

# **Adam Bede Study Guide**

## **Adam Bede by George Eliot**

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# Plot Summary

A love triangle roils the peaceful pastoral life of a rural English village. With this novel, the earliest vestiges of what may be considered feminist consciousness make an appearance in English literature. The reader experiences the heavy existential burden of the British countryside of the same era depicted in Thomas Hardy's dark novels, but with a lighter authorial touch. The timeless theme of love and its casualties emerges through the eyes and words of an outstanding woman novelist who is the contemporary of the French woman novelist George Sand. The former, George Eliot is a nom de plume for Mary Anne Evans, while George Sand is the nom de plume of Aurora Dupin.

Although the story necessarily involves two young men vying for the affections of one Hester ("Hetty") Sorrel, it is the woman's experiences, viewpoint and sensibilities that form the foundation of the narrative and provide color and drama. Perhaps both contemporary authors who took the name George felt they needed to disguise their gender to write in depth about the European female consciousness of the mid-1800s. In any event, the appearance of this novel alongside those of George Eliot's French counterpart marks an important—if ironic—time in the evolution of literature that helped to set the stage for later advances in the status of women.

Adam Bede is a down-to-earth farm lad in Hayslope, a small northern English town close to the Scottish border. He is described as a rough-hewn, tall youth with jet black hair and dark eyes "under strongly-marked, prominent and mobile eyebrows, indicating a mixture of Celtic blood." He is an honest, God-fearing youth who falls in love with the mercurial Hetty and believes that she also loves him. But Hetty hides from Adam her passion for the aristocratic Arthur Donnithorn, a wealthy college student with a strong sense of entitlement.

Arthur plays along with Hetty to feed her passion, and she conceives a child which she hides from her family and friends as best she can. One day, Adam Bede sees the couple kissing passionately deep in the woods and realizes that he's been played for a patsy. Adam angrily confronts Arthur when they are alone and demands to know his intentions with regard to Hettie. He tells Arthur that he loves Hettie and wants to marry her. Hetty agrees to marry Adam and not long after, Arthur writes a letter to Hetty in which he tries to break off their affair. This only inflames her passion, and she sets out on a solitary journey to find Arthur in Windsor. Along the way, she delivers her child in the woods and in a panic, buries the infant in the ground and leaves it to die.

Hetty is arrested and charged with child murder. Both Adam and Arthur visit her in jail, but her mental health has deteriorated badly and she seems detached from any kind of reality. Just the day before her scheduled execution, Arthur carries by swift horseback a legal pardon and a stay of the execution. Adam Bede returns to his village in a profound depression. Gradually, he becomes interested in Dinah Morris, a young woman who is becoming a Methodist evangelical and who was once the love interest of his younger brother, Seth.

Adam and Dinah marry and begin to build a happy family, as common sense replaces passion in this quiet rural countryside.



# Chapters 1-5

## Chapters 1-5 Summary

Chapter 1: Adam and Seth Bede work alongside several other carpenters at the workshop of Jonathan Burge, master craftsman, fashioning everything from doors and windows to items of furniture. Seth, Adam's younger and less decisive brother announces with pleasure that he has finally finished his door. The other workmen pause briefly and look over at the door, then break up into laughter. Adam, although not laughing, has a wry smile on his face. When Seth asks what's funny about the door, Adam tells him he forgot the panels. One of the men pokes fun at Seth for being a Methodist ("Methody") and insinuates it's because of his religion that he made the mistake. Adam coaxes his brother to take his error and the ribbing in stride, saying everyone makes mistakes. When the town clock begins to strike 6 p.m., all the men but Adam and Seth immediately drop their tools and race out the door. Adam asks Seth if he's coming directly home; his brother says he'll stop to see the beautiful Methodist lay preacher Dinah Morris first.

Chapter 2: By 6:45 p.m., villagers young and old swarm the town square to witness something revolutionary—a woman preaching the Gospel. Dinah Morris, a determined and crafty woman, is nonplussed about the assembly. She raises her left hand as the sun sets and stares at the crowd in her Quaker cap. She calls in a firm voice for the congregation to join her in a prayer for a blessing. Dinah tells the crowd about her childhood experience of meeting John Wesley, founder of Methodism, as a white-haired old man with a soft voice. With the crowd—some Methodists, some other denominations—gathered round, Dinah gives a lengthy sermon that draws tears and provokes smiles as she plays the heartstrings of these unsophisticated folks like a well-tempered clavier.

Chapter 3: After Dinah's sermon, Seth Bede joins her and they walk through the cool evening air toward her home. Self-consciously, Seth reaffirms his love for her and raises the issue of marriage. Seth tells her he would not want to intrude or restrict her ministry or involvement with the church and quotes scripture to the effect that a good Christian marriage with children is one way to do God's will. Dinah sidesteps his sophistry and tells him plainly that she does not see herself being married, but will continue to pray for him. Crushed, Seth drops her off and heads home. At this point, George Eliot makes another authorial intrusion into the narrative to describe Methodism and remind the reader that both Seth and Dinah are Methodists. She describes Methodism as peculiar and out of the mainstream, adding that Seth and Dinah deserve the reader's sympathy.

Chapter 4: Adam's mother, Lisbeth, encourages him to eat some supper even though a coffin he's working in isn't yet finished for a burial service the next morning. Adam says he's not hungry and his mother encourages him to eat and not work all through the night to meet his deadline. "Isn't the coffin promised?" he asks his mother. "Can they bury the man without a coffin? I'd work my right hand off sooner than deceive people with lies i'



that way." She frets that Adam might move away soon, leaving his aging parents. This angers Adam and he retreats to the basement to work on the coffin. Seth tries to help Adam, but his brother tells him to eat his supper and put himself and Lisbeth to bed. At 6 a.m. the next day, Adam and Seth deliver the coffin in time for the burial. When Lisbeth answers a "thud" on the front door, Adam tells her his father, Thias Bede, has fallen into the water and says he and Seth are trying to revive him.

Chapter 5: In his ornate and comfortable home, The Rev. Adolphus Irwine, vicar of Hayslope, gets into a heated discussion of Methodists with a local resident, Joshua Rann. Specifically, they debate the importance and impact of Dinah Morris, the lay Methodist preacher who'd drawn such a large and enthusiastic crowd in the town square. Irwine asks Rann his opinion on what should be done about Dinah. "Well, your reverence, I'm not for takin' any measures again' the young woman. She's well enough if she'd let alone preachin'; an' I hear she's a-goin away back to her own country soon," Rann says. "But that Will Maskery, sir, is the rampageousest Methodis as can be an' I make no doubt it was him as stirred up th' young woman to preach." As their conversation swirls, they are interrupted by the appearance of Arthur Donnithorne, godson to Reverend Irwine. The reverend tells Adam that he and his wife would like to meet the young Methodist firebrand.

## Chapters 1-5 Analysis

Most of the major characters are introduced in these chapters, and the author paints a vivid picture of life in rural England. With thick regional accents, Eliot puts flesh and blood on the names of her characters and describes a simple, hard-working and honest way of life for the residents of Hayslope and surrounding villages. Also, the theme of Methodism is introduced in the person of Dinah Morris who is a young lay Methodist preacher. Not only is it an oddity that a woman preaches, but also a fact that Methodism is a relatively new Protestant branch of Christianity not without its skeptics and antagonists. Since Henry VIII, Catholicism has been replaced by the Church of England, which is only a slightly more liberal denomination than the Catholic church. Methodism, started by John Wesley, seems dangerously radical to these uncomplicated farm folk, including Adam Bede, the novel's protagonist.

Adam's religion is hard work; he is a skilled carpenter who is proud of his trade and his abilities. His younger brother, Seth, looks up to and emulates Adam who is a godlike figure to the younger man. Adam's is the character least changed by the machinations of the novel, although he does experience personal and spiritual growth. He is probably educated only through the elementary grades and finds the Bible his most constant reading companion. He takes all its stories literally to heart and believes every one of them.

