

Victorian Social Life as Reflected in George Elliot's *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner*

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Abstract

This article examines the representations of Victorian social life in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner* particularly on social class, gender relation, religious life, rural community, as well as the role of setting and language in constructing Victorian social reality. Using narratological framework, this article analyzes the interwind between fabula, actors, and setting to reveal how Victorian values are articulated through the narrative structure. The result shows that both novels present the interaction among upper, middle, and lower-class characters, and also highlight women's position in Victorian society, especially in terms of marriage, economic security, and moral expectations. Rural community is portrayed as a space of shared values, like sympathy and respect. Religion, especially Methodism, becomes significant moral force that influences the individual behavior and communal norms. The setting and the language also reflect the social life of Victorian era. This article argues that the narrative structure in those novels not only reveal the social values but also presents the problems occurred within early to middle Victorian society.

Keywords: social life, narratology, Early to Middle Victorian Era, George Eliot

INTRODUCTION

The Victorian era was the era when Queen Victoria was in the throne. This era marks the social, moral, and cultural transformation in England. The era was divided into early and middle Victorian era and later Victorian era. According to Mitchell (2009) the Victorian age in England must first understood as an exceptionally long period marked by changes across nearly all areas of politics, law, economic, and Social life. This era shows the class structure, the strengthening of moral codes, the redefinition of gender roles, and the development of influence in religious movement in the daily life. Literary works in this period have important role in representing the changes. It functions not only as a reflection of social reality but also as a medium for criticism.

According to Frawley (2017) The development of industrial society in this era, along with the growth of major town and cities and sharp population increases, allowed government functions to expand rapidly, literary rates rose, print culture spread widely, ect. This event of course had impact to the economic condition generally. Although Victorian age was famous of its improvement in industrialization, there were some bad effects especially to the workingmen. The rapidly growth of population in city was living without good sanitary, women and children were working in the factory with the low wage. In line with Albert (2000), although this era is described as peace, the whole age is not unfairly in peaceful activity. It indicates that Victorian Era shows the complexity of the life of its society.

Those kinds of complex life including the intellectual issue are about the changing intellectual climate when the novel as the imaginative world became a work to accommodate the new attitude to the meaning of individual and society. One of the prominent writers in that era is George Eliot. Eliot offers a nuanced portrayal of social relation and moral values embedded in rural English society. Eliot expresses the life in her era in two of her novels, *Adam Bede* (1859) and *Silas Marner* (1861).

Both novels are commonly read as realist novel since they depict the everyday life of characters in the rural area. There are some descriptions about social interaction and domestic life. These novels also describe the complexity of Victorian values related to social class, gender, and religion. The characters in both novels are described to be different in their social background. Moreover, the novels highlight the women character's experiences, especially in the marriage and social expectation.

Some researchers have been analyzed both novels but they are frequently analyzed them one by one. The issues of analysis also focus on one or two aspects. *Adam Bede* novel has been examined in relation to one or two issues. Mahal (2014) focuses the analysis of *Adam Bede* novel on the issue of psychological aspects of the characters, while Divyasree (2022) analyses the novel from the issue of the theme and the culture. The issues of Gender and Sympathy are seen by Sopher (2012) in her research. As *Adam Bede*, *Silas Marner* novel has also analyzed individually in certain issue. Jauhari (2008) focuses on materialism in *Silas Marner*, and Makkonen (2012) concerns on masculinity in *Silas Marner*. The previous studies show that both novels

have not been analyzed together and comprehensively to reveal the issues in the early to the middle of Victorian era. Moreover, fewer studies have examined how Victorian values are constructed through the narrative structure itself.

This article finds the gap by examining the issues of social life of early to middle Victorian England in *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner* through narratological framework. As Mieke Bal (1997) stated about narratological concepts namely fabula, actors or characters, and setting, this article analyzes how the narrative structure functions as a medium through which Victorian values are articulated and negotiated. Focusing on the interaction between narrative structure and social content, this article believes that the representation of social class, gender relations, religious life, and rural community in both novels cannot be separated from the narrative mechanism that organize event, characters, and perspectives. Thus, through narratological reading of Mieke Bal, this article concerns in how Eliot's narrative constructs critical engagement with values and contradictions of early to middle Victorian society.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study applies textual analysis through the framework of narratology by Mieke Bal as the lens of analysis. The focus of the analysis is the characters or actors, fabula, setting, and the narrative languages in Eliot's *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner*. The data in both novels are collected through close reading and library research. The analysis is conducted to reveal how the narrative structure represents social class, gender relations, religious values, and rural community life in Victorian era.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Characters Construction and Social Class

