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COUNTRY FOLK AND COUNTRY LIFE IN GEORGE
ELIOT'S EARLY NOVELS

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INTRODUCTION

One of Charles Dickens's favorite themes was low life in the great city of London ; Thackeray's the higher social stratum ; sir Walter Scott gave a vivid picture of Scotland, while George Eliot preferred the rural life of Midland. Here she was at home ; the daughter of a wealthy land agent, she was throughout her youth in daily contact with the plain country folk, who were her neighbours, the farmers and their wives, the village doctors, rural schoolmasters, country parsons and dissenting preachers. She had also the opportunity to visit the most aristocratic homes in the neighbourhood when she accompanied her father on business tours.

The natural environment was a source of inspiration to her : the place of her birth, Nuneaton, a small border town, between Leicestershire and Warwickshire, and the home of her youth, were once part of Shakespeare's Forest of Arden at the northern end of Warwickshire itself. Thus, through the same environment, George Eliot in the days of Queen Victoria rendered the same service for rural England that Shakespeare did in the time of Queen Elizabeth.

In the opening of '*Mr Gilfil's Love Story*', we are told that the narrative is supposed to begin in the year 1788, that is about the middle of the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The date of *Adam Bede* is eleven years later, and that of *The Mill on the Floss* is in the reign of George IV.

However, during the forty years between the end of the American War of Independence (1775-1783) and the death of George III in 1810, little change had taken place in the habits, manners and ideas of English people. At the end of the period the change began and in the upper strata of society, there was considerable progress. But among the farmers and the clergy and the smaller squires who inhabited the Midland counties of England, far from the capital, far from the sea-coast, with few newspapers and no leading articles, without railways, and yet partially affected by the manufacturing industries of the nearby

towns which were still comparatively in their infancy, the old fashion, the old beliefs and the old prejudices survived in their entirety forming a wealth of material of which George Eliot gave a picture of English rural life. The way of life of the old generation which she could remember well herself, and which must often have been described by others who knew them still better, was the main sources of her inspiration in those early novels by which she at once achieved great success and one of the highest rank among fiction writers of her age.

George Eliot partly follows in the footsteps of George Crabbe, who takes us into the labourer's cottage and gives us his own version of rural happiness, a version about which we shall have something more to say later. She was the first who took the village community as it stood, a little world by itself, with its clergy, landed gentry and its middle and lower classes.

The scenes of the various stories are set chiefly in the Midland counties of England, and though *The Mill on the Floss* cannot easily have been in Staffordshire or Warwickshire, yet the people in it are the same people, and speak the same language. We don't pretend that there is any marked peculiarity in the inhabitants of this district as to enable us at once to recognize their portraits in George Eliot's pages and to declare that the original of them could only have been found in that group of counties of Central England. People like these fictitious characters, intensifying, perhaps, into roughness as one gets further North. It is this, which, as T.E. Kebbel noticed in 1881, distinguished them.« Slightly it is true but still quite perceptibly in the eyes of any competent judge, from the neighbourhood provinces ».¹ These characters use the dialect and the grammar of the Midland counties which George Eliot had a perfect command.

¹ Kebbel T.E. Village Life in George Eliot : the Fisers magazine (1881)

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER ONE : DEFINITION OF THE MAIN CONCEPTS AND VARIOUS TYPES OF PEOPLE

1.1 Definition of the main concepts

1.1.1 The folk

According to Oxford advanced learner dictionary, the new 7th edition p 576, the term 'folk' is a noun that refers to the people in general ; ordinary working class. Its plural is a friendly way of addressing more than one person. It is also the members of your family especially your parents ; people from a particular country or region, or who have a particular way of life : country folk. As an adjective (only before a noun), it is traditional and typical of the ordinary people of a country or community based on the beliefs of such ordinary people. Likewise, it is the way of life of common people of a society or region considered as the representatives of a traditional way of life and especially as the originators or carriers of the customs, beliefs, and arts that make up a distinctive culture (www.Thefreedictionary.com)

1.1.2 The Stratum

This word stands for a layer or set of layers of rock, earth, etc. It is also a class in a society : people from all social strata . (Oxford advanced learner dictionary, the new 7th edition p 1461). Likewise, this word is a noun whose plural is strata. Its meaning depends on the field in which it is used. Let's define this word taking some fields into account.

In general it is a layer of material, naturally or artificially formed, often one of a number of parallel layers one upon another: a stratum of ancient foundations.

It is also one of numbers of portions or divisions likened to layers or levels: an allegory with many strata of meaning.

In Geology, it is a single bed of sedimentary rock, generally consisting of one kind of matter representing continuous deposition.

As far as Ecology is concerned, (in a plant community), it is a layer of vegetation, usually of the same or similar height. In the same field, it is considered as a layer of the ocean or the atmosphere distinguished by natural or arbitrary limits.

Talking about Sociology, the word refers to a level or grade of people or population with reference to social position, education, etc.: the lowest stratum of society.

As far as Linguistics.(in stratificational grammar) is concerned, it is a major subdivision of linguistic structure (www.merriam-webster.com)

1.1.3 The Gentry

This word is defined according to the Oxford advanced learner dictionary, the new 7th edition p 622 , as people belonging to high social class : the local gentry, the landed gentry, those who own a lot land. It is also people of high social rank below the titled people. On the web site www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gentry, it is defined as the qualities appropriate to a person of gentle birth ; especially : courtesy. It is also defined on the same web site as a class whose members are entitled to bear a coat of arms though not of noble rank, specially : the landed proprietors having such status.

1.1.4 The yeoman

According to the Oxford advanced learner dictionary, the new 7th edition p 1710 , yeoman is (in Britain in the past) a farmer who owned and worked on his land. It is also an officer in the U.S. Navy who does mainly office work. The internet defines it as an officer in the U.S. who works as a clerk. It is also defined as a farmer in the past who owned a small amount of land. Moreover, it

is a person who owns and cultivates a small farm ; specifically : one belonging to a class of English freeholders below the gentry, a person of the social rank of yeoman, one that performs great and loyal service (www.merriam-webster.com)

1.1.5 The tenant

This term according to the Oxford advanced learner dictionary, the new 7th edition p 1524 stands for a person who pays rent for the use of the room, building, land, etc, to the person who owns it. Moreover, the term means a person, business, group, etc that pays to use another person's property : someone who rents or leases a house, apartment, etc, from a landlord. It is also someone who holds or possesses real estate or sometimes personal property (as a security) by any kind of right . Moreover, the internet defines tenant as someone who has the occupation or temporary possession of lands or tenements of another ; specifically : one who rents or leases (as a house) from a landlord (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tenant>).

1.1.6 The clergy

According to the the Oxford advanced learner dictionary, the new 7th edition p 263 this word means the priests or ministers of a religion especially of the Christian church. According to the internet the term is defined as people (such as priests) who are the leaders of a religion and who perform religious services. It is also a group ordained to perform pastoral or sacerdotal functions in a Christian church, a group ordained to perform pastoral or sacerdotal functions in a Christian church. (www.merriam-webster.com)

1.1.7 The clerk

This term according to the Oxford advanced learner dictionary, the new 7th edition p 263 means a person whose job is to keep the records or accounts in an office, shop/store, etc. It is also an official in charge of the records of a council, court, etc. Likewise, it is person whose job is dealing with people arriving at or leaving a hotel (receptionist). As far as the internet definition is concerned, it is a person whose job is to keep track of records and documents for a business or office. It is also an elected or appointed official whose job is to take care of official papers and business for a court or government, :a person who works in a store. Moreover, it is an official responsible (as to a government agency) for correspondence, records, and accounts and vested with specified powers or authority (as to issue writs as ordered by a court or one employed to keep records or accounts or to perform general office work, one who works at a sales or service counter. (www.merriam-webster.com)

1.1.8 The surplice

According to the Oxford advanced learner dictionary, the new 7th edition p 1489 the term surplice stands for a loose white piece of clothing with wide sleeves worn by priests and singers in the choir during church services. According to the internet, it is a loose, white piece of clothing that is worn by priests or singers at church services. It is also defined as a loose white outer ecclesiastical vestment usually of knee length with large open sleeves. (www.merriam-webster.com)

1.1.9 Thackeray

This is the name of one of the English novelists of the 19th century. His full name is William Makepeace Thackeray. He was famous for his satirical works, particularly 'Vanity Fair', panoramic portrait of English society. Here is a part of his biography according to www.wikipedia.org

Thackeray, an only child, was born in [Calcutta](#),^[1] India, where his father, Richmond Thackeray (1 September 1781 – 13 September 1815), was secretary to the board of revenue in the British [East India Company](#). His mother, Anne Becher (1792–1864), was the second daughter of Harriet Becher and John Harman Becher, who was also a secretary (writer) for the East India Company.

William's father, Richmond, died in 1815, which caused his mother to send him to England in 1816 (whilst she remained in India). The ship on which he travelled made a short stopover at [St. Helena](#) where the imprisoned [Napoleon](#) was pointed out to him. Once in England he was educated at schools in [Southampton](#) and [Chiswick](#) and then at [Charterhouse School](#), where he was a close friend of [John Leech](#). He disliked Charterhouse,^[2] parodying it in his later fiction as "Slaughterhouse". (Nevertheless Thackeray was honoured in the Charterhouse Chapel with a monument after his death.) Illness in his last year there (during which he reportedly grew to his full height of 6' 3") postponed his matriculation at [Trinity College, Cambridge](#), until February 1829. Never too keen on academic studies, he left the University in 1830, though some of his earliest writing appeared in university publications *The Snob* and *The Gownsmen*.^[3]

He travelled for some time on the continent, visiting Paris and [Weimar](#), where he met [Goethe](#). He returned to England and began to study law at the [Middle Temple](#), but soon gave that up. On reaching the age of 21, he came into his inheritance but he squandered much of it on gambling and by funding two unsuccessful newspapers, *The National Standard* and *The Constitutional*, for

which he had hoped to write. He also lost a good part of his fortune in the collapse of two Indian banks. Forced to consider a profession to support himself, he turned first to art, which he studied in Paris, but did not pursue it except in later years as the illustrator of some of his own novels and other writings.

1.1.10 Nuneaton

According to the web site www.wikipedia.org, **Nuneaton** [/nəˈniːtən/](#) is the largest town in the [Borough of Nuneaton and Bedworth](#) and in the [English](#) county of [Warwickshire](#).^[1] The population of Nuneaton's eleven wards in 2011 was 81,877.

Nuneaton is most famous for its associations with the 19th century author [George Eliot](#), who was born on a farm on the [Arbury Estate](#) just outside Nuneaton in 1819 and lived in the town for much of her early life. In her novel [Scenes of Clerical Life](#) (1858), "Milby" is the thinly disguised market town of Nuneaton.

The Nuneaton Built-up area is a [conurbation](#) incorporating Nuneaton and several surrounding villages, including [Hartshill](#) and [Bulkington](#), and had a population of 92,968 according to the [2011 census](#). This is significantly down on the [2001 census](#) population of 132,236,^[5] the decrease occurring mainly because [Hinckley](#) no longer forms part of the built-up area.

