

Adam Bede
by
George Eliot

Book Information

George Eliot, Adam Bede
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This eighteenth-century British novel tells of three unworldly people trapped by unwise love.

Topics: Adventure, Life Changes; Classics, Classics (All); Emotions, Love; Mysteries, Murder; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Romance, Romance (All)

Main Characters

Adam Bede a trusting and capable carpenter who first loves Hetty, and later Dinah

Captain Arthur Donnithorne the young squire who steals Hetty's heart

Dinah Morris Mrs. Poyser's niece and a Methodist preacher

Hetty Sorrel Mr. Poyser's niece, a coquettish young woman of seventeen

Lisbeth Bede Adam and Seth's mother

Martin Poyser the proprietor of Hall Farm

Mrs. Poyser Martin's wife

Parson Irwine the vicar of Hayslope

Seth Bede the brother of Adam, a preacher who also loved Dinah

Vocabulary

bucolic relating to or characteristic of rural areas

indignation anger aroused by something unjust or unworthy

inefficacious inability to produce a desired effect

loquacious very talkative

pedagogue a teacher

querulous fretful or whining

Synopsis

Adam Bede is a young carpenter who lives in Hayslope. He is very talented and one day will be offered a partnership in Mr. Jonathan Burge's business. Everyone knows and respects him, especially Captain Arthur Donnithorne, who regards Adam as his best friend even though they are from different stations in life.

Mr. Burge would like Adam to be his son-in-law, but Adam has eyes only for young Hetty Sorrel, the beautiful niece of Mr. Poyser, who runs Hall Farm. Hetty, however, cares nothing for Adam. Hetty cares only for Donnithorne, who she secretly begins seeing after meeting him one day in her aunt's dairy.

Adam's brother, Seth, has fallen in love with a lovely young Methodist preacher named Dinah Morris. Dinah is a niece of Mrs. Poyser. Hetty is described as "helpless as a kitten," but Dinah is strong and serious. One evening, while taking a walk, Seth proposes marriage to her. She declines and tells him that her life is dedicated only to God and preaching.

It is explained that Adam's father drinks too much, and one morning he is found drowned. At the funeral, the thoughts of the congregation are on everything else but Matthias Bede. Hetty is sorely disappointed when Donnithorne does not appear at the service because he has already left with his regiment.

When Donnithorne returns, he celebrates his birthday with a grand party to which nearly all of Hayslope is invited. Adam is invited to sit at Donnithorne's table.

One August night, a few weeks after the party, Adam is returning home from work on the Donnithorne estate when he spots Donnithorne and Hetty in an embrace. Adam calls his friend a coward, and Adam refuses to leave without a fight. Adam, overpowering Donnithorne with his sheer strength, knocks Donnithorne unconscious. Adam later revives him and convinces Donnithorne to write

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a letter to Hetty telling her their relationship is over and they can never marry.

The next day, Adam delivers the letter to Hetty. She reads the letter in her bedchamber and is completely distraught. She sees no way out of her misery and begins contemplating suicide.

Hetty never gets over Donnithorne, but she resigns herself to a marriage with Adam. Mr. and Mrs. Poyser give their enthusiastic approval to the match, for they are fond of Adam. The wedding is scheduled for March so that proper preparations can be made and more rooms can be added to the Bede household. Soon, through delicate hints, it is concluded that Hetty is pregnant, so she decides to run away under the guise that she is visiting Dinah in Snowfield. She is determined to find Donnithorne. When she arrives at Windsor, where he is to be stationed, she learns that he is in Ireland. Devastated, she wanders around until her baby is born. She leaves it to die in the woods, but is racked with guilt and later returns to find the baby gone.

After his grandfather dies, Donnithorne returns to Hayslope where he learns that Hetty is in prison for the murder of her child. He does everything he can to free her. Meanwhile, Hetty is silent and in shock. It is only when Dinah visits her in prison that she confesses everything. Just moments before Hetty is to be hanged, Donnithorne arrives with a pardon -- her sentence has been commuted to deportation. A few years later, she dies on her way home, and Donnithorne is sent to Spain.

