

WHY DO WE STILL READ GEORGE ELIOT?

Daniel René AKENDENGUE
 Université Omar Bongo
 GABON

0. Introduction:

George Eliot died more than one hundred years ago (she was born in 1819 and died in 1880). She wrote eight novels of which the most important are Adam Bede (1859), The Mill on the Floss (1860), Silas Marner (1861), and Middlemarch (1872). What is striking is that people keep on reading her novels and short stories. Thus, our objective is to attempt to discover the reasons why her works are still read and enjoyed. In the first place, we will analyse the contents of her novels to see the themes which are developed. Next, we shall consider the realistic side of her novels. Then, we will study the religious aspect of George Eliot's work. Finally, we will attempt to demonstrate that George Eliot is a novelist of ideas and that this contributed to render her novels universal.

I. In George Eliot's novels, what attracts the reader is the the plot of the stories which are told. In Adam Bede, the novelist speaks of Hetty who dishonours her village because of materialism. According to George Eliot, Adam Bede is «a country story - full of the breath of cows and the scent of hay». The Mill on the Floss, which is her second novel, is the tragic story of a brother and a sister whose family relations are conflictual. As for Silas Marner, it tells the story of a weaver called Silas. The discovery of a child at his doorstep enables him to reintegrate the community. Finally, Middlemarch is the story of human relations in a provincial town.

Many themes are developed in George Eliot's novels. In Adam Bede, the novelist deals with good and evil. To substantiate my point, the theme of evil is symbolised by Hetty. Hetty is a young girl. She has not received a good education. In addition, she has not been marked by religion. Hetty Sorrel is one of those people who have learned their catechism, and who have attended church every Sunday. Unfortunately, they have never developed a true idea of Christian feeling. In Hetty's case, it is that lack of commitment to religion

which is at the basis of her attraction to things which have to do with the body, namely, pleasure and wealth.

Hetty likes material things. That image is conveyed in the chapter entitled «The Two Bed-Chambers». In that chapter, we are introduced to a girl who is keen on jewels and dressing. This is conveyed by the full length description on pages 196 and 197, where Hetty is seen dressing and contemplating herself. Here is a relevant passage:

And so she sat down again, with the large earrings in her ears and the black lace scarf adjusted round her shoulders. She looked down at her arms: no arms could be prettier down to a little way below the elbow. (P.196)

Two men enter Hetty's private life: Arthur Donnithorne the Captain in the Loamshire Militia, and Adam Bede the carpenter. The element which is worth stressing in Hetty's characterization, is her love for earthly things. Materialism is what restrains Hetty from marrying Adam. Hetty is prepared to marry Adam if the latter can afford to buy her those material things. Adam being unable to do so, she turns her attention towards Arthur. Hetty is sure that Arthur who has money can make her happy and throughout her life. And it is after these reflections that the young girl falls into Arthur's arms.

As a result of that adventure, she falls pregnant. What is alarming in Hetty's case is the fact that she is not yet married. Being pregnant without a husband, she goes against the moral code and principle of the society in which she lives. All can be mended if Hetty and Arthur get married. But that case can no longer happen because a conflict occurs between Adam and Arthur. As a result of that conflict, Arthur writes to tell Hetty that he breaks up his union with her, and decides to go and join the army.

It is at that level that the reader foresees what can happen. Being pregnant and realising that Arthur can no longer marry her, Hetty flees to a remote district and gives prematurely birth there. Hetty is very embarrassed. She does not know what to do with the baby. To bring it home will be shameful and she will probably be kicked out by her aunt. She therefore commits a sin: the murder of her baby. The theme of evil brightly emerges at that level. In the novel, there is a good passage in chapter 45, where the author depicts the shameful deed. The reader witnesses step by step the process:

And all of a sudden I saw a hole under the nut-tree,

like a little grave. And it darted into me like lightning.

I 'd lay the baby there and cover it with the grass and the chips. (P.499).