The town is located 9 miles (14 km) north of [Coventry](#), 20 miles (32 km) east of [Birmingham](#) and 103 miles (166 km) northwest of London. The [River Anker](#) runs through the town. Nuneaton (as defined by the Office for National Statistics) had a population of 70,721 according to the 2001 census, though the

2008 estimate is closer to 73,000 inhabitants. However, both of these figures exclude the Camp Hill area of the town, which is deemed to be in the Hartshill subdivision of the Nuneaton urban area by the [Office for National Statistics](#) (ONS), as can be seen from the map included in its report on Key Statistics for urban areas^[6] and the dataset of this report, which cites a population of 12,207 for the Hartshill subdivision (by comparison, the population of the civil parish of [Hartshill](#) in 2001 was just 3,611 . A more representative figure is given by the combined population of Nuneaton's 11 wards, which was 78,403 in 2001 according to the ONS (see table [below](#)).

Towns close to Nuneaton include [Bedworth](#), [Atherstone](#) and [Hinckley](#), with [Tamworth](#) and [Lutterworth](#) a little further afield. The nearest city is Coventry, 9 miles (14 km) from the centre of Nuneaton. [Leicester](#) and then [Birmingham](#) are the next closest cities. A local landmark is Mount Judd, which is a large mound of quarry residue that was formed when Judkins Quarry was dug out. Mount Judd lies in the northwest of the town and can be seen for miles around. The town lies 3 miles from the [Leicestershire](#) border, 8 miles from [Staffordshire](#) and 12 miles from [Derbyshire](#).

There are various [Ordnance Survey](#)-recognised viewpoints at the extremities of the town. One of the most noteworthy is in the west of Hartshill Hayes Country Park from where looking north [Atherstone](#) can be seen and looking northeast [Leicester](#) can be seen, depending on visibility.

History

Nuneaton's name came from a 12th-century [Benedictine nunnery](#) (parts of which still survive) around which much of the town grew. Prior to this it was a settlement known as 'Etone', which translates literally as 'water-town'. Nuneaton was listed in the [Domesday Book](#) as a small [hamlet](#). A market was established in 1233 (and is still held today). The first recorded use of the modern name was

in 1247 when a document recorded it as 'Nonne Eton'. The Nunnery fell into disrepair after 1539 (with Henry VIII's [Dissolution of the Monasteries](#)). [King Edward VI School](#) was established by a royal charter in 1552. From 1944 it became a [grammar school](#) for boys and, although it was locally known as KEGS, it never included the word "*grammar*" in its name. In 1974 it became a [sixth form college](#). Other grammar schools in Nuneaton during the 1944 to 1974 period were Nuneaton High School for Girls and Manor Park. Additionally Nicholas Chamberlaine School in Bedworth was an early [comprehensive school](#) that had a grammar school stream.

Nuneaton grew gradually from the 17th century onwards, due to its position at the centre of the Warwickshire coalfields. At the time of the first national census in 1801 Nuneaton was already one of the largest towns in Warwickshire, with a population of 5,000. During the [Industrial Revolution](#) in the 19th century, Nuneaton developed a large [textile](#) industry. Other industries which developed in the town included [brick](#) and [tile](#) making and [brewing](#). By 1901 the population of Nuneaton had grown to 25,000.

Nuneaton became an [urban district](#) in 1894, and was upgraded to the status of a [municipal borough](#) in 1907.

Due largely to [munitions](#) factories located in Nuneaton, the town suffered heavy bombing damage during [World War II](#). The heaviest bombing raid on Nuneaton took place on 17 May 1941, when 100 people were killed, 380 houses were destroyed, and over 10,000 damaged, a few smaller raids took place on the town, most notably on 25 June 1942. As a result of the bombing, much of the town centre was rebuilt in the [post-war](#) years.

On 6 June 1975, six people died and 38 were injured when a [train crashed](#) just south of [Nuneaton railway station](#).

1.2 VARIOUS TYPES OF PEOPLE

1.2.1 The Gentry

As a member of landed gentry of the period, George Eliot left several very interesting portraits, in particular those of Sir Christopher Cheverel, Arthur Donnithorne and his grandfather. The Cheverels, the Olddimports and the Donnithornes belonged to families who were naturally expected to supply country members, high sheriffs and chairmen of quarter sessions. They live in a mansion, hired domestics and had tenants. Often they were not very popular among their tenants.

« Mr Olddimport was in the worst odour as a landlord having kept up his rent in spite of falling prices and not being in the least stung to emulation by paragraphs in the provincial newspapers, stating that the Honourable Augustus Purwell or Viscount Blethers had made a return of ten per cent on their last rent day »².

Old squire Donnithorne tried to take Mr Poyser out of the best part of his farm for his own profit. However, the old squire was always polite with the tenants and their wives when he had to speak to them ; but the farmers found out « after long puzzling » that the polish was one of the signs of hardness. The old man always spoke in the same deliberate polite way, whether his words were sugary or venomous. He peered at his tenants with his short-sighted eyes, a way of looking which, as Mrs.Poyser observed, « allays aggravated her ; it was if you was an insect and he was going to dab his finger-nail in you »³.

² « Mr. Gilfil's love-Story » chap I pp. 133-134

³ Adam Bede, book IV chap. XXXII p. 330

His society was the parson and his family; he used to invite them every week for dinner, for he was a « good christian ». he used to go to church every Sunday accompanied by his family. The tenants could see his carriage winding slowly up the hill when they came to church. He was always late, making his way among the bows and curtsies of his dependants to a carved, canopied pew in the chancel. The ladies followed him, wearing a fashionable little coal-scuttle bonnet with a wreath of small roses round it, or diffusing as they went along a delicate odour of indian roses on the unsusceptible nostrils of the congregation. Then behind came the house-keeper's black bonnet and the ladies' maids with hats which had once been their mistress's and then « the powdered heads » of the butler and the footman.

The son of the squire was sometimes in the army but his « real » life would be when he became a country gentleman: that was his real ambition:

« He would not have changed his career for any other under the sun »⁴ as arthur Donnithorne thought, and he imagined himself.

«spoken well of on the market days as a first mate landlord ; by-and-by making speeches at election dinners, and showing a wonderful knowledge of agriculture ; the patron of new ploughs and drills, the severe upbraider of negligent landowners, and withal a jolly fellow that everybody must like»⁵.

He imagined how he would be greeted on his own estate and how the neighbouring families would look for the woman who would play the lady wife to the first rate country gentleman.

4 Adam Bede, book V chap. XIIIV pp. 420-421

5 Adam Bede, book V chap. XIIIV pp. 420-421

In the village, there were sometimes people like countess Czerlaski and her brother Mr Bridmain. He had won a partnership in a silk manufactory and made a moderate fortune that had enabled him to retire. The countess had determined to play a part in the gentry in a neighbourhood where people were extremely well acquainted with each other's affairs and where the women were mostly ill-dressed and ugly. But out of respectability, Milby refused to acknowledge countess Czerlaski in spite of her assiduous church-going.

1.2.2 The secondary Squire

We have another class, that of the secondary squire, which stands in reality between the yeoman and the gentry. To this class belonged Mr. Farquar. This class, when there was not a great country family in the neighbourhood, took its place in the people's estimation. They farmed their own land but had tenants under them. This class of men was common ; they were strictly honourable in money matters but a little inclined to be purse-proud, not from ostentation, but simply because the public opinion of their circle regarded the ability to pay one's way as the first of human virtues. They considered faith, hope and charity to be excellent in their place and when applied to other people, but that never to stand in need of them if was something more excellent still. This trait is well brought out in The Mill on the Floss through the medium of Tom Tulliver's emotion on hearing of his father's bankruptcy. Such men were narrow minded, as they could not well be otherwise. They would say that « **the confounded newspapers were beginning to talk about peace** ». They were of the opinion that wars were required at certain intervals in order to give employment to the army. The consciousness of having money gave these men great confidence in their opinions; their properties, however, did not as a rule, pass from father to son, because they were more commonly divided on the death of the « pater familias » so that the family could not stay on the same footing for more than two or three generations except if the estate was considerably vast or

if, as it often happened, the sons themselves made money and bought new lands of their own. Sometimes on the death of the old squire there was nobody to succeed him. The estate was divided, and the village did without a squire as well as it could.

The people belonging to this class had an independence of character and a general integrity, but they possessed all the failings of their class without any of the accomplishments or liberality by which gentlemen of the larger estates were usually redeemed. They had all the faults the average country gentleman could have which a retired life and the homage of dependants and flatterers were calculated to engender; but their life was even more retired, and the deference of inferiors even less likely to be robbed of its effect by experience of the world, because they had seen little and read little to correct the prejudices of their education.

1.2.3 The clergy

Apart from the squire, the parson was one of the main personalities of the village. George Eliot had a weakness for top-booted parsons who came to church with their boots on and even sometimes forgot to take off their surplice. There were many parsons like Mr Gilfil who hunted with warwickshire hounds, shot partridges and hares and farmed their own land without a suspicion that they were either neglecting their duty or taking a wrong view of it.

As we can notice, George Eliot, though she was under the influence of the thought of many liberal and cultivated minds, looked back on these parsons with a respect and sympathy that is hardly understandable to present day clergy-men who are supposed to be distinguished for earnestness and piety above their fellows. The conversation she reported as having with Adam Bede on the respective merit of Mr. Irwine and his successor Mr. Ryde, the zealous evangelist, is conclusive in this respect.

« And so I come back to Mr. Irwine, with whom I desire you to be in perfect charity, far as he may be from satisfying your demands on the clerical character. Perhaps you think he was not as he ought to have been a living demonstration of the benefits attached to national church?

But I am not sure of that ; at least I know that the people in Bronxton and Hayslope would have been very sorry to part with their clergyman, and that most faces brightened at his approach ; and until it can be proved that hatred is a thing for the soul than love, I must believe that Mr. Irwine's influence in his parish was a more wholesome one than that of the zealous Mr. Ryde, who came there twenty years afterwards, when Mr. Irwine had been gathered to his fathers »⁶. Then she goes on.

« Mr Ryde insisted strongly on the doctrines of the reformation, visited his flock a great deal in their own homes, and was severe in rebuking the aberrations of the flesh-put a stop, indeed, to the Christmas rounds of the church singers, as promoting drunkenness and too light a handling of sacred things »⁷.

But as Adam Bede had apparently reported, few clergymen could be less successful in winning the hearts of their parishioners than Mr Ryde.

« They learned a great many notions about doctrine from him, so that almost every church-goer under fifty began to distinguish as well between the genuine gospel and what did not come precisely up to that standard, as if he had born and bred a dissenter ; and for some time after his arrival there seemed to be quite a religious movement in that quiet rural district »⁸

6 Adam Bede, book II chap XVIII pp 175-176

7 Adam Bede, book II chap XVIII pp 175-176

8 Adam Bede, book II chap XVIII pp 176-177

However, the congregation began to fall off, and people began to speak lightly of Mr. Ryde because he wanted to judge every from the pulpit as if he had been a ranter, and yet he would not abide the dissenters and was a deal more set against them than Mr Irwine had been. What was more he did not keep within his income.

Adam Bede went on:

« Mr Ryde was a deal thought on at a distance, I believe, and wrote books ; but as for math' matics and the natur o'things, he was as ignorant as a woman. He was very knowing about doctrines, and used to call'em the bulwarks of the reformation, but I've always mistrusted that sort o'learning as it leaves folks foolish and unreasonable about business »⁹.

