

**George ELIOT: A BEAUTY PAINTER**

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## INTRODUCTION

It is generally assumed that books play a prominent role in the acquisition of knowledge. Moreover we owe to romantic writers a genuine love of nature, a greater emotional sensibility and a stress on the importance of ordinary people and common place things that they fill in their novels unfortunately these days people read less and less novels.

However, surprisingly some novels remain popular and are regularly read even though they were published centuries ago. The case of D. H. LAWRENCE's, Charles DICKENS', George Eliot's novels just to mention but a few is illustrative.

Our concern here is George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *Adam Bede* (1858). But what makes George Eliot's novels so attractive? My hypothesis is that they are well painted and readable. Their qualities certainly force the readers' admiration and make them indulge in them.

The purpose of this paper is to go through these novels and study what makes the author a beauty painter. The study is significant as it helps the novelists to enrich their literary productions which will be more didactic tools for the teachers. It will also impact the students' readability.

To achieve my goal, I have used the sociocritical analysis and psychoanalysis as literary theories to respectively examine Beauty and the way she painted the beautiful in her novels under study.

The article focuses on three aspects. The first part deals with George Eliot's source of inspiration and her sense of beauty. The second aspect consists in presenting the universe of the beauty in the two novels. The third part and the last concerns George Eliot's writing style.

### I- George Eliot's source of inspiration and sense of beauty

#### 1.1. George Eliot's source of inspiration

George Eliot's early life greatly provided her with a source of her inspiration. Up to the age of 38 when she wrote *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857), she spent her early life in Warwickshire, (England) travelled a lot abroad before meeting Lewes with whom her intellect came to full bloom.

As R.D Trivedi (2013) put it, "... she travelled extensively on the continent, visiting France, Switzerland, Germany and Italy. Lewes (her husband) accompanied her everywhere and by his discernment and sympathy encouraged her in her ambition to write fiction"<sup>6</sup>

Her stays in Italy, Germany and Holland opened her mind to various influences and procured with a mature mind that rendered her works exciting. She has a mind open to purity and whenever she depicts landscapes or people it shows limpidly through. Her keenest weapons for this achievement are her keen observing eye and her very deep psychological insight. For George Eliot, the most beautiful prospect is always closest to nature in its best garments, when earth and sky conjugate their efforts to make man's eye and mind happy.

But landscape visible beauty is not always the same criterion as far as depiction of man is concerned. Above physical features, more important aspects are dominant and the first of all is the "beauty of the soul".

Therefore, no study of George Eliot's sense of Beauty could ignore these aspects. Most of people usually see a beautiful landscape or qualities in a person but they lack the necessary sensibility to catch it and furthermore to express it.

Indeed "the author of *Adam Bede*" always proceeds reservedly while presenting funny situations as well as more serious matters. She knows how to evoke, for instance, an atmosphere of misery. She arouses the reader's emotion without provoking disgust or repulsion:

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<sup>6</sup>Trivedi, R.D. *A Compendious History of English Literature*. Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, 2013., p.582

- Oh father, (...) I couldn't have thought as any folk lived  
in this way, so close together.  
- It looks comical to me, child, now –and smells bad- .....  
Here and there a sallow, begrimed face looked out from a  
gloomy doorway at the strangers....<sup>7</sup>

The atmosphere of slum is well created but nothing shocks the reader's good taste. All the same, she likes to linger on lovely prospects. From the studied novels, I could make a voluminous book of passages through which George Eliot is paying homage to Beauty. She devotes lengthy passages to it and it is an unmitigated pleasure to admire her paintings:

A wide plain where the broadening floss hurries on between  
its green banks to the sea and the loving tide rushing to meet  
it, checks its passage with an impetuous embrace (...) far  
away on each hand stretch the richpastures and the patches of  
dark earth, made ready for theseed of broad-leaved green  
crops, or touched already with the tint of tender-bladed  
autumn sown corn (...) And this is Dorlcote Mill. I must  
stand here a minute or two to look at it, though the clouds are  
threatening, and it is far on in the afternoon. Even in this  
leafless time of departing February it is pleasant to look at  
perhaps the chill damp season adds a charmto the trimly  
kept, comfortable dwelling-house, as old as the oaks and that  
shelters it from the northern blast.<sup>8</sup>

After reading this passage, I wondered whether I could speak of “**poetic-prose**”. I see all the painting at once. Three vital elements are put in presence: Earth, Water, and sky, and in order to bring a note of perfection, on the bridge, the author herself is beholding the whole scene, bewildered, in spite of the lowering sky and communicating to people her state of mind, arousing their deepest emotion.

