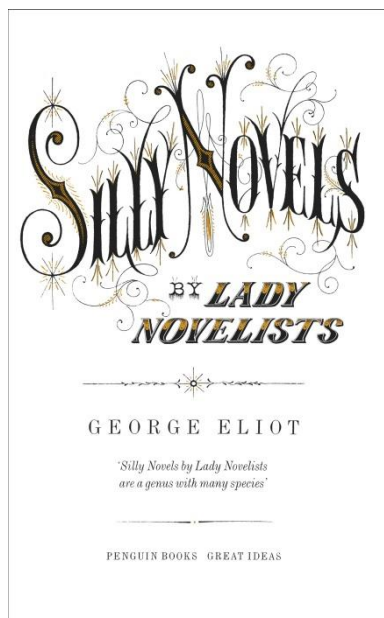

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**“Annihilating Vanity”: Challenging Women’s Writing in
George Eliot’s *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* (1856)**



Treball de Fi de Grau / BA Dissertation

Author: Clara Sánchez Artero

Supervisor: Dr Carme Font Paz

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística

Grau d'Estudis Anglesos

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, women have endured the consequences of gender inequality by virtue of their feminine sex. Successful novels by women from the late eighteenth century well into the nineteenth century were more often considered as commercial products than as literary works. George Eliot (1819-1880) challenges this notion in her essay “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists”, published originally in the *Westminster Review*, while, simultaneously, she directs a critique on certain types of novels designed for a female readership that she considers degrading. In spite of being a remarkable writer, Eliot’s motives and harshness towards her fellow women novelists were and are questioned. However, she criticises the alleged “silly novels” so as to conduct a social commentary and issue a call for a literary female revolution. Eliot aims at escaping the stereotypical connection between women and romance while searching for a non-limiting literary expression that ties female readers to love stories. She also discusses education for women, class discrimination and struggle, religion and intellectual pursuits. My study will examine Eliot’s “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” (1856) to ascertain Eliot’s concept of ‘silly’ and identify the main criticisms she makes to novels by women. I will pay particular attention to Eliot’s ideal notion of a novel, as well as the main dangers she attributes to the novel for women, thus anticipating Eliot’s steadfastness in her belief in women’s intellectual powers and ability to be active participants in social change and gender equality.

Key words: George Eliot, silly, novel, women’s writing, social class, education.

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Introduction

Across the centuries, a social system influenced by patriarchal dynamics questioned and limited women's abilities and expression on account of their gender. Focusing on the literary marketplace of the nineteenth century, and in spite of a considerable number of women writers, the female gender was still mostly regarded as incapable of true good writing. Albeit for a few exceptions, cultural biases relegated women to a secondary category in the practice and art of literature, separate from the "true" literature which was exclusively written by men as they were the ones suited and thought to write quality compositions. "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" (1856) by George Eliot, the pseudonym of Mary Ann Evans, challenges this judgement. Her essay is a critique on feminine novels that the author considers degrading. Her determined and revolutionary spirit embodied in her words is questioned by the harshness directed towards her fellow women novelists. Anderson and Shaw consider that Eliot's "tone of the essays is characteristically harsh", but that in her novels, by contrast, "the quality of the narrator's presence helps us to view with a sympathetic understanding unappealing characters whom we would otherwise pass over quickly" (Anderson & Shaw, 2013: 8). Eliot engages in a social commentary on what those 'silly novels' represent, and with it she aimed to inspire a literary revolution for women, as well as debating other topics concerning women in Victorian society. Even though her position and intention were made clear for some people, her writing created controversy to the extent to which she is indeed, calling for a revolution or merely degrading the works of other women since she opposes their views. Therefore, this paper will seek to clarify and examine her intentions behind this apparent 'harshness' towards her fellow women. This research paper studies George Eliot's "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists", published originally in October 1856 in the *Westminster Review*. Eliot appraises novels written by women authors and exposes their misleading victories,

inevitably generating controversy. The aim of this study is to ascertain Eliot's concept of 'silly' and identify the main criticisms she makes to certain novels of her time. Her ideal conception of a novel will also be determined, along with her thoughts on the dangers that these female novels transmit, thus anticipating Eliot's steadfastness in her belief in women's intellectual powers and ability to be active participants in social change and gender equality.