In Chapter 3, the reader learns of the attraction of Seth Bede for Dinah Morris, the Methodist preacher, thus setting up the romantic quintet that will involve Seth, Dinah, Adam and Hetty Sorrel. The fifth person in this web is Arthur Donnithorne, one of the



landed gentry whose aristocratic upbringing blinds him to the real feelings of real people—such as Hetty Sorrel—with whom he comes into contact.



# Chapters 6-10

## Chapters 6-10 Summary

Chapter 6: A bucolic scene unfolds with Dinah Morris' aunt Judith Poyser trying to interest her in working in the barn while Nancy bakes pies in the oven and Hetty Sorrel polishes the furniture at the ancestral Hall Farm. The landlord, Squire Donnithorne, drops by for a visit and tells Mrs. Poyser he'd like to speak to her husband about raising horses. When he learns that Hetty is working at the dairy, he decides to stop and say hello. The squire tells Mrs. Poyser that he might like to farm the land they lease someday. But she says he wouldn't enjoy it because "farming is putting money into your pocket wi' your right hand and fetching it out wi' your left."

Chapter 7: Hetty blushes flirtatiously when Arthur Donnithorn speaks to her, inviting her to dance with him at a celebration on his estate July 30. Mrs. Poyser answers that they would be pleased to attend, and Donnithorne asks Hetty to promise him two dances. She agrees.

Chapter 8: Adolphus Irwine, rector of Broxton who'd arrived with Donnithorne, asks Dinah about her conversion to Methodism. He asks her if the advances of young men ever distract her from her preaching and she says, "I've got no room for such feelings." Mrs. Poyser tells Hetty that Adam Bede's father has drowned; she is shocked and very upset by the news.

Chapter 9: Hetty finds herself day-dreaming about Donnithorne, little concerned with Adam Bede who is being promoted by family members as a good match for her. But Hetty sees Adam as a poor, struggling man with elderly parents to care for, while Donnithorne is a dashing aristocrat with an air of wealth and luxury.

Chapter 10: Lizbeth Bede prepares her husband's corpse for funeral services, cleans and straightens his room for visitors. Perturbed at Adam's absence, Lizbeth finds her son in the barn, sleeping off the fatigue of overwork and grief. The dog Gyp barks and awakens Adam, who says he will come and say goodbye to his beloved father. Once Lizbeth's hysteria quiets a bit, Seth Bede finds himself delighted to have some time alone with Dinah.

## Chapters 6-10 Analysis

Amidst the everyday comings and goings of rural people in the Hayslope community, Hetty Sorrel begins to stand out because of her wistful daydreaming about Arthur Donnithorne. Initially neither Mrs. Poyser—Hetty's aunt—nor Adam Bede detect this growing infatuation. Adam loves Hetty and because of his ingenuous nature assumes she returns that affection. Thus is born the secrecy that surrounds Hetty's blossoming affair.





On a visit to Hayslope, the Anglican Reverend Augustus Irwine grills Dinah Morris about her Methodism and her preaching. Using the Socratic method, he asks her a series of questions to draw her out such as, Does the Methodist church encourage women to preach? Do you think your youth handicaps you in your ministry? To these, Dinah answers that the Methodist church, although not encouraging women to preach, does not prohibit it and says her youth gives her a greater empathy with children because she is closer to her own childhood and is very interested in the proper upbringing of young people.



# Chapters 11-15

## Chapters 11-15 Summary

Chapter 11: Adam rummages around in the carpentry workshop, looking for some wood for his father's coffin. He reminds himself that "there's nothing but what's bearable as long as a man can work." His intention is to gather the appropriate wood and take it into town so his mother isn't disturbed by the noise of construction. He hears light footsteps in the house at around 4:30 a.m. and hopes it may be Hetty, but is pleased to find Dinah instead. "It was like dreaming of the sunshine and awakening in the moonlight," the narrator observes. When Lizbeth comes downstairs they gather for breakfast and Adam tells his mother his plans for the coffin. She demands that he build it alone, with no assistance from Seth. In good spirits, he agrees.

Chapter 12: Arthur Donnithorne admires himself in his full-length mirror when he awakens at his father's estate. He tells Pym, his dog, that he wants to go fishing for a week at Eagledale but he finds that his favorite horse has been lamed. He accepts another horse and heads off. He stops for a moment in a wooded area, and sees Hetty coming his way. Arthur walks along her side and continues walking before opening his mouth. He asks her about her regular passage on the trail, and the power of their mutual attractions gets the better of them. Hetty drops her basket and Arthur, with trembling fingers, places it gently on her shoulder. She tells him she must hasten to an appointment with Mrs. Pomfret who is teaching her to be a "lady's maid," and they part company.

Chapter 13: Hetty leaves Mrs. Pomfret at 7:45 p.m. and encounters Arthur Donnithorne again in the woods on her way home. They stop and talk, he puts his arm around her waist and kisses her. They part again and Hetty arrives home floating on Cloud 9. Donnithorne rushes off and questions his interest in Hetty deciding that although he can't marry someone of her lowly social status, he can allow himself a fling.

Chapter 14: When she returns home, Hetty encounters Dinah who tells her she looks very happy. She also reminds Hetty that she will soon be leaving for her home village, Snowslope. Hetty isn't interested in supper and doesn't want to go to bed when everyone does.

Chapter 15: Hetty entertains notions of herself as an upper-class lady with all her finery, living a carefree life with Arthur. Dinah comes into Hetty's room and cautions her that some "trouble" may be awaiting her; she says her awareness came naturally to her as a spiritual awareness. Hetty asks, what kind of trouble? But Dinah simply says that everyone experiences trouble and she should therefore seek her "Heavenly Father" as a support against that "evil day."



## Chapters 11-15 Analysis

Although most of the people close to Hetty Sorrel seem oblivious to the fact she is in romantic thrall to Arthur Donnithorne, Dinah Morris senses something afoot and cautions her to put her life in God's hands to avoid "trouble." Playing the innocent, Hetty asks Dinah what kind of trouble she means but Dinah only specifies that something evil may befall her. Dinah has no knowledge of Hetty's affair, but her instincts tell her that Hetty seems fey, or exhilarated as before death.

The author describes Dinah as possessing "sympathetic divination" which also enables her to pick up on the fact that Adam is crazy about Hetty. Dinah visits Adam in his workshop, and pets his dog Gyp. She tells Adam she has great empathy for animals because they may have many needs to communicate but are limited because they have no speech. Humans, on the other hand, have many words at their disposal and yet still find it difficult to communicate their innermost thoughts and feelings, Dinah says. Whether this is a ploy to get Adam to open up about his desire for Hetty is unclear, but if Dinah is possessed of divine insight into the souls of men she may also be aware that Adam could be touched by the same evil that she cautioned Hetty about.

In this same section, the reader gets a vivid picture of Arthur Donnithorne as a self-absorbed, superficial aristocrat concerned only with his own wants and wishes including a fishing expedition to the Hayslope area. In the same way that he might direct a servant to prepare a certain horse for him to ride, he approaches his relationship with Hetty on the basis of whatever pleasure and momentary distraction it may provide. He is, in a word, selfish.



# Chapters 16-20

## Chapters 16-20 Summary

Chapter 16: Arthur Donnithorne sets out to see the Reverend Irwine, but meets up with Adam Bede along the way. They stop to talk and Arthur is reminded of his admiration for this plain-spoken, upright carpenter. Arthur says he doubts that Adam is ever tortured with self-doubt, and Adam agrees. Their paths diverge and Arthur bids farewell to Adam. When he gets to the rectory, Reverend Irwine is engaged in eating a big breakfast. They talk philosophically for some time, and Arthur never gets around to raising the question about his relations with Hetty. Finally, Irwine must leave for an appointment and Adam heads home with the realization "he must trust now to his own swimming."

Chapter 17: In this chapter, the author indulges herself in a long-winded ramble about her feelings and perceptions of her characters. She speciously speculates on their motives and quizzes the reader on his/her perceptions. The chapter serves as a break in the action and a shift of pace.

Chapter 18: "There's no real making amends in this world, any more, nor you can mend a wrong subtraction by doing your addition right," Adam Bede muses after his father's death but especially as the organ music swells during the funeral at Hayslope Church. Adam struggles to find some meaning in his life and to reject the notion that his father's life—like everyone's—was basically absurd.

Chapter 19: Adam thinks constantly of Hetty and the possibility they might wed. Although he has neither proposed marriage nor engagement, his yearning for her grows into obsession. He weighs the pros and cons of such an arrangement, figuring how he would handle every question that might come from his family. Adam takes inventory of himself and realizes he has imperfections along with strengths, such as his carpentry skills.

Chapter 20: Adam dresses up in his Sunday church clothes and heads to Hall Farm for a visit with the Poysers and perhaps Hetty. His mother, Lisbeth, questions him about his dress, and he tries to pull away because he knows that she suspects him of trying to impress Hetty. At Hall Farm, he encounters Hetty while she is picking currants. She blushes when she sees him, which he mistakenly reads as a sign of her love. In truth, she is thinking about when she might see Arthur Donnithorne again.

## Chapters 16-20 Analysis

In Chapter 18 some of the poignancy and fragility of human life is transmitted to the page through Adam Bede. At his father's funeral, Adam realizes that life is short and that he must make some adult decisions for the rest of his life. The stage is set for tragedy as Adam's obsession with Hetty grows while her obsession with Arthur Donnithorne seizes her heart. There is craft in the way the author sets up this situation and it no



doubt derives from a study of classic literature, more precisely Greek tragedy which hinges on how the character flaws of an individual can seal that person's fate.

As noted above, Chapter 17 is extraneous and condescending because the author patronizes her readers in a kind of hypothetical Dick-and-Jane monologue. "But, my good friend, what will you do then with your fellow-parishioner who opposes your husband in the vestry?" the author asks. George Eliot solicits the reader's sympathy for her plight as a novelist by explaining her various dilemmas. "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," she whines. This kind of digression is insulting to the reader's intelligence and raises the question whether the author has a firm grip on her own characters and story.



# Chapters 21-25

## Chapters 21-25 Summary

Chapter 21: Adam leaves Hall Farm and goes to the home of Bartle Massey, a crusty old schoolteacher who teaches adults to read. Aware of his educational deficiencies, Adam wants to become literate. As he waits for his lesson, he observes Massey teaching a 24-year-old stone mason, a middle-aged brick maker who's "got religion" and wants to read the Bible, and a much older "thin and wiry" man who is a fabric dyer. Adam and Massey dialogue about domestic happiness. Adam believes a woman is what a man needs for a happy home; Massey in effect says "humbug" and declares he prefers his dog to women.

Chapter 22: Hetty fondly, carefully, removes the earrings that Arthur gave her and quickly tries them on. But she doesn't have time to fasten them because the entire Poyser family is ready to leave on a covered cart for the Chase Farm where an annual spring bazaar is underway. Arthur, who has taken over management of his grandfather's estate in Hayslope, confides to Irwine that he plans to hire Adam Bede to oversee the woods on the estate at a salary of one guinea per week.

Chapter 23: At the fair, Adam the tenant is invited to dine with Donnithorne the landlord upstairs, among the most favored tenants and local residents. His brother Seth tells Adam to enjoy himself and not worry about him: Adam's success is his also, Seth says. At the dinner, three suitors eye the charming and beautiful Hetty—Adam, Donnithorne and Bartle Massey.

Chapter 24: The guests gather for the arrival of Donnithorne, then Mr. Poyser delivers a flattering toast to their young landlord, praising his fairness, honesty and concern for the tenants. Donnithorne in turn makes a toast to Poyser and the other guests. Reverend Irwine makes a toast to Donnithorne and the toasting with country ale goes on until time for the games. Then a dance is planned for the evening.

Chapter 25: Festive games include "well-soaped poles to be climbed by the boys and youths, races to be run by the old women, races to be run in sacks, heavy weights to be lifted by strong men." (p. 284) Arthur Donnithorne stays far away from Hetty and seldom casts a glance in her direction. Hetty, meanwhile, is encircled by women who remark on her beauty, causing her to be uncomfortable.

## Chapters 21-25 Analysis

In these and other chapters, George Eliot indulges in confusing shifts of verb tense. Within a few lines, the narrative shifts from the present progressive to past tense. For example, in Chapter 22, p. 262-263, the reader learns that "she [Hetty] cannot keep the earrings long else she may make her uncle and aunt wait." But a few lines later, in the

same paragraph, Hetty "slipped it [a locket] on along her chain round her neck." The repetition of this tense shift tends to slow and confound the reader.

Also, the author does more telling than showing generally, describing her characters' inner thoughts and feelings rather than showing how those inward processes affect behavior, and how that behavior affects others. However, this style of writing was conventional at the time of this book's publication. Many sections that display extreme authorial intrusion could have been deleted by a skilled editor, which would have tightened the narrative and made for a smoother reading experience.



# Chapters 26-30

## Chapters 26-30 Summary

Chapter 26: Adam spies Hetty at the dance, as she is pining for the attention of Donnithorne. Adam approaches Hetty, who has been holding the sleeping child Totty in her arms. Dreaming of how pleasant it would be to return home at night to a house with Hetty inside, Adam asks if he can take the child and give Hetty a break. In making the transfer, Totty awakens and flails her arms about. One arm hits Hetty's necklace, scattering her locket and beads everywhere. "My locket, my locket!" Hetty cries. "Never mind the beads." Adam searches for the locket as the dancers line up for the fourth dance. A sickening doubt crosses his mind: what unknown admirer gave her the locket? Adam decides to leave the dance and go home. He is fast asleep when Arthur finally begins to dance with Hetty.

Chapter 27: Adam, walking in the woods with Gyp, encounters Arthur and Hetty kissing. The dog barks, they separate quickly and Arthur walks nonchalantly toward Adam. He concocts a story about walking Hetty home and asking for a kiss in return. Adam confronts him with the fact they have kissed many times before and tells Arthur Hetty would have responded to his love if Arthur hadn't meddled by playing games with Hetty's heart. Adam calls Arthur "a coward and a scoundrel." They come to blows; Adam lands a heavy punch that brings Donnithorne to the ground. Adam tries to rouse the unresponsive Arthur and wonders whether he might have dealt him a death blow.

Chapter 28: Arthur fights his way back to consciousness and asks the anxious Adam to get some water to drizzle on his face and some brandy. When he does so, Arthur asks Adam to help him into the hermitage where he rests and demands more water and brandy. Adam fetches both; Arthur seems much restored to his former self. Adam demands that if Arthur has been deceiving Hetty by telling her that he loves her, he must "undeceive" her before he returns home from his country vacation. Adam demands that Arthur break off his "flirtation" with Hetty, and he reluctantly agrees.

Chapter 29: Arthur awakens the next morning, filled with anxiety and dread. He goes for a ride in the forest and analyzes all the implications of his actions and their effects not only on himself and Hetty but also on Adam. He convinces himself the best solution is to write a letter of apology to Hetty and state clearly why he must break off their affair. He rides back home and writes the letter. When Adam drops by the Chase to see how Arthur is, a servant hands him Arthur's letter for delivery to Hetty. Arthur is pleased with himself for passing the responsibility for delivery to Adam.

Chapter 30: After church on Sunday, Adam goes to the Poysers' house and gives Hetty the letter from Arthur. He also gives her a gentle admonishment about not allowing herself to become involved with a man who, because of his social status, could never marry her. Slowly, it begins to dawn on Hetty that she has placed herself in an extremely vulnerable position. Seth arrives, and Adam asks him how his relationship with Dinah





Morris fares. Somewhat comically, he tries to offer his brother romantic advice and support.

## Chapters 26-30 Analysis

The romantic undertow becomes a tsunami in these chapters. The trope of a large dance as a setting for broken hearts, secret crushes and even violence gets dusted off and pressed into service. Adam, his heart in his throat, tries to engage Hetty who is meanwhile dreaming of Donnithorne; he avoids her and does not glance in her direction. After he notices Hetty's fancy locket, a heartsick Adam begins to wonder who gave it to her and decides to leave the dance early and go home.

On another occasion, Adam catches Hetty and Arthur smooching in the woods. They throw punches and Donnithorne is knocked out. When he regains consciousness, Donnithorne receives a dressing down from Adam who demands that he break off his flirtation with Hetty. In a relatively short space of time, the reader sees the respect and good wishes Adam had for Donnithorne degenerate into fisticuffs. Those who find British upper-class snobbery repellant will no doubt be gratified when the strong-willed and muscular Adam Bede gives the effete Arthur Donnithorne a knockout punch.



# Chapters 31-35

## Chapters 31-35 Summary

Chapter 31: When Hetty receives and reads Arthur's letter proclaiming his undying love but acknowledging that their affair is futile, Hetty collapses on the bed and wails herself to exhaustion. She then falls into a deep sleep in her clothes and only awakens at 4 a.m., to face the gray dawn and the realization that she would have to hide her grief just as she hid her short-lived happiness. "She would like to run away that very morning and never see any of the old faces again," the author says. (p. 351) Hetty asks her uncle if she can work as a lady's maid in another household. "Nay, Nay," says Mr. Poyser with a promise to find a better husband for her. This, Hetty knows, refers to Adam Bede. In her own cunning way, Hetty begins to consider that possibility simply for the sake of a change.

Chapter 32: The old squire Donnithorne visits the Poyseres to tell them he's decided to lease the adjacent dairy farm to a Mr. Thurle because the current tenants can't seem to handle the responsibilities. Mrs. Poyser tells him that if he wishes to rent their farm to another tenant as well, he will need to find someone happy living in a rundown house full of rats, frogs and mice. She tells Donnithorne she cannot assume any more duties at the dairy farm for health reasons, and the squire tells her that is not his intention.

Chapter 33: Hetty seems to recover from her trauma, smiles and enjoys Adam's visits. The love-struck Adam begins to believe that Hetty and he are fated to be together, that the affair with Arthur was just a passing fancy. In this chapter, the author again turns directly to the reader to speculate on the characters' awareness and motives. Adam is offered a share of Mr. Burge's business and is able to secure a house of his own; he has visions of living there with Hetty to raise a family.

Chapter 34: Adam walks Hetty home from church and tells her the news about his business offer. He tells her earnestly that she is the only person with whom he wants to share the house — without actually proposing to her. Hetty smiles nervously but doesn't respond directly. Adam asks if he can reveal the news to her aunt and uncle, and Hetty assents. A tentative March wedding is planned by the Poyseres, who think Adam and Hetty would make a good marriage.

Chapter 35: Adam works long and hard to get financially set for the wedding; Hetty takes Mrs. Poyser's advice and goes shopping in nearby Treddleston. But Hetty experiences dread, and sometimes seems quite unhappy. On one of her trips to Treddleston to buy wedding accoutrements, she schemes how she can switch coaches in Treddleston and get on a wagon for Windsor, where she hopes to throw herself on the mercy of Arthur Donnithorne.



## Chapters 31-35 Analysis

"Mendacity!" proclaims Big Daddy in Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. In these chapters, simmering mendacity and plotting continue. The decent and respectable Adam believes that he will soon have Hetty, now that Arthur Donnithorne has tried to extricate himself. Adam throws himself into work and seeking new business opportunities under the assumption that he and Hetty will soon marry and have a family. But the evil that Dinah Morris pointed out to Hetty has already taken root. Even as they make wedding plans, Hetty is unfaithful in her mind and imagination as she schemes a way to slip out of Hayslope on a shopping trip and escape to Windsor to see Arthur. Uncomplicated Adam has no clue about this festering lust because she seems incapable of such treachery.

Hetty seems to have an extremely low opinion of herself to pursue Arthur after he has basically used her for his own entertainment and never even professed to love her. Perhaps Hetty's troubled nuclear family is the source of her low self-esteem; the author never ascribes her behavior to any particular experience in her childhood. But she is described as pretty and willful, which are aspects of her that make her more attractive. In these chapters, the reader sees how Hetty's own personality and character lead her astray. She is, in many ways, just as selfish as Arthur.



# Chapters 36-40

## Chapters 36-40 Summary

Chapter 36: Hetty sets out on her journey to Windsor with a small amount of money and the clothes on her back. She gets rides from kindly farmers in their covered wagons and, exhausted, finally pays the last of her money to take a hired carriage into Windsor. It takes her five days to reach her destination from Hayslope. She stops at the Green Man to seek lodging and ask about Arthur Donnithorne. The innkeeper says Donnithorne is in Ireland with his regiment and has been gone for two weeks. Exhausted by travel and weakened by hunger, Hetty collapses. When she comes to, she voraciously eats bread and meat provided by the innkeeper.

Chapter 37: Hetty awakens the next morning rested but still faced with her problem of reaching Arthur. She pawns her jewelry to her hosts for three guineas so she can return home; they agree to return it to her if she claims it within two months. Then she goes out for a long, meandering walk in the woods. She gets lost as night falls, and tries to find a pond or pool of water to drown herself. The night and the waters are very cold. She stumbles along in the dark, seeking the road home. She encounters a gruff old man who directs her back to the main road.

Chapter 38: After Hetty has been gone 10 days, Adam Bede goes to search for her in the nearby villages of Snowfield and Stoniton but returns empty-handed. When he conveys the news to the Poyzers, they become quite alarmed and fear the worst. Adam tells the Poyzers that he will go and search for her in Broxton because "it's the right thing."

Chapter 39: Adam goes to visit Reverend Irwine and tells him of Hetty's disappearance and his search for her. Irwine tells Adam he's received a letter informing him that Hetty is imprisoned in Stoniton on a charge of child murder. Adam becomes enraged and tells Irwine all that he knows about her relationship with Arthur Donnithorne. She has been deceived and had her heart broken by Donnithorne, Adam says as he starts to leave for Stoniton. Irwine implores him not to seek Donnithorne but to ride with him to Stoniton to see what can be done for Hetty.

Chapter 40: Irwine returns to Hayslope, leaving a vengeful Adam in Stoniton where he hopes to exact some justice for Hetty—who he believes innocent—and punishment for Donnithorne for leading her into a terrible situation. The Poyser household is heavy with grief not for Hetty but for the shame that the situation has brought them. The squire Donnithorne—Adam's grandfather—dies. Bartle Massey visits Irwine and is persuaded to go to Stoniton to prevent Adam from harming Donnithorne, which would only compound the tragedy.



## Chapters 36-40 Analysis

Almost in desperation, Hetty makes arrangements for her trip to Windsor. Once she gets there, the reality of her situation dawns on her and she becomes profoundly depressed. She wants to drown herself but can't find a large enough body of water in the night, and returns to her lodgings. This does not seem like an attention-grabbing outburst but rather the actions of a truly depressed woman. It appears that her karmic retribution returns to her rapidly, before she can do harm to herself or others.

Ever-faithful Adam is so concerned about Hetty's disappearance that he will find her and bring her home. The real problem however is that Hetty must find herself if she is to escape her self-imposed suffering. Her actions and reactions are those of a love-starved child who, as an adult, seeks the love she needs in unhealthy and dangerous ways. While searching for love on her own terms, Hetty turns a blind eye to Adam who already loves her. This section of the book could stand as an object lesson in the futility of great passion when it blinds us to the realities around us, when we shape our behavior around old, unsatisfied yearnings for love and approval.



# Chapters 41-45

## Chapters 41-45 Summary

Chapter 41: Irwine and Massey ride to Stoniton and find the room where Adam is staying. Surprised, he invites them in. Massey says he'll stay in the second bed with Adam until Hetty's trial. The two men reassure Adam that Donnithorne undoubtedly suffers pangs of conscience already for his part in Hetty's fate. But Adam remains adamant that Donnithorne must be punished. Irwine tells him that he's visited Hetty and that the evidence against her looks compelling that she delivered Arthur's child and abandoned it in the woods to die. Adam learns that Dinah hasn't visited Hetty yet.

Chapter 42: Adam sulks in a funk in his room as the trial begins. He can't face the horror of Hetty's murder trial and avoids the courtroom. But Bartle Massey comes in during a break in the court proceedings and tells Adam Hetty has no friends or family to support her, and the evidence against her looks damning. Adam decides he must go and be by her side, so they eat a bit of bread then hurry back to the court.

Chapter 43: Sarah Stone, wife of the gentleman who gave Hetty lodging, testifies that she helped to deliver Hetty's child during the first night. The baby clothes in which she dressed the infant were then entered as evidence. John Olding, a local laborer, testifies that he saw Hetty stash the child in a small hole in the ground and cover it with wood chips. The jury returns a verdict of guilty, but Hetty faints during the reading of her punishment—hanging. Adam is sickened and angered at the outcome.

Chapter 44: Having already learned of the death of his grandfather through a letter from his Aunt Lydia, delivered to him upon his arrival at Liverpool, Arthur Donnithorne is elated rather than grieved. There was no love lost between Arthur and the old squire. He is also pleased to hear that Adam and Hetty plan to be married. He drifts along in soporific musings until he returns to the estate and reads a letter from Irwine informing him of Hetty's arrest and trial. Then Arthur runs out, jumps on a horse and heads toward Stoniton.

Chapter 45: Dinah Morris goes to Stoniton and is permitted into Hetty's cell because she is a Methodist preacher and wants to comfort the terrified, isolated Hetty Sorrel. At first, Hetty does not respond when Dinah speaks to her, but gradually she comes out of her trance and they embrace. Dinah leads them in a series of prayers; Hetty finally confesses the entire episode of her baby's death in detail for the first time. She explains that she was crazed with grief and fear when she left her baby. Dinah assures Hetty she will be with her until the last moment.

## Chapters 41-45 Analysis

What Dinah Morris identified as "evil" and modern-day psychologists would probably call codependency at last leads Hetty into a hellish situation. Unable to locate Arthur on



her desperation mission, or search for a "rescue," she panics and leaves the hitherto-mentioned love child in the woods to die. Once convicted of murder and sentenced to die, Dinah visits her in her dismal prison cell and tells her to put her life in God's hands. They pray together, but the reader is left with the sense that Hetty neither feels remorse nor makes a frank conversion to Christianity.



# Chapters 46-50

## Chapters 46-50 Summary

Chapter 46: After church on Sunday, Adam finally decides to see Hetty in her cell before the execution. Hetty, clinging tightly to Dinah, apologizes for her dereliction of affection for him and asks his forgiveness, Adam says he'd forgiven her a long time ago. They exchange a few words, and finally embrace and kiss like two lovers who know they will soon be parted forever. As they begin to say farewell, Hetty, Dinah and Adam hear the rustling of jailers as preparations for her hanging proceed. Solemnly and sadly, Adam departs.

Chapter 47: As the last moments approach, Dinah clutches Hetty and asks her to join in an unending prayer to God for mercy. Just at that time, a sweaty and crazed Arthur Donnithorne rides into Stoniton with a legal pardon in one hand, waving it in the air. He rides directly to the sheriff, who knows him, and hands him Hetty's commutation.

Chapter 48: Adam and Arthur meet coincidentally in the woods again. Some of the old boyhood affection between them returns as they speak. Arthur tells Adam that if he'd known Adam loved Hetty, he would never have interfered. Filled with remorse and self-loathing, Arthur tells Adam he will leave Hayslope for a very long time and join the army. He hopes that his absence will help heal the wounds of local folks, and tells Adam that he should pursue his prospects with the manager of his inherited estate because he is an able skilled and hard-working young man..

Chapter 49: Adam Bede is with the Poysers and Dinah at Hall Farm in the autumn of 1801. The Poysers tell Dinah Morris how much they appreciate all the care and work she has brought to the farm since coming to live with them. Dinah diplomatically tells Mrs. Poyser that her Methodist work is her true calling and she must leave to pursue her ministry. The Poysers are ambivalent about the news; they want Dinah to have a good and happy life but they also want her to remain with them. When they insinuate that Dinah would be breaking her word if she leaves, Adam leaps to her defense and tells them what a fine person she is. Adam and Dinah say farewell before they head back to Hayslope.

Chapter 50: Adam and Dinah walk in silence along the path home without going arm-in-arm. But there is an electricity in the air that informs their silence more than words. Adam expresses regret that she is leaving; she explains that her decision is for her own spiritual advancement and not because of anything related to the Poysers. Adam asks whether she's informed his brother Seth, who loves her although he knows they will not marry. She affirms that she told Seth the previous Sunday—the same day Adam remembers him coming home from church in a depressive funk. The notion of marriage to Dinah crosses Adam's mind but he dismisses it because of the priority of her spiritual mission. In the "slight words and looks and touches" that course between Adam and Dinah are planted seeds of love.





## Chapters 46-50 Analysis

Hetty remains in darkness—literally and figuratively—overcome with sadness and depression. Just as she is being led to the hangman's noose, she is "rescued" at last by Arthur and his pardon papers. The victory, like her affair with Arthur, seems empty. Her life is spared, but to what purpose? As a major character whose feelings and behavior impact not only the story but also the reader's awareness, her fate has great significance. The author is silent on this question. The reader may wonder if the story would be more complete with the addition of some later chapters indicating what happens to Hetty, to the exclusion of the chapters and passages in which the author indulges in fatuous fantasy and approval-seeking for herself.



# Chapter 51-Epilogue

## Chapter 51-Epilogue Summary

Chapter 51: On a fall Sunday morning, Lizbeth asks Seth to bring Dinah for a visit before she leaves. She also hints that Dinah may be attracted to Adam, and asks Seth if the prospect of their marriage would disturb him. No, Seth says, he knows he will never marry Dinah and they are good friends, which is enough for him. Lizbeth speculates that marrying Adam would probably be the only thing that would keep Dinah around. Then she scolds Adam for being so wrapped up in his work that he doesn't court Dinah, although it is obvious to her they both like each other. When he learns from Seth that Dinah is at home and not going to church, he determines to drop by and see her.

Chapter 52: Adam is met at the door by Dinah, who blushes deeply when she sees him. He understands that as a sign of deep emotion and is pleased. They are alone in the house, and they sit silently for a while. Adam takes her hands in his and tells her earnestly that he loves her with his whole heart and soul and says he wants to spend his life with her. Dinah replies that she feels love for him also but that they must submit themselves to God first, before making a decision that might put worldly love above divine love. Adam argues that marriage would not stand in the way of doing God's will, but might actually enhance that relationship. He promises to support and love her, and to never stand in the way of her spiritual advancement. Then they go outside and walk arm-in-arm in the sunshine to meet the Poyzers returning from church.

Chapter 53: Adam goes to a huge harvest dinner on a Wednesday evening at Hall Farm. Amidst all the drinking and feasting, Adam tries to find Dinah but doesn't see her. Then he learns she has already left for Snowfield and Mr. Poyser tells Adam he thought the young man had done a better job of persuading her to remain. Surrounded by festive souls, Adam feels downcast,

Chapter 54: Unable to live with his longing for Dinah, Adam rides to Snowfield and learns from a friend of Dinah that she's gone to the nearby Hamlet of Sloman's End. He gets back on his horse and rides until he's near the church where she was to preach. He finds a spot not far from the church and waits until Dinah comes in his direction. Straightaway when she sees him, they embrace and Dinah tells him that God wants them to be joined, now and forever.

Chapter 55: Little more than a month later, Adam and Dinah are married as ladies weep and gentlemen offer God-bless-yous. The Reverend Irwine says he'll write a letter to Arthur Donnithorne informing him of the happy occasion.

