

Halpen, Rosa (1884). Miss Halpen's Valedictory Essay: George Eliot as a Woman and as a Writer. *Rochester Daily Paper for Our Little People*, 4 (264).

*Graduating Essay,—“George Eliot as a Woman and as a Writer.”*

Miss Rosa H. Halpen.

Miss Halpen's Valedictory Essay on George Eliot.

Few people have read George Eliot's writings to lay them aside and forget the author ; to think no more of the great mind and heart which added these marvels to the world's literature. The thought of her lingers with us long after we have closed the books in which she has portrayed to us so faithfully the inner life of the men and women whom her genius has created. We think of her, and long to know somewhat of her inner life.

Fortunately we can know much. We know that, as a woman, she had few peers in nobility of heart and lofty aspirations. Strongly implanted in her nature was the desire to be a help and comfort to mankind. She had a wonderful power for divining the workings of minds totally different from her own, and hence could exercise sympathy in a rare degree toward those to whom sympathy was a help. She knew that “plain people often blunder upon words that are coarser than their intentions, and that are likely to fall gratingly upon susceptible feelings.” She could go back of words to comprehend thoughts such as cannot easily be expressed. Many persons in whose society she found no pleasure, and who, doubtless, did not appreciate the great privilege they enjoyed in being allowed her friendship, she freely invited to come to her at any time when her society would be a comfort to them. And we cannot doubt that there must have been many to whom her society *was* a comfort. To her the millenium meant a time when “the impulse to help our fellows should be as immediate and irresistible as that which we feel to grasp something firm when we are falling.” She gave utterance to her own heart's aspirations when she put into the mouth of Dinah the words : “It is very blessed on a cold, bleak day, when the sky is hanging dark over the hills, to feel the love of God in one's soul, and to carry it to the lonely, bare, stone houses where there is nothing else to comfort.”

And yet we know that her religion did not center on Christ. The middle and latter part of her life was one continual struggle between sympathy and theory. It was sympathy with the Christian life, not conviction, that enabled her to delineate such a character as Dinah. Every reader of her writings must feel that she longed for a satisfactory intellectual foundation for her spiritual aspirations, but found none. Her

heart worshipped the ideal moral beauty, which it is the aim of Christianity to produce ; her mind held a system of philosophy which, if consistently carried out, would uproot those motives to right living, out of which the highest morality has grown.

In "Janet's Repentance" she declares that the sick room and the lazaretto are a refuge for the storm-tossed mind, for there are found duties upon which all creeds and philosophies are agreed. There, at least, the conscience is not haunted by doubts and fears. This was the creed of her heart. The creed of her head, if carried out to all its logical consequences, would make the motives which led to the self-sacrificing life of a Sister Dora or a Florence Nightingale, impossible.

All who are acquainted with the life of George Eliot know that she failed to live up to what, in her writings, she represented as the real life. Her personal history has done much to weaken her influence as an ethical teacher. And what else can we wish of this influence but that it should be weakened, since it is such as would make us strive to be lowly, unselfish and helpful like Christ, yet not in imitation of Him nor for His sake ; to have the *spirit* of the Christian, yet not the Christian's sustaining hope.

As a writer George Eliot's greatest charm lies in the exquisite likeness with which she draws her scenes and characters. We think of them as real places and people whom we have seen and heard. Ideal men and women, marvelously gifted, noble, divinely beautiful, and the embodiment of all that is pure and good, are not found in her writings. The same is true of totally depraved characters. Her men and women are natural, with faults and virtues like the men and women of real life. They think and speak and act wonderfully like the men and women that we meet every day. And this is why they possess such a charm for us ; this is why George Eliot is a greater writer than the thousands of novelists whose faulty characters, to use her own words, "are always on the wrong side, and the virtuous ones on the right, so that we can see at a glance whom we are to condemn and whom we are to approve, and are able to admire without the slightest disturbance of our prepossessions, and to hate and despise with that true ruminant relish which belongs to undoubting confidence."

In speaking of this characteristic of her writings, George Eliot says :  
"I aspire to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. I am content to tell my simple story without trying to make things seem better than they were ; dreading nothing but falsity, which, in spite of one's best efforts, there is reason to dread."

George Eliot was the first writer to show us how interesting and picturesque English rural life is when faithfully described. During her early life at Neweaton, she lived among just such scenes and people as she writes about so delightfully in "Adam Bede." The people were for the most part plain and common-place, but to *her* they were full of interest. She loved them ; loved to know their thoughts and feelings, their hopes and desires. She used often to note down every word that was said by them in her presence. It is doubtless owing to this that she could produce such charmingly natural conversations as those of Mrs. Poyser, and it is to her close attention to details that we owe such vivid pen-pictures as that of Mrs. Poyser's dairy.

In reading her works one is often compelled to wonder how one person could understand or sympathize so perfectly with the thoughts of so many different people in so many different positions in life. Many excellent critics who did not know the author of "Scenes of Clerical Life" declared that none but a clergyman of wide experience could have written it. And a certain cabinet-maker, having read "Adam Bede" with delight, was convinced that it was written by a person who had been bred as a carpenter. We know that nothing but the closest attention to details and deep sympathy for all people in whatever station in life, could have enabled her to do this. No amount of learning and research could have done it. Her keen insight into hearts and minds totally different from her own, resulted not only in her power to sympathize, but was also the secret of her success in portraying people and places."