Historical and Social Context

The Essay "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" was written in 1856, halfway into the Victorian Era. This was a time of political reform and social change. At that moment, Britain was the most powerful Empire in the world: a culturally rich class-based society with a wealthy and powerful government. The head of the country was Queen Victoria, who ruled from 1837 to 1901, and was head of the Anglican Church as well, even though other faiths coexisted in the territory. Her reign did bring wealth and power, while the country was engaged with the culmination of the Industrial Revolution, which was an impasse for the working-class, who eventually gained some political power due to their activism and were later granted (male) voting rights in 1884. Other major factors that affected England in this period were the abolition of slavery of the British Empire and its colonial growth, Darwin's Theory of Evolution, the rise of Liberalism and the Irish nationalism, improvements in health and education. Towards the middle-end of the Victorian era, economic growth was, as usual, followed by an economic depression that outlasted the period.

Victorian society based its core moral codes on respectability and virtue as far as women were concerned. The ideal was to consider them 'Angels in the House', and so

hypocrisy was ingrained in society with a sexual double standard: men were hungry for sex while women knew nothing about it. Sexuality, their own bodies and even childbirth were not publicly nor privately discussed. Women had to fulfil their duties in this area by giving birth to children and complying with their husbands' desires. The doctrine of "separated spheres" was a gender-based social organization that placed women in the private sphere and men in the public sphere. Women raised children and dealt with the household while men were the socially and politically active individuals that provided for them.

The history of women writers in Britain and Victorian literature is closely connected to the evolution of the novel, as I will explain shortly. The English novel was already an established genre by the time Queen Victoria came to the throne, with the success of novels by eighteenth-century writers such as Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding or Tobias Smollett who gave an impulse to what Ian Watt called "The rise of the novel". Readers felt attracted to novels as they allowed the exploration of the nature of the individual and his/her relationship with society (Watt, 2001: 10-11) as well as the ways in which this new genre delved into the varieties of human experience and characters. Jane Austen famously described the novel in *Northanger Abbey* as "a work in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language" (2008: 65). As a woman novelist, she was also aware of the fact that describing human nature touched upon the relationship between individuals and entrenched forms of thinking and acting that were usually hostile to women. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the novel was often the place to provide commentary and analysis on greater social concerns, while Britain consolidated its leadership in the industrial world and grew richer in a burgeoning free trade economic system that created

wealth while working men and women struggled for subsistence (Wilson, 2006:16). This phenomenon was famously termed “the two nations” by the writer and later on Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli in his novel *Sybil* in 1845. In fact, most of the political measures passed by the government were more conducive to protect the economy than its citizens (Dennis, 2000: 20). One of the philosophies that sustained this indifference towards human suffering was Utilitarianism, predicated by Jeremy Bentham, which regarded all institutions of social life according to their usefulness, considering this the measure of all happiness: “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” (Dennis, 2000: 12). Charles Dickens, Thomas Carlyle and George Eliot, for instance, often included characters in their novels that reflected the excesses of utilitarianism and explored the possibilities for social reform inspired by the new Evangelical movement of Methodism and their emphasis on good works. George Eliot was familiar with the Evangelical movement from her schooldays, and she reflects upon its virtues and limitations in novels such as *Middlemarch*, where the character of Bulstrode is caught between the need to perpetuate a positive social image of his financial success, while being mortified by the ways in which he won this advantageous position (Plotz, 2013: 82). As a novelist and thinker, Eliot was interested in portraying the contradictions of this new society through the social and spiritual forces that affected its characters, and the ways these prevented true creativity and intellectual endeavours to flourish. She was also interested in transforming the novel into a locus of feminist awareness, rather than allowing it to be an instrument that perpetuated women’s subjection to the system by participating in it. While she acknowledged that the profession of novelist had always been open to women, in her essay “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” (1856) she compares women novelists with governesses, women who adopted the profession because it was a ‘feminine’ way to earn a living. However, she admitted in her essay, published in the *Westminster Review*, that

