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BOOK REVIEW

By Kathleen Porter

FORMS OF FEELING IN VICTORIAN FICTION

By Barbara Hardy (Peter Owen, London, 1985)

The art of representing feeling within a fictional character, and of eliciting response from the reader, was well understood by the great Victorian novelists. Their methods were so successful that the characters they created and the emotional experiences they described affect today's readers as powerfully as the readers of their own time.

In this study, Professor Barbara Hardy examines the forms and languages used by various authors to represent feeling, to analyse it, and to manipulate readers' responses. She begins by considering the techniques of some earlier writers from which developed the more 'realistic' Victorian forms of fiction. She chooses quotations which invite the reader to return to the novels with a mind sharpened by her acute observations.

Professor Hardy shows Dickens presenting passionate feelings in fairly crude theatrical form. "He is better on jealousy, pride, revulsion, fury, fear, gluttony and sloth, than on love." When the mature Dickens applies control and restraint, he is more successful, and more analytical, in his representation of the emotions.

The sympathy and irony of Thackeray, the intensities of Emily Brontë, the conflicts of passion and reason in the novels of Charlotte Brontë, and her use of allegory and personification, are all considered in
detail. Professor Hardy argues that Thomas Hardy imaginatively places "episodes of feeling" within the whole structure of the novel, making the passion part of the pattern. Her brilliant exposition of Henry James's complex structures guides us through his highly concentrated forms of expression. She marks his different use of the omniscient narrator. James's characters know what they are doing and feeling; they are conscious and critical of themselves, and the narrator observes and analyses from within the character, preparing the way for writers of the next century.

Isabel Archer, in The Portrait of a Lady, had read George Eliot, and, not unexpectedly, Professor Hardy reaches her peak in the chapter on George Eliot. Professor Hardy says, "George Eliot's presentation of emotional experience is marked by continuity and exceptional flexibility of form." The quotations from the novels show her presenting scenes in an intense manner, using symbolism, metaphor and allegory to describe the rise and flow of a character's feelings. One of her great strengths is the use of an omniscient narrator with moods and emotions, to comment with sympathy and irony on the various dramas and crises of her characters' emotional lives. George Eliot's readers are asked to give "a pity which is scrupulously particularised and analysed."

This short book, stimulating and invaluable to the seriously interested reader, has one flaw: it has no index.