The Impact of Time in Reshaping the Traits of Woman Character in George Eliot’s Adam Bede

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Abstract

Literature is and continues to be the weapon through which the artist can fight against all forms of injustice in real life. Thus, the literary work arises out of a particular social context; that affect many facets of the artistic production. As a matter of fact, the portrayal of woman character in fiction depends on the angle of vision from which the writer can see and rewrite its traits mainly in the Victorian Era. Thereby, a feminine reflection may be more truthful to what females really live and feel under the pretext of preserving social hierarchy. Adam Bede represents one of the literary works where the novelist seeks a more egalitarian world. George Eliot was engaged in the project of liberating woman’s mind and soul through her pen by rewriting the traits of woman as a fictional character. Her heroines were puppets transmitting multiple messages and morals by criticizing and offending masculine thoughts and manners. Her innovative style employing the game of time in reshaping woman’s identity, granted her and her contemporaries a kind of historical recovery. In fact, time came not as a linear entity, but played a significant subjective role. It had its manifestation in every aspect of females’ lives and thoughts. In Adam Bede, George Eliot tries to present the protagonist Dinah Morris as a character who stands as a challenge to the whole patriarchal system through her activism and reasonable thinking in spite of the different deceptions she went through in her life. Through the duality of time and gender, George Eliot was able to create a consistent piece of writing were she examines, criticizes and reforms a corrupted social milieu.

Keywords: femininity, time, masculine thought, gender theory, identity, Victorian Period.
The present work explores female’s style and mind as presented in Eliot’s *Adam Bede*. The main issue to be tackled here is the impact of time in reshaping the traits of woman character. So, the focus is to be concentrated on the Victorian period where many literary trends saw light. George Eliot and many of her contemporaries produced a literature obsessed with the context of war of ideas, in which the female component hardly tried to emancipate her soul and mind from a corrupted social system. The Victorian age chronicles the period from 1837 to 1901. It was a period of great changes, where many ideologies saw light. This had a great impact on the social, political, and economic system.

In spite of being the age of prosperity and reform; this period had bad echoes because of the unfair social system. It deepened the misery of the muted group; which urged activists to react in various ways seeking reform. The Victorian period was concomitant too to the nineteenth century; a period of high literary prosperity. In fact, the whole former context had its reflection in literary productions, mainly those that were engaged with woman’s case. Thus, literature was an efficient tool to echo internal dissatisfaction and frustration and by the way raise collective awareness. George Eliot was one of females’ advocates whose fiction was loaded with anti-masculine opinions. As a first step, she decided to break with the old modes of writing and perception that mislead the public opinion, speaking about masculine superiority and feminine submissiveness. So the merit for her was to transmit a positive image of woman through her a pen that is no longer disempowered. She took advantage of being the other, to see what males cannot recognize with their petrified thought and sight, because otherness for man was a sign of inferiority. With an innovative style, Eliot tried to project woman’s case in literature by looking for means to reshape feminine identity under the authority of collective norms and identity. Hence, she came with a new conceptualization of feminine gender in a highly stereotypical society.

It is not surprising to see that tightened relationship between literature and general context. Therefore, the duality of social hierarchy and gender has long been a fertile ground for all those who are interested in exploring the impact of gender divisions on social relationships. As a matter of fact, our case study *Adam Bede* can be seen as pro-feminine par excellence. Eliot in her literary productions echoed a permanent interest to value woman’s existence. She tried in her manners to create her own space where to establish the legitimacy of females’ right in an illegitimate social climate. The present study tends to show Eliot’s efforts to redefine the concept of gender employing the game of time.

As it was stated above, the social context had its implication in *Adam Bede*’s construction, especially if the writer is a woman in a highly patriarchal milieu. As a result, major characters were embodiments of the feminist movement’s principles. In fact, the prior aim of feminism was to establish social equality in all domains. It included also the attempt to restore woman’s right image in masculine writings. The present novel presents an innovative portrayal of woman as a writer, character and social member. The examination of Eliot’s ideas will depart mainly from Butler’s famous quotation that “there is no original or primary gender, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original”. This statement emphasizes the fact that there is no fixed imposed identity, instead woman is able to draw herself her destiny and identity. The activists of this movement were aware of the masculine strategies to marginalize females’ existence, this is why they tried to fight against them within their space of authority; writing. They did also champion their otherness as a source of richness, not that of inferiority; in Lucy Irigaray’s *The Sex Witch is Not One*, she affirms:
“…The feminine has never been defined except as the inverse, indeed the underside of the masculine. So for woman it is not a matter of installing herself within this lack, this negative, even by denouncing it, nor for reversing the economy of sameness by turning the feminine into the standard for “sexual difference; it is rather a matter of trying to practice that difference” (159).

Gender and temporality altogether reflected Eliot’s conceptualization of intellectuals’ role in historical recovery. Therefore, her flexibility in dealing with time had its impact on finalizing the complete portraits of characters and by the way it reflects her alert in redefining gender conception.

