

A Thorough Analysis of the Enchanting Realism: George Eliot's Captivating Portrayal of Victorian Rural English Life in Adam Bede

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Abstract

This comprehensive examination examines George Eliot's novel "Adam Bede" in the context of realism in Victorian English literature. The essay explores the origins of realism as a response to Romanticism, highlighting its focus on portraying life in a genuine manner, devoid of fanciful features. Critics frequently emphasize the Victorian era as a significant time in literature due to its varied novelists, who each played a role in shaping the changing notion of reality.

The story of "Adam Bede" is analysed as an exemplary illustration of realism, stemming from Eliot's commitment to depicting common characters and mundane events with clarity. The essay highlights Eliot's distinctive methodology in developing characters, placing a greater emphasis on reality rather than a complex storyline. The characters, such as Adam Bede, Dinah Morris, Hetty Sorrel, and Arthur Donnithorne, are thoroughly examined to highlight their authentic qualities, imperfections, and development throughout the story.

The study incorporates thematic themes, including the depiction of both internal and external beauty, industrious work, and ethical conduct, all of which contribute to the novel's realism. The essay argues that "Adam Bede" adeptly portrays the social reality of Victorian society by exploring themes of social class and moral quandaries. The conclusion underscores the novel's importance as a piece of realism in Victorian English literature, matching with the wider cultural background of that age.

Keywords: Realism, Adam Bede, Victorian society, George Eliot

Introduction

The literary movement known as realism emerged in France during the 1850s as an opposition to Romanticism. Realism is a literary technique employed to depict life in its most authentic form, devoid of any element of fantasy. The realist author has a propensity to depict the concerns of individuals from all social strata, as well as ordinary matters that are commonplace and, as such, significant concerns of realism. The author endeavours to authentically depict life and employs a language that is accessible and closely resembles the everyday language spoken by individuals. In other words, the writer employs a transparent language that functions as a reflective surface, offering insights into the ordinary experiences of individuals. Upon an overview of the matter concerning realism in English novels, it becomes apparent that while Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift established the foundations of realism in this genre, the majority of their works were predominantly rooted in fictional subjects. The concept of realism held significant prominence in English literature, particularly throughout the Victorian era. Regarding realism,

the majority of critics tend to focus on the Victorian Age, a period that saw the emergence of numerous esteemed novelists, each employing an own type of reality. In this sense, Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth asserts, "The loose, baggy quality of Victorian novels is not a symptom of incomplete art but, on the contrary, a necessity of the logic of realism which discovers its forms not in individual cases but in a series and over time." (1990). As the quotation conveys, Ermarth argues that the term "Victorian novel" encompasses more than just a novel in terms of its realism and her assertion is in line with the idea that "the rise of realism in nineteenth century British literature and art shows how highly the Victorians valued art's capacity mimetic capacity." (Byerly, 1997).

Discussion

George Eliot, a renowned English Victorian novelist, was not only a novelist but also a journalist and translator. Her writings are characterized by a form of psychoanalysis that is prevalent in current literature. Published in 1859, Eliot's first complete novel, *Adam Bede*, is believed to have drawn its plot from a story narrated to Eliot by her aunt, with four main characters. Essentially, the novel's plot revolves around the rural existence of its characters and the dynamics of a romantic entanglement involving three individuals. The novel is grounded in realism, and Eliot consistently achieves her intended aim throughout the narrative. She provides numerous depictions of personalities and the countryside lifestyle in England. Therefore, the novel portrays the pastoral lifestyle of nineteenth century England. Eliot herself referred to the novel as a "country novel," indicating that it encompasses various facets of rural English life during that time period. As Eliot's first attempt at creating a book, it serves as an ideal work for comprehending the evolution of George Eliot as a novelist and grasping the significant themes that are subsequently employed in her later novels. Eliot's narrative consistently centres around the ordinary individual, while deliberately refraining from exaggeration. She successfully portrays the individuals' personal experiences with clarity, avoiding the creation of intricate and enigmatic personalities. The author's inclination to develop ordinary people in her works leads to the creation of believable characters, thereby contributing to the sense of reality. He portrays scenarios that are likely to happen in our everyday lives, lending a sense of realism to his works. Eliot portrays not just the physical movements, but also the mental actions of the characters. In addition, she approaches the religious aspects of the characters using a distinct way. While engaging in this, she does not attribute everything that individuals struggle with throughout their lives to fate; she believes that the experiences we have are consequences of our own decisions. In brief, Eliot's *Adam Bede* serves as a notable exemplification of realism, and like other realists, Eliot prioritizes character development over storyline in the work. The novel starts by introducing the reader with the characters and their distinct attributes that are unique to each individual. The novel's plot takes place in Hayslope, a town that continues to be influenced by stereotypes. To establish the scene, Hayslope is described as an old-fashioned English village. Nothing is exaggerated about this traditional English town, which embodies the pastoral English village of the nineteenth century. In addition to the quaint village that exemplifies rural life in England during the nineteenth century, the novel explores various themes such as friendship and love, which are purely representative of everyday English existence and realism. The social problems of Victorian English society are depicted; therefore, it is not difficult to understand that Eliot is attempting to establish a literary masterpiece that exemplifies social realism via the society mentioned earlier. The social realism in question is comprised of the characters' deceit regarding their social class. Additionally, one could argue that the novel's characters best exemplify Eliot's realism as Ian Adam argues, "The characters in the novel are ordinary en either social class or native endowment and

