

A Comparative Study: Portrayal of Hetty Sorrel in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and Halie in Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*

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Abstract: Both the authors George Eliot and Sam Shepard have created women characters with certain flaws in them. Though centuries apart, their characters especially women have displayed some immoral act that has brought shame to their families and the society. Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede* ends up committing the act of infanticide due to immaturity and lack of guidance while on the other hand Halie in *Buried Child* is a modern woman who enters into an incestuous act with her son, that results in the murder of the infant that had been just born. Eliot has embodied the personality of Hetty born out of a chasm of insignificance to a place of significance with the aid of an unlawful relation with someone of a superior rank. Hetty eventually gains maturity at the time of her pregnancy. She finally confesses to the crime with the aid of Dinah. Halie searches for another man power in her family. The play reveals a trait that she is unable to live without a man. She remains in search of a “phallus” throughout. To hide her mourning from her family and the world, she begins socialization with the local minister, Father Dewis.

Keywords: *infanticide, characters, family, women*

George Eliot's chief experimentation in *Adam Bede* is Hetty Sorrel's character. Hetty's vanity and narcissism are a creation of her self-consciousness and the outer forces, insentient to her, that wrought her personality. Hetty's character was constructed with harmony to James Mill's ideas of extraordinary cognition. Her catastrophe occurs in her unusual awareness of herself as well as the way she was raised as a child which automatically shaped her narcissism and vanity. Hetty's personality is constructed with a blend of psychological images, sensory impersonations and physical responses to her needs. Hetty's notion of herself is astounding; a bit she likes to see, and experience. Her reflection in the mirror is the most significant thing to her. She desires to be like a lady in the picture in Miss Lydia Donnithorne's dressing room:

It was into this small glass that she chose to look first after seating herself. She looked into it, smiling . . . she was going to let down her hair, and make herself look like that picture of a lady in Miss Lydia Donnithorne's dressingroom. . . But she pushed it [her hair] all backward, to look like the picture. . . Then she put down her brush and comb, and looked at herself, folding her arms before her, still like the picture. (195)

The corporeal picture of her is the only picture she is aware of since her awareness is only unusual. This unusual consciousness of Hetty adds to her attention in her beauty and forms into narcissism. Her world comprises of unconsciousness. Eliot erected Hetty's personality with narcissistic indications, several of which were famous quite before Eliot. However Hetty's beauty is regarded as unsafe and hazardous that conceals emotions and sentiments. It is clearly

articulated by Mrs. Poyser to her husband “that she firmly believed ‘the naughtier the little huzzy behaved, the prettier she looked” (86) and “she’s no better than a peacock as ‘ud strut about on the wall and spread its tail when the sun shone if all the folks i’ the parish was dying: there’s nothing seems to give her a turn i; th’ inside” (162). According to the American Psychiatric Association Hetty’s character, shows two of personality traits that highlight her narcissism. First being her preoccupation with desires, dreams and fantasies and second being an individual requiring constant notice and admiration. Eliot does not only demonstrate the indicators of narcissism in Hetty’s nature, however also provides evidence to the reader the cause that guided to the configuration of such a character. According to Herbert Spencer in *Principles of Psychology* George Eliot has given a psychological explanation for Hetty’s narcissistic behaviour and verifies that there is no other, autonomous case of mental ill health without a fundamental relation to other conscious or the unconscious cases. In the beginning of the novel the reader comes across the fact that Hetty is disliked by the Poyser’s from her childhood. Hetty’s mother is resented from the beginning by Mr Poyser's father and Hetty's grandfather for tying the knot to a poor man against his will:

A long unextinguished resentment, which always made the grandfather more indifferent to Hetty than to his son's children. Her mother's fortune had been spent by that good-for-naught Sorrel, and Hetty had Sorrel's blood in her veins. (383)

Though Hetty is treated well by the Poyser’s but she is scolded by Mrs. Poyser fervently alongside the servants. Hetty being her orphan niece is not treated as equally to her own children. Although the Poyser’s never wish her bad for her future, they often falter to see her as, “a daughter of their own.”(143) They rather see her as:

a penniless niece. For what could Hetty have been but a servant elsewhere, if her uncle had not taken her in and brought her up as a domestic help to her aunt (143).