Mr. Irwine was very different.

« He understood what you meant in a minute ; and he knew all about building and could see when you'd made a good job. And he behaved as much like a gentleman to the farmers, and th'old women and the labourers, as he did to the gentry. You never saw him interfering and scolding, and trying to play the emperor. And ! he was as fine a man as ever you set eyes on ; and so kind to's mother and sisters. That poor sickly Miss Anne- he seemed to think more of her than of anybody else in the world. There wasn't a soul in the parish who had a word to say against him »¹⁰

⁹ Adam Bede, bookII, chap. XVIII pp. 175-176

¹⁰ Adam Bede, bookII, chap. XVIII p. 176-177

Mrs. Poyser compared the sermons of the old-fashioned parson to « a good meal of victual », good for one « without thinking on it », and those of the more rousing man to « a dose of physic » which « gripped you and worried you, and after all left you much the same »¹¹.

It is interesting to compare the portrait of Mr. Gilfil and the description of his pastoral influence with the account given by Fraude of the clergy of the same period. Mr Gilfil is in the concrete what Fraude gives in the following abstract.

« They farmed their own glebes, they were magistrates and sattended quarter sessions and petty sessions in remote districts where there was no resident gentry of consequence, where the most effective guardians of the public peace, they affected neither austerity nor singularity, they rode, shot, huned ; ate and drank like other people ; occasionzllly when there was no-one else to take the work upon them, they kep hounds. In dress and habit they were simply a superior class of small country gentlemem, very far from immaculate, but taken all together, wholesome and solid members of practical English life . »¹²

¹¹ Adam Bede, bookII, chap. XVIII p. 176-177

¹² Adam Bede, bookII, chap XVIII pp 176-177

Here one can see that in former days the laxity of the clergyman's life impaired influence over his people. He was human as they were. If their belief was better than their life, so was his. His failure to practise what he preached did not make his preaching less true. Not appreciating the supernatural attributes which distinguished him from other men, they did not see the big gap between what was expected of such a man and what he very often did. They would not measure the immensity of the difference between his breaches of the moral law and their own. Kebbel reported the reflection of a Midland county baronet to the parishioners of a neighbouring parish blessed with an incumbent who was guilty of most of the sins which bring men to church courts that they had « a queer sort of parson, I understand, at your place ». At this, a farrier, a man in excellent practice, fired up and replied with great earnestness that the parson was « a most respectable man, barring his character. »¹³

One can see that the clergymen shared much more largely in their secular employments and amusements than later on and that they were blind to the peculiar blackness of clerical delinquency. It would have been a revelation to the parochial mind to know that a cleric should be a pale-faced momento of solemnities, instead of a reasonably faulty man whose exclusive authority to read prayers, preach christen, marry and bury necessarily co-existed with the right to sell the ground in which to be buried and take the tithes.

13 Kebbel T.E. (1881), op. cit

When the parson chatted over his pipe with the farmers about the merits of the ewes or rode home from hunting with the squire and dined with him afterwards in his top-boots, a very small element of sacerdotism could have mingled with the popular conception of him. The Midland counties, apparently, had no monopoly of such clergymen, but the soil was favourable to their growth. The frequency of large glebes in this part of England led to a tendency to convert the parson into a farmer and a sportsman and to cause him to take his place among the smaller squirearchy, distinguished only by the unique character of the duties required of him on Sundays. Where hunting was the predominant amusement, because of the nature of the country or the fame of some particular pack, the clergy naturally fell into the ways of their neighbours. They were hearty men and their healthy, good-humoured faces, their frank and friendly manners and the sound common-sense which they would often display in an emergency won them the confidence of both high and low classes.

1.2.4 The clerks

In Joshua Rann one has an excellent example of the clerk. He was the village shoemaker. When he told the vicar, Mr. Irwine, of the Dissenters preaching on the village Green, Mr Irwine replied,

« well, but you say yourself, that you never knew anyone come to preach on the Green before ; why should they come again ? The methodists don't come to preach in little villages like Hayslope, where there's only a handful of labourers, too tired to listen to them. They might almost as well go and preach on the Binton Hills. Will Maskery is no preacher himself, I think »¹⁴

Joshua there upon observed,

« Nay, sir, he's no gift at stringing the words together wi'out boot ; he'd be struck fast like a cow i'wet clay. But he's got tongue enough to speak disrespectful about's neebors, for he said as I was a blind Pharisee ;-a-usin'the Bible ; that way to find nicknames for folks as are his elders an'betters : and what's worse, he's been heard to say very unbecomin' words about your reverence : for I could bring them as'ud swear as he called you a dumb dog », an'a idle shepherd'. You'll forgi'e me for sayin' such things over again »¹⁵.

But Mr Irwine told him that will Maskery came to church every Sunday afternoon and did his wheelwright's business consciously on weekdays, and as long as he did that he must be left alone. However, Joshua went on , saying that will Maskery could not sing, and later on , he remarked

« yes ,sir, but it turns a man's stomach to hear the scripture misused i'that way.

I know as much o' the words o' the Bible as he does, an'could say the Psalms right through i' my sleep if you was to pinch me ; but I know better nor to take ' em ta say my own say wi'an' I might as well take the sacrament-cup home and use it at meals »¹⁶.

¹⁴ Adam Bede, bookI,chapV P59

¹⁵ Adam Bede, bookI,chapV P59

¹⁶ Adam Bede, Book I chapV, p60

The clerk regarded a dissenter as a kind of spiritual poacher all right-minded people must see to be in the wrong but who, when he came and plied his calling right under your nose, adding insult to injury. The clerks of those days were the non-commissioned officers of the rural church, zealous for its honour according to their lights. They were always ready to battle for its dignity and were full of the importance conferred upon them by their share in its service. Keibel reported that he knew a clerk who retained his top-boots long after the clergy had abandoned them and who was excited to a pitch of wrath at being asked to tea by a dissenting farmer. They might, the clerk thought, nearly as well have asked the vicar ; this being the highest peak of combined profanity and impertinence to which his imagination was capable of soaring.

1.2.5 The lawyers

One has a good portrait of the lawyers in « Janet's Repentance » . Mrs Pittman and Dempster were popular in Milby and its neighbourhood. Mr Benjamin Landor, against whom no-one had anything particular to say, had a very meagre business in comparison. Old lawyer Pittman had once been a very important person, having in his earlier days managed the affairs of several gentlemen in those parts, who had been obliged to sell everything and leave the country. Mr Pittman then bought their estate, taking on himself the risk and trouble to make a profit on the sale.

Apparently he must have been unlucky in his later speculations, for in his old age, he had not the reputation of being rich; and though he rode slowly to his office in Milby every morning on an old white hackney he had to give up the best profits and the active business of the firm to his younger partner Dempster.

Pittman was not considered as a virtuous man in Milby, and people like to tell the least advantageous portions of his life « in a very sound manner ». yet he was trusted and liked nevertheless.

There was hardly a landowner, a farmer or a parish within ten miles of Milby who did not give their affairs to the legal guardianship of Pittman and Dempster. The clients were proud of their lawyers' unscrupulousness. Dempster's talent in « bringing through » a client was a very common topic of conversation with the farmers over a glass of grog at the « Red Lion ».

1.2.6 The Rest of the Middle class

Still at Milby, one finds two doctors, Mr Pratt who was middle-sized, insinuating and silvery-voiced, and Mr Pilgrim who was tall, heavy, rough-mannered and spluttering. They were both considered as having great power of conversation, and both were top-boots. Mr Pilgrim had long rounds among the farm-houses in the course of which he had two large meals which he called « snaps », and after each « snap » he had a few glasses of «mixture » with very little water in. So, after a hard day in which he had no regular meal, it seemed a natural relaxation to step into the bar of the « red Lion », where he could find his friends, the lawyers.

The owner of the pub played an important part in the village. He had the art of putting the right questions and providing the proper answers, and so the same old story was told night after night with everybody interested as if they were new.

It is apparent that the community was extremely closely-knit and there have already been many examples of this. Another member of the middle class also exemplifies this fact, for the schoolmaster, Bartle Massey, is a man devoted to his task, and who yet would not hesitate to close his school to help a friend.

The Tenants

In comparison with her treatment of the upper and middle classes, George Eliot deals with relatively few actual types of tenants ; instead, she paints their characters fully in relation to their environment. This aspect of her work will therefore be discussed in more detail later when dealing with their way of life and surroundings. One may, however, introduce the essential features of this type of villager here.

There was Mr Poyser coming in to « hev a cup o' tea » at four o'clock or in his shirt-sleeves to meet the squire « a shade redder than usual, from the exertion of pitching »¹⁷. He was also seen in his Sunday suit of drab and his breeches, with a red-and-green waistcoat, walking to church on Sunday morning trough the well-known meadows where the newly mown grass lay thick on the ground, glittering in the recent rain, while Marty and Tommy found a « perpetual drama » in the great, rambling, overgrown, hedge.

The poyser and their likes, at least in the midland counties, shared the same characteristics of behaviour as the Gilfils. The red-and-green waistcoat was not a mere tradition, but exemplified their individuality. However, the broad-skirted drab coat, breeches and grey stockings, and the low-crowned hat were more traditional and lasted quite a time. Mrs Poyser had some idea of « quality » and always adressed the parson's wife as « madam » and always sent her a couple of fowls at Christmas « with her respectful duty ».

¹⁷ Adam Bede, book VI chap XXXII P 331

Mr Poyser was a man of few words, brought up in the old country tradition according to which the squire and the farmers were separated by « a law of nature » which it would have been impious to try to overthrow. On the other hand, Mrs Poyser had a « sharp tongue but a kind heart back of it » and she believed in having her way, declaring,

« there 's no pleasure I' living, if you're to be corked up for ever, and only dribble your mind out by the sly, like a leaky barrel »¹⁸.

¹⁸ Adam BEDE , book IV chap XXXII P336

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER TWO: NEIGHBOURHOOD : Habits, Manners and Traditions

Having discussed the individual characters which distinguish George Eliot's rural novels, we may now deal with the life of the village as a whole.

2.1 Working hours

In Félix Holt George Eliot describes a midland village as seen by the traveller.

« they were cheerful villages with a neat or handsome parsonage and grey church set in the midst ; there was the pleasant tinkle of the blacksmith's anvil, the patient cart-horse waiting at the door, the basket-maker peeling his willow-wands in the sunshine, the wheelwright putting the last touch to a blue cart with red wheels ; shere and there a cottage with bright transparent windows showing pots full of blooming balsams or geraniums, and little gardens in front, all double daisies or dark wall-flowers ; at the well, clean and comely women carrying yoked buckets, and towards the free school small britons dawdling on and handling their marbles in the pockets of unpatched corduroys adorned with brass buttons »¹⁹.

¹⁹ FELIX HOLT Vol.1 P.5

This was the village of acknowledged optimists.