The characters or the imaginative people involved in the works of the Victorian era are described as upper, middle, and lower-class people. In the case of George Elliot's *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner*, there are more than one group of people of different classes in both stories. George Elliot's *Adam Bede* consists of two different classes of characters. They are lower class people which are represented by the family of Adam. The member of families are Seth Bede, Lisbeth, Matthias, and The Poyser

family which we called as middle class people after they are rich. The other is The Pysers that consists of Martin Poyser and his wife, Rachel who rented Hall Farm from Squire Donnithorne and had turned it into a very successful enterprise. The next is Totty Poyser or "Old Martin" Poyser who is Mr. Poyser's elderly father. Hetty Sorrel is Mr. Poyser's orphaned niece, who lived and worked at the Poyser farm., while Dinah Morris is another orphaned niece of the Poysers. The middle-class people we could also find is in Mr. Irwine's family. He is the Pastor and lives with his mother and youngest sister.

The example of upper-class character is the family of Donnithorne that we could see in "*The young gentleman was Arthur Donnithorne, known in Hayslope, variously, as "the young squire," "the heir," and "the captain."*" (Elliot: 59). In Bal's narratology, this quotation shows that the character Arthur Donnithorne functions as actor which is constructed by the social sign or social status not by the character itself. Moreover, the double layers of calling as "the young squire," "the heir," and "the captain" shows that Arthur identity is constructed by the social position and the power relation in the community. In terms of the narrative structure, the role of actor in Arthur indicates the values of Victorian era which is embedded in the social status, honor, and the social authority.

In terms of fabula, the information of Arthur Donnithorne is through the social identity functions as the preparation of the next narrative events. In this case, fabula is not only as the presence of individual but also as the sign of social consequence or social position of Arthur in the structure of the rural community. Arthur's social status as the rich creates asymmetric relation with other actors or characters. The construction of actor and fabula, Eliot represents the Victorian social values that places the social class as the center of moral and social.

In *Silas Marner*, Eliot presents two kinds of social classes that run together in harmony. They are conscious of their own class, no disputing between the class, and they live peacefully and help each other although the way Eliot depicts the villagers, the poor, as the lower class to be feeble minded person who use the term 'clung' rather than 'mystery', as in: *superstition clung easily round every person* (Elliot: 7). This

example showed the character of one of the social classes in the novel, whether it is the poor, the villagers or the lower-class people.

in the discussion of actor, the quotation above shows the construction of rural community as the collective actors or characters who are identified as having similar belief. The word "superstition" is not for certain character or individual but it is for general characteristic in every character in the community. In means that rural community functions as the ideological actors who represent the values and moral in Victorian era.

In fabula context, superstition functions as the narrative condition that influences the development of the events or actions of the other actors or characters. Collective belief constructs the way of the community to understand and give the meaning of some events that cannot be explained rationally, and influences social response of other characters who are considered as "difference". Thus, superstition is not merely cultural setting but it is part of fabula that can run social conflict in the society. It can be said that the correlation between fabula and collective actors in rural community shows how social values in Victorian is reproduced through shared belief.

Besides, the novel represents the lower class or the poor, Aaron's family, who work as the gardener in the rich family, Silas Marner and some of the neighbors in Raveloe. In addition, the upper-class characters are depicted by the Squire Cass family. As it it stated in the novel "*The greatest man in Raveloe was Squire Cass, who lived in the large red house with the handsome flight of stone steps in front and the high stables behind it, nearly opposite the church.*" (Elliot, 27).

The phrase "The greatest man in Raveloe" indicates the highest social authority in Raveloe community. The identity of Squire Cass as the actor is constructed by the recognition of collective community. Thus, this character here functions as ideological actor that represents the powerful class in the village in Victorian society. In fabula, the character of Squire Cass described as the influential character in Raveloe. He defines the social relation of the actors and influences the development of the events. His house in "nearly opposite the church" positions him in certain power. This condition strengthens that fabula, social power, and values are correlated each other.

