

**TRUTH AND MORALITY IN THE FICTIONS OF VICTORIAN AGE:
A STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO CHARLES DICKENS, GEORGE
ELIOT AND THOMAS HARDY**

Sovabrata Das,
Guwahati.

ABSTRACT

The theme of truth and morality is interconnected with each other. To explore this idea further, this paper is intended to focus on three novels of the Victorian era viz, A Tale Of Two Cities by Charles Dickens, Adam Bede by George Eliot, and Tess of The D'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy relatively citing incidents from texts and comments from critics to show how each novel is steeped in realism inspite of fictional detail and how each text conveys a moral message pertaining to the age of the author. The age referred here is Victorian since the authors and the texts taken into account belonged to this period.

KEYWORDS

Literature, fiction, truth, morality

INTRODUCTION

Every writer has his or her own age and literature is nothing but reflection of society. Literature gives a scope for the imagination of the mind and enables us to comprehend the text. Fictionality is a distinctive property of a literary text and fictional texts posit a reality of their own. John Hospers holds the idea that literature is 'true to life'¹ or 'true to human nature'² which indicates that the characters described by the novelist behave in the same way as people do in real life. Fictional objects or descriptions include imaginary characters, places and events as created by the author himself. Thus fictional objects or descriptions normally imply that it is not real and are basically made up or invented. But everything unreal is not a fictional description and a certain kind of reality pertains to it. A question that one must contemplate upon is whether the utterer's intention sufficient to explain fiction. Actually how things are described in a fictive narration determines how things are in the fictional world. Moreover, the job of the author is also to

convey moral concerns through truth perceived in the age. Let us briefly discuss the idea of morality and literature.

LITERATURE AND IDEA OF MORALITY

It is often asked how morally charged content has an impact on literary value. In thinking about the impact we are actually thinking about the literary value of moral value. We accept some differences but sometimes we object to the content that is being depicted. Frank Palmer argues that literature promotes moral understanding by acquainting us “with scenes, objects, people and circumstance in such a way that we learn through that acquaintance.”³ Oscar Wilde is of the view that there is nothing such moral or immoral literature⁴. But then there are books which are banned because they portray truth which may be detrimental to political, moral, or religious orthodoxy. However, literary value judgments vary from era to era, or culture to culture. As in George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*, Hetty Sorrel the protagonist is punished by the author because she wanted to rise above her class by marrying Arthur, who belonged to feudal class. But if it has to be viewed from today’s context we would have asked ‘what’s wrong in wanting to marry a rich man?’ So, here lies the morality concern of the author. Moral value is treated something that contributes morally and the question is to find out if moral contribution makes a difference to the literary work.

TRENDS IN VICTORIAN NOVELS

Victorian age has been a complex age marked by developments of arts and mechanical inventions with the society being the most rigid one. As a reaction to the idealism of the Romantics, realism becomes the hallmark of the Victorian writers. Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, George Eliot are stark realists of this period. The characters with vivid imaginative detail are made to seem real. These writers are however critical to their age and even hostile to its dominant assumptions. Thus Hardy attacks Victorian morality, Dickens critical of French Revolution and George Eliot’s novels reflect the rationalism of the age.

CHARLES DICKENS’ “A TALE OF TWO CITIES” (1859)

The novels of Charles Dickens with their capacious social canvases and their voice of social reform seem to invite reading of their political message. Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* is written against the background of French Revolution (1789). He has very well juxtaposed the historical background along with the lives of the individuals-Lucie, Charles Darnay and Sidney Carton.

French Revolution has been the natural outcome of social oppression. England and France have been in a state of turmoil and witnessed the heights of human misery.

In historical fiction, fact should strictly adhere to the imaginative detail and this is what actually Dickens does in his novel. In the chapter called “The Wine Shop” Dickens uses the symbol of the mill to suggest the sense of acute poverty during this time. Another instance of realism is the storming of the Bastille. Dickens describes about flashing weapons, blazing torches, shrieks etc to give a vein of the Revolution. He not only deals with the problems of industrial workers as echoed in Doctor Manette but the lives of Manette and Carton are parables of the Revolutions of social regeneration through suffering and sacrifice. Carton embodies the novel’s central theme of regeneration and also its moral view. His heroic death demonstrates the possibility of rebirth through love and sacrifice. In the opening lines of *A Tale of Two Cities*-‘It was the best of times and worst of times’- Dickens expressed some of the strongly ambivalent feelings about French Revolution. It is true that tender minds are appalled by the bloodshed and horror, but the famous ideal of liberty, equality and fraternity remained an inspiration to all liberal thinkers throughout the nineteenth century.

Inspired by Thomas Carlyle’s *The French Revolution*, to which Dickens refers in the preface to his novel, he says ‘to add something to the popular and picturesque means of understanding that terrible time’⁵, and this surely has been accomplished with remarkable success. In this novel he has interwoven many themes, each with a comment on some aspect of human life and experience and each one of them is an exploration of some contrast or paradox. In the first place we might say that it is concerned with love and hatred. In contrast to the passions of mob stands the clear vision of an individual being motivated by love. For instance Carton’s surrendering himself to the guillotine in the greatest act of love which man is deemed capable.

