CHAPTER- II

GEORGE ELIOT: THE QUEST FOR AGNOSTIC ETHICS

F.W.M Myers recorded a conversation with George Eliot at Cambridge in 1873. In the conversation she concedes that she is an agnostic. Essentially religious, she was brought by her intellectual honesty to what Walter Allen termed as “reluctant agnosticism.” (220) Her wide readings in philosophy, and her contact with men like G. H. Lewes, Bary and Herbert Spencer changed her attitude towards Christianity. She read Hennell’s Enquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity, and felt sad that, doctrines infinitely important to man are buried in a charnel heap of bones, over which nothing is heard but the barks and growls of contention.

Strauss’s *Life of Christ*, Feurbach’s *Essence of Christianity*, and Spencer’s *The First Principles*, profoundly altered her views on religion and turned her towards agnosticism. Scientific determinism leads to ethical determinism. She evolves out a moral outlook, which is based on the firm conviction that the seed determines the nature of the tree. Though, like Kant, she does not deny the existence of God from moral intuition, she nevertheless lays stress on morals. She employs irony to criticize prudential Victorian ethics, and expresses her dissent on its decadent moral values. Like Arnold, she regards love as great value. Her two novels *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch* will be examined closely in this respect. Her agnostic ethics become a substitute for religion, for she looks at life from this typical moral angle.

Mary Ann Evans, otherwise George Eliot, was born in Warwickshire in 1819 and spent the early years of her life with her father,
an estate agent, and her brother, Isaac. From childhood she showed an
abnormal aptitude for study, quickly outstripping her brother in the range
of her academic achievements and in the facility with which she acquired
knowledge. Diana Neill writes in this regard: “Many years later she
painted the picture of the two children with considerable humour and
insight in The Mill on the Floss.” (206)

From historical background of Victorian perspective, materialism
did not completely deaden intellectual activity in this era. A spirit of
questioning was dominant. There was a revolution in scientific thought,
following upon the works of Darwin and his school. There was a great
outburst of social political theorizing—such as that of Herbert Spencer
and John Stuart Mill. In addition, popular education became a practical
thing. This in its turn produced a new hunger for intellectual matter,
leading to increased production of the Press and other forms of literature.
But the scientific and philosophical developments also led to the rise of
pessimism. Old customs and faiths had lost their hold, but a new order
had not yet been established. A gloomy view of life, for instance, is
reflected in the works of George Eliot. It was, on the whole, a complex
age, and the complexity is reflected in its literature in the form of
agnosticism.

Marry Ann Evans was brought up as an orthodox Christian and had
been considerably influenced by her Evangelist aunt, Mrs. Elizabeth
Evans. She was a regular church-goer in her youth. However, later in life
when she came into contact with the Brays and other intellectuals of the
age, she lost faith in orthodox Christianity and stopped going to church. It
was only under pressure from her ailing father that she again took to
church-going. But she did never again believe in the Christian concept of
God, Heaven and Hell, and in the Immortality of human soul. This has
exposed her to the charge of being irreligious, an agnostic. This led to
David Cecil calling, George Eliot was not religious. But a close study of her life, her letter and her works will put more light in this respect.

The tension of George Eliot's mind need not, however, be understood quite so narrowly. In broader terms which can be seen as representing an intellectual malaise from which scarcely a great mind of the century was free—whether that of Mill, Carlyle, Marx, Melville, or Dostoevsky. George R. Creeger writes in this context:

Such minds, all one way or another legatees of European romanticism, had explored too deeply the hidden landscapes of the psyche, were too aware of suffering and injustice despite progress, and too convinced of the probable certainty of God's death to accept with complacency the rational and optimistic shibboleths of the age. Yet this fact of unease, though it could proved debilitating (never more clearly than in the case of Mill) was also a potent source of energy. (3)

The fact is that George Eliot was an intellectual and a rationalist whom the irrational and the supernatural in orthodox Christian belief could not satisfy. She was in touch with the latest scientific, religious and philosophical thoughts of the age, as Basil Willey asserts that probably no English writer of the time, and certainly no novelist, more fully epitomizes the century; her development is a paradigm, her intellectual biography a graph, of its most decided trends. Starting from evangelical Christianity, the curve passed through doubt to a reinterpreted Christ and a religion of humanity: beginning with God, it ends in Duty.

At the age of twenty two George Eliot went with her father to Coventry, and there, under the influence of Charles Bray, a Coventry manufacturer, she began to free herself from the narrow religious outlook.
which bound her family. She met Charles Hennell, whose *Enquiry* led her to question the validity of revealed religion. Unhappily for herself, she fell in love with Hennell and suffered her first humiliating disappointment when he married the daughter of Dr. Brabant—the model for Dr. Casaubon. George Eliot meanwhile showed an unfeminine stoicism in consoling herself by finishing her successful rival’s translation of Strauss’s *Life of Jesus* (1846). Friendship with free thinkers and wide reading in science and philosophy at this time completely undermined her religious beliefs and she rejected religion altogether. The break was made with reluctance as she knew it would cause her father much pain.

George Eliot outlook was sufficiently vague even at the age of 30. She had grown to her full intellectual stature. She had read widely and intelligently; and she had not devoted herself to any special line of inquiry, she was becoming familiar with the world of ideas which were ignored in the early domestic circle. So far, however there is no appearance of any intention to take up work. “We fancy, says Mrs. Bray in 1846, that ‘she must be writing her novel’—apparently, because she ‘is looking very brilliant just now’.” (Stephen 30). But the ‘novel’ appears to be merely conjectural, and her labours upon Strauss has not suggested a possibility of her taking up an independent part in such inquiries. Her difference would suggest rightly or wrongly that she was not qualified to contribute to philosophical or critical literature.

She was therefore at a loss to find any channel for the store of intellectual energy already enriched by much experience and reflection. A poem, written some years later, suggests a state of mind which may illustrate her position at this period. She describes a ‘Minor Prophet’, a gentleman of Puritan descent who has taken up new ideas with the old dogmatic confidence. He is a phrenologist and a vegetarian, interested in
‘physical research’, and fully expecting a regeneration of the world by the adoption of scientific inventions and eliminations of faulty human types.

She smiles sadly at the prospect, and feels ‘short sighted pity’ for the coming man who

‘Will not no half the dear imperfect things
That move my smiles and tears—will never know
The fine old incongruities that raise
My friendly laugh; the innocent conceits
That, like a needless eyeglass or black patch,
Give those who wear them harmless happiness;
The twists and cracks in our poor earthenware
That touch me to more conscious fellowship
(I am not myself the finest Parian)
With my coevals.’

