

From Egoism to Altruism: A study with reference to George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life*.

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Abstract

George Eliot began *Amos Barton*, the first story of the *Scenes of Clerical Life*, on 23 September 1856. These stories are *The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton*, *Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story* and *Janet's Repentance*. *Scenes of Clerical Life* was serialised in eleven instalments in *Blackwood's Magazine*. This apprentice novel was published in two volumes on 6 January 1858. The topography given in the three stories narrated in *Scenes of Clerical Life* speaks very much of the places known to George Eliot. She was born on south Arbury Farm which stands within Arbury Park. All the places that have been made famous through her *Scenes of Clerical Life* lie within a day's walk from the farmhouse. Less than a mile across the grassy park one can see the Arbury Hall, and the Cleveral Manor of *Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story*. To the left, standing on hill, is Astley Church, the Knebley Church of the story. A mile to the east from Griff House is Stockyard, the Paddiford of *Janet's Repentance*. The fictitious names of many other towns can easily be identified with their originals. A mile south of Nuneaton, the visitors can see the Shepperton Church, which is a small stone church. The story of Amos Barton with a description of this church and, in all essentials, the description still applies to it. It was in this church that Mary Ann Evans was baptised and it was this church she attended with her parents during their stay at Griff. It is no wonder she looks back at it so fondly. Nearby is the little vicarage and it was there that Milly fought her losing battle with poverty and sickness. The little vicarage is an old-fashioned house with a pretty garden. The Astley Church, the original of Knebley Church in *Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story* is near the Arbury State. In fact the protagonists of these stories evolve from egoism to altruism through the vicissitudes of their life.

Key words: Humors, Sorrows, Moral, Religious Apathy, Sympathy, Troubles.

George Eliot in her first major work *Amos Barton* asserted that men and women in general suffer from the vice of selfishness and self centeredness and it is our duty to evolve from that 'windy subsistence'(George Eliot : *Scenes of Clerical Life* (ed.), David Lodge, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, England, 1987, p.20.). George Henry Lewes, in a letter to John Blackwood, wrote that *Scenes of Clerical Life* intended to portray the clergy "like any other class with the humours, sorrows, and troubles of other men". (Thomas A. Noble (ed.) : *Scenes of Clerical Life*, Yale University Press, London and New Haven, 1965, p. 6.)

The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton, the first of the three tales, constituting the *Scenes of Clerical Life*, is the sketch of a commonplace clergyman, the curate of Shepperton:

Now, the Rev. Amos Barton was one of those men who have a decided will and opinion of their own; he held himself bolt upright, and had no self-distrust... . He was like an onion that has been rubbed with spices; the strong original odour was blended with something new and foreign. The Low-Church onion still offended refined High Church nostrils, and the new spice was unwelcome to the palate of the genuine onion-eater. (George Eliot : *Scenes of Clerical Life* (ed.), David Lodge, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, England, 1987, p. 67.)

Amos Barton is a poor curate of Evangelical views, with a loving wife and six children. He tries to support his family on eighty pounds a year. His wife, Milly, is a gentle, graceful woman, elegant in mending clothing. She is ill matched with Amos Barton's awkwardness. People sneer at him at his back. A change in people's estimation of Barton begins with the premature birth of Milly's baby. In a few days the infant died and Milly would die soon. The children are brought to bid good bye to their mother. Milly tells Patty, the eldest, to look after the others. None but Patty realises what calamity is going to befall them. The mourners, who once laughed at the curate, are now sympathetic to him. Barton regrets that he had not been considerate to his wife when she was alive. Sympathy and money came from all sources. Barton regularly visits his wife's grave. On the night before leaving Shepperton, he falls down upon Milly's grave crying. Many years later he comes to visit Milly's grave. He is accompanied by a thirty one year old woman whose face reminds one of Milly Barton without her beauty. This woman is Patty who remains with her father.

The second of the series, *Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story*, is melodramatic in nature. It deals with a single aristocratic family of Milby, that of Sir Christopher Cheverel and his elegant lady. George Eliot subtly delineates the vulgarity and unrefined way of life, led by the British aristocracy. It is the tale of a woman whose nature has been shrouded by a tragic experience in love. At Cheverel Manor, two women sit on the lawn. The younger one, Caterina Sarti, is tiny and dark-eyed and is the ward of older woman, tall, proud, Lady Cheverel, whose husband, Sir Christopher Cheverel, a baronet, watches from a window. Caterina was adopted and brought to England from Italy, where Sir Christopher had studied the architecture of Milan fifteen years ago:

But neither he nor Lady Cheverel had any idea of adopting her as their daughter, and giving her their own rank in life. They were much too English and aristocratic to think of anything so romantic. No! the child would be brought up at Cheverel Manor as a protegee, to be ultimately useful, perhaps, in sorting worsteds, keeping accounts, reading aloud, and otherwise supplying the place of spectacles when her ladyship's eyes should wax dim. (George Eliot : *Scenes of Clerical Life* (ed.), David Lodge, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, England, 1987, p. 152.)

