

ELIOT'S VIEW OF METHODISM IN *ADAM
BEDE*

by

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Outline

Thesis: Eliot's accurate portrayal of Methodism shows her belief that it was unimportant to rural English Life

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Eliot's View of Methodism in *Adam Bede*

Adam Bede was George Eliot's—pseudonym of Mary Ann Evans—second book and first novel. Eliot was raised in a strict Methodist family. Her friendships with two skeptical philosophers, Charles Bray and Charles Hennell, brought her to challenge and eventually reject her rigid religious upbringing (“George Eliot” 91). *Adam Bede* was based on a story told to Eliot by one of her Methodist aunts, a tragicomedy, and the moral of the novel is that man cannot escape the results of his actions (Wiesenfarth 145). *Adam Bede* is a novel of English pastoral life (Magill 26). Eliot's commentary on John Wesley's Methodism comes most notably through the character Dinah Morris; however, the other characters' actions also reflect Eliot's view of Methodism. An unsigned review—attributed to Anne Mozely—in the July 1859 edition of *Bentley's Quarterly Review* stated that “where a Methodist preacher is heroine the question of religion must be more predominant than it is usually permitted to be in a novel” (Carrol 95). In *Adam Bede* George Eliot gives an accurate portrayal of Methodism, but by doing so, she shows her belief that Methodism was unimportant to rural English life.

“Methodism arose from the search of John Wesley and his brother Charles for a deepened religious life within the ordered ways of the Church of England, which John described as ‘the best constituted national church in the world’” (Baker 493). Wesley sought no drastic reform in doctrines but rather a greater spiritual experience. He also strove for “more opportunity for a spiritual quest within Christian groups, undeterred by denominational barriers” (Baker 493). In the Complete English Dictionary of 1753 Wesley defined a Methodist as “one that lives according to the method laid down in the Bible.” Wesley preached salvation by faith with conviction of personal experience. According to Wesley's *Rules* only condition for membership was “a desire to be saved from sins.” *Rules*

also insisted the members should avoid evil, do good, and seek holiness. The major emphases of Methodist preaching are salvation through grace by faith, witness of the Holy Spirit to a person's salvation from the penalties of past sin, and the theoretical possibility of personal triumph over temptation (Baker 493-4).

Eliot worked hard to give an accurate portrayal of Methodism. She read many of Wesley's writings and described Dinah's outdoor sermon in way similar to how Wesley described how he would give his ideal sermon (Height 273). Modern historians have also noted "Wesley's unconventional preaching in the open air" (Baker 493). Methodists "were progressive in enrolling women as leaders, and even preachers" (Baker 493); therefore, to have a woman—Dinah—be a minister is an accurate portrayal.

Most contemporary reviews of *Adam Bede* were admirable; however, many Methodist publications attacked the book (Karl 300). "Methodism is brought in only to show how unimportant it is as a social force in a rural community, and ultimately it serves merely as the particular 'clothing' of Dinah's humanitarianism" (Goode 19). *Adam Bede* is not a religious novel (Collins 97). An unsigned review in the July 1861 edition of the *London Quarterly Review* renounced *Adam Bede* as "a tale of seduction; relieved by Methodist sermons and prayers" (Carrol 104). The author's of the review main dislike of *Adam Bede* is that instead of idealizing Methodism and making it the force the brings together the community of Hayslope, George Eliot creates a realistic portrayal of events. *Adam Bede's* evil is "hidden well beneath the wit of Mrs. Poyser and Adam Bede" (Carrol 104). The author of the review states that Eliot claims that the power to resist evil consists of a natural power to act on foreseen consequences; those like Adam who have this power are fortunate, and those like Arthur without the power are unfortunate. The author of the review goes on to state that the strength to choose right as right and wrong as wrong is not

recognized in *Adam Bede*, and that the whole book is a vivid picture of the effects of wrong doing and its only morality is to impress self-restraint by a clearer view of those effects. The author of the review then states his belief that it is immoral to preach only the consequences of sin, while ignoring the guilt of yielding to sin. Even though Arthur is portrayed as being an honorable, high-minded gentleman he believed it was a necessity that he lie to Adam, and instead of being disgraced forever for fathering an illegitimate child he “would gladly have persuaded himself that he had done no harm.” The author of the review then completes his review by stating that a man like Arthur can not be high-minded and generous, for if he were his sins would have tortured him (Carrol 104-112).

In *Adam Bede* George Eliot creates an accurate representation of Methodism but uses the realistic action of the characters to show how in rural England much of Methodism’s morality was ignored. Dinah’s Methodism is used as an explanation for her caring ways. The citizens of Hayslope appear to ignore teachings of Methodism—that people should do good and want to be saved for their sins. *Adam Bede* is not best viewed as a religious novel but instead as a realistic view of English rural life at the end of the eighteenth-century.

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