The story of Adam Bede begins on the premises of the village carpenter and builder of hayslope where Adam worked. The employees' labour is described with accuracy. There floated a scent of pine-wood, and one of the men was singing; and a general atmosphere of happiness prevailed. The same precision and happy atmosphere prevail in the descriptions of the many incidents connected with the making of butter and cheese, which were the daily activities of the Poyzers. One is introduced to Mrs Poyser's dairy by George Eliot ; it was worth looking at

« Such coolness, such purity, such fresh fragrance of new-pressed cheese, of firm butter, of wooden vessels perpetually bathed in pure water ; such soft colouring of red earthenware and creamy surfaces, brown wood and polished tin, grey limestone and rich orangered rust on the iron books and weights and hinges »²⁰.

This making of the butter and cheese could hardly have been described by anyone who was not familiar with the subject from personal experience. George Eliot's father had been a farmer as well as a land agent, and his wife, like most farmers'wives, played her part in the domestic economy through the manufacture of butter and cheese, and probably also through the carding and spinning of wool, which George Eliot mentioned as being one of the occupations of women in the cottages.

²⁰ Adam BEDE, book I chap. VII p.82

2.2 Leisure time

One sees the farmers when they had tea-parties, with the copper kettle, the home-made muffins and the rich cream in the fragrant tea. The cream was real farm-house cream which had been the same morning in the udder of the cow; from the pail it had been carried to the meaner elements of milk and lay ready for the skimming-dish, before being finally transferred into the cream-jug. The farmers had tea in their best kitchen when farm-houses had no parlours, but this kitchen was a charming one. The fire was reflected in a bright row of pewter plates and dishes; the tables were very clean ; the salt coffer was in one chimney-corner, and a three cornered chair in the other ; the walls behind were tapestried with fitches of bacon and the ceiling ornamented with pendant hams.

If the farmers never moved from their village, the squire often went abroad and had intellectual interests. In the Manor house, Sir Christopher, who had spent some time in Milan and was an enthusiastic admirer of Gothic architecture, decided to plan a way of altering his plain brick family mansion and making into a Gothic Manor house. When this preoccupation does not grip him, he would hunt with the parson, have conversation with his lawyer or steward, or generally give orders to everybody.

The ladies spent their time doing such delicate work as making chair cushions which would complete a set of embroidered covers for the drawing-room. Or they would spend their morning, as Miss Asher did, winding silks while lady Cheverel and lady Asher were holding the skeins. They would sing and play the harpsichord or the piano, and when there were guests, they entertained them in this way. After the singing, in the evening, they would play card, usually whist, or chess. In the afternoon the ladies would go for a walk and take with them their painting and drawing equipment.

In the village very few exciting things happened. Arthur Donnithorne's twenty-first birthday was the occasion of a great feast for everybody. The village

people put on their best clothes, that is their Sunday clothes, the church bells were rung calling people to « the chase », the residence of the Donnithornes.

However, the farmers would not leave their farms alone for, as Mrs Poyser said,

« there's been ill-looking tramps enoo'about the place this last week, to carry off every ham an'every spoon we'n got »²¹.

« No grand company » came except the parson and his family. In « the chase » there were different parties, organized for the dinner, one for the tenants of large farms, which was upstairs, as a proof of their superiority over the small tenants, who were downstairs.

However, there were some exceptions, such as people deriving their dignity from their function rather than from their pocket, such as Adam Bede who had just been offered a post as land agent, and .Bartle Massey, the schoolmaster. Upstairs had none of the inferior ale, but wine and dessert. After the dinner there were games such as one can still find at garden fetes nowadays, and even a donkey race « conducted on the grand socialistic idea of everybody encouraging everybody else's donked and the sorriest donkey and the sorriest donkey winning »²².

There were two bands, a local one capable of playing excellent Jigs, reels and hornpipes, and a large band hired from a neighbouring village.

One of the villagers performed a rustic dance, never smiling, « as serious as if he had been an experimental philosopher escertaining in his own person the amount of shaking and the varieties of angularity that could be given to the human limbs »²³.

Then the dance started, opened by the young squire with the wife of the most imoprtant tenant.

²¹Adam Bede, bookIII chap 244

²² Adam Bede, book III chap. XXV p. 263

²³ Adam Bede,_boook III chap. XXX p. 269

Every year at the same time, there was the harvest supper preceded by the chant of « harvest home ». The supper at hall farm was prepared by the master's wife, it must have been the same every year, for Adam who was late afraid of missing the roast beef which he knew came after the pudding. The farm labourers and their masters sat at the same table eating the excellent roast beef, with a great clatter of knives and pewter plates, but without any hum of voices; eating was too serious a matter to be performed with divided attention. These labourers enjoyed their meal, for, except on Sundays and Christmas Day, they had to eat a cold dinner and drink their beer out of wooden bottles in the fields. The supper was followed by the great ceremony of the evening, the harvest song, connected as it was with a drinking ceremony.

In the market town, one of the great events of the year was the charity bazaar, which took place at St Ogg. All the well-dressed people of the town and its neighbourhood would be there and all the young ladies of best families would have stalls.

2.3 The Pubs

In the village the pub and the church were the main centres of social life. The « Donnithorne Arms » at Hayslope and the « Red Lion » at Milby were very much the same. There was a bar or a kitchen on the right-hand side where the less « lofty customers » assembled, while the parlour on the left was reserved for the « more select society ». In the first room, one could see the assembled company all puffing their pipes in a silence which had an air of severity. The more important customers, who drank spirits and sat near the fire, would stare at each other as if a bet were depending on the first man who winked, while the beer drinkers, chiefly men in fustian jackets and smocks, kept their eyelids down and rubbed their hands across their mouths as if their draughts of beer were a funeral duty attended with embarrassing sadness. In the pub people would sometimes discuss the events of the village, if for example, such an

outstanding occasion as a girl preaching on the village Green or the arrival of a new tenant should arise.

2.4 **The church**

The other centre of attraction was the church. The well-dressed parishioners were generally very regular church-goers, and to the younger ladies and gentlemen, Sunday morning was the most exciting time of the week;

«for few places could present a more brilliant show of outdoor toilettes than might be seen” leaving the church at one o’clock»²⁴.

For example, there was the belle of the village clad in purple and ermine with a plume of feather” neither drooping nor erect, but maintaining a discreet medium .

²⁴ « JANET REPENTANCE » chapII,P 53

In the interior of Knebley church

« the farmers' wives and children sat on the dark oaken benches but the husbands usually chose the distinctive dignity of a stall under one of the twelve apostles, where, when the alternation of prayers and responses had given place to the agreeable monotony of the sermon, pater familias might be seen or heard sinking into a pleasant doze, from which he infallibly woke up at the sound of a concluding doxology»²⁵.

The kind of sermon to which the congregation listened amounted

« indeed, to little more than the expansion of the concise thesis that those who do wrong will find it the worst of them ; the nature of wrong-doing being exposed in special sermons against lying, back-biting, anger, slothfulness, and the like ; and well-doing being interpreted as honesty, truthfulness, charity, industry, and other common virtues, lying quite on the surface of life, and having little to do with deep spiritual doctrine »²⁶

The sermon was heard all the more with satisfaction as it had been heard twenty times before, for at the level of the intellect in the village it was repetition not novelty which had the stronger effect, and « phrases, like tunes, » were a long time « making themselves at home in the brain ». None of the old people held books and the young ladies and gentlemen used to joke about their « inferiors » in the congregation through the medium of telegraphic communications from the galleries to the aisles and back again.

Shepperton had a choir which was considered as one of distinction, and which people from the next parish came occasionally to hear. It was composed of a Carpenter, who had an amazing power of singing « counter », and two lesser musical stars, accompanied by a bassoon and two key-bugles.

²⁵
«_Mr GILFIL'S LOVE STORY »VolII chap 138

²⁶
«_Mr GILFIL'S LOVE STORY »VolI chap 138

2.5 The Night school

The quaint and eccentric, but kindly schoolmaster, Bartle Massey, kept Nightschool in those days, and no doubt George Eliot heard from her own father some of the descriptions which enabled her to write that charming account of the country nightschool which appears in *Adam Bede*

« Nay, Bill, nay, Bartle was saying in a kind tone, as he nodded to Adam, beging that again, and then perhaps it'll come to you what a, r, y, spells. It's the same lesson you read last week, you know »²⁷. Bill was a sturdy fellow, aged four-and-twenty, an excellent stone-sawyer, who could get as good wages as any man in the trade of his years ; but he found a reading lesson in words of one syllable a harder matter to deal with than the hardest stone he ever had to saw. The letters, he complained, were so uncommon alike, there was no tellin' em one from another' . Next to Bill was a Methodist brick-maker who, after spending thirty years of his life in perfect satisfaction with his ignorance, had lately got religion and along with it the desire to read the Bible. Next to him was another man nearly as old. It was touching to see these three big men, with the marks of their hard labour about them, anxiously bending over the worn books, and painfully making out,

« The gras sis green, » the sticks are dry, the corn is ripe'-a very hard lesson to pass to after columns of single words all alike except in the first letter. It was almost as if three rough animals were making humble efforts to learn how they might become human. And it touched the tenderest fibre in Bartle Massey's nature for such full-grown children as these were the only pupils for whom he had no severe epithets and no impatient tones »²⁸.

²⁷ Adam Bede, book II chap XXI p 226

²⁸ Adam BEDE, book II chap XXI p 228

2.6 The Workhouse

In most of the villages there was a workhouse, called the « college » at Shepperton. This was a huge, square, stone bulding a « dreadful place » where the parson had to go and read prayers once a week. There the poor people were taken in charge by the parish. In the workhouse there were many types of persons; there was a one-eyed woman with a scarred and seamy face, the most notorious rebel in the place, a young man afflicted with hydrocephalus who rolled his head from side to side and gazed at the point of his nose, then a tall fellow who had once been a footman in the best family of the parish ; he had been sent there because he had enunciated a contemptuous opinion of boiled beef.

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER THREE : THE DIALECT

George Eliot's use of dialect was artistic. She used just enough of it as it was necessary to give point and finish to the personages of rural life who live in her pages. In the opening chapter of *Adam Bede* one can see her skill, for the men spoke in the free talk of the workshop and they not only varied in the degree to which they used dialect expressions, but « there is a certain individuality in their way of employing it which marks them off from each other, as Axon pointed out »²⁹ .

Let be Addy, let be. Ben will be joking. Why, he's i' the right to laugh at me I canna help laughing at myself! I shan't loose him, till he promises to let the door alone', said Adam. Come, Ben, lad', said Seth, in a persuasive tone, 'don't let's have a quarrel about it. You know Adam Will have his way.

²⁹ Axon, W.E.A. *George Eliot's use of dialect*, (1880)

«You may's well try to turn a waggon in a narrow lane. Say you'll leave the door alone, and make an end on't. 'I binna frightened at Adam,' said Ben, but I donna mind sayin' as I'll let't alone at your askin', Seth. Come, that's wise of you, Ben', said Adam, laughing and relaxing his grasp »³⁰.

That George Eliot fully appreciated the value of dialect is shown in the speech of Mr Casson, the innkeeper of the «Donnithorne Arms».

« I'm not this countryman, you may tell by my tongue, sir. They're cour'ous talkers i' this country, sir; the gentry's had work to understand'em. I was brought up, among the gentry, sir, an' got the turn o' their tongue when I was a bye. Why, what do you think the. Folks here say for 'hevn't you' ? The gentry, you know, says, 'hevn't you'-well, the people about here says ' hanna yey. It's what they call the dileck as is spoke here about, sir. That's what I've heard squire Donnithorne say many a time ; it's the dileck, says he»³¹.

