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**THE IMAGINARY VISION IN *ADAM BEDE*:  
HETTY'S MIRRORS AND THE *OBJET A***

by Katrina Ruth

In October 1857, George Eliot began her first full-length major novel, *Adam Bede*. Having just completed her last 'scene' – 'Janet's Repentance' – from *Scenes of Clerical Life*, she decided to use a 'large canvas'<sup>1</sup> for her next endeavour, an endeavour which would be only the beginning of a series of successful novels. In a letter to her publisher, who was expecting another 'scene' that would continue the success of the series of pastoral stories about the lives of clergymen, Eliot wrote to John Blackwood, claiming that: 'my new story haunts me a great deal. . . . It will be a country story – full of the breath of cows and the scent of hay'.<sup>2</sup> Thus the novel *Adam Bede* was begun and with it Eliot created a plot where the intrigue involved not another rustic clergyman, but this time a rustic butter-maker. The engaging character Hetty Sorrel who wants much, much more for herself than the farming community of Hayslope can ever offer her is a fascinating and tragic figure set in the midst of a community where quiet acceptance of one's lot in life and where concern for others are expected standards of behaviour.

Another standard of behaviour, taken more seriously by Eliot herself than by the members of the community of Hayslope, is the idea of sympathy, or mutual concern for others. Highly critical of egoism, the great Victorian vice, Eliot created her own philosophy which she would later name her 'doctrine of sympathy'. This 'doctrine' came out of Eliot's own personal belief in the new philosophy from Germany, 'the Higher Criticism', which emphasized the love of other humans *over* the love of God, a divine being. Once ardently devoted to the traditional Anglican Christian faith, Eliot chose this new belief and adhered to it with a religious fervour. Thus, the importance placed upon human interaction and true human love for others was for Eliot nothing short of a religious truth. Anyone who fell prey to self indulgence to the exclusion of all others, was, in Eliot's 'religion of humanity', (her own name for her understanding of 'the Higher Criticism') nothing short of a sinner. What makes Hetty Sorrel such a tragic figure within this dialectic is that she is truly incapable of sympathetically interacting with others. This study implements the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan in order to understand the extent to which Hetty is enveloped in her narcissistic, mirror-image love of self to the total *exclusion* of all others. I will also claim that Hetty is tragically only capable of having an 'imaginary' relationship with her self, via her mirrors. All other relationships she experiences throughout the novel are imaginary as well.

Though the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan came nearly a century after Eliot's works, I see that certain parallels exist between the French post-Freudian theorist and the Victorian novelist. Lacan's theory fits nicely with Eliot's 'doctrine of sympathy' because both encourage interactive and/or sympathetic relationships with others and discourage the over-indulgent love of self. According to Lacan, this can only occur when the 'subject' or character fragments herself, or breaks a part of the self away from the narcissistic or

‘imaginary’ image of herself which she sees in the mirror. We shall see that in these themes, Eliot almost anticipates Lacan. Eliot’s portrayal of Hetty’s egoism as one which is centred on mirrors is strikingly similar to the theory which Lacan put forth in 1936 which also claimed that the subject’s need to break from her ideal ego was necessary.<sup>3</sup> Lacan’s theory, coincidentally, is called ‘The Mirror Stage’. For the purpose of this study then, I will claim that Hetty’s ego is built up by her attempt to obtain an imaginary mastery of her own mirror image. Hetty’s egoistic self image is not simply a result of vanity; it is much more far-reaching than a superficial love of her own beauty. It is what we might call an imaginary *vision* of who and what she might become or a self image which she cannot ‘get at’, one which is ungraspable, unobtainable; thus we see the similarity to Lacan’s *objet petite a*, the object (not the subject) of one’s desire.

