



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. The novel tells the story of the Potifex family, most precisely the story of Ernest Potifex and the four generations before him, as it is recounted by Edward Overton, Ernest's godfather. The family tree is traced back to the eighteenth century, starting with John Potifex, a carpenter. The family line 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 young boy who suffers in the loveless and hypocritical environment. He is trying hard to find his way in life. His school years are marked by the tyranny of his headmaster, but later on, at University, he finds some freedom. However, freedom soon comes to an end when Ernest obeys his father's demand to become a clergyman. Motivated by the intention to help others, Ernest plans to found an institution to treat ailments of the soul and he also tries to find converts, but his efforts fail and he also loses all the money he has to a crook. He becomes imprisoned and seriously ill and later on he decides to break his relationship with his parents and the Church as well. He receives some help from his godfather and he starts a business with Ellen, his father's former servant. The two fall in love with each other and get married, but Ellen starts drinking heavily, even though the couple has two children together. Ellen proves to be bigamous, so Ernest gets released from the terrible marriage. He is helped out once more by his godfather who hires him as his secretary. He eventually reconciles with his parents, comes into a substantial inheritance and, after years spent travelling abroad, he proposes to return to society and unmask its hypocrisy whenever he can.

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