As a result of her crime, Hetty Sorrel is punished by the institutions. She is caught and put in jail where she waits to be hanged. But Providence will help her. She will be deported. Dinah Morris represents goodness. She is a good character. She is not selfish at all. She sympathizes with people. She wants to share the joys and sorrows of the others. Dinah's wish is to weep with those who weep and to laugh with those who laugh. In Dinah's characterization, we witness an important theme; that of sympathy and love for the neighbours. That theme is taken from The Bible. We see it in the Ten Commandments: «Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself» (Matthew 22, 37). Dinah is mentally active. She is always thinking about the poor, the underdog. She helps them morally. We are shown her moral activity in her prayers. In that respect, the chapter entitled «The prison cell» is relevant. Dinah manages to make Hetty recover her courage through prayers. Praying becomes a means of comfort, a source of moral strength. Furthermore, praying is seen in that chapter as a means to enter into communication with God and to ask for his forgiveness.

In her novels, George Eliot also develops the theme of tragedy. That tragedy is found through the themes of suffering, homely existence and death. In addition, tragedy is manifest in her books by the presence of life drama analogy. The theme of tragedy, which is present in George Eliot's novels, is but the reflection of tragedy that human beings are facing in their lives. For George Eliot, «tragedy is to be found not merely in high life romance or in extreme situations, but in homely and monotonous existence in the great ordinary course of everyday human life»¹. It is George Eliot's belief that life should be tragic. This explains in a way the presence of tragedy in some of her novels. The novel is for her an imitation of life on earth. And people like to read her novels because they feel concerned about the tragedy and destiny which surround the world.

Tragedy must not be reflected only in the succession of events. It must also be found in the situations and the representations of crucial moments. This important side of tragedy has not been neglected by George Eliot. The reader witnesses it almost all along her narrative.

On page 110 of Scenes of Clerical Life, the author saddens the reader through the description she conveys. The passage deals with the portrayal of the situation which presents itself after the death of Amos Barton's wife. It is a passage which is striking because of the intensity of the tragic of its painting. Here is the passage:

The burial was over, and Amos turned with his children to re-enter the house - the house where, an hour ago,

Milly's dead body lay, where the windows were half-darkened, and sorrow seemed to have a hallowed precinct for itself, shut out from the world. But now she was gone; the broad snow-reflected day-light was in all the rooms; the vicarage again seemed part of the common working-day world, and Amos, for the first time, felt that he was alone - that day after day, month after month, year after year, would have to be lived through without Milly's love. Spring would come, and she would not be there; summer, and she would not be there; and he would never have her again with him by the fireside in the long evenings.

In addition to the presentation of the tragic nature in the descriptions, we find in the author's narrative the presence of tragic situations. In Adam Bede we find a tragic situation when Adam discovers his father drowned in the river:

This was the first thought that flashed through Adam's conscience, before he had time to seize the coat and drag out the tall heavy body. Seth was already by his side, helping him, and when they had it on the bank, the two sons in the first moment knelt and looked with mute awe at the glazed eyes, forgetting that there was need for action - forgetting everything but that their father lay dead before them. (P. 96)

The reader discovers a pathetic situation on p. 612 of The Mill on the Floss. The scene is about the meeting between Tom and Maggie, a meeting during which Tom decides to turn Maggie out of doors, after her misadventures:

«Tom» - she began, faintly, «I am come back to you - I am come back home - for refuge - to tell you every-thing-»
 you will find no home with me», he answered with tremulous rage. «You have disgraced us all- you have disgraced my father's name. You have been a curse to your best friends. You have been base deceitful - no motives are strong enough to restrain you. I wash my hands of you for ever. You don't belong to me.

II. George Eliot is also much read because of the religious aspect which is strongly present in her novels. Adam Bede for example describes with vigour the impact of religion on the inhabitants of Hayslope. It is the influence of religion which obliges Hetty to flee her village, for she has been pregnant without being married beforehand. It is once more the strength and influence of religion which push her to kill her baby.

