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ADAM BEDE – OVERCOMING EGOISM THROUGH SUFFERING

Abstract: George Eliot wrote under the influence of continental philosophers, especially Ludwig Feuerbach and Auguste Comte. Both philosophers claim that the crucial problem of the individual is egoism, which can be transcended by means of sympathy and contact with others. According to Feuerbach and Comte, loyalty to family and community is the best way to transform initial egoism into altruism. This research is aimed at dealing with the issue of egoism in Eliot's first novel, Adam Bede. The three main characters are analysed through the prism of the ethical concept of Feuerbach and Comte. The paper argues that at the beginning of the novel Adam Bede, Arthur Donnithorne and Hetty Sorrel symbolise different aspects of egoism. Adam and Arthur succeed to transcend their egoism through deep suffering, which is viewed as an instrument of moral development. Although critics often cite Hetty Sorrel as a typical representative of unredeemed egoism, this paper argues that she matures through suffering. The beginning of her transformation is marked by the confession of her crimes, which is the initial stage of redemption. However, with the exception of a few characters, the society of Hayslope treats her as an outcast, unable to even attempt to understand and forgive her. Still, although the importance of suffering and attachment to family are underlined in Adam Bede, the novel implies that altruism should not be equated with self-sacrifice. The protagonists, Dinah and Adam succeed in attaining personal fulfillment that is not inconsistent with the common good, that is, a certain reconciliation of egoism and altruism is accomplished.

Key words: George Eliot, Ludwig Feuerbach, Auguste Comte, Adam Bede, moral, egoism, altruism, sympathy.

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1. Introduction

George Eliot is one of the key writers who enabled the transformation of the English novel from a literary genre that served for entertainment into a serious literary form. This writer believed that art generally had a moral and educational function. Therefore, her literary oeuvre is inextricably linked to an ethical concept based on altruism and social responsibility of the individual. The period in which Eliot published novels coincides with the time in which scientific discoveries questioned the divine origin of man, as a result of which the influence of religion on individuals began to decline drastically. The writer herself was an agnostic, and part of her artistic endeavour was to transfer the question of morality from the supernatural to the ethical sphere. Eliot believed that England was a great living society whose evolution and progress depended on the interpersonal relationships of its members. According to her, everyone is born an egoist, and reaching maturity is reflected precisely in the rejection of petty and selfish personal goals for the sake of higher and nobler aims. In order to become an integrated member of society, the individual has to transcend his/her inborn egoism, which means that he/she has to accept his/her place in society and come to terms with the limitations that society imposes. As George Levine (1969) persuasively argues, in the fictional world of George Eliot, those characters who do not come to understand that the past and society, especially our nearest and dearest, lay great claims on us, are starting the path of destruction and dehumanisation (p.220). Those characters fit into the category of 'unredeemed egoists', and they are the typical antagonists in Eliot's literary oeuvre.

Although George Eliot was not a philosopher herself, the influence of continental philosophers such as Ludwig Feuerbach, Auguste Comte, and Benedict Spinoza is quite evident in her fiction. These philosophers are representatives of 'Higher Criticism', a critical method that deals with demythologising sacred texts (Gatens, 2013:p.215). Eliot, similarly to these philosophers, was interested in the human side of religion, its moral impact and sympathetic impulse (Parveen, 2018:p.165). Therefore, we should not oversimplify the influence of the mentioned philosophers by claiming that Eliot's novels are the mere translation of their philosophical theories. However, it may be argued that her novels serve as a testing ground for some of their ideas.

When it comes to Eliot's first novel, the influence and presence of Feuerbach's and Comte's ideas is obvious. In his influential *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach (1854) distinguishes three basic human powers: the ability to love, to think, and the power of will (p.3). His starting hypothesis is that each individual is dominated

by one of these three abilities, and that everything one strives for testifies of the motivating power of his/her actions (Ibid, p.14). According to Feuerbach, in order to be truly moral, the individual has to develop two of these three abilities – the ability to love and the power of will. Morality requires a strong will, a will that cannot be shaken and that must be in accordance with valid moral norms. In order for an individual to be moral, he/she must understand morality as his/her obligation (Ibid, p.46). Just willpower, however, is not enough. No matter how much one tries to be correct, there is always a gap between oneself as a sinful being on the one hand and moral perfection on the other. This gap may only be overcome through love and sympathy. Although Feuerbach perceives all three major human powers as important, love stands out among them as the noblest and most divine (Ibid, p.8).

Similarly, Auguste Comte, the founder of sociology and coiner of the term 'altruism', distinguishes three regions in man: heart, mind, and character. According to Comte, the conflict between egoism and altruism takes place in the heart. Out of 10 instincts that are connected to the heart, 5 are egoistic (nutrition, sex, maternal, military/destructive, and industrial/constructive). The dominance of egoistic instincts is a clear indication that egoism is the natural state of man. As stated by Comte (1973), if one strives for moral perfection, he/she must move from initial egoism (p.556). In order to overcome that natural state, the mind has to control, to restrain the heart, which is often unstable and inconsistent.

As suggested by Feuerbach (1854), the individual needs the other man in order to reach a fuller understanding of him/herself. The other serves as my objective consciousness that helps me to have a clearer insight into my faults (p.65). Similarly to Feuerbach, who claims that man gains complete self-awareness through contact with another man, Comte (1973) claims that the individual finds the source of his own stability in another man (p.565). This philosopher is famous for always giving priority to society over the individual, supporting such an attitude with a statement that family and society are collective beings that lead to the conception of humanity (Comte, 1877:p.22). Although Comte advocates the position that everyone should strive to live for others and to put their interests above his/her own, he also underlines that in practice this requires certain effort. Therefore, the next section of this paper deals precisely with the efforts of the main characters in *Adam Bede* to recognise their own mistakes, which is the first step on the way from innate egoism to a desired altruism.

2. Adam Bede, Arthur Donnithorne, and Hetty Sorrel – Three Different Aspects of Egoism

Adam Bede, Arthur Donnithorne, and Hetty Sorrel are the main characters of Eliot's first novel, *Adam Bede*. These characters are going to be analysed through the prism of the ethical concept of Feuerbach and Comte. The aim of this analysis is to demonstrate that all three characters are selfish, at least at the beginning of the novel, although their egoism manifests itself in a different way. For example, Adam Bede is a hard-working and responsible member of the community, but without compassion for people who do not possess firmness and constancy of character. On the other hand, Arthur Donnithorne is the embodiment of sensibility, but he is devoid of the sense of responsibility. However, both of them experience maturation and moral progress thanks to suffering, which is suggested by Feuerbach as pivotal to achieving altruism. Finally, this subsection also deals with the character of Hetty Sorrel, who is interpreted by the majority of critics as an unredeemed egoist, a frivolous person without a consciousness of the world apart from the one directly linked to her. Still, this paper argues that Hetty experiences a certain awakening and moral progress, development that may not be great in its effects, but is in accordance with Hetty's nature.

2.1. Adam Bede versus Arthur Donnithorne

Feuerbach, as mentioned, insists that each individual should develop his/her two basic powers – the ability to love and the power of will. There is no morality without the harmony and complementation of these two fundamental powers, and it is precisely this harmony that is lacking in two major male characters in *Adam Bede*. Whereas Adam symbolises the power of will, Arthur is the embodiment of sensuality. Both go through a period of suffering that enables them to expand their consciousness and to become better and nobler people. Suffering helps Adam become more lenient towards the weaknesses of others, whereas Arthur takes responsibility for what he has done and becomes aware of how far-reaching the consequences of our folly and thoughtlessness can be.

At the very beginning of the novel it is clear that Adam Bede is an exceptional young man. With all his indisputable virtues, such as honesty, diligence, and attachment to family, he also has a certain flaw, and that is excessive severity towards the mistakes of others. The narrator highlights Adam's problematic attitude towards his father, who is a drunkard and a dangler. He fails to realise that not all people

possess the firmness and constancy inherent in him. It is obvious that Adam is not a character driven by instincts and feelings – he is a rational man who judges actions based on the consequences those actions led to. Although he is appreciated and respected in his village, the novel suggests that he lacks a certain gentleness, understanding for the weaknesses of others. Therefore, his moral development goes in the direction of developing sympathetic and imaginative capacities that are according to Moira Gatens (2013) necessary to reach moral maturity in the fictional world of George Eliot (p.216). Such a claim goes in line with Feuerbach's hypothesis that, although willpower is important, the most sublime human power is a man's ability to love and sympathise. As Forest Pyle (1993) notices, imagination and sympathy are significant because they soften the contrast between self and others (p.6). The fatal flaw of the novel's main characters (with the exception of Adam) is that they see themselves as isolated individuals whose decisions and choices do not affect anyone. In order to reach moral maturity, they have to realize that they live in a society of mutually dependent members. It is only the development of imagination that will help them to broaden their horizons, mature and become representatives of an ethic responsive to both self and others (Blumberg, 2013:p.12).

Arthur Donnithorne is the character who enjoys life and its benefits, who ignores eventual consequences and naively believes that only his sincere intentions matter. Whereas Hetty takes his courtship seriously, for Arthur this is just a pastime stemming from a young man's natural urge to spend time with beautiful women. As it is obvious that he lacks willpower, his moral maturation goes in the direction of restraining the heart by reason. Arthur, due to his high social status that has always allowed him to act recklessly, hopes that any damage he causes by his rashness he could make up with his innate generosity. As Blumberg (2023) persuasively argues, only suffering and facing his own thoughtlessness can teach Arthur the moral lesson that wealth prevented him from learning: 'that not everything can be bought or redeemed or repaired by money' (p.9).

At the beginning of the novel, there is a sharp contrast between Arthur and Adam. Whereas Adam is the embodiment of rationality, hard work and willpower, Arthur is the embodiment of sensibility. Adam lacks sensibility, Arthur lacks imagination and willpower. Their moral growth goes in the direction of developing the capacities they lack. However, the alliteration present in their names suggests that they also have some common features. For example, they share the ignorance of personal flaws and weaknesses. Therefore, the first step in the moral transformation of both characters is awakening an awareness of their mistakes. In the case of Adam, the beginning of moral maturation is indicated by the death of his father, which

represents the initial sparkle that influences Adam to view relationship with his father, but also his character in general, in a wholly different light:

‘Adam thought but little to-day of the hard work and the earnings he had spent on his father: his thoughts ran constantly on that the old man’s feelings had been in moments of humiliation, when he had held down his head before the rebukes of his son. When our indignation is borne in submissive silence, we are apt to feel twinges of doubt afterwards as to our own generosity, if not justice;’ (Eliot, 1960:pp.195–96)

In Feuerbach’s view, just like in Eliot’s, suffering is something which elevates man and helps him overcome the routine of the ordinary and the everyday. Only deep suffering can shake life from its roots and transform a man.

‘Deep, unspeakable suffering may well be called a baptism, a regeneration, the transition into a new state. [...] all the intense emotions which had filled the days and nights of past week, and were compressing themselves again like an eager crowd into the hours of this single morning, made Adam look back on all previous years as if they had been a dim sleepy existence, as he had only now awaked to full consciousness.’ (Eliot, 1960:pp.409–10)

The key event that influences the development of sensibility in Adam is facing the devastating news concerning Hetty Sorrel. It is only when he is confronted with inconvertible facts that point to Hetty’s crime that Adam admits to himself that he misjudged Hetty and that he was overly harsh to his former friend. The climax of his moral development is the moment in which he reaches out his hand in reconciliation to Arthur. Only this, converted Adam, is able to see the situation realistically. Although he sympathises with Hetty and her suffering, Adam finally sees her as she is: a frivolous and superficial person.

As far as Arthur is concerned, he is not a character devoid of imagination and sensibility. However, he lacks a sense of responsibility and willpower. Whereas Adam’s awakening of consciousness occurs as a consequence of the loss of his father, Arthur’s moral development is triggered by his confrontation with Adam. Although Arthur convinced himself that he hadn’t done anything that couldn’t be repaired, he is forced to view his actions from a different perspective. Confronting Adam made him reflect on his actions and realise they were reckless and inappropriate. Adam is the voice of reason admonishing Arthur, that what he sees as a fleeting adventure, Hetty perceives as a courtship that will be crowned with marriage. Still, after Arthur returns from Ireland, he is taken aback by the news that Hetty was sued for infanticide. Aware that what has passed cannot be changed, Arthur attempts

to at least alleviate the misfortune that befell his dear people through his fault. At the peak of his moral development he no longer thinks about how his actions will appear in the eyes of others, but rushes to save Hetty from being hanged, when he has failed to achieve her complete pardon. In addition, Arthur begs Adam that neither he nor the Poysers leave the village where they have spent so many years. Under the given circumstances, it seems to him that the most correct decision is for him to leave the village.

2.2. Hetty Sorrel

In contrast with Adam and Arthur, of whom the former symbolises reason and willpower, the latter sensibility, Hetty is not distinguished by exceptional character traits. She is adorned with beauty, but only externally, without the virtues that would highlight that beauty even more. Hetty is so steeped in egoism that she is not at all touched by the fates of the people around her, not even by the death of Thias Bede and the pain that Adam feels because of it. Nancy Henry (2008) states that Adam is morally superior to Hetty because he is devoted to his family and local community (p.56).² The contrast between the two of them is also indicated by the narrator, who remarks that Hetty is like a plant without roots, whereas Adam often speaks about his attachment to family, noting that man is not a bird who flies away from the nest as soon as it gets its wings. Some critics claim that the author is too harsh towards Hetty and such statements are based on the fact that she, unlike Arthur, is not given a chance for redemption and forgiveness. Moreover, Nancy Ann Mark notices that the narrator has also contributed to the negative reception of the character of Hetty Sorrel. For example, we learn how she feels and what she thinks, not from her, but from the narrator. Therefore, this critic concludes that the reader's opinion of Hetty is negative largely due to the narrator's bias, whose suggestions make it impossible to view her in a positive light (Mark, 2003:p.450). Still, if the fact that the narrator influences the formation of the reader's opinion with her comments is indisputable, attention should be paid to Hetty's deeds, which speak for themselves. Although the statement that Hetty went through a very difficult period is correct, it is not clear how much Hetty is aware of what she has done and what her responsibility is. The truth is that Hetty Sorrel is a vain and narcissistic person who believes that everyone should admire her beauty, a character whose 'actions are guided by an

²For Comte, attachment to the family is of paramount importance for overcoming egoism as the natural state of the individual. In his opinion, the only way for society to progress is to subjugate individuality to the social role of the individual and that the family is the basic unit of society (Comte, 1973:p.555).

aversion to pain and an attraction to pleasure' (Blumberg, 2023:p.12). Devoid of imagination, she is not aware of the consequence of her illegitimate pregnancy. She demonstrates her shallowness by not taking any action in terms of solving her status because she is afraid of society's condemnation. Although Hetty confesses to Dinah that she has been worried about what would happen to the baby, her own child is, in her own words, a stone around her neck. Her careless attitude towards her newborn child once again confirms that Hetty is an unredeemed egoist who only cares about herself. Her behaviour pattern has not changed much since her early youth. For example, Hetty has never felt any gratitude towards her aunt and uncle who took her in after her parents died. Therefore, Hetty possesses a flaw that qualifies her as a classic antagonist in the fiction of George Eliot – the conviction that she is independent in relation to her family and her surroundings. As George Levine (1969) persuasively argues, the individual in the fictional world of George Eliot cannot completely isolate him/herself from his/her family and environment, and even when someone succeeds in doing so, it inevitably leads to destruction and dehumanisation (pp.219–20).³