John Forster remarks in relation to this text as the “...the subtlety with which a private history is associated with a most vivid expression of the spirit of the days of the great French Revolution is but a part of its strength in this respect...Mr.Dickens has obtained his hold upon the public by the energy of an original genius, that penetrates with a quick instinct through the outer coverings of life to much of its essential truth”⁶

Thus, we can say that Dickens with his imagination describes about an event of such gripping human drama as well as importance not only in European history but also in world history. The moral that Dickens conveys through the treatment of history is that violence begets violence and hatred is the reward of hatred.Thus, Forster has well commented on Dickens in this case.

GEORGE ELIOT’S “ADAM BEDE” (1859)

In order to get through George Eliot’s novels, we have to understand them in historical terms and only understanding their location in their own time we can access the time. Eliot takes up issues like gender, class and in particular how valid are the limit which circumscribe women’s lives and

also seek to understand the relations that subsist between people in society. Victorian society has a strict view concerning women. If woman tries to move to the world of freedom and seek employment they are ridiculed. In *Adam Bede* when Dinah Morris becomes a preacher she is criticized. Many people attend her sermon because of her beauty. Let us consider for example, the description of Dinah Morris as she is about to preach: “There is no keenness in her eyes; they seemed rather to be shedding love than making observation; they had the liquid look which tells that the mind is full of what it has to give out, rather than impressed by external objects..”(Eliot pg 31)⁷

Adam Bede is a pastoral novel which presents realistic images of daily life in a quiet rural community. It is the very setting where Eliot grew up—English Midland, Midland superstitions; customs, traditions have been depicted well. Thus there is the superstition in the novel that a knock in the door at night means death in the family.

Eliot’s preoccupation with class division is very prominent. Hetty Sorrel wants to marry Arthur who belonged to feudal class. Perhaps, that is why she punishes Hetty and Arthur. Her characters suffer because they violate some moral code and yield to temptation. Hetty yields to temptation. This sin, the result of moral weakness is followed by punishment and suffering. Arthur leaves her telling that he could never marry her and by this time she is already pregnant with Arthur’s child.

In *Adam Bede* George Eliot creates the illusion of a stable and immemorial rural world. This illusion is appropriate to the values represented by the hero and heroine. Dr Raymond Williams in “The Country and the City” ascribes its pastoral mellowness to the operation of a selective memory and a representation of what he calls the ‘knowable’ rather than the ‘known’ community.⁸

Adam Bede is a schematic moral drama in which sociological interest is subordinated and for the most part fragmentary. The social order of Hayslope is threatened not by historical necessity but by sin. Arthur’s seduction of Hetty is presented as a determined sequence of events. But Eliot’s determinism does not exclude moral responsibility. Arthur is presented as fully responsible being.

Charles Dickens opines on realism of the novel as “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.”⁹ The background of *Adam Bede* is based on family history and she has very well enveloped the facts of locale and personal history of all kind with the imaginative detail of the narrative and that is what makes her novel a big hit.

George Eliot in the same context writes: “Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult...Examine your words well, and you will find that even when you have no motive to be false, it is a very hard thing to say the exact truth, even about your own immediate feelings—much harder than to say

something fine about them which is NOT the exact truth.”¹⁰ Thus, we observe here how Eliot presents truth and her moral concerns prevalent during her time.

THOMAS HARDY'S TESS OF D'URBERVILLES (1891)

Thomas Hardy in this novel depicts the predicament of the agricultural community in England during nineteenth century. Industrial prosperity grew as a result of which agricultural sector declined. Hardy seems passionate about revealing the evils of industrialism. In the novel, the steam threshing machine at Flintcomb Ash made agriculture less in demand.

The theme of the novel is the undeserved suffering of the innocent in a harsh world. Hardy is attacking the Victorian concept of the double standards, by which extra marital sexual activity by men is considered as natural weakness, but if engaged in by women then it is censured as evidence of vice. Tess' confession is a great blow to the Victorian man but he confidently expects to have his own sexual escapade condoned. Moreover, he even asks Izz, one of Tess' dairymaid friends to go with him abroad as his mistress.

The setting of most of the actions takes place in Wessex—the fictional name of Dorset County. It is the very place where Hardy spent his life and thus his descriptions of the landscape, its customs, is truly authentic.

Tess' final moral collapse represents an inevitable yielding to a fate which is too strong for her. Hardy expresses his own view—“...I still maintain that her innate purity remained intact to the very last; though I frankly own that a certain outward purity left her on her last fall, I regarded her then as being in the hands of circumstances, not morally responsible, a mere corpse drifting with the current to her end.”¹¹ (Mahon pg 69)

The narrow morality which questions Tess' purity has been very common in Victorian England. We can ask how Tess can be a pure woman when the novelist himself calls Tess 'A Maiden No More'. Hardy is of the view that Tess may not be a virgin after her seduction by Alec but her spirit and mind continued to be pure. She is an unfortunate victim of circumstances and fate has worked against her happy life. So, it is obvious in this novel that Hardy pleads for a liberal approach towards woman for a more enlightened sexual relationship.

