

THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING THE LIFE AND PHILOSOPHY OF GEORGE ELIOT IN LITERATURE

Gavkharoy Akhmedova

Phd student of FerSU

ahmedovagavharoy@gmail.com

Abstract

Eliot's was a time in which the Impressionists and the Realists lived side by side. The Impressionists worked to explain the world according to its essence; the Realists endeavored to demonstrate that same world according to its existence. Happily, it was also the era of the Positivists, who attempted to explain the world according to the way essence and existence interrelate. Eliot was a thorough and deliberate woman, one who consciously planned and executed everything she wrote. This article focuses on the importance of learning the life and works of George Eliot.

Key words: realism, impressionist, realist, positivist, Daniel Deronda, love, life, novel.

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. She broke with her family and scandalized her society by choosing to live with a married man, George Henry Lewes, whose wife refused to divorce him. She wrote and developed as a writer even at a time when women were discouraged from intellectual work. Hence the assumption of her pen name, George Eliot, in place of her real one, Marian Evans.

What is especially impressive about Eliot's literary career is the way it continually widened in scope as new projects provided more room for the exercise of her intellect and imagination. She began by doing translations of German philosophy and theology, "soul-stupefying work" that nonetheless taught her respect for the

meticulousness required for good writing. She then moved to editing and reviewing, staying in the shadow of others but becoming versed in contemporary issues and literary styles. Finally, she began writing fiction—first short stories, then novels.

George Eliot's novels have been widely read because her characters are fictional presentations of everyday-life. She wrote about the kind of people she knew—creating portraits of real people who lived in the Victorian midlands. They are more important because they are a revelation of the true George Eliot: an intellectual personage, a moral teacher, a champion of social responsibility, an exponent of the higher values of life, and an abiding literary force.

George Eliot's characters greatly increase the reader's respect for human beings. She gives rich descriptions of what goes on inside the hearts and minds of her men and women, many of whom are commonplace, uninteresting people with unspoken sorrows and unshared joys. Through them reality continuously works out its results of good and evil under the unalterable law of cause and effect. Both action and character develop from wicked deeds, and good is a production of righteous living. Therefore, the ultimate source of conduct as exemplified by her novels is the character's own inherent nature, guided by present circumstances, and controlled by his own free will.

George Eliot reflected her own conception of values in her characterization. She loved beauty in everyday life. She portrayed beauty of strength and gentleness in character. She wrote about the beauty of human face. She loved beauty in nature as well as in music, art, and literature.

Reflections of George Eliot's philosophy can be divided into four categories: moral rectitude, duty, truth, and love. These four concepts were fundamental principles of her life.

Throughout her life, Eliot learned from the Romantic poets, the German philosophers, the classical Greek dramatists, the medieval theologians, the French Impressionists, and the Baroque composers that there are numerous ways of evaluating and expressing life, each true and valid in its own way and all containing some degree of merit that made it worthy of serious consideration. Recognizing the

basic differences among these historical entities, George Eliot adopted those portions of each of them which appealed to her as fundamentally sound. She incorporated them into the wholly personalized life philosophy that gave direction to both her life and her fiction.

Among her most notable early novels is the autobiographical *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), which is both a childhood joy and an unsettling exploration of childhood trauma. Her big books Henry James would refer to them as her “baggy Monsters” came a few years later: *Romola* (1863), a monumental historical novel, exploring the religious and artistic ferment of 15th-century Florence, and *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866), a background of the British labor movement of the 1830s. Her most important novels were her two final ones *Middlemarch* (1871–72), a sprawling anatomy of English society, and *Daniel Deronda* (1874–76), an attempt to reach beyond English society to embrace larger issues of identity and nationalism.

“Daniel Deronda” tested her reputation by raising issues that many of her readers preferred to ignore. Deronda is an English aristocrat who discovers midway through the novel that he was born a Jew. With this personal revelation comes a more general awareness of British intolerance, and this prompts him, at the end of the book, to leave England for Palestine.

When the novel appeared, many readers were offended by the idea of a Jewish hero and by the criticism of Britain, which was central to the plot. Others faulted the novel’s structure, arguing that its “Jewish parts” lacked the coherence and realism of its “British parts.” But Eliot’s overreaching in this final novel her determination to attempt more than her society or even her talent could encompass reflects the enormous ambition that had propelled her career from the beginning.

Unlike Jane Austen, where so much of what counts resides in the dialogue, making her easily adaptable to the screen, Eliot’s greatness lies not in her dialogue, which Virginia Woolf noted was the weakest aspect of her fiction, but in her style, an element that can not be separated from the written word.

The most important aspect of Eliot's style is her narrative voice, which frequently breaks into the action to philosophize or cast judgment on what is going on. In the following celebrated passage from *Middlemarch*, we are alerted to the countless sorrows that transpire around us without our noticing them:

That element of tragedy which lies in the every fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.

The second line of this passage is often quoted alone, diluting the force of Eliot's meaning: for it is not only humanly impossible to absorb the tragedy of everyday life; it is also a function of human stupidity that this tragedy goes unnoticed. Eliot's genius is to show that the two ideas are both connected and distinct. Eliot's voice, in its assumption of a wiser, juster, more all-encompassing perspective, is the ligament of her novels. It elevates them from ingenious storytelling to divine comedy.

Eliot seems to have conceived of human character as resembling a chemical reaction in which a large number of potentially important variables are present but only some are activated. The direction a life takes becomes a matter of which variables are activated and which are not, something that lies, at least partially, within the individual's power to control. "The strongest principle of growth lies in human choice," she asserts in *Daniel Deronda*.

Any study of George Eliot, either as person or as novelist, should begin with a recognition of her philosophic, religious, or literary movement. Throughout her adult life, Eliot remained unreservedly open to every intellectual and ethical stimulus available to her not only through the ordinary channels of study and experience but also through her judicious exercise of imagination and insight. Her sensitivity to both the past and the present and her intuitive awareness of the future gave Eliot a perspective of life.

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