



## THE EMERGENCE OF BOURGEOIS FAMILY AND SEXUAL OPPRESSION IN GEORGE ELIOT'S ADAM BEDE

GEORGE ELİOT'UN ADAM BEDE ADLI ESERİNDE BURJUVA AİLE YAPISININ VE CİNSEL BASKININ ORTAYA ÇIKIŞI

### Aslı DEĞİRMENCI

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#### Abstract

This study examines George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) as a work depicting the agricultural working class of a rural community sixty years before its publication, at the end of the eighteenth century, and also argues that *Adam Bede* not only depicts a rural working class community in their daily existence but also offers an insight into the formation of the emerging class of the bourgeoisie. The private and public institutions, namely family and the church, also play a vital role in determining the gender and class boundaries, and maintaining the social order, which we can see clearly at the end of the novel. By giving specific examples from the novel, this paper depicts how with the slow and steadfast approach of industrialization, the values of capitalism as well as the bourgeois class enter the community of Hayslope. By contrasting the communal household of Poyser with the individual characters, Adam and Dinah and the family they start together, the ending of the novel is interpreted in the light of Frederick Engels' *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) in which he states that the communistic household (a model which the Poyser family in the novel exemplifies) as opposed to the later patriarchal family, did not have gendered labor, and the family labor had a public character and a concern for society.

#### Öz

Bu çalışma, George Eliot'un 1859 yılında yayımlanmış olan *Adam Bede* adlı romanını yayımlanmasından altmış sene önce onsekizinci yüzyıl sonlarında İngiltere'deki kırsal bir topluluğu (Hayslope) ve tarımsal işçi sınıfını resmeden bir eser olarak incelemektedir. Aynı zamanda bu romanın sadece işçi sınıfını günlük uğraşları içinde resmetmekle kalmayıp cinsiyetin ve toplumsal rollerin yeni yeni ortaya çıkan burjuvazi sınıfında nasıl kullanıldığını da çok iyi gözlemlediği düşünülmektedir. Romandaki özel ve kamusal kurumların, yani aile ve kilisenin de toplumsal cinsiyet ve sınıfsal sınırları belirlemekte ve toplumsal düzeni sağlamaktaki etkisini, özellikle romanın sonunda açıkça görülmektedir. Bu çalışma, sanayileşmenin yavaş ve emin adımlarıyla gelmesinin yanı sıra kapitalizmin ve aynı zamanda burjuva sınıfının Hayslope halkını nasıl etkilediğini romandan belirli örnekler vererek göstermektedir. Daha müşterek bir yapısı olan Poyser ailesini, ana karakterler Adam ve Dinah ve onların kurduğu çekirdek aile yapısı ile karşılaştırarak, romanın sonu Frederick Engels'in *Ailenin, Özel Mülkiyetin ve Devletin Kökeni* adlı eserindeki açıklamalarla birlikte yorumlanmaktadır.

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Born as Mary Anne Evans in 1819 in Warwickshire, George Eliot is considered to be “one of the central novelists of English language” and “the most respected English novelist of her time” (Bloom xi; Jedrzejewski 1). Having started her writing career as the editor of and regular contributor to the *Westminster Review*, Eliot's career as a fiction writer started in 1857 with the publication of *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858) which comprised of three stories based on “recollections of her Warwickshire childhood” (Jedrzejewski 32). Published in 1859, *Adam Bede* was Eliot's first novel and the work that made her well-known in the literary circles although at the time the real identity behind the pseudonym “George Eliot” was not known. Leslie Stephen commented that it was *Adam Bede* that “placed the author in the first rank of the 'Victorian' novelists” although she had a productive career with six more novels (66).