“fiction is a department of literature in which women can, after their kind, fully equal men [...] and women can produce novels, too, that have a precious speciality, lying quite apart from masculine aptitudes and experience” (Nunokawa, 2013: 197). Writing these novels required a ‘defeminizing process’ (Wilkes, 2010: 11). According to her, “women had a “genuine observation, humour and passion” and that prepared them to confront major questions regarding the human experience. She also believed that any novelist should seek what she termed ‘the quality of truthfulness’. As Gilbert and Gubar said, what Eliot finds inimical to women’s progress was “a paralysis of self-loathing” and the “debasing and enfeebling of the minds and souls of women” (2010: 466). Eliot directed her criticisms towards modifying this state of intellectual paralysis, as she was aware of the fact that most women novelists were not commonly seen as capable of being writers but rather as women who wrote. Subsequently, their works were taken into account and judged more as commercial products than as literature, which was written essentially by ‘learned’ men. When the genre of the novel appeared, it was contemplated as plain writing for simple-minded readers and hence, suitable for women’s writing. The novel had gained full respectability by the nineteenth century, but most novels by women were still received with scepticism and their quality was often questioned. Male writers entertained three main representations of women: the angel who was an innocent, passive and submissive woman; the evil or femme fatal, which tended to be a prostitute, a witch or everything a woman must not be; and their “ideal”, sometimes a female character left the pattern only to design a new one as a new role model, for instance, Mina Murray in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). The outcome was the same: images imposed on women to tell them who they were supposed to be. Thus, the novel was widely employed by women writers to question and defy that which limited them and silenced their voices.

George Eliot's Life and Work

Mary Ann Evans, born in 1819 in Warwickshire, England, was a Victorian novelist who published her works under the pseudonym of George Eliot. She was raised by a well-positioned family in a rural county that allowed her to grow up surrounded by books and to receive a conservative education. She was a heartfelt Evangelist when she was young because of her environment. Her mother died when she was fairly young, this event made her come back home from school to her father, whom she lived with until his passing. In her twenties she first became acquainted with intellectuals and was attracted to rationalism. This promoted her new political and religious ideas: the more her intellectual horizons broadened, the furthest she was from the religious faith she once cherished and, consequently, became estranged from her father. She moved to London, where she established her permanent residence and lived her life to the fullest, outside the typical social constraints. Evans travelled all over Europe, worked as a translator and editor, she was a poet, a writer and a literary critic. She became one of the main contributors and assistant editor of the *Westminster Review*; however, the only articles signed by her belong to the *Fortnightly Review*. The reason behind this was the convention at that time of journals acting as one single voice; this implied no censure for reviewers, which was a positive trait, but anonymity meant no credit for their work: its end was promoted by the *Fortnightly*, yet the previous production was not in vain:

“From 1851 to 1854, George Eliot edited the *Westminster* without pay or acknowledgment, gaining experience and exerting influence without formal recognition. (...) George Eliot wrote reviews to earn money but writing them was also a valuable intellectual exercise for her. These pieces reveal her extensive reading and her skills as a critic. Reviewing taught her to go straight to the heart of a book's content.” (Harris, 2013: 35)

Poetry is not the genre and area for which Eliot is best known; nevertheless, she was persistent in her writing since it allowed her to experiment with metrical forms, themes and mythical characters. Another reason could be the popular belief, as Harris speculates, that novel-writing was an art form of less value than poetry and Eliot wanted to be considered also a participant of this higher literary genre (2013:36). As her life was ripe with experiences, she also wished to give those the best form that suited the expression of truth and genuine feelings. Eliot was also unconventional in her personal life, as she lived for many years with the philosopher George Henry Lewes until his death in 1878, a married man who never divorced regardless of being alienated from his wife. Even though they did not formalize their relationship, they considered themselves husband and wife, and Eliot even took his name after he died. During her final years, Eliot engaged with a relationship with John Walter Cross, who was twenty years younger than her. They got married and she passed away that same year, on December 22, 1880. Eliot was a prominent intellectual, artist and innovator ahead of her time; she did not let the social conventions and sexism of her time prevent her from doing what she desired.

