

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF THE MORAL VALUES IN VICTORIAN BRITISH SOCIETY
AS SEEN THROUGH ADAM BEDE BY GEORGE ELIOT

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Article Received: 16/09/2021

Article Accepted: 29/10/2021

Published online: 09/11/2021

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.9.4.114](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.9.4.114)

Abstract

The Victorian age is the period whereby Queen Victorian ascended to the throne in 1837 and reigned until 1901. It is also known as the age in reaction to Romanticism according the movement in literature and art originating in revolt against the formalities and conventions of classicism. The period was characterized by religion morality and its rigid code of behaviour in the society. The fight between the social classes was hard and pitiless. The current research work which focuses on the moral values in the Victorian Age in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* comes out to understand the British citizen's living conditions of the Era. Thus the psychoanalytic approach helps me to better understand the issue. As a result, the study shows that the Victorian Age was a class-based society where the race for material blinds people. It was a society of injustice and social inequalities.

Key Words: British society; Victorian Age; Moral values, inequality; social injustice.

Introduction

Also called the Victorian Age, The Victorian Era is the period whereby Queen Victorian ascended to the throne in 1837 and reigned until 1901. This Age began and ended with the reign of Queen Victoria. The literary Victorian Age ran until just about the time the Titanic sank. Culturally, the age came to accept social and political change as the norm. The mid-19th century rose with the middle class, industrialization, urbanization, an increase in technology, and the advancement of science and pseudoscience. The tendency of the Age is toward the novel although the Victorian writers investigate the relationship between people and society, between the individual and the self. Supports or suggests the research of Freud. It is characterised in

the 19th century by conscious preoccupations with the substantive and imaginative aspects of life and nature which was in fact a broad movement which 'swept through western period from the second half of the 18th century to that of the 19th. It assumed different aspects in many other countries. In England for instance, it was dominantly a literary revolution. Writers such as Charlotte Bronte, Robert Browning, Lewis Carroll and George Eliot abundantly depicted the facets of Victorian living based on Religion, Morality and a rigid moral code, Elitism, Industrial impacts improvement and rural settings. They put a tress on moral principles and moral values which sometimes happen to be unfair.

The aim of the current research work is to present the social structure of the Victorian society

and to depict the main characteristics of the key social issues of the period. To reach my goal I use psychoanalytic theory to penetrate the behaviour of some key protagonists of the novel under study.

1- *Structure of the Victorian Society*

The 19th century Victorian society was a society full of social barriers where the lower class faced hard life conditions while the upper class remained insensitive to the situation. The upper class known as the Gentry most of the time valued history, heritage, lineage and the continuity of their family. They believed that they were born to rule and guide the others, they find themselves as having a kind of "divine" right, with a deep and strong paternalistic view of society; apt to preserve tradition with their first born or grandson to inherit them, as the case of Arthur Donnithorne, the grandson of the Squire Donnithorne in *Adam Bede* and other representative of the Gentry in the same novel, such as the clergymen or the families. They are often land owners hiring workers and laborers and seldom work by themselves; in case of financial bad situation, they adapted and opened up their rank to the wealthiest among the second class citizens allowing them to buy a place; an illustration is the case of Adam Bede in *Adam Bede* who first became the wood manager and at the end bought it and became the owner. Finally, the Elite has life valuing, riches and leisure. George ELIOT works clearly to put all her characters in a highly hierarchical society shared in three distinctive classes.

The second class citizens are known to their progress, their laissez-faire attitude, their competitive ideas, their piety, hope, honesty, decency, charity, their family minded honour, they are also hard working character which leads them to the idea of self-help and assistance to others.

Finally, there are the agricultural labourers who have their own ranking according to their different job; they range among the third or lower class. In *Adam Bede*, Alick, the shepherd, Kester Beatle, the senior labourer and jack-of- all- trades, and Tim the Wagoner are good examples.

2- *Selfishness and honesty throughout Adam Bede*

George Eliot's *Adam Bede* is a king of searching, and comprehensive examination of the grounds of conduct. The society is made up people from different backgrounds each with his philosophy and his own way of dealing with the various he encounters. The approach to solve problems may be surprising while others may be seen as foolish ones. No one is to be blamed. Trying to understand the why of such behaviours may be helpful for judgement. The setting of the novel under study is mainly about rural and community life. Morality then takes an important place in the life of the protagonists. Through the analysis of their behaviour and their deeds, it is possible to better understand the principles and codes of conduct of the society.

