

Moral Problems in the Major Characters of George Eliot's *Adam Bede*

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Adam Bede (1859) is the first full length novel written by George Eliot. In this novel both Hetty and Arthur suffer for their violating moral principles. Poignant tragedy ensues because of their being creatures of weak moral fibre. This moral weakness results in sin and this is followed by punishment and intense suffering. The Arthur -Hetty story traces the movement from weakness to sin and from sin to nemesis. Hetty's tragedy is woven through certain episodes that spring from her moral weakness. In the light of these moral issues that the novel, *Adam Bede* is to be read.

With Hetty's narrow, shallow and hard interior life, she is an atheist. The relentless attention given to her inner emptiness has turned her to be so. Her faith in God has ceased. Thus Hetty's story illustrates the moral truth that sin is sure to be followed by punishment and

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suffering. Infact, in *Adam Bede* (1859) George Eliot's moral approach is primarily based on the consequences of the moral lapses in a character.

Keywords: Morality, Religion, Sin, Christianity, Suffering.

George Eliot's novels are all dramas of moral conflict. She did not believe in the principle of art for art's sake, but in the art for the sake of morality. She believes in the fact that men's deeds determine their ethical impulses as much as men determine their deeds. If we yield to temptation and sin, suffering and nemesis are sure to follow. We have to reap the consequences of our own action. Her characters suffer because they violate some moral codes.

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In his book, *Twilight of the Idols*, the 19th century German philosopher Nietzsche criticises George Eliot in the following words:

They have got rid of the Christian God, and now felt obliged to cling all the more firmly to Christian morality. Christianity is a system, a consistently thought-out and complete

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view of things. If one breaks out of it one thereby breaks the whole thing to pieces, one has nothing of any consequence left in one's hand. (Nietzsche *Twilight of the Idols: The Anti Christ*, p.60).

Notwithstanding Nietzsche's annoyance at Eliot's moral approach, it must be admitted that she is successful in reconstructing Christian morality on a non-metaphysical and non-doctrinal basis in her literary works and the key to this process was to deal with the consequences of one's deeds and actions shaped by one's feeling and conscience. The major characters in all her novels provide a paradigmatic study of this moral approach.

The narrative in *Adam Bede* develops out of Arthur and Adam's friendship and Arthur's betrayal of it by seducing Adam's betrothed Hetty and the final union of Adam and Dinah. This story is carefully presented to enable George Eliot to explore the idea of morality by resorting to the consequences of one's actions and deeds.

Essentially the contrast between Arthur and Adam centers round their differing attitude towards truth. When Arthur is discovered in a compromising situation with Hetty by Adam, Arthur, instead of showing the native impulse to speak the truth frankly, is evasive and tries to deceive and outwit Adam by suppressing the fact. This attitude of Arthur is grounded in his false ego and assumed dignity that he sticks to his point and does not admit his misdeeds. Arthur is never sympathetic to Adam because he has ruined Arthur's dream of life. Arthur considers his flirtation with Hetty and stolen kisses to be very trifling, but for Adam this is a question of honour not only for himself but also for the common people around .

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As the novel proceeds, the erosion of truthfulness in Arthur is contrasted with Adam's loyalty to truth. Arthur's lack of integrity and moral depth are evident when he makes light of the act of showering kisses on Hetty. This enrages Adam and in utter disgust he tells Arthur,:

And you've been kissing her, and meaning nothing, have you? And I never kissed her in my life ... but I'd ha' worked hard for years for the right to kiss her. And you make light of it. You think little o' doing what may damage other folks, so as you get your bit o' trifling, a means nothing .(Adam Bede,p.299)

In fact, in the opening chapter, Adam indicates his strong attachment to conscience and work. His altruistic love for work is organic and rooted in conscientiousness which, in turn, forms the basis of his religious understanding. He explains his concept of religion to his brother Seth Bed in the following words:

Nay, Seth, lad; I'm not for laughing at no man's religion. Let'em follow their conscience, that's all. Only I think it'ud be better if their conscience 'ud let 'em stay quiet i' the church...there's a deal to be learnt there. And there's such a thing as being over-spiritual; we must have something beside Gospel i' this world. Look at the canals, an'th' aqueducts, an'th' coal-pit engines, and Arkwright's mills there at Cromford; a man must learn summat beside Gospel to make them thing, I recon. (Adam Bede,p.9)

Adam's acute sense of justice and fairness is vindicated in his conversation with the Rector, Mr. Irwin on the eve of Hetty's trial. Mr. Irwin represents a conservative and

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dogmatic attitude in Hayslope community. His rigmaroles and moral sermons fail to impress Adam. Adam wants to expose Arthur and to bring him under public scrutiny as he says : “It’s right people should know...it was a fine gentleman made love to her”. (Adam Bede,p.142)

He insists that Mr. Irwin ‘you’ll be doing her a harm by sparing him’. (Adam Bede,p.142) Though at first Mr. Irwin admits Adam’s arguments as sound but later on he interprets Adam’s desire as an act of vengeance and passion for revenge. Mr. Irwin counters Adam’s arguments by saying that ‘No amount of torture that you could inflict on him could benefit her... it is not for us men to apportion the shares of moral guilt and retribution’. (Adam Bede,p.142)

Mr. Irwin may be correct in his argument on the basis of the Christian tenet but it is, in fact, too harsh to demand perfect stoicism from Adam at this moment as his sentiment must be judged sympathetically and this is to be done in the light of the immense mental torture he has experienced. The woman, he hoped to marry, is in danger of being hanged. The blow is so unexpected and sudden that he is shocked and confused.