George Eliot in her article “Natural History of German Life” (1856) complains about the limited knowledge on “real characteristics of the working-classes” as represented in art as well in political and social theories (142). Examining the works of William Henrich Riehl on German working classes, she yearns for the same kind of work on English working classes. However, she is careful when she talks about the form of such a work. For, she believes that a detailed and true representation of working classes, the peasantry, or as she calls the “People” should be the vital quality of such a work. Published three years before *Adam Bede*, this essay continually registers Eliot’s passion for adherence to the reality. She proclaims that “We want to be taught to feel, not for the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant, but for the peasant in all his coarse apathy, and the artisan in all his suspicious selfishness” (145). She gives utmost importance to the true representation of different social classes, and at some points in her article she explains what I believe she undertakes to do in *Adam Bede*:

If any man of sufficient moral and intellectual breadth, whose observations would not be vitiated by a foregone conclusion, or by a professional point of view, would devote himself to studying the natural history of our social classes, especially of the small shopkeepers, artisans, and peasantry, –the degree in which they are influenced by local conditions, their maxims and habits, the points of view from which they regard their religious teachers, and the degree in which they are influenced by religious doctrines, the interaction of the various classes on each other, and what are the tendencies in their position towards disintegration or towards development, –and if, after all this study, he would give us the result of his observations in a book well nourished with specific facts, his work would be a valuable aid to the social and political reformer (147).

It cannot be known for sure if *Adam Bede* had been helpful to any social or political reformer but it is certain that it fulfills the qualities of the work Eliot envisions despite the fact that it is a fictional text. In this essay, I would like to examine *Adam Bede* as such a work, one which depicts the agricultural working class of a rural community sixty years before its publication, at the turn of the century. I argue that *Adam Bede* not only depicts a rural working class community in their daily existence but also witnesses the deployment of sexuality in the emerging class of the bourgeoisie. The private and public institutions, namely family and the church, also play a vital role in determining the gender and class

boundaries and maintaining the social order, which we can see clearly at the end of the novel.

*Adam Bede* takes place in the small fictional village of Hayslope and the main events of the novel cover two years at the end of the eighteenth century, from 1799 to 1801. The four main characters of the novel, Adam Bede, Hetty Sorrel, Arthur Donnithorne and Dinah Morris form what can be called a love rectangle as the young and hardworking carpenter Adam Bede falls in love with the beautiful dairy maid Hetty who is the orphaned niece of Martin Poyser, one of the large tenants of the local estate owner Squire Arthur Donnithorne. Adam's love for Hetty turns out to be unrequited as Hetty falls for Captain Arthur Donnithorne, the grandson of the squire and heir to the estate. However, young and irresponsible Arthur does not take his affair very seriously and when he leaves for his regiment in Windsor after Adam's confrontation with him about their relationship, Hetty realizes that she is pregnant with Arthur's child and though she accepts Adam's marriage proposal, she leaves in search of Arthur when her pregnancy advances. Being unable to find Arthur, Hetty returns to the Midlands and gives birth to the child and leaves it in the wilderness to die. When the authorities arrest Hetty for infanticide, she is found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. When the news of Hetty's incarceration reaches Hayslope, Adam is sad but still wants to help Hetty. However, it is Dinah Morris, the lay Methodist preacher and another niece of the Poyser family that comforts Hetty in her cell and gets a confession from her, thus saving her soul. In the meantime, Arthur Donnithorne returns to Hayslope for his grandfather's funeral and when he learns of Hetty's trial, he interrupts with the court and accomplishes to get a pardon for Hetty. Her death sentence is changed to transportation to the colonies. All through this, Adam and Dinah realize their mutual affection for each other and decide to get married. The novel ends with an epilogue that takes place in 1807 in which the reader learns that Hetty dies on the way back from the colonies, Arthur is doing well as he is now a Colonel, and Dinah and Adam enjoy their apparently happy married life.