The community of Hayslope is living an exemplary life and everything seemed to go smoothly at the beginning. Arthur shows lack of self-control and has been egoist. He belittles the harm he is doing by flirting with Hetty, the novel reaches its climax which is Hetty's tragedy. Even though, later on, the community comes to resume its former situation, it cannot redeem Hetty. The way George Eliot portrays the character of Arthur Donnithorne in *Adam Bede* could lead to social criticism. In fact, the first cause of the tragedy, the egoism of Arthur which makes him please himself by pleasing other people is nothing but the corollary of class optimism. In a patriarchal and paternalistic society as revealed in the novel, the egoism of the aristocratic class almost goes without saying; it is the result of a social situation. In the case of Arthur Donnithorne what George Eliot is saying is certain. In her comment, she says:

He (Arthur) was but twenty-one, you remember; and we don't inquire too closely into character in the case of a handsome generous young fellow, who will have property enough to support numerous peccadilloes - who, if he should unfortunately break a man's leg in his rash driving, will be able to pension him handsomely; or if he should happen to spoil a woman's existence

for her, will make it up to her with expensive bonbons, packed up and directed by his own hand. It would be ridiculous to be prying and analytic in such cases, as if one were inquiring into the character of a confidential clerk. (Adam Bede pp122)

The egoism of Arthur is that of some rich spoilt a young man who knows the assurance which gives money and rank and who allows himself anything because he can pay and give compensations, that is to say make the life of other people as he wants.

When he was a lad of seven, he one day kicked down an old gardener's pitcher of broth, from no motive but a kicking impulse, not reflecting that it was the old man's dinner; but on learning that sad fact, he took his favorite pencil-case and a silver hafted knife out of his pocket and offered them as compensation. He had been the same Arthur ever since, trying to make all offences forgotten in benefits. (Adam Bede 282)

Even when offended, Adam found himself guilty or debtor, he still had their reflex of class.

A patronizing disposition always has its meaner side, and in the confusion of his irritation and alarm there entered the feeling that a man to whom he had shown so much favour as to Adam, was not in a position to criticize his conduct. (Adam Bede pp282)

Admittedly Arthur Donnithorne whom George Eliot's irony never deserts has never had good conscience, he holds himself guilty; he knows what he does in flirting with Hetty as he uses to refer to her as a little thing.

He should have to go away in a few weeks, and the poor little thing would be miserable. He must not see her atone he must keep out of her way. (Adam Bede pp130)

But when he gives way to temptation as Adam and Eva did in the Eden Garden, that doesn't prevent him from reassuring himself through thinking that other people in the same situation might have done worse.

If there was something in his conduct that Poyser wouldn't have liked if he had known it, why, no man's conduct will bear too close an inspection; and Poyser was not likely to know it; and, after all, what had he done? Gone a little too far, perhaps, infiltration, but another man in his place would have acted much worse. (Adam Bede pp252)

Arthur Donnithorne knows from the beginning the role which plays his comfortable situation in Hetty's life and he neglects nothing to attract her. For instance, when Adam surprised Arthur and Hetty in the wood, Arthur was wearing his evening dress of fine cloth and fine linen which shone. How then the poor "little frightened bird" niece of a peasant so fascinated by anything which shines could avoid the trap? Arthur personally knows. This is dangerous because their friendship cannot go beyond the two of them. It cannot reach the awareness of others, he thinks of it at the very beginning: No gentleman, out of a ballad, could marry a farmer's niece.

After a closer reading of the novel under study I notice that George Eliot ironises the fact that -Arthur thinks that no one will know about his friendship with Hetty and that the only problem will be the fact that they might get too fond of each other, and parting would be rather hard. This is irony because later on they have been surprised by Adam, the last person who is supposed to know about it as he is also in love with Hetty. Another reason that proves that Arthur hasn't a good conscience is the fact that he can flatter Adam by lying, saying that there is nothing substantial between him and Hetty so he hides the evidence. However, when he notices that Adam was serious, he has been obliged to confess his error. Arthur's nature and behaviour is based on a feeling of benevolence and self-satisfaction. Even Reverend Irwine comments on it more than once and Arthur has some ideas that this is true.

Such a morality of feeling can have external validity only if one assumes utilitarian identity between self-interest and public good. It would seem that the pursuit of good opinion would compel someone like Arthur to do good and avoid evil, since

there is some consonance between what is right and what will produce pleasurable feelings.

When comparing Arthur and Adam, we can say that both have a belief in what is “right or Wrong”; both have conscience yet neither one sees what is really to his interest. They do see this because their morality is essentially an egotistic business one and their conscience is concerned with comfort. While seducing Hetty, Arthur is not so much imprudent as he is unfeeling; what feeling he has is in grown, cannot get outside and so becomes corrupted. Adam is unable to grieve at the loss of his father, to sympathize with his mother, or to forgive Hetty. His fault is the basic sin, anesthesia, lack of feeling. Nevertheless, in spite of their faults, Arthur and Adam are not so alienated from the world around them - and perhaps this helps to keep them from such absolute tragedy as Hetty's. Adam believes that the simple affections are the anchor and guardian of the moral being.