George Eliot’s contribution in women’s history lies in the fact of giving the right picture of the other sex without misleading the public opinion. Her ability to profit from the factor of time allowed her to enter wider horizons. Thomas Mann says “Time is the medium of narration, as it is the medium of life”, this emphasizes again the dynamic dimension of time as having multiple interpretations. Hence, the literary depiction of time is far from that understanding of successive minutes and hours. The fictional portrayal of temporality reflected the author’s confinement with the characters that she is able to report the minute details of their hidden thought. The treatment of time in the literary text provided the reader with multi-dimensional characters whose consciousness reveals dissatisfaction with their reality. In fact, there is a tight relation between temporality and consciousness, since the former has its manifestation in the individual’s internal thought; Sherover argues that “because time permeates every activity of the being of the self, it order the continuity of change in all the complex relations that constitute a self, it permeates the relations each has with others” (107). Through stream of consciousness technique, interior monologue, fragmentation, theory of time…Evans was able to surf in the depths of her heroines and prove that time and consciousness are really interwoven in several instances. It was the past experiences and deceptions that left their scars on human psyche and by the way give birth to a new person with a new identity. In fact, the limitations of time had its impact in every aspect of the characters’ lives. It offers a portrait of fictional entities with multiple subjectivity. As a matter of fact, in Adam Bede there is an emphasis on the interrelation between “true time” and “time of consciousness”. Past experiences were alive in the minds of characters, it resulted in multiple ways of thinking and behaving. Evans tried to control her characters’ thoughts in a way to prove the impact of chronological time on their consciousness. For instance, her heroines lose themselves in meditation, recalling past experiences which deepened their frustration with their real lives. Such atmosphere urged them to change and abandon that subordinate, submissive personality. The different modernist elements that Eliot employs (the flow of thoughts, inner side of personality, interior monologue, stream of consciousness, fragmentation…) work hand in hand to portray a female character with a new identity which has nothing to do with patriarchal measures. This is how time factor affects shared conventions and fixed identities.

In Adam Bede, the protagonist is Dinah Morris who is portrayed as a challenge to the traditional image of femininity. She is contrasted also to some passive characters like Hetty Sorrel whose existence is characterized by inability to take her personal decisions and being too emotional. As it was stated in a previous section, the novel took place in the Victorian period, an era with high gender discrimination. Eliot concentrated on her characters’ internal thought, to reflect the different states of mind they went through while living under such condition, which led them at the end to reshape their own identities. Young argues that
for Eliot, looking to ‘see’ the consciousness of another as a means of knowing another means seeing the other through the lens of the self seeing involves negotiation between image and its analysis, an analysis based on the seer’s past knowledge or experiences or desires. To see the other means always to know a “negotiated” other, or reflection of the self” (76-77).

She focuses on woman’s tendency to break with the old misconceptions, by studying the different experiences she went through. Her heroines were icons of women’s revolutionary thought. She resorted to the idea of human’s everlasting quest for satisfying her ambition. Thus, mobility and dynamism were two of the major impulses guiding characters, which is characterizing Eliot’s style based on the idea of multiplicity and openness. This goes hand in hand with this article’s title since the notion of time is one of the impulses drawing the traits of female characters. Having a first look at Dinah Morris’s character, we can see the significance of her existence being a Methodist preacher who plays a vital role in the life of thousands of people. She has her particular manners that allowed her to solve thorny issues and compete the masculine discourse. What noteworthy, is that Dinah shares Eliot a lot of traits. The writer devoted her narrative to the study of women characters, who were challenging the whole patriarchal society. Dinah is depicted as destroying woman’s typical image of caring mother and devoted housewife. Instead, she was disagreeing the marriage institution and chose a spiritual dimension to her life. She has her own idea about marriage “there’s no man could love her better, and leave her freer to follow the Lord’s work” (Eliot, 35). She kept longing for independence and self-fulfillment in spite of being undermined by the public mentality. She is described as a working woman who is able to make sacrifices for others. She is presented as an ideal example of successful women whose actions were appreciated by those who are surrounding her. Her activism defending her opinions and thoughts were offended by the stereotypical other because of her tender manners. From a young age, she started teaching and organizing meetings which placed her on the position of leader not that of the learner. She has a great amount of self-confidence to voice loudly her beliefs despite masculine’s attempts to deny the significance of her preaching. She has the magic power to attract people and provide them with internal security (like in the case of Hetty Sorrel). She prioritizes other’s benefit over her own, which led her to repress her desires and emotions. This is evidence on how Dinah is a revolutionary female character who is able to control her inner desires. Despite the criticism she faced in her social life, she succeeded to draw her own trajectory. What made her really a successful preacher, is the fact of never prejudging people no matter how their faults were. She did always focus on the good side of human personality. She had even the ability to fascinate the other gender “the stranger, who had been interested in the course of her sermon, as if it had been the development of a drama – for there is this sort of fascination in all sincere unpremeditated eloquence” (Eliot, 34). Moreover, she works in a mill to be financially independent. It was true that the figure of Dinah was unique in many levels, but she was at times defeated by the factor of time which made her abandon many of her principles and submit to the mainstream culture. She lives the kind of inner struggle between her human emotional side and her spiritual commitment. She loses at times herself in past memories “Dinah, seeing that Lisbeth’s attention was attracted, told her the story of her early life–how she had been brought up to work hard, and what sort of place Snowfield was, and how many people had a hard life there” (Eliot, 112). She was able to reproduce the whole past in her consciousness. The character of Dinah Morris is contrasted with that of the narcissist Hetty Sorrel, who was misleading by appearances and vanishing beauty. Her unreasonable thought led her to bad consequences. In spite of the fragility of
Hetty’s personality, she is also presented as a revolutionary female character who challenged the whole society to defend her own desires.

