

## Samuel Butler's Criticism on British Education of the Victorian Age

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**Abstract:** Samuel Butler is one of the three great novelists in the latter part of the nineteenth century. He criticized many fields of the British society, especially that of the British education which was important in the Victorian Age. Butler resented the English educational system as a whole only because he had suffered too much from it and had seen too many other people who suffered from it. In his masterpiece *The Way of All Flesh* Butler presented a very detailed account of the life the protagonist who suffered too much from family education, public school education and university education. The paper is an attempt to explore Butler's criticism on the pernicious aspects of the Victorian family education, public school education, and university education in order to send some social message that Samuel Butler's works may bring to the world today.

**Keywords:** Samuel Butler; *The Way Of All Flesh*; Victorian Age; Family Education; Public School Education; University Education

### 1. General Talk on the English Education of the Victorian Age

The Victorian Age was an age of expansion, both in commerce and territory. England of the 19th century was the most powerful country in the world and indeed it ruled the waves; in this century, as the rulers boasted, the sun never set. In their conquests of the other nations and in their self-aggrandizement, they firmly believed that it was their faith that did them good and brought them happiness.

Therefore the Victorian Age was also an age of faith. It was made an important part of the educational system. The clergyman school-master education became the best choice and was the most welcome. Little children were taught to say their prayers before their meals and were led to the Church

on Sundays. In many schools and universities, besides Latin and Greek, the chief thing the students studied was theology. In many English households fathers often beat their children at will. When their children entered schools like Shrewsbury they were taught by such teachers as Dr. Kennedy who gave them graceful but useless things. When some of them became college students in the English universities like Oxford and Cambridge they got such teachers as the Professor of Worldly Wisdom who suppressed any kind of originality of the students and thought it the last thing they would do to help the students think for themselves. Many young people spent the best of their years in taking many tedious and useless courses. As a result, their brains were greatly damaged. A great number of the students had to become clergymen after graduation, for they had no other choices. Actually, many English schools were like Shrewsbury and many universities were like Oxford or Cambridge. Butler was a typical product of such an education. Had he not escaped from them earlier he would have suffered heavier losses.

Butler resented the English educational system as a whole only because he had suffered too much from it. *THE WAY OF ALL FLESH* was well written only because it was semi-autobiographical. And had Butler not studied at Cambridge he could never have written the chapter of *THE COLLEGES OF UNREASON* in *HREWHON*. In *THE WAY OF ALL FLESH* which dealt with a young man's self-discovery and self-determination, the defects of the English educational system were clearly described. The novel was popular early in this century just because it told about the education of an artist as a young man, of his apprenticeship to life, of his self-exile from the middle class, of his youth unhappy and aspiring, struggling hard through trials and errors to snatch a kind of victory from looming defeat. This novel shows the whole process of

the formation, development and subversion of the individual unconscious memory of the main character Ernest, who breaks the evolutionary chain of unconscious memory to achieve self-reconstruction and get a totally new life.<sup>[1]</sup>

## 2. Family Education

Samuel Butler was never happy when he was a little boy. The childhood of Ernest, according to Jones, was drawn faithfully from Butler's own unhappy childhood. So it is no wonder that the first half of the novel was better written than the second. Bernard Shaw, one of the most enthusiastic admirers of Butler wrote in the preface to *LIFE OF SAMUEL BUTLER*, Butler told the story of his childhood so frightfully well in his novel *THE WAY OF ALL FLESH* that it could not be done better... But the moral of Butler's life is that not even genius can come through such an education as Butler's with its mind unharmed.<sup>[2]</sup> Butler admitted that his life resembled that of the protagonist Ernest and the narrator was the alter ego of himself.<sup>[3]</sup> Like many boys, Ernest suffered a great deal from his father's physical punishments. When he was only two years old, his father began to whip him two days after their teaching program started. Like Butler Ernest was taught to kneel before he could crawl. The bitterest incident was when the three-year-old boy was reciting a hymn he was badly beaten by his father because he pronounced "come" as "tum".

