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Adam Bede

George Eliot · *1859* · *original English text*

In the English village of Hayslope in 1799, Adam Bede, a strong and honest carpenter, loves the pretty dairymaid Hetty Sorrel. Hetty dreams of the young squire, Arthur Donnithorne, and the Methodist preacher Dinah Morris, who loves neither of them, is a quieter presence. George Eliot's first full-length novel is a story of a seduction, a crime, and the long road of moral consequence.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What do we owe one another when one person's weakness harms another, and how do we live with what we have done?

Eliot believes that actions have consequences that do not vanish with good intentions. Arthur means no harm, and does it anyway. Hetty's vanity and fear lead her into a terrible crime. Adam's righteous anger softens as he learns what sorrow means. Dinah's faith and the village's plain virtues are shown without sentimentality. Eliot pleads for sympathy for ordinary people, and the book argues that the gentle and the strong can learn from each other.

KEY CHARACTERS

Adam Bede
A master carpenter, strong, proud, and honest.

Hetty Sorrel
A pretty dairymaid, vain and dreamy.

Dinah Morris
A Methodist preacher and Hetty's cousin.

Arthur Donnithorne
The young squire, well-meaning and weak.

Seth Bede
Adam's gentle brother.

Mrs. Poyser
The farmer's wife, a sharp-tongued wit.

Mr. Irwine
The kindly rector.

Bartle Massey
The schoolmaster.

Grades 10–12

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01
Hayslope and Hall Farm
BOOK FIRST

Adam and his brother Seth work in Burge's carpentry shop. Dinah preaches on the green, Hetty dreams of Arthur, and Arthur and Hetty meet in the wood on his birthday eve.

- The workshop and the green set a whole village in place.
- Dinah's preaching makes a strong impression.
- The meeting in the wood is the seed of the plot.

02
The Pause and the Village
BOOK SECOND

Eliot stops to state her creed of plain, truthful painting. Adam works through the week, and the village shows its church, its school, and its farms.

- The chapter 'in which the story pauses a little' is Eliot's statement of purpose.
- Adam's night school shows his character.
- The Poysers' farm is full of life.

03
The Birthday Feast
BOOK THIRD

Arthur comes of age and gives a great feast and a dance. Adam sees how Arthur looks at Hetty and fears what it may mean.

- The feast is a high point of village life.
- The dance puts Hetty and Arthur together.
- Adam sees, and is troubled.

04
The Crisis
BOOK FOURTH

Adam finds Arthur and Hetty in the Grove and strikes him down. Arthur writes a letter of farewell. Mrs. Poyser speaks her mind to the old squire, and Adam and Hetty become engaged.

- The fight in the Grove is the book's breaking point.
- Arthur's letter is a sad kind of honesty.
- Mrs. Poyser's speech is a famous comic and brave moment.

05
Flight, Trial, and Prison
BOOK FIFTH

Hetty leaves to find Arthur, fails to find him, and is arrested for the death of her child. She is tried and condemned, and Dinah visits her in the prison and leads her to confess.

- Hetty's journey is a long, lonely one.
- The trial is shown with restraint.
- Dinah's visit is the heart of the novel.

06
Reprieve and Marriage
BOOK SIXTH AND EPILOGUE

Arthur arrives with the reprieve. Adam is at last reconciled to him, and Adam and Dinah are drawn together and marry. In 1807 the family gathers in the timber yard.

- The reprieve comes at the last moment.
- Adam's forgiveness of Arthur is hard-won.
- The epilogue shows a quiet family life.

Consequences · Sympathy · Faith · Village Life

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. Eliot interrupts the story to explain her aims. Notice how she asks for sympathy for ordinary people.
2. Watch how Arthur's good intentions fail.
3. Dinah and Adam are very different people. Look at what each teaches.
4. The prison scene is the book's center. Ask what Dinah offers Hetty.

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