An Idyll of Saints and Sinners

Larry Bronson
Western Michigan University
With so many new books coming out all the time, one may wonder why I chose George Eliot's *Adam Bede* for the subject of a review when I could have picked any one of a dozen best-sellers. The reason I have chosen a book which was published almost a hundred years ago for the subject of my review is that I do not feel too much can be said about a book such as *Adam Bede*.

*Adam Bede* is as a refreshing change from some of our twentieth century works as a swim is from mowing the lawn on a hot summer day. In this novel, there is no sex, no slaughter, no glamor, no real villain or hero—in short, *Adam Bede* contains nothing that would be likely to earn it a best-seller rating today. What then are the reasons that this book has endured for almost a hundred years?

George Eliot's careful delineation of both her major and her minor characters accounts for a great deal of this novel's persistent popularity. There is first of all, of course, *Adam Bede*, who is ostensibly the main character in the novel. Adam, strong of body, intelligent, but perhaps too guileless for his own good. Ranking almost equally in importance with Adam is *Seth Bede*, Adam's brother. George Eliot makes it clear that the Bede brothers have a strong family resemblance, but she points out that Adam's dark complexion, as opposed to the fair complexion of Seth, is carried out into their temperaments as well. She sums up the difference between the two brothers in one succinct sentence: "The idle tramps always felt sure they could get a copper from Seth; they scarcely ever spoke to Adam."

Another masculine character who figures prominently in the action of *Adam Bede* is *Arthur Donnithorne*, the heir-apparent to the land surrounding the market town of Hayslope, the community where the principal characters of this book live. Arthur is well-meaning and dreams of all the things he will do for the tenants when he come into ownership of the land. However, Arthur has one tragic weakness; he lacks self-discipline of mind. He is unable to stop from becoming too deeply involved in an illicit affair with one of his tenants.

The *Reverend Irwine*, rector for the community of Hayslope is one of George Eliot's most appealing male characters. His charitable disposition is shown by his exemplary conduct toward his mother and invalid sisters. He is depicted as being a paragon of virtue with an easy-going tolerance for the Methodist movement which is just beginning to gain prestige in England at the time *Adam Bede* takes place. In short, the rector is conscientious, lives well, and, as the author says, would do almost anything to help someone else, but would probably not give his body to the fires of the martyr's stake.
While her masculine characterizations are admirably executed, George Eliot's concept of her female characters is equally clear. The action revolves around two principal young women: Dinah Morris and Hetty Sorrel.

Dinah Morris is one of the leaders of the new Methodist movement just beginning in Hayslope. She is almost a saint on earth, always ready to pray or to comfort someone who is in trouble. She is forever running off to some distant community to help the "brothers and sisters" form a new group of Methodists.

It is, however, just this saintly atmosphere which is the flaw in Dinah's characterization. In attempting to emphasize the good qualities of Dinah, the author has overdrawn her to such an extent that the character of Dinah does not live in our imaginations. She is a series of shadows which pass through our minds, leaving a definite set of impressions, but failing to stand out from the mass as a separate entity. She comes, does her work, and then goes, and once gone, disappears into a filmy haze of reminiscence.

In direct contrast to the saintly character of Dinah is Hetty Sorrel. Hetty is a pretty, self-willed person who cares for nobody but herself. She is beloved by Adam Bede, but only cares for him enough to keep him interested in her. The attentions of Arthur Donnithorne are a different matter. He shows an interest in Hetty and the grim web which brings about the tragedy in this novel is woven.

Hetty is very much flattered by Arthur's attention, and due to his vacillation and her rash impulses, the affair goes too far, and Hetty, finally realizing her condition, breaks off her engagement to Adam and goes in search of Arthur's regiment. She thinks all that is necessary is to find Arthur and then everything will come out with a storybook ending. Unfortunately for her, she fails to find Arthur, and desperate, she abandons her new-born child and is brought to trial accused of murdering it.

Helping to hold the story together are the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Poyser, uncle and aunt to Dinah and Hetty. Martin Poyser is a typical English farmer, shrewd, cautious, and bound by tradition to the land which his forefathers' worked before him. Mrs. Poyser is a good-hearted woman who will do anything for anybody, provided she doesn't kill them with her tongue first.

In addition to the clarity of image which is exhibited by all of the characters, except Dinah, is the careful prose style in which this book is written. In fact, careful is almost a key word to apply to a commentary on George Eliot's style. She uses words which say exactly what she wants them to say, without using a word too many or a word too few. Her humor is the quiet, chuckling kind; it never breaks out into a guffaw. The scene in which Mrs. Poyser tells the old squire just what she thinks of him is excellently executed and the book is almost worth reading just for that scene alone.

The author carries this careful concept one step farther than just employing it for humor. The passages describing poor Hetty's plight, a situation which could very easily become sordid under a different
treatment, are executed with skill, good taste, and restraint, and the pathos of the situation is pointed up rather than the sordidness of it. The author’s account of the trial and the events which happened after it are handled with sympathy and a feeling for the tragedy of the events.

As any writer must do in order to be great, George Eliot writes with a compassion for human nature. Her compassion, however, exceeds that of a merely sympathetic treatment of Hetty’s trial. She shows understanding and tolerance for the follies of all the characters in *Adam Bede*. She does not, as Jane Austen does, satirize human follies and failures. These human failings seemed humorous to Jane Austen and she expressed her amusement best by writings novels which exaggerated and ridiculed these follies. But to George Eliot, these follies are something to weep over, rather than something to laugh about. She finds nothing amusing about the misfortunes of any of the characters. Even old Lisbeth Bede, mother to Adam and Seth, is treated with a human understanding of an old woman’s querulousness.

However important her knowledge of human insight is to the success of *Adam Bede*, the author writes as well of pastoral scenes as she does of human problems. She describes the geographical features of Hayslope with a spontaneity which comes only from having lived in a rural community. It is quite obvious that George Eliot enjoyed being out-of-doors, else she would never have been able to describe the rural scenes in *Adam Bede* with such forceful clarity.

Keeping all the concepts of George Eliot’s genius in mind, it will be no surprise to anyone to learn that *Adam Bede* has maintained a high place among critics of discrimination for almost a century.

**LOVE AT U.S. 12**

We groped for love that cold night at the edge of murky ribboned reality with the tired snow skipping and skidding a slow and silent dance of tumbling pirouettes across and against our glassed whisper world. Then the long gray puppets of searching white and glaring eyes of red that flickered on and flashed off as the clanging of their machined melodies of whining notes pierced and punctured our warm mirage of flake danced love . . . and echoed in rude reality.

Peter Green