

A letter on George Eliot's Adam Bede

16 January 2010

The following letter was sent to the World Socialist Web Site in response to "In praise of George Eliot's Adam Bede on its 150th anniversary"

David Walsh's piece on George Eliot rounds out the last year's important anniversaries. Eliot's novels remain some of the most important of the 19th Century, and have a striking relevance to life today. It was a sensitive and insightful choice and this article should be read through alongside Walsh's article on "Why We Need Byron".

I think Walsh is quite correct to draw attention to Eliot's historical context—the growth of industrial capitalism in Britain, but also the stunning developments in mid-Nineteenth Century European art and science as a whole. Heinrich Heine, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Vissarion Belinsky, not to say Darwin, Dickens, and Eliot herself, discovered something truly objective about human life. She could not have produced what she did without the cultural ambience produced by the others.

As another contemporary of Eliot's, the critic Matthew Arnold, remarked, "[The great work of literary genius] must have the atmosphere, it must find itself amidst the order of ideas, in order to work freely; and these it is not so easy to command.... For the creation of a master work of literature two powers must concur, the power of the man and the power of the moment, and the man is not enough without the moment...."

This network of thinkers also has, as Walsh indicates, important ramifications for our own work in politics, science and culture, and these figures need to be systematically studied to help stimulate new and progressive development in the 21st Century.

Eliot's fiction continues to illuminate the emotional potentialities and limitations of our own lives. Although the particular social circumstances that Eliot

describes may be more-or-less extinct in themselves, they have transformed and developed themselves and remain a part of us as historically developed human beings.

One finds relevant and memorable scenes in nearly every book of hers: the tenderness and humanity of the character Silas Marner in the novel of that name, how Marner defeats the expectations of lazy town gossips (and the reader), and how wonderful it is to discover what people are really capable of.

The Mill on the Floss shows the complexity of emotions in family relationships but, unlike much contemporary fiction, in front of a social canvas that is illuminated in detail: people are capable and incapable (often in spite of straining) of certain thoughts and actions because of who they are in the social structure of the 1820s in Britain. Eliot carefully depicts the intelligence in men and women of the middle class and the moral conflict economic and social success bring.

Her masterpiece, *Middlemarch*, cannot be encapsulated in a few words, but its theme, the intrusion of money and tradition into the most intimate emotions still carries weight every single day for millions of people, though certainly in a way different from what Eliot was able to understand in 1872.

Even her less-than-perfect works can entertain us and teach us: *Felix Holt: the Radical* shows us the first stirrings of the modern British working class, and the emergence of the personality type of the political worker even at a moment when the working class remains tied to the bourgeoisie. Her historical novel, *Romola*, exhibits Eliot's knowledge of and feeling for Renaissance Florence.

One of the most important things Walsh has done with this article is to shed light on *Adam Bede*'s Chapter XVII, "In Which the Story Pauses a Little," where Eliot speaks as an author writing about people that lived 60 years earlier, "dreading nothing but falsity." The chapter is a consideration of what art is in

its relation of objective reality, a question that has preoccupied the truly great artists.

As Georg Lukács says of similar passages by Goethe, Balzac and Tolstoy, the chapter is a “part of the unbroken chain of splendid examples of this organic unity of literary effectiveness and theoretical insight....” Lukács notes that for artists of the highest caliber, “an original and profound mediation about problems of literature and art is seen as one aspect of their mastery of reality, as a prerequisite for an accurate and adequate representation of reality.”

By bringing Eliot forward, the *WSWS* reminds us that this sort of theoretical aptitude is also necessary for insightful artists today. My sense is that the article provides invaluable help to artists by showing them what to strive for in this respect.

Sandy English
11 January 2010



To contact the *WSWS* and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact