

George Eliot's flawed women-Hetty and Rosamond

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Abstract:

George Eliot (1819-1880) is one of the greatest novelists of the Victorian period. She was a realist dealing with real people with real problems, and still made them sympathetic. She was a pioneer in psychological analysis in fiction. She believed in humanity and nonspiritual understanding of morality in which man has a potential for moral growth and accountability. Eliot concentrated on character and the moral development of the lives she describes. Moreover Eliot portrayed how our actions determine our consequences which in turn affect our life. Her superiority over other novelists lay in her humanitarian sympathies and her psychological insight.

This paper attempts to draw the characters of George Eliot's flawed female characters, Hetty and Rosamond. These characters from *Adam Bede* and *Middlemarch* respectively are self-centered and immature. Their desires conflict with the desire of others. Their beauty acts as a guise and reveals their inward self-absorption.

Keywords: Psychological analysis, morality, humanity, consequences, sympathy and moral development.

Introduction

The plot of *Adam Bede* consists of Hetty Sorrel and her sexual relationship with Arthur, the Squire and the consequent result of the relationship ending in pregnancy and later Hetty murdering the child. Other characters *Adam Bede*, Arthur and Dinah are woven around her and each of the characters undergoing their self-development through their experiences of life.

Hetty, a dairy maid, was a very beautiful young girl with rosy cheeks. Her beauty was

“like that of kittens, or very small downy ducks making gentle rippling noises with their soft bills, or babies just beginning to toddle and to engage in conscious mischief- a beauty with which you can never be angry, but that you feel ready to crush for inability to comprehend the state of mind into which it throws you” (*Adam Bede* 83).

Hetty was well aware of her beauty and the way it influences men causing their heads to move around whenever she passed their way. Eliot describes Hetty's beauty as a spring-tide beauty. It was a beauty of young frolicking things, hopping and moving around with a false air of innocence.

A Squire, Arthur Donnithorne was attracted to Hetty and was carried over by her beauty. Hetty too had set her heart towards him as he was a handsome young gentleman with white hands, a gold chain, and occasional regimentals and with lot of wealth and grandeur. Hetty was influenced by his class and status which set her heart vibrating.

Hetty was pretty confident that her uncle wanted her to marry Adam, a carpenter, for there was no stiff segregation of rank between a farmer and a carpenter. Hetty had been brought up by her uncle as a domestic help to her aunt so it was impossible for her to go against his wishes. Hetty felt that Adam was in her influence and whenever he did not visit Hall Farm for a long period then Hetty “took care to entice him back into the net by little airs of meekness and timidity, as if she were in trouble at his neglect” (Adam Bede 99).

Hetty knew the influence of her beauty and charms and the impact it exerts on her admirers especially Adam. Hetty’s aunt, Mrs. Poyser noticed her shallow and kitten like beauty and remarked that “the naughtier [Hetty] behaved, the prettier she looked” (Adam Bede 85).

Hetty’s beauty was so impressive that no one could get angry with her. Eliot finds her a shallow person. Thus vanity became the only guiding principle that dictated Hetty’s behavior.

Hetty considered Adam as a poor man, with old parents to keep and he would not be able to give the luxuries as she shared in her uncle’s house. Hetty cared for all the luxuries and she dreamt of sitting in a carpeted parlour, wearing white stockings, having large beautiful earrings, having lace around the top of her gown and moreover she did not like to get up early or scolded by anybody. She always thought,

“If Adam had been rich and could have given her these things, she loved him well enough to marry him” (Adam Bede 99).

Attracted to Arthur, Hetty kept on thinking about him and dreaming about him. While Arthur Donnithorne was a naïve, insecure young man who was concerned with the perceptions of him by the tenants as he would soon be the patriarch of the Donnithorne Estate.

Arthur was deeply in love with Hetty but he was well aware of her social position and he knew that this affair would not end in their union. His good and soft nature stopped him to continue this passing affair but his heart had a yearning for her. He had made a serious affair of an idle matter, by thinking of it as if it were of any consequence. His initial flirtations became a passion and he did not realize where he was heading to. Neither did he realize the seriousness of his action nor the consequence of his action.

Meanwhile Adam was busy dreaming about Hetty and her place in his life as his bride. He blindly loved her without knowing her thoughts and dreams. He was impressed and mesmerized by her beauty and did not find fault with her. Adam could not think anything evil against Hetty since her beauty had bewitched him.

Arthur felt that Hetty was a dear, affectionate, good little thing. Hetty had pretty eyes and long eye lashes but there was no depth in her eyes or in her soul, as the narrator points out,

“There is no direct correlation between eyelashes and morals”. (Adam Bede 154)

The relationship between her beauty and its message for others is linked to Hetty's lack of interiority, her simplicity of mind, and her inability to be or feel like others, to feel as they do. It was Mrs. Poyser, her aunt, who first detected her shallow nature and self-absorbing beauty; she pointed it out to her husband.

“She’s no better than a peacock, as ‘ud strut about on the wall and spread its tail when the sun shone if all the folks I’ the parish was dying: there’s nothing seems to give her a turn I’ th’ inside, not even when we thought Totty had tumbled into the pit...It’s my belief her heart’s as hard as a pebble” (Adam Bede 156).

Arthur thought there was no harm in meeting Hetty. He would explain to her that she should not consider and think about him seriously. Finally when Arthur came face to face with Hetty he longed for her attention. Hetty’s face had a language that transcended her feelings.

Arthur justifies his action by saying that “The wider the distance between them the less harm there is, for then she’s not likely to deceive herself” (Adam Bede 298).

The meaning of love is different for Arthur and Adam. Adam believed in trust, honesty and commitment in his concept of love while Arthur believed in flirtations and playing around and behaving to a woman as if he loved her but yet not loving her all the while.

Arthur wrote a letter terminating their relationship and further added to forgive and forget him and he would be her affectionate friend all his life. On reading the letter her dream world with Arthur was shattered and her pain of separation was unbearable and she cried for the whole night. Hetty wanted to run away from the present situation as “hers was a luxurious and vain nature, not a passionate one” (Adam Bede 335).

Hetty for the first time thought about Adam not because of love or sympathy but she wanted to escape from the present sorrowful situation. She thought by marrying Adam there would be a change in her life. She did not consider her happiness nor did she think of Adam’s happiness.

Adam was a sensible man yet he had fallen in love with a girl who had nothing more than her beauty to recommend her. Adam could not recognize her shallow nature as he had imagined her to be virtuous. Adam loved her deeply even after knowing that she had already loved someone else other than him. He patiently waited for her to return his love. He had deep love for Hetty of “whose inward self he was ignorant” (Adam Bede 353).

As the narrator points out that, sensible men would fall in love with sensible women, saw through their deceits of coquettish beauty, never imagined themselves loved when they are not loved and marry the woman most fitted for them in every respect. Adam was an exception to it. Though he was practical and sensible man but he was carried away by Hetty's beauty,

“For the beauty of a lovely woman is like music. Beauty has an expression beyond far above the one woman's soul that it clothes...the noblest nature is often the most blinded to the character of the one woman's soul that the beauty clothes” (Adam Bede 354).

Adam proposed to Hetty. Adam could hardly believe in the happiness of that moment. He asked her,

“Do you really love me, Hetty? Will you be my own wife, to love and take care of as long as I live?”(Adam Bede359)
Hetty did not speak but Adam's cheek was very close to hers so she put her cheek against his,

“like a kitten she wanted to be caressed-she wanted to feel as if Arthur were with her again”(Adam Bede 359).

Mr. Poyser accepted the proposal and kissed Hetty and wished her good luck. Adam too kissed Hetty but it stirred no passion in her. This was best life could offer her for a change.

On knowing about her pregnancy, Hetty travelled with sadness in her heart to a strange land with a hope of meeting with Arthur. Hetty travelled endlessly and she slept on a hard bed for the first time and she missed the comforts of her house. Her heart was filled with sorrow and she felt that Arthur would somehow take care of her and shelter her. Her hardships had begun; she was tired, exhausted and fatigued. Finally she delivered a baby and since it was a premature baby, it died. Hetty was caught and imprisoned for infant foeticide. She was to be hanged till death.

On knowing Hetty's situation, Adam would never allow Hetty to suffer alone while Arthur would go unpunished that too for some pleasure for a short while. A man is responsible for his actions. If he were to bear the punishment for his actions then he wouldn't be a coward and selfish of his actions. But if someone else is punished for those actions of his he becomes irresponsible and takes his actions as lightly as possible.

Dinah, a preacher visited Hetty in order to share her sorrow and awaken her soul. Hetty did not understand anything and was utterly sad. Dinah knelt down and asked Hetty to join her. Dinah asked her to confess her sin since they were in the presence of God. Dinah held her hand tightly and prayed to the Lord to melt her hard heart and put the fear of her sin and make her feel the presence of God and make her cry for mercy and let the moment of pardon come to her.

