more vividly or more interestingly to the minds of her readers, the country life of contemporary England. It must be remembered that these pictures are really pictures of her own childhood days; and the impressions received in youth are the most lasting.

Her pathos must also be considered. The writings of many authors remind me of the sermons of sensational preachers. The stimulation is so great that all control is lost and one believes that the end in view has been accomplished; but in a short time that individual will again be following his old habits. On the other hand, take a preacher who appeals to the reason, building up and tearing down as the occasion demands; and though he may not win so many in the same length of time, those won will be of the more reliable sort.

I would, then, liken George Eliot's pathos to the latter. It is powerful, yet always under command. Her characters are tender, firm, selfreliant, and pure.
Her writings are for the thoughtful. Leslie Stephens says, "When I compare her work with that of other novelists, I cannot doubt that she has powers of mind and a richness of emotional nature rarely equalled, or that her writings—whatever her shortcomings—will have a corresponding value in the estimation of thoughtful readers."