George Eliot's describing eye and dramatic presentation finds full play while she makes physical portraits too. Blackwood—her publisher couldn't help feeling continually increasing admiration for her as he read the manuscript of *Adam Bede*. From his letters correspondence with her I can read: "Lisbeth is a perfect picture....-31 March 1858- Hetty is a wonderful piece of painting. One seems to see the little villain. -24 October 1858-"<sup>9</sup>  
I hold from the last word of Blackwood that for George Eliot, physical beauty or social outcome are not the most important sources of happiness. Characters like Hetty Sorrel, Rosamund Vincy, Arthur Donnithorne, Mrs Glegg, Dustan and Geoffrey Cass, Nicholas Bulstrode, and by opposition to them Adam Bede, Bob Jakin, Bartle Massey, Caleb Garth, Dinah Morris, Dorothea Brooke, Dolly Winthrop are living examples of it.

With such a background, I dare say I could have nothing but a perfect aesthete of Nature painting and human body and soul observing. The psychological aspect is indeed paramount in George Eliot's works. Even if her description of landscape is utterly life like there is much more with her. Her portraying is very realistic and vivid. Moreover she has a deeper insight and looks on the soul of men which makes the greatest part of the raw material of her writing and that point is my next most important concern.

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<sup>7</sup>George, Eliot. *Adam Bede*, Penguin English Library. 1858,. p.1 2

<sup>8</sup>George Eliot. *The Mill on the Floss*, Book 1860, Ch. 1

<sup>9</sup>Cross John Walter: "*George Eliot's Life as Related in her letter and journals*". (3 vols) W. Blackwood & Sons, Edinburgh & London, 1885

## 12- George Eliot's sense of beauty

George Eliot's sense of Beauty is being presented in a personal light. For her, the point is not to produce something beautiful for the eye or the mind but to present reality as it is. Dealing with the importance of Art she said:

Art is the nearest thing to life. It is the mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot. All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the people<sup>10</sup>.

Thus George Eliot brings art very close to life, to everyday life without any artifice. She claims it more clearly in *Adam Bede*:

All honor and reverence to the divine beauty of form! Let us cultivate it to the utmost in men, women and children- in our gardens and in our houses. But let us love that other beauty too, which lies in no secret of proportion but in the secret of human sympathy. Paint us an angel (...), paint us yet oftener a Madonna turning her mild face upwards and opening her arms to welcome the divine glory: but do not impose on us any aesthetic which shall banish from the region art those old women scrapping carrots with their work-worn hands, those heavy clowns taking holidays in a dingy pot-house, rounded back and stupid, weather-beaten faces that had bent over the spade and had done the rough work of the world those homes with their tin pans, their brown pitchers, their rough curs and their clusters of onions<sup>11</sup>.

Two realities are pushed forward through the last two quotations. The first is about the form of our artistic production. We must try our best to present our creations in their closest form to reality. The second point is about the subject-matter. For George Eliot, the last years of the XVIIIth century and the first half of the XIXth century had been very hard times for the lower classes in England. To these points of views, we must add that for hard, a character's true joy should be searched in others' happiness.

Let's present now the universe of the beauty in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*.

## II-Presenting the universe of the beauty in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*

### 21-*Adam Bede*

*Adam Bede* is the first lengthy fully elaborate novel by George Eliot. The first part of the novel bears this influence and shows a persistent tendency to resolve the narrative in to pictures. As can be read in the following lines, George Eliot "with a single drop of ink at the end of her pen", started painting the surroundings of Jonathan Surge's workshop. That day,

The afternoon sun was warm (...) and a scent of pine. Wood from a tent-like pile of planks, outside the open door mingled itself with the scent of the elder bushes which were spreading their summer snow close to the open window opposite.<sup>12</sup>

As we can be collected from this description, the weather is fine, we are in summer, the sun is bright and full of delicate pleasant fragrance. Up to their vision is static and when

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<sup>10</sup>George Eliot. *Adam Bede*, Penguin English Library, 1858, Book one, Introduction P.19s

<sup>11</sup>Ibid,p.224

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p.49

the men started talking, it was as if the painting were to start moving. From afar we can behold on the painting:

the level sunlight lying like transparent gold  
among the gently-curving stems of the feathered grass and the tall  
red sorrel, and the white umbels of the hemlocks lining the  
bushy hedgerows. It was that moment in summer that the sound  
of the scythe being whetted makes us cast lingering looks at the  
flower-spring- led tresses of the meadows<sup>13</sup>

This pastoral prospect may be described by Wordsworth in such words that we would feel emotion-stricken. Typical romantic paintings swarm the story. This gift to depict nature is equally lavished on her for house and indoors activities describing.