As the scandalous affair between Hetty and Arthur drew attention with Victorian and later readers, the focus of criticism usually stays on Hetty Sorrel and her drama.<sup>1</sup> However, this novel also draws attention to the quite realistic portrayal of the class and gender distinction at the end of the eighteenth century in a rural setting like Hayslope where the industrialism of the northern England has not affected much yet.<sup>2</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes that Marxist feminist scholarship has seen the eighteenth-century England as the moment of a split between “the public and domestic spheres” (135). Sedgwick, examining the homosocial desire and the historicity of the female in *Adam Bede*, perceives this novel as a finely articulated “big bang theory of class and gender foundation” (138). In order to show how gender and class are represented in this novel, this study first closely examines four different scenes of social gathering in the novel and compare them in terms of the class and gender binaries they represent. Margaret Reynolds in her introduction to *Adam Bede*'s Penguin edition draws our attention to the duality of some scenes in the novel (xxxiv). To her list of the events that happen twice in the novel, we might add two scenes of public religious activity and two celebratory events.

The first of these scenes is in the second chapter of the novel titled “The Preaching” in which we witness Dinah’s preaching on the green, which brings almost all of the villagers together in the open air to hear a woman preaching for the first time. This chapter, being the one we are introduced to Dinah is also important in the sense that the only other main character we get to know before her is the titular character Adam Bede to whom we are introduced to in the first chapter of the novel. All people present there, some of whom the narrator introduces to the reader, stand looking at the same direction towards Dinah and there is clearly no distinctions in terms of sex, class or age in their positioning. The eldest inhabitant of Hayslope as well as children; the artisans and shop owners as well as farm laborers, and women as well as men stand together in that scene, creating a sense of uniformity we will not be able to see in the rest of the novel. Furthermore, Dinah’s words on the nature of this group of people before her make them bond together: “Why, you and me, dear friends, are poor. We have been brought up in

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<sup>1</sup> Henry James thinks that the hero of the novel is not the titular character Adam Bede but rather Hetty Sorrel: “The central figure of the book, by virtue of her great misfortune, is Hetty Sorrel. In the presence of that misfortune no one else, assuredly, has a right to claim dramatic pre-eminence. The one person for whom an approach to equality may be claimed is, not Adam Bede, but Arthur Donnithorne” (17).

<sup>2</sup> Terry Eagleton suggests that “Though [the novel’s] countryside is a thoroughly capitalist set-up, it still has a festive, semi-feudal aura about it” (171).

poor cottages, and have been reared on oat-cake, and lived coarse; and we haven't been to school much, nor read books, and we don't know much about anything but what happens just round us" (29-30). This class consciousness brought out by Dinah's words in this scene also resonates with the other forms of consciousness, mainly the fact that this group of people stand out in the open air and hear religious words not from a member of the church but from a dissenting woman, as well as a fellow worker. Clearly, the dissent in Dinah's presence is not only in purely religious matters but also felt through the difference of her sex and the group's uniformity as working class.

Standing in full contrast to this scene is another religious activity: Adam's father's funeral in the chapter entitled "The Church". The church here manifests its difference to Dinah's preaching not only through the building which represents the institutionalized religion but also the behavior of Hayslopers in this chapter. This scene clearly exemplifies the class and gender distinction within the workings of institutionalized religion. People from different sexes are separated in this scene; while women go inside the church to talk to each other, men stay outside until the service begins. Outside the church, while many of men stand together near the church door, Mr. Casson, the landlord of the Donnithorne Arms, stays outside of this group and stands alone. Inside the church, there is a clear distinction of the class represented by the seats; the seats for Mr. Donnithorne and his family is in the chancel which is usually reserved for the use of the clergy. Moreover, Mr. Donnithorne, as the ultimate patriarch of the community, sits on "handsome crimson cloth cushions" which clearly sets him aside from the rest of the people who sit on the same grey pews (214). Also, the ruling class of Hayslope, Mr. Donnithorne and his daughter Miss Lydia are the last to enter the church just before the service begins while everyone awaits them. The contrast between these scenes is of course most clear in the gender of the preacher and how they look different in terms of their appearances. Dinah's plain dress also stands in full contrast to Mr. Irwine: she does not even wear a cap while she is preaching but Mr. Irwine's hair is powdered and combed back carefully. All these differences in these scenes, this study argues, suggest not only Eliot's keen observations of such a community but also a critique of the institutionalized religion, the church, as the reinforcing element of gender and class oppression. Dinah, preaching on the green, on the other hand, dissents to this institution not only as a woman but as a working-class woman.