Hetty occupies a spot beneath the Poyser’s children. As a result, her narcissism mechanisms like a self-protection scheme. Hetty’s narcissism origins from discrimination; losing her own place as a daughter, she detests the Poyser’s children and sees them as opponents. She does not seem concerned for the parents who gave birth to them. Hetty has hardly any:

loving thought of her second parents—of the children she had helped to tend—of any youthful companion, any pet animal, any relic of her own childhood even . . . did not understand how anybody could be very fond of middle-aged people. (199)

According to Barbara Hardy in *The Novels of George Eliot*, Hetty’s feelings for Arthur seem similar to, “Cinderella- fantasy in which he plays a god like handsome prince who will magically elevate her above all rivals especially Mary Burge” (54). Hetty Sorrel portrays a shadowy facade of psychological realistic of an orphan young person. This experience of an orphaned young person is encouraged in the comatose soul of Hetty, and she conducts herself consequently. The product of her narcissism is heredity, but a result of the exterior forces that affected the development of her character. Hetty can be seen from two sides. In the beginning of the novel, Hetty is condemned for her arrogance and self-centeredness, but as the novel progresses the reader gains sympathy for her during her search for Arthur Donnithorne. She is looked upon the reader as an immature and a guiltless person. She is seen as an inexperienced seventeen years old without any rational education and acts on her impulsive behaviour. She is childlike living in a dream world. The reader is caught between her defenselessness of her situation and her lack of knowledge. The damaging aspect of this is her lack of depth in her character that leads to her to in pursue Arthur who eventually leaves her with an unwanted pregnancy which again with the fear of society leads to a criminal act. Her behavior compared to a typical teenager of today may to the reader of this materialistic century seem quite normal. She wishes to increase her significance through all the worldly things eventually avoiding rational advice. Bad luck and crime further lead her into withdrawing into herself, and ultimately Dinah plays the role of bringing her to understand the extent of her impetuous deeds. Eliot has personified the character of Hetty coming out of an abyss of irrelevance to a position of significance with the

help of an illicit relation with a person of a higher class. Eliot believes the fact that the dreams are not only represented by rich and the wealthy but the ordinary can also harbor the same. Hetty inches to maturity during the time of her pregnancy. With the help of Dinah she eventually gains courage to confess her act of infanticide. This leads the reader towards sympathy for Hetty. It is quite strange that the novel's name is *Adam Bede* though it centers on Hetty's affair, pregnancy and her misfortune. The novel's end chapter concludes with her death sentence. Eliot has created a frivolous character that passes through a misguided life and ends up filling the reader's hearts with sympathy. Halie, is the centre of this play and unfortunately presides over the destruction of this home. She is an incestuous woman whose affair with her son Tilden resulted in an infant who is buried alive by Dodge. She yearns for her son Ansel who died. Her presence in the play is limited but she is the pivot around which the play revolves. However the beginning of the play gives an allusion that an act of incest was committed by the mother Halie with her elder son Tilden. Michael Tavv in *A Body across the Map: the Father-Son Plays of Sam Shepard* remarks that Tilden stands for, "one aspect of the Oedipal impulse, the mother is seducer." (52) At the commencement of the play, Halie positions herself in the upstairs area of the house signifying as the domineering mother. She allegorically supervised the complete world living "down" below. Her primary manifestation in the play as a distant voice from the top of the staircase, proposes her bodily, religious and poignant division from her entire family. She is a character who wears different masks at different occasions. Leonard Mustazza in *Women Roles in Sam Shepard's Buried Child* states that, "her role-shifts and role-reverses, as well as the ones witnessed in Shelly's behaviour, may be interpreted as a sign of woman's power and skill to adapt to the dire conditions they find themselves in, and to stand up against the violence of the men around them." (37) However Halie's role transfers do not take place to protect her but somewhat as trials; that she has the chance to bring out within the transitional position in which she is caught. Her each role is played by her perfectly. She enjoys every camouflage that she puts on. At the initial stage she works as the anxious mother and stern concierge of the immobilized immature, powerless men that are around her, who seem to fall into completely incapacitated state whenever this "dominant" female form emerges. She further on a mask that brings forward her memory: the seemingly young and innocent woman who takes pleasure in the troupe of men with money.

When she confronts Shelly, she changes her disguise again; fighting for her role as the matriarch of the house she lives in. Her situation is similar to Dodge fighting for her position and finally she withdraws back to her realm upstairs, a sign of her dominance which stand for her seclusion. Halie accomplishes those female stereotypes that build up the patriarchal power and provide oneself the thematic position to women According to Germaine Greer in *The Female Eunuch*, "Halie represents as female stereotypes, "[s]he is the Sexual Object sought by all men, and by all women. She is of neither sex, for she has herself no sex at all. Her value is solely attested by the demand she excites in others. All she must contribute is her existence." (67) Halie in the play has been represented as a sexual entity for men, a woman of unrestrained and subdued sexual cravings owing to the reality that her spouse Dodge according to Ann C. Hall in *A Kind of Alaska: Women in the Plays of O'Neill, Pinter and Shepard* is, "old, feeble, and impotent" (56). Halie relates her one of the past experiences with the audience:

Halie: I went once with a man.