That Eliot depicts an actual subjective relationship existing between a human being and an inanimate object such as a mirror indicates the proximity to Lacan of the tradition in which George Eliot was working. In both Eliot and Lacan, the subject attempts to have meaningful interaction with the mirror. For Lacan, this involves a *seemingly* meaningful interaction, an imaginary interaction, between the subject and her image in the mirror which she attempts to grasp and have as her own. For Eliot, the actual physical mirror itself and the imaginary vision of both her body and her future life which it offers her, become Hetty’s ‘others’. Hetty’s mirror, the instrument which reveals her complete, flawless image back to her, then, is her best friend. The mirror ‘tells’ her that because of her physical beauty, she can truly and realistically aspire to a life with the handsome, wealthy Captain Donnithorne. In a similar way, Lacan’s theories emphasize the imaginary relationship the subject creates between herself and the non-threatening, apparently whole image of herself which she sees in it. Only the hard, cold glass of the objective mirror interrupts this imaginary image of the self and the body as whole and complete. For Lacan, when the subject recognizes that her relationship with the mirror image is broken off by the mirror, and that the self which she sees is actually fragmented, that the ideal union between the self and the image no longer exists, the subject can then situate herself in complex and meaningful relationships with others. I claim that Hetty does not experience this break with ‘The Mirror Stage’, that instead she remains in the imaginary realm which helps her sustain her unified, non-interactive self.

We may begin then with Eliot’s striking portrayal of Hetty’s almost human relationship with one of her two mirrors in Chapter 15. Eliot makes a striking distinction between the two mirrors by showing how Hetty has two very distinct ways of catching her reflection every day. She considers the mirror allotted to her by the Poysers useful only for the very rudimentary needs of her daily toilette. Though it is quite inadequate to reflect back her image as certain, whole, or perfect, Hetty tolerates it only because it serves its purpose as a utility which gets her through the day. ‘She could see a reflection of herself in the old-fashioned looking-glass, *quite as distinct as needful, considering that she had only to brush her hair and put on her nightcap*’ (emphasis mine).<sup>4</sup> This mirror, along with its base, is an antique; with ‘tarnished gilding about it’ and a ‘firm mahogany base’, it was considered a valuable possession to the Poysers who had bought it ‘a quarter of a century

before, at a sale of genteel household furniture' (194). Nevertheless, we see how seriously Hetty regards the very function of a mirror, any mirror, in general. She endows this same mirror, this mirror which has very ordinary functions, with subjective, almost human characteristics by engaging in an emotional interchange with it. In this passage, Hetty expresses her aggravation – in a very personal and subjective way – over the shortcomings of this mirror. 'A queer old looking-glass! Hetty got into an ill-temper with it almost every time she dressed' (194). We see then that Hetty recognizes her need for a mirror that can offer her a less tainted image of herself, and that she cannot function, even on a daily basis, with this marred image.

Hetty's anger with the objective mirror, the mirror itself, is related, I believe, to the illusory image of herself which it is unable to reflect back. Because of its physical inadequacies, Hetty 'objects' to the mirror – it has 'numerous dim blotches sprinkled over it, which no rubbing would remove' (194). This mirror then forces her to see a somewhat imperfect image of herself. Significantly, Hetty does not recognize or refuses to recognize that this mirror is actually showing her a somewhat fragmented image. This is the first of several instances in which we see the mirror practically 'asking' Hetty to break away from it. Although she knows that the blotches are on the mirror itself, and that this particular mirror does not adequately reflect her physical form, we see that Hetty is dependent upon the certain, whole, completely unstained image upon which she thrives.

That Hetty cannot 'get at' her image, or physically be at one with her image is seen in the physical effort and energy she expends in order to achieve the best view of herself in this very disagreeable mirror. Besides the blotches, Hetty complains about the limited movement of the mirror which minimizes the number of possible views she can get of herself.