However, we cannot agree with the critics who claim that Hetty shows no signs of any moral progress whatsoever. Whereas Knoepflmacher (1970) propounds that Hetty has primarily the function of an agent who transforms Adam and Arthur into 'sadder and wiser men' (p.37), this article advocates the position that she still achieves some progress under the influence of Dinah Morris, who is her regular visitor in prison. Only in the company of Dinah Morris, who is the embodiment of Eliot's concept of sympathy, Hetty finds the strength to talk about what she has gone through and the circumstances that forced her to get rid of her own child. Confession is both in traditional Christianity and in Feuerbach's humanism essential in order to bring about repentance. If anything, Hetty's confession makes her think for a moment of others who also have suffered, such as Adam and the Poysers. Even though she has been selfish to the core for most of her life, Hetty still possesses a grain of humanity, unlike most of those around her. The final impression is that 'suffering comes in unjust allotment' (Blumberg, 2013:p.10) and that most members of society have not developed sympathy. Whereas a few individuals forgive Hetty, society as a whole rejects her mercilessly and unwaveringly, without the slightest attempt to penetrate her motives and forgive her.

³That man being dependent on the other members of the community is suggested not only by Comte, but also by Feuerbach. For him, the other is important not only because he/she represents a sort of a mirror in which we can see our reflection, but also because he/she is our connection to the world: '[m]y fellow-man is the bond between me and the world. I am, and I feel myself, dependent on the world, because I first feel myself dependent on other men' (Feuerbach, 1854:p.82).

In conclusion, it is an indisputable fact that Eliot accepts the majority of Feuerbach and Comte's ideas, such as the importance of suffering and attachment to family. In her fictional world there is a lot of suffering, both deserved and undeserved. Her first novel suggests that pain and suffering, particularly the suffering of others, can be productive and set one on the path of self-development and moral maturation. However, even though Eliot recognises the importance of suffering as an instrument of personal progress, she is not so optimistic about self-sacrifice. Although Dinah and Adam share certain doubts about the moral propriety of their right to marital happiness due to Hetty's severe punishment, their final resolution to nonetheless marry symbolises a sort of middle ground between the condition of egoism and altruism. Eliot's decision to end the novel in such a way is part of her implication that self-sacrifice that will not bring good either to oneself or others is not desirable because it is destructive to the whole community. Dinah and Adam's position should not be compared to the position of Maggie Tulliver, whose choice would cause misery to others. In *Adam Bede* we have a wholly different situation, one in which 'the other's loss is inevitable no matter how one behaves or what one renounces' (Blumberg, 2009:p.553). Therefore, Dinah and Adam come to an understanding that the renunciation of their desires could not possibly bring Hetty back. Moreover, although Hetty suffered the most and was punished most cruelly, Adam also had his share of suffering. The narrator suggests that Adam and Dinah's marital happiness is earned and that they should not have any doubts whatsoever concerning their moral rectitude towards Hetty. In contrast with Adam's attraction to Hetty, which is based upon mere passion and Adam's misjudgment of Hetty's traits, Dinah and Adam's relationship is deeper and more mature. Their love is closer to the definition of affection, which is the highest form of love in both Feuerbach and Eliot's view. That form of love is not devoid of suffering and pain. Dinah and Adam have witnessed and experienced various forms of loss and pain during the course of their lives. Those experiences taught him an important lesson – that pain and suffering are inevitable in life and that marriage is a union of two people ready to share not only pleasures and happiness, but also sadness and pain.