Hetty narrated the whole incident about her journey to fetch Arthur and the birth of her baby and its death and her capture. She told Dinah that she didn't want to kill the baby. Since the baby was

born prematurely she didn't know what to do. She didn't want to face her family and the shame and disgrace that she brought to them made her keep the baby in the hole under the nut-tree.

When they reached the guillotine, the cart stopped and the crowd yelled. The shout of the crowd was because of excitement as they saw a horseman coming at full gallop. The horseman's eyes were glazed by madness. It was Arthur Donnithorne carrying a letter in his hand and waving it in air as a signal. He had brought Hetty's release from death.

Arthur could not get Hetty a complete pardon and full freedom and therefore Hetty was transported and he could do nothing about those years that would be spent in disgrace and guilt.

Hetty is keenly aware of her 'self' and her physicality but unable to envision another empathically. Eliot's purpose is to show that even the shallowest characters, notably Hetty, have a depth, an inside, which is not apparent on the surface. And that they have a possible depth, which can be cultivated or perhaps constructed, with the help of a loving community, by their response to suffering. And the huge struggle in the prison cell, which Dinah sees as a spiritual battle to save Hetty's soul before she is transported, is at the same time an intense struggle to make Hetty see that there is something besides herself in the world, that there is an outside, and, conversely, an inside, to herself.

Hetty was much faulted for agreeing to marry Adam after that incident, yet Adam's actions were as blind as hers. Adam's love for Hetty was based on her beauty and nothing else. Though Adam was a sensible man, he was carried over by this brainless beauty.

Hetty could not survive and became a victim of her environment. Her beauty and her shallow nature and her moral instability led to her downfall. Her biggest sin was to love a man who was insecure and timid belonging to a different station. Though she could not survive her situation, her "dark hard soul" was awakened and made to "feel" by Dinah. She saw others beside herself for the first time. There was moral and spiritual awakening within her which ultimately saved her soul. She sought Adam's forgiveness after realizing and 'feeling' the pain she caused to him.

In *Middlemarch*, Rosamond was not as shallow as Hetty but she never managed to love. She did not love the medical profession except for the social status and financial rewards it brought. She was more realistic than Hetty. She saw Lydgate as a social advancement.

Rosamond and Lydgate's marriage also turned out to be a failure because of their wrong assumptions about and presumptions of each other. They fell in love with the idealised notions of each other, but they realized that they had quite contrary expectations from life. Rosamond failed to fully recognize her husband's passion for his profession and his ideals. Her interest in his profession was defined only by the potential advantage it may bring to their lives.

It is made clear that not only Rosamond but also Lydgate was the product of a so called "proper education" that had failed to teach men the difference between the real intentions and the seeming, snobbish attitude of a woman. Having internalized fixed notions about women, men

themselves also became the victims of their own making. Thus, the problem went beyond the idea of a woman facing the society, it turns out to be a cultural problem in which both men and women suffer almost equally as individuals within the boundaries of their social community, which represented the society as a whole.

Rosamond Vincy had an excellent taste in costume and a nymph-like figure. Lydgate saw an adorable kindness in Rosamond's eyes. Lydgate was under the opinion that an accomplished woman almost always knew more than men, though her knowledge is of a different sort.

Lydgate admired Rosamond exceedingly. She had just the kind of intelligence one would desire in a woman— refined, cultured, submissive, lending itself to finish in all the delicacies of life, and treasured in a body which expressed that with a force of demonstration that excluded the need for any other confirmation. Lydgate thought that if ever he married, his wife would have that feminine radiance, that unique womanhood which must be branded with flowers and music. She must have beauty which by its very nature was virtuous. She must be moulded only for pure and delicate joys. Each lived in a world of which the other knew nothing.

In Rosamond's love it was not necessary to envision much about the inward life of Lydgate or of his serious business in the world. He had a profession and was clever, as well as adequately handsome but the strong fact about Lydgate was his good birth, which distinguished him from all Middlemarch admirers, and presented marriage as a prospect of growing in rank.

Lydgate had no intention of staying with her but it seemed that the brief impersonal exchanges they had together were creating that unusual intimacy which consisted in shyness. In fact, they flirted and Lydgate was secure in the belief that they did nothing else. Lydgate and Rosamond lived in dissimilar worlds. Each lived in a world of which the other knew nothing.