This episode is quite significant in the study of Adam’s character as for the first time Adam breaks away from his usual rigid and reticent self to give vent to his innermost feelings and emotions. Adam is apprehensive from the very beginning about the irrevocable tragic and disastrous consequence of the sinful and immoral acts of Arthur and Hetty, still there is a tone of helplessness and resignation in his utterance, ‘it can never be undone’. (Adam Bede,p.459) Adam’s wound seems sufficiently deep and permanent to give his cry that ‘no

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one pitied her (Hetty) enough and the folks at the Farm were too hard with her'. (Adam Bede,p.460)

True to Mr. Irwin's estimation Arthur proved at last to be a man with a heart and conscience and not coldly selfish. He gets remorsestricken at the sight of Hetty's ordeal. He takes out Hetty's handkerchief whenever he is alone and sheds tears. This is a tangible sign of misery and his inner sufferings. At the end of the fifth book Arthur acknowledges *and* spells out his guilt to Adam and thus his moral regeneration begins.

The contrast between the two main female characters — Dinah Morris and Hetty Sorrel, is also carefully developed. Dinah represents the moral centre of the novel. Dinah is more than simply a charismatic personality. Her exceptional disinterestedness impresses everyone, even Hetty. Dinah's power is the power of tact which proceeds from acute and ready sympathy. She is careful not to oppose any feeling, but it is also the power of touch that provides physical reassurance. Dinah grows out of the habit of vision. She moves from inspirational talk to silent feeling. In the scene of the expected execution of Hetty, it is the embrace of Dinah which counts for the trembling Hetty, who clung to her and clutched her as the only visible sign of love and pity. Dinah embodies comfort and solace.

Indication of Dinah's humanity and sympathy for fellow human beings, as the novel proceeds, forces us to re-examine her religious quaintness. Dinah's spirituality has an expanding material core. In fact Dinah's original unpremeditated doctrinal enthusiasm is tempered by experience. Notwithstanding some adverse criticism Dinah's initial adherence to Christian methodism is not inconsistent with the moral vision of George Eliot as the author's

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moral message is complete when Dinah rises above her narrow religious concept by marrying Adam Bede. Thus she is able to provide human face to her abstract spirituality.

The coming together of Adam and Dinah, though restrained by difficulties in their attitudes, is handled with considerable delicacy. Their mutual regard is compared with little quivering rain-streams. For the success of their union Adam should offer Dinah freedom of religious conscience. She will continue teaching as a Methodist for the comfort of the sick . Adam argues that feeling is a sort of knowledge that can equip her with experience which would help her in counseling others. With Adam, Dinah is able to combine practical religion with family life.

Dinah's dealing with Lisbeth Bede and Hetty Sorrel in their moment of distress is truly admirable. It also shows that she never pushes her common sense and feeling into a radical questioning of her faith. It sometimes appears that Dinah is not just one who prays, but herself an object of worship.

On the other hand, in George Eliot's world morally frivolous Hetty plays a vital role. Hetty, we are told, is entirely uninfluenced either by religious hopes or fears. In fact, her mental life is barely above that of an intelligent animal. What she represents becomes clear in chapter fifteen where she is making a little altar of her looking - glass and worshipping her own image. As K. M. Newton in his book *George Eliot: Romantic Humanist*, remarks

With Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede* narcissistic self-absorption prevents feeling being shaped morally by experience. Children and animals which would readily call forth human

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feeling arouse little other than irritation in her.(Newton, K.M.; *George Eliot: Romantic Humanist*, p. 55)

To Arthur, Hetty is an exciting temptation. To Adam, she is a religious symbol and Adam's love for her is more important than its object. With Hetty, however, Adam is deceived. As her beauty affects him impersonally, he cannot conceive of her inner life.