Epilogue: By 1807, Adam and Dinah have settled into a peaceful domesticity with their son Addy and daughter Lisbeth.



## Chapter 51-Epilogue Analysis

The concluding chapters seem contrived rather than organically worked out. Having set into motion the theme of unrequited love in the disastrous relationship between Hetty Sorrel and Arthur Donnithorne, it seems the author has made a determination that the story must have a happy ending. Mysteriously, Hetty Sorrel drops out of the narrative completely after her pardon and the reader may well wonder what becomes of her. At the same time, the author doesn't make clear why Adam does not pursue Hetty once she's released from prison. Through the process of elimination and the realization that Seth will never marry Dinah, Adam seems to fall in love with her as if it's inevitable.

Dinah's initial spurning of Adam rings true but her sudden realization that God has willed they marry and raise a family seems fabricated for the sake of the plot. Would an ending in which no one got married have made this story more poignant? Probably, although perhaps the dictates of public taste during George Eliot's time may have directed otherwise. This novel could easily be one of those stories with multiple, different endings so the reader could choose which suited him/her best. The tragic narrative line suddenly turns sunny at the end as if the author is signaling the reader not to despair, life always has a silver lining. The stark realism of the bulk of this work could easily have borne a dissonant ending, in keeping with its prevailing theme that life can be very unkind, indeed.



# Characters

## Adam Bede

Adam is a tall, handsome, hard-working carpenter with a strong character and plenty of common sense. But when it comes to Hetty Sorrel, Adam is blinded by love, drunk as it were on his feelings for her to the extent that he can't read his own feelings well. Adam shows patience and devotion toward his aging mother, especially after she is widowed by the drowning of her husband. Because Adam is simple, he sees the world in simple terms and perhaps misses many of the subtler colors and nuances of relationships. Adam's work ethic and his sturdy character serve him well once he realizes that Hetty is involved with Arthur Donnithorne; he is really the one who saves her life when she faces execution for the murder of her illegitimate child. After the disastrous affair, in typical fashion, Adam readjusts himself to life and eventually marries Dinah Morris; together they raise a happy family. Because of his many virtues, Adam is clearly the protagonist of this story. If nothing else, Adam serves as an example of sanity, hard work and kindness towards others—qualities missing in most of the other characters in this novel.

## Seth Bede

Seth Bede, Adam's younger brother, looks up to his older brother with admiration and a sense of discipleship. While Adam begins to experience some of the dark side of life, Seth remains somewhat blissfully ignorant and innocent. Seth seems untroubled when Adam courts Dinah—the girl Seth loves although they remain only friends. While this may seem an odd relationship by modern standards, it must be remembered that in this rural setting there is a dearth of eligible single men and women and only so many potential combinations of couples. Adam is sometimes overbearing with Seth in his role as older brother, but the reader gets the sense that Adam is only trying to impart some sense of struggle in the adult world to prepare Seth for adulthood in the absence of their father.

## Hetty Sorrel

Hetty Sorrel, who stays with her relatives the Poysers in Hayslope, is pretty, vain and headstrong. Because of a somewhat deprived childhood, Hetty is vulnerable to the charms of Arthur Donnithorne, the callow aristocrat who breezes into town on a fishing expedition and stays long enough to play with her affections and get her pregnant without really caring about her. Hetty uses her attractiveness to get her way. She is a manipulator rather than an achiever and, because of her youth, a victim who is used by the older Arthur Donnithorne. Hetty is ruled by passion and self-interest, not unlike Arthur. Although the death of her infant is sad, the reader gets the impression she really cares more about losing Arthur than losing her child.



## Dinah Morris

Dinah is a young, enthusiastic Methodist lay preacher who is the apple of Seth Bede's eyes. She is a rather conventional woman of the 18th Century, except for her unfeminism and religious obsession. Because of these traits, she is not seen as approachable by most of the eligible young men and she gives Seth a slip, the better to pursue her church activities. She is looked on with a combination of respect and awe by the local villagers.

## Arthur Donnithorne

Arthur Donnithorne is a callow, aristocratic college student of wealth and social standing. In this regard, he is unlike any of the other characters. Although not a bad person, Arthur is self-absorbed and rather calloused toward others. In many ways, he merits the label "idle rich" because his life is just a series of diversions intended for his own amusement. His membership in a militia is really a form of entertainment available to only a few upper-class British families. Arthur schemes on people, like Hetty Sorrel, to get what he wants because he is blind to the experience and concept of suffering. Having never suffered himself, Arthur lacks compassion and insight so that using other people seems as natural to him as issuing a command to a servant. Because of wealth and prestige, Arthur is viewed by some in Hayslope with resentment, by others with admiration and by Hetty Sorrel with passion. The most admirable thing he does is to procure an official pardon for Hetty when she is faced with execution on charges of child murder.

## Gyp

Gyp is Adam Bede's faithful dog, who follows him practically everywhere.

## John Wesley

As the founder of the then-controversial Methodist church, John Wesley's name appears frequently in the book. People's obsession with this strange new church extends even to arguments about what Wesley would think or say on certain issues.

## Lisbeth Bede

Lisbeth is the mother of Adam and Seth. She is described as tall and dark-featured like Adam, her firstborn, and dedicated to him like a mother who finally has a child later in life. There is "a strong likeness between her and her son Adam. Her dark eyes are somewhat dim now—perhaps from too much crying—but her broadly marked eyebrows are still black, her teeth are sound and she has as firmly upright an attitude as when she is carrying a pail of water on her head from the spring."



## Reverend Augustus Irwine

Reverend Irwine is a representative of the conservative element of Christianity in rural England. Although undoubtedly a good man, Irwine is a bit pompous and self-satisfied. The very idea of Methodism as a radical new challenge to the authority of the Anglican Church is galling to him and he focuses on Dinah Morris—the most visible local exponent of that protestant denomination—as interlocutor to answer his questions about the sect. Irwine is also a bit of a match-maker who encourages Adam to pursue Dinah, which is in keeping with the wishes of his family as well as the Poysers who sponsor Dinah during her time in Hayslope.

## Jonathan Burge

Jonathan Burge is a master carpenter and builder, with a large workshop in Hayslope where Adam Bede and his brother Seth Bede work. Eventually Burge offers Adam the opportunity to become, in effect, a business partner.



# Objects/Places

## Windsor

Windsor is the town where Arthur Donnithorne goes after he leaves Hayslope and Hetty Sorrel. Hetty tries to follow him but is arrested along the way and accused of murdering her infant.

## Hayslope

Hayslope is the small rural village near which Adam Bede and his family, Hetty Sorrel and Dinah Morris live at the opening of the story.

## Hall Farm

Hall Farm is the property where the Poysers live and work, on the estate of Squire Donnithorne. Originally, the land was an estate owned by Arthur Donnithorne's grandfather, but it passes to Arthur upon his death. The estate includes farm land which is rented to tenant farmers, such as the Poysers.

## Stoniton

Stoniton is the nearby town where Hetty Sorrel is arrested, imprisoned and convicted on a charge of child murder.

## Coffin

With his skilled artisan's hands, Adam Bede has constructed many wooden objects including coffins. Never has he put such love and care into a coffin as he does in making one for his father who has drowned, probably as a result of intoxication.

## Locket

A fancy locket with a gemstone given to Hetty Sorrel by Arthur Donnithorne is what betrays her affair to Adam Bede. At a harvest celebration dance, Hetty's locket comes apart and drops to the floor. In helping her to pick up the pieces, Adam asks himself who gave it to her since Hetty clearly could not afford to buy one herself.



## **Ireland**

Arthur Donnithorne is in Ireland for two weeks with his militia group when Hetty arrives in Windsor to find him. Penniless and pregnant, she eventually delivers their child and abandons it in the woods.

## **Chancery Court**

The Chancery Court in Stoniton is where Hetty Sorrel is put on trial for murder and convicted.

## **Hayslope Church**

The Hayslope Church is where Adam and Dinah are married in 1801.