frequently in both, its tragic actions grows out of a commonplace seduction, its setting is humble and representatively agrarian” (1975). The quotation provides a comprehensive explanation of the evidence that demonstrates the realistic nature of "Adam Bede," a masterpiece of Victorian English literature. Eliot's work was evidently susceptible to criticism from fictional historians due to her emphasis on moral concerns inside society. The author utilizes realism in the storytelling, which is essential for accurately portraying both the characters and the circumstances. The author's exploration of moral dilemmas and objective truth in Adam Bede provides a clear depiction of the origins and consequences of social problems. Therefore, it is accurate to assert that realism plays a significant role in the novel.

Considering the explanations provided above, it is evident that the utilization of characters depicted by Eliot is a highly notable manifestation of realism in the novel. The novel's protagonist, Adam Bede, gives his name to the title of the book. He is employed as a carpenter and is known for his diligent work ethic. Adam possesses a compassionate nature and consistently demonstrates a willingness to assist all beings, ranging from humans to animals, in his vicinity. Adam, an English peasant, is a tall, attractive, hard-working, and youthful individual who is employed as a carpenter. Not only does he possess a compassionate nature, but he also has a significant amount of practical wisdom. However, he tends to be excessively proud of himself. Eliot demonstrates in the novel that Adam is an ordinary villager by stating that “in reality Adam was convinced that his father was dead but he knew there was no other way of repressing his mother’s impetuous wailing grief than by occupying her with some active task which had hope in it “(Adam 51). According to the quote, Adam Bede assumes the role of both financial and moral leader of his family following the death of his father. He is not prone to exaggeration and he has the traits of a typical English peasant. Despite lacking a formal education, he maintains a strong sense of pride in himself and possesses an astonishing level of intelligence. He perceives life as uncomplicated; in fact, it is straightforward for him. He perceives himself as resilient and he never pardons the shortcomings of others. He believes that the world operates in a cyclical manner based on certain principles, and that it is important for everyone to fulfil their responsibilities even in unfavourable conditions. Consistent with this notion, he embodies qualities of both moral and ethical integrity, as well as spiritual and conscientious responsibility. He consistently endeavours to resolve issues in a suitable manner. In addition, he possesses integrity and demonstrates a strong work ethic, resulting in his unwavering loyalty to his job. This type of loyalty endows him with tremendous determination and facilitates his adeptness in problem-solving and self-expression. He believes that his judgments of right and evil are accurate, demonstrating self-assurance and a determined character. Conversely, Eliot refrains from depicting perfect characters and compromising the realism of the work. Despite the positive aspects of Adam Bede, he also exhibits negative traits that indicate his immaturity. To begin with, his response towards his father demonstrates an absence of empathy towards those who possess frail qualities. It is unreasonable for him to demand that others emulate his conduct and loyalty to his responsibilities; doing so reveals an intolerable aspect of him. Throughout the novel, it is also evident that he has a propensity for violence and attempts to resolve certain issues through the use of force; at times, he even considers violence to be a practical solution to problems. For example, upon discovering the extramarital relationship between Arthur and Hetty, his response demonstrates an aspect of his character characterized by intolerance. Due to the influence of his passions, he attempts to resolve the issue through a physical confrontation with Arthur. He exacts vengeance in this manner by compelling Arthur to correspond with Hetty as a means of severing their ties, which is considered permissible conduct. This type of conduct encircles all admirable qualities, Adam