ARGUMENTS

Thus, by critically analyzing the novels it appears that each fiction is not entirely a work of imagination. Realism lies deep into every text and eventually it carries a flavour of morality within them. The intermingling of realism or truth and morality in literature is clearly evident in the texts discussed. Each author has tried to view morality from their own point of view and most

importantly the age and background they belonged to. In this process the truth also gets reflected in the texts. For instance the details of French revolution by Dickens, settings of *Adam Bede* and Hardy's conception of Victorian mentality is actually true. But ultimately it is the readers who decide whether the book is morally good or bad, although the judgments might differ from individual to individual.

However, readers while reading novels engage themselves in 'willing suspension of disbelief'. We know that the scenes or characters that are presented to us are merely a work of fiction but we tend to suspend that knowledge for the sake of literary pleasure. Let's say for instance—the role of chance and coincidences that dwell with the protagonist lives are purely the imaginative creation of the author. Reality has nothing to do with it but setting aside our disbelief we come to accept at some level that the events might be real or actually might have happened and which ultimately leads us to experience emotions of pity and fear. Tess' confession letter does not reach Angel as it slips under the carpet. If it would have reached Angel on time circumstances could be averted.

CONCLUSION

Fictionality is definitely not a bar for understanding the truth of the world. Fiction can tell truth and make something seem real that facts can never do. That is why, we prefer reading *A Tale of Two Cities* rather than any other history books. The descriptions that the author provides is all his own and we do not know how far it is true. Writers write bits from their experience and manipulate them into narrative which is why it sounds so authentic. Moreover, fictions promote moral understanding particularly by educating emotions that are part and parcel of this understanding as we have seen in the novels above. Thus we can conclude with Gordon Graham remark "Novels and poems supply patterns of human relationship, its fulfillment, destruction, or corruption, and these can enter directly into the moral experience of those who are reflecting upon how best to live, because the devices of art reveal to us the internal 'how it feels' as well as external 'how it is'."¹²

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy Of Literature*, pg 225

² Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, pg 225

³ Diana Fritz Cates, *Ethics, Literature and the Emotional Dimension of Moral Understanding*, <www.jstor.org/stable/40008668>

⁴Janet Cameron, *Oscar Wilde on Morality in Literature*. <www.janetcameron.suite101.com/Oscar-wilde-on-morality-in-literature-a316999>

⁵ Ralph W.V.Elliot, A Critical Commentary on Dickens' "A Tale of Two Cities", pg 55

⁶ [John Forster, from an unsigned review, Examiner 10 December 1859], Charles Dickens: *The Critical Heritage.*, Philip Collins(Ed), pg 788-9

⁷ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*

⁸ Neil Roberts, *George Eliot Her Beliefs and Her Art*

⁹ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*. <www.enotes.com/adam-bede-criticism/adam-bede-george-eliot>

¹⁰ David Walsh, *In praise of George Eliot's Adam Bede on its 150th anniversary* <www.wsws.org/articles/2009/dec2009/eli1-d30.shtml>

¹¹ Maureen E.Mahon. *Thomas Hardy's Novels. A Study guide.*

¹² Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*. Pg 251

BIBLIOGRAPHY

"*Adam Bede by George Eliot.*" [enotes.com](http://www.enotes.com). <<http://www.enotes.com/adam-bede-criticism/adam-bede-george-eliot>>.

Brown, Douglas. *Thomas Hardy*. Great Britain: Longmans publication, 1961.

Cameron, Janet. "*Oscar Wilde on Morality in Literature.*" [suite101.com](http://www.janetcameron.suite101.com). <<http://www.janetcameron.suite101.com/oscar-wilde-on-morality-in-literature-a316999>>.

Cates, Diana Fritz. "*Ethics, Literature and the Emotional Dimension of Moral Understanding.*" [Jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org). <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40008668>>.

Collins, Philip(ed). *Charles Dickens : The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge, 2005.

Dentith, Simon. *George Eliot-(Harvester New Reading)*. Great Britain: The Harvester Press, 1986.

Eliot, George. *Adam Bede*. New York: Collier Books, 1962.

Elledge, Scott(ed). *Tess of the D'urbervilles Thomas Hardy*. USA: W.W.Norton & Company, 1965.

Lamarque, Peter. *The Philosophy Of Literature*. USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2009.

Mahon, Maureen. *Thomas Hardy's Novels. A Study Guide*. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1978.

O.Jordan, John(ed). *Cambridge Companion To Charles Dickens*. UK: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2001.

Roberts, Neil. *George Eliot Her Beliefs and Her Art*. USA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975.

W.V.Elliott, Ralph. *A Critical Commentary on Dicken's "A Tale of Two Cities"*. Great Britain: Macmillan, 1966.

Walsh, David. "In Praise of George Eliot's Adam Bede on its 150th Anniversary." wsws.org. <<http://wsws.org/articles/2009/dec2009/eli1-d30.shtml>>.
