CHAPTER III

EGOISTS: ABSOLUTE AND REPENTANT
(1) ABSOLUTE EGOISTS

An absolute egoist has no moral consciousness. He pursues his own selfish interests and desires. He tends to assume that 'the order of things corresponds to the desires of the mind', and he delights in fancying it in accordance with those desires.¹ Many of George Eliot's egoists engage themselves in such day-dreaming. And since their desires are not chastened by submission to law and their actions are not governed by a true vision of the relation of things, they are truly at the mercy of circumstances and their desires are more often frustrated than satisfied.

Their downfall is inevitable as a result of the consequence of wrongdoing. These unmitigated egoists are starkly self-centred, and are beyond moral resurrection. They often die a terrible death; they are not even granted forgiveness for the evil wrought by them. The representatives of absolute egoists are Countess Czerniak, Captain Wybrow and lawyer Dempster from the Scenes of Clerical Life, Hetty in Adam Bede, Stephen Guest from The Mill on the Floss, Dunstan Cass in Silas Marner, Tito Melema in Romola, Casaubon in Middlemarch.

Matthew Jermyn in *Felix Holt* and Grandcourt in *Daniel Deronda*.

Countess Czerlaski and Captain Wybrow are static portraits of absolute egoists. The Countess is a great leech and is the cause of the sad fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton. George Eliot underlines her principal traits:

It is true the Countess was a little vain, a little ambitious, a little selfish, a little shallow and frivolous, a little given to white lies... Thus there was really not much affection in her sweet speeches and attentions to Mr. and Mrs. Barton. 2

The central trait, which is the cause of Captain Wybrow's ruinous egoism, is his utter self-centredness. He 'always did the thing easiest and most agreeable to him' relating it ironically to 'a sense of duty'. 3 He indulged in necking and petting Caterina, while intending to jilt her to marry Miss Asher. Lawyer Dempster is Janet's husband. A brute who drinks and beats up his wife every night, he is 'callous in worldliness, fevered by sensuality, enslaved by chance impulses'. 4

In *Adam Bede*, Hetty Sorrel strikes us as an example of such a stony egoist. She is a vain, coquettish girl, shallow, pleasure-loving, but 'without any strength of purpose to withstand temptation'. 5 Flirtatious by nature, she 'was quite

---

3 Ibid., Vol. II, 'Mr. Gilfil's Love Story', Chap. IV.
4 Ibid., Vol. III, 'Janet's Repentance', Chap. II.
used to the thought that people liked to look at her. Her thoughts were largely preoccupied with Arthur:

Bright admiring glances from a handsome young gentleman, with white hands, a gold chain, occasional regimentals, and wealth and grandeur immeasurable — those were the warm rays that set poor Hetty's heart vibrating, and playing its foolish tunes over and over again.

Hetty's dreams are full of luxuries. Her narrow vision helps her live fully in the present without a thought of the future:

They are but dim ill-defined pictures that her narrow bit of an imagination can make of the future; in fine clothes, Capt. Donnithorne is very close to her...

George Eliot has a foreboding of disaster:

It is too painful to think that she is a woman, with a woman's destiny before her — a woman spinning in young ignorance a light web of folly and vain hopes which may one day close round her and press upon her, a rancorous poisoned garment, changing all at once her fluttering, trivial butterfly sensations into a life of deep human anguish.

The narrow, stunted imagination, and pathetically limited sensibility of Hetty Sorrel are expressed in natural and animal terms. She is variously described as a bright-cheeked apple, a kitten, a duck, a lamb, a calf. Mrs Foyser aptly

6 Adam Bede, Chap. IX.
7 Ibid., Chap. IX.
8 Ibid., Chap. XV.
9 Ibid., Chap. XXII.
says, 'She's no better than a peacock, as 'ud strut about on the wall, and spread its tail when the sun shone if all the folks e' the Parish was dying.'  

Early in the novel she is seen day-dreaming, without a thought of the future, without a feeling for Adam's (her fiancee's) troubles whose father has drowned. George Eliot observes:

Young Souls, in such pleasant delirium as hers, are as sympathetic as butterflies sipping nectar; they are isolated from all appeals by a barrier of dreams — by invisible looks and impalpable arms.