As Ernest grew a little older, his father trained him as if he were a performing animal, except that he did not teach him anything useful.

Butler's early experiences were exactly like those of Ernest. His father treated him as cruelly as Theobald treated Ernest. The canon's motto was: break your child's will early or he will break yours later on. By the time Samuel went to public school he, like Ernest, appeared to have not much strength. "Obey me, your true self, and things will go terribly well with you, for I, Ernest, am the one who made you." This was the case between father and son at Langar Rectory. How could it be possible that such a child reared in such an atmosphere at Langar, the graceless, life-hating Puritanical environment of the 19th century England could be happy? Butler could never forgive his father for his treatment of him, and any suggestion of parental authority,

whether in the world of science, art, or letters, would set up his automatic reaction of resentment and defiance.

As Christina was the necessary aide to Theobald, Mrs. Butler always stood by the canon in their spiritual battle against their children. She was a very dull woman and was very pious. As Butler grew a little older, his father's cruelty and tyranny were replenished by his mother's false sentiments and blackmail. The thing Butler was most afraid of was the sofa talks through which his mother would pass on information extracted by kisses and caresses to his father who would then summon him to the dining room for severe punishment. In fact, Butler's dislike and distrust of women and his fear of surrendering himself to emotion derived much from his mother's sofa-talks through which his confidence was greatly betrayed.

In *THE WAY OF ALL FLESH* the only ideal woman was Alethea Pontifex, Ernest's aunt. Unlike Theobald and Christina she was kindhearted and well-educated. Poor Ernest received much warmth from her. Alethea took good care of Ernest, especially when he was at school. She introduced him to carpentry, which did him much good, and partly out of a belief that a boy ought to have a trade to fall back on (precisely what public school education did not give him), partly out of a desire to see Ernest get some muscular exercise. This gave Ernest the happiest time of his life. His aunt visited the teachers at the school and set up a cooperation with them in teaching Ernest. Furthermore, she made Ernest do some outdoor exercises and establish good relationships with nice boys. As a result, Ernest's cheeks were soon flushed, and his eyes were glistening.

## 3. Public School Education

Yet, under the teaching of the taskmasters at his school, Ernest was filled with too much stuff. When he was 12, he knew every page of his Latin and Greek grammars by heart. Besides reading a lot, he was proficient in arithmetic and had a fair knowledge of French. One day, Ernest was sent to a public school named Roughborough. The headmaster was one of Theobald's old acquaintances at Oxford, named Dr. Skinner, who was quite a pedantic and dull fellow. But Christina had a high opinion of him. However, her son disliked this

man. In their first account, little Ernest provided himself with an escape from Dr. Skinner's factious talk by crying loudly, "doubtless through an intense but inarticulate sense of boredom greater than he could bear." After his parents left the school, Ernest "felt weak, feeble, ill at ease, and unable to see his way out of innumerable troubles that were before him."

After Ernest entered the school, he heard awful accounts of Dr. Skinner's temper and his bullying, which the little boys there had to put up with. During his entire stay at this school, Ernest was far from happy, for "Dr. Skinner was much too like his own father." He "found the atmosphere of Roughborough so gusty that he was glad to shrink out of sight and out of mind whenever he could." When Ernest went home on holidays, he never had a holiday feeling, for his father often forced him to speak out what mischievous things he had done at school and then gave him a hearty beating. This happened so often that Ernest began to passively resist his parents. One day, Theobald and his wife probed and probed into the misdemeanors of Ernest and of other Roughborough boys, until they were on the point of reaching subjects more delicate than they had yet touched upon. As Ernest had no interest in his studies (the only place where he could be happy was the old church near the school, where he could hear an old organist playing) he failed in his exams, and his marks were considerably low. At the end of a term, he received a report in which the headmaster of the school recommended that his pocket money be made to depend upon his merit money.

Indeed, we can see from the above that the natural instincts of the child were seriously suppressed by the teachers and headmaster of Roughborough. The courses were dull and boring, and the teachers were as dull as the courses. How could the students be interested in them, and how could their natural gifts develop quickly?

