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The Seventeenth George Eliot Memorial Lecture: George Eliot and Marriage

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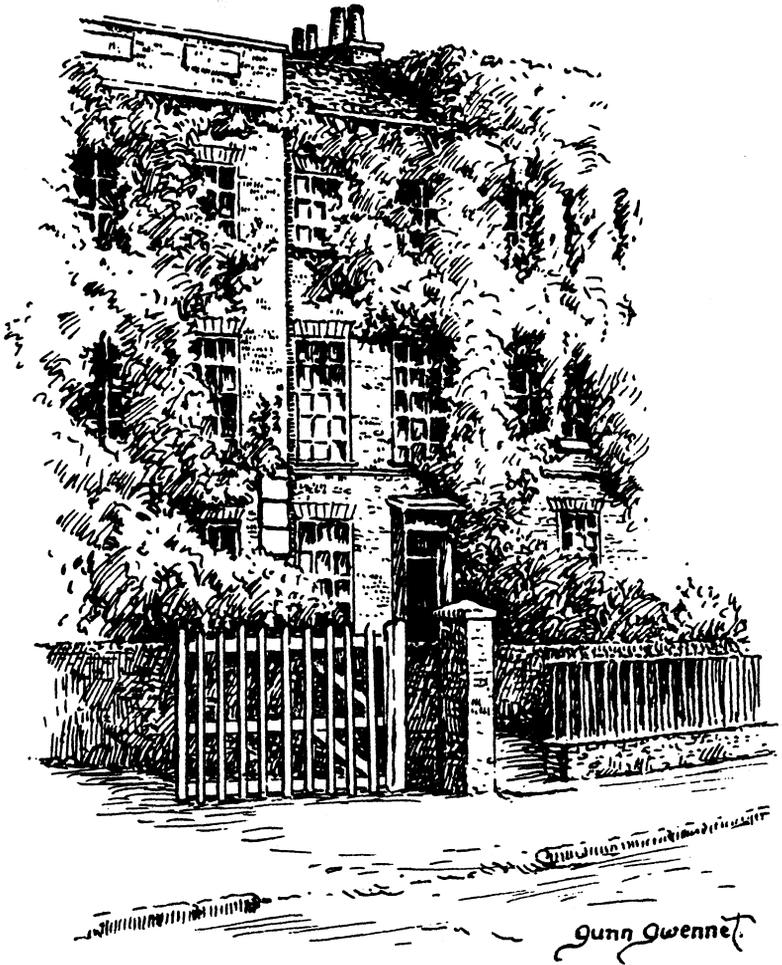


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N^o8, Parkshot,
Richmond, Surrey.

George Eliot and G. H. Lewes moved into lodgings here in October 1855. It was to be their home for 3½ years. Here the scratching of George's pen nearly drove her to distraction! The house was demolished many years ago.

(illustration from George Eliot by Blanche Colton Williams, published by The Macmillan Company, New York, in 1936.)

The Seventeenth George Eliot Memorial Lecture - 1988
delivered by Graham Handley

GEORGE ELIOT AND MARRIAGE

Marian Evans and George Henry Lewes began to live together in July 1854, and her letters to friends and to her brother Isaac later show how seriously she regarded their relationship. As far as she was concerned it was permanent, a marriage of true minds and hearts. As she put it, 'Light and easily broken ties are what I neither desire theoretically nor could live for practically. Women who are satisfied with such ties do not act as I have done. They obtain what they desire and are still invited to dinner. 'In her letter to Isaac she refers to Lewes as her husband; her dedications of the manuscripts of her novels are always to her dear husband. Yet she was hurt and humiliated by the fact that society did not accept their union. And thus, after 24 years of 'married' life with Lewes until his death in 1878, she was still unsettled enough to need the formal tie denied her with him. And 18 months after Lewes's death she married John Walter Cross, 20 years her junior. Seven months later she died.

Biographers have generally regarded her 'marriage' to Lewes as being uniformly happy. I find this hard to accept - though of course I suggest that they were very happy for the most part - in view of George Eliot's presentation of the trials and tribulations of marriage over the range of her fiction. Both Lewes and Marian were moody and suffered from ill-health; their relationship, I suggest, had its own ups and downs which were beneath the surface of anything that has been discovered. She drew from life, from her own observation of relationships but she drew also, I suggest, from personal experience.