Hetty's childishness is insisted on to point her moral narrowness. Dinah thinks of her as a poor child, ill-equipped to deal with the demands of maturity. Even Arthur possesses a moral dimension lacking in Hetty, for she continues to live in a narrow and stunted present; 'he felt the situation acutely; felt the sorrow of the dear thing in the present, and thought with a darker anxiety of the tenacity which her feelings might have in the future.'

10 Adam Bede, Chap. XV.
11 Ibid., Chap. IX.
12 But this child-like girl cannot be called innocent, as R.I. Jones would have us believe; for Hetty is positively involved in the moral issues of self and selflessness.
13 Adam Bede, Chap. XXIX.
She is full of fear and despair when she discovers that she is pregnant. Her dream has failed her, even 'the blind vague hope that something would happen to set her free, from her terror' has died. She is desperate but unable to imagine or anticipate, unable to look tragedy in the face until it is upon her.

She does not use Arthur's letter to save herself — for she is an inexperienced girl and there is no mental ability at all — in other words, she is exceptionally stupid, as her moral and intellectual limitations are explained earlier. Only she feels that 'something else would happen — something must happen — to set her free from the dread'. George Eliot adds, 'In young childish, ignorant souls there is constantly this blind trust in some unshapen chance'.

We witness each stumbling movement of panic of the mind which cannot express or explain its own response. It is almost — though not quite — a reduction to animal consciousness; helpless, frivolous, childish creature, inadequate even to understand, much less to contend with, the gigantic shadows of calamity.

14 WJ Harvey in The Art of George Eliot (London, 1963), p. 231, rightly calls this "a diminished parallel to Arthur's egoistic belief in the intervention of some benign Providence".
Hetty remains the same even at the end of the novel, when she is in prison and in near prospect of the gallows. Mr. Irwine tells Adam about her that 'some fatal influence seems to have shut up her heart against her fellow-creatures'. Though Dinah finally rescues her through and brings her to confess and to seek forgiveness of those she has injured, she shows little repentance. She remains unredeemed to the very end.

Next in the series is Stephen Guest in *The Mill on the Floss*. He belongs to a higher social class, a class of wealth, luxury, ease and refinement. He is a complacent, vain, young man with a consciousness of his own superiority. He is privately committed to Lucy Deane, Maggie's cousin; even in his choice of Lucy we discern his self-regarding motive.

Soon Maggie is drawn towards Stephen, who appears a spiritually course young man when compared with her. His 'diamond ring, attar of roses, and air of nonchalant leisure at twelve O' clock in the day, are the graceful and odoriferous result of the largest oil-mill and the most extensive wharf in St. Ogg's'.

---

15 Adam Bede, Chap. XLI.

16 *The Mill on the Floss*, Bk VI, Chap. 1.
He is a vulgarian compared with Arthur Donnithorne, a coxcomb and an insensitive egoist compared with Philip Wakem. He is only too self-centred — there is no sanctity in his relationship with Lucy; and he has no scruples about making love and proposing to Maggie. He argues to Maggie that her refusal to marry him will serve no one's happiness, but will cause him unbearable anguish.

Joan Bennett sees Maggie's misadventure with Stephen in a different light. She imagines that George Eliot intended Stephen to be "improved" by his love for Maggie, to discover as a result, a new sincerity, new depths within himself. George Eliot, however, needed space and time to build her major characters, and Stephen is a rush-job and so he emerges as an egoist to the end, having no law but his own impulses.

Dunstan Cass is another variation on this type of egoists. He is of the extreme type of moral stupidity, having no other concern in the world than pleasing himself — in line with Countess Czermak and Captain Wybrow. He does not hesitate to extort money from his own brother under merciless threats of blackmail, nor does he feel any moral scruples when he robs poor Silas of all his money. He meets his end by getting drowned in the stone pits after robbing the weaver.

17 See Bennett: op. cit., p. 127.
Tito Melema from *Romola* is one of the most thoroughly dealt with specimens of stark egoism. He is pictured, as the Greeks of that time perhaps deserved to be pictured, 'not as originally false, but as naturally pleasure-loving, and swerving aside before every unpleasant obstacle in the straight path at the instance of a quick intelligence and a keen dislike both to personal collision and to personal sacrifice'.

