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A critical appreciation of women's status in George Eliot's *Felix Holt, The radical*

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Abstract

This study focuses on the problem of the appreciation of Women's status in Victorian period. It aims at bringing out the value of women of the Victorian era and to reduce people's negative appreciations of women's affairs with a special reference to George Eliot's *Felix Holt The Radical*. To achieve our goal, we have used psychoanalysis and New Historicism as literary theories to critically overview of women's status in George Eliot's *Felix Holt, The Radical*. Our analyses have revealed that George Eliot resorts to his fictional work as a strategy to depict women's status. She also points up in her novel the real roles played by women that impact daily life in her period.

Keywords: Victorian era, status, affairs, women, psychoanalysis

Introductions

The status of the Victorian women was sustained in the constant approach of Victorian motherhood. The issue is the fact that many people consider a woman as simply a mother, no matter her age or marital status. Women are not simply reproductive machines, they are still often defined by the ability to be wife and mother to both husband and child. Women of the Victorian era were divided into three classes such as the Victorian lower-class women, middle-class women and Victorian upper-class women. They spent most of their time on socializing with one another. They were jobless, and they did not spend their time on raising children unless they were extremely poor. But, George Eliot's moral purpose in her novels was to emphasize the role played by women in diffusing human goodness throughout history. In *Felix Holt The Radical*, she made the transition from the more individual expression of female oppression to the thorough social analysis. George Eliot's sociological and political understanding of the women question has, as yet, been overlooked by most critics.

The objective of this study is to find out solutions to the problems of slavery, bondage which are parts of humans' challenges. The novel *Felix Holt The Radical* deals with political events and depicts a dynamic society stirred by eternal contradictions which raises antagonism among men and women and results in discrimination. That is why historicism theory and social criticism have been used to better understand what happened in the past as far as women's status is concerned in George Eliot's *Felix Holt, The Radical*.

This first part of our research work focuses on Woman's Fate and her Reaction to it in *Felix Holt, the Radical* the second discusses George Eliot's position about women status.

A Woman's Fate and her Reaction to it in *Felix Holt, the Radical*

Men Attitudes towards Women in the Novel

The first impression we have of Harold Transome is that his ambitions make him cruelly blind to his mother's hopes and fears. The very fact that she is a woman makes her hardly worth considering to him anyway. We have already looked at chapter one of *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Through Mrs. Transome's eyes, now let us look at Harold Transome through the same pages. Harold's greeting to his mother after fifteen years of separation consists of "a light kiss on each cheek"¹ and it is in the same moment that the terrible truth dawns on Mrs. Transome that her son is now a stranger. It is obvious from the first that Harold does not share the deep sentiments of his mother. He does not experience the same bitter disappointment at their meeting and he remains insensitive to the immense gulf which has produced itself between them. How marvelously George Eliot shows the insignificance of Harold's mother for him, in telling us that Harold only glanced at his mother in passing, the

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aim of his regard being the local newspaper. After only a very short while in the house then, Harold Transome shows just how brutal his lack of sensitivity makes him; his brutality being confirmed by his statement. "Gad. What a wreck poor father is." "Well, it's a slow and easy death." Harold did not ever notice his mother whilst quenching his thirst for local political information. Mrs. Transome remained dazed and disappointed in the face of this son, the fact of which he was either ignorant, or of which he preferred to be ignorant, and so he goes on to hammer the last nail into the coffin when she says without tact or gentleness "I'm a Radical". Consider for a moment the lot of his poor woman Mrs. Transome. She has placed all her hopes, in her younger n. She even wished the death of his brother that he might succeed; she wants him to be something grand all the wishes to be near to him in affection and understanding. However, when son comes back from abroad after fifteen years, he is not even interested in his other's state of mind or health. He cannot be bothered with her emotional scenes and he considers her only as an old woman whom he must pamper Mrs. Transome is powerless against the change in her son; powerless against her own fate which is so dreadfully linked with her son's career. As a mother she has nothing, as a wife she has no more, and as a woman she has misery as her punishment.

Harold is completely unconscious of his mother's problems and anxieties; he does not really care. He just wants a trouble-free time as far as all women were concerned, he does not relish the complications and awkwardness which he considers to be inevitable from the female quarter. Harold moreover makes known straight away his feelings on marriage. As we know, young Harry's mother is a slave, a situation which suits Harold very well since the woman would not have expected to have any say whatever in his affairs, and would run nicely to and fro in compliance with his orders: "I hate English wives; they want to give their opinion about everything. They interfere with a man's life. I shall not marry again" ^[1].

