

GEORGE ELIOT'S COMPLEX REALISM. RURAL, SOCIAL, MORAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL REALISM IN *ADAM BEDE*

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ABSTRACT. The present study aims to discuss the novelty brought in the literary field by Eliot's complex realistic approach in her literary representations. The first part of the work focuses on the transition to Victorian literary realism and the way in which Eliot manages to masterfully bridge the distance between time gaps by acknowledging that each age, though irrevocably separated from that preceding it, must reinterpret the past it has lost in order to arrange its own present. It also discusses Eliot's strong commitment to the moral vocation of art and her attempt to shape her literary creed that art is moral only if it is aesthetically effective. The second part of the study deals with *Adam Bede*, Eliot's first experimentation with this new type of novel that was quite a novelty and a radical innovation in its time. The focus is on the way in which Eliot manages to embody in one novel her commitment to rustic, social, moral and psychological realism altogether as a literary genre by rejecting the reigning social, religious, and literary aesthetic conventions based on didacticism and focusing on adopting realistic plots, settings and common characters modeled on the image of her present world. Her endeavor represents an unusual phenomenon, at least at the time when Eliot began her career as a novelist.

KEY WORDS: victorianism, rural, social, moral, psychological realism

Introduction. The Realistic Novel During Victorianism

If Renaissance is identified with drama and Romanticism with poetry, the Victorian age can be easily identified with the novel. The novel was the most prevalent genre of those times because it was especially well suited to writers who strove to capture the diversity of industrial life and the class disputes and divisions created by industrialism.

Augustan writers and writings were highly dominated by reason and characterized by an earthly realism, Romantics, on the contrary, by idealism and emotion, therefore, the Victorians had to fuse somehow these contradictory tendencies and synthesize the ideal with the real. Indeed, there was an acute need to compensate the oppressive climate of the actual Victorian life with the transforming power of the ideals but, at the same time, Victorians realized the necessity of continuing to live in a real world and of

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accepting the routine of ordinary life with all its customs and conventions. There was a direct relation between literature and life, for Victorian authors themselves were part of and shared the disillusion, the doubts, the turmoil and radical changes England went through. Every writer, in his/her own way, directly or indirectly, endeavored to come up with some realistic answers and solutions to the pressures of a completely new life style and its demands.

Therefore, the dominant paradigm of the century had very little to do with the previous Romantic idealism, but emphasized in turn a new approach to character and subject matter, that gave birth to a new direction which later came to be known as Realism. As a literary movement, Realism started in France in 1850s and it was a reaction against Romanticism and what it stood for. Gradually it took hold among the great novelist, both in Europe and America, and Victorian English writers made no exception. In England, Realism coincided with Victorianism and was mainly characterized by a certain closeness between the novelist and his reader particularly during the early Victorian period. There was a public demand for realistic novels that faithfully depict the ordinary, real life they lived in. For the Victorian readers, the novel became more than a means of entertaining. They wanted to be close to what they were reading, to pretend that literature was journalism, and that fiction was history.

Literature was seen as a transcript of life as it was happening in the real world. The Victorian novelists depicted in their novels different themes, subjects and created plots that were highly connected to reality. The best novels written during Victorianism transcended the requirements of their reading public and can still be easily read with pleasure by the following generations, including the postmodern readers. During Victorianism, we witnessed a new category of writers that turned to fiction in order to express private passions, personal emotions, symbolic meanings that are, and will continue to be, common for all people regardless of time and space. The Victorian writers considered themselves teachers, who had to deliver a moral message in order to instruct their society. The novel was seriously informed by journalistic methods and techniques, such as objectivity and fidelity to the facts, combined with a close documentation and observation of everyday life. Victorian realism drew its characters from all social classes and explored areas of life usually ignored by the arts. Writing had become an important commercial activity and novels were written primarily to please the public and sell. The middle class readership demanded these realistic novels in which the contemporary world they knew was faithfully described and not idealized as the Romantics had done.

In nuce, one may state that Victorian realist novel emphasized attention to detail and aimed to show “life as it was”, to replicate the true nature of reality. In so doing, the Victorian writer set about to heighten his/her readers by

increasing their knowledge and clarifying their moral standards. The characters that the realistic Victorian writers produced are complex and psychologically complicated, and their interior and exterior lives, experiences, actions or emotions, all reflect the daily struggles of their age. In all Victorian novels, the descriptions of streets, buildings and people are realistic and accurately reflect the living conditions in mid-19th century England.