According to Guy Roselyn in 1878, Mr Casson was right. There were people in Derbyshire who said « hanna yey». The ignorance of Casson was certainly less due to self- complacency than to want of knowledge. He could notice a difference between his speech and his neighbours'. When squire Donnithorne told him that the country people spoke a dialect it gave him a key to the mystery of the difference he noticed in the speech. However, Casson could not differentiate his own style from that of the gentry, amongst whom he had been brought up.

³⁰ Adam Bede, book I, chap I, p 9-10

³¹ Adam Bede book I, chap I, p 17

«The departure from conventional English is in this case a note of Caste. The English gentry, as a body have a flavour of public school education and university culture, and yet their household dependants speak in another tongue. The drawing room and the servants' hall have each their own vocabulary and grammar, and a philological gulf is fixed between the two, though one might at least suppose that the yawning chasm would easily be bridged over with a little educational effort»³².

Without displaying too much of the dialect itself or using too many unfamiliar words, George Eliot gave the impression of provincial speech.

In old Joshua Rann she gave a vivid picture of a Midland character, although not a dozen of his words are unknown to the dictionary. Giving the news of Thias Bede's death to Mr Irwine he explained,

«An'Seth Bede's been to me this morning to say he wished me to tell your reverence as his brother Adam begged of you particular t' allow his father's grave to be dug by the white Thorn, because his mother's set her heart on it, on account of a dream as she had ; an' they'd ha' come theirselves to ask you, but they've so much to see after with the crowner, an' that an' their mother's took on so, an' wants 'em to make sure o' the spot for fear somebody else hould take it. An' if your reverence sees well and good, I'll send my boy to tell 'em as soon as I get home ; and that's why I make bold to trouble you wi ' it, his honour being present»³³.

The same method is used for the portrait of Mrs Poyser. This kind-hearted woman could not understand Dinah's vocation and tried to persuade her to get married.

³² Axon W.E.A. George Eliot's use of dialect. (1880)

³³ Adam BEDE, bookI chapV PP61-62

«You're like the birds o' th'air, and lives nobody knows how. I'd ha' been glad to behave to you like a mother's sister, if you'd come and live i' this country, where there's some shelter and victual for man and beast, and folks don't live on the naked hills, like poultryma-scratching on a gravel bank. And then you might get married to some decent man, and there'd be plenty ready to have you, if you'd only leave off that preaching, as is ten times worse than anything your aunt Judith ever did. And even if you'd marry Seth Bede, as is a poor wool-gathering Methodist, and's never like to have a penny beforehand, I know uncle'ud help you with a pig, and very like a cow, for he's allays been good-natur'd to my kin, for all they're poor, and made 'em welcome to the house; and 'ud do for you, I'll be bound, as much as ever he'd do for Hetty, though she's his own niece.»³⁴

George Eliot used some words that one cannot find in the dictionary, such as “**dawing**” for “**morning**” and “**overrun**” for “**run away**”. Guy Roselyn said that the dialect used in The Mill on the Floss was the one of Lincolnshire, though it contained typical expressions from Derbyshire such as appear in the other novels. She used the word “nesh” for nice in for example “she's as nesh and delicate as a paich –blosson” said Mr Bates of Tina in “Mr . Gilfil's Love Story”. In The Mill on the Floss Luke said to Maggie,

«Don't fret miss; they're nesh things them lop-eared rabbits, they'd happen ha' died, if they'd been fed». “Girl” is always “gell”. In “janet's repentance” Mrs. Jerome said “**Hush, hush, lizzie ! little gells must be seen and not heard.**” In The Mill on the Floss Mrs Tulliver told Magie, “**Take it upstairs, a good gell after she there's had omitted to put her bonnet away**».

³⁴ Adam_Bede, book I chap VI, p 77

George Eliot expounded her own theory as to the artistic use of dialect in a letter to professor Skeat :

«It must be borne in mind that my inclination to be as close as I could to the rendering of dialect, both in words and spelling was constantly checked by my artistic duty of being generally intelligible. »

«But for that check I should have given a stronger colour, to the dialogue in Adam Bede which is modelled on the talk of North Staffordshire and the neighbourhood part of Derbyshire. The spelling, being determined by my own ear alone, was necessarily a matter of anxiety, for it would be as possible to quarrel about it as about the spelling of oriental names. The district imagined as the scene of Silas Marner is in North Warwickshire, but here, and in all my other presentations of life except Adam Bede it has been my intention to give the general point of view rather than a close portraiture of the provincial speech as have heard it in the Midlands and the Mercian region. It is a just demand that art should keep clear of such specialities as would make it a puzzle for the larger part of its public; still one is not bound to respect the lazy obtuseness or snobbish ignorance of people who do not care to know more of their native tongue than the vocabulary of the drawing-room and the newspaper »³⁵.

Dinah Morris, the saintly Methodist, does not speak the dialect, although she was on the same social and educational plane as the dialect speaking characters of Adam Bede. The reason was, according to Axon, that Elizabeth Evans, the original of Dinah, left an autobiography full of religious fervour with only one word regarded as unfamiliar to conventional English.

³⁶ Cited by English Dialect Society Bibliographical list (1873)

There is another reason why George Eliot would have been justified in not putting dialect words into the mouth of Dinah; one may not notice accidents of speech and manner when in the presence of somebody who is possessed by a spirit of intense religious earnestness. One may not be conscious of this or that imperfect form of words, but hear only that higher language in which soul calls to soul.

A slow reader but someone who has to plough through stuff for work, I skim and flick uneasily, and by middle age had almost completely lost my teenage habit of unhurried reading for pleasure. But in the last decade I've started again in a gentle way to read fiction and biography for amusement alone. It was George Eliot who tempted me back. *Middlemarch* fair blew me away. *The Mill on the Floss* followed, then *Silas Marner*. And while in Africa last month I decided to tackle her first novel, *Adam Bede*.

Eliot's reputation has no need of my support. Suffice it to say she's the reason I've never attempted a novel: after George Eliot, what would be the point? The chord she strikes in my soul resonates on every page.

But years of reading-for-work have left me almost unable to tackle a printed page without a pencil in hand; I make marginal notes reflexively, for no particular purpose. So reading *Adam Bede* in aeroplanes, hotels and on the road — and struck most forcefully with the similarity of the rural dialect in which her characters speak, and that of the more homespun natives of the Derbyshire-Staffordshire borders where I live today, I began to note down similarities and differences between her rural English and that spoken in the same places some 150 years later.

I'm pretty sure they're the same places. 'Oakbourne' must be Ashbourne, of course; but, more tentatively, I think (from her physical descriptions) that

Wirksworth is probably her ‘Stoniton’ or ‘Snowfield’. Insofar as the main story is set anywhere, I think it lies not far off the A515 road from Ashbourne to Draycott-in-the-Clay ... but enough of my Derbyshire-centric theories. Here is my list of changes and similarities in language.

First, pronunciation: having as a local MP crowned unnumbered village beauty queens and smiled to hear the royals-for-a-day pronounce themselves ‘Appy and hhonoured’, it’s sweet to find that country people were making just the same mistake when Eliot wrote. ‘He’ll be comin’ of hage this ’ay ’arvest, sir ...’ says Mr Casson. But curious to note that ‘wonderful’ has entirely changed meaning (‘It’s wonderful she doesn’t love the lad’ means it’s strange); and ‘doubt’ has almost reversed its meaning: ‘... for I doubt Adam’s heart is so set on her’ means the speaker surmises that indeed it is. This usage has now been lost in Derbyshire, as has the use of ‘country’ as a noun to mean not ‘state’ or ‘nation’ but ‘region’ or ‘part of the country’ (‘I could leave this country and go to live at Snowfield’). So has ‘careful’, used to mean ‘worried about’ — as in ‘Do not be careful and troubled for me, Adam.’

Lost not only in Derbyshire but in British English, but living on in American English, is Eliot’s characters’ use of ‘sure’ to signal assent (‘Yes, sure. Let me know if you’re in any trouble’). Likewise the use of ‘axed’ to mean ‘asked’: dead in Derbyshire, this survives in West Indian English. Only in French and Spanish, though, does ‘direction’ still mean ‘address’ today: ‘... there might be a delay in the [letter’s] delivery, from his not knowing an exact direction’. And a really useful word Eliot uses in her own voice, ‘benignant’, seems to have been lost: a pity, because ‘benign’ is not quite the antonym of ‘malignant’ for which one sometimes searches.

I was fascinated by the weird and very common use of the word ‘nor’ in nothing like its present meaning but, it seems, to mean ‘than’: as in ‘for there’s more

workmanship nor material in [cabinet-making]' (meaning more value-added than raw material); or 'An' them French are a wicked sort o' folks, by what I can make out; what can you do better nor fight 'em?' Here the sentiment if not the phraseology seems to have survived!

Having for years railed against the sloppy modern and horribly Blairite (as I thought) use of 'do the right thing', I was depressed to encounter it falling from the estimable Adam Bede's own lips a century and a half ago: 'for I believe he's one o' those gentlemen as wishes to do the right thing, and to leave the world a bit better than he found it ...'; but pleased to find the modern-sounding 'in a minute' used in the same way: 'I'll send for him in a minute.' Likewise 'my old man' — meaning 'my husband'. Or this: 'They say the gaol chaplains are mostly the fag-end o' the clergy'!

And here's an oddity: 'Yes; a young woman started from our country to see Dinah, Friday was a fortnight.' Repeated use of this formulation suggests it meant 'a fortnight last Friday'. This too has died out in the north Midlands. But not the ubiquitous exclamation that Eliot renders 'eh' throughout, but which is almost certainly what we now render as the northerners' 'ee' — as in 'Ee by gum'. Eliot's notation causes me to realise that Derbyshire folk do not quite say 'ee' but in fact pronounce it rather closer to Eliot's 'eh'.

Surprised once to find that French doesn't seem to have an idiomatic way of saying 'look forward to' (*anticiper avec plaisir* is a bit plonking), I was interested to find that earlier 19th-century English doesn't seem to have that sense of the phrase either: 'This possibility heightened the anxiety with which he looked forward to Arthur's arrival.'

'Happen' — meaning 'perhaps' — remains very familiar in Derbyshire: 'He isna cliver enough for thee, happen; but he'd ha' been very good t' thee'. And almost as I write, those thees and thous are drawing their last breaths in isolated

pockets of Derbyshire in 2012. My generation may be among the last to hear them used as part of daily idiom. How I'd love to walk with Eliot around Ashbourne market this Saturday, and tread the backways with her to Cubley, to Yeldersley and to Norbury; and let her see and hear the persistence, and the change.