Dinah visits the Poyzers quite often, and she and Adam are slowly drawn to each other. Adam soon realizes his love and proposes to her. She finds room in her heart for God and Adam, and they are married and have two children.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

The dialogue in this book makes generous use of regional expressions and colorful language to flesh out the characters. Find several examples in the book to support this statement.

Some possible answers are as follows: Lisbeth says, "Aye, thee't allays ready enough at prayin', but I donna see as thee gets much wi' thy prayin'." (chapter four) Ben says, "Bodderation, Adam! Lave a chap aloon, will 'ee?" (chapter one) Mrs. Poyser says, "An' sit up burnin' candle, an' lie a-bed wi' the sun a-bakin' you like a cowcumber i' the frame?" (chapter fourteen)

Literary Analysis

How does the author succeed in portraying Hetty as being soft and helpless like a kitten?

The narrator often describes just how delicate and pretty Hetty is. She is praised and noticed for her looks. These looks cause her to be the play thing, or pet, of Arthur Donnithorne. She is too innocent to understand what is happening and falls madly and unrequitedly in love. On her journey to find him, she is quite helpless and cannot survive without the help of others.

Inferential Comprehension

What do you think would have happened if Hetty had found Donnithorne when she went to Windsor? Would things have turned out differently?

Donnithorne, although quite reluctant to accept the consequences of his actions, is generous and probably would have assisted Hetty. He proves his desire to help by getting a pardon from her death sentence. However, it is clear that he could not marry her, and probably would not have done so, even under those circumstances. One possibility is that he would have hidden her away someplace, taking good care of her until the baby was born, and then given the baby to an orphanage.

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Constructing Meaning

In Hetty's case, how is the commuted sentence more cruel than the death penalty?

Her commuted sentence of deportation does indeed prove to be more cruel than the death penalty. Instead of dying quickly, after she had made her peace with God, she is forced to live a life far from everything and everyone she knows. The pain of isolation is long and enduring compared to the quickness of death. Most tragically of all, she dies on her return home.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization Though the title of this book is *Adam Bede*, some have asserted that the central character is not Adam but Arthur Donnithorne. Some assert that Eliot gives more detail and scrutiny to him. Have students write a list of the major characters in the book. Have them explain how each contributes to the story's main idea. Also, have students choose who they think the main character is and why.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Captain Donnithorne mentions some pamphlets about Antinomianism, Evangelicalism, and other "isms" to Parson Irwine. This book, in fact, contains many references to the Evangelical movement, which was popular at the time. Antinomianism literally means "anti-law." It is a position which asserts that since man is saved by faith alone, he is then no longer bound to obey the moral law of God. It is said to be a logical, though incorrect, conclusion to Dispensationalism. Dispensationalism is a belief that God has worked in many ways throughout history through different economies or dispensations. A Dispensationalist makes a major distinction between the Old Testament and the New Testament of the Bible. It is the direct opposite in belief to Covenantalism. Have students research these "isms" as well as any others they can find, such as Experientalism, Mysticism, and Pietism. Have students compare and contrast these different "isms".

Understanding the Author's Craft George Eliot's books are very autobiographical and contain characters based on many real people in her life. The character Adam Bede is universally recognized as a portrait of her father, Robert Evans. Mary Ann's (George Eliot's real name was Mary Ann Evans), father worked at managing the estates of some very wealthy people, even some who were nobility and heads of state. He acquired quite a fortune, and the Evanses were able to live in very nice homes. Have students research Mary Ann Evans and her father to discover how he is the inspiration behind the character of Adam. For further study, students might research Eliot's life to see how her religious beliefs influenced *Adam Bede* as well. Eliot herself can be seen in the character of Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*. A composition assignment could involve researching Eliot's life and how it is seen in several of her books.

Comparing and Contrasting The main events of this novel take place in 1799, the year after William Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* was published. In fact, Arthur actually recommends the book to Parson Irwine. Critics have seen much Wordsworthian influence on Eliot's writing. *Lyrical Ballads* included anecdotes and psychological studies of humble people, much as does *Adam Bede*. "Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," for instance, shows the peace the author is able to find reflecting on beautiful landscapes and memories. Have students read *Lyrical Ballads* and discuss its influence on Eliot's *Adam Bede*.