He is beautiful, refined, flexible, mean, cowardly, a Greek and an Italian at once. Laurence Lerner calls him 'a charming egoist', who 'tries to slip away from anything unpleasant'. Like Arthur Donnithorne, he genuinely wishes to do good, but cannot force himself to do so the hard way. Infact, he is a profounder study than Arthur, and he becomes totally corrupt as Arthur does not. Tito does not begin by doing anything wrong, he simply argues himself out of the unattractive duty of going to look for Baldassare — his adoptive father, in pursuit of his own welfare.

This explains the mixture of weakness and ambition in Tito's basically selfish nature. Tito's growth in treachery

---


is strong and rapid; he betrays Baldassare first, then Bardo by selling his library, and later Romola by betraying her love. He moves about in the midst of these conflicting feelings and circumstances. His shallow nature is everywhere consistently unfolded and, throughout the action 'we watch corroding selfishness eating away potential good in him'. Consequently, he becomes more and more entangled in his own deceits and forced to even blacker acts of cowardice and cruelty.

The influence of circumstance on character is illustrated best in the case of Tito. The circumstance of a perennial blissful life as husband to the beautiful Romola forced him to deviate from his search for Baldassare; the chance of flirtation leads him away, by slow degrees, from Romola whom he really loved. He soon stumbles into a third crisis by perpetrating a mock-marriage with Tessa before he actually married Romola. It was an unforeseen event, which a man of Tito's nature alone would have performed. It starts a third account of deception, this time to Tessa; adding to the two heinous ones against Baldassare and Romola. As Paris remarks:

Tito recognizes no higher no-higher law of nature than his own interests; he has no sense of that moral order, that doctrine of consequences which tradition holds over the head of wrongdoers.  

20 See Bennet: op.cit., p. 148.

George Eliot analyses his moral nature thus:

There was still one resource open to Tito. He might have have turned back, sought Baldassare again, confessed every to him — to Romola — to all the world. But he never thought of that. The repentance, which cuts off all moorings to evil, demands something more than selfish fear. He had no sense that there was strength and safety in truth: the only strength he trusted to lay in his ingenuity and his dissimulation. 22

Like all other egoists, Tito too is a schemer. The dead weight of concealment grows heavy on him. 23 He is isolated from his wife on three counts. He has to hide from her the story of Baldassare; the story of Tessa; and the scheme of selling her father's library because he had secretly planned to slip from Florence at the ripe hour.

Alienated morally from Romola, he is reduced to a lost, lonely soul. Tired of his virtual isolation, he wants to make amends to Baldassare, by confessing when it is already too late. Later, when Baldassare makes an abortive attempt on Tito's life, he makes his confession composed of a bunch of lies. His final stroke of betrayal of Baldassare comes when he tells a got-up story of their relationship which lands

22 Romola, Chap. XXIII.

23 The Saturday Review, 25 July 1863, quoted in G.S.Haight (ed): A Century of George Eliot Criticism (London, 1966), p. 22, aptly describes Tito's plight at this stage: He burns to get on in the world, he sincerely loves Romola; he likes to play and trifle with Tessa; and he is haunted day and night by the fear Baldassare...
Baldassare in prison.  

Tito's treacherous career in private life is matched by his public treachery on the international scale. He betrays the Frate and later the Five (The Medicean leaders), at their head Bernardo del Nero, Romola's godfather, thereby breaking the last links with Romola. Tito keeps his triple game trying to strengthen his influence with all political parties of Italy:

The result most cared for was the securing of a future for himself at Rome or at Milan; for he had a growing determination, when the favourable moment should come, to quit Florence for one of those great capitals where life was easier, and the rewards of talent and learning were more splendid.

Tito, while disclosing the Medicean plots and securing his safety, did not bother if it meant the death of his close associates. The last hideous act is his double-dealing with the letter of Savonarola, which brings the tornado upon the Florentine popular government, and also a third encounter between Tito and Baldassare in its course, which brings about his death. Disaster thus overtakes him as a consequence of his wrong doing, and he dies a sinner without the benefit of repentance.