Like most novelists of her day, Eliot uses an omniscient point of view — that is, she views the action from any point she finds convenient, whether from the narrator's standpoint, as a disinterested spectator might see it, or as seen or felt by any character. This viewpoint has many advantages, and it is well suited to Eliot's strengths as a novelist. It allows her to show what any character thinks or feels and to show an act and its consequences with great comprehensiveness. Eliot uses this technique to increase the reader's sympathy and understanding of characters and of the situations they find themselves in. It also allows better control of the reader's awareness, which is the main source of the irony so important in Eliot's novels. The reader generally knows more than any single character (for example, about Godfrey's marriage and that Dunstan is the thief), and this superior knowledge lends ironic humor to the things the characters think and do in their ignorance. However, the reader is not told everything. The news of Dunstan's death is perhaps less of a surprise than to Godfrey, but it has never been a certainty. This allows the reader to feel something of the shock that Godfrey must feel at that moment.

The excellence of Eliot's characterization depends partly on this omniscience, but the most important factor is Eliot's deep understanding of human psychology. Her major characters are portrayed in great depth. Their reactions are varied: they are capable of surprising, yet they never seem arbitrary. On reflection, that which seemed surprising in them is seen to be consistent with their previous actions. They do not remain static, but their development builds on the past. A prime example of this is Silas. His belief in God goes through a

series of developments that are directly related to the things that have happened to him. Throughout all these changes, however, he clings to some support — his church, his work, his gold, or his daughter. His character displays both change and constancy, and this makes him recognizably the same person even as he changes. His character does not merely change — it develops.

Eliot's style lends her several aids to characterization. The omniscient point of view sometimes does this by giving the reaction of an unprejudiced observer, someone whom the reader will believe. The Miss Gunns find Nancy charming; and since they are neutral toward her at best, the reader is likely to accept their view.

Another important device of persuasion is metaphor, which is likely to go almost unperceived by the reader, but which have a cumulative effect. Throughout the opening chapters, Silas is compared to a spider in a number of ways, and this "insect-like existence" lends reality to the withering of his humanity.

A third device of characterization is speech. The characters do not all talk alike. Squire Cass' speech is rough but forceful. Priscilla sounds almost like a man, and from what we see of her it is evident that she is trying to fill a man's place. All of the characters except Godfrey speak a more or less rustic dialect, but it is more pronounced when Eliot is calling attention to the insularity of the community — for example, at the gathering at the Rainbow. Godfrey's speech is always somewhat more refined than his neighbors' or his father's, indicating perhaps that he is at least trying to hold himself above a life of "conviviality and condescension."

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FOUR: SOCIETY AND RELIGION

In the paternalistic and feudalistic society of Scenes of Clerical Life and Adam Bede there was nothing harsh and oppressive. Indeed, on a casual social level, a spirit of camaraderie prevailed. What allowed this camaraderie between classes was not any spirit of egalitarian democracy, but simply an unquestioning acceptance of the need of the justice of rigid class distinctions. In this best of all possible worlds there was no place for protest and no need of escape. Adam Bede is the personification of this state.

«Adam...was very susceptible to the influence of rank, and quite ready to give an extra amount of respect to everyone who had more advantages than himself, not being a philosopher, or a proletaire with democratic ideas, but simply the stout-limbed clever carpenter with a large fund of reverence in his nature, which inclined him to admit all established claims until he saw very clear grounds for questioning them.»³⁷

Adam was more practical than theoretical and had no pretention to set the world to rights:

³⁷ Adam Bede, book I chap XVI p 160

«He saw there was a great deal of damage done by building with ill-seasoned timber-by ignorant men in fine clothes making plans for outhouses and workshops and the like, without knowing the bearings of things-by slovenly joiners' work, and by hasty contracts that could never be fulfilled without ruining somebody; and he resolved, for his part, to set his face against such doings. On these points he would have maintained his opinion against the largest landed proprietor in Loamshire or Stonyshire either ; but he felt that beyond these it would be better for him to defer to people who were more knowing than himself. »³⁸

The society of these novels is simple in structure and apparently self-contained and impervious to change. A completely static world, however, is not possible, and the rural centre of Hayslope is disturbed not merely by the seduction of a pretty, light-hearted milkmaid by the handsome young squire but by the arrival of the world outside in the form of the mildly revolutionary force of Methodism. Methodism was more an alien curiosity than a conquering Gospel, and Dinah, the Methodist preacher, explained herself why country people did not welcome this new sect:

³⁸ Adam Bede, book I chap XVI p 160

«But I've noticed in these villages where the people lead a quiet life among the green pastures and the still waters, tilling the ground and tending the cattle, there's a strange deadness to the world, as different as can be from the great towns, like Leeds, where I once went to visit a holy woman who preaches there. It's wonderful how rich is the harvest of souls up those high-walled streets, where you seemed to walk as in a prison-yard, and the ear is deafened by the sounds of worldly toil. I think maybe it is because the promise is sweeter when this life is so dark and weary, and the soul gets more hungry when the body is ill at ease»³⁹..

Dinah transcended the religious movement of which she was the spokeswoman. As the novel progresses one thinks of her less as a Methodist and more as a practical saint divorced from sectarianism and as a warmly human embodiment of the essence of Christianity.

In the Mill on the Floss, the atmosphere is completely different ; there is a sense of struggle, a grasping for security in social status, a frank acceptance of material values and an occasional note of protest that characterised the increasingly important middle-class society of Victorian England.

³⁸ Adam Bede, book I chap XVI p 160

The benevolent paternalism of the society in the first novels is succeeded by a society where a certain measure of equality was within the grasp of all, provided one had a comfortable balance in the bank and the assurance of a good return on investments. With a few exceptions the citizens of St Ogg's independent farmers, merchants, professional men, subscribed to the Gospel of success, whose characteristic virtues were diligence, frugality and, if circumstances permitted, honesty. Since the characters in The Mill on the Floss had been partially released from a system of rigid class segregation, they were more sensitive to social status, more exposed to impersonal economic forces, than were those in the first novels. One is now in a world that was dominated by the pursuit of financial security, a world that was to become increasingly familiar in English fiction. The passion for money runs through the story like a repulsive disease ; the history of the Tulliver family is charted in a series of financial crises. Beneath the casual pleasantries of social life lay a bedrock of economic necessity. One may be surprised that no Marxist Critic has extracted the following passage from The Mill on the Floss for appropriate comment, for it is an analysis of English philistinism:

« In writing the history of unfashionable families, one is apt to fall into tone of emphasis which is very far from being the tone of good society, where principles and beliefs are not only of an extremely moderate kind, but are always presupposed, no subject being eligible but such as can be touched with a right and graceful irony. But, then, good society has its claret and its velvet carpets, its dinner engagements size week deep, its opera and its fairy ballrooms; rides off its ennui on thorough-bred horses, lounges at the club, has to keep clear of crinoline vertices, gets its science done by Faraday, and its religion by the superior clergy who are to be met in the besthouses ; how should it have time or need for belief and emphasis ? »⁴⁰ .

The expensive and ironic nature of society life is emphasized. It required:

«nothing less than a wide and arduous national life condensed in unfragrant deafening factories, cramping itself in mines, sweating at furnaces, grinding, hammering weaving under more or less oppression of carbonic acid- or else, spread over sheep-walks, and scattered in lonely houses and huts on the clayey or chalky cornlands, where the rainy days look dreary. This wide national life is not based entirely on emphasis- the emphasis of want, which urges it into all the activities necessary for the maintenance of good society and light irony ; it spends its heavy years often in a chill, uncarpeted fashion, amidst family discord unsoftened by long corridors. »⁴¹

⁴⁰ The Mill on the Floss, book V c hap III, p 290

⁴¹ The Mill on the Floss, book IV, chap III, pp 290-291

Much of Eliot's research for *Adam Bede* focused on Methodism, the evangelical form of Protestantism founded by John Wesley in the early 18th century. One of the central characters in *Adam Bede* is the young Methodist preacher Dinah Morris, who is as passionate in her service to God as she is selfless about bringing comfort to those in need or sorrow. As Eliot had long ago given up her own Christian faith, her idealised picture of Dinah might seem paradoxical. But Eliot had an abiding interest in religion's social function as well as deep respect for the church as an institution which had, at its best, given form and direction to people's highest moral aspirations. In a letter to her friend Francois d'Albert-Durade, written in 1859, she explained the place of religion in *Adam Bede* by saying that she 'no longer [has] any antagonism towards any faith in which human sorrow and human longing for purity have expressed themselves... I have the profoundest interest in the inward life of sincere Christians in all ages'.

She followed this, however, by saying that despite her interest in Christianity, her 'most rooted conviction is, that the immediate object and the proper sphere of all our highest emotions are our struggling fellow-men and this earthly existence'. In Eliot's humanistic view, ordinary people (not supernatural agents) shape the world for better or worse. Because of this, people's religious beliefs are much less important than — and may even impede — their capacity for sympathy. Thus her novels often feature clergyman of imperfect faith, like Mr Irwine in *Adam Bede*, or imperfect behaviour, like Mr Farebrother in *Middlemarch*, whose flaws do not unfit them for their sacred duties but rather highlight that theirs is a fundamentally human benevolence. Dinah may be devout, but the good she does is attributable to her, not to God. When the pretty dairy-maid Hetty Sorrel — seduced and then abandoned by the local squire, Arthur Donnithorne — is imprisoned for infanticide, Dinah's compassion, rather than divine intervention, brings about the small miracle of Hetty's repentance. Some readers find it disappointing that, at the end of the novel, Dinah (who until

then has been determinedly single, dedicating herself to her public work) gives up preaching and retreats into domesticity as Adam's wife. However, this step not only reflects historical developments in Methodism, but also confirms Eliot's commitment to a secular morality: the apparatus of the church and the authority of the preacher yield to a recognition of our own personal accountability for what she calls in *Middlemarch* 'the growing good of the world.

In Silas Marner George Eliot doesn't specifically state that religion is bad or dangerous nor does she say that one shouldn't be religious. Instead, she presents certain aspects of religion that she believes are prone to creating uncertainty and confusion. She then allows readers to make up their own mind. One of her major concerns is the way people believe in God; she doesn't deny the existence of God, but she says that even if he does exist, he does not interfere, so focusing on signs and symbols from God is dangerous because it detracts from the human aspects of life. Silas Marner states that how one treats others is more important than the religion one follows or if one believes in God.

Eliot directly questions the purpose of organized religion, but is less emphatic in questioning God, and tends to not refer directly to God (both literally and figuratively as the word "God" appears twenty-four times throughout the entire book, and most of these are general expressions.) Thus, the book is an impartial observer of the way religion is practiced and the way God is evidenced in the popular beliefs rather than a direct attack on the validity of religion and the concept of God. Eliot is very careful to never attack the existence of God, so even when Silas feels betrayed, he keeps his faith in the existence of God, but he believes that "there is no just God that governs the earth righteously, but a God of lies." Silas gains a "shaken trust in God" which quickly assures that the existence of God is never questioned by Marner or any other inhabitant of Raveloe or Lantern Yard. This allows Eliot to focus on the way characters

believe in God through the practice of religion rather than the deeper theological issue of the existence of God.

Eliot observes that even within Christianity the interpretations of God are very different. She states that Marner “was quite unable, by means of anything he heard or saw, to identify the Raveloe religion with his old faith,” but even within Raveloe, Eliot illustrates different modes of belief: one a God of precise laws and moral absolutes and another impersonal, parental God. These beliefs coexist within Raveloe because the focus of the community is not on how religious one is — “to go to church every Sunday in the calendar would have shown a greedy desire to stand well with Heaven” — but on how one behaves.