When her brother, Fred was sick, Rosamond took the opportunity to call Mr. Lydgate to treat him. This created a peculiar intimacy between them. Their eye contact made them self-conscious. Gradually they became comfortable and enjoyed each other's company. Lydgate, having a weakness of women, flirted with her. She loved the admiration of Lydgate and she did not distinguish flirtations from love either in herself or in others. Her thoughts were occupied with Lydgate himself.

Mrs. Vincy asked Lydgate to deliver a message to her husband at Stone Court about Fred Vincy's health. Rosamond was very happy to see him but his behaviour disappointed her. As Lydgate rose to go, Rosamond dropped her chain and he stooped to pick it up, he was too close to her face, as he raised his eyes he saw Rosamond looked very natural and there was a quivering appeal in her eyes which touched him. His flirtations turned into love. He did not know where the chain went but there was passionate love within him. Two large tears rolled down her cheeks and there was complete silence between them. Forgetting everything else and feeling the outrush of tenderness for Rosamond and her joy depending on him made him put his arms round her and kissed her two large tears. Rosamond confessed her love and he accepted it with gratitude and

tenderness. Within half an hour he was an engaged man whose soul was not his but Rosamond's and he was bound voluntarily.

Rosamond would make a good wife, her intelligence was just the kind that Lydgate found appropriate, and hers was a type of beauty that confirmed virtue. It was not exactly her pain or yearning that kindled Lydgate, but rather his sudden belief that Rosamond depended on him for her joy. So passion overtook the warm-hearted and reckless Lydgate, a passion that constructed Rosamond's desire in terms of himself. The narrow-minded vision pervaded both sides of the Lydgate and Rosamond relationship and this led to the doom of their marriage.

Lydgate wanted to pursue his medical profession in Middlemarch with the intention of serving the people but his lack of understanding his wife made his life a failure both professionally and personally. This failure was due to the thoughts that they do understand the other perfectly. Lydgate's vanity was of the conceited sort, never sneering, never impudent, but enormous in its assertions and generously scornful.

Lydgate was in debt and this made him moody and silent which further brought alienation from Rosamond. They were married because they loved each other and they would face the difficulties of life together till things got better. Rosamond was aloof from him and felt that her world was not according to her liking and Lydgate was a part of that world. Rosamond asked him if his practice could be better as she did not like to change her life style and live like wrenches. Lydgate immediately got angry and did not like to be dictated by women. His ego was hurt. Rosamond held him responsible for their present state and he did whatever he wanted to do even if his family was kind to him. Lydgate was seeing cracks in his marriage because of the hard and trying circumstances.

Lydgate no longer had the strength and time for his scientific pursuits. He was anxious about his state of affairs and his debts. The pressure of his foreseen difficulties, his failing marriage and his loneliness made him try a dose of opium. Now he took up to gambling for getting easy money. He felt humiliated and thought of various ways to get money without any security. Rosamond's father too did not help because he thought if he paid once, many more would come. Lydgate had no place to go. Lydgate's disintegration began when he learned that compromise was necessary for success.

When Dorothea went to meet Rosamond, she saw Will Ladislaw sitting closely with Rosamond and Will was clasping both her hands and they were speaking in low soft tones. She informed Rosamond that she had come to deliver a letter to Lydgate and thought of giving it to her. Rosamond knew that it was a severe blow to Will and she believed in her own power to soothe and subdue. She put out her arm and laid the tips of her fingers on Will's coat. Will got angry and shattered Rosamond with his anger. Will felt no bond for Rosamond so, he didn't mind offending and hurting her. She was thoroughly shaken and her world was in ruins. Will left the house and Rosamond fell back fainting.

After Lydgate's death, Rosamond married an elderly and wealthy physician who was kind and took care of her four children.

Eliot anticipates us to see Rosamond as a product of her environment. She has a flawless beauty but she does not have a positive female model which to some degree has influenced her personality and development. Eliot points out Rosamond's education. Her childhood and education do not prepare her for the adversities all married couples experience. Eliot uses her as an example of the misfortunes of shallow women. She highlights the importance of seeing reality instead of appearance. Rosamond has a shallow outlook of life indicative of the importance she places on appearances. She has a hollow social personality. This situation of Rosamond in social setting attempts to show that her character and behavior have been partially determined by Victorian attitudes towards women.

Lydgate's spots of commonness lay in the nature of his prejudices, which, in spite of noble intention and sympathy, were half of them such as are found in ordinary men of the world. Lydgate, in a moment of frustration near the end of his life, called Rosamond his "basil plant". Rosamond's actions or feelings remained unaffected by such characterization. While Lydgate acknowledged his own failures, he regarded himself as a victim of the undesirable influence of others. Rosamond equally misjudged Lydgate and was ignorant to his needs. Ultimately, she was unhappy in her marriage as it had fulfilled none of her hopes instead had brought misery in her life.