24 George Eliot declares his spiritual death thus, '...he had borrowed from the terrible usurer Falsehood, and the loan had mounted and mounted with the years, till he belonged to the usurer, body and soul.' Romola, Chap. XXXIV.

25 Romola, Chap. LVII.
In *Felix Holt*, all the characters involved in the Transome story — Mrs. Transome, the unscrupulous lawyer Jermyn, their illegitimate offspring Harold Transome, and the minor characters — are admirable studies in egoism. Harold Transome and lawyer Jermyn belong to this class of stony egoists.

Harold is in line with Tito and Grandcourt — who seem born to make women, whether wives or mothers, suffer. Harold is hard and arrogant; also he is a heedless son who has returned, having made a fortune in the Levant, with political ambitions. Like any egoist all his actions are directed to selfish ends. Paris comments:

> Harold's practicality does not negate the fact that his approach to reality is basically subjective; for his ends are always selfish and he regards others not as fellow beings with a center of self of their own, but as objects to be manipulated for the achievement of his purposes.\(^{26}\)

Characteristically, Harold tells his mother that he never forgets places and people, "how they look and what can be done with them". George Eliot observes that he had:

> a way of virtually measuring the value of everything by the contribution it made to his own pleasure. His very good-nature was unsympathetic: it never came from any thorough understanding or deep respect for what was in the mind of the person he obliged or indulged...\(^{27}\)

In spite of all his manipulations, he fails to woo Esther.

\(^{26}\) Paris: *op.cit.*, p. 131.

\(^{27}\) *Felix Holt*, Chap. XLIII.
Matthew Jermyn, George Eliot tells us, is as:

A fat-handed, glib-tongued fellow, with a scented cambric handkerchief; one of your educated low-brad fellows; a foundling who got his Latin for nothing at Christ's Hospital; one of your middle-class upstarts who want to rank with gentlemen, and think they'll do it with kid gloves and new furniture.28

Infact, 'moral vulgarity cleaved to him like a hereditary odour'. For Harold, Jermyn is a rascal who has battenent on his mother for years and must be punished accordingly.

He is a hypocrite with pretensions to respectability and virtue:

He defied any man to say that he had intended to wrong people; he was able to refund, to make reprisals, if they could be fairly demanded. Only he would certainly have preferred that they should not be demanded. . . Here, in fact, was the inconvenience; he had sinned for the sake of particular concrete things and particular concrete consequences were likely to follow.29

Jermyn is dishonest and selfish, and has been swindling money in his management of the affairs of the Transome estate. The height of his hypocrisy is that he claims sacrifice for the interest of Mrs. Transome, who has endured untold privation due to his dishonest selfishness.

28 Felix Holt, Chap. IX.
29 Ibid.
He is absolutely unscrupulous that he wants Mrs. Transome to speak of her relationship with him, to her own son to save himself the possible retribution of his selfish deeds through a ruinous law-suit.

In *Middlemarch*, we meet Edward Casaubon, another sinister monster of egoism. An out-and-out egoist, he matches Tito in callousness. He too has no consideration for anything in this world except himself. He is a reserved and vain scholar, sedulously building up a reputation for intellectual power which he knows he does not possess. 'Lacking the vigour for physical pleasure to compensate for the poverty of his mind', he lets his life 'dribble away in a narrow rebulet of pedantry'.

He seeks a wife for relief from his loneliness and to protect him from the pressures of the world. Faris observes:

His egoism and insecurity craved a responsive, applauding world, and Dorothea was to supply it. She was to see him as he wished to be seen and as he wished to see himself; she was to clothe his unsightly nakedness with a warm, soft covering of faith hiding himself from himself.

---

30 Like Tito, he is unredeemed, though he is not shown as developing, but as a result of a process.
31 G.S. Haight: *Introduction to the Riverside edition of Middlemarch*.
32 Faris: op.cit., p. 183.
Casaubon is incapable of any affection for anyone. He is 'the centre of his own world', and is liable to think that others were providentially made for him, and especially to consider them in the light of their fitness for the author of a Key to all Mythologies'.