Bede's strong will being in particular. Subsequently, Adam's remorse for his violent behaviour toward Arthur provides insight into his impending maturation. He recognizes that his actions were improper and without purpose. Since he has no influence over the situation at Hetty's trial, he feels pity for her. All of this demonstrates that Adam ceases to judge others according to his own rights and treats everyone equally, irrespective of their character or actions. He sets aside his proclivity for aggression and his lack of tolerance. Consequently, his negative attributes that had previously isolated him from others diminish. He teaches himself to prioritize the happiness of others over his own, to have compassion for others, and to forgive the faults of others, including those of his enemies. Constantly observable in our surroundings, each of these attributes seems real rather than fictitious. Adam Bede attains a greater degree of maturity and realism over the course of the novel, while maintaining a consistent personality. His values shift, but he remains strong by the end of the novel; the only difference is that he has learned to love despite negative aspects and accepts everything as it is. His personality remains consistent despite the fact that he gains maturity and experiences growth.

Dinah Morris, the subsequent significant figure in the novel, is considered a woman who lives and works for the benefit of others, as she strives to acquire anything that she believes will be advantageous to others. Both individuals share a similar trait with Adam Bede, in that they both perceive the negative aspects of others alongside their positive qualities, and she also advises individuals to strive for an improved existence. Dinah appears to be an unrealistically excellent character in the eyes of the majority of readers. Additionally, readers may have a tendency to perceive her as an insincere individual; however, Eliot crafted a character wholly based on historical events; this should be considered when evaluating Dinah Morris's character. Suggesting how realistic Eliot's approach to Dinah in the novel is, Gordon S. Haight asserts, "Dinah Morris is apparently a study from life; and it is warm praise to say, that, in spite of the high key in which she is conceived, morally, she retains many of the warm colours of the life" (1966). By this quotation, Haight seeks to demonstrate that Eliot creates a character who bears resemblance to those of us in daily life. Additionally, some critics contend that Dinah's portrayal as an ideal woman devoid of any flaws undermines her realism as a character. It is believed by some that Dinah's compassion for others is contrived and that no woman in the world is flawless. Dinah is an absolutely lovely woman, but that does not mean she is devoid of flaws. She is as devoted to her work as Adam Bede is; even when confronted with an obstacle, she does not surrender; rather, she labors to resolve it. She dedicates the majority of her life to charitable work and the betterment of others. Her primary mission is to lead individuals to God. Therefore, it can be asserted that she educated herself on techniques to calm individuals and influence them positively. She acts for the glory of God; that is, she considers herself to be his servant. Due to her diligent nature, she never fails to attend to her tasks. She visits impoverished individuals, including the unwell and those imprisoned, in an effort to comfort them and lead them to God. For her, God is the highest priority; in fact, she places God before all else. She acts in a manner that she is certain yields favorable outcomes. She is respected and admired by all those in her surroundings and "in Adam Bede George Eliot presents the character Dinah Morris as a working woman who produces narrative. Dinah is a Methodist preacher who is also a mill girl" (Peel, 2008). This statement portrays Dinah as a diligent lady who dedicates a significant portion of her life to labouring for others. Through this depiction, Eliot promotes a sense of reality in her readers.

A character whose development occurs over the course of the novel, Hetty Sorrel, exemplifies the realism that Eliot implements in the work. Earlier chapters portrayed her as self-centered and vicious; however, as the narrative progresses, her suffering garners sympathy. At the age of seventeen, Hetty is likely not highly educated. She is incapable of accurately analysing situations or predicting their outcomes due to the fact that she is immature and has received a limited education. She has aspirations and requires protection as every other young person. The undesired pregnancy make her withdraw into herself, so she refuses to talk with people. For her story Valeri Ferrari writes, “In George Eliot's 18th century tale, *Adam Bede*, the author weaves a story that takes us along on the journey of a young woman who, finding herself pregnant, runs off to find the baby's father and ends up arrested for infanticide” (Ferrari, 2008). Furthermore, the quotation clarifies that the character and narrative of Hetty Sorrel exemplify the principles of realism. Throughout history, we have been informed about adolescent women who forsake their infants, leading to fatal consequences. Considering this case, it is evident that Eliot exemplified a commendable portrayal of a realistic character.

