



## Dinah Morris: The Paragon of Moral Virtue, in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*

Piyali Das

Assistant Professor  
Department of English,

Gour Mohan Sachin Mandal Mahavidyalaya, South 24 Pdns, West Bengal, India

**Abstract:** By the middle of the nineteenth century, it was felt by the Victorian people that Women should take the lead in regenerating the industrial society and in bringing back the moral purity. A longing was expressed for stable values, by men and women alike. They looked back to the re-establishment of pre-industrial moral standards and for this, women were offered a new role as the standard bearers of morality. Each sex was to have its distinct sphere of influence and be complementary to each other. Woman's superior morality was to match man's superior reasoning. The woman's work was the work of the spirit, her reward was spiritual, not financial.

Thus, by the cultivation of such characteristics like self-denial, forbearance, fidelity - women were to teach or rather to show how to live in virtue. They were to do this, not by preaching moral values in public, but by manifesting them in homes, by the magic of their voice, look, word and all the graces of woman's tenderness.

George Eliot was respected for her teachings and the novels can be seen to a certain extent - as parables in which the new attitudes to human experience are focused and defined. The novels are case studies of morality where the characters are put under test and the readers taking their lessons from those lives learn to live more generously themselves. So, one of the main purpose of her novels is to examine the process of enlargement in the lives of certain exceptional people. Instead of freedom from the imprisoning conditions of the past, they choose eventually to go back to simple family or social duties. This is done by the central women characters of her novels, who are ultimately installed as the paragon of moral virtue and at the same time to be the upholders of the values specially codified for the Victorian woman.

Placed in this background, I am going to analyze the widely acclaimed novel of George Eliot, *Adam Bede*. The novel has two complementary themes - morality and humanism - portrayed in the character of Dinah Morris. Through her, Eliot works out her belief in the religion of humanity and at the same time placing her belief on this particular woman to be the upholder of morality, which has been discussed already to be the most important characteristic of the Victorian Woman. Eliot is also trying to save as much as she can of the truth in the older religion, through writing from the point of view of the new ideology. Though the breakdown of the old Christian certainties had led to the general religious crisis and produced the symptoms of anxiety and despair, Eliot was able to rise above a merely personal response to the new situation. Through her teaching she was able to connect the old religion with the new, and thus to bring back the lost faith in human beings. This is what is done by Dinah exactly in the novel, of infusing hope in the life of the people all around her.

Much of the fascination for *Adam Bede* comes of the high and pure moral tone of the story, it grasps on the higher motives and interests of life and its undertone of yearning after a religious motive and ideal, adequate to all the problems of human destiny. This religious motive is in a way more than a yearning as it is a fixed and self-contained confidence in altruism, which is expressed in sympathy and feeling and pathos most tender and passionate. This novel is full of ardent desire to make men realize their need of each other, of longing to show them how much better and happier the world be if we were more sympathetic and had more fellow-feeling.

In *Adam Bede*, Dinah strives towards a selfless, spiritual identification with suffering humanity. Contrasted to this self-sacrificing figure is Hetty who is the natural, instinctive self, seeking its own pleasure. The two women are juxtaposed in the novel in various ways. At first, one readily notices the striking difference between the spirituality of the ascetic Methodist preacher and the hedonistic amorality of the diary-maid. In conventional terms, they represent nature and grace, 'Madonna', and 'Magdalen'.

Dinah's selflessness is so extreme that she appears as a pale, disembodied spirit living through other people and their troubles, while Hetty appears to be a 'pleasure-seeking' person who is untouched by anything outside her immediate desires. The contrast is enforced in a variety of ways - in the two bedroom scenes, for example in Hetty disguising herself as Dinah and in Dinah substituting herself for Hetty in Adam's dream. But as 'polar opposites' they have a good deal in common, each avoiding the full complexity of life in the community. Dinah's sermon to the unresponsive onlookers in Hayslope, at the beginning of the novel, is an attempt on her part to beseech her congregation to see the world differently. With her firm belief in visible manifestations of Jesus, she appeals to them to see afresh.

Dinah, in a way, can be said to exist on the periphery of Hayslope life, bringing her message of sin, suffering and redemption, from time to time, during brief visits or through her letters. She firmly believes that she has been called to minister to others, not

to have any joys or sorrows of her own; but this presents another aspect of her situation, as Mrs. Poyser points out in frustration, that her stance makes reciprocal relations impossible:

“..if everybody was to do like you, the world must come to a standstill... everybody 'ud be running after everybody else to preach to 'em, instead o' bringing up their families, and laying by against a bad harvest. It stands to sense as that can't be the right religion.”

[*Adam Bede*, p.85]

She objects to Dinah's placid disengagement from the world, in which she is herself embroiled. Not only that, her speech also is a discourse on the Victorian notions of femininity. As she continues:

“When there's a bigger maggot than usual in your head you call it ‘direction’; and then nothing can stir you - you look like the Statty o' the outside of Treddles on Church, a-starin' and a-smilin' whether it's fair weather or foul. I hanna common patience with you.”