Mrs. Transome has always been used to a certain amount of responsibility expectantly concerning the Transome estate and it is a role which she enjoys, being an active and intelligent woman. Harold, however, has other ideas as to his mother's occupations. Behind the brief utterances which pass from Mrs. Transome to her son we denote a tone of self-pity and bitterness. She tries to reason with Harold at one stage but when Harold replies to her with the following statement poor Mrs. Transome is powerless in the evidence of his Will:

Women, very properly, don't change their views, but keep to the notions in which they have been brought up. It doesn't signify what they think - they are not called upon to judge or to act. You must really leave me to take my own course in these matters, which powerfully belong to men. You shall have a new carriage and a pair of bays all to yourself; you shall have the house done up in first - rate style, and I am not thinking of marrying. But let us understand that there shall be no further collision between us on subjects in which I must be master of my own actions ^[2].

Whatever Mrs. Transome herself might think, Harold. is the man and Harold's word goes. Mrs. Transome here echoes a sentiment which we have already mentioned, and which came from Mrs. Holt's lips. The words are different but the meaning is the same when Mrs. Transome says: "I don't know who would be a mother if she could foresee what a

slight thing she will be to her son when she is old" ^[3]. Mrs. Transome is doomed to be the beautiful doll of Transome Court, to be put on slow and cosseted, but not to be considered as far as feelings are concerned. When she has the affairs in her hands she "allowed things to go wrong," a fact which is set down by Harold "simply to the general futility of women's attempts to transact men's business" ^[4].

Harold cannot bear the thought of any female interference, since for him a woman can do nothing but interfere, and cannot possibly help since she knows nothing anyway. "Western women were not to his taste: they showed a transition from the feeble animal to the thinking being, which was simply troublesome."¹²⁹ The only time when Harold feels he must take his mother into his confidence concerning his affairs is when he considers visiting and wooing Esther, "but he needed his mother's assistance and it was necessary that he should both confide her and persuade her," otherwise she would have known nothing of his designs. Harold feels no sincere consideration for his mother as a being with an energetic, thinking mind, but he would rather not have die bother of another brain to deal with; he much prefer merely to occupy himself with the physical side of his mother's welfare.

We shall once again turn from Harold attitude to women as a son, and shall consider his attitude as a lover or husband. This is a mode of behavior which differs little from the one we have just discussed, since for Harold Transome all women could be easily categorized and ranged on the same shelf.

Harold Transome regarded women as slight things, but he was fond of slight things in the intervals of business; and he held it among the chief, arts of life to keep these pleasant diversions within such bonds that they should never interfere with the course of his serious ambition ^[5].

Women, for Harold, should not be particularly intelligent; indeed it appears that an intelligent woman would have been something of an oxymoron for him.. He considers them neither to be gifted in business or logic, and a woman so gifted is someone to be avoided at all costs since she would want a say in the rightful affairs of men. Harold has little or no respect for the female race and he treats all women as things to be pampered- cosseted and cared for materially, but as things incapable of dealing with any responsibility. Indeed even when he decided in his own mind that he would like to marry Esther he does not envisage any difficulty or obstacles in the accomplishment of his desire. Women, for him, were to lay themselves completely open to male persuasion, fall into agreement with male wishes, and obey men's orders, without showing a will of their own 'and it had never entered into that mind that the decision did not rest entirely with his inclination."¹³² Even the fact Harold has it in his mind to marry Esther, does not mean that at last he has found something worthy in a woman for "to be deeply in love was a catastrophe not likely to happen to him" ^[6].

It is obvious when pursuing the subject of the male attitude towards the female sector of society, in nineteenth century England, that Harold Transome's ideas are very typical of the time. Men in general regarded a wife as a burden, a woman as a liability rather than an asset, and if they' really had to take a woman on them they would rather have an empty-headed, pretty little thing that would not interfere in their affairs. They wanted wives who would be contented to stay at home sewing, and who would be one hundred per cent dependent on and obedient to, her husband, the master.