She goes on to explain that she is anything but indifferent to hopes for another future—

‘The earth yields nothing more diving
Than high prophetic vision—than the seer
Who, fasting from man’s meaner joy, beholds
The paths of beauteous order and constructs
A fairer type, to shame our low content.
But prophecy is like potential sound
Which turned to music seems a voice sublime
From out the soul of light, but turns to noise
In scrannel pipes and makes all ears a verse.' (Stephen 37)

She seems to intimate distraction between the past and the present, between the old fashioned society and the pragmatic preacher of scientific or quasi-scientific. George Eliot was far too loyal to her friends, not to be little blind to their defects; and Bray was a man of real sense and ability. "Yet the 'minor prophet' was a kind of inferior Bray, and among his disciples and colleagues there was plenty of people who showed the ugly side of scientific arrogance and the readiness to substitute a tune upon 'scrannel pipes' for the pathetic if imperfect music of the older creeds."

(Stephen 38)

George Eliot desired to sympathise with these leaders of progress, but contempt for the past jarred most painfully upon her feelings, and seemed treasonable to the best human affection. The intensely tender and sensitive nature which promoted her longing for some 'woman's mission' made her shrink from too close an alliance with the iconoclasts who would indiscriminately condemn things sacred to her memory.

In 1850 George Eliot, a rationalist and bluestocking was honoured by being offered the assistant editorship of the 'Westminster Review.' Founded by the Utilitarian Jeremy Bentham, it was the organ of the philosophical radicals. She came to London, and, once settled in the capital, new and wider horizons opened out before her. Congenial and important friendships were formed with Froude, Francis Newman, Greg and the Martineaus, and above all, with Herbert Spencer. To Carlyle the latter may have seemed the most 'immeasurable ass in Christendom', but to many he represented all that was most impressive in English philosophical thought. Founder of the evolutionary philosophy, Spencer believed that all knowledge could be unified on the basis of a single all-pervading principle, that of evolution. In his Education, Intellectual,
Moral and Physical he showed a frank contempt for the humanities and urged that science should made the principal instrument of education. The splendour of Spencer's intellect fascinated George Eliot and she fell deeply in love with him, but the philosopher fled—not, however, before he had introduced her to George Henry Lewes.

Lewes, a free thinker and a versatile professional writer on philosophy and natural science, is remembered, if he can be said to be remembered at all, as the authors of the phrase 'emergent evolution'. In his own time he commanded much respect among advanced thinkers. Like many, George Eliot's own literary hero, Lewes, was physically unattractive and, moreover, he had ruined his health by incessant literary work and the poverty to which he condemned himself in order to provide generously for his wife, from whom he was separated. Outwardly he had little to offer a woman like George Eliot, but his devotion won her love. They could not marry, but convinced in her own mind that her love for Lewes was honourable and right, she proudly defied Victorian convention and lived with him. She dedicated her books to him, took his name and was, in every way except in the eyes of the society, his wife. This resulted in as Diana Neill puts:

Her action cost her the esteem and friendship of her own family, who renounced her and refused, even when she became famous to have anything to do with her. For a time, too, close friends turned cold. She resigned her post on the Westminster Review, and soon learnt that only unsigned articles from her pen would be accepted. Yet in spite of these humiliations, she did not flinch from a course of action which her conscience, the only arbiter she admitted, approved. (207)
No one was more thoroughly abreast than George Eliot of the newest thought, the latest French or German theory, the last interpretation of dogma, the most up-to-date results in anthropology, medicine, biology or sociology. It is she who first translated Strauss’s Life of Jesus and Feuerbachs’ Essence of Christianity. From the very outset, she showed the instinct—which was deeply imbedded in the consciousness of the century as a whole—to see both sides of any question: to tolerate the ordinary while admiring the ideal, to cling to the old while accepting the new, to retain the core of tradition while mentally criticizing their forms. This conservative—reforming is the leading motif of her life, her life-long quest was to achieve a synthesis of these two opposites, to harmonise the Static and Dynamic Principles, Traditions and the Enlightenment, the Heart and the Head. This has always remained the focus of an agnostic. It is this tension, which is the basis of all her novels. It was this which exposes her to the charge of being irreligious, for she criticised the forms of orthodox faith, but all the time, remained true to the essential of that faith. Wagenknecht in the Cavalcade of the English Novel points out:

George Eliot’s revolt against her inherited faith was based on intellectual ground alone; at no time was there a moral revolt. It was inevitable, therefore, that, being what she was, she should have spent the rest of her life trying to preserve the Christian morality without supernatural sanctions. The rationalist in her could not accept the Christian concept of God, and she regarded any faith in the supernatural as inconceivable; she regarded the concepts of the immortality of the soul as unbelievable. She represented the whole predicament of the religious temperament cut off by rationalism from the traditional objects of veneration, and the traditional intellectual formulations. She was not, of course a.
a practising Christian, but in her estrangement from the religion about Jesus, she was none the further from the religion of Jesus. She knew the hunger and thirst after righteousness, and the need for renunciation—the need to lose one’s life in order to gain it. And, though religious consciousness was pre-eminently moral, it was not exclusively so; she also had the faculty of reverence, the capacity to acknowledge the reality of the unseen. (80)

That she was deeply religious initially is clearly brought out by her letter to Madam Bodichon when she writes that she has very little sympathy with free thinker as a class, and has lost all interest in mere agnosticism religious doctrines. She cares only to know, if possible, the lasting meaning that lies in all religious doctrine from the beginning till then. According to Wagenknecht:

It was no accident that while George Eliot was the major English novelist who did not profess the Christian religion, none other should ever have set forth the Christian ethic with such intellectual power. Her intellect robbed her of God, but she made no God of the intellect. Love was the most imperious need of her nature at all times, form her childhood when like Maggie Tulliver she gave her young adoration to her brother, Issac Evans, until the last year of her life, when she trusted her decline to J.W.Cross. Adam Bade speaks for her as well as for himself when he says, ‘It isn’t notion sets people doing the right thing—it’s feeling; and, again, that feeling’s a sort of knowledge’. The same philosophy lies at the heart of Deniel Deronda, so different from Adam Bade in other ways. (97)
George Eliot was no clamorous atheist, she soon outgrew the first zest of her emancipation and refused to bear a label, even the rationalist, Positivist label; she simply waited patiently for more light. She found it difficult to believe that men had brought forth sublime thoughts than the universe itself; and her faith in free will always separate her from the thorough-going naturalists. Dorothea Brooke identifies herself with the divine power against evil; and George Eliot herself speaks of the breath of God within us. She refused to reject human values and take molecular physics as her dominant guide. Some men might have been happy on that basis; George Eliot could not. It has often been pointed out that she never made loss of faith the principal theme of a novel. This was partly, as we have seen, because she was no iconoclast: it was partly because as an artist she had her roots in the world of her believing youth: it was partly because she never reached the certitude of unbelief.