Instead of swinging backwards and forwards, it was fixed in an upright position, so that she could only get one good view of her head and neck, and that was to be had only by sitting down on a low chair before her dressing-table. (194)

Even though she recognizes that the hard, cold objective nature of the mirror is keeping her from achieving the oneness or unity with her image, she still insists on rejecting any kind of fragmentation from it. She goes to great lengths to see as much of her body as the wholeness, the completeness of her physical body is as important to her as the whole, complete image she has of her subjective self. By refusing to fragment herself from this mirror image, she is denying herself any possibility of having meaningful subjective relationships. Indeed, she sees all of the possible instruments which would produce fragmentation from her image as bothersome and unnecessary gadgets which simply exist to create physical discomfort. We see, for example, that because of the 'big brass handles' at her knees, 'she couldn't get near the glass at all comfortably' (194). Hetty then ignores all possible means which would bring to an end the imaginary 'Mirror Stage' relationship she has with herself and denies subjective identification. For Eliot, this kind of identification would mean the offering of sympathy.

An example of Hetty's inability to engage in relationships involving sympathy is seen in Chapter 8. The scene is, almost appropriately, a funeral, that community gathering which, above all others, seems to require the deepest expression of human sympathy. Eliot nicely shows how Hetty falters in two instances. First, because she was involved with her mirror and her mirror image only minutes before Dinah arrives with the news that Thias Bede has drowned, Hetty misunderstands the information, believing that Adam was the victim. Mrs Poyser recognizes the reason for this misunderstanding: 'Adam Bede and all his kin might be drowned for what you'd care – you'd be perking at the glass the next minute' (140). Eliot's 'dialectic of mirrors' not only reveals that Hetty is incapable of forging subjective relationships, but here we see that her own aunt knows that Hetty's love of her mirror image interferes with the relationships she already has.

Secretly locked away, Hetty keeps her other mirror, one which is not tainted. 'A small red-framed looking-glass, without blotches' (195), this is the mirror she prefers to the larger one which has so many physical limitations and defects. Confident enough in the image she receives from this less flawed mirror, she lays it aside, and chooses to create yet another illusory image of herself by letting down her hair to 'make herself look like that picture of a lady in Miss Lydia Donnithorne's dressing-room' (195). It is important to note that with this less imperfect mirror, not only does Hetty achieve an illusory image of the wholeness and completeness of her beauty, but she also creates an illusory vision of the life she might have if she lived in the same social class as Miss Lydia Donnithorne. Eliot herself uses language similar to Lacan's, referring to Hetty's vision for her life as an 'imaginary drama' which made her 'cheeks [flush] and her eyes [glisten]' (204). Quoted below is her imaginary vision. With her objects around her and just within her grasp – her large earrings, her scarf, and her best mirror – she is transported into her vision, one which she believes is also just within her grasp.

Captain Donnithorne couldn't like her to go on doing work: he would like to see her in nice clothes, and thin shoes and white stockings, perhaps with silk clocks to them . . . Perhaps some day she should be a grand lady, and ride in her coach, and dress for dinner in a brocaded silk, with feathers in her hair and her dress sweeping the ground. (196-7)

The portrait then serves as yet another type of mirror, for when she looks at it, she does not see Miss Lydia, but herself, the imaginary Hetty who is permitted to love and to live a life with Captain Arthur Donnithorne, who is otherwise inaccessible to Hetty the butter-maker who lives with and works for her aunt and uncle.

Nevertheless, because Hetty is so enveloped in her vision, she does not recognize that her scarf has been caught on the mirror, and when she stands up, the mirror falls to the floor. 'At the thought of all this splendour, Hetty got up from her chair, and in doing so caught the little red-framed glass with the edge of her scarf, so that it fell with a bang on the floor'. (197) That the mirror was caught by her scarf and served as the intruder in this imaginary 'relationship' – for it caused the mirror to '[fall] with a bang' – is significantly

