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## Moral Education of the Protagonists in George Eliot's *Felix Holt*

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### **Abstract :**

*Felix Holt*, published in June, 1866, charts the moral growth and development of the major protagonists, Felix Holt and Esther Lyon, at the backdrop of Reform Movement. Though Felix Holt is presented as an idealized and straightforward character, he lacks in humility. While he ties himself up with public life, he tries to reform both Esther Lyon and the working class. He sees the two roles as being quite separate and incompatible, and his moral development through the novel is from his initial scorn of Esther and of women in general, as being obstructive to his larger aims, to his final realization that his relationship with her is inseparable from those aims of social reform. At the end of the novel, Felix outlook on public life, women and marriage undergoes a significant change and Esther chooses to lead a noble, meaningful and moral life ignoring the lure of luxury and wealth.

**Keywords : George Eliot, Felix Holt, Moral**

George Eliot's *Felix Holt*, published in June, 1866, charts the moral growth and development of the major protagonists, Felix Holt and Esther Lyon, at the backdrop of Reform Movement. This novel is praised 'for the way George Eliot enlists our sympathies in the lives of her characters - good and bad - with a heartiness which few other... writers can even rival' (Jedrezejewski 67). Though Felix Holt is presented as an idealised and straightforward character, he lacks in humility. While he ties himself up with public life, he tries to reform both Esther Lyon and the working class. He sees the two roles as being quite separate and incompatible, and his moral growth in course of the novel is from his initial scorn of Esther and of women in general, as being obstructive to his larger aims, to his final realisation that his relationship with her is inseparable from those aims of social reform. At the end of the novel, Felix's outlook on public life, women and marriage undergoes a significant change and Esther chooses to lead a noble, meaningful and moral life ignoring the lure of luxury and wealth. She rightly epitomizes George Eliot's view of woman as a moral force behind the throne. (Eliot, *Felix Holt* viii)

Felix is initially aware of loopholes of his character and he frankly discloses this to Reverend Lyon, on his first appearance in the novel :

I'm perhaps a little too fond of banging and smashing, ... a phrenologist at Glasgow told me I had large veneration; another man there, who knew me, laughed out and said I was the most blasphemous iconoclast living. That is, says my phrenologist, 'because of his large ideality, which prevents him from finding anything perfect enough to be venerated'. Of course, I put my ears down, and wagged my tail at that stroking. (Eliot, *Felix Holt* 60)

Reverend Lyon, however describes this iconoclastic idea in terms of 'too confident self-reliance (Eliot, *Felix Holt* 61) which is manifested both in Felix's relations with Esther, and in his aims of social reform. To Esther, he says; 'That's what makes women a curse; all

life is stunted to suit their littleness. That's why I'll never love, if I can help it; and if I love, I'll bear it, and never marry'. (Eliot, Felix Holt 109) This rejection of personal commitment on the assumption that it will conflict with his public task is closely linked with his lack of realism in politics. Felix Holt had his illusions like other young men, though they were not of a fashionable sort. His idealism is made dangerous by the sudden rash fits of rebellion with which he springs to its defence. And Lyon warns Felix against this failing :

You yourself are a lover of freedom, and a bold rebel against usurping authority. But the right to rebellion is the right to seek a higher rule, and not to wander in mere lawlessness. Wherefore, I beseech you, seem not to say that liberty is licence. (Eliot, Felix Holt 131)

These two aspects of his iconoclasm, the personal and the public, must be seen as symptoms of the same flaw in character. The interlink between two roles of Felix is suggested by a parallel series of events which contradict his assertion of their incompatibility. Especially important is the election riot which occurs simultaneously with his rejection of Esther's love. He felt that if they marry that they would ruin each other's lives. But he longed to know her fully. Immediately afterwards, he got involved in the riot; he over-confidently imagined he could control events. He believed he had the power, and he resolved to carry the dangerous mass out of mischief till the military came to awe them while attempting this, he inadvertently killed a man, and then the mob went out of control. His too confident self-reliance caused the failure.