This problem of faith concerns more than Marian Evans, the woman: we understand it, if we are to understand George Eliot, the novelist. She was great only to the extent that memory and her natural goodness made it possible for her to rise above her unfaith. If you had asked her what she thought of mysticism, she would have replied that she feared and distrusted it. But probably no one ever succeeded in being a great writer without having something of the mystic in him; so it is not surprising to learn that George Eliot told John Walter Cross that in all that she considered her best writing, there was a not herself which took possession of her, and that she felt her own personality to be merely the instrument through which this spirit, as it were, was acting.

George Eliot was not an atheist and her only approach to religion was moral. She moralised religion or it is the moral aspect of religion.
which appeals to her the most. She finds ‘Duty’ peremptory and absolute. This makes all her novels, ‘criticism of life’ as David Cecil points out:

Now this criticism was exclusively and consistently a moral criticism. George Eliot, though she was a thinker, was not a particularly original thinker. And her conception of life was that held by the dominant school of thought in advanced circles of her day. She was a thoroughgoing Victorian rationalist. The progress of thought and discovery made it impossible for her to believe in the supernatural; she had given up the Puritan theology of her childhood. But the moral code founded on that Puritan theology had soaked itself too deeply into the fibre of the thought and feeling for her to give it up as well. She might not believe in heaven and hell and miracles, but she believed in right and wrong and man’s paramount obligation to follow right, as strictly as if she were Bunyan himself. And her standards of right and wrong were the Puritan standards. She admired truthfulness and chastity and industry and self-restraint; she disapproved loose living and recklessness and deceit and self-indulgence. (387)

She believed in free will. She thought every man’s character was in his own hand to mould into the right shape or the wrong; and she thought that all his strength should be put forward to mould it right. Matthew Arnold thought that conduct was three-fourths of life; George Eliot went further, she thought it was four-fourths. Activities were right in so far as they assist you to be good, they were wrong in so far as they prevented you. And such activities as were neither right nor wrong, were frivolous, unworthy of the attention of a serious person. Another fundamental of her philosophy is a conviction what life is just. She was sure that those who
live a virtuous life are essentially contented. However, well meaning you might be or however lucky, she was sure that you cannot escape the consequences of your own actions; that you sins find you out, that the slightest slip will be visited on you, if not immediately then in times to come.

Bernard J. Paris opines that the religion of the future, George Eliot felt, would be a religion not of God, but of man, a religion of humanity (13) opines in his essay ‘George Eliot’s Religion of Humanity’. The central preoccupation of George Eliot’s life was with religion, and in her novels, which she thought of as ‘experiments of life’, she was searching for a view of life that would give modern man a sense of purpose, dignity and ethical direction. The order of thing is unconscious, unresponsive to man, unrelated to human desire and values; but there is, in Eliot’s view, another order, a human, a moral order which is responsive to consciousness and which is a source and sanction of moral values. Bernard J. Paris further writes:

The moral order is manifested in love and fellow-feelings between individuals, in the products and traditions of human culture, in the laws and institutions of society, in the creeds, symbols, and ceremonies of religion; in general, in any human institution or activity which by interposing itself between the individual and the alien cosmos lessens the disparity between the inward and the outward and humanizes the world. The moral order is not independent of cosmic or non- moral order, but exists within it and is in some respects a product of it. (14)

It is in the light of these views that George Eliot constructs her novels. The idea which are their germ are all moral ideas; the conflicts
which are the mainspring of their action are always moral conflicts. They divide themselves into two classes. In some like *Janet's Repentance*, *Adam Bade*, *Silas Marner*, the moral course is clear. The characters are in a position to do what they think right, only. They are tempted to do something wrong instead; and the conflict turns on the struggle between their principles and their weaknesses. In *Silas Marner*, Silas is a naturally affectionate, unselfish character warped by a love of money, but ultimately redeemed by his love for the child Eppie. Godfrey is a kindly well-meaning young man, marred by his inability to admit the disagreeable truth about himself; Arthur Donnithrone in *Adam Bade* is such another, only he is mastered by his weakness to resist the temptations of the flesh. Hetty is a vain, weak little egoist, whose vanity and weakness bring her merely to the gallows; Janet Dempster is a generous idealistic character saved from drink and despair by the influence of an evangelical preacher.

George Eliot, knowing that the wages of sin is untold misery, did not shrink from showing it requiting the transgressor as Diana Neill puts:

> Such moral determination gave to her novels a certain rigidity, but it also gave them power and significance. Sorrow was strictly determined, but by character, not by external factors. Her characters are caught in some unbreakable chain of causation: 'our deeds determine us as much as we determine our deeds' is an assertion fully justified by her novels. (208)

George Eliot was an austere rationalist who had discarded religion along with mystery, beauty and hope, but who retained an inexorable ethical creed that demanded nothing for right action beyond the sober satisfaction of having done what was right. Virtue, indeed, was its own
reward; to ask more was venal. Excessive devotion to study probably impaired an imagination that most likely had never been overactive. This was a defect in novelist and to some extent may be held responsible for the subsequent decline of her popularity once the moralizing Victorian age was over. Diana Neill further writes in this regard: “Consciously antiromantic, she rejected glamour, personality, physical loveliness and insisted that true beauty is of the soul and can be seen only in action. It is doubtful if a woman novelist had ever had such an austere taste in males.” (209) Her true heroes are often humble and ordinary people.

George Eliot was something unlike the typical Victorian novelist. She was essentially intellectual, psychological, and philosophical novelist interested, not like the Victorians, in the study of external and objective life, but in the analysis and diagnosis of the inner motives of her characters. This concentration of George Eliot on the inner life of the soul is her main difference from early Victorian novelists. Her mind was always active. Experience set her about her task of analyzing and generalizing the events that happened, as well as in discovering why and how things happened. When she cast her eyes on the world around her it was this analysis that gave a spirit to her creative imagination. She was inspired, not by what she felt or fancied, but by what passed in her mind; not by a strong desire to convey her impressions of life but by pronouncing judgments on what she has seen. Her main interest was not in the story or description of scenes. It was in the analysis of her character and the moral disposition they possessed.