Within Raveloe, the popular interpretation of God is of the impersonal yet parental God — an interpretation very different from Lantern Yard’s belief in an active God. Alongside their belief in a Christian God, Raveloe’s beliefs incorporate some elements of paganism such as the belief in and desire for charms. Even with a faith in God, these people want a little extra assurance that things will be better for them, and they are willing to look away from Christianity and God to find it. Eliot uses these folk beliefs to demonstrate that the inhabitants of Raveloe are not entirely convinced of God’s manipulation of events and they do not share Lantern Yard’s belief that God is active in their lives, so even though the inhabitants of Raveloe trust in charms, they would never have drawn lots to determine a person’s guilt because Raveloe’s God as an almost deistic god who creates and judges, but one who is not actively involved in day-to-day matters. God to Dolly is not entirely Deistic because she allows that he may have guided Marner to Raveloe to care for Eppie, but she and the other lay members of the community are not concerned with God or religion beyond a secondary experience.

Eliot seems to suggest that this view is the correct view of religion because she warns against placing too much faith in God as do the inhabitants of Lantern

Yard. She argues that once one places too much faith in God, God is in a position to be blamed for any negative event in one's life rather than focusing on human causes. Silas Marner was betrayed by his friend; however, the lots and God decided for the community that he was guilty, so Marner believes he was betrayed by both his God and his friend because he was assured that God would reveal the truth (he even declares "God will clear me" three times.) Had the lots turned the other way, his faith would have remained, but Marner is placed in a position where his faith in God is destroyed because of the Lantern Yard belief that God is responsible for all actions. Marner eventually regains his faith in God saying to Eppie that he believes that "God was good to me" in delivering her to him, but he never fully regains a personal belief and faith in God. God remains on the outside of his life because Marner can never fully trust in him again.

Eliot warns that focusing too much on God can retard a person's life and places one at a disadvantage in this world. The negative effects of this are demonstrated by the inhabitants of Lantern Yard's quick belief in Marner's guilt and their inability to see that William Dane had manipulated events. The negative traits of this are contrasted with the positive aspects of life in Raveloe where the community gathers at the Rainbow and interacts with each other rather than just with God.

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER FIVE : REALITY AND FICTION

Having seen the individual characters which distinguish the rural novels of George Eliot, and their way of living, one is left with a strong impression that according to her the people of these villages and small towns must have formed, on the whole, very happy and contented little societies. It is remarkable that in none of these stories dealing exclusively with village life, or with the life of towns scarcely to be distinguished from villages, do we find a single trace of any social discontent or jealousy or misery. No complaints of those being ‘**hard times**’ for the poor, no serious abuse by grasping or unjust landlord, no imputation upon game or the game laws are thought to be necessary to the truthfulness of a picture which is to reflect the rural life and manners of the England of that time. Nobody can suppose that George Eliot meant to be otherwise than impartial; the exact truth without embellishment or simplification was the target she set herself in Adam Bede. « Certainly I could, if i help the highest vocation of the novelist to represent things as they never have been and never will be. »⁴².

This was her reply to a possible criticism that she could have put more « **beautiful things** » into the mouth of the Rector or Broxton ;
« then, of course, I might refashion life and character entirely after my own liking ; I might select the most unexceptional type of clergyman, and put my own admirable opinions into his mouth on all occasion. But it happens, on the contrary, that my strongest effort is to avoid any such arbitrary picture, and to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless

⁴² Adam Bede, book II. chap XVII P 171

«defective ; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused, but I feel as much bound to tell you precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath. »⁴³.

It is certain that she had at hand all the necessary materials for forming a correct judgement. Her ability to form one will hardly be called in question. One need only recall the illuminating passage from The Mill on the Floss already quoted in which she showed a great keenness of perception of the true situation of the lower classes. (2) Thus, we have in her all the elements of a competent witness; knowledge of the circumstances, power of discrimination and a desire to tell nothing but the truth. The impression she gave is not brought about by any dancy pictures or rural innocence or simplicity. On the contrary, vice and crime, meanness and folly figure freely in her pages. The peculiarity is that do not seem to spoil the whole picture or to disturb the general senerity of the world in which the people dwelled. The seduction of Hetty Sorrel apparently left the popularity of the Donnithornes unharmed, and the old gentleman's attempt to swindle Mr Poyser out of the best part of the farm gave rise to no abuse of « landlordism ». The farmers at Knebley grumbled much at Squire Oldimport, but his conduct produced no violent reaction or real ill-will. One can find no indication whatever that the agricultural labourer was either ill-used or discontented. In short, these village scenes appear intended to represent the state of society which had been relieved long previously from all the harsher elements of feudalism, while still preserving in mild and mellow vigour its more generous and kindly qualities.

43 ADAM Bede, book II. chap XVII.. p 171

Reference has already been made to old Mr Donnithorne and his quarrel with the Poyser, but no impression is thereby created of the general badness under which such things were possible ; the intercourse between high and low, between the farmers and their labourers, is of the most genial and amiable character, and even the picture of Mr Poyser's harvest home is plausible, master and men sitting together with an appetite created by labour in which all had participated. It is necessary to remember that many of these scenes are drawn after what is called « the **bad times** » had begun. They do not lie back in the golden past in the days of Cobett's youth, the time in which one is told, the English labourer was better off than he had been either previously or subsequently. They belonged to the period when prices had risen almost to famine point, when nothing like any commensurate increase had taken place in wages, and when the enclosure of waste land commons had deprived the poor man of the resources by which he had formerly supplemented his income.

In 1782, Cowper anticipating Crabbe wrote that nowhere but in faint Arcadian scenes did the poor taste happiness or know what pleasure meant. In Crabbe's The village the countryman's life was a sad one harassed by intolerable and hopeless poverty. Of what avail, in the midst of all the sadness described by Crabbe, were the « few **hours of sweet repose and the gleams of transient mirth which Sunday brings** ». The pleasures of the villagers were too short. Some, perhaps, went on the Green, between « **the squire 's tall gate** » and the « **church way walk** » ; others « **a little tribe of friends** », talked of the sermon which they loudly praised and there were « **the rural beaux, their best attire put on to win their nymphs** ». A group of farmers were discontented; « **Much in their mind they murmur a lament, that one fair day should be so idly spent** ».

It seemed that in the country there was no security for property and no tranquillity for its inhabitants. The labourer, poverty-stricken, already,

completed his ruin by vices. Sunday had not come to an end before quarrels broke out on the Green ; they arose in the « **noisy** » inn. Immorality was the same in the country as in the capital. Several « **drawn from the plough** » had become criminals.

When a man was out of work he applied to the overseer who sent him from house to house to seek employment. The employer was obliged to give him his food and little money; the parish added the rest. The poor were very bitter; thrust on one side by the younger generation and unable to help others without any help for themselves, why should they have lived if they have to end their days in the « **house that holds the parish poor** »?

The agricultural labourers and not the farmers felt the effect of a bad harvest and of more burdensome wars. In 1782 corn was dearer than in the preceding fifty years. The American war of Independence had raised the price of all the necessities of life, and wages were still the same. Noblemen who wished to round off their properties, business men, or men in quest of the political influence attaching to the possession of land, drove the poor out of the cottages which they occupied on the still free lands, deprived them of their gardens and often even of their work. In many places cattle-breeding was a substitute for corn-growing, and a few sheperds would replace a great number of reapers. The agricultural labourer, seeing his ressources diminished and his expenditure increased, despaired of the future and sank into apathy.

As in George Eliot's fiction, so also in reality; the farmers enjoyed all the prestige given by wealth and success, without being landowners. Unfortunately their prosperity was not shared by their labourers, whose conditions had not improved for a long time. Growing prouder with their increase in wealth, the masters held more and more aloof from the men. The high price of provisions, so profitable to the farmers, combined with the stationary condition of wages, had reduced the labourer to abject poverty.

As these circumstances were not revealed by George Eliot, English rural life as she painted it still retained some of the signs of Arcadia. Its form had not yet lost all its original sweetness. That the gentry and their tenantry should have been living on happy difference of rank and birth was more willingly recognized at that time than later on and the farmer, sustained by high prices, had no intention to rise out of his own had not entirely disappeared from the more sequestered parts of English and continued to keep the relations between the two classes for a footing satisfactory to both. It is a little surprising that one can find no mention of the existence of any distress among the peasantry in George Eliot's pages. The four novels that have been chosen for study cover the whole period within which the condition of the labourer is commonly thought to have sunk much from one of moderate comfort to one of comparative indigence; yet in these books, the common people seem to have been as contented and comfortable as they would have been at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Well before 1825, Cobett had been declaiming about the degradation of the peasants, and there is other historical evidence to show that his statement had foundation.

Perhaps the peasantry of the Midland counties enjoyed a better life and was protected from the ills which weighed upon their contemporaries in the northern and south-western counties. However, Cobert extended his « rural **Rides and Drives** » into Leicestershire and Staffordshire, and his description of the labouring poor in a leicestershire village exceeded anything he wrote on the

South. Nottinghamshire was the scene of the Luddite riots, and though, the Luddites were operative, one knows that it was the general distress of the country, which contributed to deprive the people of work. In The village, Crabbe's cottage interiors indicate a condition of life among the peasantry of Suffolk which is irreconcilable with the Kesters Bales and Tims whom one can find in Adam Bede.

However, one must repeat that George Eliot Claimed for herself the same kind of credit as Crabbe did for himself, the credit for having reproduced common life with the accuracy of a « **Dutch painter** ». It is difficult to believe either that George Eliot could have been entirely ignorant of the squalid penury, which, according to her contemporary writers, was the lot of the ordinary English peasant during the period in question, or that, not being ignorant of it, she should never have made the slightest allusion to it. This is all the more surprising when one considers that she wanted to be realistic and precise all the time. For instance where she used dialect, she described and imitated only that with which she was familiar. She understood the language of North Staffordshire and Derbyshire and used it in Adam Bede, but she was not familiar with Scottish and she is very careful to avoid it, « **I think** », she wrote of Mr Craig the gardener,

« it was his pedigree only that had the advantage of being scotch , and not his bringing up; for except that he had a stronger burr in his accent, his speech differed little from that of the Loamshire people about him. »⁴⁴

If George Eliot seems to have left the poor condition of the labourer aside, it was perhaps because her main interest was in the observation of the village people themselves.

⁴⁴ Adam Bede: book II chap XVIII. p 199

Her humour is perhaps the only other quality which can be compared with her power of observation for the fullness of its development. Her heroes and heroines were not merely creatures of the imagination, but had a real existence in the heart of England. She took her characters from that very large majority of her fellow countrymen of insignificant stamp described in the fifth chapter of « **Amos Barton** ».

« At least eighty out of a hundred of your adult male fellow-Britons returned in the last census are neither extraordinarily wicked, nor extraordinarily wise ; their eyes are neither deep and liquid with sentiment nor sparkling with suppressed witticism ; they have probably had no hairbreadth escapes or thrilling adventures »⁴⁵.

Throughout she emphasized the ordinariness of such characters. « Their brains are certainly not pregnant with genius and their passions have not manifested themselves at all the fashion of a volcano.

