INTRODUCTION

The present thesis on "Marie Corelli: A Critical Estimate" deals with two problems, - Corelli's literary art and her philosophy.

The Oxford English Dictionary explains 'popularity' as "the fact or condition of being approved, beloved or admired by the people, or by many people." In her own time Corelli was admired by many people. She had become their favourite novelist. Her popularity can be well imagined first by the number of the editions of her novels. A Romance of Two Worlds has been edited sixteen times and reprinted 27 times; Vendetta has been reprinted 46 times; Thelma 61 times; Barabbas 60 times; The Mighty Atom 48 times and God's Good Man 28 times.

The Young Diana, which was published for the first time in 1918, is now in its seventh edition. According to Messrs. Methuen, the first edition of Temporal Power "reached the amazing number of 120,000 copies." In a newspaper cutting of Corelli's Scrap-Book, dated July 1906, it is said that she sold approximately 100,000 copies of her novels a year. "The Sorrows of Satan was ... the best-seller of all Marie's best sellers." Corelli's works were read by millions. As Scott-James says,

2. Note: The figures of reprints and editions are based on the available latest reprints and editions and on Cumulative Book Index.
they "thrilled hundreds of thousands of readers." The editor of the Review of Reviews, W. T. Stead, mentions "the phenomenal success" of The Master Christian. Thelma 'was the novel of the year'.

Secondly, Correlli received numerous letters from her enthusiastic readers. She said once to her first biographer Kent Carr: "From hard working miners in Texas, from army and navy men, from hospital nurses, from little children even who sympathise with Lionel and Jessamine in The Mighty Atom, come all sorts of loving and kindly greetings, for which I am deeply grateful." After the publication of A Romance of Two Worlds, "a gigantic amount of correspondence flowed in upon the authoress from India, Africa, Australia and America." The doctrines of Correlli's religious creed stirred Indians. "Learned Brahmins studied" her work. Indian princes addressed her with reverence. They considered her as "one who is inspired with the truths of the Divino." At the time of the Boer War not only English soldiers but even Boers read her novels. A strange outcome of the publication of Ardath was that some enthusiastic Americans proposed the building of a Correlli city in Fremont Country, Colorado U.S.A. The response to Correlli's novels was

1. Fifty Years of English Literature—by Scott James. p. 78.
3. Miss Marie Corelli—by Carr. p. 56.
5. Miss Marie Corelli—by Carr. p. 32.
6. Ibid—p. 55
7. Marie Corelli—by Coates and Warren Bell. p. 68.
not less phenomenal in her own country. She was held in great esteem both by the public at large and by royal personages. Queen Victoria and King Edward VII read her works. She was a frequent guest of honour in high social circles in London. A clergyman of the church of England, tortured by atheistic notions, was thinking of committing suicide. But the doctrines of A Romance of Two Worlds saved his life. Several clergymen based their sermons on her works like Barabbas and The Sorrows of Satan.

Thirdly, her novels have been translated into all the principal languages of the world. According to Coates and Warren Bell, Barabbas was "translated into more foreign tongues than any other novel of either the past or present, - the translations comprising thirty or forty languages."  

Fourthly, as Eileen Bigland says, Corelli was "Popular with a surprising number of intellectual people." She was admired by intellectuals like George Meredith, Cuming J. Walters and Clement Scott in her days. Lord Tennyson and Gladstone commended her novels. As Carr remarks: "Corelli's genius had won half the world to her worship." As F.A. Baker points out, she was also "idolized by the uncritical mob."

2. Miss Marie Corelli - by Coates and Warren Bell, pp.14C.  
4. Miss Marie Corelli - by Carr, pp.83.  
5. The History of the English Novel - by Baker, pp.221.
But the popularity which Corelli enjoyed in her prime did not last long. It declined suddenly after the First World War, in the letter phase of her life. What was the reason for this sudden decline in her popularity? The problem of Corelli's popularity is the problem that every popular writer has to face. Mere popularity does not mean greatness. That Corelli was a popular writer does not necessarily mean that she was a great one. Joseph Warren Beach remarks in The Twentieth Century Novel: "In no period of English literature could the greatness of a writer be gauged by his popularity. The great body of readers are quite unmindful of questions of form, and for the most part indifferent to honesty and seriousness in the treatment of human nature. It is only exceptionally that writers of genius, like Scott and Dickens, are among the best sellers... If the size of one's audience is any test of greatness, then Marie Corelli... had every reason to suppose that she was the most important writer of her time." Corelli herself seems to have been conscious of this problem. In My Little Bit, she says: "The words 'people' and 'popularity', viewed by academic darklanterns of literature, are opprobrious epithets. Any person designated as 'popular', or 'favoured by the people' falls at once outside the pale of mutual admiration." The problem of Corelli's popularity is closely related

to the problems of her philosophy and art. In investigating these aspects of her work, we are inevitably confronted with a consideration of the intrinsic worth of her novels. Is there any philosophy, in the metaphysical sense of the term, in her novels? She deals with the ultimate Reality and the general causes and principles of Creation. She relies on spiritual intuition as the means of acquiring an intimate knowledge of the mysteries that cannot be comprehended by the intellect. She believes in the immortality of the soul, and in its union with God. Was not Corelli a mystic? Where from did she get her philosophic doctrines? Was she influenced by the Theosophical Society? Again, is there any element of permanent artistic significance in her novels? If it is there, why is it that, as a writer, she has been almost ignored by literary critics?

It will be possible for us to see when these questions are answered that Corelli had a real gift of story-telling which fascinated millions of readers. She could throw open the golden gates of Romance which have always captivated the common man. She championed the revolt against realism with phenomenal, if temporary, success. A few of her thrillers like Thelma and Temporal Power will always make exhilarating reading and philosophic romances like A Romance of Two Worlds and Ardash are sure to attract some intellectuals in every generation. The recent revival of interest in her novels is clearly indicative of this fact.
Her love of melodrama, the enigmatic charm of her personality and her rhetoric and sentimentality were partly responsible for that aspect of her popularity which is not commensurate with greatness. She did not possess that union of the intellect and imagination which is essential to greatness. Instead of evolving an integral philosophy, she borrowed from many quarters and produced a patchwork, with, at the same time, an anxiety to conceal the sources from which she drew. She was a strange combination of the earnest visionary and the poseur. But this need not blind us to the element of greatness that runs through her major writings like a vein of gold through a piece of rock. An attempt will be made in the following pages to give a cogent account of all these aspects of her literary work.

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