This moral viewpoint is never absent from George Eliot’s novels. In her novels philosophy, morality and psychology are interlinked factors. Man is seen as a moral creature; i.e. men and women are gifted with a conscience, inspired with ideals and notions of right and wrong, and given
the capacity to choose. Her great law of conduct is the act and it consequences. In this process there is the conflict between desire and duty, between passion and self-sacrifice, between egoism and loyalty to others. Gorge Eliot’s concern with the moral side of human nature is the chief source of her peculiar glory, the kernel of her contribution to English literature. A tragic vision of life lies behind all of Gorge Eliot’s novels—naturally growing out of her moral and philosophical ideas. Sin and folly bring their retribution. The tragedy of her character, springs from an awesome combination of character-traits, circumstances and faith. No human being is free of weakness, and given into weakness is bound to bring its own inescapable consequences.

*The Mill on the Floss*. George Eliot’s second full-length novel, was published in 1860. Broadly speaking, the theme of the novel is the development of the character of its chief figure, Maggie Tulliver, who is an agnostic like George Eliot. We live through Maggie’s experiences, first as a child and little girl, and then as a grown-up girl, till her tragic death in the flooded river, Floss. Maggie is an intense, sensitive girl capable of loving another deeply, but also with an insatiable desire for affection. The dilemmas facing her are supreme test for Maggie who at last realises that great suffering is involved in renunciation. At last the flood claims Maggie’s life when she goes to save her brother. In their final moments, brother and sister are reconciled—in their death they were not divided.

The river in the novel is described as a great one which, “flows forever onward and links the small pulse of the old English farms with the beatings of the world’s mighty heart.” (2) At the outset, then, it suggests a larger dimension than the Dodsons and Tullivers who were accustomed to move in, and it soon becomes symbolic of the vague aspirations and uncontrollable impulses which carry Maggie to her tragic end. Mrs.
Tulliver, on at least three occasions, expresses her fear for Maggie in this connection: “... wandering up and down by the water, like a wild thing—she’ll tumble in some day.” (7) Gradually, the river becomes the symbol of disaster, threading its way through the landscape of Maggie’s adolescence.

The Mill on the Floss is an autobiographical novel and in Maggie we get an account of the author’s own complex personality. The novel has been called the spiritual autobiography of Mary Ann Evans. In several details, the life of Mary Ann Evans coincides with that of Maggie Tulliver’s, especially in the early part of the novel. The early scenes of her life were present in Mary Ann Evan’s mind when she wrote this novel, and furnished her with suggestions upon which her imagination freely worked within the limits of her design. Memory supplies her with the material which makes her account of childhood so vividly poignant and innocently happy. “I take it that The Mill on the Floss is the novel most visibly close to George Eliot’s life. As in many novels loosely classed as autobiographical, this closeness to life has advantages and disadvantages, and shows itself in various ways,” (Barbara Hardy 170).

For Tom, who had inherited the placid arrogance of his mother’s people, life was not difficult. He was resolved to be just in all his dealings and to deliver punishment to whomever it was due. His sister Maggie grew up with an imagination beyond her years of understanding. Her aunts predicted she would come to a bad end because she was tomboyish, dark-skinned, dreamy and indifferent to their wills. Frightened by ill luck in her attempts to please her brother Tom, her cousin Lucy, and her mother and aunts, Maggie ran away, determined to live with gypsies. But she was glad enough to return. Her father scolded her mother and Tom
for abusing her. Her mother was sure that Maggie would come to a bad end because of the way Mr. Tulliver humoured her.

Agnostic tendencies from childhood are reflected in Maggie who is quite imaginative and sensitive. She has a head as well as a heart which is more quick at learning than Tom. Her imagination is fertile and vivid. She loves reading, and has the gift of telling stories so that her character seems to come alive. She weaves fairy-tale romances about the creatures of the animal world, such as the spiders in the mill. The round pool in the garden is invested with a sense of mystery by her. When upset, she creates for herself an imaginary world which is just what she should like the real world to be.

Her love of books is unlimited. Even after the domestic calamity, her books are her sustenance; and Bob can not think of a better present of her than books. Her religious asceticism is a result of her vast reading and contact with Thomas Kempis. But after all, it is imagination, more than intelligence, that characterises her mental make-up. It is this powerful imagination that paints for her rosy pictures of gypsy queendom out of an act of fretful truancy.

Her response to criticism shows her sensitive nature. Indeed, from this sensibility stems her curious habit of withdrawing into the attic in the face of anyone’s anger, and beating the daylights out of an old wooden doll which she keeps there for the purpose. She drives nails into this doll which is the symbolic target for Maggie’s revenge against unhappiness. Or, she would communicate her sorrows to the worm-eaten rafters and shelves.

Maggie’s sensitivity stems from her emotional nature. Imagination and impulsiveness go together. Maggie is constantly guided by her impulses, whether in the act of cutting off her troublesome locks of hair,
or that of bursting out in anger against her mother for finding fault with her father, or against her uncles and aunts for not fully coming to her mother’s rescue. Numerous examples of Maggie’s impulsiveness may be cited: pushing Lucy into the mud in a fit of jealousy over Tom’s attention to her; running off to the gypsies with the romantic vision of becoming their queen; or her ecstatic hugging of Tom when some music pleases her. Her impulsiveness, springing from imaginative and sensitive nature, is partly responsible in making her vulnerable to the great temptation of Stephen Guest and the subsequent elopement.

All the traits of Maggie’s character—her poetic imagination, her sensitivity, her impulsive actions—are aspects of a basic feature in her psyche, which is reflection of her agnostic tendencies. The hope lies in love as Maggie Tulliver is born with an immense capacity for bestowing love and hungering for it from others. In her need for giving and receiving, love lies the key for her admittedly complex character. Here love substitutes for God. Her father, Mr. Tulliver, provides for her the fullest scope for loving and being loved. She is always his ‘little wench’ even after she ceases to be a little one. He defends her against criticism, appreciates her qualities and sympathises with her sorrows. She, in her turn, loves him whole-heartedly, looks after him in his final illness, and scolds her mother for thinking more of her household goods than of Mr. Tulliver’s life. She defends him against her aunts and uncles who blame him for rash conduct. “You ought not let anyone find fault with my father”, she says to Tom. Love, in her opinion, has no place for recognizing faults—it has to be a total involvement.

Maggie from her childhood adores Tom, her brother, even more than her father. He is her idol. Devoted to him, she defends him against her father’s worry that Tom might do him out of business when he grew
older. Her childish declaration is: “I love Tom so dearly—better than anybody else in the world. When he grows up, I shall keep his house, and we shall always live together.” (31) She can not bear to hurt Tom in any way. Indeed, her need for his love is the strongest need in her being. She is jealous when Tom shows greater attention to Lucy, and she pushes Lucy into the mud. She runs away to the gypsies when Tom hits her for her misbehaviour with Lucy. When she grows up, her love for Tom is partly responsible for her refusal to marry Philip. Even though Tom’s reaction, on her return to St. Ogg’s after the elopement with Stephen, grieves her deeply, she has no thought but that of rescuing Tom when the floods come.