In Adam Bede, religion is represented by Dinah Morris, the priest of the Methodist Church of Hayslope. For example, she is seen preaching on page 68:

Saviour of sinners! when a poor woman, laden with sins,
 went out to the well to draw water, she found Thee sitting
 at the well. She knew Thee not; she had not sought Thee;
 her mind was dark; her life was unholy. But Thou dist
 speak to her, Thou dist teach her... Jesus Thou art in the
 midst of us, and Thou knowest all men.

Religion is also strongly present in Scenes of Clerical Life. The first short story entitled «The Sad Fortunes of Rev. Amos Barton» is profoundly religious. In this short story, George Eliot depicts Amos Barton, the pastor of Shepperton. The third short story entitled «Janet's Repentance» is also marked by religion which is represented by Pastor Tryan.

Thus, the contemporary reader reads George Eliot because he is interested in religion, and because George Eliot devotes a great space to it in her novels.

Religion has strongly influenced George Eliot during her childhood. That link to religion has orientated a lot her philosophy or doctrine of «sympathy», pity and love for the neighbour. She develops that principle in many of her novels and her collection of short stories. In Scenes of Clerical Life for instance, she says :

The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies; because art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow men. (P.15)

In Adam Bede, the narrator declares :
 These fellow-mortals, every one, must be accepted as they are: you can neither straighten their noses, nor brighten their wit, nor rectify their dispositions; and it is these people - amongst whom your life is passed that it is needful you should tolerate, pity, and love: it is these more or less ugly, stupid, inconsistent people, whose movements of goodness you should be able to admire - for whom you should cherish all possible hopes, all possible patience. (P. 222)

The novelist keeps the concept of sympathy present in in many episodes and the following passage of «Janet's Repentance» is just a case in point :

Janet felt she was alone: no human soul had measured her anguish, had understood her self-despair, had entered into her sorrows and her sins with that deep-sighted sympathy which is wiser than all blame, more potent than all reproof - such sympathy as had swelled her own heart for many a sufferer. And if there was any divine pity, she could not feel it. . . (PP.344-345)

Some pages further down, she adds, about Janet Dempster (the main character) :

The act of confiding in human sympathy, the consciousness that a fellow-being was listening to her with patient

pity, prepared her soul for that stronger leap by which faith grasps the idea of the Divine sympathy. (P.397)

Thus, to well demonstrate her doctrine of sympathy, George Eliot uses the pathos. She understandably creates pathetic characters and situations. The painting of pathetic moments is found in Adam Bede, Scenes of Clerical Life, and The Mill on the Floss. In Adam Bede, we can retain the moment when Hetty confesses her crime to Dinah, in the prison cell . It is a crucial moment . Hetty who had thus far concealed her crime, bursts out :

I did it, Dinah... I buried it in the wood... the little baby... and it cried... I heard it cry... ever such a way off. . . all night. . . and I went back because it cried. (P. 497)

In Scenes of Clerical Life, the passage which triggers off the reader's emotion, is the one which describes Mr Dempster's last hours. Let us specify that Mr Dempster is Janet's husband. He is a character in the short story entitled «Janet's Repentance». The scene showing his last moments, is saddening. In this short sequence, Janet speaks to her " husband for the last time". It is a very solemn moment :

«Robert, do you know me?»
He kept his eyes fixed on her, and there was a faintly perceptible motion of the lips as if he wanted to speak.
But the moment of speech was for ever gone - the moment for asking pardon of her, if he wanted to ask it. Could he read the full forgiveness that was written in her eyes? She never knew; for, as she was bending to kiss him, the thick veil of death fell between them, and her lips touched a corpse. (p.388)