Another character is Eppie. She lives as a lower-class character who realizes about the position. As she said,

I shouldn't know what to think on or to wish for with fine things about me, as I haven't been used to...it 'ud be poor work for me to put on things and ride in a gig, and sit in a place at church, as 'ud make them as I'm fond of think me unfitting company for 'em.(George Eliot, 203)

Eppie is constructed as the actor in the lower class that has awareness of the hierarchical position in Raveloe community. The statement "I shouldn't know what to think on or to wish for with fine things about me" shows the identity of Eppie that is it not constructed by class mobility, but by internalization of simple values and her life experience. In Bal's view, this role of actor as ideological actor brings values of lower class, namely honesty, humble, and sincerity.

In fabula, Eppie's words functions as the main point that highlights the tension between the possibility of social mobility and loyalty toward moral values in the community. The fabula does not trigger Eppie to have higher social status, but position her as the balance of the hierarchical structure in the society.

George Eliot presents depiction of lower-class protagonists in *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner* through the configuration of fabula and actors, that reflects the social and moral values of early to middle Victorian England. In *Adam Bede*, Adam as the lower class actor is portrayed as attaining material stability and social recognition through hardwork, discipline, and moral integrity. The fabula surrounding Adam emphasizes a linear moral progression in rural social structure. In contrast, *Silas Marner* constructs a more complex fabula centered on psychological and spiritual suffering. Silas, as marginalized lower class actor, experiences alienation, loss of faith, and social isolation, reflecting the vulnerable of individuals in early to middle Victorian ideals. These narratives represent early to middle Victorian.

B. Gender, Rural Community, and Social Control

The realism of Victorian era is also in the representation of woman's lives, especially those from middle- and lower-class families. In George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner*, women's experiences are closely connected to the structure of rural community, where social relations are shaped shared moral values, economic

dependency, and communal expectation. The interrelated issues like gender, rural community, and the social regulation, are depicted consistently in both novels. It highlights how Victorian realism constructs everyday life of the characters.

Within the social context of nineteenth-century England, marriage functioned not merely as personal relationship but a social strategy closely linked to economic security and class mobility. This value system is narratively constructed in *Silas Marner* through the actors and fabula.

In the context of actor, Nancy Lammeter is presented as a female character whose social value is defined by moral virtue, physical attractiveness, and her suitability for marriage within the village community. Although she is from a middle- or lower-class background, she is repeatedly positioned as a desirable wife for Godfrey Cass, a member of the rural elite. As in "*At one time everybody was saying, What a handsome couple he and Miss Nancy Lammeter would make! and if she could come to be mistress at the Red House...*" (Eliot, 29) it shows the construction of Nancy identity. As an actor, Nancy embodies Victorian ideals of femininity that align moral worth with marital desirability.

In the perspective of fabula, the narrative situates marriage as a central event that reinforces existing social hierarchies. The probability of Nancy to become "mistress at the Red House" signifies an anticipated upward movement in social status through marriage. The narrative reflects early to middle Victorian values that associate female success with economic security and integration into elite domestic space.

The interaction between fabula and actor in Eliot novel constructs a realist representation of Victorian gender ideology. In terms of narrative, it appears to normalize marriage as a pathway to social stability for women. In this way, *Silas Marner*, not only reflects the social realities of Victorian England but also subtly critiques the gendered expectation in the marriage in the rural community.

In *Adam Bede*, the relationship between Hetty Sorrel and Arthur Donnithorne is constructed through the interaction between actors and fabula. It reflects gender ideology and class structure of early to middle Victorian England. As an actor, Hetty is positioned as a young woman from a rural- or lower-class background whose desires are shaped by physical attraction, social prestige, and material aspiration. It is because

this value is important in Victorian society; marriage functions as a means of women's social mobility. On the other hand, Arthur Donnithorne, functions as an actor that symbolizes aristocratic privilege, masculine authority, and economic power within rural community. Hetty's preference to Arthur over Adam reveals how class hierarchy informs romantic desire and female agency in Victorian rural life. As in the quotation "*Hetty blushed a deep rose-colour when Captain Donnithorne entered the dairy and spoke to her.*" (Elliot: 81)

The fabula in this case happens in as the sequence of events initiated by Hetty's choice leads not to upward mobility but to moral and social crisis. The impossibility of marriage between Hetty and Arthur reasserts the rigidity of class boundaries characteristic of early to middle Victorian society. Through this narrative, it can be seen that a social order in which female desire that challenges class norms is disciplined through narrative consequences.

