

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

1992

Adam Bede: Author, Narrator and Narrative

Cynthia Huggins

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Huggins, Cynthia, "Adam Bede: Author, Narrator and Narrative" (1992). *The George Eliot Review*. 181.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/181>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Cynthia Huggins

ADAM BEDE: AUTHOR, NARRATOR AND NARRATIVE

Readers of novels seem to have a natural, almost instinctive, tendency to perceive the voices of the author and the omniscient narrator as being one and the same. This tendency is even stronger when the narrator is blatantly intrusive, frequently inserting his own opinions into the objective narrative material of the novel. And although there are certainly some novelists who truly intend their narrative voices to be perceived as their own, this is not the case with George Eliot in *Adam Bede*.

In analyzing the narrative voice in this particular novel, I was struck by the almost total agreement, on the part of the critics, that there is a distinction in Eliot's work between the author and the narrator. In fact, Barbara Hardy goes one step further and makes a case for a third category, discriminating between characters who tell their stories, the narrator who does everything but tell his or her story, and the reticent author whose name never appeared on the cover or title-page.¹ For the purposes of this study, I will be using categories which are basically parallel to Hardy's, though my third category differs somewhat: (1) the author - Mary Ann Evans, (2) the narrator - George Eliot, and (3) the narrative itself.

Any serious student of English literature knows that 'George Eliot' is the pseudonym for Mary Ann Evans, but the fact was hardly common knowledge to the readers of *Adam Bede* in 1859. The newly-published novel was an immediate success, selling thirteen thousand copies in the first year, and two thousand copies in the first month alone. A comment by Elizabeth Gaskell, the Victorian novelist and biographer of Charlotte Brontë, humorously reflects both the mystery of the author and the popularity of the novel: 'I have had the greatest compliment paid me I ever had in my life. I have been suspected of having written *Adam Bede*'.² While I do not wish to elaborate on the historical facts surrounding the mystery of the author hiding behind this pen name, it is important to try to understand why Mary Ann Evans chose to let George Eliot narrate *Adam Bede*, rather than speaking through her own authorial voice.

The use of pseudonyms has been fairly common practice throughout the history of English literature, particularly among female writers who felt the need to disguise themselves behind a man's name. Just a decade earlier, the Brontë sisters had published novels and a book of poetry in the names of Acton, Currer and Ellis Bell. Pseudonyms create a situation in which the relationship between the author and the work is reserved, and the fiction creates a reality, rather than reality creating fiction. Or as Michal Ginsburg explains it, 'The author who chooses to use a pseudonym wants to upset the "normal" relationship according to which he is the "father" of his works; he wants to be himself an offspring of his own imagination.'³

In her fascinating study of narration in Victorian novels entitled *The Sense of an Audience*, Janice Carlisle argues that Evans wrote as George Eliot because she herself was too far

removed, socially and intellectually, from her potential audience. 'Her fiction would have to perform considerable acts of mediation between herself and her audience. She was quite literally inventing "George Eliot" so that she could speak, through him, to her reader.'⁴ Pointing specifically to her association with the *Westminster Review*, her rather unconventional religious beliefs, and her relationship with George Henry Lewes, Carlisle claims that Evans felt the necessity of bridging the distance between herself and her readers.

Yet the narrative voice of George Eliot does more than satisfy Mary Ann Evans's desire, as well as that of her publisher, to sell books. As Dianne Sadoff explains, 'This pen name represents a transformation of gender which granted the author male authority and placed her in a patriarchal tradition of storytelling.'⁵ Although George Eliot narrates anonymously in *Adam Bede*, as in his other novels, he is most definitely a man, believed by some critics to be based in part on Robert Evans, Mary Ann's father. Eliot appears frequently in the first person, as evidenced in the final paragraph of chapter 17, when he refers to himself as 'I' no less than thirteen times. He is narrating actual facts to the reader, quite self-consciously, from the very opening of the novel. 'This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen, I will show you ...' Eliot remembers these events partially from his own childhood and in large part as told to him by Adam Bede, whom he often calls, as in chapter 33, 'my friend Adam.'