## **Treddleston**

Treddleston is a small village between Hayslope and Stoniton where the schoolmaster Bartle Massey lives, and where Hetty Sorrel goes shopping for wedding items as she prepares for a joyless marriage to Adam Bede.





# Themes

## Class differences

The tortured love affair between Hetty Sorrel and Arthur Donnithorne is emblematic of the separate worlds of British aristocracy and the common folk. During a fishing excursion in the country, the self-absorbed Donnithorne has a lighthearted affair with Hetty that leaves her pregnant. Donnithorne regards his encounter with Hetty as a diversion, not unlike fishing. The fact that he is an immature, spoiled rich kid means that he sees the world and the people in it as a vast playground available to him because of his wealth. It apparently never enters his mind until too late that he is playing with Hetty's heart because her feelings for him are genuine while his are, at best, ambivalent.

This difference in perspective is largely economically-based. In Hetty's world, there is hardly time or resources for trifling relationships because survival is always an issue. The country farm folk from whom she springs live close to the earth, in touch with their crops and animals, and the seasons of nature. Their spiritual makeup is as grounded in reality as their dedication to hard work. The aristocratic Donnithorne, on the other hand, is a college student who has never experienced the struggle for existence that is a daily fact in Hetty's life. He is an emotionally immature young man on a lark, seemingly unaware of the powerful force of deep emotions. Their connection is, from the outset, a connection of inequality. The word "love" means different things to each of them, reflecting their class backgrounds.

Donnithorne does not set out to break Hetty's heart, and when he is called to accounts by Adam, who does have a real love for Hetty, Donnithorne does the right thing and tries to break off their relationship. He is unaware, however, that he has fathered a child because Hetty hides her pregnancy as best she can. Her desperation when Donnithorne rejects her—combined with her anxiety about the child—lead her to the desperate act of abandoning her infant in the woods. By this point, the seeds of dark tragedy are sown as she is arrested and imprisoned. The author's message about sincerity is crystal clear, and the fate of Hetty can be read as one instance of how the British class system creates differences that can be fatal.

## Methodism

The rise of the latest protestant sect in England, Methodism, is prominent in the novel. The story reveals how everyday people respond to this cultural change. Some disdain Methodism and hold it in contempt. But some, like Dinah Poyser, embrace the new faith and begin a ministry of teaching to spread the word. Because there are a variety of opinions and different levels of understanding by the local population, Methodism is controversial and probably ranks as one of the "hot" issues of the time.



The Rev. Augustus Irwine, a traditional Anglican priest, feels threatened by the rise of this new sect that allows women to preach and tries to gain a better understanding from Dinah Morris—the Methodist lay preacher.

## Status of Women

Nowhere in this novel is the plight of Hetty shown to be as desperate as when she is in jail, awaiting execution for child murder. Her powerlessness, and the powerlessness of women, is underscored by the visit of Dinah, who comes to comfort her and convince her that her fate is in God's hands. This passive acceptance of things as they are contrasts markedly with the contemporary world in which a criminal defendant would hire a Johnny Cochran or F. Lee Bailey to argue their case to dismissal. The seemingly free-spirited Dinah represents the first glimmer in this story of a woman who is striving to reach her full potential, albeit within the confines of a strict religion.

On the other hand, Dinah Morris serves as a kind of forerunner of today's feminism. She is individualistic, strong-willed and completely independent of men. As a preacher of Methodism, Dinah challenges the traditionally male bastion of the clergy. And by her independent lifestyle she challenges the social norms and conventional behavior of women. To most of the local residents, she is as much a mystery as the new religion she preaches. Not only that, but Dinah is not afraid to speak up and say what she wants. By contemporary standards, this is not revolutionary but for the 18th Century when the novel is set this behavior is seen as outrageous. Women, in fact, are some of her biggest critics because they seem to feel threatened by her attitudes and behavior. But her religious involvement protects her, to some extent, from scandalous gossip.

# Style

## Point of View

The point of view, generally, is that of the well-informed narrator as is the case in many contemporary mainstream novels. However the author often steps out of her detached, objective stance to speak directly to the reader. Sometimes this discursive style is used to comment on the narrative or to question the motives of the characters; in other instances the author uses it to launch into long-winded exhortations more appropriate to an essay than to a work of fiction. Here are but a few examples:

When Dinah wants to come into Hetty's room at night to tell her something important: "We know she (Dinah) had to tap twice because Hetty had to put out her candles and throw off her black lace scarf." (Chapter 15, p. 165)

"But, my good friend, what will you do then with your fellow-parishioner who opposes your husband in the vestry?" (Chapter 17, p. 184)

"It is for this rare, precious quality of truthfulness that I delight in many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise." (Chapter 17, p. 185)

To the modern reader, this stylistic anachronism may be jarring and perhaps dilute the objective credibility of the narrator. At the very least, these discursive tangents tend to slow down the pace of the story and leave the reader feeling abandoned by the narrator, who has chosen to abrogate the role of story-teller to make side comments that seem gratuitous and confusing. When the point of view is shifted in this manner it tends to blunt the narrative drive.

## Setting

The novel is set in 1799 at the dawn of the 19th Century in rural England close to the Scottish border. Most of the characters are uneducated but upright folks, with colorful language and a keen understanding of farm animals and human nature. Just before the turn of a new century, even rural England experiences some of the dislocations associated with the arrival of a new century in terms of social, religious and technological changes. More specifically, most of the action occurs on the inherited estate of Arthur Donnithorne known as Hall Farm which is populated largely by tenant farmers and tradesmen, such as Adam Bede.

## Language and Meaning

Most of the dialogue is in a Northern English dialect that seems as much Gaelic as Anglo-Saxon. While no doubt authentic, this dialect sometimes becomes almost incomprehensible to the contemporary English-speaking reader. Without a translation



thesaurus, the reader may decide some of the words and phrases will remain incomprehensible and rely on his or her sense of the story gleaned from those sections in plain English. While the use of this dialect lends some color and a sense of authenticity to the story, it can also obscure portions of the narrative that supply nuance and texture. Some examples:

"I shanna rest i' my grave if I donna see thee at th' last; an' how's they to let thee know as I'm a-dyin', if thee't gone a-workin' i' distant parts, an' Seth belike gonbe aerter thee, and thy feyther not able to hold a pen for's hand shakin', besides not knowin' where thee art? Thee mun forgie thy feyther—thee munna be so bitter again' him. He war a good workman, an' taught thee thy trade, remember, an's niver gen me a blow nor so much as an ill word—no, net even in 's drink." (Chapter 4, p. 41)

"We're not dumb creatures to be abused and made money on by them as ha' got the lash i' their hands for want o' knowing how t' undo the tackle. An' if I'm the' only one as speaks my mind, there's plenty o' tyhe same way o' thinking i' this parish and the next to 't, for your name's no better than a brimstone match in everybody's nose—if it isna two-three old folks as you thnk po' saving your soul by giving 'em a bit of' flannel and a drop o' porridge." (Chapter 32, p. 365)

## Structure

The novel is structured in the traditional linear form with primary characters involved in a situation that becomes a crisis. The resolution of the crisis comes at the cost of two lives—Hetty's and her infant child's. The unfolding of the plot follows the kind of dark inevitability associated with Greek tragedies wherein the outcome is rooted in fatal character flaws of the actors. The lengthy passages depicting English rural life, cast in idiomatic local dialogue, at first obscure the explosive plot. The turning point in the novel is when Adam Bede angrily confronts Arthur Donnithorne about his motives in regard to Hetty Sorrel, because Adam is in love with her and believes correctly that Arthur is toying with her heart. Arthur writes Hetty a letter disavowing their relationship that causes her to panic—not only because of the rejection but because she alone knows she is pregnant with Arthur's child. Her panic grows into madness that causes her own death and the death of her infant.