The chief victim of his egoism is his youthful wife Dorothea. He expects her to praise his work and look upon him with unmingled awe and admiration. His egoism is allied to Mrs. Transome's; like her, Casaubon is living a lie — a lie of his great book — the knowledge of its worthlessness haunts him ceaselessly. As FR Leavis remarks:

... egoism plays a part more like that which it plays in Mrs. Transome's tragedy. The essential predicament in both cases involves the insulation of the egoism from all large or heroic ends.

Haunted by his failure, he begins to think of his wife too as 'a personification of the shallow world which surrounds the ill-appreciated author'. Consequently, like the other egotist Tito, he suffers from torments of isolation — self-distrust, having been turned by his marriage into a peculiarly torturing form of solitary confinement.

33 Middlemarch, Chap. XXIX.
Closely linked with despair is his intense jealousy of Dorothea which springs from his fear that she has penetrated the secret about his great book. George Eliot explains it:

There is a sort of jealousy which needs very little fire: it is hardly a passion but a blight bred in the cloudy, damp despondency of uneasy egoism.35

Casaubon is a terrifying figure of futility. This lonely, uncertain, unhappy man seeks to maintain his self-importance by being an autocrat in his own house, insisting that his wife should be totally absorbed in him. His ingratitude to her is of a quality that almost surpasses Tito's. In order to keep his cousin Will Ladislaw and Dorothea apart, he provides in his will that she would forfeit his estate in case she married him. He remorselessly exerts pressure on her, demanding promises which will tie her down to a life of pointless academic drudgery. His is indeed, a type of callous, morbid egoism.36

The last, though by no means the least sinister, specimen of this archetypal character is Sir Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt in Daniel Deronda. His egoism is of a subtle,

35 Middlemarch. Chap. XLVIII.
36 Robert Speaight: George Eliot (London, 1965), p. 99; He says: 'The selfishness of a lifetime bears an inevitable fruit, and it was in the logic of Casaubon's character that in the end he should be companionsed by his pride.'
involved and purely destructive kind, with the added horror of insidiousness, for it is perfectly civilized and is in no way expressed through direct action. Grandcourt is a rich, arrogant man who has had a mistress for nine years, with children. He is ever unforgottably before us, with his aristocratic ways, his 'adiago of utter indifference', his 'atmosphere of altar of roses', and his 'inward voice'.

There is nothing of the romantic villain in his appearance; 'he is only an English gentleman, with faultless manner when he did not intend them to be insolent'. 37 He has a wide susceptibility to boredom — in fact, he will not take notice of that which interests everyone, finding it 'a bore'.

In everything Grandcourt seeks power — not power as the ordinary ambitious man conceives it, but power considered in relation to his will. Even when it is not to his interest, for the sake of asserting his will, he enjoys doing the opposite of what people expect him to do. He considers most people beneath his notice; even his courtesy is of the odious kind whose chief function is to indicate contempt. Underneath this patrician facade 'we are made to feel the desert of ennui, and the desire at all costs to dominate'. 39


39 Speaight, op.cit., p. 115.
His reaction to Gwendolen's acceptance of him is typical:

She had been brought to accept him inspite of everything. . . . He meant to be master of a woman who would have liked to master him, and who perhaps would have been capable of mastering another man. 40

Jerome Thale observes that 'there is a kind of atmosphere of cruelty. . . about Grandcourt, and we see it very specially in his relation to Gwendolen'. 41

He is a pure egoist, and therefore incapable of love. Soon after their marriage, Gwendolen discovers that his behaviour is that of a man for whom nobody else exists except as attributes of himself, as things to be used. As Fritchett observes:

His lust is for power, he describes nothing for its own sake, but only as a tribute from the universe to its centre, which is himself. His own will is the one law of his being. 42

He is like Tito and Casaubon in having few relations in this world, and in having hardly any motive to live for others.