Some scenes appeal to all our senses like the one showing Adam and Seth Bede on their way to deliver the coffin:

her road wound pleasantly along the lanes and across fields  
where the pale woodbines and the dog roses were scenting the  
hedgerows and the birds were twittering and trilling in the tall  
leafy boughs of oak and elm. It was a strangely-mingled picture  
-the fresh youth of the summer morning with Eden-like  
peace and lovely-" nests, the stalwart strength of the two  
brothers in their rustic clothes, and the long coffin on their  
shoulders.<sup>14</sup>

Our eyes see, our nose smells, and our heart sings with the birds the fresh youth of summer and the beauty of the picture in which the two brothers are so brightly put.

There are different kinds of description but the link between them is their photogenic character. When we have either outdoors prospect so home realities, the care to be faithful to aesthetics and reality is the main concerns. And even when it is very simple it touches the most sensible fibers of our nature.

Numerous passages and beautiful are spread all over the book and it would be quite vain to pretend to show the whole genius of George Eliot in only material descriptions. There's a whole chapter devoted to both setting and characters in which the story pauses a little. Through the chapter, George Eliot presents her own theory of what Art should be and sheds light for catching her sense of beauty in a better spirit through her character study.

The keyword of the book is sympathy, the one poor word which includes all our best insight and our love. In a character study, I going to present only the figures evolution and experiences best embody George Eliot's sense of Beauty. We have three main kinds of character.

The first range represents communal life, conventional world or simply society. They are rather neutral in the course of the novel but their "dramatis personae" are also folded in the hands of Lady Destiny.

- The second one is composed of characters with no basic attitude towards life. They evaluate at random often breaking the rules set by Nature long time ago.
- The last category contains character shaving the advantage of George Eliot's sympathy. But like the two first classes they are all the same submitted to the yoke of Destiny and know a tragic process. From this last category, the first name that comes to our mind is Adam Bede. From the beginning of the novel to its end, Adam hasn't changed a lot physically if ever. He is a hardworking man -the novel starts with a hard

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid. p.62

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p.95

working day and ends with another hard working day; *Adam Bede* is a smart piece of painting.

As George Eliot's first full-length novel, *Adam Bede* puts forward too many much things at the same time. It makes any study on it may turn lengthy. As far as George Eliot's sense of Beauty is concerned, it has been fully described in a very fresh mind, never to be seen again in any of her following books. Her genius is shown in her way of presenting her subject-matter as when as the depth of her analysis. But what about *The Mill on the Floss*?

## **2.2 *The Mill on the Floss***

*The Mill on the Floss* is a great tragedy. Had it been written in the form of a play with the authorship of a Shakespeare, we would have felt stricken by its power. When we read the last lines of the work, so strong is the impression that covers us. It was written in the Middle-Victorian Period, a moment doing when nothing could be taken for granted anymore, with the Industrial Revolution provoking instability in the bosom of both human and society.

As with most of her works, her aim while writing that novel was chiefly exploring and trying to understand human motives and the message delivered in almost intellectual language patched here and there with passages betraying a thorough romantic soul.

As a matter of fact, the first chapter of *The Mill on the Floss* puts us in the rural ambiance of *Adam Bede* before the action makes the difference. Actually setting descriptions through vivid and powerful expression come more rarely.

As for the way characters are sketched, it is impossible to meet a single full portrait. Only from time to time do we read about hair, a brow, a pair of expressive eyes or a vague figure. On the contrary, we know everything of the characters' natures, their strengths as well as their weaknesses. Therefore, the task of presenting George Eliot's sense of Beauty would be much more difficult if we were to deal with only considerations. But like George Eliot, we must drive below far ahead in human souls and find Beauty where lies in her most secret hues and tints. So doing, we would be able to show George Eliot's sense of Beauty as seen through *The Mill on the Floss*.

In accordance with this new state of mind, we can notice the appearance of a new feature, Music. Its importance in *The Mill on the Floss* increases the pathos of certain situations and brings to the fore the 'sensibility' of the author.