Maggie’s suffering is her partly the result of the clash of personalities as far as she and Tom are concerned. She is dreamy and forgetful, imaginative and impulsive, sensitive and emotional; and her brother, unfortunately for her, was none of these things. She has agnostic behaviour and he simply cannot understand her. And as they grow up, Tom’s sturdy self-control and concentrated purposefulness, as against her wayward impulsiveness, come into conflict, causing an ever-increasing breach between them. In the end, pathetically the River Floss, the companion of their childhood, reunites them in an eternal embrace. When Tom in the boat calls her “Maggie” (493), she at last gains that “mysterious wondrous happiness that is one with pain.” (495)

Maggie, as she grows up, has not lost the need to love and be loved, a strong source of hope for an agnostic. The affection developing from tender pity for the deformed Philip in her young days matures into love for the intelligent, sensitive and cultured (though handicapped) young man that Philip grows up to be. Though beginning in the days when Maggie has very little experience of the world, the liking for Philip never
dies out in later life. The affinity between the two is inevitable, for both are lonely, emotional and sensitive, craving for affection and sympathy. It is some agnostic thinking which surprises the readers that the beautiful Maggie should have loved a deformed youth. However, Maggie is not an average girl attracted by looks alone. In Philip’s case, she is stimulated both mentally and sympathetically. Maggie cannot continue in her relationship with Philips because he is the son of her fathers enemy, as such, Tom would fiercely oppose their friendliness. The subterfuge of the so called chance meeting in the Red Deeps make Maggie unhappy in the heart of hearts, for she is fully aware of its moral aspects. She is characteristically relieved on the whole when the meetings are discovered. All through her life, Maggie is torn between duty and desire, personal and happiness and family ties; and her liking for Philip is one victim of this conflict.

Maggie’s Elopement with Stephen, in which she can not so much be blamed for active participation as for passive compliance, is a subject of criticism. But Maggie does not yield to the passion ultimately. A lesser girl would have agreed to marry Stephen, a saintly girl would not have gone with him in the first place. Maggie being a human being with passion as well as a highly developed conscience, decides on a noble course of action. This self sacrifice, of course, comes late, when the damage has already been done to the people she loves as well as to herself—that is the very tragedy of Maggie. Her this independent thinking is reflection of her agnostic nature.

Maggie’s final decision to sacrifice her own happiness with Stephen comes when she burns his letters. This is true renunciation. She has experienced passion and knows the pain of giving it up to the call of conscience. She gives up Stephen knowing that she would cause great
misery to Philip and Lucy if she married him. She had earlier on decided to take to the path of renunciation under the influence of a book by Thomas Kempis. But that is what Philip called “narrow self—delusive fanaticism.” This fake resignation naturally breaks down in the face of the world and its attractions summed up by Stephen, but ultimately she does read the path of self-sacrifice and renunciation. It is futile to argue that it is too late, for that is the very essence of her tragedy. It is partly her blindness and wrong self-assessments which led to her suffering. This again is her agnostic and independent thinking.

Maggie Tulliver, by any standards, is a complex personality whose actions can not be always explained logically. She is firm enough to decide on carrying on an independent life in the face of opposition. Her strength of mind makes her spring to her father’s defense against her powerful aunts. But she passively submits to Tom’s insistence that she should not marry Philip. She has been called weak-minded for this. Indeed, her sensitive passionate personality is torn in conflict, both internal and external out of which she desperately seeks for personal and spiritual emancipation. Her strong impulses and emotions pull her in one direction while a keenly developed moral conscience tends to suppress her desires. Maggie sometimes tends to seek relief from the conflict by evading responsibility—such as her compromise formula of meeting Philip by chance in the Red Deeps in secrecy. The same evasion is seen in the elopement when Maggie is “borne along by the tide.” But this evasion can merely constitute an uneasy truce with conscience. She has to decide, the conflict—between duty and personal happiness, loyalty to others and personal desire—is acute and painful. Stephen’s letter asking her to marry him in spite of everything is the final test. The battle of emotions in her mind is stupendous. It is indeed the greatest moment of temptation. She almost succumbs and writes ‘come’ to Stephen. But at last, with super
human effort, she overcomes it and sides on a course of self-sacrifices. She realises that she can not achieve real happiness as Stephen's wife, for her conscience will pose a great burden on her. Her wish for a whole life and fulfillment of the desires of the senses contend with the wish for renunciation of these very earthly desires. "I was never satisfied with a little of anything," she says to Philip, "that is why it is better for me to do without earthly happiness altogether." To Maggie Tulliver of this world, torn with the conflict waged by great imaginative aspirations of the soul, there is only one way—that of self sacrifice.

The inner conflict is extended to the outer world too, Maggie seeks to break the monotonous conventional social pattern into which she is born. She is at odds with the rigid and unimaginative self-righteousness of Tom. The self-sacrifice that has helped Maggie to give up Philip first and Stephen next is finally directed to the rescue of her brother in that moment of dire calamity, the sweeping flood of Floss. Their pride and feud have no place in the presence of this deluge. In her first spontaneously moral action, she rushes to Tom's rescue and is swept to death in his arms, as though one were meant to see in that death her reconciliation to all those forces to which she could by temperament and action never be reconciled. Maggie's final action, however, can be seen as the last stage in the progress of her growth according to Feuerbach's principle and therefore altogether consistent with what has gone before. George Levine writes:

Beginning in mere egoism and rebellion, she moves on to the incomplete sympathy—as a result of family pressures—of her asceticism; the suffering which endures intensifies that sympathy and produces in her a surer vision of reality so as to make her capable of a deliberate act of renunciation with
Stephen; her rescue of Tom, however, is to be seen as a spontaneous moral action which suggest the real beginning of Feuerbach’s genuinely noble man. But Maggie’s newly earned ‘nobility’ is once again exercised in the direction of her family, and will, moreover, never be tested, in that infinitely more complicated social world which posed her moral dilemma. (120)

George Eliot was an intellectual with a forceful and comprehensive mind, and has a large generous way of looking at things. Her own life had unhappy experiences but she did not become embittered. However, her vision of life was essentially tragic, as she was fully alive to the existence of the sad gap between man’s aspirations and his actual achievement. At the same time, she was conscious of man’s nobility for entertaining those aspirations. Actually she works out her agnostic philosophy through this use of irony of life. Her tragic vision takes into account the roles played by various things—nature, character, environment and fate—in the thwarting of man’s aspirations.