Eliot's Art of Realism

The new Victorian writers continued to preserve in a way some well-established habits from the previous Romantic era, while, at the same time, they continuously and vehemently push the art of writing in new and interesting directions. In a predominantly patriarchal society, women writers often felt the need to write under male pseudonym in order to receive recognition. This was the case of Mary Ann Evans, known as George Eliot. The stories of her novels present a realistic and complex picture of provincial society and deal persuasively with the Victorian ideals of duty and self-sacrifice. Most of all, they speak for the strength and subtleties of woman that had certainly sunk deep into English letters when George Eliot began to write, as Chesterton states.

George Eliot was one of the Victorian *sages* as well as a novelist, who lived a controversial and unconventional life and wrote in the same manner. Although she shocked her contemporaries with some of her choices in life, she eventually earned a much-deserved esteem and recognition of an accomplished author. She has been widely praised both for the richness and intellectual depth of her fiction and the universality of her themes:

She is interested in science and religion, philosophy and art, ethics and politics, psychology and sociology, finance and law, and the broad cultural and economic developments that attended modernization. As a polymath and a reader of extraordinary range and insight, Eliot brought a great deal of learning to her art, which nonetheless always remained centrally trained on human moral and psychological experience. (Anderson 2016: 10)

Her moral visions regarding social order and the struggles of the common individual that lives in provincial English communities are enriched and sprinkled with depictions of the newest currents and ideas that best characterized the Victorian age. Many ideas regarding religion, social norms, traditional values, ethics, and at times even politics, were communicated through Eliot's realistic fiction. Her endeavor represents an unusual phenomenon, at least at the time when Eliot began her career as a novelist. As previously mentioned, George Eliot wrote her novels in a period of change and transition towards a new order. In Knoepflmacher's words:

The changes experienced by George Eliot's generation were especially disheartening because of their abruptness. The mid-Victorians had to shift from tradition—a mode of life based on the repetition of sameness—to the insecurity of an existence in which men could neither hark back to time-honored norms nor confidently predict the outcome of the innovations around them. (Knoepflmacher 1968: 2)

Most of Eliot's novels are set in the 1830's, an age of abrupt historical changes, reform and agitation. Her proclaimed aim, to write a "natural history" of English life, drove her back to the time of her childhood and beyond, where the web of society could be held securely in memory. The result was a curious double perspective, for she walked between two eras, upon the confines of two worlds, and has described the old in terms of the new. To the old world belonged the elements of her experience, to the new world the elements of her reflection on experience (Gilmore 2004: 128). In her novel, Eliot manages to masterfully bridge the distance between these time gaps. As U. C. Knoepflmacher noticed, George Eliot understood that each age, though irrevocably separated from that preceding it, must nonetheless reinterpret the past it has lost in order to arrange its own disordered present (Knoepflmacher 1968: 13). As critics have observed, Eliot's use of the nineteenth century rural settings can at times evoke a romanticized nostalgia for an idealized industrial landscape, but at the same time, the human interactions that play out in these places are far from idyllic and demonstrate a deep understanding of the moral complexities of socio-cultural ideologies that shape, and are shaped, by the rural locale (Goodman 2016: 87).

Eliot's novels are notable for their realistic depictions of this pre-industrial English countryside of her own childhood, a period which she describes with a nostalgic tone. More than any of her contemporaries, George Eliot aimed to increase the possibilities of her novel as a literary form, and break with the classical demands of art showing life as it should be, by showing life as it is. The contrast between the pre-Reform Bill world she writes about and the modernity of her reflections upon it, makes for a different fictional treatment of the past than in other Victorian novelists (Gilmore 1986: 128).

Eliot transforms her novels into vocal instruments of social commentary and human analysis. She used her writings as a new way of presenting ordinary aspects of life with great integrity and transparency, attempting a sympathetic presentation of mainly country, middle-class people, whom she depicts in all their dignity and deep humanity. She considered that art was the nearest thing to life, a mode of extending experience and of widening human interaction.

In 1856, at the beginning of her literary career, Eliot wrote an essay *The Natural History of German Life* on the work of the German sociologist, Wilhelm

Heinrich von Riehl and published it in the *Westminster Review*. In this essay, written before the launch of her career as a novelist, she expressed her literary conviction that fiction should cultivate the sympathies of its readers and bring them to a better understanding of those with whom they share their worlds. All these ideas were derived from Riehl's work, including the belief that realistic representation should be based on direct observation and experience and not on suppositions extracted from theoretical, preconceived principles. In all her novels, Eliot endeavoured to depict authentic representations of experience and refused to indulge in current conventions and popular taste.

