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**TO EDUCATE OR NOT TO EDUCATE:
PATTERNS FOR WOMEN IN GEORGE ELIOT'S NOVELS**

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Throughout her novels, George Eliot points out the deplorable state of education for women in the nineteenth century and the effects that poor education has upon the individual. Only limited schooling, if any, was available to girls whose parents could not afford to pay substantial sums, and too much schooling for girls was commonly viewed as unnecessary and even dangerous. In addition, schools generally spent a large proportion of their time teaching various "accomplishments" and very little on more academic subjects. Characters in most of Eliot's novels reflect common perceptions on education for women and illustrate the undesirable results of inadequate or inappropriate schooling.

An assortment of Eliot's characters make statements to the effect that women should not know too much. Regarding Dorothea's studies which she undertakes to help Casaubon in his work, her uncle Mr. Brooke says, "We must not have you getting too learned for a woman, you know" (Middlemarch 174). When Maggie Tulliver is a child, her father states (in her presence):

She understands what one's talking about so as never was. And you should hear her read – straight off, as if she knowed it all beforehand. And allays at her book! But it's bad . . . a woman's no business wi' being so clever; it'll turn to trouble, I doubt. (Mill 15)

Tulliver earlier told his wife that Maggie is "twice as 'cute as Tom. Too 'cute for a woman, I'm afraid" (Mill 11). Tom Tulliver feels threatened by his sister's abilities with books. In an attempt to obtain support for his belief that girls are too silly to learn subjects such as Latin, Tom appeals to his teacher. Mr. Stelling pleases Tom and wounds Maggie by stating that girls "can pick up a little of everything, I daresay. . . . They've a great deal of superficial cleverness; but they couldn't go far into anything. They're quick and shallow" (Mill 132).

Many of Eliot's male characters prefer women who lack education or even intelligence. Tulliver describes his wife to Mr. Riley: "I picked her from her sisters o' purpose, 'cause she was a bit weak, like; for I wasn't agoin to be told the rights o' things by my own fireside" (Mill 17). Harold Transome in *Felix Holt* does not want any competition from women; he is interested only in subservience (292). He tells his independent-minded mother, "I hate English wives; they want to give their opinion about everything. They interfere with a man's life" (19-20).

In contrast, several of Eliot's women are criticized because of their lack of education or intelligence. When Felix Holt first meets Esther Lyon, who teaches French and has been reading Byron, he decides that she is shallow and silly (66). Similarly, Daniel Deronda perceives Gwendolen Harleth as an "ill-educated, worldly girl" (385; ch. 35). A common explanation for the lack of any necessity for education for women is presented by Duncan Crow in *The Victorian Woman*:

What was the point of proficiency in the use of globes or in Latin, Italian or even French when the girls would never have the need to use such knowledge? What a girl needed to know was how to care for the sick and how to sew and how to cook, and these things she did not learn at school. Furthermore, the competitive spirit which prevailed at school gave them the wrong ideas. When they came home there would be no question of competing; it was their duty to submit to the will of their elders, especially their male elders.(60)

All too often, this opinion was shared by both men and women.

Eliot's female characters receive a wide variety of types of schooling, ranging from that of a dame school to the attentions of expensive boarding schools and governesses. In most cases, the academic curriculum is very weak and the emphasis on suitable accomplishments is pronounced. The education of Nancy Lammeter, the daughter of one of the leading men of Raveloe, stopped with her experience at Dame Tedman's. Although Eliot never describes the school, its effectiveness can be judged to some extent by its impact upon Nancy:

Her acquaintance with profane literature hardly went beyond the rhymes she had worked in her large sampler under the lamb and the shepherdess; and in order to balance an account, she was obliged to effect her subtraction by removing visible metallic shillings and sixpences from a visible metallic total. (Silas Marner 142; ch. 11).

Although Nancy seems to have learned very little at Dame Tedman's, at least it is not reported that she suffered from mistreatment or from the unhealthful conditions which were common at many such schools.