In her childhood Caterina's only playmates were Maynard Gilfil, Sir Christopher's ward who is madly in love with her and Anthony Wybrow, the heir. Anthony Wybrow, a shallow, selfish fellow, has made love to Tina who yielded to his courting. To Anthony Wybrow it is a mere flirtation and he does not hesitate to forsake Tina when his uncle Sir Christopher dictates him to marry the rich Miss Beatrice Assher who maliciously tells Caterina about Anthony Wybrow's refusal to love her (Caterina).

In a state of desperation and excitement, Caterina takes a dagger from the gallery artifact and goes to meet Wybrow. Much to her surprise, she comes to know of his death. These aggravating circumstances brought Tina's passionate nature on the verge of lunacy. Mr. Gilfil reassures her that evil intent and act do not have the same end.

Janet's Repentance, the last of the *Scenes*, embodies George Eliot's religion of philosophy and is the most interesting of the *Scenes*. *Janet's Repentance* represents Milby during the advent of Evangelicalism. It is the tale of a conflict between religion and irreligion and of the impact of a sympathetic human soul on a bruised, suffering woman. The Rev. Edgar Tryan, an earnest Evangelical clergyman, comes to Milby, an industrial town, sunk in

religious apathy. The scanty ministrations of the old curate, Mr. Crewe, fail to rouse any religious sentiment. His effort to rectify this state of affair is stubbornly encountered by group of men, headed by Mr. Dempster, a drunken lawyer, who beats his wife, Janet, until he drives her to find repose in drink.

One night Dempster forces Janet to leave home. Mrs. Pettifer takes Janet her home. Janet meets Mr. Edger Tryan, the Evangelical clergyman, and finds solace in his company. Tryan's sympathy for Janet's suffering leads Tryan to tell her his own history. Dempster breaks his leg in a fall from his gig. His wounds are fatal; he does not regain consciousness and in two weeks Dempster dies. Tryan's instructions help Janet surmount her crisis. She never feels strong temptation to resort to drink but is happy with the charitable activity. Tryan tells Janet that they will meet in heaven, kisses her and dies. It is only at his funeral that the citizens of Milby come to know that he has been no hypocrite but a genuinely selfless man.

George Eliot wrote *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* for the *Westminster Review* in September 1856 and this is of much significance to the students of the novelist because she began her first story immediately after it. She finished writing *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* on 12 September 1856 and began *The Sad Fortunes of Rev. Amos Barton* on 23 September 1856. In *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*, she asserted that “the real drama of Evangelicalism” was to be found, not in the fashionable world of old society but “among the middle and lower classes”. (F. B. Pinion : *A George Eliot Companion*, Macmillan, London, 1985, p. 77)

The central figures of all the three stories are clergymen. They are concerned with obscure, unfashionable provincial life. In Chapter 5 of the first story of *Scenes of Clerical Life*, George Eliot's insistence on the obscure unfashionable provincial life is poignantly expressed:

The Rev. Amos Barton, whose sad fortunes I have undertaken to relate, was, you perceive, in no respect an ideal or exceptional character; and perhaps I am doing a bold thing to bespeak your sympathy on behalf of a man who was so very far from remarkable, - a man whose virtues were not heroic, and who had no undetected crime within his breast; who had not the slightest mystery hanging about him, but was palpably and unmistakably commonplace; who was not even in love, but had had that complaint favourably many years ago ‘An utterly uninteresting character!’, I think I hear a lady reader exclaim — Mrs. Farthingale, for example, who prefers the ideal in fiction; to whom tragedy means ermine tippets, adultery and murder; and comedy, the adventures of some

personage who is . quite a ‘ character’. (George Eliot : *Scenes of Clerical Life* (ed.), David Lodge, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, 1987, p. 80)

The first story of *Scenes of Clerical Life* was drawn from personal experience. Shepperton Church is Chilvers Coton, a suburb of Nuneaton. In this Church Mary Ann Evans was baptized and she attended it during the whole of her stay at Griff. The reverend Amos Barton was in reality the Reverend John Gwyther and Milly Barton was his wife Emma. Mrs. Hackit is thought to be the projection of George Eliot’s mother. (Oscar Browning : *Life of George Eliot*, Walter Scott, 24, Warwick Lane, London, 1890, p. 47). Thus an autobiographical colouring is conspicuously felt here.

In chapter 5 of the first story of *Scenes of Clerical Life*, George Eliot’s emphasis on the obscure, unsophisticated provincial life is minutely expressed. Indeed, in 1858 it was a remarkable achievement for George Eliot to hold the view that a novelist could faithfully depict ordinary people and scenes. Through her faithful picture of ordinary life she had been able to rouse men’s sympathy.