They are simply men of complexions more or less muddy, whose conversation is more or less bold and disjointed. Yet these commonplace people many of them bear a conscience, and have felt the sublime prompting to do the painful right; they have their unspoken sorrows, and their sacred joys; their hearts have perhaps gone out towards their first born, and they have mourned over the irreclaimable dead.

« Nay, is there not a pathos in their very insignificance in our comparison of their dim and narrow existence with the glorious possibilities of that human nature which they share »?⁴⁶.

⁴⁵ AMOS BARTON : chap V. p 66

⁴⁶ Amos BARTON chap V, p 67

In *Adam Bede* she reminded us that our fellow mortals must be accepted as they are; we could neither straighten their nose nor brighten their wit nor rectify their dispositions. As she said in *Adam Bede* that it was these people among whom our life was passed and that it was needful that we should tolerate them with pity and love ; it was these more or less ugly, stupid, inconsistent people whose movement of goodness we should be able to admire, for whom we should cherish all possible hopes and show all possible patience. It was for the rare and precious quality of truthfulness that she delighted in many Dutch paintings which lofty-minded people despised. She wanted to tell her simple story without trying to make things seem better than they were dreading nothing more than falsity. She said that she found a source of delicious sympathy in the faithful pictures of a monotonous, homely existence which had been the fate of so many among her fellow mortals, rather than a life of pom or absolute indigence, of tragic suffering or world stirring actions. Her interest was not in prophets or heroic warriors, but in an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner while the nooday light, softened perhaps by a screen of leaves fell on her mob-cap and just touched the rim of her spinning-wheel, her stone jug and all those cheap and common things which were the necessities of life. Or her interest was in a village wedding, where an awkward bridegroom opened the dance with a high-shouldered, broad-faced bride. She wrote:

« 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 for my erevyday fellow-men, 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. »⁴⁷.

⁴⁷
Adam Bede, bookII chap XVII. pp 174-175

In *Adam Bede*, George Eliot sets out her commitment to realism as a literary genre – a commitment she would continue to develop over the course of her career. Dr Rohan Maitzen explains how detailed research and Eliot’s own experience fed into the realist project, enabling her to express her beliefs about religion, sympathy and understanding.

Adam Bede (1859) was George Eliot’s first full-length novel but not her first fiction: that distinction goes to *Scenes of Clerical Life*, a collection of three novellas published in 1856. By that time Eliot had established herself as an editor, essayist, and reviewer, but though, as she later reflected, ‘it had always been a vague dream of mine that some time or other I might write a novel,’ she feared she was ‘deficient in dramatic power’. *Adam Bede*’s gripping story of seduction and infanticide proved Eliot had no need to worry – and while *Scenes of Clerical Life* had been well-received, it was *Adam Bede* that became a bestseller.

Adam Bede is an early example of the realism for which George Eliot became celebrated. The exact meaning of ‘realism’, however, has been much debated. In an essay on the artist and critic John Ruskin (1819-1900), Eliot herself defined realism as ‘the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature.’ To her, realism did not mean a naïve belief that writing can transparently represent the real world, but the conviction that writing should not falsify or romanticise it. Eliot regarded realism as a moral choice, as well as an aesthetic one; as she explains in her essay ‘The Natural History of German Life’ (1856), ‘Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.’ In her essay ‘The Natural History of German Life’, George Eliot suggests that the purpose of literature is to expand readers’ moral sympathies and imaginations.

In Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, Eliot pauses her unfolding story to expand on this principle, urging artists not to focus only on ‘divine beauty of form’ but to

‘give the loving pains of a life to the faithful representing of commonplace things’, so as to help us all learn to accept and sympathise with our ‘fellow-mortals, every one . . . as they are.’ Because for Eliot realism is a philosophy rather than a literary style, it is compatible with this kind of metafictional interruption. Indeed, by prompting us to think about how a novel is written, rather than immersing us in its illusions, narrative intrusions can enhance the realistic effect. *Adam Bede* opens with just such a moment: ‘With this drop of ink at the end of my pen,’ says the narrator, I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799. In Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, titled ‘In which the story pauses a little’, Eliot writes that her ‘strongest effort is... to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind’.

The specificity of that date points to another important dimension of Eliot’s realism: giving a ‘faithful account’ includes paying scrupulous attention to contexts and settings, especially historical backgrounds. Though for some aspects of *Adam Bede*, such as the landscape and local dialects of the Midlands, Eliot could draw on her own childhood memories, she also (as scholar Joseph Wiesenfarth has documented) took research notes on late 18th-century fashion, on details of the weather in 1799 (‘August seems to have been a rainy month’), and on national and international events, including the publication of Wordsworth’s first volume of poetry, the building of Joseph Arkwright’s spinning mill and the death of George Washington.^[2] She immersed herself in the culture and practices of rural life, reading agricultural texts such as *The Book of the Farm* and *A Six Month Tour through the North of England*, as well as issues of the *Gentleman’s Magazine* from 1799 to 1801. The January 1799 issue of this publication contained a description of the 21st birthday celebrations of the Duke of Rutland, which Eliot used as the inspiration for Arthur Donnithorne’s Birthday Feast. From *A Six Month Tour*, she copied into her

notebook that ‘all [in the north of England] drink tea’ – and she used that detail in *Adam Bede*. Eliot’s research had a greater purpose than simple accuracy: she believed that only through a rich understanding of their actual conditions (including the history that led to them) could people work effectively — realistically — for social or political change.

The story's plot follows four characters' rural lives in the fictional community of Hayslope—a rural, pastoral and close-knit community in 1799. The novel revolves around a love "rectangle" among beautiful but self-absorbed [Hetty Sorrel](#); Captain [Arthur Donnithorne](#), the young squire who seduces her; [Adam Bede](#), her unacknowledged suitor; and Dinah Morris, Hetty's cousin, a fervent, virtuous and beautiful [Methodist](#) lay preacher. (The real village where Adam Bede was set is [Ellastone](#) on the Staffordshire / Derbyshire border, a few miles from Uttoxeter and Ashbourne, and near to Alton Towers. Eliot's father lived in the village as a carpenter in a substantial house now known as Adam Bede's Cottage).

Adam is a local carpenter much admired for his integrity and intelligence, in love with Hetty. She is attracted to Arthur, the charming local squire's grandson and heir, and falls in love with him. When Adam interrupts a tryst between them, Adam and Arthur fight. Arthur agrees to give up Hetty and leaves Hayslope to return to his militia. After he leaves, Hetty Sorrel agrees to marry Adam but shortly before their marriage, discovers she is pregnant. In desperation, she leaves in search of Arthur but she cannot find him. Unwilling to return to the village on account of the shame and ostracism she would have to endure, she delivers her baby with the assistance of a friendly woman she encounters. She subsequently abandons the infant in a field but not being able to bear the child's cries, she tries to retrieve the infant. However, she is too late, the infant having already died of exposure.

Hetty is caught and tried for child murder. She is found guilty and sentenced to hang. Dinah enters the prison and pledges to stay with Hetty until the end. Her compassion brings about Hetty's contrite confession. When Arthur Donnithorne, on leave from the militia for his grandfather's funeral, hears of her impending execution, he races to the court and has the sentence commuted to [transportation](#).

Ultimately, Adam and Dinah, who gradually become aware of their mutual love, marry and live peacefully with his family.

The importance of [Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*](#) to the way *Adam Bede* is written has often been noted. Like its model, *Adam Bede* features minutely detailed empirical and psychological observations about illiterate "common folk" who, because of their greater proximity to nature than to culture, are taken as emblematic of human nature in its more pure form. So behind its humble appearance this is a novel of great ambition.^[3]

[Genre painting](#) and the novel arose together as middle-class art forms and retained close connections until the end of the nineteenth century. According to Richard Stang, it was a French treatise of 1846 on Dutch and Flemish painting that first popularised the application of the term realism to fiction. Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England*, p. 149, refers to Arsène Houssaye, *Histoire de la peinture flamande et hollandaise* (1846; 2d ed., Paris: Jules Hetzel, 1866). Houssaye speaks (p, 179) of Terborch's "gout tout hollandais, empreint de poesie realiste", and argues that "l'oeuvre de Gerard de Terburg est le roman intime de la Hollande, comme l'oeuvre de Gerard Dow en est le roman familiere."^[4] and certainly it is with Dutch, [Flemish](#), and English genre painting that George Eliot's realism is most often compared. She herself invites the comparison in chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, and [Mario Praz](#) applies it to all her works in his study of *The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction*.

Immediately recognised as a significant literary work, *Adam Bede* has enjoyed a largely positive critical reputation since its publication. An anonymous review in [The Athenaeum](#) in 1859 praised it as a "novel of the highest class," and [The Times](#) called it "a first-rate novel." An anonymous review by [Anne Mozley](#) was the first to identify that the novel was probably written by a woman.^[6] Contemporary reviewers, often influenced by nostalgia for the earlier period represented in *Bede*, enthusiastically praised Eliot's characterisations and realistic representations of rural life. [Charles Dickens](#) wrote: "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." (Hunter, S. 122) In fact, in early criticism, the tragedy of infanticide has often been overlooked in favour of the peaceful idyllic world and familiar personalities Eliot recreated.^[7] Other critics have been less generous. [Henry James](#), among others, resented the narrator's interventions. In particular, Chapter 15 has fared poorly among scholars because of the author's/narrator's moralising and meddling in an attempt to sway readers' opinions of Hetty and Dinah. Other critics have objected to the resolution of the story. In the final moments, Hetty, about to be executed for infanticide, is saved by her seducer, Arthur Donnithorne. Critics have argued that this *deus ex machina* ending negates the moral lessons learned by the main characters. Without the eleventh hour reprieve, the suffering of Adam, Arthur, and Hetty would have been more realistically concluded. In addition, some scholars feel that Adam's marriage to Dinah is another instance of the author's/narrator's intrusiveness. These instances have been found to directly conflict with the otherwise realistic images and events of the novel.

CONCLUSION

Although George Eliot did not speak of the bad conditions of the labourers and the indignation excited among them by the poor law, people like Keble who came some years later reported that they remembered her being accurate in her description of countryside life. Her role was to be that of recorder and reflective observer of man in his society. She avoided the quality of the documentary because her material was bound to her by her actual experience or personal association and was transformed by memory and reflection. She was not simply stating facts that might be taken from a government report or recording the actual impression of the person who was there. She gave her version of a way of life which, although it was rooted in the past, continued to exist powerfully in George Eliot's imagination.

In the novels studied one obtains a picture of rural England as it was before the days of the agitators, the reformers and the philosophers, the England of old leisure undiseased by hypothesis, the England when this old leisure lived chiefly in the country among pleasant seats and homesteads, and where one could saunter by the fruit-tree wall and scent the apricots warmed by the morning sunshine. This is a picture of old England when people knew nothing of week-day services and thought none the worse of the Sunday sermon if it allowed them to sleep from the text to the blessing ; when people liked the afternoon service better because the prayers were shorter, and they were not ashamed to say so. This is a picture of old England when people were not made squeamish by doubts and psalms and lofty aspirations, when they fingered the guineas in their pockets, ate good dinner and slept the sleep of the irresponsible. One obtains a picture of that jolly old England which is characteristic of its time, and in which one can recognize the virtues and idiosyncrasies of the men of that generation.

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