From the first story onwards marriage is presented as a trap as well as a delight. Milly Barton with her growing family has poverty to contend with as well as her husband's insensitivity to the burdens she carries. She accepts it all, even draws sympathy and love from it, but we note the author's irony as she dies, the implication being that only too late does he realise what he has inflicted upon her by being blind to her needs. There is no word of criticism from her, but this enhances the sympathetic appraisal of her marriage experience. In Janet's Repentance that experience is even more searing though it is qualified by optimism and redemption. Janet comes through the valley of alcoholism into the green fields of salvation, but not before she has been brutalised and degraded by her degraded husband. We are moved by her isolation within her marriage, but it is not until we move on to The Mill on the Floss that we have marriage explored at depth. It is a twofold exploration, given at a comic and economic level with the Dodson aunts and their spouses, given at an intensely dramatic level, ultimately a tragic level, with Mr and Mrs Tulliver. As with Jane Austen, money plays an important part in the marriages of George Eliot's fiction. Mrs Glegg's loan to Mr Tulliver and her threat to call it in show the profit-motif which rules her behaviour: she is somewhat mollified when she realises that her own husband has provided rather better for her than she had hoped. Mrs Tulliver has an irascible husband who goes to litigation and loses, subsequently has a stroke, and is bankrupted. By the Dodson code she has married badly. But the sensitivity and insight with which she is drawn is remarkable, and even more remarkable is the focus on the broken father and his attempts to make small retributions to the wife he has failed.

Silas Marner has another kind of marriage situation. With the death of his wife, who remains unidentified publicly, and the bringing up of his child by Silas, Godfrey Cass is free to marry Nancy Lammeter, who knows nothing about the first wife. Their marriage is childless (Nancy's baby dies)

but some sixteen years on all is revealed and Godfrey is forced to confess. Here his own abject egoism and her sublime acceptance of what has happened are probed with a tremulous truth to life. Marriage does not turn out as we expected it would: we do not know our own partners, and the experiences and concealments make for complex relationships and misunderstandings. This is not pessimistic but realistic: there can even be a greater coming together as a result of revelations which bring with them the need for emotional and sympathetic adjustment.

In Romola the marriage of Tito and Romola is given with the now customary insight and sympathy, but here there is a difficulty. Whereas Tito breathes the impure air of corruption and betrayal which is part of the quality of life, Romola breathes too much of her author's approval. The egoist marries the saint, but whereas the egoist is real the saint is merely idealised ink. In Felix Holt we have a wonderful study of the isolation of the woman in a sterile marriage. I refer of course to Mrs Transome, whose husband is now senile: not only does she have to live in this dead present, she also has to live with her secret, the fact that her son Harold (unknown to himself) was fathered by the family lawyer Jermyn. Consequently we view marriage in name only, and a woman who has put status and respectability in the forefront of her life. Nemesis is near, but the investigation of her consciousness in suffering is one of George Eliot's artistic and sympathetic triumphs in her presentation of the terrible isolation and loneliness within a marriage.

With her last two novels George Eliot's examination of marriage reaches its full maturity. The idealistic Dorothea marries the pedantic Casaubon and suffers from a coldness and distance that breeds hatred. The examination is not one-sided though, and husband and wife are brought temporarily together in human communion and sympathy before Casaubon's death. Also investigated at depth is the marriage between Rosamond and Lydgate, where the presuppositions before marriage are translated into the terrible fact of incompatibility afterwards. Lydgate's idealism is destroyed by his wife's inflexible egoism. And if these two marriages are presented with realistic intensity, so too, in brief but telling compass, is that between Bulstrode and his wife Harriet. With convincing and sure psychological insight George Eliot shows Harriet responding to adversity and disgrace with loyalty and love.

Daniel Deronda marks the most positive investigation of marriage in George Eliot's fiction. Gwendolen, though aware that Grandcourt has a discarded mistress and children, marries him from economic necessity and in the mistaken belief that she can manage him. She can't, but he not only manages her, he reduces her: we feel that she is sexually compelled and degraded. The result is that she wishes to kill him - or herself - and that when he drowns she feels that she is responsible for not saving him, that her wish has in fact become murder. She too has been isolated in her thoughts and emotions during the most intimate of relationships.

As I said earlier, George Eliot is not pessimistic but realistic, probing with great subtlety and truth the marriage state. Marriage, unlegalised, made her an artist, and the presentations of marriage within her art show how real and imaginative was her study of it.