Just like Ernest in Roughborough, Samuel Butler was extremely unhappy at Shrewsbury-the most strictly classical of all public schools in Butler's day, under Dr. Kennedy and Butler's own grandfather. He wrote at the beginning of chapter Forty-five in *THE WAY OF ALL FLESH*:

"Some people say that their school days were

the happiest of their lives. They may be right, but I always look with suspicion upon those whom I hear saying this. It is hard enough to know whether one is happy or unhappy now, and still harder to compare the relative happiness or unhappiness of different times of one's life; the utmost that can be said is that we are fairly happy so long as we are not distinctly aware of being miserable."

So, Roughborough is just Shrewsbury; Dr. Skinner is none other than Dr. Kennedy; and Ernest, Butler himself.

Butler did not tell us much about his life at Cambridge because, as he said, undergraduate life had been described in a score of novels. We only know that his life at this university was a period of bitter experiences in his search for self-determination. When he was a freshman his natural instinct, like that of other boys, was to do as those in authority told him. Later on he discovered that the authorities could not always be trusted, for the right books Butler read were often not the ones the authorities recommended. Butler's overworking at this university did much harm to his eyes. He told us that he disliked classical studies because he had to grind away at them for his degree. Thus he envied those "nice boys". Exams had no terror for such students. They did not get up early. They rose joyously in the morning, like the birds in the spring time, without fears for the future or shames for the past. The last thing they would do would be to force themselves to sit reading for hours as he had to. He envied their freedom. He venerated them for taking full advantage of it. Besides study Butler had another task set by his mother: to hunt husbands for his sisters. After Butler took his degree and hunted a husband for his sister, he returned to Cambridge for the May term of 1858 to study for ordination, which was an accepted thing, a tradition of the family. Yet Butler had no interest in this and he often went to the Church unwillingly. Furthermore, he hated the Simonites who were also studying for ordination, as they were gawky and uncouth. Since Butler had doubts on biblical stories and infant baptism, he refused to be ordained. There was much correspondence by letter between the father, who behaved as a tyrant, and the son, who resisted eagerly and strongly. Finally they made an agreement-Butler was to go to New Zealand to do sheep farming, and

the canon was to advance capital. Fortunately, Butler's sheep run was successful, and he made a large amount of money. In fact, this sheep farming was far better than his studying at Cambridge. The life at "Mesopotamia" was in every sense, a part in the making of our hero. The distance it put between him and his parents enabled him to get hold of himself emotionally; the healthy life there developed him physically; solitude helped him to sort out his ideas; material successes gave him confidence. All these were contrary to the life at Langar and Cambridge.

#### 4. University Education

Though Butler did not tell us much about his experience at Cambridge in *THE WAY OF ALL FLESH* he described very well the *COLLEGES OF UNREASON* in *EREWHON*. We have every reason to say that had Butler not suffered and seen many others suffer he could never have described these Erewhonian colleges so well.

From Butler's descriptions of the Colleges of Unreason we can see very well that they are none but the colleges of Cambridge or Oxford. "As regards the city itself, the more I saw the more enchanted I became. I dared not trust myself with any description of the exquisite beauty of the different colleges, and their walks and gardens."<sup>[4]</sup> The Colleges of Unreason were thus called because the people in these colleges believed in unreason more than reason. The professors of unreason said that Life would be intolerable if men were to be guided by reason and reason only. In addition, the professors of unreason objected to progress, as could be found in one professor's talk with Higgs the protagonist: "I ventured feebly to say that I did not see how progress could be made in any art or science, or indeed in anything at all, without more or less self-seeking, and hence, unamiability. "Of course," said the Professor, "and therefore we object to progress."