Eliot, in depicting these scenes, is clearly laying out these details as the proof of the unjust system which not only oppresses the lower classes but also the women in that class system. Another set of examples that can be compared in order to see this critique of class division are the two celebratory scenes, namely Arthur's birthday festivities in the middle of the novel and the Harvest Supper at the Poyser household at the end of the book. The festivities for Arthur Donnithorne's birthday, told in five separate chapters, constitute the entire Book Third of the novel. Eliot takes her time in describing the details of this one night where the whole communities of Hayslope and Broxton are invited to celebrate the coming of age party for the heir to the estate. During these festivities, we see a clear-cut distinction of class in the Chase Farm. It is not only that the ruling class is separated from the working class but also there is a categorization among them, too. The tenants like Poyser, who rent the land of the Donnithorne's, eat indoors as opposed to the artisans and farm laborers. The titular character Adam is elevated above his status despite his own wishes, so even families are separated at the request of the host:

When Adam heard that he was to dine up-stairs with the large tenants, he felt rather uncomfortable at the idea of being exalted in this way above his mother and Seth, who were to dine in the cloisters below. But Mr Mills, the butler, assured him that Captain Donnithorne had given particular orders about it, and would be very angry if Adam was not there (282).

Inside the dining room the tables are separated for two different sexes; men eating at one table (and drinking the strong ale) and women seated at the other table with their children. Thus, it turns out the upper classes not only set themselves apart and eat their dinner in another room but they also reinforce a division of genders in the dinner they provide for the lower classes. All in all, the lengthy descriptions of these birthday festivities are quite telling how the upper classes are keen on reinforcing a separation of different social classes and sexes.

In contrast to the birthday celebration scenes, the harvest supper we observe at the Hall Farm –the farm the Poyser rent—breaks down not only the class division but also the sexual one. The Poyser sit at the same table with their servants and laborers regardless of their sex. The communal sense is felt more strongly in this scene as they eat, drink and sing together. Martin Poyser, being the host, serves the food himself and actually cares whether or not his servants and laborers like the food that night:

It was a goodly sight –that table with Martin Poyser's round good-humoured face and large person at the head of it helping his servants to the fragrant roast beef and pleased when the empty plates came again. Martin, though usually blest with a good appetite, really forgot to finish his own beef to-night—it was so pleasant to him to look on in the intervals of carving and see how the others enjoyed their supper (562).

Even the idea of celebrating the harvest, an activity done collaboratively and that will benefit many people, stands in contrast to the idea of celebrating just one man's birthday in an extravagant manner just because he is the grandson of the richest man in the area.

Thus, by looking at the juxtaposition of these four different scenes of social gathering we can say that Eliot gives her reader the means to see how class stratification and gender oppression work in different situations. It is obvious that when the working (and/or lower-middle) classes are involved, this oppression and stratification is less felt not only by the readers but also the characters themselves. However, the ending of the novel shows us the signs of how Hayslope is becoming more thoroughly capitalistic and how the social relations are already being affected by it. One good example of this change is the idea of family in the working classes and in order to better understand how Eliot seems to depict this transition period and change, we can first look at Frederick Engels and his theory on the effect of capitalism on the institution of family. Frederick Engels in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) explains that monogamy, as opposed to the other family forms experienced throughout the history, “was the first form of the family to be based, not on natural, but on economic conditions – on the victory of private property over primitive, natural communal property” (128). Engels further explains that although at first it seems in the favor of women, in fact monogamous family registers the first class oppression, that of the female sex by the male:

Thus when monogamous marriage first makes its appearance in history, it is not as the reconciliation of man and woman, still less as the highest form of such a reconciliation. Quite the contrary. Monogamous marriage comes on the scene as the subjugation of the one sex by the other; it announces a struggle between the sexes unknown throughout the whole previous prehistoric period... The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man

and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male. Monogamous marriage was a great historical step forward; nevertheless, together with slavery and private wealth, it opens the period that has lasted until today in which every step forward is also relatively a step backward, in which prosperity and development for some is won through the misery and frustration of others. It is the cellular form of civilized society, in which the nature of the oppositions and contradictions fully active in that society can be already studied (128-129).