Hetty's lack of moral feeling is indicated by many details. She has no tender memories of childhood, pets or flowers, since they did not give any pleasure to her. She thinks of her young cousin as worse than the nasty little lamb brought in by the shepherd. She is pleasure-craving, vain and averse to face difficulties. 'She's no better than a peacock', (Adam Bede, p.61) says Mr. Poyer. 'It's my belief her heart's as hard as a pebble'.* (Adam Bede, p.62)

Hetty is unmoved by Adam Bede's affection since she doubts in his ability to afford her even such luxuries as she has shared in her uncle's house. Later, determined to conceal her pregnancy, she takes to duplicity to accept Adam's proposal with no thought of the anguish in store for him. Mistakes increase her confusion. Her little silly imagination had fixed on Arthur as an impressive provider of pleasure. Life at Donnithorne Chase, where she was learning lace-mending from the lady's maid, furnishes her with provisions of marrying Arthur Donnithorne and leading a life of idleness, pleasure and luxury. Hetty's poverty of culture renders her expectations of Arthur's protection vulnerably unrealistic.

Dominated by egoism that takes no account of others' interest and feelings, she can be budged only by fear of pain and of scorn. Hers alone is an unquiet mind at Thias Bede's

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funeral service, because Arthur does not turn up there. It is only the fear of public criticism which impels Hetty to deceive everyone over her misfortunes. Her guilty mind is always apprehensive of being exposed and so she tries to suppress her baby's cries and finally to cause its death.

In the end the fear of everlasting punishment induces Hetty to speak the truth to Dinah, apologise to Adam and forgive Arthur. Apart from the influence of extreme terror Hetty never softens. Hetty Sorrel's negligent abandonment of her tender, helpless and nameless child to its death is an unpardonable crime. Infanticide rouses condemnation stronger than those evoked by any other kind of murder.

Unsympathetic as she is, Hetty Sorrel, however, has one feature on which sympathy may be built, the basic human desire to live. During her wandering in search of Arthur she clings to life only as the hunted brute clings to it. It is due to George Eliot's technique of narration that Hetty's journey to Windsor and subsequent events evoke strong empathy with a figure whose every act is self-centred. Hetty curses her love, hates her baby like a heavy weight.

Just as the narrative in the first book circles round Hetty's physical presence, so after her imprisonment there is a similar indirect circuitous approach to her mind. Her appearance in court hardly lessens our sense of remoteness. She is no more than an image totally unresponsive except to her uncle's name. The legal evidences give no clue to her inner life, still they are suggestive. In fact truth about her cannot be uncovered by a legal process.

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This situation is resolved, however, when Hetty steps forward and is clasped by Dinah. This embrace is impersonal — it simply restores her to human society by making it possible for her to confess. This confession reveals the fact that infanticide is an action of an instinctively subnormal girl who is incapable of maternal affection towards her own baby. But a modern leader may try to soften Hetty's crime in interpreting it in the light of Hetty's psychological trauma. She is simply torn by agony and compunction.

Though she has the feeling that the world is reproaching her and there is a painful stirring of maternal instinct in her, but the bruise within her is the effect largely of mental emptiness, The horror of this situation is that a barely human creature, who stares at Dinah, is intelligent enough to know that she is going to be hanged.

These two ideas — Hetty's minimal humanity and her impending death - are equally necessary in bringing one of the novel's most important insights into focus. In the last chapter of the second volume George Eliot laments as to why there is so much sorrow in the religion of human beings.

With Hetty's narrow, shallow and hard interior life, she is an atheist. The relentless attention given to her inner emptiness has turned her to be so. Her faith in God has ceased. She gets so frightened as to understand that she is going to be hanged for killing her baby.

However, Hetty's death at this stage would have made consideration of broader issues very difficult. In the last brilliantly staged encounter between Arthur and Adam, George

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Elitot has freely expressed her unyieldingly stern vision of the moral order. Thus as a matter of logical and aesthetic necessity, the great lessons of the novel come finally together.

Thus Hetty's story illustrates the moral truth that sin— yielding to temptation — is sure to be followed by punishment and suffering. This truth is also illustrated by the character of Arthur. He is a man of weak moral fibre, he, yields to temptation, and the result is the tragedy that wrecks poor Hetty's life, as well as his own. He knew from the start that he could never marry Hetty, still he flirted with her, and had intimate relations with her. He was a man, superior to Hetty both in years and in experience of the world. A weak woman is, indeed, weaker than a weak man, and so Arthur Donnithorne's responsibility is much greater for the suffering and tragedy of poor Hetty.

As a result of his moral weakness in yielding to temptation, Arthur too suffers from deep spiritual anguish. His life is also wrecked. He is miserable, wretched and repentant. He tries to do his best, amends but he fails to save Hetty from transportation, and cannot heal the wounds that he has inflicted on himself, on Adam, on the Poysers, and on all those connected with poor Hetty. He was deeply repentant as he expressed to Adam that he was, wrong from the very first, and a horrible wrong had come of it. His words of repentance are: 'I was all wrong from the very first, and horrible wrong has come of it. God knows, I'd give my life if I could undo it.. (Adam Bede, p.470)

Adam Bede, however, is more than informative and moralistic. It offers the reader an enlargement of his religious consciousness. With this new sense of the didactic potentiality of

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her fiction, George Eliot apparently is able to broaden the range of her teaching in her subsequent novels which will involve intellectual assimilation and assent.

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