Another idea inspired by Riehl, which Eliot fully embraced, was that the characters of the realistic fictional representations should be common, ordinary people, depicted in their natural environment, rather than some idealized exotic romantic settings. The anti-town sensibility and a rural, peasant class sympathy were also ideas influenced by Riehl and later on incorporate by Eliot in her novels (Anderson 2016: 358). Therefore, Eliot advocated for realistic portrayals of ordinary and common men and against idealizing trends in literature and in visual arts, especially in depictions of peasants and rural life. Eliot is reacting of course, in part, against the long tradition of "high" style literature which she regards as essentially idealistic, a tradition that has ignored the reality of everyday, common life. Indeed, Eliot was a pioneer and a vocal promoter of literary rustic or village realism that's why her plea was for an art that represented the ordinariness of country life.

Eliot's first fiction, the short stories of *Scenes of Clerical Life* and the novels *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss* and *Silas Marner* are mainly set in rural locations and became literary representations of Eliot's rustic realism, incorporating meticulous descriptions of rural life and traditions and other details of the agricultural landscape such as harvest dates, flora and fauna. Eliot also proves to be a keen observer of the customs that give each rural location its individual characteristics and pays great attention to the distinct local dialects she incorporates in her writings (Goodman 2016: 87).

Rustic, Moral, and Social Realism in *Adam Bede*

Following G. H. Lewes in his belief that realism is the basis of all Art, and that antithesis is not Idealism but Falsism (Lewes 1858: 493), Eliot herself often defined realism in terms of truth and morality and aimed to be an honest, uncompromising author determined to avoid falsehood. Eliot's intentions are expressed, in both the form and content of *Adam Bede*, in the well known statement on Dutch painting with which she opened the second book of the novel:

So I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things better than they were; dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity, which, in spite of one's best efforts, there is reason to dread. Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult... Examine your words well, and you will find that even when you have no motif to be false, it is a very hard thing to say the exact truth, even about your own immediate feelings—much harder than to say something fine about them which is not the exact truth. It is for this rare, precious quality of truthfulness that I delight in many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise... I turn without shrinking from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sibyls, and heroic warriors to an old woman bending over her flower pot, or eating her solitary dinner..."Foh!" says my idealistic friend, "what vulgar details! What good is there in taking all these paints to give an exact likeness of old women and clowns? What a low phase life! - clumsy, ugly people..." Therefore let Art always remind us of them; therefore let us always have men ready to give the loving pains of life to the faithful representing of commonplace things—men who see beauty in these commonplace things, and delight in showing how kindly the light of heaven falls on them. There are few prophets in the world; few sublimely beautiful women; few heroes. I can't afford to give all my love and reverence to such rarities: I want a great deal of those feelings from my every-day fellow man, especially for the few in the foreground of the great multitude, whose faces I know, whose hands I touch, for whom I have to make way with kindly courtesy. (Eliot 2005: 129-130)

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Dutch school of painting was less popular because of its focus on concrete details of the common people and of the everyday life it depicted. Eliot uses this digression in her novel in order to emphasize the idea that this type of realistic representations is more valuable than a romanticized presentation of life. The fragment above functions as a sort of manifesto for the moral value of realism, of how faithful representations of commonplace things and people have the ability to enliven human sympathy by relating the observer or the reader closer to life and to the characters. In Eliot's understanding, people should be accepted as they are, imperfect, hesitant or limited rather than raising them to unattainable ideals. Therefore, unlike her contemporary French realist writers, Eliot's realism is based both on the reliance on one's own experience and on the "fellow-feeling" with other human beings.

Eliot was very familiar with the social context of the 19th century and proved a remarkable talent in depicting the depth and scope of the provincial English world. She used her knowledge to enliven characters who moved naturally in the course of their daily activities and who seemed as real as the historical period they inhabited.

In her novels she deals with a wide range of issues, such as the clashes between the provincial and the metropolitan, or between agricultural, professional life vs. an industrial, commercial one. She also showed a predilection for such issues as social hierarchies, self-deprivation,

marginalization, moral obligation, religion, justice, love and relationships or gender roles.

