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Ian Sutton
Day School on the Novels of George Eliot at Birkbeck College

A seminar on George Eliot's novels was held at Birkbeck College, London, on Saturday, November 13th, 1993. It was chaired by Laurel Brake, of the Extra-Mural Department of London University, and the speakers were Rosemary Ashton, Professor of English at University College, London, Sally Shuttleworth, Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Leeds, and Gillian Beer, Professor of Literature and Narrative at the University of Cambridge.

Rosemary Ashton's paper, was '*The Mill on the Floss* and Natural History', which drew interesting parallels between the novel and Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Ideas on the science of natural history, evolution, survival and inheritance from one generation to the next were very much in the air (particularly in the circle of G. H. Lewes), but Ashton's final verdict was that they could not be seen as central to the story. A suggestion in the discussion which followed that Maggie's choice between the crippled Philip and the fit Stephen was symbolically an evolutionary one found no general favour.

Sally Shuttleworth looked at 'Sexuality in the Novels of George Eliot': in *Adam Bede*, where the equation Hetty = sensuality and Dinah = spirituality was seen to be inadequate; in *The Mill on the Floss*, where for the first time sexuality was thoroughly integrated with moral choice; and in *Middlemarch*, where (the speaker felt) the portrayal of Dorothea's sexuality was compromised by the stress on her child-like character. Dr Shuttleworth illuminated the whole topic by her account of contemporary medical opinion on sex and the female body, which was seen as a suppressed volcano of desire - a view that may be reflected in the way that even George Eliot separates desire from knowledge (a separation that does not occur in the 'sensational', though lightweight novels of Rhoda Broughton). The subsequent discussion gave the audience a chance to discuss a question of perennial interest to George Eliot scholars: did Dorothea really have sex with Mr Casaubon?

Gillian Beer's talk, entitled 'What is NOT in *Middlemarch*', was more discursive. She showed how the circumstances of publication, in separate volumes over a whole year, would have affected the way its first audience read the novel; how that audience - and the author - would have brought the concerns of 1870 to bear on a story of 1830; how little was the nostalgia that George Eliot felt for a vanished world; and how contemporary criticism - that the novel lacked spirituality and was basically pessimistic - was in many ways true. Perhaps the most original aspect of this talk was Professor Beer's examination of the advertisements that accompanied the separate volumes of *Middlemarch* - from a 'natural cure for baldness' to 'Chocolat de la Compagnie Coloniale'.

Sometimes these advertisements show intriguing parallels with, and tacitly comment on, the action, but how far George Eliot could have been aware of them and whether they had any relevance at all to her art were questions prudently left unresolved.