Felix Holt has already ruled the possibility of women out of his life, when still a young man at an age when young men's thought normally turns in that direction. His ambitions do not allow for the pastime of courtship and he is determined to fight against any natural impulses in order to aid the triumph of his aims and principles. It is interesting to note that for all men, a woman and unlimited success are incompatible, with the one ruling out the other. He has the same ideas on marriage as others; it is an institution certainly troublesome and definitely incompatible with ambition for he says:

I'll never marry, though I should have to live on raw turnips to subdue my Mesh. I'll look back and say: I had a purpose once - I meant to keep my hands clean and my soul upright, and to look truth in the face; but pray excuse me, I have a wife and children - I must lie and simpler a little, else they'll starve^[7].

Although Felix accepts women for what they are at this, moment in the novel and although he judges them by the same standards as others do. He realizes at the same time that they should fight for their personality and their rights. When Felix expounds these to Esther, the impression is strong that here is George Eliot herself speaking: "If a woman really believes herself to be a lower kind of being, she should place herself in subjection; she should be ruled by the thoughts of her father or husband. If not, let show her power of choosing something better". Felix had almost a horror of falling in love in the same way that Harold Transome has but even more deeply, since Felix is fearful for his principles as well as his ambition. He has chosen to live his life according to noble ideals and to try to do something constructive to help his fellow man; therefore he does not want either his will or his results ruined by a woman as shown here: "Men can't help loving them, and so they make themselves slaves to the petty desires of petty creatures. That's what women a curse: all life is stunted to suit their littleness"^[8].

Felix has a lot more to think about than to worry his head with women's problems and consequently his affectionate affair with Esther occupies much less of his-time than it does hers. It does not take first place in his hierarchy of values, as it would have done in many other young men's. Felix can stand back from his affections and look at situation coolly. As a matter of fact, the narrator pointed out that: "He had thought a great deal of Esther with a mixture of strong disapproval and strong liking, which both together made a feeling the reverse of indifference; but he was not going to let her have any influence on his life. The reactions of lawyer Jermyn to women once again accord with our findings so far. All three men fall, with individual modifications, into the accepted pattern of men's behavior. However, Jermyn finds himself in no position to study the cares of this same woman, and any reminder of that past affair is troublesome, the fact of it could prove to be inconvenient, and according to his traditional "right" as a man. He chooses to ignore the woman who once sacrificed so much for him, and his only wish regard to Mrs. Transome is that his past relationship with this lady should never cause him any bother. It is for these reasons that Mrs. Transome finds herself as powerless With Jermyn as she does with her son. Even Jermyn does not reflect upon the suffering and discontent of his ex-mistress, all he is worried about is

avoiding any unpleasantness between Harold and himself. In taking a brief look at one or two very minor characters we shall get a more general impression of these same sentiments. Sir Maximums Debarry does not understand his wife's remarks about the inevitable concern of Mrs. Transome with regard her son and grandson, and he shrugs the matter off with the words: "look my dear; women think so much of the minutiae."

Christian's attitude also follows the familiar plan, for, when talking of Wycliffe's marriage he says that "He made a fool of himself with marrying"^[9] and that his wife, Annette's Leduc is "one of your meek little dialyses, who have a will of their own once in their lives - the will to choose their own master."^[10] And when talking of Annette's eventual fate he says with cynicism "there's no knowing what a woman will not do."^[11] To add one more to the long chain of men's much guarded superiority over women we hear the man in the pub saying: "I've been a forced to give my wife a black eye to hinder her from going to the preaching. Lords-a massy, she thinks she does not know better nor me, and I can't make heard nor tail of her talk"^[12]. Thus, the natural thought of men for women, the traditional power which the former exercise over the latter, and the consequent scale of importance in qualities which men create for women, are common to all walks of life, to all social classes, as we have seen in the same way that the woman's inferiority does not change whatever her social position.

Women Attitudes towards Women in the Novel

It is obvious that Mrs. Debarry expects a woman's humour to be influenced above all by the man in her life, and she expects her to take the limelight and to leave it only according to the time, being so indoctrinated into the traditions of the country, would have agreed with her. Esther is particularly upset by appearances since she has little knowledge of either women or men. All her judgment are based on visible data and although, for example, she sees the suffering undergone by both Mrs. Transome and Mrs. Holt, she finds sympathy for the former merely because she finds her more honourable, discreet, and majestic than Mrs. Holt and therefore, for Esther, more worthy of consideration. As for Felix's mother, Esther is merely embarrassed by her direct manner and complaining tongue. She dislikes any lack of refinement in a woman and dismisses the crude with obvious awkwardness. So the following quotation may be a good illustration: "And in spite of the almost solemn memories connected with Mrs. Holt, Esther's first shudder was raised by the idea of what thing this woman would say, and by the mortification of having Felix in any way presented by his mother"^[13].