Adam Bede and *Silas Marner* depicts in nineteenth-century England and are therefore commonly situated within realist tradition. In *Adam Bede*, for example, the rural setting, although located at the end of the eighteenth century, becomes crucial narratives space, especially for the readers who were living in that period marked by rapid urbanization and industrial growth. The event happens in the village shows the contrast to the increasingly urban environment of early to middle Victorian England.

The narrative shows the rural community as a complex social system governed by hierarchy, land ownership, and communal recognition. The portrayal of realist is the evidence that there is a local landlord, who is described as being "*spoken well of on market-days as a first-rate landlord; by and by making speeches at election dinners, and showing a wonderful knowledge of agriculture; the patron of new ploughs and drills.*" (Elliot: 435) and later gaining public authority through political and agricultural involvement, such as making speeches at election dinners and promoting new farming technologies. It shows the integration of economic power and social prestige within rural life. In this way, both novels prove that Victorian realism is shown by presenting rural life as a meaningful site of social organization and cultural community.

In addition, there is one important aspect that George Eliot reveals in her realist novels is the centrality of human sympathy. In articulating the concept of realism, Eliot

emphasizes sympathy as the key aesthetic and ethical principal. As noted by Habib (2005), Eliot's fourth principal of realism is grounded in her view of beauty, which she defines not through formal proportion or idealized appearance, but through "the secret of human sympathy." She says: "love that other beauty too, which lies in no secret of proportion, but in the secret of human sympathy."

In *Adam Bede*, Dinah showed her sympathy to Lisbeth after Adam's father death, demonstrating how sympathy operates as a form of social supports in moment of personal loss. As in the quotation "*Ah!*" said Lisbeth slowly, still wondering; "ye comed in so light, like the shadow on the wall, an' spoke i' my ear, as I thought ye might be a sperrit. Ye've got a'most the face o' one as is a-sittin' on the grave i' Adam's new Bible." (Elliot: 108)

Using the narratological framework, especially focuses on fabula and actor, this discussion shows that *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner* as the realist representations of early to middle Victorian England. The articulation of actors reveals how gender, class, and moral value are embedded in individual characters whose lives are shaped by rural structure and communal expectation. The fabula in both novels organizes around everyday experiences, such as work, marriage, faith, sympathy, and loss, and they are reflecting the Victorian belief.

C. Religion and Moral Framework: Methodist

Another significant issue represented in both novels is religious condition of England, especially the presence of Methodism. In *Adam Bede*, Methodism is not merely described as doctrinal belief but as a lived religious practice embedded in rural life. This issue is narratively constructed through the interaction between actor and fabula.

The character Dinah Morris functions as central actor or character through whom Methodism is represented. As a working class woman and a Methodist preacher, Dinah embodies an alternative religious authority. As it is stated in the description "*But Dinah walked as simply as if she were going to market, and seemed as unconscious of her outward appearance as a little boy: there was no blush, no tremulousness, which said, 'I know you think me a pretty woman, too young to preach.'*" (Elliot: 20) The first sentence of the quotation above shows that there is humility, simplicity, and lack of

self-consciousness. The absence of "blush" or "tremulousness" indicates that Dinah's authority does not drive from social status but from moral conviction.

Another example about Methodists is in the quotation "*I want to go to the Hall Farm too," said Mr. Irwine, "to have another look at the little Methodist who is staying there. Joshua tells me she was preaching on the Green last night."* (Elliot: 60) in fabula perspective, the event that involves Dinah's preaching, like her sermon on the Green, are presented as ordinary yet socially significant occurrences within village life. The curiosity of "little Methodist" reflects how Methodism was perceived as both familiar and slightly unconventional within rural community. Those examples indicate that methodism issue is quite important in early to middle Victorian England.

In Silas Marner, Elliot tries to reflect the changing religious of in her own time, a period marked by doubt, transition, reassessment of institutional faith. Influenced by her intellectual and social knowledge, Eliot herself experienced a shift of religious belief. Within the rural village of Raveloe, religious knowledge among villagers is limited, however, they demonstrate strong moral attitude toward one another.

D. The Narrative Devices through Setting and Language

Adam Bede presents a detail portrayal of rural areas life of England, which functions as central element of its realist narrative. With narratological framework, the setting in the novel operates as a crucial component of the fabula, shaping the social relations and everyday experiences of the actors. The rural world constructed in *Adam Bede* is geographically and socially divided into two contrasting regions: Loamshire and Stonyshire, represented the villages of Hayslope and Snowfield.