In The Mill on the Floss, George Eliot excels in the painting of tragic moments. There are two of them which are worth our attention. The first one is found in the passage where Mr Tulliver is told that his furniture have been sold after his failure in the suit. At the moment his furniture were being sold, Mr Tulliver was sinking in a deep coma. After his coma, he remembered that he had lost the suit and that certainly his mill would be sold. But he had never thought that he could lose even his furniture. The tragic mo-

ment, the moment when he had to face reality, occurred when he rose from his bed and decided for the first time to go downstairs. His children, who imagined the shock Mr Tulliver could receive when he had ascertained the emptiness of his dining room, were very anxious. Mr Tulliver who had noticed the anxiety in his children's countenance, asked : «Have they sold me up, then?» he said more calmly, as if he were possessed simply by the desire to know what had happened»(P.347)

The short moment which followed was unbearable for the children who were very embarrassed. Mr Tulliver himself was desperately waiting for an answer. All had to be said, and it was Tom who was the first to disclose the truth to his father:

«Everything is sold, father; but we don't know all about the mill and the land yet», said Tom, anxious to ward off any question leading to the fact that Mr Wakem was the purchaser
« You must not be surprised to see the room look very bare downstairs, father», said Maggie, «but there ' s your chair and the bureau - they're not gone»(P.347)

The seventh chapter of the fifth book of The Mill on the Floss ends up with Mr Tulliver's death. Mrs Tulliver who had spent many hours at the bed-head of her husband, was now going through the most tragic moment of her life. She was powerlessly witnessing her husband's struggle against death. The moment is very tragic :

For an hour or more the chest heaved, the loud hard breathing continued, getting gradually slower, as the cold dews gathered on the brow. At last there was total stillness, and poor Tulliver's dimly-lighted soul had for ever ceased to be vexed with the painful riddle of this world. (P. 464)

Thus, the depicting of the tragic is vividly carried out in the situations that the characters face, and in some crucial moments of their lives.

But the tragic painting is also found in the portrayal of the characters, especially the main ones. The character we are interested in is Janet Dempster in Scenes of Clerical Life. She is the main character. Janet embodies the theme of "tragedy". Her life has been a failure. Janet had married Mr Dempster, a man who spent his time drinking and who often beat her.

The character of Janet is striking. Janet is a woman who suffers but does not want people to know about it. One of her main idiosyncrasies is her pride. Living with a drunkard and brutal man, Janet Dempster's life can be summarized using the term tragedy. On page 284, George Eliot conveys to the story-reader a short portraiture of this character. It is a passage which shows that the character is not happy :

Her grandly cut features with the natural paleness of a brunette, had premature lines about them, telling that the years had been lengthened by sorrow.

Janet has experienced a life which looks like hell. She has always been ill-treated by her husband, as the writer points out :

He (Mr Dempster) had no pity on her tender flesh; he could strike the soft neck he had once asked to kiss. Yet she would not admit her wretchedness; she had married him blindly (p. 335)

Janet lives in total despair. She has nobody to comfort her and does not want anybody knowing that she really suffers. Janet lives in a world of sorrows, disappointment and despair:

Poor Janet! how heavily the months rolled on for her, laden with fresh sorrows as the summer passed into autumn, autumn into winter, and the winter into spring again. Every feverish morning, with its blank listlessness and despair, seemed more hateful than the last;

every coming night more impossible to brave without arming herself in leaden stupor. (P.333)

On page 344, the novelist stresses the loneliness of the character: "Janet felt she was alone: no human soul had measured her anguish, and understood her self-despair, had entered into her sorrows and her sins".

In the first short story of Scenes of Clerical Life, the pathos is manifest when Amos Barton tells his children: "God is going to take away your dear mamma from us, she wants to see you to say goodbye" (P.107). The pathos is made more deeply distressing when the dying Mrs Barton says to her children: «I 'm going away from you, Love your papa, and take care of your little brothers and sisters. God will help you» (P.108). There is also pity in the next picture: «The mother motioned with her pallid lips for the dear child to lean towards her and kiss...»(p. 100). The function of that sentence is to render the theme of pity and compassion, dear to George Eliot, more vivid. Pity is

everywhere in the episode. For example, we read: «They (the children) cried because mamma was ill and papa looked so unhappy» (p. 108).