From what have been said above, one can notice that Arthur and Adam are like “night and day”. Adam is more honest and more responsible than Arthur. Adam tries to be honest anywhere even at his carpentry. He hates slipshod work; this is why he examines correctly wood before using it. When Adam makes some furniture or an equipment, he charges the exact price for it, he never accepts to be underpaid nor allows himself to ask more. This makes us recall the incident between he and the old Squire who thinks that Adam was requiring more than he deserved when the latter has made a screen frame to her daughter, Miss Lyddia.

One pound and thirteen for a grim crack like that! Lyddia, my dear, if you must spend money on these things, why don 't you get them at Rosseter, instead of paying double price for clumsy work here? Such things are not work for a carpenter like Adam. Give him a guinea, and no more. When Adam noticed that Miss Lyddia was embarrassed, he made a bow and said No, thank you, Madam; I'll make you a present o ' the screen if you please. I've charged the regular price for my work and I know it's done well... but if I'm

paid, I can 't take a smaller price than I asked. (*Adam Bede* pp233)

Besides, Adam never deceives people and never accepts to be deceived. He cannot bear a man to behave in a dishonest way and we can say that is one of the reasons why he fights Arthur who, instead of behaving like a gentleman behaves like a coward. Adam is responsible and wants everybody as well as Arthur to be responsible. In addition to the above mentioned moral values the novel bears other moral values such as human sympathy, social integration, hard work, leadership and self- sacrifice to mentioned but all.

3- *The issue of Religion as seen in Adam Bede*

When talking about moral values it is important mention the issue of religion. It is still widely believed that the majority of people at that time attended church or chapel regularly. At the same time the development of science leads the majority of the Victorian doubt with the moral values that churches taught. the Victorian England, and in particular its cities, experienced a breakdown of religious practice and what amounted to a secularisation of social consciousness and behaviour. Georges Eliot herself experienced by her own life the disregarding of this moral code. When *Adam Bede*, was published, Christianity was very influenced by Evangelicalism which was one of the most important religious trends at that time. But as paradoxical as it appears, the Good news is preached in a very hostile environment because most of the time the Gentry by their attitude, seem to be deaf and dead to gospel, moreover, they don't care for their mission through the divine message. As Dinah, Morris in the novel has devoted her life to preach it. She works tirelessly for anything she believes will benefit others. Like Adam, she sees the best in people but is also able to see their imperfections and to urge them toward a better life and toward God. She preaches, but she is never preachy, and because of her simplicity and gentleness, she is able to convert even the hardest of hearts. In *Dinah*, George Eliot may be giving a phenomenological role.

Christianity transcends the limits of natural man though grace, and Dinah was never left to herself; but it was always given her when

to keep silence and when to speak. And do we not all agree to call rapid thought and noble impulse by the name of inspiration? After our subtlest analysis of the mental process, we must still say, as Dinah did that our highest thoughts and best deeds are all given to us. (*Adam Bede* pp95)

A retrospective glance at the Author's own religious experience makes us understand well her choice and vision of religion; and leads her to find her own answer. Thus, within her contact with many sects she happened to suffer a great deal from an inner conflict: she then saw much disagreement in Christianity and the puritan theology and was finally induced to question the source of her faith. It was her break with Christianity enhanced by her belief in emergent Sciences of Sociology. So, as result she gave up the religious code inherited from the puritan theology that had deeply soaked the fibers of her thought and feeling. Henceforth she became ascetic. George Eliot rebelled against the Christian way of life she was taught in her childhood. Nevertheless, she tries to point out the importance of religion in man's life even though she herself doesn't believe in God as such as she mentioned in her novel.

4- Love as a natural force

Many characters have been transformed in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*. Lovers are portrayed as gentle, kind, and accepting. Adam loves Hetty and his working, hard work is his prayer and "Second god". Arthur loves Hetty, Dinah loves her God her preaching, she is purge from worldly love, her love as pure as pure water. Hetty loves Arthur her love is transformative because her love causes her suffering, her loves proves to be night mare for her. Love has magnetic force that is why it is love which forces to Hetty permits to Arthur playing her body, otherwise in those days a girl could not think about it because if a girl lost her Chasity she definitely lost the right of living. Hetty's love force her to do so. Hetty is an example of true lover. Dinah is a symbol of love in the novel. She loves all the people around

her village and whenever they are in need she is there to console them. Lisbeth is consoled and loved by Dinah. When Hetty is shunned by all for her crime, it is Dinah, who loves her without being judgmental. She consoles her and listens to her pain and agony and makes her feel free and relaxed at the end of the novel. She confesses her sin and is free from the burden. Hetty even asks for forgiveness to Adam for her betrays. Dinah's love has changed Hetty¹. Dinah's love and care has also changed Adam's view point to perceive the beauty. He used to see only the outer beauty of Hetty and is blindly in love with her, but when he notices Dinah with Hetty in the cell and her love for Hetty, he is totally changed. He finds the inner beauty of Dinah more loving and eternal than the outer beauty of Hetty. His perception to analyze and see the beauty has been changed because of Dinah's loving behaviors.