When Mrs. Transome meets Esther for the first time, the old lady prepares herself to be extremely critical. She is pleasantly however, and what is interesting to notice are the criteria by which Mrs. Transome judges Esther. These criteria are the very ones which society has laid down, the physical and compartmental requirements. Esther, the old woman decides that she is sufficiently superficial and would be acceptable among the aristocracy. It is ironic that a woman who abhors the fact that she should be judged by such values, judges others. During the course of the friendship between these two women however, Esther begins to see a little through the shining varnish of Transome Court life, and in doing so she realizes that Mrs. Transome is not as happy as she could appear to be. Esther,

however, does not grasp the fact that. this unhappiness, the grief and misery, which are apparent in the old woman's face and voice, are caused by men. It is through no fault of her own that Mrs. Transome is dissatisfied with her life to all accounts she is a rare beauty, a woman full of grace and elegance, not simple of mind, and of a penetrating insight and extraordinary understanding. The dissatisfaction results from the very fact that Mrs. Transome does have all these attributes at the same time as being a woman.

A woman of the day did not need the more subtle qualities; indeed they were not to be desired. Esther doesn't really seem to understand just how deep and destructive the problem was, and all she saw was its results. She doesn't have the same degree of comprehension as the older woman, and yet she feels that all is not well. It is on purpose that the narrator said that: "The sense that Mrs. Transome was unhappy affected Esther more and more deeply as the growing familiarity which relaxed the efforts of the hostess revealed more and more the threadbare tissue of this majestic lady's life" ^[14]. The impression that Esther would be perfectly satisfied with her cushions and embroidery if Felix Holt were at her side, is quite strong. Denner knows when Mrs. Transome is suffering and tries her hardest to comfort the old lady; she often knows, too what causes the suffering even if she doesn't understand why. Mrs. Transome can safely reveal her innermost thoughts to Denner - never in so many words, but by more subtle and discreet means - without the anxiety as to their being passed on, and yet not with the certitude of them being thoroughly understood. Denner, for her part, has full comprehension of Mrs. Transome's worries as a mother and about her past affair, but she doesn't grasp the full implication of the various events.

Denner considers each situation and applies her own philosophy to it, then she does her best to persuade her mistress that all is, in fact, not as dramatic as she would imagine. Mrs. Hickes is completely devoted to her mistress and feels the bondage between them the more strengthened because of the intimate trust which is placed in her. Mrs. Transome's maid -is presented to us as a -small, neat, exquisitely clean old woman ^[15]." Dernier, as we have said already, is resigned to her fate, and therefore happier in her existence than her mistress. Her regard for Mrs. Transome is one verging on worship. This is pointed out by the following word: "There were different orders of being - so ran Denner's creed - and she belonged to another order than that to which her mistress belonged ^[16]".

The important thing about these two women is that both the maid and the lady feel the same inferiority, the same lack of liberty, and powerlessness as all women felt, and yet the one comes to terms with these feelings and the other continually struggles with them. Yet again we see two women from totally different backgrounds, but with the same problems by the very virtue or vice of their being women and with the only thing in common between them being a deep understanding of the sufferings of their sex and thus of each other. The following quotation shaved that:

There was a tacit understanding that Denner knew all her mistress's secrets, and her speech was plain and unflattering: yet with wonderful subtlety of instinct, she never said anything which Mrs. Transome could feel humiliated by, as by a familiarity from a servant who knew too much. Denner identified her own dignity with

that of her mistress ^[17] and then Mrs. Transome knew perfectly that Denner had divined her thoughts ^[18].

Mrs. Transome feels that her whole life has been "full of fears" ^[19] and now there is nothing left for her as an old woman. Denner's philosophy however is extremely different. She feels that everyone is given an equal chance in life, but this chance depends on what happens to him or her in a chain of events. The events are linked and each depends on which goes before which leads eventually to a bad or a good end. Thus Denner is never really destroyed by a piece of bad link since she feels that she might always gain in the end. Her own description of her theory for life expresses extremely well what we are trying to say by the use of an image: "I look upon it; life is like our game at whist, when Barks and his wife come to the still-room of an evening, i don't enjoy the much, but I like to play my cards well and see what will be the end of it ^[20]".

