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The Way of All Flesh

Samuel Butler



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The half autobiographic, half fictional story of Samuel Butler's The Way of All Flesh has been long considered one of the best examples of satire directed against Victorian morals and hypocrisy. Thenovel tells thestory of the Potifex family, most precisely the story of Ernest Potifex and thefour generations before him, as it is recounted by Edward Overton, Ernest's godfather. The familytree is traced back to the eighteenth century, starting with John Potifex, a carpenter. The familyline is continued by John's son, George, a publisher, his son, Theobald who becomes a minister and finally by Ernest, Theobald's eldest son. Ernest's relationship with his parents, especially with his father, is highly problematic. Both his parents are trying to dominate the youngboy who suffers in the loveless and hypocritical environment. He is trying hard to find his way in life. His school years are marked by thetyranny of his headmaster, but later on, at University, he finds some freedom. However, freedom soon comes to an end when Ernestobeys his father's demand tobecome a clergyman.Motivated by the intention to help others, Ernestplans to found an institution to treat ailments of thesoul and he also tries to findconverts, but his efforts fail and he also loses all themoney he has to a crook. He becomes imprisoned and seriously ill and later on he decides to break hisrelationship with his parents and theChurch as well.He receives some help from hisgodfather and he starts a business with Ellen, hisfather's formerservant. The two fall in love with each other and getmarried, but Ellen starts drinking heavily, eventhough the couple has twochildren together. Ellen proves to be bigamous, so Ernest getsreleased from the terrible marriage. He is helped out oncemore by his godfather who hires him as his secretary. He eventually reconciles with hisparents, comes into a substantial inheritance and. after years spent travelling abroad.heproposes to return to society and unmask itshypocrisy whenever he can.

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