Although Eliot reveals very little personal information, we are able to pick up bits and pieces, scattered throughout the novel. For example, we learn in chapter 35 that he is an Englishman and has visited abroad on more than one occasion: 'I have often thought so when, in foreign countries, where the fields and woods have looked to me like our English Loamshire.' And he is still familiar, at the time of the narration of the novel, with the area of England in which *Adam Bede* is set, as evidenced by the opening sentence of chapter 43: 'The place fitted up that day as a court of justice was a grand old hall, now destroyed by fire.'

Although we are given the time frame in which this novel is set, we are never told exactly when the narration itself is being penned. But we know that it is many years later, as evidenced in chapter 17, when Eliot speaks of 'Adam Bede, to whom I have talked of these matters in his old age.' Eliot reminisces fondly about earlier times, and unfavourably compares his current age to them:

Leisure is gone - gone where the spinning-wheels are gone, and the pack-horses, and the slow waggons, and the pedlars, who brought bargains to the door on sunny afternoons ... Even idleness is eager now - eager for amusement: prone to excursion-trains, art-museums, periodical literature, and exciting novels.

Chapter 17, mentioned earlier, also provides us with the only tangible evidence in the novel that Eliot is, in fact, a man, when Mr. Gedge addresses the narrator specifically as 'Sir': 'Ay, sir, I've said it often, and I'll say it again, they're a poor lot i' this parish - a poor lot, sir, big and little.' The general sense of this runs throughout the novel, however, especially in Eliot's comments about women and marriage, though it is never elsewhere explicitly stated.

Given even this limited biographical information about the narrator of *Adam Bede*, it becomes apparent that Mary Ann Evans intentionally perceived George Eliot as separate and distinct from herself, and as an element in the structure of the novels which Evans authored. K.M. Newton relates Evans's response, penned in a letter to John Blackwood, to Alexander Main's book of narrative extracts from her work: 'I have always exercised a severe watch against anything that could be called preaching, and if I have ever allowed myself in dissertation or in dialogue [anything] which is not part of the *structure* of my books, I have sinned against my own laws.'⁶ Evans's fear was that the extracting of certain narrative passages from her work, as though she herself were speaking in those passages, would seriously damage the effect of the novel as an artistic whole.

It seems that this fear was well-founded, as we can see from the remarks of critics who do not discriminate between Mary Ann Evans the author and George Eliot the narrator. Rachel Trickett, for example, criticizes the 'authorial presence' in Evans's novels: 'The intimate authorial "we" is used by George Eliot to teach her reader to be alert for the points she thinks important.'⁷ Trickett goes on to argue that 'George Eliot's imagination is continually checked and sometimes confused by her conscious or didactic intention,'⁸ a statement which would undoubtedly have roused the ire of Mary Ann Evans.

Most critics, however, as I have said, do not confuse Evans and Eliot, but perceive them as two separate, though obviously linked, entities. A further separation is often made between the intrusive narrator of *Adam Bede* and the objective narrative material of the novel, though, again, there is necessarily a strong link between the two. In *The Dual Voice*, Roy Pascal's book concerned with free indirect speech, which abounds in *Adam Bede*, he argues:

In George Eliot, as in Thackeray, this narrator has a double character, the absolute non-personal narrator on the one hand; on the other the author, very much like George Eliot herself, who uses 'I' or 'we' to address the reader, draws general conclusions, and establishes general truths.⁹

Although admitting that often these two voices merge, Pascal claims that the narration itself is an early vision of the modern novel, in which the characters and plots tend to be self-interpretive, rather than relying on an intrusive narrator.

Pascal goes on to argue that what are generally perceived as flaws in *Adam Bede* are actually a result of Eliot's intrusion into the narrative material of the novel. 'Often one feels like begging George Eliot, "Please leave the characters alone, to themselves, please leave us alone, to make our own conclusions."¹⁰ Although Evans employs free indirect speech in the novel, her use of it is not consistent in Pascal's view.

