

Genesis and Appreciation of the Early Novels of George Eliot: A Critical Study

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Abstract

This paper will help us to understand comprehensively how George Eliot's works influenced her contemporary and later novelists. As David Cecil regarded her as an heir to Dickens and Thackeray and forerunner of Tomas Hardy and Henry James. Dr. F.R., Leavis in *The Great Tradition* observes a striking influence of George Eliot on Henry James in his fictional creation. He further says that George Eliot writes out of her memories of childhood and youth – she writes about the England of her young days. Barbara Hardy opines that George Eliot tries to measure the individual life against the flow of history. She further says that her early novels, so often dismissed as mere sentimental apprentice work, is an exercise of many years of wide ranging study and emotional experiences and they contain real inside into personal and social relationships and connections. That is why it is so important to understand the genesis and development of her novels.

Key Words : Genesis, Appreciation, George Elliot, Adam Bede, Silas Marner, The Mill on the Floss, Provincial life.

Adam Bede, George Eliot's first full-length novel, was completed on 16 November 1858. The first reference to this novel can be traced in a letter George Eliot wrote to John Blackwood on 5 September 1858:

I have a subject in my mind which will not come under the limitations of the title *Clerical Life*, and I am inclined to take a large canvas for it, and write a novel. (Gordon S. Haight : *Selections from George Eliot's Letters*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1985, p. 178.)

Describing the nature and scope of *Adam Bede*, George Eliot wrote to John Blackwood on 17 October 1857 that "It will be a2 country story full of the breath of cows and the scent of hay". (Gordon S. Haight : *George Eliot : A Biography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1968, p. 249.) *Adam Bede*, published in three volumes on 1 February 1859, established George Eliot as the leading novelist of the day. George Eliot dedicated *Adam Bede* to George Henry Lewes with the following words, "To my dear husband, George Henry Lewes, I give the MS. of a work which would never have been written but for the happiness which his love conferred on my life". (Oscar Browning : *Life of George Eliot*, Walter Scott, 24, Warwick Lane, London, 1890, p. 62.)

Adam Bede received an immediate success. Three thousand copies were sold in the first three months and by March 1860, the novel was translated into Hungarian, German, Dutch, French and Russian languages. The Russian translation went through three editions in 1859 and this translation was read by Tolstoy who rated *Adam Bede* as an example of the 'highest art'. ' Gordon S. Haight: *George Eliot: A Biography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1968, p. 279..

The origin of *Adam Bede* lies in a story, narrated to George Eliot by her aunt, and is to be taken into account:

The germ of *Adam Bede* was an anecdote told me by my Methodist Aunt Samuel (the wife of my father's youngest brother), - an anecdote from her own experience. We were sitting together one afternoon during her visit to me at Griff, probably in 1839 or 1840, when it occurred to her to tell me how she had visited a condemned criminal, - a very ignorant 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. My aunt afterwards went with her in the cart to the place of execution; ... This story, told by my aunt with great feeling, affected me deeply, ...The character of Dinah grew out of my recollections of my aunt, ... who was a very small, blacked-eyed woman, The character of Adam and one or two incidents connected with him were suggested by my father's early life; but Adam is not my father any more than Dinah is my aunt. (Walter Allen : *George Eliot*, Macmillan, London, 1964, p. 98.)

Presentation copies were sent to Mrs. Carlyle, Charles Dickens, Thackeray, Charles Kingsley and Richard Owen. *Adam Bede* was a sensation. As Oscar Browning, son of Robert Browning, and one of the close friends of George Eliot, pertinently "remarked:

The sensation caused by its appearance has seldom been equalled in literary history. It was felt that a new power had arisen in English letters. Darwin's *Origin of Species*, appeared in the same year, and the two books, so different in their characters, so similar in their originality, divided the attractions of the *thinking* world. (Oscar Browning : *George Eliot*, Walter Scott, 24, Warwick Lane, London, 1890, Pg.61)

In view of the earlier discussion, if we subscribe to the views of contemporary men of letters and reviews in the journals of the day on *Adam Bede*, these will apprise us of the tremendous impact of the novel on the reading public.

In July 1859, the *Quarterly Review* remarked:

We do not know whether our literature anywhere possesses such a closely true picture of purely rural life as *Adam Bede* presents. Every class that makes up a village community has its representative; and not only is the dialect of the locality accurately given but the distinct inflection of each order. (David Carroll (ed.): *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1971, p. 97)

Adam Bede has taken its place among the actual experiences and endurances of my life ... The conception of Hetty's character is so extraordinarily subtle and true, that I laid the book down fifty times, to shut my eyes and think about it. I know nothing so skilful, determined, and uncompromising. The whole country life that the story is set in, is so real, and so droll and genuine, and yet so selected and polished by art, that I cannot praise it enough to you. David Carroll (ed.): *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1971, p. 97

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) wrote to George Eliot on 30 September 1859,

“At length I have read *Adam Bede* - finished it last night in considerable alarm at the probable consequences of having read a volume and a half in the day; consequences however which were not so bad as I expected”.. (Gordon S. Haight : *Selections from George Eliot's Letters*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1985, p. 224.)