The chief courses the students took were called "Hypothetics". What are Hypothetics? They were to teach the students how to provide intelligent answers to all sorts of questions that arose in all sorts of strange and impossible situations. The leading professors in these colleges argued that to teach a boy merely the nature of things which existed in the world around him, and about which he

would have to be conversant during his whole life, would be giving him a narrow and shallow conception of the universe, which it was urged might contain all manner of things which were not currently to be found therein. They believed that to open the boy's eyes to these possibilities, and so to prepare him for all sorts of emergence was the object of the system of Hypothetics. To imagine a set of utterly strange and impossible contingency, and to require the youth to give intelligent answers to the questions that arose therefrom, was reckoned the fittest way of preparing them for the actual conduct of their affairs in their afterlife. The professors did not teach the students reason for they held that it was dangerous to do so, because the Erewhonians believed that reason would make people doubt the justice of the generally-accepted beliefs, laws and customs. Because no definite opinion was welcome in this country it was very difficult to get it from any of the people in these colleges, except for such subjects as weather, eating and drinking, holiday excursions, or games of skill. To have no definite opinion was regarded as the perfection of scholarship and good breeding. So, what is the ultimate purpose of university education? As Professor Ni said very well, "A true university is not only to train many professionals but also to help them become wholesome personalities with deep cultural breeding and high moral sentiments."<sup>[5]</sup>

Before studying any Hypothetics, the students in these colleges had to spend the best of their years in studying the Hypothetical language—a language that was composed at an early stage of civilization. The colleges would give anyone a maintenance for life if he attained some proficiency in such a dead language. The professors usually spent many years in translating some of their good poetry into the Hypothetical language. To do so with fluency would be regarded as a distinguishing mark of a scholar and a gentleman. As many scholars liked translation, many valuable and noble thoughts had been translated over and over again into the Hypothetical language. There was one young man who spent 14 years in the study of this language and was greatly damaged by it. He assured Higgs the visitor that he would not open another Hypothetical book after he had taken his degree. He had the fortune of taking his degree, but, as the

narrator cried out, “who could give him his 14 years back again?”

In the Art Department no student was allowed to continue his study in the actual practice of the art he had taken up, unless he made equal progress in its commercial history, for art was fully commercialized.

Higgs the visitor met many professors, among whom the Professor of Worldly Wisdom was one who carried the most weight in these colleges, and he had the reputation of having done more than any other living man to suppress any kind of originality of the students. He was the terror of many students. Once he plucked a poor fellow for lack of sufficient vagueness in his saving clauses paper. Another boy was severely criticized by him for having written an article on a scientific subject without making free enough use of the words like “carefully”, “patiently” and “earnestly”. Still another was denied a degree simply because he was too often and too seriously right. He told Higgs that it was not their business to help students to think for themselves. And it was the very last thing which one who wished them well would encourage them to do. Their duty was to ensure that they would think as they do, or at any rate, as they held it expedient to say we do.

So it is no wonder that the students in these colleges suffered a great deal, for the natural instincts of the lads in most cases absolutely rebelled against their training. But who could help? The professors taught what they wanted to teach and the students had to learn. Higgs the visitor cried out: “Heaven forbid that I should be flippant, but it appeared to me to be a wanton waste of good human energy that men should spend years and years in the perfection of so barren an exercise, when their own civilization presented problems by the hundred which cried out for solution and would have paid the solver handsomely; but people know their own affairs best. If the youths chose it for themselves I would have wondered less; but they don’t choose it; they have it thrust upon them, and for the most part are disinclined towards it. I can only say that all I heard in defense of the system was insufficient to make me think very highly of its advantages.

At all events it is quite obvious that Butler was satirizing the university education of Victorian

England. The “Hypothetics” refer to all sorts of graceful but useless courses or lectures given in the colleges of England, while the “Hypothetical language” refers to none but Latin and Greek which have been taught and studied so much and so extensively in many universities. Since Erewhon is England and the Erewhonian institutions were the counterparts of England, the Colleges of Unreason certainly refer to the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge which are not different from some of our universities which are known for their outdated teaching concept, poor overall teaching process design, lack of teachers’ ability to guide cultural awareness and imperfect teaching evaluation system.<sup>[6]</sup>

Butler had been trying to find his occupation throughout his life though he never found one. As a result, he disliked professionals and remained an amateur all his life. Butler did different kinds of work-sheep farming, drawing, composing music, translations, writing-but he was never a professional.