George Eliot has been called “the first modern novelist” due to the fact that she encouraged a crucial transformation for the development of the English novel. In 1858, the name George Eliot appeared for the first time in a published collection of short stories. In spite of this, the first work ever published by the author was in 1846 and anonymously. *Middlemarch* (1871-72), *Daniel Deronda* (1876) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) are some of her most significant novels and are characterized by being mature novels, in the sense that, compared to the vast majority of novels in her time, which aimed for a young public, Eliot’s catered all readers. Eliot examined real subjects from the daily lives of men and women, within the family, the community and their inner selves. Honesty and traces of her infancy are perceptible in her writing and the themes are explored with great

intensity and depth. She believes that individuals have the essential abilities to move towards a better society and uses her fiction to instil her ideals in her readers. What characterizes her work is that she defies Victorian social standards –in her writing as well as in her life– without breaking apart from tradition. She takes it towards a new direction by using old methods for new purposes: Eliot is an innovator. The main features could be summarized as an intellectual approach to the central issue of her novels; plots that denote complexity and dramatization; and the use of psychological observation and realism for themes such as the social status of women, marriage, religion, political reform, morality, human relations and education, among others.

Mary Ann Evans became George Eliot in order to protect her privacy and also the public judgement and rejection that many female writers of her time endured, especially if they led unconventional lives. Signing her works as a male author granted her the opportunity to position herself as one of the major novelists of her time; in addition, since she was already a well-known figure, she could also be evaluated separately from her previous works as a translator and journalist. In addition, this advantage allowed her to write according to her own taste and views of life instead of writing those unrealistic romantic novels she abhorred. Nonetheless, after a few men attempted to claim authorship on her talent, Mary Ann revealed her identity upon the publication of her novel *Adam Bede* in 1859. After claiming authorship, she continued to write under the pen name George Eliot and her works remained being respected, in spite of the ‘scandalous’ personal life she led; her culmination arrived with *Middlemarch* (1871-72). She died in 1880 having earned the highest honour and admiration from her peer novelists. The fact that she disguised herself as a male author creates certain controversy: it is true that being a female writer was extremely complicated back then, nevertheless she is, at the same time, disassociating herself from everything related to the female literary tradition:

“As the means by which Eliot was able to gain cultural power, extending the range of possible subject matter and audiences for her work. In this way, Eliot was able to position her work within "high-culture" literary tradition during an era when women's writing was increasingly assigned low cultural status”. (Easley, 1996: 146)

She aims at empowering women while hiding herself behind a man’s name, as if she was admitting that a woman could never triumph in the literary world. Her idea was a valid one and her plan worked, so why did she keep the pseudonym after claiming authorship, instead of emphasizing her gender when she was already a respected writer? Perhaps she wanted to be included in the men’s world and open a door for the rest of women writers. Her character creates controversy in her life-decisions as well as in her writing. Her essay “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” is as well a source of debate given her attitude towards her fellow female novelists. I shall return to this matter in chapter one.

Chapter 1

George Eliot’s Reasons and Consequences

1.1. Eliot on Silliness and its Dangers

While George Eliot remained in Richmond, working chiefly on “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists”, she became “increasingly irritated by what she read, and increasingly determined to prove for herself that ‘women can produce novels not only fine, but among the very finest’” (Uglow, 2008: 82). Eliot’s understanding of ‘silly’ involves a grouping of invalidating and harmful conventions. She renounces this ‘silliness’ for hindering the furtherance of the female novel and consolidating the bias that opposes the reality of a full female education. Moreover, she states that ‘silly novels’ have no literary value and encourage women to live of fantasies and melodrama. They are characterized by the lack of realism, a condescending moral tone and the use of a forced and unnatural language.