Since January 1859, George Eliot had been busy with *The Mill on the Floss* which, she explained, “will be a novel as long as *Adam Bede*, and a sort of companion picture of provincial life, ... a work which will require time and labour”. (Gordon S.Haight, *George Elliot: A Biography*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1968. p.295)

The earliest reference to *The Mill on the Floss* can be traced in George Eliot’s brief entry in her own *Journal* on 12 January 1859. She wrote: “We went into town today and looked in the Annual Register for cases of inundation”. (Gordon S. Haight, *George Elliot: A Biography*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1968. p.295) George Eliot completed writing *The Mill on the Floss* on 21 March 1860 and the novel was published on 4 April 1860. Six thousand copies were sold in the first seven weeks.

In a letter, written on 21 April 1859, to John Blackwood, George Henry Lewes hinted about the novel George Eliot would be writing.

You must prepare for a surprise with the new story G. E. is writing. It is totally unlike anything she has written yet. The novel will be a companion picture to *Adam Bede*; but this story is of an imaginative, philosophical kind, quite new and piquant (Henry Auster : *Local Inhabitants : Regionalism in the Early Novels of George Eliot*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge and Massachusetts, 1970, p. 137).

George Eliot was hesitant about the title of the novel. Provisionally the novel was named *The Tullivers of St. Ogg’s on the Floss*. It was John Blackwood who decided the title of the novel. John Blackwood wrote to George Eliot:

Since then we have been considering the various titles proposed, and this morning it suddenly came across me that *The Mill on the Floss* would be an appropriate title and in some respect more appropriate . . . It has, too, a sort of poetical sound. (Gordon S. Haight : *The George Eliot Letters*, Volume III, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1955, p. 244.)

It would be wise to look into the response *The Mill on the Floss* elicited from the contemporary critics and journals before we evaluate the novel. On 14 April 1860, the *Saturday Review* commented:

The Mill on the Floss may not, perhaps, be so popular as *Adam Bede*, but it shows no falling off nor any exhaustion of power... George Eliot has established her place in the first rank of our female novelists ... In her new novel she has set herself to describe the triumph of principle over feeling, as in *Adam Bede* she described the dreadful results of giving feeling the victory. (David Carroll (ed.) : *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1971, pp. 114-15, 118)

Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe, published in 1861, is the last of the first four early-phase novels of George Eliot. The first reference to *Silas Marner* is traced in an entry in George Eliot's *Journal*, London, 28 November 1860. She wrote: I am engaged now in writing a story, - the idea of which came to me after our arrival in this house, and which has thrust itself between me and the other book I was mediating. It is *Silas Marner : The Weaver of Raveloe*. I am still only at about 62 page, I have written slowly and interruptedly of late. (Gordon S. Haight (ed.) : *The George Eliot Letters*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1954, volume III, p. 360 (Hereafter it would be referred to as *Letters*).

As the origin of *Adam Bede* lies in a story narrated to George Eliot by her aunt, the Methodist preacher, Mrs. Samuel Evans, so also, the genesis of *Silas Marner* consists in an experience George Eliot had in her girlhood. In a letter of 24 February 1861, George Eliot wrote to John Blackwood: It came to me first of all, quite suddenly, as a sort of legendary tale, suggested by my recollection of having once, in early childhood, seen a linen-weaver with a bag on his back; but, as my mind dwelt on the subject, I became inclined to a more realistic treatment. (David Carroll (ed.) : *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1971, p. 170.

John Blackwood expressed the same view in his letter to Mrs. John Blackwood. On 15 June 1861, he wrote to Mrs. John Blackwood, "*Silas Marner* sprang from her childish recollection of a man with a stoop and expression of face that led her to think that he was an alien from his fellows" (*Letters*, volume III, p. 427.)

George Eliot began *Silas Marner : The Weaver of Raveloe* with a quotation from *Michael* (1800), a pastoral poem by William Wordsworth. Now we should look into the views, held by the leading critics and journals of the day. Their observations will apprise us of the impact the novel had on the reading public.

Henry Crabb Robinson called it “an admirable novel, perhaps George Eliot’s best (Gordon S. Haight: *George Eliot: A Biography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1968, p. 342.). On 13 April 1861, the *Saturday Review* commented:

The highest tribute that can be paid to this book may be paid it very readily. It is as good as *Adam Bede*, except that it is shorter ... All that can be said against *Silas Marner*, as compared with its predecessors, is that it is shorter, and therefore slighter / But, within its limits, *Silas Marner* is quite equal to either of its predecessors, and, in combining the display of the author’s characteristic excellences with freedom from blemishes and defects, is perhaps superior. (David Carroll (ed.) : *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1971, pp. 170, 174.)

In July 1861, the Westminster Review in an estimation of *Silas Marner* showered words of praise unsparingly on the book. The *Journal* observed:

In *Silas Marner*, the dead level and dry bones of English country life fifty years since, are illumined and vivified by a power of sympathetic insight which is one of the rarest of intellectual gifts ... The most remarkable peculiarity and distinguishing excellence of *Silas Marner*, is the complete correlation between the characters and their circumstances; the actors in this story come before us like the flowers of their own fields, ... It is impossible to dissociate any of the characters from the village in which they were born, and bred - they form an organic whole with Raveloe; they are not connected with it by any external, or even humorous bands, but by vital threads that will not bear disruption. (David Carroll (ed.) : *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1971, pp. 186,187, 174.).

Rightly Dr. F.R. Leavis, in his monumental work *The Great Tradition*, has said that *Silas Marner* is a “Charming minor masterpiece...., It is a success of reminiscent and enchanted re-creation.. (F. R. Leavis : *The Great Tradition*, Chatto and Windus,, 1960, p.46).

Works Cited

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