As intellectual independence derives largely from the physical environment and the psychological expectation within which one grows up, Butler, like Ernest, reached out to imagine conditions he had known as a child-not the standard professions of clergyman, doctor, lawyer, which the public schools and universities led to, but the solidly useful trades of carpenter, tailor, musician, sailor, hotel-keeper, bargeman. What he hated most was those professions his father advised him to choose. He wrote in the *NOTEBOOKS*, “I suppose an Italian peasant or a Breton, Norman, or English fisherman, is about the best thing nature does in the way of men.”<sup>[7]</sup>

Butler was most unwilling to be a clergyman. He often contended that ministers were to be regarded as paid advocates, who made their living by preaching certain doctrines, and were accordingly the very last persons to be accepted as impartial witness to the truth of what they preached. If they were married and had families and were without private means, their line of retreat was cut off and they simply had to go on believing after a fashion because the consequences of acknowledged unbelief would have been very unpleasant. Butler knew very well as a child that the children of many clergymen were unhappy and that most priests were the most outrageous hypocrites of all hypocrites. So he would rather starve to death

than to be a clergyman. Butler's grandfather was a bishop, and he made Butler's father a clergyman, too, though the canon had wanted to join the Navy. And what's more, the canon took it for granted that his son ought to become a clergyman, too. He was introduced in the novel as Theobald<sup>[8]</sup>, who assumed that, since ordination was the road he knew and understood, and indeed the only road about which he knew anything at all, it must then be the road for his son Ernest, too. Butler's refusal to be ordained because of his doubt about infant baptism made the whole family greatly astonished. There were many letters exchanged between the young man and his parents, who first persuaded him and finally became very angry with him when they thought that they could not save their son from bad temptation.

Then, in Butler's view, there were only two possible professions for his son who was so misguided as to reject the Church as a calling. He would make Samuel become either a schoolmaster or a lawyer. If Samuel Butler took any of them, his father would offer big financial help. But Samuel Butler regarded these two careers with almost as much abhorrence as ordination. He wrote to his mother: "I would migrate, learn to farm in England, turn to doctor, or learn to paint, in which I have strong reason to believe I should succeed. But 'no' from my father. To the other two courses, namely the law or a schoolmaster's life, I say 'no, no' less decidedly. You would, with the best intentions in the world, make me a bed that I know very well would not fit me. I know that when I am in, escape is impossible; and knowing that I have duties to myself to perform even more binding on me than those to my parents, with all respect, adopt the alternative of rejecting the pounds, shillings, and going in search of my own bread my own way."<sup>[9]</sup>

Already he was thinking seriously of becoming a painter; but this aroused the strongest opposition at home, even stronger than his refusal of ordination, on the ground that painting was not respectable and artists were known to be immoral. The dispute ended finally with the canon's planning his son's emigration as the least "evil" course left open and arranging to plant his errant son in a colony, that of Canterbury in New Zealand, which had at any rate the merit of having been

established on sound Church of England principles.

Yet Butler had no intention of spending his life as a sheep farmer. After he made enough money, he just sold his sheep and returned to London. He settled in Clifford's Inn and began to devote his life to being an artist. His ambition at the time was to become a painter. He took art seriously and attended lessons in the Heatherley's Art School for a few years. He loved writing as much as he loved painting. And because he worked hard on painting, he became an occasional exhibitor at the Royal Academy. "Mr. Heatherley's Holiday" and "Family Prayers" were the two representatives of all his paintings. But, in fact, he had not learned much at that art school. He blamed their conventional teaching for putting him on the wrong track, as could be seen soon from his *NOTEBOOKS*.

Besides painting, Butler was greatly interested in music, especially in Handel's music--the most powerful influence in his life. The most distinctive feature of his music is his ear for texture. His fame, accidentally, was like Butler's--a posthumous one. Having been greatly influenced by Handel's music, Butler's affection for Handel became deep-rooted and unshakable. There are few books of his that do not contain some reference to Handel--illustrations and lessons drawn from the greatest of all musicians. He liked the tunes and rhythms of Handel's music more than anything else. "Handel knew when to stop," he wrote in his *NOTEBOOKS*, "and when he meant stopping he stopped much as a horse stops, with little if any peroration." And whenever he was troubled he would turn to the piano and lose himself in the massive flow of Handel. In order to express his thanks to this 18<sup>th</sup>-century man, Butler published in collaboration with Festing Jones a book of short piano pieces and a few years later published *Narcissus: A Dramatic Cantata*.

