

Session 6 - Critical Responses

Below is a collection of 19th and 20th century criticism on the works of George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell, two of the great Victorian novelists whose works are still in print. To finish our session of discussions on these two writers, I offer these comments and criticisms as a way to make us think of the achievements and the legacy of these two very famous women writers.

Eliot's comments on Gaskell's work:

Gaskell seems to me to be constantly misled by a love of sharp contrasts - of 'dramatic' effects. She is not content with the subdued colouring- the half tints of real life. Hence, she agitates one for the moment, but she does not secure one's lasting sympathy, her scenes and characters do not become typical. But how pretty and graphic are the touches of description.

How far would you agree with Eliot's views on Gaskell?

Deanna L. Davies, 'Feminist Critics and Literary Mothers: Daughters Reading Elizabeth Gaskell' (1992)

Unlike her contemporaries Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell has occupied a shadowy position in feminist criticism: neglected by some critics because of her conservative values, uneasily respected by others for achieving literary and financial success. When seeming to warrant study at all, she has often bewildered feminist critics who do not find in her work the kind of protest that makes Brontë and Eliot seem such modern women. Yet it is too easy to dismiss Gaskell as simply a less powerful and talented writer than her acclaimed cohorts.

What kind of 'protest' do you feel makes the writings of Brontë and Eliot seem more 'modern' than Gaskell's? In what ways might Gaskell be viewed as 'modern'?

But Cynthia is more complex and more likeable than Rosamond, she is Gaskell's triumph. In her editor's opinion: 'one of the most difficult characters which have ever been attempted'. Andrew Davis says: 'What I think is so remarkable is that Gaskell treats her with such insight and sympathy. One can readily imagine how George Eliot would deal with such a character - poor Cynthia would get a fearful drubbing. *Newsletter 29*

What are your views on the way Eliot and Gaskell treat their respective characters? How far do you agree with Andrew Davies' view of Eliot?

Geoffrey Sharp writes about Gaskell (Observations and Inventions p 547)

Whenever the opportunity arose, attention was called to those aspects of her fiction which betoken the pen of a lady - novelist; on such occasions the term 'authoress' appeared appropriate....

She had, moreover a woman's concern for the significant trivialities of daily intercourse, and could depict the manners of Lancashire operatives with the same vividness as she portrayed those of Knutsford ladies.

What are your views on Gaskell's use of detail? In what ways does Eliot use detail, are they the same as or different from Gaskell?

Geoffrey Sharp:

If one were to make any adverse criticism [of Gaskell] these would concern the lack of grand designs and the absence of a pervasive philosophy: Mrs Gaskell possessed little architectonic power; nor did she see into the life of things.

How far do you agree with these comments? Could they in any way also apply to Eliot?

Continues....

Similar criticisms have been levelled against Gaskell by both male and female critics. The comments below come from Patsy Stoneman, Elizabeth Gaskell 1987

- Lack of proportion and correctness (Dale Spender).
- Failure to come to a point (H. P. Collins)
- Confusion of different issues (Edgar Wright)
- Inclusion of adventitious, unnecessary and irrelevant material (John MacVeagh)
- A general lack of focus (H. P. Collins, Kathleen Tillotson and John Lucas)

How far do you feel the above comments provide a fair summation of Gaskell's work? Which of the above criticisms might you apply to Eliot and why?

Shirley Foster on Eliot from 20th Century Perspectives: vol pp.210 and 211

Though Eliot calls into question the romantic codes and social conditions which deny women alternatives to matrimonial fulfilment, she nevertheless maintains her basic conviction that marriage represents the heart of female experience, often a means of moral regeneration as well as emotional satisfaction. Almost none of her heroines tries seriously to challenge the supremacy of marriage in women's lives. Eliot herself idealises the qualities most closely linked with women's traditional roles of wifedom and motherhood, glorifying the virtues of service, devotion to others, and self-abnegation. This idealisation of womanhood seems to derive from her own ambivalent attitude to womanhood.

...Her heroines attain individual pre-eminence by achieving traditional standards -they become exceptional not by defying conventional roles but by excelling in them. Defaulters are punished according to the extent of their departure from them.

In what ways do Gaskell's heroines follow this path and in what ways do they differ from it?

Manchester Quarterly 1908 v. 27

Thomas Newbigging writes on George Eliot:

She is skilled in the deep secrets of the human heart, and is often abstruse when dealing with ordinary sentiments and incidents.

And on Gaskell in the Athenaeum March 1866 the reviewer, after deeming Wives and Daughters an 'every day story', writes:

'An every day story' is no easy thing to write – especially if the horrors and the crimes which every day fill our police - vans are avoided.

How far do you agree with the above statement?

Though she can fathom the depths and unravel the intricacies of character, she cannot be said to be skilful at plot. In depicting character and in analysing motives she is unrivalled.

How far is the above statement true of Eliot and Gaskell?

James T Foard, Manchester Quarterly

The chief excellences of all George Eliot's books are their psychological delineation of her own wrestlings of soul, doubts and trial and tribulations, mental and spiritual and the autobiographic insights that they afford of a very cultured, gifted and phenomenally masculine feminine mind.

How far do you agree with the above statement and how much of it can be applied to Gaskell?