And since the means to own private property is usually restricted to the ruling classes, the monogamous marriage is supported by the bourgeois law. Engels also talks about what he calls “sex-love” as the mutual affection in monogamous marriage. However, he adds that being too immersed in the thoughts of the ownership and inheritance, the bourgeois class cannot contain sex-love and this leads to decay in moral values in the form of hetaerism and prostitution. For Engels, “sex love in the relationship of husband and wife is and can become the rule only among the oppressed classes” (135).

It is possible to see that kind of relationship in Mr. and Mrs. Poyser’s marriage in *Adam Bede*. It is obvious that in their relationship there is not an oppressed side, or at least it is not the female that is oppressed. One of the most powerful passages in the novel is the chapter “Mrs. Poyser Has Her Say Out.” Despite Mr. Donnithorne’s constant efforts to ignore her and talk to Mr. Poyser alone, Mrs. Poyser does not let go off him. She is conscious and logical and able to speak up unlike her husband. When the old landlord threatens them with not renewing their lease, she interrupts two men’s talk, once again, and in an impatient manner, starts her talk: “Then, sir, if I may speak – as, for all I’m a woman, and there’s folks as thinks a woman’s fool enough to stan’ by an’ look on while the men sign her soul away, I’ve a right to speak, for I make one quarter o’ the rent, and save another quarter” (378). Having started with these words, this talk drives Mr. Donnithorne away from the Hall Farm and makes Mrs. Poyser a local celebrity in the days to come. The emphasis on her economic production in Mrs. Poyser’s words is more revelatory in terms of distinguishing their household as a communal one. Engels explains that:



In the old communistic household, which comprised many couples and their children, the task entrusted to the women of managing the household was as much a public and socially necessary industry as the procuring of food by the men. With the patriarchal family, and still more with the single monogamous family, a change came. Household management lost its public character. It no longer concerned society. It became a private service; the wife became the head servant, excluded from all participation in social production (137).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in line with Engels' words above, reads the Poyser household as the pre-industrialist large family household in which three generations live, the spheres of women's and men's work are indistinguishable as well as the managerial and manual labor (138). The lines between kin and servant as well as the lines between workplace and home are blurred in this household. Sedgwick compares this pre-industrial household/workplace of the Poyser with the clear division of labour in Adam and Dinah's family. Adam's workplace has the notion of finishing work at a certain time but what falls upon Dinah is the care of the children and housework that never ends.

One outlet from the conventional roles tailored for the women, the preaching of Dinah which separates her from the other women characters and sets her as an unconventional and independent woman who can exist outside the family institution also fails by the end of the novel. The reason why she chooses Adam and marriage is simple: love. But even in the sphere of love it is the woman, the other sex who has to give up her own life. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* explains that for men "the beloved woman is only one value among others; they wish to integrate her into their existence and not to squander it entirely on her. For woman, on the contrary, to love is to relinquish everything for the benefit of a master" (642). It is disappointing to see Adam and Dinah's relationship fit perfectly into this description. It is Dinah who leaves all her life and what she holds dear to herself until that moment and comes to live with Adam in his world in compliance with his wishes. Another critic who thinks this ending to be disappointing is E. J. Lawless, who writes that

Readers familiar with the character of Dinah Morris will be struck by the fact that in the novel Eliot undermines the right of Dinah to be central figure, has extreme difficulty allowing this preacher woman to be a strong character, and, in the end, forces her to

submit to the will of a male character, Adam Bede, in a completely unsatisfying conclusion (252).