Dodge: (mimicking her) Oh, a "man".

Halie: A wonderful man. A breeder.

Dodge: And he never laid a finger on you, I supposed. (Long silence) (2)

The above dialogues may give explanation for the fervent love for her son. Elaine May in *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* remarks that "sexually frustrated mothers whose husbands were not in command might turn their perverted desires toward their sons." (97) The outcome of this relationship between mother and the son is an infant murdered and buried by Dodge articulating his power above the women and that whatever is formed exterior to the patriarchal system is finished. During most of the play's beginning Halie, stays upstairs, far from her husband whom she doesn't love or care. Her reference at the beginning of the play is "Halie's voice". She left her house in search for a "phallus." This indicates that she is

unable to live without a male and she sticks to the man's world that recognizes her as an individual being.

Halie is no longer the same woman to her husband Dodge and her lover Father Dewis, likewise the incestuous relationship with her son Tildon. To escape the calamity and disaster, she escapes from her family; she begins to socialize with Father Dewis and takes shelter in her past. When she appears on the stage she, "is dressed completely in black as though in mourning." (27) She begins to reminisce about her dead son Ansel:

Halie: when Ansel passed away he left us all alone.....He could have earned lots and lots of money . . . He was a hero, don't forget that. A genuine hero brave, strong and very intelligent. (59)

The delight from her life has emaciated away from the past thirty years. *Buried Child* gives a critical insight into the broken American family. The deterioration of the American Dream, the misshapen politics of that time and the denial to alter the route was the plan of Shepard's play. This drama was written at the time of America's Recession, Inflation and the Vietnam War. Like all family members Halie is also isolated and aloof. She is wearing a black dress, as though in mourning in the beginning of the play. This adds to the sad and dominating mood of mourning in the house. The next day with Father Dewis she is wearing a yellow dress and white gloves. Though the whiff of scandal and her role in this family scandal is in the air she talks down to the family. The incest and resulting infanticide is actually the disease inflicting this family. The presentation of the miraculous corn and carrots maybe is the expectation of America business as usual mind set and the lack of awareness of the ills affecting their society. Her yearning for a town life, sleeping alone, flirting with the Father Dewis are all comparable to the degeneration America faces.

Shepard works against the theory of a country that is concealing its past, looking ahead to a new day. George Eliot was commended for writing this novel. It had become known for the protuberance of realism. Realism is a debated concept in literature itself. Eliot has defined realism in an essay based on the artist and critic John Ruskin in *Modern Painters* as, "the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature"(17) George Elliot considered realism as an essential part of her artistic talent a feeling apparent in *Adam Bede*. Hetty's crime its cause, social impact and conclusion is a study of her character and nature in a very realistic way. To understand, analyse and eventually sympathise and forgive Hetty's impulsive actions and misadventure is a success in Eliot's projection of realism.

Both the plays though based rural, are placed in different times and parts of the world. *Adam Bede* is about a small Village Hayslope in England in 1799. *Buried Child* is about Midwestern USA in about the 1970s. Hetty's crime its cause, social impact and conclusion is a study of her character and nature in a very realistic way. To understand, analyse and eventually sympathise and forgive Hetty's impulsive actions and misadventure is a success in Eliot's projection of realism. *Buried Child* explores three generations of twisted family relationships. Halie's flirting and incest combined with Dodge's has demolished the moral fabric of this family. Both these characters also projected the social and political unrest of the seventies which was tearing America apart. Shepard in this critical play has compared the Country with a functional defective family with no chance of correction and improved circumstances. Though Halie has not committed the infanticide her immoral actions have lead to this imbalanced family adrift in the sea of shame and aimlessness with no shore or change in sight. As a character Hetty is innocent, naïve and selfish and shallow. In comparison Halie comes in as a destructive sexually loose and dominating personality. Hetty by committing the act of infanticide destroys her future and harms nobody else. Halie on the other hand with her debased actions leads to the infanticide and destroys the whole family. It is a story of a child-woman versus a corrupt and thoughtless mature woman.

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