Pathos is patent while Mrs Amos Barton is dying: «They watched her breathing becoming more and more difficult»(P.108). It is total when Mrs Hackit tells Mr Amos Barton: «She feels no more pain now...» (p. 109)

So, pathos is very present all through the passage. George Eliot's aim is to lead us to sympathize with her characters. In that respect she says in Scenes of Clerical Life: "I wish to stir your sympathy with commonplace troubles to win your tears for real sorrow..."(P.97)

III. From another perspective, people like to read George Eliot because of the realism found in her novels. We can affirm that George Eliot is a realistic novelist, because her stories are drawn from reality. For example, the story of Adam Bede was told to George Eliot by her aunt. She says:

The germ of Adam Bede was an anecdote told me by my Methodist Aunt Samuel, an anecdote from her own experience... she told me how he had visited a condemned criminal, a very ignorant girl who had murdered her child and refused to confess - how she had stayed with her praying, through the night and how the poor creature at last broke out into tears,

and confessed her crime.(P.585)

In her portrayal of Dinah, George Eliot drew from her own scholarship and from personal experience. In preparation for Adam Bede, she annotated Robert Southey's Life of Wesley and used it in the setting the scene for the preaching.

George Eliot used to put in her novels and short stories people who had really existed. In Scenes of Clerical Life («The Sad Fortunes of Rev. Amos Barton»), the Rev. Johns has been identified as William Johns a well-known Unitarian minister and schoolmaster, who spent most of his adult life in Manchester and its surroundings.

The borrowing from reality is also seen when George Eliot says:

After I had begun «The Scenes of Clerical Life», I mentioned to George Lewis that I had thought of the plan of writing a series of stories containing sketches drawn from my own observation of the clergy, and calling them «scenes from Clerical Life» (P.429)

George Eliot told her husband in a note of Scenes of Clerical Life :

It will consist of tales and sketches illustrative of the actual life of our country clergy about a quarter of a century ago; but solely in its human and not at all in its theological aspect . . . representing the clergy, like any other class with the humours, sorrows, and troubles of other men (P.17)

Some of George Eliot's characters were close to her parents. Her father was an agent to the Newdigate family of Arbury Park, a man of sterling character, some of whose lineaments are recognizable in Caleb Garth in Middlemarch and in Adam Bede. Her early fiction is full of portraits of kinsfolk and neighbours. Tom and Maggie Tulliver in The Mill on the Floss represent broadly her relations with Isaac, and Celia, and Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch, those with Chrissey. The central plain, watered at one extremity by the Avon, at the other by the Trent, as she described it in the opening chapter of Felix Holt, with its meadows and homesteads, scattered hamlets and trim cheerful villages, was likewise to be the background of her earlier stories and novels.

To write Romola, George Eliot was inspired by reality. She prepared herself for the feat of writing that novel, by filling her notebooks on the spot, and by an exhaustive course of reading in historical books and modern literature.

George Eliot firmly believed in the portrayal of re-

ality that she assimilated to truth. She says in Scenes of Clerical Life : "My only merit must lie in the truth with which I represent to you the humble experience of ordinary fellow mortals." (P.97)

For George Eliot :

Art must be either real and concrete, or ideal and eclectic. Both are good and true in their way, but my stories are of the former kind. I undertake to exhibit nothing as it should be; I only try to exhibit some things as they have been or are . (P. 29)

In Adam Bede, George Eliot expressed her satisfaction about her conception of literature: "So I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things seem better than they were, dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity." (P . 222)

During the 1850's, George Eliot formulated her belief when she said in a note included in Adam Bede :

Art ought to embody the life of everyday, that is it ought to please and instruct through extending our sympathies ..., that realism ought to further its conquest of romance by patient observation and faithful depiction (P.21)

In George Eliot, truth was a doctrine and a conviction to which she held on with religious devotion. Truth was the whole duty of the novelist. The fullest statement of her artistic creed is in the opening statement to the second book of Adam Bede, where she says :