After studying the major traits of the above mentioned characters, we will see the impact of temporality in rewriting their image. In fact, time and memory are two intertwined entities which guide the performance of character in the course of events. According to Bergson “Memory, as well as time, is forever growing and ‘pregnant’ memories are not forgotten, only stories and subject to the whims of perception and recall. Consciousness is similar to time, duration and memory”. This idea goes hand in hand with the title of this article, since it emphasizes the fact of fictional character’s mobility and unfixedness. It cannot be read from only one angle of vision. Instead it bears multiple interpretations. When the reader, lives the written text, he can enter characters’ own world. In the case of Adam Bede, George Eliot is the kind of all-knowing narrator who offers the reader with a panoramic view of her protagonists. Hence, the various experiences that Dinah Morris and Hetty Sorrel went through in the course of events had the great impact on their personalities. The notion of time keeps being the hidden power which controls people’s lives and decisions. Here we are not speaking about objective time where hours and minutes count, whereas we are speaking about the notion of psychological time filled with memories of loss and success. Those moments are responsible for the maturity of fictional entities. It is said that “ Bergson’s view removes the external standards and replaces it with what the internal sense of time reveals – that real time is that which people live and it is qualitative, not quantitative in nature” (Gillies, 102). In fact, the notion of time has a great transformative power. In the first sections of the story, Dinah Morris was the kind of devoted character who seeks her happiness in the eyes of the others. Later, she comes to give a particular importance to her desires and emotions. The act of marrying Adam at the end and giving up her social activism was the turning point in her career as an effective female character. Even though she preserved her sympathy towards others, she seemed to lose her enthusiasm in voicing woman’s thoughts and ideas. The factor of time was worthy enough to reshape the personality of Dinah, she went through different stages having a leading role from an early age as a preacher, to adopting some conventions of the Victorian society about the necessity of marriage while keeping her core values of compassion.

Temporal frame had the ability to reproduce the traits of female protagonist, living the kind of inner struggle in a high stereotypical society. In fact Bergson gives the concept of time a subjective dimension; his view “removes the external standard and replaces it with what the internal sense of time reveals, that real time is that which people live and it is qualitative, not quantitative in nature” (Gillies, 102). The different experiences that fictional characters live in the course of events, destabilize their psyche and consequently recreate another type of character with another mode of thinking and behaving. The same for Hetty Sorrel on whom life experiences left its scars. On an advanced level of the story, she seemed to be the kind of passive character who does not yet know true meaning of life. She was seduced by appearances and physical beauty that led her to face a tragic ending. Being haunted by the memories of her relation with Donnithorne, she showed an unexpected self-confidence to defend her love. She was able to challenge the whole society just to satisfy her desires. The lines describing her in the dark field were echoing the kind of inner struggle that she lived when looking for Donnithorne. She tried by all means to look for a future to her coming baby, but her attempts were fruitless. All the scenes and states of mind she went through proved her uniqueness as a female in a prejudiced society. At the end of the story, her figure witnessed
another kind of transformation. She comes to understand true meaning of life. Hetty who was presented at the beginning as selfish, narcissistic and vain, turned to be responsible and determined. She wasn’t able to get rid of Arthur’s memories which had damaged her present and even future life “Hetty herself should feel that any pain she had suffered through Arthur in the past was compensated to her a hundredfold” (Eliot, 441). Even Adam Bede lost that passion for Hetty Sorrel “when Adam and Hetty looked at each other, she felt the change in him too, and it seemed to strike her with fresh fear. It was the first time she had seen any being whose face seemed to reflect the change in her: Adam was a new image of the dreadful past and dreadful present. She trembled more as she looked at him” (Eliot, 460). In fact, Hetty can be said to be the victim of a whole society; starting from the Poyser family who was discriminating the orphan girl, to social norms which deepened class conflict. Thus, the external forces did undermine her paths towards a better life; she was again the victim of masculine irresponsibility when she found herself alone fighting to preserve her love. What can be said at the end of this article is that George Eliot, the woman writer with a masculine pen-name was presenting an ambivalent point of view. She was at times portraying a highly revolutionary character but then it turned to be fragile and easily manipulated by the other. The different experiences that female characters went through in the course of events had the great impact on their personalities. The protagonist Dinah Morris was unable to preserve her core values, prioritizing her noble activism over perusing her desires. On the other hand, speaking about Hetty Sorrel, we have two facets: the one of victimized disempowered lady and the other of determined conscious female. Therefore, temporality plays a vital role in the psychological maturity of fictional entity. It can even rewrite the general traits and orientations of the heroines in a way that it present a new model of female character ready to challenge just to defend her femininity.
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