Donnithorne's flaw is insincerity; Hetty's is gullibility. Adam Bede is the only one seemingly possessed of a strong character and thus he is the hero of the story. Once Donnithorne is out of the picture forever and Hetty is executed for child murder, Adam is able to refocus his affections on the Methodist proselytizer Dinah toward whom his younger brother brother Seth once had tender longings. They marry, raise a family and appear happy in the way that rural people of their position in society generally are happy. Indeed, in the way that Hetty Sorrel might have been happy too if she had not been seduced by Donnithorne. The author skillfully constructs the plot so the reader has no clue about the resolution until it is too late in the lives of the characters for any other outcome. The structure serves to drive home the idea that we humans have the power to make our lives what we want, if we can have that awareness and act accordingly. In

this way, the novel may cause the reader to examine his or her own life to search for potentially fatal character flaws.

Although Hetty's life is spared, she practically drops from the narrative after being released from prison. It seems somewhat out of character that the strong-willed Hetty would neither attempt to contact Arthur nor marry Adam, who she knows loves her. The plot might have been stronger had Hetty actually been hanged because it would have resolved the love triangle involving Hetty, Arthur and Adam. As it stands, the behavior of both Hetty and Adam seems to run contrary to type and is baffling because the author never really answers the question as to why this sudden shift occurs.



## Quotes

"In his tall stalwartness Adam Bede was a Saxon, and justified his name; but the jet-black hair, made the more noticeable by its contrast with the light paper cap, and the keen glance of the dark eyes that shone from under strongly-marked, prominent and mobile eyebrows, indicated a mixture of Celtic blood. The face was large and roughly hewn, and when in repose had no other beauty than such as belongs to an expression of good-humored honest intelligence." (Chapter 1, p. 4)

"There are various orders of beauty, causing men to make fools of themselves in various styles, from the desperate to the sheepish; but there is one order of beauty which seems made to turn the heads not only of men but of all intelligent mammals, even of women. It is a beauty like that of kittens, or very small downy ducks making gentle rippling noises with their soft bills, or babies just beginning to toddle and to engage in conscious mischief—a beauty with which you can never be angry, but that you feel ready to crush for inability to comprehend the state of mind into which it throws you. Hetty [Sorrel] was that sort of beauty." (Chapter 7, p. 86)

"Hetty was thinking a great deal more of the looks Captain Donnithorne had cast at her than Adam and his troubles. Bright, admiring glances from a handsome young gentleman with white hands, a gold chain, occasional regimentals, wealth and grandeur immeasurable—those were the warm rays that set poor Hetty's heart vibrating and playing its foolish tunes over and over again." (Chapter 8, p. 99)

"But for the last few weeks a new influence had come over Hetty—vague, atmospheric, shaping itself into no self-confessed hopes or prospects, but producing a pleasant narcotic effect, making her tread the ground and go about her work in a sort of dream, unconscious of weight or effort, and showing her all things through a soft, liquid veil, as if she were living not in this solid world of brick and stone, but in a beautified world, such as the sun lights up for us in the waters." (Chapter 9, p. 103)

"An' him to be drownded in the brook as we passed o'er the day we war married an' come home together, an' he'd made them lots o' shelves for me to put my plates an' things on, an' showed 'em me as proud as could be, 'cause he know'd I should be pleased. An' he war to die an' me not to know, but to be a-sleepin' i' my bed, as if I caaredna nought about it. Eh!" (Chapter 10, p. 109)

"The desire to see Hetty had rushed back like an ill-stemmed current; Arthur Donnithorne was amazed himself at the force with which this trivial fancy seemed to grasp him. It was because he had made a serious affair of an idle matter, by thinking of it as if it were of any consequence. He would amuse himself by seeing Hetty today and get rid of the whole thing from his mind." (Chapter 12, p. 135)

"Dinah felt a double care for Hetty, because she shared Seth's anxious interest in his brother's lot, and she had not come to the conclusion that Hetty did not love Adam well



enough to marry him. She saw too clearly the absence of any warm, self-devoting love in Hetty's nature to regard the coldness of her behavior towards Adam as any indication that he was not the man she would like to have for a husband." (Chapter 15, p. 164)

"So I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things seem better than they were; dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity which in spite of one's best efforts, there is no reason to dread. Falsity is so easy. 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." (Chapter 17, p. 185)

"'This is not the first time you've met Hetty Sorrel in this grove,' Adam said. 'And this is not the first time you've kissed her. Instead of acting like th' upright, honorable man we've all believed you to be, you've been acting the part of a scoundrel. You know as well as I do what it's to lead to when a gentleman like you kisses and makes love to a young woman like Hetty, and gives her presents as she's frightened for other folks to see.'" (Chapter 27, p. 312)

"'Dear, dear Hetty, sweet as our love has been to me, sweet as it would be to me for you to love me always, I feel that it would have been better for us if we had never had that happiness, and that it is my duty to ask you to love me and care for me as little as you can. The fault has been all mine. Since I cannot marry you, we must part—we must try not to feel like lovers any more. I am miserable while I say this, but nothing else can be...I shall be, as long as I live, your affectionate friend.—Arthur Donnithorne.'" (Chapter 31, p. 349)

"Poor Hetty's vision of consequences, at no time more than a narrow fantastic calculation of her own probable pleasures and pains, was now quite shut out by reckless irritation under present suffering, and she was ready for one of those convulsive, motiveless actions by which wretched men and women leap from a temporary sorrow into a lifelong misery." (Chapter 31, p. 356)

"But now necessity was pressing hard upon Hetty—now the time of her marriage [to Adam] was close at hand—she could no longer rest in this blind trust. She must run away; she must hide herself where no familiar eyes could detect her; and then the terror of wandering out into the world, of which she knew nothing, made the possibility of going to Arthur a thought which brought some comfort with it." (Chapter 35, p. 382)

"Deep unspeakable suffering may well be called a baptism, a regeneration, the initiation into a new state. The yearning memories, the bitter regret, the agonized sympathy, the struggling appeals to the Invisible Right—all the intense emotions which had filled the days and nights of the past week, and were compressing themselves again like an eager crowd into the hours of this single morning, made Adam look back on all the previous years as if they had been a dim sleepy existence, and he had only now awakened to full consciousness. It seemed to him as if he had always before thought it a light thing that all men should suffer." (Chapter 42, p. 446)



"At last Hetty whispered, 'I did do it, Dinah...I buried it in the wood...the little baby...and it cried...I heard it cry...ever such a way off...all night...and I went back because it cried. But I thought perhaps it wouldn't die—there might somebody find it. I didn't kill it—I didn't kill it myself. I put it down there and covered it up, and when I came back it was gone...It was because I was so very miserable, Dinah...I didn't know where to go...and I tried to kill myself before and I couldn't do it.'" (Chapter 45, p. 472)

"Adam needed the calm influence; he was amazed at the way in which this new thought of Dinah's love had taken possession of him, with an overmastering power that made all other feelings give way before the impetuous desire to know that the thought was true. Strange, that till that moment the possibility of their ever being lovers had never crossed his mind and yet now all his longing went out towards that possibility." (Chapter 51, p. 523)





## Topics for Discussion

What is the prevailing attitude among villagers toward Methodist lay preacher Dinah Morris?

What is Dinah Morris' attitude toward the simple rural folks who surround her?

How does Hetty Sorrel react when Adam Bede sees her special locket fall to the floor and break apart?

What inference does Adam draw from the existence of the locket and Hetty's behavior?

When Hetty Sorrel is imprisoned and receives a visit from Dinah Morris, does it seem that the visit is motivated primarily by the desire to make a convert to Methodism or by her genuine feelings of affection toward Hetty?

What is Hetty Sorrel's immediate reaction when she receives the letter from Arthur breaking off their affair? What course of action does she choose?

Does Dinah Morris seem to have a specific type of "evil" in mind when she cautions Hetty to stay in close contact with God?

How does Seth Bede handle the sudden interest in Dinah Morris by his brother Adam, after the release of Hetty from prison?

What is the attitude of Lizbeth, Adam and Seth's mother, toward Arthur Donnithorne?

How does Dinah Morris handle Adam's marriage proposal?