



The Egoist As A Meredithian Masterpiece

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George Meredith's novel "The Egoist" stands as a pinnacle of his literary achievements, often considered his masterpiece for several compelling reasons. Published in 1879, the novel exemplifies Meredith's profound exploration of human nature, his mastery of intricate character portrayal, and his adept use of comedy as a tool for social critique.

The Victorian era is often imagined by Americans as a time of strict sexual and emotional repression, epitomized by the stereotypical "stiff upper lip" of the English. However, beneath this surface lies a period of remarkable literary creativity, evidenced by the success of authors such as the Brontës and Thomas Hardy. These writers offered bold critiques of traditional English institutions like marriage and the aristocracy. George Meredith's "The Egoist," while generally more humorous and satirical, also secured his reputation within this vibrant literary milieu.

Sir Willoughby Patterne, the protagonist of "The Egoist," is a biting caricature of the contemporary English aristocrat. At a time when the government was increasingly adopting humanistic policies and taking over roles traditionally filled by the church and charity (such as marriage, public health, and education), Patterne represents the epitome of a pampered, narcissistic nobleman. His self-absorption is so profound that he expects everyone around him to affirm his unique sensitivity and eccentricity. His pursuit of marriage is driven by a desire to find someone who will mirror his interests and emotions, thus insulating him from the outside world, which he disdainfully calls "the world." This extreme self-centeredness, which disregards the feelings of his potential spouses and his servants, serves as a critique of the old-money English culture. The novel's setting, largely confined to the grounds of Patterne Hall, underscores this theme of privileged insularity and its impact on the broader world.

George Meredith provides a powerful portrayal of a sensitive and intelligent woman grappling with mental, moral, and emotional turmoil as she strives to break free from her engagement to a self-centered man. Meredith's narrative, marked by a keen sense of self-awareness, honesty, and insight, explores the nature of egoism, suggesting that it is a universal human trait.

Clara Middleton's changing attitude toward Patterne's courtship—from initial fascination to eventual repulsion—mirrors Meredith's critique of marriage and the status of women in Victorian England. Initially captivated by the splendor of Patterne Hall, Clara soon becomes disturbed by Willoughby's obsession with retreating from the world. She fears that marrying him would mean losing her identity and becoming a prisoner in his self-absorbed existence. In contrast, her family, especially her father, is more concerned with the social and financial benefits of the match, ignoring Clara's emotional distress. The rigid patriarchal norms and societal expectations surrounding marriage seem to trap Clara, offering no escape. Unlike a previous fiancée who eloped to escape Patterne, Clara has no such recourse and must rely on subtle strategies to secure her freedom and happiness within this oppressive system.

To explore these themes further, it is essential to examine how Patterne Hall itself—its rooms, their functions, and the other buildings on the property—reflects Sir Willoughby's values and attitudes. Additionally, analyzing how characters interact and express themselves, such as the conversation between Patterne and Dr. Middleton about Clara's future over wine, will provide valuable insights for a deeper analysis.

The story revolves around an English gentleman who represents a prestigious family. This family's eminence was originally built upon a strong sense of egoism that surpassed others through sheer force of will or character, establishing what we now recognize as a noble lineage. However, as time has progressed and societal norms have evolved, maintaining this eminence requires adapting to more nuanced forms of superiority without reverting to outdated behaviors of domination and exploitation under a modern facade. The "Comic Spirit," once respectful of a more restrained and socially beneficial form of egoism, now mercilessly exposes it in its various disguises. Sentimentalism, particularly in matters of love, is scrutinized as merely a projection of self rather than genuine emotion.

The narrative begins with Sir Willoughby Patterne's return to Patterne Hall after a three-year absence from England. His first encounter is with Laetitia Dale, a devoted friend. Excitedly greeting her, he remarks on the beauty of her name and inquires about her well-being. His anxious question allows him to discern what he seeks in her eyes, and he embraces her warmly before letting her go.

“Laetitia Dale !” he said, he panted. “Your name is sweet English music! And are you well?” The anxious question permitted him to read deeply in her eyes. He found the man he sought there, squeezed him passionately, and let her go.’