Eliot demonstrated an amazing ability to penetrate deeply into the minds of her characters and to represent the inner struggle of the soul, thing that earned her a well-deserved place among the “founding-fathers” of the modern psychological novel. Eliot’s psychological realism led her to create heroes and heroines that differ radically from those of other Victorian writers of her time. Unlike Dickens and Thackeray, who were less preoccupied with the process of inner change, focusing mainly on one single, external, dominant feature that best served their ultimate thematic purposes, Eliot emphasizes in her writings the complex psychological development of her characters who develop gradually and who go from weakness to strength and vice versa.

In presenting the inner struggles of the soul, Eliot created characters neither good nor evil, which move “from weakness to strength and from strength to weakness according to the works they do and the thoughts they cherish” (Long 2019: 509). The plot of Eliot’s stories is born out of the relationships and the inner or outer conflicts of these carefully portrayed characters. It is the development of the characters’ soul, the motives behind their behavior, the slow growth or decline of their moral power that Eliot focuses on:

George Eliot’s sphere was the inner man; she exposed the internal clockwork. Her characters are not simply passive, and they do not stand still; they are shown making their own history, continually changing and developing as their motives issue into acts, and the acts become part of the circumstances that condition, modify, and purify or demoralise the will... Thus she rationalizes life and character, bringing the obscure into clear daylight, with her zeal for truth applying the most rigorous logic to the resolution of each problem... (Baker 1968: 235)

Unlike her Victorian contemporaries, Eliot defies and challenges the conventional happy-endings of the novels. Most of her books end in a sober tone, without a real hero or heroine, because her ultimate goal is to give a picture of life wholly unmodified. The ending is often meant to underline the moral of the story, which is rarely optimistic or idealized.

Adam Bede was her first long novel, which she described as “a country story—full of the breath of cows and the scent of hay” (Haight 1985: 179). Although the novel has the air of a pastoral country land, it is not an idealized story of shepherds and peasants that carry on their lives in an undisturbed harmony. It is a story of virtue and vice confronting each other in a social community that is prone to lose its traditional values. *Adam Bede* is Eliot’s first experimentation with a new type of novel that was quite a novelty in the literary field of those times. George Eliot did not regard the novel as a simple

means of entertaining. She believed that novels, same as poetry, can and must be vehicles of revealing the human condition and of offering moral lessons about the quality of common life. In all her literary representations, Eliot manifested a strong commitment to the moral vocation of art and tried to shape her literary creed that art is moral only if it is aesthetically effective.

Adam Bede represented a radical innovation in its time and it demonstrates Eliot's great interest both in psychological realism and rural life. In this novel Eliot rejected the reigning social, religious, and literary aesthetic conventions based on didacticism but focused on adopting realistic plots, settings and common characters modeled on the image of her present world, one in which traditional structures were breaking down. In *Adam Bede*, George Eliot sets out her commitment to rustic, social and psychological realism altogether as a literary genre. The germ of this novel, as Eliot herself recorded in her journal, was a true story told her in 1839 by her Methodist aunt, Mrs. Samuel Evans, of a visit to "a condemned criminal, a very ignorant young girl who had murdered her child and refused to confess - how she had stayed with her praying, through the night and how the poor creature at last broke into tears, and confessed her crime" (Johnstone 1997: 24).

The novel depicts a rural community at the turn of the nineteenth century and is set in an agricultural landscape, the fictionalized Midlands village of Hayslope, Loamshire. The book, rich in humor, describes, with truthful observations of minute details, the rural life of four major characters in a fictional, pastoral community in 1799. The plot revolves around a story of seduction and infanticide in which are engaged the beautiful Hetty Sorrel, Captain Arthur Donnithorne, the handsome charming squire who seduces her; Adam Bede, her suitor; and Hetty's virtuous cousin, Dinah Morris, a young Methodist preacher.

Written in a time of radical changes in all fields of life and activity, the novel displays the negative effects of all these transformations on the lives of the common, rustic people who are deviated from the normal, traditional way of living and thinking. Unable to cope with an avalanche of temptations that come from outside, and, at the same time, incapable to manage their own inner weaknesses, Eliot's characters are prone to fall into the traps of their own ambitions.

This is the case of Hetty Sorrel, a physically attractive young girl, who allows herself to be seduced by Captain Arthur Donnithorne, a feudal lord's grandson. Hetty aims to cross the barrier of her social condition by attempting to marry a man that belongs to a higher class, one who lives according to a different code of values. Hetty's character becomes central in the novel because, in contrast with Dinah Morris, who stands for selflessness, piety and inner beauty, she represents the prototype of the woman that hides, behind her external beauty, a hard, emotionless, and ambitious side. Focused

on achieving her goals, regardless the consequences, she ends up by murdering her own newborn child in order to hide her shame. However, her character is the most successful female figure in the novel. Unlike the other characters, she is not idealized, she is depicted in her complexity, as a woman with impulses, ambitions, moments of exaltation and despair, happiness and suffering.