Certainly I could, my fair critic, if I were a clever novelist, not obliged to creep servilely after nature and fact, but able to represent things as they never have been and never will be. Then, of course, my characters would be entirely of my own choosing, and I could select the most

unexceptional type of clergyman, and put my own admirable opinions into his mouth on all occasions. But you must have perceived long ago that I have no such lofty vocation, and that I aspire to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. (P.221)

About truth in her novels, George Eliot adds in Adam Bede :

And I would not, even if I had the choice, be the clever novelist who could create a world so much better than this in which we get up in the morning to do our daily work ... So I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things seem better than they were; dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity, which, in spite of one's best efforts, there is reason to dread. Falseness is so easy, truth so difficult. (p. 222)

V. Conclusion

What fascinates the reader of George Eliot's novels is the moral side of her work. She was above all a novelist of ideas. In that respect, David Cecil says in Early Victorian Novelists :

The ideas which are their germ are all moral ideas; the conflicts which are the mainspring of their action are always moral conflicts. They divide themselves into two classes. In some, «Janet Repentance», Adam Bede, Silas Marner, the moral course is clear. The characters are in a position to do what they think right, only they are tempted to do something wrong instead; and the conflict turns on the struggle between their principles and their weakness.(PP.230-231)

George Eliot was not like the other novelists of the 19th century who used to write for entertainment, to

please the readers. In Early Victorian Novelists, David Cecil says :

The English novel, in its first period, consisted of a number of characters and incidents knit together by an intrigue centering around a young attractive hero and heroine, and rounded off with their happy marriage. (P.219)

George Eliot did not want to follow the traditional pattern of the plot. For her, it was not necessary that the plot resulted into a marriage, a happy ending, or a hero corresponding to the Victorian conception. George Eliot used characters and scenes to convey her ideas. Those characters and scenes were subsidiary to the central idea around which the story was built. Her books were structured around an idea. That is why David Cecil affirms in Early Victorian Novelists : «George Eliot's serious characters are envisaged exclusively in their moral aspect . They are portraits of the inner man» (P.232)

George Eliot was especially interested in ideas. In The Mill on the Floss, she raises the problem of conduct, i.e. how one should act if one wants to do right, but cannot find a satisfactory method for doing it. So, in The Mill on the Floss, Maggie Tulliver thirsts for righteousness, but she finds no way of satisfying her desire in the materialistic provincial world in which she lives. It is more or less the same problem in Middlemarch (1872) where Dorothea Brooke, the main character, wants to live a life of self-sacrifice for the good of others, but she cannot find scope for it in humdrum Middlemarch.

George Eliot's active generating brain forbade her to confine herself merely to describing and observing. She had to draw conclusions, to construct a system of values and to adopt an attitude of mind.

To wrap up, we can say that George Eliot's concentration on the moral side of human nature is the chief source of her peculiar glory, the kernel of her precious contribution to English and World literature. No wonder many people still enjoy reading her.

NOTES

- 0 Barbara Hardy, Critical Essays on George Eliot. London: Routledge &
- 1 Kegan Paul. 1971, P.197

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Résumé :

Le présent article tente d'expliquer ce qui fait la gloire de George Eliot, romancière anglaise, plus d'un siècle après sa disparition. L'article tente de découvrir pourquoi romancière est lue et relue plus de cent ans après sa mort.

Pour mener son étude, l'auteur de l'article se penche sur le contenu des romans, sur le réalisme, la religion et la philosophie de la romancière.

Mots-clés : Réalisme, religion, philosophie.

Abstract:

The present article attempts to clarify over what makes the glory of George Eliot, an English novelist, more than one century after her death. The article tries to discover the reasons which lead people to read her more than one hundred years after her death.

To carry out his study, the author of the article considers the content of her novels, as well as realism, religion and the philosophy of this novelist.

Key words : Realism, religion, philosophy.