Hayslope in Loamshire is described as an agrarian community and no touch of industrialization. In the quotation "*I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr. Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder, in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799."* (Elliot: 3) situate fabula firmly in a pre-industrial rural environment. This setting foregrounds the lives of common people, like carpenters, farmers, and dairy workers, who function as the dominant actors in the narrative. On the contrary, Stonyshire is described as bleak and associated with early industrial development as seen in the reference to a cotton mill that altered local employment patterns. "*It's a dreary bleak place. They were building a cotton-millth*

ere; but that's many years ago now. I suppose the place is a good deal changed by the employment that mill must have brought ." (Elliot: 87)

The juxtaposition of these two rural landscape like "*That rich undulating district of Loamshire to which Hayslope belonged lies close to a grim outskirts of Stonyshire,*" (Elliot: 15) reflects the social and economic tension characteristic of early to middle Victorian England, a period that negotiates the transition between agrarian tradition and industrial modernity.

In *Silas Marner*, Eliot narrows the spatial focus to a single rural setting, the village of Raveloe. Through Bal's perspective of narratology, Raveloe functions as a stable narrative space where the fabula unfolds around communal memory and moral continuity. As in the quotation "*...and Raveloe was a village where many of the old echoes lingered, undrowned by new voices. Not that it was one of those barren parishes lying on the outskirts of civilization--inhabited by meagre sheep and thinly-scattered shepherds: on the contrary, it lay in the rich central plain of what we are pleased to call Merry England.*" (Elliot: 11) although Raveloe is not isolated from civilization, it represents the "Merry England," a symbolic rural ideal that preserves traditional values among broader Victorian transformations.

The language in both Eliot's novels is also significant that can be seen from the dialogue. Eliot employs everyday rural speech to construct authority and social specificity. In *Silas Marner*, Mrs. Whintrop's dialect "*I'd a baking yisterday, Master Marner, and the lard-cakes turned out better nor common, and I'd ha' asked you to accept some, if you'd thought well,*" (Elliot: 96) reflects ordinary village intonation and emphasizes communal warmth. Similarly in *Adam Bede*, Lisbeth's speech to Dinah "*Ye might ha' made the parridge worse,*" she said to Dinah; "*I can eat it wi'out its turnin' my stomach. It might ha' been a trifle thicker and' no harm, an' I always putten a sprig o' mint in mysen; but how's ye t' know that?*" (Elliot: 118) indicates the rhythms of rural oral culture. Within Bal's framework, such dialogue contributes to the characterization of actors by embedding them linguistically within their environment.

However, Eliot also employs figurative language selectively, specifically in describing Dinah Morris. Similes comparing her face "*white flowers with light touches of colour*" (Elliot: 21) and images of restrained emotion "*Her pale face became*

paler; the circles under her eyes deepened, as they did when tears half-gather without falling”(Eliot: 24) elevate Dinah’s moral and spiritual presence. This stylistic contrast highlights Dinah’s function as an actor of ethical authority, blending realist representation with moral symbolism without abandoning social plausibility.

when these aspect are combined together, they exemplify Victorian realism as defined by accuracy social depiction and moral engagement. As Abou-El-Seoud (2009) notes, realist novels portray both urban and rural spaces with attention to the lived condition of different social classes. Through narratological framework, Eliot’s rural setting is not passive background but active narrative structures that organize fabula and shape actors. Therefore, both novels can be read as coherent representation of early to middle Victorian England.

CONCLUSION

By using Mieke Bal’s narratological framework, this article shows that *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner* represent early to middle Victorian social life through the interaction of fabula, actors, and setting within their narrative structures. The analysis shows that both novels represent the dynamic among upper-, middle-, and lower-class characters, and position them in social class that becomes the central element in the construction of rural society. Gender relations are represented through women’s roles in marriage, economic security, and moral expectation, revealing how female characters negotiate personal desire and social control. Rural communities are represented as spaces of shared values such as sympathy, respect, and moral responsibility, while simultaneously functioning as mechanism that regulate individual behavior. Religious life, especially Methodism, is represented as significant moral force that shapes individual conduct and communal norms. In addition, the representation of rural settings and everyday language strengthens the realist portrayal of Victorian social reality. Through its narratological analysis, this article argues that the narrative structures of *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner* not only represent Victorian social values but also reveal the social tensions and problems inherent in early to middle Victorian society.

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