ironic because her scarf, like her other secret possessions, functions as an *objet a*, that which represents the inattainable. In Lacan's theory, the *objets a*, once they have 'broken away from' the whole, can become part of the symbolic order of meaningful signification. I contend that this is one way in which we can view the function of one of Hetty's precious objects, for it is almost 'asking' her to break away from it. This imaginary object interferes with the imaginary connection between the objective self and the visionary self in the mirror, suggesting perhaps that the whole, imaginary self break away from it. Instead of recognizing this need to break away, instead of recognizing that the mirror is almost "requesting" this break because the mirror itself breaks away from her, instead of recognizing its request that she fragment herself from her image and from her vision, Hetty continues to perpetuate the vision – now without the help of the mirror. Eliot notes that 'she was too eagerly occupied with her vision to care about picking it [the mirror] up' (197). This seems to suggest that once Hetty has the imaginary vision, the mirror itself is no longer important. Indeed, her recognition that the mirror has fallen is marked only by 'a momentary start' (197) and she immediately '[begins] to pace with a pigeon-like stateliness backwards and forwards along her room, in her coloured stays and coloured skirt, and the old black lace scarf round her shoulders, and the great glass earrings in her ears' (197). It appears then that Hetty can sustain her imaginary vision without the help of the mirror because she has so many other objects, other Lacanian *objets a* – her colourful skirt, her lace scarf, and her glass earrings – to replace the one that was lost. And instead of recognizing the actual break from the mirror as a symbol of her need to break away from her self and to interact sympathetically with others, Hetty merely replaces the lost imaginary object with others that are just as imaginary and which perpetuate the imaginary vision just as well.

In Chapter 15, we see that these objects are interestingly *named* – a very *subjective*, personal process, not by Hetty, but by Eliot herself, who, in essence, satirizes Hetty's subjective importance of *objective* things. The simplistic names which Eliot chooses represent this moralistic flaw which she sees within Hetty. By naming Hetty's objects for her, Eliot shows how foolish she is for not putting the same kind of effort into relationships with people. Eliot's naming process, then, gently mocks the subjective relationship Hetty has with her 'things'. Her earrings are referred to objectively as toy-like 'baubles' (204), and the place where she keeps them hidden away with the locket which Arthur gave her – just as she has hidden her good mirror – is referred to as her 'treasure-drawer' (380), and the name designated to the sum of his collection is 'trinkets' (380). All of these names smack of the utter insignificance which Eliot sees in these objects which have, in a very true sense, become Hetty's best friends.

Another example of Hetty's reliance on objects is seen in an incident involving a personal gift given to her in secret, and we shall see again how she sacrifices interpersonal relationships for her more comfortable objective relationships. This particular incident raises questions concerning Hetty's ability to love the giver more than the gift or the object itself. During the dance for Arthur's birthday celebration in Chapter 26, Hetty's reaction to her broken locket, given to her secretly by Arthur, shows her reliance on the object which rep-

resents both a gift as well as a symbol of devotion. As Hetty places the troublesome Totty into Adam's arms, the child's hand catches the string of beads, breaks the string, and scatters the locket and beads on the floor. Hetty's reaction, expressed to Adam 'in a loud frightened whisper' (332), reveals both the importance of the object as well as of the giver. It also indicates how lightly she takes her relationship with her bothersome yet lovable young cousin, Totty. It is difficult, in fact, to determine which is more important to Hetty: the lover or the locket, for the two seem to be intertwined at this moment. Indeed, the two appear to be so interlocked that she sees both as objects. 'My locket, my locket . . . never mind the beads,' she cries (332). Just beyond her grasp, both physically and symbolically, the locket represents the life which Hetty aspires to, the imaginary vision, as much as, if not more than, it represents Arthur's devotion to her. For Adam, Hetty's desire to have the locket back is motivated by romantic or sentimental reasons, and he in turn reacts in bewilderment and despair. 'Adam assented silently. A puzzled alarm had taken possession of him. Had Hetty a lover he didn't know of?' (332). For Hetty, however, the locket represents yet another imaginary vision of the life she could have with Arthur, thus the emphasis of this interchange with Adam, a man with whom she is supposedly in love, is upon the object itself and more importantly, the vision itself.