The centre of tragic irony is the contrast between what the human will of the individual sets out to do, and thinks it can do, and what it actually does: the contrast and conflict between aspiration and achievement. Maggie, as tragic heroine struggles through out in a triple conflict—the struggle within her own divided self, between passion and duty; the clash between her own temperament and that of Tom; and the collision between her and her environment and with external events, which are outside her control. All merge to bring about the tragic outcome. Maggie is not an ordinary girl, docile, pretty and obedient. She is an intelligent, imaginative girl striving for emancipation and a fuller life. But she is lonely, for her environment refuses to understand or sympathise. Even her father who loves her and admires her intelligence,
fears she is too ‘cute’ for a girl. She longs to enlarge her life and develops the faculties she knows she possesses. The tragedy of Maggie Tulliver is to quite an extent the result of her own character. There is an element of self-indulgence in her character. This even seems to be the design of the novelist to bring out of moral issues, the major theme with the independent thinking of the character. Joan Bennett opines in this regard:

Clearly Maggie, in her youth and experience, is only fumbling after the conception that the author here enunciates in her own person and through the mind of Dr. Kenn. Maggie can only rely on the moral sense, or conscience that her temperament her upbringing and her environment have combined to develop in her. But the total effect that George Eliot seems to be trying to produce is more complex than she can achieve in the form of fiction she is using. To express her own consciousness of the subtle discriminations necessary to the just solution of a moral problem, and to set against this the grouping of a girl to as little to rely on expect her instincts, required more space and a different artistic form. (122)

George Eliot expresses her own humanist belief in progress. She is attracted to the story of the ugly duckling who, like Maggie, discovers a new life of beauty. In Middlemarch when Dorothea is suffering bitter frustration because of Casaubon’s inadequacy, she thinks of Will Ladislaw as like a ‘lunette opened in the wall of her prison’. Such images typical of this group of characters, who hope that in the future a better world will be revealed. George Eliot’s belief in progress is stated clearly
in *The Mill on the Floss*. Talking directly to her readers, she discusses the limitations of the society of St. Ogg's:

> I share with you this sense of oppressive narrowness; but it is necessary that we should feel it, if we care to understand how it acted on the lives of Tom and Maggie—how it has acted on young natures in many generations, that in the onward tendency of human things have risen above the mental level of the generations before them, to which they have been nevertheless tied by the strongest fibers of their heart. (271)

George Eliot's novels are full of rich abundant life because her mind is open to a wild variety of conflicting impressions, to the greatness of ordinary love as well as to the possibility of intelligent self development. Also, her own emotional life pulled her in opposite directions. She abandoned the Christian faith forever in the 1840's but there are many indications that she experienced an irrational sense of guilt. Maggie's feelings that she cannot desert her family appears to be a projection of her creator's emotions. Uprooted from the secure environment of her early days, she longed to return to the simple, static world of her childhood. This conflict between heart and the head makes for ambiguous attitudes towards progress.

*Middlemarch* is a complex work of art and a number of themes and ideas are woven into its complex fabric. One of its major themes, however, is the frustration of noble ideals and lofty aspirations by meanness of opportunity, that is an unfavourable environment and "spots of commonness" in the character of the idealist himself. George Eliot studied this very theme in *The Mill on the Floss* and her other novels also, but in *Middlemarch* the theme has been studied with reference to a number of characters, and has been universalised in this way.
Dorothea is the first major character in the novel whose life is a tragedy of frustrated idealism, which is due to her agnostic approach. She has an intense desire to do good and make some noble achievement. But Middlemarch society, narrow, stinted and tradition bound, offers little opportunity for the realisation of her lofty ideals and noble aspirations. She seeks to find an outlet for her ideals by making projects for the rebuilding of the cottages of the poor tenants on the state of a neighbouring Baronet and friend of the family, Sir Chettam. But the scope for such philanthropy is extremely limited and it brings little satisfaction. Thus her lofty aspirations are frustrated by her meanness of opportunity.

Her opportunity is further limited by the fact that she is a woman. It is only through marriage that she can achieve self-fulfillment. This meanness of opportunity combined with her spots of commonness frustrates her idealism. She is self-deluded, self-deceived, and self-centered, incapable of seeing the point of view of others or of making correct valuation of those who come in contact with her. Casaubon is no true scholar, he is a pseudo-scholar, a mere pedant, and his researches are of no use at all for he has been anticipated in the field of comparative mythology, and the work he is doing has already been done by others. In marrying him, she thought she was marrying Pascal but soon she is disillusioned; and frustration and intense spiritual agony are the result.

Dorothea shows distrust of Supreme Power which is agnostic in nature and she feels moral desolation. R. H. Hutton writes in this regard:

it is only here and there, in the rare glimpses she gives us of the solitude of Dorothea’s heart, that this radical deficiency of faith is carried, as it seems to us, into any touch untrue to what we know of real life. It does sow come out, we think, in one or two descriptions of Dorothea’s secret struggles, and
the bitter tone in which the close of Lydgate’s career is described. (57)

Generally, however, nothing can be more truthful or less like preconceived theory than the pictures of provincial life in this wonderful book.

But not the less does this deep distrust of the Supreme Power, who in the words of the ‘Prelude’ to Middlemarch, has fashioned the natures of women with inconvenient indefiniteness, gave a certain air of moral desolation to the whole book, and make us feel how objectless is that network of complicated motive and grotesque manners, of which she gives us so wonderfully truthful a picture—objectless as those strange scrawling on the bare mountain side which, mistaken when seen from a distance for the handwriting of some gigantic power, turn out when approached to the mere track of old destructive forces, since diverted into others channels—the furrows of dried-up torrents or the grooves of exhausted glaciers. (57-58)

Middlemarch from the standpoint of agnosticism studies social fabric and there is a conflict between the old and the new. The old is yet dominant, but it would gradually give way to the new, and the 1870, when Middlemarch was published, it was clear that the future lay with the new. This conflict between the old and the new, this decay and dissolution of the old dispensation and transition to the new, is seen even more clearly in the field of religion. There are two forms of religious traditions. One is the practical, kindly, undogmatic tradition of Anglicanism, the best representative of which is Mr Farebrother. They believe in doing a good turn, a kindly, humane act, and do not bother much about the theoretical
questions of right and wrong. Such men were more interested in conduct than in faith; they had a respected position in the structure of society, which enabled them, to some extent, to mitigate the rigours of class difference. Even when comparatively poor, they were accepted by the gentry as one of themselves, but they knew where the shoe pinches for their uneducated parishioners. Sometimes, like Farebrother, they were men of deep intellectual interests; and were the sort of men who to-day would be university or sixth-form teachers.