Willoughby Patterne stands out as the quintessential target of the Comic Spirit in George Meredith's literary universe. Among Meredith's characters, Willoughby epitomizes egoism to an extreme degree. Meredith views egoism akin to Original Sin in the eyes of our ancestors—a universal condition inherent in all individuals, but one that can only be transcended through rigorous self-reflection and personal growth.

In examining Willoughby's character through incidents like Lieutenant Pattern's visit and his correspondence prior to returning from America, we witness his deep immersion in egoism. However, it's primarily in his romantic entanglements that the Comic Spirit actively pursues and exposes him. Meredith posits that falling in love represents a crucial existential ordeal for all his characters—from Richard, Evan, and Emilia to Wilfrid Pole, Dahlia, Harry Richmond, and others listed. This moment marks a profound test of a person's character and worth, where the ideal that one has long pursued seems within reach in the form of their beloved.

Meredith perceives a significant challenge in deciphering one's true desires when another person's well-being becomes intertwined with their achievement. The incorporation of this "second person" into one's identity, whether through marriage or deep emotional commitment, brings forth hidden complexities and challenges. Even the least imaginative among us, when faced with opposition from others, may doubt their convictions. Willoughby's tendency to shield himself behind a facade of marital duty—a belief that his wife must be beyond reproach—is a subtler form of egoistic allure.

Thus, Meredith's exploration of Willoughby Patterne and his ilk serves not just as a character study but as a profound meditation on human nature, love, and the complexities of egoism. Through Willoughby's journey and ultimate exposure, Meredith underscores the perpetual struggle between self-interest and genuine human connection, offering a rich tapestry of insights into the human condition. In comparing characters like the Whitworths, Weyburns, and Wentworths—individuals who embody practiced self-mastery and a balanced consideration for others—with Willoughby Patterne, George Meredith highlights a stark contrast in attitudes towards love and relationships. The former group, characterized by their self-discipline and thoughtful regard for others beyond themselves, exemplify Meredith's ideal heroes. They navigate life with a sense of restraint and a deep understanding of the complexities of human interactions. Their actions often reflect a broader concern for societal harmony and personal integrity.

In contrast, Willoughby Patterne's perspective on love stands out distinctly. His assertion that he and his beloved share "an inner temple" where their love is an exclusive sanctuary, shutting out the world, reveals a profound egoism masked as spiritual depth. Willoughby romanticizes their relationship as a higher form of love—an "excommunication of the world"—which he believes brings them unity, isolation, and happiness.

Meredith portrays this attitude not as uncommon but as spiritually perilous. Willoughby's viewpoint, though lofty in its rhetoric, is criticized for its selfish isolationism and failure to acknowledge the broader moral and social responsibilities inherent in genuine love. It represents a form of love that, rather than enriching and connecting individuals to their community, isolates them and disregards the impact of their actions on others. Through Willoughby's character, Meredith challenges conventional romantic ideals and exposes the pitfalls of egoism masquerading as spiritual depth. He invites readers to contemplate the true nature of love—a concept that, in Meredith's view, should transcend individual desires and selfish isolationism to encompass empathy, mutual respect, and genuine connection with others.

Meredith's aim with "The Egoist" was to create a comic drama in the style of Molière, focusing on the exposition of a single type-character—Willoughby Patterne. This character serves as a distillation of egoism, embodying its various facets and consequences. The novel, therefore, operates within a specific thematic and stylistic framework, akin to Molière's approach in presenting characters that embody certain traits or vices with a comic lens.

Critics who view Willoughby Patterne as a counterpart to every individual, seeing his egoism as reflective of a broader human condition, miss Meredith's intended realism. Meredith himself disavows the idea that Willoughby should be seen as a universal type, instead framing him as a specific character crafted for comedic exposition. The novel functions as a "condenser" of egoism, highlighting its absurdities and pitfalls through Willoughby's actions and relationships.