According to Lawless, the real disappointment lies “in the sacrifice of the character Dinah to literary convention and the realities of the patriarchal society in which she lives” (252). Although we are informed that it is not Adam but the Methodist church that restricts her preaching, this decision seems to be convenient to the needs of their new family, and both Adam and Dinah seem content with this development. It is only Seth, Adam’s brother and a Methodist himself, who is troubled by this decision of the Methodist church but he is hushed easily by Adam, the new patriarch of their family. It is even more interesting that Eliot makes Seth talk against Dinah’s abandoning her preaching because it was Seth who has proposed to Dinah early in the novel just to be turned by down her as Dinah wants to “live and die without husband or children. I seem to have no room in my soul for wants and fears of my own, it has pleased God to fill my heart so full with the wants and sufferings of his poor people” (41). The fact that Dinah seems to so easily renounce her life’s cause and now finds the satisfaction in marriage she would not a few years ago adds to the disillusionment readers feel about the novel’s ending.

There other events taking place at the end of the novel that can also be presented as unsatisfying. However, these endings can also be interpreted in line with Eliot’s adherence to the reality and how she imagined her characters would behave or have to behave as Hayslope adjusts to the needs of the time. In that sense, the transformation of Adam from a poor artisan to a shop-owner who has his own workers and who continues to collaborate with the ruling class despite Arthur’s betrayal of his trust is quite telling. And for me the symbolic sign of this change lies in Adam’s riding a horse at the end of the novel when he goes to Snowfield to see Dinah and bring her back. Very early in the novel, the narrator while making a critique of “the heroines in satin boots” and “heroes riding fiery horses,” informs us that Seth was never on horseback except for once when he was a child (44). Adam and Seth’s family has never been prosperous enough for them to ride horses. In fact, this comparison based on their means to ride horses was one of the first of many examples setting the class distinction between the ruling and working classes. The horse-riding of Adam at the end and the fact that he borrows Mr. Burge’s horse is a clear indication of the transition period he is going through. I will not go as far as Terry Eagleton and say Adam is “a petty-bourgeois pragmatist who had no theories about setting the world to rights and who thus functions as a reliable agent of the ruling class” (Eagleton 114). However, it is clear that by owning

a private property and creating a gendered family, Adam is ready to be immersed in capitalism which is coming slowly but surely to Hayslope. As we never have seen Adam riding a horse before, we have never seen Dinah in a church either. At the end, during their wedding, we see Dinah inside the church for the first time. She is no longer the dissenting independent woman but already under the oppression of public and domestic institutions, the church and the family. And her family/household, as suggested by Sedgwick, is not a productive one like her aunt Mrs. Poyser's household. The only production Dinah is capable of, as seen in the epilogue, is reproduction of her children.

Another point about the ending of the novel that is quite explanatory of the class and gender repression is the forgiveness granted towards Arthur, the male and member of the ruling class, while Hetty the female and one of the working class is silently deported from the novel. Here it might be useful to turn to Engels one last time. Engels, while explaining the moral results of monogamous family, states that heterism which is the continuation of male sexual practice outside the family constraints,

is not merely tolerated, but gaily practiced, by the ruling classes particularly, it is just condemned in words. But in reality this condemnation never falls on the men concerned, but only on the women; they are despised and outcast, in order that the unconditional supremacy of men over the female sex may be once more proclaimed as a fundamental law of society (130).

Considering these words by Engels, it should come as no surprise that the male dominated society would ask for the deportation of Hetty from the society, and Eliot, being a realist writer, would comply with that.

To conclude, the novel at the end restores the repressive sexual and class order that has been interrupted by Arthur and Hetty's sexual involvement. The nuclear family of the newly emerging petty-bourgeois class is celebrated with the occasion of Adam and Dinah's wedding. And one last time we see a social gathering in Hayslope as everyone comes to celebrate Adam and Dinah's wedding, to give their blessing to this new formation. George Eliot, as a realist writer, depicts the changes and transitions happening to the characters in this rural village just before industrial capitalism completely takes over the place. The challenges directed at the gender and class oppression that were already there, mainly Dinah's preaching as a Methodist preacher, are diverted by the end of the novel. Whereas the new emerging

family of Adam and Dinah is completely compliant with the wishes of new bourgeois society which seems to oppress women the most.

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