Felix is imprisoned and Esther Lyon is whisked off to Transome Court and all appears to be lost. But she saves him from his double misfortune by publicly speaking out in the Court insisting on Felix's integrity of character and mission and privately she met Felix in the prison to reaffirm her love and sympathy for him. It is then that Felix realizes that there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life and that his role as a lover and a social reformer is not incompatible. Through Esther he can now integrate the torn halves of his life. Esther's woman .passion and her reverence for rarest goodness rushed together in an undivided current. Now that he has found something perfect enough to be venerated in his private relationships, there is a corresponding maturity of his political iconoclasm:

But I 'm proof against that word 'failure'. I've seen behind it. The only failure a man ought to fear is failure in cleaving to the purpose he sees to be best. As to just the amount of result, he may see from his particular work - that's a tremendous uncertainty: the universe has not been arranged for the gratification of his feelings. (Eliot, Felix Holt 365)

His love for Esther is inseparable from his political acknowledgement of the higher rule which he is now prepared to conform to. Felix's moral growth is evident when he ultimately admits to Esther Lyon : 'If you take me . . . I shall be forced to be a much better fellow than I ever thought of being'.(Eliot, Felix Holt 400)

Esther, living at Treby, .frustrated in her desire for social advancement comes under the influence of Felix Holt. Her horizon expands and she begins to feel that if Felix Holt loves her, her life would be exalted into a sort of new blessedness, such as one may imagine in beings who are conscious of painfully growing into the possession of higher power. She sees him as the means of checking her pettiness with the suggestion of a wider life.

But after a short while, Esther discovering the facts of her past, is taken to Transome Court for a rehearsal of her new position in society. From now onwards she starts experiencing actual moral ordeal in her life. Upto this point in the novel, she has been alternately annoyed and impressed by the high ideals of Felix and her father; now she moves into the isolated, darker world of Transome Court where such ideals are unknown. The two sides of her character come into equal conflict; the unregenerate Esther, a Mrs. Transome in embryo, is attracted by the genteelness of Transome Court and the homage paid to her by Harold, while the partly reformed Esther gradually becomes aware of the hollowness of this existence and the threadbare tissue of this majestic lady's life. The question is whether she will succumb to its middling delights, overhung with the happiness of motiveless ease, before she comes to realize the full relevance of the desecrated sanctities of Mrs. Transome's life. Ultimately Esther is led to her final choice by two visions.

The first was revelation of Lyon's past, a vision of passion and struggle, of delight and renunciation which epitomizes the inner moral of the novel. This is followed by the vision of consequences, the sight of Mrs. Transome at her moment of supreme suffering : The dimly-suggested tragedy of this woman's life, the dreary waste of years empty of sweet trust and affection, afflicted her even to horror. It seemed to have come as a last vision to urge her towards the life where the draughts of joy sprang from the unchanging fountains of reverence and devout love. (Eliot, Felix Holt 396)

Now she sees the full relevance of Mrs. Transome's life in her own relationship with Harold, and so she turns instinctively to Felix.

Esther's moral conflict is beautifully summed up by the author in the following words:

She herself, in her utopia, had never been what she was now- a woman whose heart was divided and oppressed. The first spontaneous offering of her woman's devotion, the first great inspiration of her life, was a sort of vanished ecstasy which had left its wounds. It seemed to her cruel misfortune of her young life that her best feeling, her most precious dependence, had been called forth just where the conditions were hardest, and that all the easy invitations of circumstance were towards something which that previous consecration of her longing had made a moral descent for her...the gradual wooing of Harold had acted on her with a constant immediate influence that predominated over all indefinite prospects; and a solitary elevation to wealth of which she had no notion how she should manage and looked as chill and dreary as the offer of dignities in an unknown country. (Eliot, Felix Holt 361)

Esther's choice to support Felix is not merely a personal choice of Felix, but also a social commitment to the working class. At the trial of Felix Holt she uses her new position to appeal for him, identifying herself with the people among whom she has been brought up : 'Some of that ardour which has flashed out and illuminated all poetry and history was burning today in the bosom of sweet Esther Lyon. (Eliot, Felix Holt 377)

It is only through uniting herself with Felix Holt and his social vision that she can discover an outlet for the intense and noble feeling which is part of her nature. The life of the ego and will, exemplified by Mrs. Transome, Harold and the values of Transome Court, becomes for Esther a denial of her quintessential nature. It offers nothing to feeling and imagination, whereas Felix's vision calls forth all her powers of feeling. She realises that her love for Felix is :

A supreme love, a motive that gives a sublime rhythm to a woman's life, and exalts habit into partnership with the sours highest needs' whereas Harold Transome's love for her seemed to threaten her with a stifling oppression. (Eliot, Felix Holt 392)

In this novel, the titular hero waits passively in prison for the moral regeneration of Esther to be completed so that his divided life can be unified. Poised between the contrasting worlds of the novel, she is given the final task of evaluation, and it is an anticlimax to realise at the end that as a reward for her rejection of the world of Transome Court she is allowed to marry Felix who has throughout been insulated from its corroding gentility. By the end of the novel Esther Lyon shows an 'exquisite type of gentleness' (Haight, Letters 364), while Felix exhibits a 'regenerating tenderness' (364), which according to Eliot should be the basis of human nature.

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