All of these objects then, appear as metaphors of the life with Arthur which Hetty envisions. Like Arthur, they are barely accessible to her and only then in secret, which, I believe, makes them even more appealing to her. There is a certain mystique about them; like Arthur, they remain hidden and she only indulges in them in her privacy, just as she indulges herself in *secret* meetings with him in the woods. By giving her such gifts, Arthur then serves for Hetty as a vehicle by which she can attempt to grasp her imaginary vision. His secretive way of functioning in their actual relationship – meeting Hetty secretly in the woods, giving her secret gifts which she must keep hidden, going into and coming out of hiding without anyone's recognition – only exacerbates the extent of the vision. The way in which his presence figures in this relationship then is as elusive as the gifts, the valuable things which occasionally appear on Hetty's doorstep, keeping her reaching for the object or the lover himself.

We see the ultimate expression of Hetty's friendship-like dependence upon her mirror in Chapter 31. After having received a letter from Arthur Donnithorne, telling her that he cannot marry her and that he must leave her, she feels that the mirror is all she has left, for it has so far functioned as the primary 'other' which sustains her vision. She feels now, however, that it can no longer reflect back for her the imaginary visions she so longs for, as Arthur's departure has just destroyed them. The very nature of this important 'relationship' with the mirror is critical for Hetty at this juncture, for, as Eliot tells us, she has seen, at last, 'the shattering of her little dream world' (379). Even with her swollen, red eyes, Hetty still '[catches] sight of her face in the glass' and yet now she looks on her mirror as a '*companion* that she might complain to – that would pity her' (379; emphasis mine). Unable in her sorrow to desire a symbolic, interactive sympathy with another human being, Hetty seeks out the only meaningful response she knows, that is, pity – one in which she is the recipient only, and one in which no reciprocity on her part is required.

Even when she recalls Dinah's entreaty in Chapter 31 to come to her if ever she needed a friend, she quickly dismisses the notion, knowing that Dinah would not stroke her ego. 'Any affection or comfort Dinah could have given her would have been as indifferent to Hetty this morning as everything else was' ( 381). The mirror, the object, then serves as a pretend 'companion' which will hear her complaints, which will feel *for* her, and which will not look inward, as Dinah does.

Just as she recognized only the 'momentary bang' of her mirror dropping earlier, and not the necessity of breaking away from it completely, Hetty does not, in this episode, recognize the significance of breaking away from either her mirror or her other objects which have for so long grounded her in her imaginary vision. Indeed, when she does recognize that it is only the objects that have brought her happiness, she immediately sentences herself to a life of misery, for without her objects to help perpetuate her imaginary vision, she is forced to face the reality of her lot. After the sobbing wears off and she awakens, 'she [begins] to discern the *objects* round her in the dim light. . . . there sat the earrings and the locket – the signs of all her short happiness – the signs of the life-long dreariness that was to follow it' (379; emphasis mine). Her objects are so significant to her that her life without them and hence without the vision they induce, would be meaningless. Yet Hetty refuses to accept such a lot, and she almost immediately begins to look at the objects, which had only momentarily tainted the imaginary vision, with a nostalgic fondness.

The consequences of Hetty's imaginary relationships with her mirrors and her objects, which help her claim and reclaim her imaginary vision over and over, are numerous. We have seen how she is incapable of offering sympathy herself, has passionately rejected the *acceptance* of Dinah Morris's offer of sympathy, and later in the novel, rejects Adam's offer of true, sympathetic human love, only to continue to grasp the ungraspable – that illusive imaginary vision – at times represented only by the trinkets, or objects, he gives her – of Arthur Donnithorne.

#### Notes

1. *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven and London, 1954-78), II, 381.
2. *Ibid*, 387.
3. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York, 1981), p. 257.
4. George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (1859; New York: Viking Penguin, 1987), p. 194. Further page references to this edition are given in the text.