The first chapter of the book, above the setting description, shows a progression in the action of describing which puts a soul in the landscape:

A wide plain were the broadening Floss hurries on between its green banks to the sea, and the loving tide rushing to meet its, checks its passage with an impetuous embrace (...) Far away on each hand, stretch the pastures and the patches of dark earth made ready for the seed of broad-leaved green crops, or touched already with the tint of the tender-bladed autumn-sown corn (...)  
) And this is Dorlcote Mill. I must stand a minute or two, here on the bridge and look at it, though the clouds are threatening and it is far on in the afternoon. Even in this leafless time, of departing February it is pleasant to look at perhaps the chill damp season adds a charm to the trimly-kept, comfortable dwelling-house, as old as the elms and chestnuts that shelter it from the northern blast. The stream is brimful now and lies high in this little withy plantation, and half drowns the grassy fringes of the croft in front of the house. As I look at the full stream, the vivid grass, the delicate bright-green powder softening the outline of the great trunks and branches that gleam from under

the bare purple boughs, I am in love with moistness, and envy the white ducks that are dipping their heads far ahead in the water here among' the withes, unmindful of the awkward appearance they make in the drier world above ... Now I can turn my eyes towards the mill again, and watch the unresting wheel sending out its diamond jets of water. That little girl is watching it too; she has been standing on just the same spot at the edge of the water ever since I paused on the bridge. And that queer white cur with the brown ear seems to be leaping and barking in ineffectual remonstrance with the wheel; perhaps he is jealous, because his playfellow is so wrapped in its movement.<sup>15</sup>

This lengthy passage as we told it before shows a progression:

- First the writer describes the landscape surrounding the Floss -the stress is laid on the Floss and its banks. It is the background of more important items which will be shown later on.
- Then shown the mill, the description requires our being acquainted with the water first for: no water, no mill. Besides all that we are told the time of the year is winter. Yet, nature is in harmony with men; the vegetation is verdant.
- Now the river and the mill are put together and consequently we have to deal with the owner of the mill or of his house.
- Up to now, we are with the author forgetful of the characters who might be the real persons evolving in the novel. But George Eliot brings us back smoothly in the novel and we can see Maggie fascinated by the water which will be the cause of her death. The end is already foreshadowed from the very beginning. All the English country side receives its praises when, becoming a character of her own novel, George Eliot sings:

The wood I walk in on this middle May day with the young yellow-brown foliage of the oaks between me and the blue sky, the white star-flowers and the blue-eyed speedwell and the ground ivy at my feet - what grooves of tropic palms, what strange ferns or splendid broad petal led blossoms could ever thrill such deep and delicate fibers within me and this home scene? These familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird-notes, this sky with its fitful brightness, this furrowed and grassy fields, each with a sort of personality given to it by the hedgerows - such things as these are the mother tongue of our imagination, the language that is laden with all the subtle inextricable associations the fleshing hours of our childhood left behind them.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>George Eliot. *The Mill on the Floss*, Penguin English Library, Book first, 1860, pp. 3-4

<sup>16</sup>George Eliot. *The Mill on the Floss*. Penguin English Library, Book first, 1860, p.27

Here, we have George Eliot's source of imagination and her ranking among the greatest romantic writers. Her rhapsody over nature is simple but vivid. Moreover she shows us that imagination's source is nowhere but in nature and scenes which stir our emotion when our character is less toughened. George Eliot is also at ease when she is presenting calamities.

In *The Mill on the Floss*, we have examples of it at the beginning of Book four and at the end of the novel.

The various kinds of setting description given to us put forward the author's skill in painting nature; but the depth of her sense of Beauty is better shown in the soul she puts in this description, bringing there to confess her superior observing eye and her unique style in presenting it.

Besides George Eliot has talents of writer and those of naturalist, psychologist and painter. She is also a good musician. Certainly due to her sojourns in Italy, we are given in *The Mill on the Floss*, very nice musical pages in which we get above the symphony, the influence it produced on the soul and mind of the people present.

A fact is particular in the characterization of *The Mill on the Floss*; George Eliot presents the most important themes of her fiction through some characters: Destiny, Duty Honor, and Nemesis.

Though coming just after *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss* doesn't present the same vivid, faithful, and complete gallery of portraits we meet in the former. Indeed, no one can positively paint the characters of *The Mill on the Floss* from the description we get of its reading. Very slight allusions make us if the character is handsome or not, according to George Eliot's, canon of beauty, and some characters are totally physically unknown such as the Moggs, Mr. Moss, Kezia, the Turnbolls, though we can say everything of their various states of mind. As we can get now the action moves from the outer world to the inner. The entire novel has been pushed forward along its route by psychic forces. But as it is commonly said, everything that glitters is not gold and no human being's act is totally perfect.