The doctrine of sympathy is the main idea that George Eliot wanted to convey in *Scenes of Clerical Life*. She wrote:

“The only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures. ...if Art does not enlarge men’s sympathies it does nothing morally”. (George Eliot : *Scenes of Clerical Life* (ed.), Thomas A Nobel, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1965, p. 61.)

The note of sympathy finds its expression in the selection of Amos Barton, the curate of Shepperton, as the central character of the first story. The note, the novelist says, is embodied in the story itself:

..., after all, the Rev. Amos never came near the borders of a vice. Elis very faults were middling - he was not very ungrammatical. It was not in his nature to be superlative in anything; unless, indeed, he was superlatively

middling, the quintessential extract of mediocrity. (George Eliot : *Scenes of Clerical Life* (ed.), David Lodge, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, 1987, p. 85.)

Amos Barton fails to realize the loneliness of human love and he will have to suffer for his indifference to Milly and he learned through suffering:

The burial was over, and Amos turned with his children to re-enter the house - the house where, an hour ago, Milly's dear body lay, ... and Amos, for the first time, felt that he was alone — that day after day, month after month, year after year, would have to be lived through without Milly's love. Spring would come, and she would not be there; summer and she would not be there; and he would never have her again with him by the fireside in the long evenings. George Eliot : (*Scenes of Clerical Life* (ed.), David Lodge, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, 1987, p. 110.)

In all fairness it should be noted and admitted that *Amos Barton* is probably the best of the three *Scenes* because it is more faithful to life than the other two stories. It is full of homely realistic details and free from startling incidents and strong passions.

In *Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story*, the doctrine of sympathy finds expression in the character of Mr. Gilfil. Mr. Gilfil's story, like *Amos Barton's*, is meant to widen the sympathy of the readers. The doctrine of sympathy is glaringly expressed when Gilfil is attempting to dispel Caterina's sense of guilt. Poor Caterina is a victim of circumstances. She was deprived of education and training that would have made her confident enough to cope with the turmoil's of life.

Caterina's development was the result of no systematic or careful appliances. She grew

... up very much like the primroses, which the gardener is not sorry to see within his enclosure, but takes no pains to cultivate ... It is very likely that to her dying day Caterina thought the earth stood still, and that the sun and stars moved round it; but so, for the matter of that, did Helen, and Dido, and Desdemona, and Juliet; whence I hope you will not think my Caterina less worthy to be a heroine on that account. (George Eliot : *Scenes of Clerical Life* (ed.), David Lodge, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, 1987, p. 159-160.)

In *Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story*, Mr. Gilfil is the predecessor of Mr. Irwine in *Adam Bede*. This story generates a sense of rural community life like that of *Adam Bede*. The influence of Christian teaching on provincial town constitutes the background subject of *Janet's Repentance*. In some of his speeches, Gilfil consoles Caterina when he speaks:

Tina, my loved one, you would never have done it. God saw your whole heart; He knows you would never harm a living thing. He watches over His children, and will not let them do things they would pray with their whole hearts not to do. It was the angry thought of a moment, and He forgives you. . (George Eliot : *Scenes of Clerical Life* (ed.), David Lodge, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, England, 1987, p. 234.)

The significance of human love and the value of shared suffering are brought out in connection with Mr. Gilfil's efforts to help Caterina:

Mr. Gilfil felt as if in the long hours of that night the bond that united his love for ever and alone to Caterina had acquired fresh strength and sanctity. It is so with the human relations that rest on the deep emotional sympathy of affection : every new day and night of joy or sorrow is a new ground, a new consecration, for the love that is nourished by memories as well as hopes — the love to which perpetual repetition is not a weariness but a want, and to which a separated joy is the beginning of pain. George Eliot : *Scenes of Clerical Life* (ed.), David Lodge, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, 1987, p. 236).

In the third story *Janet's Repentance*, the doctrine of sympathy is at its highest. This story represents Milby during the advent of Evangelicalism. The concept of sympathy lies in the story of Janet Dempster's degradation and redemption of Mr. Tryan's self-sacrifice. George Eliot has, in fact, created an Evangelical clergyman of the highest order in her presentation of Mr. Tryan. Mr. Edgar is undoubtedly Evangelical but his religion is essentially a religion of humanity. This kind of sympathy is inextricably associated with the concept of suffering. The flow that has been an undercurrent in *Amos Barton* and *Mr. Gilfil's Love- Story* has become a main stream in *Janet's Repentance*. It is through our own suffering that we learn to feel for others. George Eliot speaks:

But a heart that has been taught by its own sore struggles to bleed for the woes of another - that has 'learned pity through suffering'. George Eliot : *Scenes of Clerical Life* (ed.), David Lodge, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth,1987, p. 373).

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