The other religious tradition, much more vehement and fanatical, is loosely called Evangelical. By the year 1830, the Evangelical movement was nothing new, but such is the conservatism of the Middlemarchers that they regard it as something new and are suspicious of it. Bulstrode and Tyke are the representatives of this sect. Evangelicals laid stress on the strict adherence to religious dogma. They made a rigid distinction between those who had received divine Grace and those who had not. They believed in the doctrine of the original sin, and that all men were consequently depraved, till they received divine Grace and were controlled and guided by His Will. The Evangelicals thought that they were the chosen of God, and so would never admit that there was any evil in them. Thus they were self-righteous, firmly convinced of the rightness of their conducted, and critical of others who did not belong to their sect.

In Middlemarch, the two sects are in conflict, and the older is suspicious of the new. Says A.O.J. Cockshut,

The relations between the Evangelicals and the old-fashioned, decent, traditional Anglicanism is well given in the exchange between Mr. Vincy and Bulstrode at the end of chapter 13. Mr Vincy is asking Bulstrode to give Mr. Featherstone a certificate that Vincy’s son had not been borrowing money on
the doubtful security of his expectations from Featherstone’s will. Bulstrode accuses Vincy of “Worldliness and inconsistent folly”, and asks how he can give a certificate in proof of a negative proposition about which he can have no certainty. This combination of high spiritual talk with reluctance to do a kind action to help a friend (and in this case also a relative) angers Vincy, striking him as typical of Evangelical cant. He says: ‘I’ve never changed: I’m a plain Churchman now, just as I used to be before doctrines came up. I take the world as I find it, in trade and everything else. I’m contented to be no worse than my neighbours. (113)

This exchange, which should be studied in full, gives the essence of the mutual misunderstanding. For Vincy, and even for the clergyman Ferebrother, religion is a kind of seal or sanction upon decent behaviour; it is a social guarantee of the moral values of civilized life. For Bulstrode religion is, in principle, the mainspring of every thought and action. But in the case of a coarse and grasping man, like Bulstrode, this enthusiasm contains within it a terrible trap.

About the distress of Supreme Power and moral desolation, R.H. Hutton writes:

It is only here and there, in the rare glimpses she gives us of the solitude of Dorothea’s heart, that this radical deficiency of faith is carried, as it seems to us, into any touch untrue to what we know of real life. It does so come out, we think, in one or two descriptions of Dorothea’s secret struggles, and in the bitter tone in which the close of Lydgate’s career is described. Generally, however, nothing can be more truthful or less like preconceived theory than the pictures of
provincial life in this wonderful book. But not the less does this deep distrust of the Supreme Power, who, in the words of the Prelude to Middlemarch, has fashioned the natures of women with inconvenient indefiniteness, give a certain air of moral desolation to the whole book, and make us feel how objectless is that network of complicated motive and grotesque manners, of which she gives us so wonderfully truthful a picture—objectless as those strange scrawlings on the bare mountain side which, mistaken when seen from a distance for the handwriting of some gigantic power, turn out when approached to be the mere tracks of old destructive forces, since diverted into other channels—the furrows of dried-up torrents or the grooves of exhausted glaciers. (57)

According to W.H. Harvey the quest for a true vocation, and its frustration by an unsympathetic environment, is the central theme of the novel, the theme which unifies the heterogeneous material into a single whole. This theme is best illustrated by the stories of Dorothea and Lydgate, but variations of it are also provided by a host of other characters. Dorothea, of course, is an idealist, she has a theoretic mind—a modern Saint Theresa—and she seeks self-fulfillment by achieving something noble and remarkable. But the limited and conservative Middlemarch society has an inhibiting effect on her quest for her true vocation. For some time she tries to engage herself with projects for building new and better cottages for the poor tenants, but such projects are soon felt to be inadequate. Her quest is also inhibited by her sex, for her conservative environment provides little freedom of movement to a young girl like her. She marries Casaubon in the hopes that in marrying him she would be marrying a Pascal, and find her true vocation by helping him in his scholarly researches. Again her quest is frustrated because
Casaubon is no true scholar but only a dried up pedant, a mere stick of a man, pseudo-scholar in capable of any higher achievement. The marriage is a failure, for Dorothea fails to find her true vocation through it. Then she marries Will Ladislaw, the only man she had ever loved, and in this marriage soon dwindles into a good wife and mother.

Ldygate is equally frustrated in this quest for a proper vocation by an inhibiting environment. Well educated, cultured and progressive, he had come to Middlemarch in the hope that in the seclusion of this provincial town he would be able to pursue his scientific research undisturbed. But the Middlemarchers are entirely incapable of appreciating such projects, and have a poor opinion of a professional man who does not practice for money. Then he has to face the hostility and jealousy of other medical man of the town. Soon he is entangled into marriage by the vain and frivolous Rosamond, and as a consequence is involved in endless financial difficulties. His financial difficulties, the pressure from his wife, and the lack of appreciation on the part of Middlemarchers, ultimately compel him to leave Middlemarch for London where he becomes a fashionable doctor, practicing for money. His rare gifts are thus wasted; his quest for true vocation comes to naught. There are a number of other characters who search for their true vocation. There is, for example, Casaubon, busy in the study of Comparative Mythology, and trying to discover a key to the common origin of mythologies among different peoples and in different ages. His quest for his vocation is frustrated because he is a dried up and shrivelled pedant, entirely lacking in that sympathy and vision which characterise a true scholar. Then there is Mr. Brooke who dabbles in politics, but has a grasshopper mind, is unable to make coherent public speech, and has to give up his chosen vocation—politics—for good.
Farebrother too has scientific interests, dabbles in scientific research, but is a failure. He then takes to the church, and achieves a measure of decent success in this profession. But he always feels that this was not his true vocation, and it was a mistake on his part to have taken it up. Ladislaw is an amateur artist, but he is unsuccessful in this chosen vocation. However, he has better success in politics and is elected to parliament, and the expenses of his election are borne by his constituency. Mr. Vincy wants that his son Fred should take to the church as his vocation, for it is the only vocation considered respectable in Middlemarch. But Fred does not like this vocation and ultimately becomes the manager of two estates under the guidance and supervision of Caleb Garth, and is happily married to Mary Garth. All these characters have doubts and they represent agnostic’s inclinations and reflect George Eliot’s own agnosticism. Irony is lavishly employed to highlight agnosticism. W. H. Harvey writes in this regard:

All of these characters enrich the theme of vacation with their individual characteristics; between them they diversify and enliven what might otherwise remain a moral abstraction. They provide a crowded and ample human context in which Lydgate and Dorothea are firmly rooted and from which they derive depth and resonance. The theme ramifies and mutates throughout the novel. (75)

Study of morals is a major issue leading to agnosticism as Isobel Armstrong comments: “In other words, the status of moral comment inside her novels is the same as any moral comment outside any novel. It demands inspection.” (118) George Eliot has a special purpose to perform in her works like Middlemarch as Quentin Anderson puts: “But for George
Eliot re-enactment brought it with an irresistible impulse to include a character who could function as knower, an embodied voice.” (160)

George Eliot is seen at her greatest in Middlemarch. Not all her qualities are manifest in it as it lacks the charm of the first part of The Mill on the Floss, and the humor is much more severely controlled. The view of life expressed is a somber one, and one that can not be holy accepted. George Eliot seems to conceive that life is seen as primarily a gymnasium for the exercise of the moral faculties. Perhaps this is not much more than to say that George Eliot has to pay the price of her earnestness. It meant that she had a comprehensive view of life, a view that could take in every variety of experience she knew. Walter Allen writes:

One’s a it is excessive, yet, fused with her remarkable imagination and her intellectual power, it made her the great novelist she is. It meant that she had a comprehensive view of life, a view that could take in every variety of experience she knew. And, like an ardently held a religious belief it made every action of her character important. Agnostic though she was, it isn’t going too far to say that in the sense she is a religious novelist.(234)

In consequence, the character themselves achieve a new importance in her novels. One of the signs of this new importance of the characters is her relentless and scrupulous analysis of them. This is something new in English fiction and in it is indeed preciously here that her essential modernity lies. “George Eliot’s procedure depends upon the constant corroboration and assent too her sayings. In other words, the status of moral comment inside her novels is the same as any moral comment outside any novel. It demands inspection,” (Armstrong 118).
The fact that George Eliot makes the aspirations of a scientist, one of the central concerns of *Middlemarch* is of great significance. The year of Lydgate’s birth—1802—is the one in which the term “biology” (Coleman 1) came into formal use for the first time. This discipline later occupied the position of one of the higher sciences in the Comtist system.

Two cities have given some attention to the biological ideas implicit in *Middlemarch*—U.C. Knoepflmacher in an appendix to his *Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel*, and W.J. Harvey in a paragraph in his essay on this intellectual background of the novel. I fully share professor Knoepflmacher’s concern that both belief and form should be taken into account when appraising George Eliot’s novels, but it must be emphasis that what is paramount is the artifact, which may be explained, but neither swamped not substituted by thought and ideology. (Kakar xii)

George Eliot internalises tragic reversal. She generally avoids the suddenness which is supposed to be integral to it, making it a gradual—and continual—process of change. Reversal for George Eliot is no mere plot device and her finest reversals are mental events. She depicts series of changes culminating in a reversed state of mind, veering of conduct, judgement and approach to life. “It is also a reversal of expectations, not in the sense of merely of ironic happenings but of what the protagonist expects of life.” (Kakar 35) It is so inseparable from recognition that it would be quite legitimate to speak of reversal recognition, were it not for the fact that Aristotelian peripeteia subsumes anagnorisis. It is only one aspect of the reversed state of affairs—being a change from ignorance to knowledge, reversal internalised. This is the predicament of an agnostic.
The sunny humour notwithstanding, the presiding deity of George Eliot’s fictional world is of pain. Pain and suffering are primeval and they are deeply embedded in the human psyche as a part of the earliest memory of the species. Centuries of Christian thought, especially having represented suffering as not only the common human lot but as the weapon with which evil may be confronted and conquered. “Chaos is conquered when suffering achieves its purpose; and the sacrifice of man...abounds unto the many.” (Weisinger 201) Pain and suffering permeate the scheme of things in such a way that no escape from them is possible. Neither renunciation nor insensibility offers an escape. The authorial voice sounds of the eternal note of sadness—a typical agnostic approach to life.

George Eliot’s vision of the world is tragically tragic.

She too sees the turbid ebb and flow of human misery and hears ‘the still sad music of humanity’. Life seems to her to afford no lasting joys. Even the happiness offered by Nature is illusory; the smiling, undulating field hides some Ruth sick for home, the babble of the tripping rivulet but drowns the agonised cry of human despair that vainly strives to rise above it. (Kakar 118)

No wonder, therefore that man’s religion is so deeply imbued with sorrow. In its own image the anguished human mind creates a suffering God.

George Eliot’s life and her works clearly thus reflect that she remained quite troubled with religion and moral stand points. About her agnosticism A.E. Baker opines:
She emancipated herself from the Evangelical creed in which she had been brought up, but she was always religious-minded. The phase of rationalism through which she passed after abandoning the belief in heaven and hell of her Evangelical upbringing did not last long. Pantheism she found unsatisfying and she resigned herself to the conviction that there is no answer to our cravings for a definite faith. But hundreds of passages in her novels imply that she could never eradicate a profound sense, not merely of divine immanence, but of divine transcendence. Her Puritanism, her worship of duty, rested all her life upon the consciousness of an inner reality, which adherents to be creeds readily identified with the Divine. The monitor within represented something higher than ourselves, whether of another order of being or simply the loftiest ideal conceivable to man. The latter question remains inscrutable; but the terms which she constantly speaks of duty and conscience, and the Supreme Power, which fashioned us, are the terms of the who could hardly help believing.” (138)

Thus George Eliot’s quest for agnostic ethics becomes clear and it is vividly reflected in her works. The tragic shadows on the characters also state that a firm morality standard was missing in them. Therefore, all these characters show agnostic inclinations.

It is quite clear now that the formative years of George Eliot were passed in the opening decades of the Victorian era and there was an intellectual ferment in England, such as had never been witnessed before. This spirit of questioning and intellectual unrest leading to her agnostic attitude is thus reflected in her works. Man’s faith in orthodox religion
was shaken; she could no longer accept without question God's omnipotence, benevolence, mercy, etc., for such orthodox notions of God were contradicted by facts. The established order, customs, faiths and beliefs, traditions and customs, were losing their hold on the minds of the people, and the new order of things had not yet been established. Man had lost his mooring in God, Religion and Nature. And this is one of the major concern in George Eliot as Thomas Pinnery puts: "At the heart of each of George Eliot's novels lies the conviction that the basis of morality, and hence vital principle of all that is good in life, is strength of feeling." (28) This mechanistic view of the universe precluded any faith in a Benevolent Creator. Man felt orphan and defrauded. He took a gloomy view of life, for he felt miserable and helpless with nothing concrete and definite to fall back upon.

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