### III- George Eliot's style

Above the message delivered in George Eliot's two novels, a common point can be noticed: the technique of writing.

In all the novels studied, there is a mechanism the readers are put in the setting beforehand and the characters are ushered in gradually. When they are all presented, the setting description makes off and the intrigue goes on with destiny standing by sarcastic with the **dramatis personae** folded in her hands

It also always happens that by the end of her novels, the story is developed at a smart pace. The reader is often left behind and it gives from the impression of a story which has finished in an unsatisfactory ambiance.

George Eliot's sense of Beauty cannot be defined in only one direction. It is a way of conceiving reality and life which is adapted to different situations: Faithfulness to simple reality in art and analysis of characters' motivations.

These two points include more developed items. Painting with the preoccupation to be closest to life for "art is the nearest thing to life:

"To this regard, the author gives too much important value to realism. the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite substantial reality".<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, Penguin English Library, Introduction, 1858, p.17



Setting descriptions like great names of the Romantic Movement are conveyed with much lyricism and pathos.

George Eliot has her own way of dealing with human beings. Her first preoccupation is to search in their deepest fibers the motivation of their acts, their states of mind which could explain their failings, their joys and their problems.

The first criterion of beauty in this domain is the ability of each to feel for his neighbor the simplest but the greatest of sentiment: Sympathy. The most beautiful character is the one with the richest stock of sympathy; physical features are of minor importance:

the balance in contemporary painting and literature needs to be weighted towards the laboring poor in recognition of the fact significant changes in English society have taken place in the last hundred years and that the human reality of this emerging order is all but unrepresented in the art of its time.<sup>18</sup>

The concern for the lower classes' welfare is paramount. As a rather new class, people of the second nation should know them better and get their importance in the historical process of their time and country.

Thus presented, I may not think that George Eliot's sense of Beauty is manifested at random according to various situations. I need to bring to the fore that George Eliot started writing at the mature age of 39—when people like Dickens had already made themselves known—and that her sense of Beauty had already been deeply enhanced in her mind. The progression of its form is then to be caught as the maturing of a fruit which had taken long time to come out.

When I come nearer to the expression of this sense of Beauty, there are some features which are always met and others more rarely. The question of each character's moral choice allows me to appraise the author's concern.

Such characters as Hetty, Arthur, Maggie, Stephen, Godfrey, Bulstrode, Fare brother, just to deal with a few of them are confronted to a moral choice and their attitudes in the trial speak either of their strength or their weakness. So their novels should be read though are several aspects of them worth considering here.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, it is important to advocate that artists do not create their works under conditions of their own choosing. Objective circumstances impose themselves, and the most searching artists must find a way in or around them. We value a novelist, for example, not by abstract, ahistorical, standard, but how he or she responded to the specific challenges of the day and the medium.

The whole of our study is centered on the acceptance of George Eliot's sense of Beauty which enlightened the readers' mind. This beauty can also be interpreted as the manifestation of a hope in the perfectibility of the human soul at grips with the adversity of society, nature and that of the human soul itself.

Therefore George Eliot's strength lies in profound and elaborate psychological studies of character. She was specially attached by rural characters that are so designed as to bring out the humorous as well as the pathetic side of human life together with its overmastering passions and their tragic consequences, humor, pathos and tragedy constitute the substance of her novels, the tragedy predominating. Here she invites the readers to respect the common sense of those characters.

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid p.19

Moreover as George Eliot did, this research work stresses on ‘‘painting’’ novels with good images or figures of speech help the readers be more interesting in what they are reading. In the same line of thought Ngara (1982:22) concluded

Readability is the result of a number of interacting factors. The style of the writer has an important part to play. A simple style is often easy to cope with, while the use of involved sentences and unusual words may result in difficulties for the readers. But an easy style is not necessarily a good indication of the novel’s readability; neither does a complex style necessarily hinder readability. A dull book in a simple style can bore the reader, stiff and tempt him to throw it away<sup>19</sup>.

That is why George Eliot’s novels are important as documents of their day and stand for ever. This paper then highly recommends that writers make use of these raw materials to convey their messages. This can help teachers of literature achieve one of their goals which is to make students talented in literature in the today’s world invaded by the Technologies of Information and Communication (TIC).

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<sup>19</sup> E, Ngara ‘‘Stylistic Criticism and the African Novels’’ London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1982.