Female novelists who write these types of novels, as claimed by Eliot, have no talent and all they strive for is to contempt their vanity. Eliot advises women writers not to succumb into the temptation of banal and meaningless stories that neglect reality and morality. She declares that novelists who write 'silly novels' are bored literate women belonging to a high or middle class; and defends that women who write for a living would never be blameworthy of 'silliness', regardless of the modesty of their work. For her, this art requires a strong morality and intellect. This attitude and writing reaffirm the inferiority of women in the literary production, encouraged by critics. Eliot's primary "concern is focused on the reviewers themselves who clearly promote mediocre writing by women as a way of characterizing women's literacy in general. Her reappraisal is an attempt to put such representations out of play." (Shaw, 1992: 208). Praised women novelists misrepresent feminine literature by writing 'silly novels' while truly talented women novelists are brutally judged and shattered by experts:

"No sooner does a woman show that she has genius or effective talent, than she receives the tribute of being moderately praised and severely criticized. (...) when a woman's talent is at zero, journalistic approbation is at the boiling pitch; when she attains mediocrity, it is already at no more than summer heat; and if she ever reaches excellence, critical enthusiasm drops to the freezing point." (Eliot, 2001: 40-41)

Eliot discusses the notion of misplaced chivalry, where "male reviewers had a tendency to overpraise writing by women as a double-edged gesture of chivalry which flattered and demeaned at the same time." (Shaw, 1992: 207). The reason behind this courtesy was to maintain female writers occupied with their 'silly novels' and blinded by their false stardom so they would not attempt at actually thinking: "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" (Eliot, 2001: 28).

George Eliot's grounds for publishing "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" were the dangers they posed to society. Not only this type of novelistic writing endangered female writers by granting them a mistaken sense of accomplishment but also female readers by poisoning their minds. 'Silly novels' are a dangerous to women: they degrade women's position as intelligent beings with their works; they sabotage the cause of feminine education by creating an image of educated women as dull and self-satisfied; and they poison the mind of female readers with foolish fantasies. In the Victorian Era, novels were one of the main instruments for entertainment and education, especially for women who were mostly confined to the house sphere. Therefore, what they read influenced them and shaped their viewpoints on life, and those novels made them dream about disheartening life-expectations. Eliot is aware that whoever reads 'silly novels' would conclude that women do not profit from education and with this issue, comes the conception that 'silly novels' are actually devised by the most literate women in society, and not by uneducated women who need to work in order to survive. She proposes that "where there is one woman who writes from necessity, we believe there are three women who write from vanity (...) ladies' 'silly novels', we imagine, are less the result of labour than of busy idleness" (Eliot, 2001: 42-43). Furthermore, providing that reading is an educational tool, and that women are visioned as more sympathetic, emotional and susceptible beings, Victorian women were perceived at risk of reading too enthusiastically, due to the fact that they were regarded as greatly influenceable by their readings. Thus, it was suitable for certain individuals that they were kept entertained with empty novels that only discussed dramatic fantasies of love instead of important matters that could give them ideas of change. The intention of Eliot's writing was to appeal "to her readers for their experiences which have nothing to do with reading, asking them to

supply mental images for an affect which cannot, the novel insists, be narrated” (Gettelman, 2021: 37). She viewed ‘silly novels’ as a poison for society.

1.2. Eliot’s Controversy

“Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” is well-known for the controversy it generated at the time of its publication, which is still a debate today. The author’s use of irony and bitterness are characteristics of her critical voice which demonstrate authority and assertiveness. Words such as: ‘empty writing’, ‘talentless’, ‘ignorance’ and ‘imbecility’ appear during the course of her social commentary together with harsh expressions. Some notable instances when describing ‘silly novels’ or their authors are: “inexperienced in every form of poverty except poverty of brains” (Eliot, 2001: 5), “they are a little less supercilious and a great deal more ignorant, a little less correct in their syntax and a great deal more vulgar” (Eliot, 2001: 32), “a recent example of this heavy imbecility” (Eliot, 2001: 38), and “the most trashy and rotten kind of feminine literature” (Eliot, 2001: 43). She condemns ‘silly novels’ and the women who write them, stating that people who judge them ought not feel bad; they need no sympathy for the reason that they do not write as a means to earn a living, a topic which has been explained in the previous section of the chapter. In her eyes, they are “ladies who think that an amazing ignorance, both of science and of life, is the best possible qualification for forming an opinion on the knottiest moral and speculative questions” (Eliot, 2001: 17). They do not deserve her mercy on account of the fact that novel-writing is highly important to her and it she will not tolerate people who do not take it as seriously as her. The message is clear: writing fiction is not a pastime. Eliot’s attitude shows no remorse nor doubt concerning her beliefs on this matter. As Perkin suggests, her anger is likely to be aggravated by the difference in treatment female writers receive, “she mercilessly anatomizes the various species of