On the other hand, Adam Bede, a skilled, sincere, honest and respected carpenter, blindly in love with Hetty Sorrel, is an idealized character, with no fault to impute. He is the protagonist of the novel, a prototype of the common, but strong, intelligent, gentle and laborious peasant. He has a limited but real social mobility. Through hard, honest work he manages to rise from being the foreman of a workshop to becoming a partner in it. For him working hard is a way of doing God's work and is as important as religion itself. Through virtue and a strong belief in his work, he succeeded to climb the ladder of social success and elevate his humble birth status. He ends up marrying virtuous Dinah, with whom he will share a happy life. His wedding is the social event that reestablishes the harmony in Hayslope, at the end of the novel. The order of their social community, which was under the threat to be destroyed by Arthur and Hetty's transgressions of class boundaries, is eventually reconstructed.

The theme of the novel is that life rewards tolerance, compassion and welfare, and punishes greed and foolish ambition. The novel also celebrates hard work and labor. All characters gain their identity in accordance with what they do. The positive characters work sincerely and with devotion, are busy and do not waste time harming others. Adam is a carpenter whose favorite subject of conversation is duty and the job well done. For him carpentry is as sacred as a religion. He puts his soul in what he does and finds consolation in it. "There's nothing but what's bearable so long as a man can work", he says (Eliot 2005: 88). Hetty also works at a cotton-mill while Mrs. Poysers is engaged in dairy supplies. All positive characters are hard-working people, committed to produce goods for others to use, acting in this way for the social good. They have a certain dignity of work that is strengthened by their desire to fit in usefully to a social environment. Arthur Donnithorne is the only one who complains that he has nothing to do. In many respects he is an outsider or an intruder in the pastoral, idealized world of Hayslope. He is also the one who brings misfortune and causes disorder in the lives of the others. Arthur's laziness becomes, in this context, synonymous with evil behavior. In Eliot's view, hard work and dedication in the benefit of the social community in which one lives is both the process and the landmark of success, fulfillment and eventual happiness.

In an age of transformations, characterized by a widespread faith in unlimited progress, one of the messages delivered by the novel is, in the

words of the narrator, that men like Adam “make their way upwards, rarely as geniuses, most common as painstaking honest men” (Eliot 2005: 152), and the result is that “you are almost sure to find there some good piece of road, some building, some application of mineral produce, some improvement in farming practice, some reform of parish abuses, with which their names are associated by one or two generations after them” (Eliot 2005: 153). Eliot herself revealed that in her novel she wanted, above all, to represent “the working-day business of the world” (Ashton 1996: 163). The message of the novel is that happiness is the reward for tolerance, compassion commitment and hard work for the welfare of others. Adam’s progress and ability to adjust underlines the society’s ability to absorb social change without being disarranged by it.

Conclusions

George Eliot’s ultimate plea was for a novel that embodied a complex realism which envisioned the world. For her, to represent the world adequately was a moral aim. She remains over the centuries one of the first English novelists of intellectual life and of psychological insight, who managed to enlarge the scope of the novel from a mere entertaining one to a medium of intellectual debate and moral meditation, offering it a new, unprecedented air of sobriety and rigor. In Ernest A. Baker’s words:

Again and again it has been pointed out that fiction in her hands is no longer a mere entertainment; it strikes a note of seriousness and even of sternness; it is turned into a searching review of the gravest as well as the pleasantest aspect of human existence, reassuming the reflective and discursive rights and duties pertaining to the novel at its beginnings, without however sacrificing any of the creative and dramatic qualities that had developed in the intervening centuries. (Baker 1968: 221)

By being the voice of an elevated culture, learned, self-reflexive, minded to promote her own aesthetic and moral aspirations, George Eliot managed to be the single most important figure in transforming the novel from a predominantly popular form into a high form of art. The resistant element in Eliot’s art, the leitmotiv of all her novels, is the complex pluri-realistic approach she promoted. By the time George Eliot died, she was celebrated as the greatest of contemporary English novelists. John Tyndall claimed she was a “woman whose achievements were without parallel in the previous history of womankind” (Haight 1968: 549). Her art anticipated the modernist experiments of writers like Henry James and the epistemological skepticism of postmodernism (Levine 2001: 2).

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