Another significant character in the narrative is Arthur Donnithorne, who is shown as a multifaceted individual. Similar to all individuals, he possesses both negative and positive attributes. He refrains from causing harm to others due to his compassionate nature. He is an affluent individual who selflessly utilizes his wealth and social standing for the betterment of others. When he formulates plans for the future, he considers not just his own advantage, but also the advantage of others. He possesses a negative aspect in which he believes he can attain things effortlessly and without doing any effort. He possesses unnecessary confidence. He is aware of his shortcomings, yet he is unable to correct them. Consequently, he encounters difficulties. He was a member of the feudal class, which nevertheless held a certain captivating allure for the working class. Arthur is aware that his romantic relationship with Hetty is not productive, yet he is unable to resist being attracted to her. Arthur's emotional disposition, coupled with his commendable and detrimental attributes, inevitably result in the detriment of others' lives. While he displays concern for others, his involvement with Hetty reveals a distinct narcissistic trait. Additionally, it should be noted that he assists others in obtaining their respect and praises. Eliot effectively presents a realistic character with his distinct qualities and goals. Considering Arthur Donnithorne, it becomes evident that the novel's characters possess realistic features, thus exemplifying the concept of social realism in *Adam Bede*. The majority of the characters in the novel possess a keen awareness of their social standing and class rank, so exemplifying the presence of social realism in the narrative.

Eliot's *Adam Bede* exhibits realism through not only its setting and characters, but also its thematic elements. Eliot juxtaposes inner and outside beauty to illustrate the lack of alignment between external and internal truths. For instance, Hetty possesses remarkable physical beauty, but her inner beauty is lacking since she harbors an inner ugliness. This type of repulsiveness prompted Arthur and Adam to engage in evil actions. Conversely, Dinah lacks the physical attractiveness that Hetty possesses, but she possesses a profound inner beauty, demonstrated by her genuine empathy towards others, without any ulterior motives. She endeavors to guide them towards God, thus rescuing their soul, with the intention of providing solace and tranquility. Another motif that exemplifies realism in the narrative is diligent labor. In fact, the majority of the characters, including *Adam Bede*, *Dinah Morris*, and *Seth Bede*, exhibit a strong work ethic and are fully committed to their respective tasks. They dedicate their days to labour and seldom disregard their employment as it is essential for them to fulfil their necessities. The imperative to engage

in labour exemplifies the Victorian Era's middle class since they are compelled to work in order to meet their necessities. Several characters exhibit negative behaviours throughout the narrative. For instance, Hetty's illicit romance with Donnithorne was morally incorrect and led to negative consequences, causing harm to everyone around them. Engaging in ethical behaviour is not only crucial for the individual, but also vital for the overall well-being of society. Eliot portrays the pastoral beauty of rural existence in the work, thus presenting a realistic aspect of the narrative.

Conclusion

Eliot's *Adam Bede* is a significant work of Victorian English literature that embodies realism and portrays the authentic country lifestyle of nineteenth century England. When analysing Victorian English literature, it becomes apparent that the majority of these works embody realism. *Adam Bede* accurately portrays the historical context in which it was written. The story successfully mirrors the reality of Victorian life. In this sense, Nancy Henry argues, “The realist principles she articulated in “The Natural History of German Life” and in scenes of Clerical Life are not only practised in *Adam Bede*, but are stressed both metaphorically and explicitly in ways that established her as a spokesperson for a new kind of realistic fiction” (2008). The quotation suggests that Eliot's utilization of realism in the narrative is significant since the realistic depiction of her characters and events is enhanced through her portrayal of Dutch painting in chapter 17. Throughout the entirety of the novel, Eliot endeavours to depict individuals of common or average status. Hence, it is unsurprising that *Adam Bede* provides a clear depiction of the causes of social instability, thereby highlighting the prevalence of realism in this story. Therefore, the novel is based on realism and “we can say that, from its earliest days, the novel has been typically concerned with depicting the development of individual life within a specific setting, a concern that is thought to have arisen in association with the rise of a certain kind of society in England. Its method of representation is realistic in its attempt to depict what the world is like, and this is achieved through the depiction of detail by means of a more largely referential use of language” (Walder, 1995). As Walder clearly suggests in the quotation, Eliot's novel, *Adam Bede* is characterized by a realistic portrayal of society. It includes elements such as social presentation, reflection of social problems, and emphasis on the plight of the poor, rural settings, depiction of Victorian morality, a sense of brotherhood, religious themes, and an objective representation of truth. These elements serve as an objective correlative, effectively illustrating the social realism in Eliot's work.

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