‘silly novel’ which such writers produced, before pleading for reviewers who will treat all women's writing according to the same aesthetic standards. Her main complaint is that reviewers treat the lady novelist with a misplaced chivalry” (Perkin, 1992: 28). By treating these women so cruelly, she intends to stop them from writing and to encourage realism in female writers to augment esteem.

Although this manifesto is widely regarded as a demand for evolution, the manners in which the message is conveyed have made it seem a negative one as well. She is demanding something better for women and fears for them; however, she is doing so by debasing women who write things she does not approve of:

“Some feminist critics such as Shirley Foster have read the essay as an anti-feminist diatribe against women's literature, pointing out that Eliot's assumption of a "masculine" editorial voice demonstrates her internalization of patriarchal values and critical stance. Others, such as Susan Tush, have argued that the essay is feminist in its attempt to formulate a higher critical standard for women's writing” (Easley, 1996: 148).

On the contrary, Eliot genuinely believes that the severe negative criticism will help talentless women writers to improve themselves or to abandon the pursuit of writing. She is getting things done and thinks that by giving her honest opinion, she is doing them a favour. Praising their work will only perpetuate the idea that educating women is worthless and will keep them in an endless circle, instead of helping them develop their minds and inspire them to pursue something more. Nonetheless, the fact that she uses a pseudonym to publish her works is an argument against her in this occasion. Even though she is actually “consciously manipulating her literary identity to resist culturally imposed notions of gendered writing” (Easley, 1996: 145) for the greater good. This fact can be perceived as her denying the female identity for own benefit; instead of using her talent to improve its image, at the same time as she is harshly censuring others that do not write quality novels. Clearly, the controversy has given rise to a debate that has provided an

important visibility to the composition. “Its attitudes are sometimes viewed as regrettable. Nicola Diane Thompson, for example, castigates George Eliot for the way the article criticizes the quality of women's writing, asserting that George Eliot 'justifies her attack in a curious manner'” (Gray, 2000: 222). “She desired a faithful representation of more prosaic lifestyles (...) Was Eliot being fair? Perhaps not” (Mahawatte, 2009: 324).

Another kind of controversy surfaces with Eliot's views regarding fiction-writing. As she is praising certain female authors for their work on fiction towards the end of the article, “in evidence that women can produce novels not only fine, but among the very finest (...) “no educational restrictions can shut women out from the materials of fiction” (Eliot, 2001: 43). She states that the freedom to be equal to men in this department, as fiction has no external criteria, is a doubled-edge sword as it “is precisely this absence of rigid requirement which constitutes the fatal seduction of novel-writing to incompetent women” (Eliot, 2001: 43). Since unskilled or unprepared people cannot be prevented from publishing, the outcome is the so-called ‘silly novel’. In response, Eliot wisely recommends: “let no woman rush into print who is not prepared for the consequences” (Eliot, 2001: 40).

Chapter 2

What a Novel Must and Must not be for George Eliot

2.1. Eliot's Main Critiques

The external position granted by Eliot's anonymity prevented her from becoming a female subject and separated her from the rest of female novelists. This study explores the author's thoughts and categorises into sub-categories the novels which are the object

of the critique. Firstly, the mind-and-millinery species are highly predictable stories with a beautiful and wealthy woman belonging to an elevated social class as main character; the scenario focuses on drama and romance in artificial circumstances, in which absurd ‘philosophic reflections’ are also common. Secondly, the ocular species present the author’s moral, religious and philosophical thoughts, proving to have no actual knowledge on the topic which results in an exaggerated lack of coherence; the aim is to solve a mystery or difficulty, except the unnatural language and the absence of real human interactions and situations make it a difficult task. Thirdly, the white neck-cloth species are religious stories with devoted Christian characters in a religious background, which tends to be set in the middle or lower classes; the Christian principles are at the core of the novel alongside the melodrama and romance of the mind-and-millinery species, offering no meaningful nor fresh content. Finally, the modern-antique species seek at modernize the antique form, hardly reaching at an addition of ancient and exotic names to draw the readers’ attention and disguise its lack of substance.