Though he painted and composed music all through his life, he preferred writing to anything else. But writing was not his profession. All the books he published in his lifetime, with the single exception of *EREWHON*, were commercial failures; he made nothing, or a great deal less than nothing, out of them, and was often compelled to publish them at his own expense. If he had depended upon it for his livelihood, he would

have merely starved. As for this, the canon wrote to his wife, "He talks of writing, but it requires more than his powers to do so. He has not that in him that will be read. He is too bumptious and not sufficiently practical..." In respect to whether he was practical or not the canon did see something of his son. But he could never have known that Butler wrote for posterity. How could he have anticipated his son's posthumous popularity? Just when Emily Dickinson died, no one had any anticipation that the woman would be one of the greatest lyric poets in the English language.<sup>[10]</sup>

### 5. Conclusion: Butler's Theory on Education

Butler's attacks on the educational system of Victorian England were not blind or unreasonable, for he saw through many defects from which he had suffered and had seen many others suffer, and from which he gradually formed his own opinions on education.

Butler joined a chorus of Victorians--Macaulay, Carlyle, and Kingsley--who insisted that education be materially useful; young people who had no great property coming to them, the majority after all, must get from their masters the know-how to enable them to earn honest livings. Butler set forth this theory of utility in education in his *NOTEBOOKS* that the rule was not to learn a thing until one was pretty sure one wanted it, or that one would want it before long so badly as not to be able to get on without it... If a boy was idle and did not want to learn anything at all, the same principle would guide those who had the care of him. This would save trouble both for boys and teachers.

Butler insisted on giving the students the sort of training that would put them in the way of making money for themselves. He was sure that the individual talent, properly tutored, would rise to its own level in the marketplace. But proper tutoring was precisely what the English public schools and universities did not provide for the youth who must earn their own livings. Butler suffered greatly from the principles of the schools and universities. He made a comparison between his grandfather and himself: His grandfather worked hard all his life, and was making money all the time he

became a bishop. He worked hard all his life, but he had never been able to earn money. This he believed was largely due to the public school and university teaching through which his grandfather made his money. Butler said he was useless because he studied dead languages, abstract math, faraway history, and Church dogmas, all of which were certainly not taught for their utilitarian value. Rather, they were just the sorts of complex superfluities which were expensive and difficult to acquire. Such an education was naturally resented as a drain on parents' capital, but was more costly to their children whose retreat was cut off. They could no longer turn to a trade or to manual labour which alone could secure their independence. For example, when Ernest's training in carpentry was completed, he had nothing to fall back on. Butler's ideal was not only an education by utility but also an education by pleasure and interest. In *The Way OF All Flesh*, we can see that Ernest always mastered what was useful and pleasant to him and often forgot what was not. When he was leaving Roughborough, he was given a little volume off Dr. Skinner's bookshelf. The book was written in Latin and was not light or cheerful reading. He wanted to remember the things in the book but failed. Yet, if anyone played a piece of music and told him where it came from, he never forgot that, and he was not conscious of trying to remember it at all. Again, when he was imprisoned, he found that he was interested in the training as a tailor. Therefore, he did as much in three hours as many men did in a year. Later, when he was dealing in used clothes with Ellen, he quickly became a fair hand. As the narrator wrote. Butler not only attacked the educational principles in public schools and universities but also condemned the academic system in art schools. His apprentice system in art was learning very slowly in company with one who was doing similar work. The great secret in painting, he felt, was not to attempt too much, but to work only at that which gave pleasure and satisfaction, even if it meant aiming at a lower point than we might have wished for. He advised art students earnestly, urging them to let knowledge importune them before they would hear it.

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