Before Harold's return she is perhaps too a symbol of Mrs. Transome's magnificent past, her rights as a lady, but now that she has all the comforts Denner becomes above all a valuable listener, a kindred spirit. Someone cares for Mrs. Transome even if that someone is only the maid, when everyone else is too preoccupied or not interested enough anyway. "If she was important to any one, it was only to her old waiting-woman Denner ^[21]. George Eliot uses -an image when describing these two women which exactly conveys to us the comfort which Denner represents for her mistress. "The sensations produced by Denner's presence were as little disturbing as those of a favorite cat ^[22]. Denner was there to be talked to, to be reassuring, yet Mrs. Transome feels that "you (Denner) will never understand what I suffered ^[23]." From an old maid to her old mistress who shares their sorrows, we have two women, who suffer from their sex, and it is this suffering which joins them together in sympathy: "The small quiet old woman obeyed, as she had always done. She shrank from seeming to claim an equal share in her mistress's sorrow ^[24]".

In conclusion we can see that women were so conditioned as to judge other women, by the same value as men used, physical and family values, and yet between all women who reflected upon life, a little we have an inevitable bond of sympathy and understanding. Each-woman, in no matter what social position, knew that she suffered immeasurably through being a woman. The attitude of the population of Treby Magna is one of not wanting to be troubled with the fair sex, consequently the more bird-brained and unthinking a woman is, the less complicated and more pleasant life is. A woman was generally considered to be a burden, and one not to be taken on until one was in a boring enough stability for he) to be an asset, and certainly not to be considered if one were still trying to get somewhere in life. Let us examine some of the reaction of the chief male characters to their female counterparts.

Discussing George Eliot's position about women status

George Eliot has contradictory attitudes to the position of women: her own struggle for a literary career coupled with the materialistic world view gave her an acute understanding of the oppression women endured under a patriarchal system. But at the same time she felt that women had a distinctive psychological makeup which meant they could exercise a special beneficent moral influence in social life. She would not admit woman's full equality with man

because she felt that the complete emancipation of her sex might coarsen the feminine nature. What is reflecting in her fictional writing, often marring the unity of her presentation of female characters ^[25]. In *The Mill On the Floss*, Maggie Tulliver is clearly struggling for some personal identity other than the strictly "feminine" one her brother Tom insists on. However, by the end of the novel Maggie has apparently found fulfillment in passive submission to Tom's male superiority ^[26]. One of Eliot's greatest achievements as a novelist is her determination to take the bitch seriously. With Mrs Transome she probes the usual stereotype of the evil woman to show that she is as much victim of a repressive patriarchal society as is the more attractive character Esther Lyon. But she does not carry through her sympathetic understanding of the bitch character.

Furthermore George Eliot shared the feminist movement's intolerance of the exclusion of women from educational and professional opportunities as well as its resentment at the inequalities between men and women inscribed in legal and political institutions. Not only did she meet some of the most influential campaigners for female rights; almost every woman with whom she was close from the 1850s onwards was active in the women's movement. Yet Eliot's support for reform was as cautious as it was ambivalent. At the height of her fame she still refused to take a radical stance on the issue of women's rights partly on the grounds of its complexity, and partly out of a belief that pronouncements on the "woman question" did "not come well" from her. Her reluctance was in part the result of her compromised social position as the partner of George Henry Lewes and a fear, perhaps that support from a woman who had lost social respect would endanger rather than promote the female cause. Early feminist criticism was largely hostile to Eliot, disliking her conservative portrayal of women. Yet one key effect of having set her novel back in time is that the women she depicts are even more restricted socially and economically than those of her own age, so that the frustration of ambition is brought into sharper focus ^[27].

Conclusion

Esther is a product of her environment as much as Mrs. Transome. These are smart and capable women, but they do not live in a system that encourages or allows them to be their best selves. This argument is not new. Wollstonecraft, Craik, Cobbe, and other women of the time have made similar arguments, that women are not educated to anything better, to be better citizens. The experience of older motherhood of a middle- to upper-class woman highlights the consequences for women living within a system that encourages them to nothing better. But in choosing something better for herself in Felix, rather than ease with Harold, Esther is choosing the possibility of effecting wider public because her private life is one that will allow her greater agency individually. The experience of older motherhood shows that the promise of separate spheres consistently fails women. Marriage and motherhood are supposed to bring bliss, happiness, and dominion over the home. Age exacerbates the issues already inherent within separate spheres when a woman no longer has the authority of adulthood over her child or legal citizenship herself. The appearance of older ages trips away all the promises of wife, motherhood, and class that separate spheres appears to give to women.

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