3. Conclusion

By viewing the three main characters in *Adam Bede* through the prism of Feuerbach and Comte's ethical concept, this paper has attempted to demonstrate that for Eliot, as well as for the two philosophers, the chief obstacle to the moral

maturation of an individual is egoism. This writer believes that egoism is a natural, innate condition of an individual that could be transcended through connecting with others. In order to reach moral maturation, it is necessary to develop rationality, sympathy and imagination. The fundamental phase in the process of moral development is suffering. As Barabara Hardy (1994) notices, for Eliot pain is productive (p.32), and it is precisely suffering that enables the development of sensibility in Adam and the strengthening of willpower in Arthur. Even though both achieve moral progress, the final impression is that Adam is morally superior to Arthur due to his attachment to family and the wider community, which for Feuerbach, Comte, and Eliot is fundamental to overcoming the initial egoism. Although the critics have often cited Hetty Sorrel as an example of a hardened egoist, this article argues that suffering affects not only Adam and Arthur, but also Hetty, just to a lesser extent. However, Hetty experiences only the first stage of moral progress triggered by suffering, which is becoming aware of one's own faults and seeing oneself as a part of the environment. The moment of Hetty's awakening occurs when she breaks silence and confesses her crime to Dinah. Nonetheless, with the exception of a few characters, the society of Hayslope treats her as an outcast, unable to even attempt to understand and forgive her. Although the importance of suffering and attachment to family are underlined in Adam Bede, the novel implies that altruism should not be equated with self-sacrifice. The protagonists, Dinah and Adam succeed in attaining personal fulfillment that is not inconsistent with the common good, that is, a certain reconciliation of egoism and altruism is accomplished.

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АДАМ БИД – ПРЕВАЗИЛАЖЕЊЕ ЕГОИЗМА КРОЗ ПАТЊУ

Резиме

Џорџ Елиот, једна од најзначајнијих представница викторијанске књижевности, писала је под утицајем континенталних филозофа. На њу су велики утицај извршили Лудвиг Фојербах и Огист Конт. Они су многоме обликовали концепцију морала код Елиот, у чијој је основи емпатија и саосећање, али и инсистирање на друштвеној одговорности појединца. Циљ овог рада јесте анализа три лика из романа *Адам Бид* кроз призму етичког концепта Фојербаха и Конта, који се заснива на превазилажењу егоизма и његовој трансформацији у алтруизам. Рад ће се посебно усредсредити на анализу моралног преображаја Адама Биде, Артура Дониторна и Хети Сорел, који у сва три случаја наступа

као последица патње, која је код Фојербаха кључна етапа у процесу sazревања. На почетку романа ова три лика представљају различите аспекте егоизма. Њихов морални развој, нарочито код мушких ликова, бива подстакнут дубоком патњом, на коју Елиот и Фојербах гледају као на продуктивну у смислу развијања саосећања и ширења видика. Иако је sazревање очигледније код мушких ликова, рад указује на то да је, супротно ставу већине критичара, до моралног прогреса дошло и код Хети Сорел, која се често наводи као типична представница окорелог егоизма. Међутим, она бива најсуровије кажњена и прогнана из друштва, а становници Хејслопа немају нимало разумевања за њу, нити покушавају да продру у мотиве њених поступака и опросте јој. Иако рад наглашава значај Фојербахових и Контових идеја, као што су приврженост породици и важност патње, импликација романа јесте да алтруизам којем теже ликови у фиктивном свету Џорџ Елиот не треба поистовећивати са самопожртвовањем. Протагонисти романа, Адам Бид и Дајна Морис, успевају да досегну самоактуелизацију која није у нескладу са општим добром, што представља неку врсту помирења два наизглед дијаметрално супротна појма, егоизма и алтруизма.

► *Кључне речи:* Џорџ Елиот, Лудвиг Фојербах, Огист Конт, Адам Бид, морал, егоизам, алтруизам, саосећање.

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