To Eliot, Lydgate's fault is not that he demanded compliance from Rosalind but he was too ignorant to see that she would not submit to his wishes. The fact that he was mastered conveys the inference that by rights he should dominate. His actions contradict any formation of equality in marriage. For him, a wife is still someone who is mindless and lacks mental maturity and intellect to match male intelligence. Eliot portrays that this kind of attitude towards women may account for much of their frustration and consequent egoism.

Lydgate and Rosamond are egoists who were unsuccessful because they acted from an inadequate understanding of their place in the society. They did not comprehend their inner lives and were detached from a universal consciousness. These characters were involved with their passions and could not surpass them through a larger vision. Comprehending a larger vision of life is possible only through accurate knowledge and insight which is a guide in moral decision.

Eliot's illustrates individual character is partially determined by social circumstances. Rosamond is ignorant, vain and self-centered. Eliot sympathises with her.

Eliot represents Rosamond's accomplishments and sophistication that are attained at the expense of belittling her intellect and stiffening her feelings. Her attractive manner and charisma hide an egoism and social ambition which were in opposition of the docility she seemed to represent.

Rosamond is the best example of the kind of woman who sees relaxation and comfort for women as a sign of status and wealth in patriarchy society. Her apprehensions about life are absolutely self-oriented.

Eliot shows how egoism can change the perception of the characters and in turn determines their actions. They value themselves and their own drives and goals over others, and self-interest determines how they interpret their circumstances and choose to act. The character that most absorbs in this self-serving distortion is Rosamond Vincy, who has been conditioned to believe her physical beauty and social refinement are sufficient to garner her a rich husband and speedy transit to a class above that of her birth family.

Rosamond has been completely shaped according to masculine dictates and equals all men's idea of a woman. She has been disintegrated by her condition as a woman reliant on the home either of husband or father. Lydgate falls into delusion of patriarchal society. It is Lydgate's aristocratic connections that make him attractive to her. She wanted to be the wife of the most distinguished man in Middlemarch. As the narrator shows pity for her egoism and narrowness, she has been shaped by the restricted values of society and her mother's leniency. The community accepts and admires the image she presents. Rosamond was unresponsive to Lydgate life's goals and her growing alienation from him as financial problems emerge. Lydgate visualizes women to be feeble both in body and mind. He endorses to the conventional ideas of female vulnerability and male responsibility to resolve their problems.

According to critics, Eliot detached beauty from virtue and it was an important aim in the creation of aesthetic and human sympathy. Eliot was hard on shallow women like Hetty and Rosamond. Eliot treats her flawed characters with sympathy. It is lack of feeling which makes them sinful. This attachment to wrong ideas is the basis of pain, blunder, and suffering. Most of her flawed characters are treated with compassion and understanding. These characters deserve our pity and not our disapproval and criticism.

Conclusion

Eliot's focusing on protagonists' human situation allows readers to bond with each character's condition. This attachment, this connection between the reader and the character, facilitates Eliot to present a realistically real world and enables her novel to convey the important facts about human nature. In Eliot's novels, knowledge is associated to masculinity and the insufficiency of women's education is a central focus. She created life-like heroines and aimed to evoke tolerant judgment, pity, and sympathy. The situations faced by her female characters mirror those faced by the women of the day.

Through the presentations of several marriages Eliot clearly concludes that, in order for a marriage to work, both parties must enter the union with common expectations for the future based on an understanding of themselves as individuals.

Hetty is deprived of the state to become reinstated in society. Eliot differentiates between altruistic love and romantic love. The romantic relationships end in tension and embarrassment. This can be emphasized with the meetings of Lydgate and Rosamond and Hetty and Arthur. Here physical features of beauty are considered and vision is not clear. Hetty and Rosamond are preoccupied with themselves and they don't see beyond that. They lack feelings and sympathy.

Marriage is for matured individuals and real marriage is not possible for hopeless romantic and egoist. The marriage of Lydgate and Rosamond is of uneven and inadequate partnership and there is no marriage for Hetty and Arthur.

To conclude, the limitations in human nature as well as the stress and conflict of the environment do not allow us to achieve most of our ideals which is excellently dealt in the novels. Consequently, the growth of the individual and his integration with life can only be achieved by the recognition and acceptance of internal and external limitations.

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