Barbara Hardy, on the other hand, praises Evans's employment of the free indirect style, calling it a 'brilliant' merging of the 'dramatized character with the narrating authorial presence.'¹¹ Yet she, too, claims that Evans should have taken it a step further:

There are many moments in these stories where the gap between character and narrator is a large one, where the commentary on feeling is solicitous, but didactic, and unparticularized. George Eliot's commentary, like Dickens's, is often made in the interests of exhortation.¹²

The phrase 'George Eliot's commentary, like Dickens's' indicates that Hardy regards the voices of Mary Ann Evans and George Eliot as being one and the same.

While most critics tend to get bogged down in discussing the author/narrator issue in Evans's novels, Elizabeth Ermarth, in her article entitled 'Method and Moral in George Eliot's Narrative', focuses on our third division in this study, which I referred to as the 'narrative' itself. Ermarth argues that part of the problem in appreciating Eliot as a narrator is simply that we, as readers, place too much emphasis and importance on him and expect too much of him. As Ermarth so delicately phrases it, 'Even the narrators, in George Eliot, walk around well-wadded with stupidity.'¹³ Ermarth argues that the narrator's mind is idiosyncratic, that his range is smaller than that of either the author or the reader, though wider than that of the other characters, and that the very fact that he must 'resort to generalizations and patterns merely testifies to the human limitations of the narrator, not to his omniscience.'¹⁴

Accepting this viewpoint and agreeing that the objective narrative material is in itself of equal importance with the narrator, George Eliot, we are left with what Ermarth calls a 'zig-zag narrative method' which demands more of the reader. We are not allowed a single perspective, but instead are forced to rely on our own judgments, derived from the shifting perspectives and the tension between the general and the particular, the narrator and the narrative. If none of the characters in *Adam Bede* can be clearly and absolutely classified as 'good' or 'bad', it is perhaps because we are forced to look at them from so many different angles and perspectives. And if the novel itself often seems (dare I say) tiresome, it is perhaps because we are forced to be so attentive to the various perspectives which it presents, a fact which may account, as Ermarth argues, for 'the sense of difficulty and even fatigue which the novels can evoke'.¹⁵

George Eliot claims, in that all-important chapter 17, that 'I would not, even if I had the choice, be the clever novelist who could create a world so much better than this'. And yet, in studying the narrative method of the author of *Adam Bede*, which appears deceptively simple on the surface, it is possible to arrive at a deeper appreciation of this novel. I mentioned earlier that readers tend to instinctively perceive the voices of the author and the narrator as being the same, which they are not in this case. We also seem to instinctively appreciate a narrative method, however unusual, if we understand that it was intentionally crafted that way, rather than simply a result of the author's ineptitude. George Eliot seems to have been a more 'clever novelist' than even he knew.

Notes

- 1 Barbara Hardy, *Particularities: Readings in George Eliot* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1983), 145
- 2 Quoted in Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983), 33
- 3 Michal Peled Ginsburg, 'Pseudonym, Epigraphs, and Narrative Voice: *Middlemarch* and the problem of Authorship', *English Literary History* 47.3 (1980), 543
- 4 Janice Carlisle, *The Sense of an Audience: Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot at Mid-Century* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1981), 171
- 5 Dianne E. Sadoff, *Monsters of Affection: Dickens, Eliot and Brontë on Fatherhood* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1982), 104
- 6 Quoted in K.M. Newton, 'The Role of the Narrator in George Eliot's Novels,' *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 3.2 (1973), 98
- 7 Rachel Trickett, 'Vitality of Language in Nineteenth-Century Fiction,' *The Modern English Novel: The Reader, The Writer and The Work*, ed. Gabriel Josipovici (New York: Barnes, 1976), 46
- 8 Trickett, 48
- 9 Roy Pascal, *The Dual Voice: Free Indirect Speech and Its Functioning In the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1977), 78
- 10 Pascal, 88
- 11 Barbara Hardy, *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1985), 146
- 12 Hardy, *Forms*, 148
- 13 Elizabeth Ermarth, 'Method and Moral in George Eliot's Narrative,' *The Victorian Newsletter* 47 (1975), 5
- 14 Ermarth, 5
- 15 Ermarth, 7