The main objection to these novels is the misrepresentation of female writing owing to “restrained ‘lady novelists’ are not taken seriously (...), but powerful female voices are condemned” (Lanser, 1992: 89). ‘Silly novels’ confirm the prejudices on feminine inferiority and the arguments against the solidification of women education with their absence of realism, forced language and a morally superior tone, which create a distorted reality. Thus, restricting the development of the female mental and social advancement by means of implementing love fantasies inside the readers’ minds. The fixed traits, stated by Eliot, that a novel shall never possess are:

“Violations of her realistic creed: psychological unreality in the development of characters, the result often of over-sentimentality; excessive character analysis, leading to morbidity of tone; over-exactness in depicting scenes of a forbidding or disgusting nature; the distortion of truth to enforce particular moral precepts; and unreal dialogue, plots, and action.” (Rust, 1956: 169)

Other characteristic qualities are the boasting attitude of lady novelists, shortness of self-criticism, the absence of purpose and, henceforth, the impossibility of readers to create a bond with the story. Eliot argues that these novels are so ill-written that represent nothing and hardly designate what they are meant to represent. As Eliot brilliantly sums up, “the foolish vanity of wishing to appear in print, instead of being counterbalanced by any consciousness of the intellectual or moral derogation implied in futile authorship, seems to be encouraged by the extremely false impression that to write at all is proof of superiority in a woman” (Eliot, 2001: 41-42). The authors of ‘silly novels’ are blinded by their fame and the illusion that they are, indeed, accomplishing something that makes them feel significant. They are being praised, a false chivalry that has been exposed in chapter one, so as to deceive them into not progressing nor wanting change. Lady novelists have been given a space to use in literature and society with the objective of making them happy and maintaining them there, without wanting more. They might think that they have earned this space, when it actually has been lent to them as a means for controlling them. This is something Eliot denounces, both female blindness and male manipulation.

2.2. Eliot’s Ideal Novel

In advance of the parameters found in “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” established by Eliot, it is crucial to understand the position she takes in her life and in the rest of her art. Harris recollects the main traits of Eliot’s identity towards the end of chapter four of *Eliot in Context* impeccably. Eliot displays her learnings and opinions, supplying models of how a novel of fiction ought to be with each one of her works. By means of realistic and plausible contexts she explores humanism deeply; benefiting from the opportunities

created, she makes contemporary social commentaries and experiments with different narrative voices. Her themes of major interest are the emancipation of women from men and society, culture appreciation, self-conscience and destructive traits of an unhealthy society: egoism, hypocrisy, greed and prejudice. The justification given by Harris on Eliot's fixation to improve the manner in which novels are written by her fellow colleges, is her preoccupation with the value of English writing that would represent the Victorian period in the future. To her, the "novel is the most significant and representative art form of her time" (Harris, 2013: 40).

Despite giving her concept of a proper novel at the end of the composition, Eliot presents her conception of 'ideal' throughout the whole text. Her main point is realism: a novel should express plausible circumstances, natural ways of speaking and realistic characters. Idealism is far too dangerous for the imagination of society. A story must be based on an accurate observation of the world and must implement themes of actual existence. The use of reality helps the reader connect with the story at a personal level by recollecting past experiences and making them ponder; idealized and artificial situations are unrelatable and interfere with this literary resource. A wrap-up of the qualities that need to be combined for a novel to be well-written is given by her in one of the final pages: a break of stereotypes accompanied by a "genuine observation, humour, and passion" (Eliot, 43). She provides additional meaningful guidance about literature as an art form:

"(1) Art's greatest benefit to men is to widen their sympathies. (2) Art has a moral mission; it must develop moral and spiritual as well as sensuous beauty. (3) Art must minister morality through pleasure, not pain. (4) Art can fulfil its moral and aesthetic purposes only if it tells the truth about life, only if it presents life realistically" (Rust, 1956: 164).

