

SYNOPSIS

George Eliot's professed intention as a writer to enlarge the sympathies of human beings is regarded in a number of feminist commentaries as conflicting with feminist ideology and aims. A review of selected feminist readings of Eliot's fiction reveals that feminist readers tend to associate the representation of **sympathy** with the diminishment of Eliot's female protagonists. This negative view of sympathy partly stems from how it is conceived by Eliot. Sympathy is ideally an inherent virtue in women; an essentialist conception that for many feminist critics alarmingly echoes patriarchal ideas of woman's nature. However, radical feminist thought offers a different understanding of sympathy and accompanying qualities such as self-doubt, sensitivity to others, and self-transcending willingness to reconcile conflicting human needs. These qualities, traditionally designated feminine and effectively rendered powerless and inferior in the patriarchal milieu, are accorded revolutionary significance, *revalued*, as the foundation-stones on which radical feminists endeavour to build an alternative morality to that of **patriarchy**. The critical relevance of revaluation, starting from and ratifying the author's intention, is then assessed in the context of the dominant current critical approach, postmodernism.

Romola illustrates the revolutionary **significance** of sympathy through the juxtaposition of the history (herstory?)

of the eponymous heroine and the experiences of the men in her life. Romola, seeming to vacillate between feminist self-assertion and reactionary self-sacrifice, is found to be consistently revolutionary as her steadfastness to the values of caring and consideration for others places her in opposition to the alienating, annihilating values of her patriarchal environment.

The popular perception of **Felix Holt** as George Eliot's political novel is refuted in favour of moral interpretations of the radicalism depicted in the novel and the parallel postulated between this moral radicalism and Eliot's radical feminist vision. This reading discloses the unity of the novel beneath the putative dichotomy and artistic inequality of its two strands of narrative. The **deconstructive** criticism and the rejection of patriarchal customs and mores for a life of sympathy that is conveyed in Felix's and Esther's stories is complemented by the depiction of patriarchal baseness, deceptiveness, and oppression in Mrs. **Transome's** tragedy.

Attitudes to and expectations of marriage expressed in **Middlemarch** are taken as indicators of the characters' moral and feminist stature. **Dorothea's** marriage to Casaubon and **Lydgate's** to Rosamond are discussed to explore the dangers of the illusions fostered by patriarchal values and stereotypes as well as the conflict between patriarchal and feminine values within and between individuals. **Dorothea's** second marriage to Ladislav is read as an affirmation of her feminine values while another aspect to **Lydgate's** tragic end is put forward.