Arthur is aware of the situation, nevertheless he cannot be indifferent to Hetty's beauty. He is very attracted by her beauty that he starts doing anything he can to seduce her. He would give the glittering things and keep on dating her and his good nature prevents him from breaking before long with her. Had it not been Adam's pressure, Arthur wouldn't have the necessary courage to write to Hetty to disrupt their friendship. Through *Adam Bede*, George Eliot proves that love is powerful. It can transform people and make impossible become possible.

5- The injustice side of the Victorian society toward women

In his article entitled *Gender roles in the 19th century* published Kathryn Hughes writes:

During the Victorian period men and women's roles became more sharply defined than at any time in history. In earlier centuries it had been usual for women to work alongside husbands and brothers in the family business. Living 'over the shop' made it easy for women to help out by serving

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www.bachelorandmaster.com/britishandamericanfiction/themes-in-adam-bede.html#.YWin6hziLIU

customers or keeping accounts while also attending to their domestic duties.

This is one of the first injustice toward women. They were constraint to play the second zone role. They don't have the right to choose for themselves. They were considered as the 'weak sex'. In Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice* the snobbish Caroline Bingley lists the skills required by any young lady who considers herself accomplished:

A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages ... ; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions ... (*Pride and Prejudice Ch. 8*)

Women were assumed to desire marriage because it allowed them to become mothers rather than to pursue sexual or emotional satisfaction. George Eliot is also one of the victims of the Victorian society injustice. She was obliged to use George Eliot as a pen name instead of Mary Ann Evan. In addition, when you go through most of her novels, one can notice the question of injustice and some sort of a social inequality which she seems to denounce though she doesn't take clearly position. Indeed, it is obvious that George Eliot doesn't take position, she leaves the reader alone to judge from his own understanding. In general, in her novels there is always a character who suffers from the wrongdoing of another even though the character who undergoes the suffering may happen to be released at the end of the story. Hefty Sorrel has been an exception in *Adam Bede*.

Contrarily to *Silas Marner* where only a few characters suffer from the wrongdoing, in *Adam Bede*, almost the whole community of Hayslope pay a tribute to the tragedy. Even if characters like Adam and Hetty bear the most afflicting moral suffering. Indeed, they bear Arthur wrongdoing. Hefty's suffering has started from the moment she received Arthur's letter telling her his breaking with her.

I know you can never be happy except by marrying a man in your own station, and if I were to marry you now. I should only be

adding to any wrong I have done, besides offending against my duty in the other relations of life. You know nothing dear Hetty, of the world in which I must always live, and you would soon begin to dislike me, because there would be so little in which we should be alike. (*Adam Bede* pp315)

So this letter strikes deep in the heart of the naive young girl who is a green fellow as far as love affair is concerned. All her hope of becoming one day a lady has vanished. Her life has collapsed because she thinks that she will never find anyone that can comfort her and love her as much as Arthur did; ignoring that Arthur doesn't really love her. The direct implication of this is that the place she lives in is no longer desirable. She cannot find Arthur, and unwilling to return to the village and shame her family, she delivers her baby anonymously. She kills the child by abandoning it in a field, where it dies of exposure. Hetty is caught and tried for child murder. She is found guilty and sentenced to hang. Is she guilty? That is the question. It calls on the social injustice in which we live on in some societies. Women are asked to be pure, faultless and faithful. They should not have kids out of marriage but very often they do not receive the total support of their lovers and they bear the consequences of their deeds alone.

Conclusion

The 19th century Victorian society was one of rapid development and change, far swifter than in previous centuries. During this period England changed from a rural, agricultural country to an urban, industrialised one. This involved massive dislocation and radically altered the nature of society. The society was well structured but divided into classes with considerable gaps between them. It was a society of great injustice and inequalities. It is a period when the poor, women and children are voiceless. It indicates the real insight of thoughts and the daily lives of the citizens of the period. George Eliot despite her great intellectual capacity was obliged to use a pen name for all her works to escape punishment from the established rules. A closer and careful reading of *Adam Bede* by George Eliot allows me to assert that, though the novel plot seems easy

to grasp, its historical background and the writing style sends the readers to the Victorian Age's moral values. The end of the novel gives an idea of hope and expectation. Arthur has the promise of becoming Colonel. Adam is purified and he gets rid of his hardness and has the chance of getting married to Dinah.

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