Eliot believes in people and their capacities. She believes they can improve morally and intellectually; and they are deliberately choosing not to, which fuels her resentment.

Consequently, she declares that they are in more want of apparent intellectual power than of moral qualities and literary skills. The author is using “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” to essentially assert all the things a novel should not be in order to set her ideal model and improve women’s writing. As Eliot claims, for the true capabilities of women novelists, it can be noticed that another reason for her agitation is that the voices of brilliant authors are not being heard since they have been hidden behind all these nonsensical works of fiction.

The manifesto is a social critique and analyses other things apart from the position of women in society and in literature. Eliot takes this opportunity to discuss how other arguments that appear in ‘silly novels’ are associated to her main thesis. For instance, education and intelligence, which have already been mentioned, social classes and religion; hence, installing a limitation to the novel’s content. First, education and intelligence are interrelated and belong to the core of the issue she presents; nevertheless, her main critiques can be identified especially during the review on ocular species. At the same time, they intend to convey an author’s bright theory on a determined topic, they ironically prove how little they actually know. Given the product provided by an educated woman, this ‘show-off’ attitude (overcomplicated language and the need to constantly demonstrate their sophistication) triggers serious doubts on the worth of women education, which is one of Eliot’s primary concerns. Second, mind-and-millinery species rise an important problematic point on class discrimination. These novels present an upper-class idyllic life solely disturbed by frivolous drama and romance, creating unrealistic expectations and diminishing the rest of the classes. They suggest that wealth and status are the ultimate destination. Lastly, the white neck-cloth species take place in a Christian environment whose characters’ honest devotion is questioned by Eliot, as she considers the morals of these novels to be vain and void. In spite of taking place in the

midst of the middle and lower classes, the sufferings of these women are the same as in the rest of the novels; there is no innovation, nothing but the special attention to Christian values.

3. Conclusions and Further Research

Eliot is in want of change, both in literature and society. She desires a proper representation of women's writing, respect towards the sacred art of novel-writing, a solid education for women, and nourishing stories for their imagination. Eliot's change begins with the termination of 'silly novels'. The author uses the advantageous position her anonymity has awarded her, with an objective criticism of her work, to provide evidence of the female writing capabilities. Eliot believes in the true potential of women and it is precisely the reason why she discourages harmful narratives, condemning them for poisoning women's minds and demoting women's writing; denouncing at the same time that, with a misplaced chivalry, certain individuals intend to control and halt the development of women's writing. Notwithstanding her noble intentions, her cruelty towards lady novelists originates controversy about her narrative. While it is true that she uses harsh words and a tone that some readers may consider bordering on the authoritarian, her ultimate goal is to help women: she is calling for a female evolution, demanding respect and seriousness for fiction-writing and authors' self-improvement; she must be assertive and clear. She objects to how this novel typology misrepresents female intelligence and confirms the stereotypical prejudices on female inferiority, apart from representing a distorted reality. The perfect novel, according to Eliot, is based on realism: a representational language use, realistic characters and life-circumstances that the reader

may connect to. She hopes for a better society and believes people can do much better; this essay is her imploring for the change.

Interesting further research could be based on a deeper analysis of reviews from “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” written by women critics of that period. What they taught and understood, their position on the controversy created and how Eliot was received by them after the publication. An alternative study could examine novels written before and after the publication to determine whether she impacted female writers or not, and in what respects. Additionally, an attractive research could constitute an inspection of male-written novels to learn if Eliot’s assessment might apply to the male gender as well in certain aspects; for instance, conducting an explicit writing typology to control or manipulate a collective. The possibilities are endless and there is still a lot to be discussed to appeal “to the consideration of any feminine reader who is in danger of adding to the number of ‘silly novels by lady novelists’” (Eliot, 2001: 44).

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