[*Adam Bede*, p.86]

Mrs. Poyser translates Dinah's interpretative principle of ‘direction’ into a ‘maggot’ or a whim. She has constant forebodings that Dinah's help is needed in Hayslope, and that her reflection of this role is a way of self-indulgence. She fails to understand the true motivation and ways of Dinah. She wittily and anxiously deconstructs Dinah's otherworldliness, just as Mrs. Cadwallader does with Dorothea in *Middlemarch*. In one sense it might be said Dinah lives in a world, cut off by her selflessness from the reality around her. Whether she is suffering the anguish of creation groaning and travailing or reposing in her more contemplative moments, she is invariably absorbed in thoughts that had no connection with the present moment or with her own personality. Such self-abnegation becomes a self-indulgent dream, as without selfhood it is not possible for her to relate to individuals in their temporal immediacy; she has first to place them in the perspective of her vision of suffering humanity. As she tells mystified Hetty it is only when she is alone that she fully experiences the presence of the people she has known:

“I hear their voices and see them look and move almost plainer than I ever did when they were really with me so as I could touch them. And then my heart is drawn out towards them. and I feel their lot as if it was my own, and I take comfort in spreading it before the Lord and resting in His love, on their behalf as well as my own.”

[*Adam Bede*, p.143]

Dinah is well aware of a world of suffering and salvation. Her religion as she views it allows her to probe only as far as her rational nature can. To feel for one more than for another seems to Dinah narrowing of sympathy which, according to her, Christ would not approve. Conversely, she believes that her commitment to causes is a mark of overflowing feeling which cannot be contained in a single relationship.

One is made aware that Eliot does and at the same time does not hold her characters responsible for what they do. Responsibility is the demand made by the power which works continually and which imposes consequences on agents who are not in harmony with natural laws. This is not the responsibility in a traditional moral sense, but it becomes identical with what Eliot considers to be a moral requirement. But the sympathetic narrator, who assumes its claims, rebels against this natural responsibility. She also asserts that if nature cannot concede us innocent and excuse us from suffering the consequences of our actions, man can and must exonerate us, at least in his judgement.

While on the one hand Dinah is presented as a pure and virtuous woman upholding the Victorian moral values, Hetty presents the other aspect of the Victorian woman. Dinah by practicing the religion of Humanity tries to reach out to the others, while Hetty concentrating on her selfish desires, alienates herself from the society. In Hetty's case Eliot tries to obliterate guilt and substitute a compassionate identification. This Eliot accomplishes in part by continually reducing Hetty's status as a morally deliberative agent, Hetty becomes a victim no doubt, although not of specific circumstances as much as of her own nature and the general human condition.

The possibility of victory for Eliot's pathetic characters is undermined by their lack of awareness of their own situation. They do not understand that struggle is necessary and inevitable aspect of life. The tragedy for characters as different as Casaubon and Hetty is that they have little sense of either the depths or heights of human life, its hazards or its possibilities. Hetty of course, provides the outstanding example of a tragic and immoral character. Hetty's last meeting with Dinah, in the prison cell, enables her to confess and once more make human contact, but she is denied the strength and wisdom which traditionally accompany tragic suffering. Without Dinah, she would have perhaps collapsed, literally and metaphorically. There is no triumph in her sufferings, as she does not understand its proper meaning to rise above it, either in heroic defiance or in conscious self-sacrifice as a kind of recognition of her common humanity. The reader can only feel pity for her incapacitating incomprehension rather than sympathy for a suffering equal:

Then Dinah said, “Hetty, we are before God. He is waiting for you to tell the truth.” Still there was silence. At last, Hetty spoke in a tone of beseeching - “Dinah.....help me.....I can't feel anything like you.... my heart is hard.”

[*Adam Bede*, p.427]

It is interesting that in *Adam Bede*, the independent woman's problem, that of Dinah, with sex and marriage are worked out through the contact with a ‘fallen’ woman, Hetty, metaphorically. This may be due to the fact that in the conventions of Victorian literature, marriage does not seem to involve sex. According to the Victorian Codes, sexual act was associated by many wives only with a duty. The Victorian ethic made fidelity the supreme virtue and sexual irregularity the blackest of sins, for which, mostly women were to suffer.

**Conclusion:** George Eliot's conviction that all human life is a serious concern, and the way of her communication of that conviction in the telling of Hetty's story, makes it quite impossible for the reader to regard the character with either contempt or condescension. The problem of Hetty - the fact that someone so incompletely human, as already stated, her comparison with lower forms of life, has nevertheless to face a human destiny which is too difficult for her. Despite her championing of the

individual, Eliot was unwilling to attach a supreme value to an intense and profound experience which did not have beneficial repercussions in the wider life of humanity.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Auerbach, Nina. *Woman and the Demon; The Life of a Victorian Myth*. Cambridge, 1982.
- [2] Cosslett, Tess. *Woman to Woman, Female Friendship in Victorian Fiction*. The Harvester Press Limited, 1988.
- [3] Eliot, George. *Adam Bede*. London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994.
- [4] Harrison, Frederic. *Realities and Ideals*. New York, 1980.
- [5] Knoepfmacher, U.C. *Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel; George Eliot, Walter Pater and Samuel Butler*. Princeton, 1965.
- [6] Roberts, Neil. *George Eliot; her beliefs and her art*. London, 1975.
- [7] Simcox, C.B. *The Free Spirit; A Study of Liberal Humanism in the novels of George Eliot, Henry James, E.M Forster, Virginia Woolf, Angus Wilson*. London, 1963.
- [8] Thompson, Patricia. *The Victorian Heroine, A changing Ideal. (1837 1873)*. London, 1955.
- [9] Whitemeyer, Hugh. *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*. New Haven, 1979.