Several of Eliot's female characters attend boarding schools located either in England or on the Continent. Maggie Tulliver and her cousin Lucy Deane attend Miss Firniss's boarding school, where Maggie wishes to read books with deeper content. Rosamond Vincy of Middlemarch attended a more prestigious school, a fact in which she takes great pride:

She was admitted to be the flower of Mrs Lemon's school, the chief school in the county, where the teaching included all that was demanded in the accomplished female—even to the extras, such as the getting in and out of a carriage. (143; vol.1; ch. 9)

Four of Eliot's major female characters attempt to improve their level of education for particular reasons. Romola continues to do her classical studies so that she will be more useful to her father, Bardo Bardi, and will, perhaps, be more attractive to some scholar who might marry her and help Bardo. Dorothea Brooke Casaubon studies Latin and Greek so that she will know more about the things which interest her husband and will be able to assist him in his research. Gwendolen Harleth forms a plan of study which she hopes will increase her understanding of the world and please Daniel Deronda. Maggie Tulliver studies because of the escape it provides as well as because of her own genuine interest and sense of self-fulfillment. In fact, although her potential as an intellectual is not fulfilled, Maggie spends more time in the study of books and gets more pleasure from learning than any of Eliot's other nineteenth-century women.

During much of the nineteenth century, a well-educated woman was an anachronism. A number of Eliot's characters become disillusioned either because of the criticism they receive for their interest in learning or because they find that the information they have obtained or the accomplishments they have acquired are misleading or useless.

Although Eliot stated repeatedly that the overall level of education for women should be raised and that this improvement would be beneficial to society in general, she also held in contempt women who flaunted their knowledge or who stressed the superiority of their own intellectuality. In "Janet's Repentance," Eliot provides the example of Miss Pratt "the one blue-stocking of Milby," who has an extensive collection of books and who writes shallow poems with insipid titles (210-211). In "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," written for the Westminster Review in 1856, Eliot comments on

several novels and points out what she finds most offensive about them. She also explains that these writers, and the atrocities they create, are not so harmless as they might seem:

If, as the world has long agreed, a very great amount of instruction will not make a wise man, still less will a very mediocre amount of instruction make a wise woman. And the most mischievous form of feminine silliness is the literary form, because it tends to confirm the popular prejudice against the more solid education of women. (Pinney 316)

Eliot was often hesitant in expressing specifics concerning what she thought a girls' school should offer to or demand of pupils. However, she was quite firm in stating repeatedly that women should have an opportunity to share in the same basic knowledge as men.

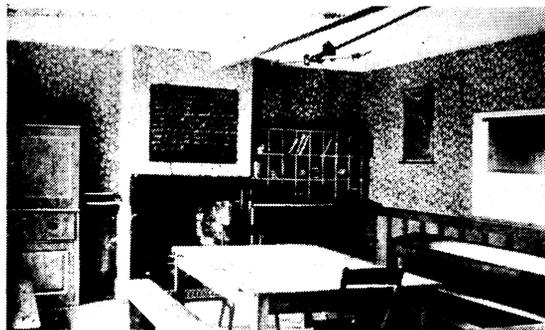
None of Eliot's women characters is active in the campaign for women's rights, enrolls in an institution of higher education for women, or even attends the sort of educational lectures which had been open to women for many years. However, Eliot was certainly not unaware of these possibilities. Her English female characters are not pioneers but women who, from the late 1700's through the mid-1800's, suffer from the combined effects of a secondary social and legal position and inadequate education.

Eliot was never an activist for the cause of women's education, but she supported the founding of Girton College, Cambridge, and contributed toward the establishment of a college for working women, as well as making her opinions about education for women very clear in her letters, essays, and novels.



*Exterior of the Elms,
Vicarage Street, Nuneaton
which Mary Ann Evans
attended from 1828 to 1832*

*Classroom interior at the Elms,
Vicarage Street.*



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