Meredith's personal letters reveal his mixed feelings about "The Egoist." He acknowledges that the novel primarily emerged from intellectual processes rather than emotional or imaginative inspiration. This intellectual genesis, combined with the constraints of comedic form and focus on a single character type, led Meredith to feel somewhat detached from the work. He even mentions that working on "The Egoist" took a toll on his health, indicating the strenuous effort involved in its creation. Ultimately, Meredith's comments suggest that while "The Egoist" may not showcase the poetic intensity found in some of his other works like "Richard Feverel" or "Sandra Belloni," it serves a distinct purpose in his literary oeuvre. Its limitations in scope and focus are deliberate, aiming to achieve a specific comedic effect rather than expansive emotional or philosophical exploration. In light of Meredith's own reflections, critics who argue for "The Egoist" as his greatest novel may overlook these nuances of intention and execution. Understanding the novel as a deliberate exercise in comic characterization helps to contextualize its place within Meredith's broader literary goals and achievements.

The supporting characters in "The Egoist" are remarkably vibrant and could easily populate several novels on their own. Clara, Vernon, Dr. Middleton, Crossjay, De Craye, and Laetitia are not merely defined by their roles within Willoughby's household; they possess fully realized lives and personalities. When Dr. Middleton and his daughter arrive at Patterne Hall, Clara's internal conflict intensifies as she grapples with her commitment to Willoughby and her growing disillusionment. This struggle is foreshadowed through the observations of Clara's companions: Crossjay, impressed by her lively demeanour and interest in the navy, rushes to tell Laetitia. Vernon Whitford, noticing Clara's perceptiveness, contrasts with Willoughby's exaggerated respect for her innocence. The tension arises from Clara's simultaneous disbelief in the possibility of rebellion against Willoughby and her hope that the man she initially admired will regain his place in her heart, setting the stage for the unfolding drama between Clara and Willoughby.

Like many of his radical contemporaries, George Meredith is often considered a feminist, believing that women were subjugated by a male-dominated society. He supported the growing movement for women's political and social freedom. Engaging with the contemporary debate known as the Woman Question, which evolved into the Women's Liberation Movement in the twentieth century, Meredith even penned a poem addressing the issue. In his essay, he intertwined the concepts of comedy and women's status, celebrating his idea of the comic Muse as one of women's greatest allies.

Meredith posits that comedy is absent where women lack social freedom, primitive where they are mere household drudges, and melodramatic where they are somewhat independent but uncultivated. Pure comedy, he argues, thrives where women are progressing towards equal standing with men in both achievements and liberties gained through a fair civilization. He views women as allies of the comic spirit due to their abundant common sense, which nurtures and sustains comedy. While women may exhibit foolishness, it is only in trivial matters; they possess a deeper understanding of life's enduring principles. Closer to the earth, their role in gender relations is to ensure men remain grounded and not lost in unrealistic dreams. Nature discourages egoism, making a female equivalent of Sir Willoughby almost unimaginable. In Meredith's comedies, love serves as a means to correct women and highlight their common sense, which, in turn, lures men into folly, thus obscuring her practical wisdom. Love becomes the opportunity for fools to reveal their true nature and the trap for the egoist.

There are notable parallels between the novel and Meredith's own life. In 1849, at the age of twenty-one, Meredith married Mary Ellen Nicolls, a twenty-seven-year-old widow of a marine officer and daughter of Thomas Love Peacock. Their seven-year marriage was fraught with tension and conflict, which Meredith attributed to his own egoism driving her away. This tumultuous relationship is reflected in Meredith's deep psychological exploration in his collection "Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside" (1862). Similar to Sir Willoughby in "The Egoist," Meredith recognized his own tendencies to seek control, expect submission, hold an artificial yet conventionally sentimental view of femininity, and see himself as the center of the universe. Both his poetry and the novel highlight the suffering of women in such dynamics and conclude that insincerity and lack of mutual understanding trap both men and women in tragic circumstances.

"The Egoist" has left a lasting legacy in English literature, influencing subsequent writers and thinkers. Its exploration of egoism and its psychological depth resonates with modern readers, offering timeless insights into human nature and interpersonal dynamics. The novel's innovative use of comedy as a vehicle for moral and social critique continues to inspire contemporary literature and theatre.

In conclusion, George Meredith's "The Egoist" stands as a masterpiece due to its profound exploration of egoism, its intricate character portrayals, its use of comedy as social critique, its literary and philosophical depth, and its enduring influence on literature. Through this novel, Meredith not only crafted a compelling narrative but also contributed significantly to the evolution of the novel form and the exploration of human psychology in literature.

Works Cited:

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