40 Daniel Deronda, Chap. XXVIII.
He marries Gwendolen only to spite and torment her; he is not only selfish but deliberately vicious. And here lies the difference between him and the other villains like Tito and Casaubon:

Tito was simply a Renaissance villain, mechanically conceived. Grandcourt is not only a more credible and more oppressive; he cannot be described in the ordinary categories of vice, and he is beyond the bounds of sympathy, perhaps even of hate.43

Grandcourt derives sadistic pleasure in tormenting Gwendolen, though acting with strict politeness, and employing for the purposes of his refined tyranny nothing stronger than the methods of 'awful rule and right supremacy'. His slow, calculated brutality crushes Gwendolen with 'a will like that of a crab or a boa-constrictor which goes on pinching or crushing without alarm at thunder'.44 Viner remarks:

He is the ultimate refinement of the Gothic villain, from whom life has drained away, leaving nothing but an impeccable, languid, sadistic shell.'45

43 Thale: op.cit., Chap. 7, p.
44 Leslie Stephen: George Eliot (London, 1902), p. 186. He sees in the power which Grandcourt exerts on Gwendolen 'the paralysing influence of unmitigated and concentrated selfishness, already illustrated by Tito and Rosamond'.
Grandcourt is ignoble, cruel, and unreceptive except only towards impressions which affect him, and he is quick enough in his perceptions. He is generous in nothing but in money-giving where the conventional feelings of a gentleman are supposed to require it. A figure of melodrama, he belongs to the same order of creation as Emily Bronte's Heathcliff — the demonic order.46

Grandcourt is reserved as all proud and closely-wrapped natures are, shrinking from explicitness, giving to all those who have to deal with him the sense of 'an absolute a resistance as if their finger had been pushing at a fast-shut iron-door'.47

His soul too is shut in the dark, since his egoism has cut him off from genuine contact with the world. He is 'a walking death', to use a phrase from Gerald Bullet.

Grandcourt is ice-cold in his egoism. With the exception of Tito, George Eliot's villains — Godfrey Cass, Arthur, even the evangelical Bulstrode — offer some 'lodgement of sympathy'. They are seen as people with an ordinary moral cause who want to do good even when they are too weak to resist temptation.

47 Daniel Deronda, Chap. XXXV.
or too far caught not to do further evil. But Grandcourt is morally perverse, and he does not mean well; nor has he even an oblique claim upon our sympathy. The skin-flint egoist dies without a flicker of repentance. He drowns before his wife while boating on an Italian lake, and one feels tempted to remark, "Serves him right — let him be the third with the Shark and the Foulpe."
(11) REPENTANT EGOISTS

Man is innately egoistic; it is natural for the mind initially to view all things as extensions of or as related to self.¹ It is equally natural, however, for experience to make clear to the individual the disparity between self and non-self. There are many responses to this experience. Some characters are destroyed; some are ennobled by their suffering; some are affected only momentarily.²

We have already discussed the characters who are destroyed because of their egoistic tendency. Those characters who are ennobled by their suffering shall be discussed in the next chapter. Here we shall discuss such egoists only as are affected but momentarily — the repentant egoists. They get only a brief flicker of potential moral recovery, when they realize something of the nature of their own behaviour. And by virtue of their repentance they escape the terrible restless extinction which is the destiny of the stony egoists. They, however, remain unredeemed, for they recover moral vision a little too late.

¹ Barbara Hardy calls it enchantment, 'a poetry erected on a dream, a dream in which the dreamer occupies the centre, and disenchantment is the making which forces the dreamer to look painfully at a reality, which puts him in his place.'

Among the repentant egoists, Arthur Donnithorne, in *Adam Bede*, comes first, as he is very near to the specimens of stark egoism already dealt with. Like the other egoists, he too is a victim of his own egoistic nature. It is his desire to be liked, to cut a fine figure in society, to be a good squire:

"He was nothing if not good natured; and all his pictures of the future, when he should come into the estate, were made up of a prosperous, contented tenancy, adoring their landlord, who would be the model of an English gentleman."

This wishful thinking corresponds to such quality of an egoist as Faris gives us:

"The egoist tends to assume that the order of things corresponds to the desire of the mind; and instead of cutting a true vision of casual sequences, the delights in imaginatively shaping the future into accord with present wishes."

He depends on the opinion of others about himself, and the approbation of the world is necessary for him:

"For my part, I could'nt live in a neighbourhood where I was not respected to go among the tenants here, they seem all so well inclined to me..."

3 *Adam Bede*, Chap. IX.
4 *Faris*: op.cit., p. 129.
5 *Adam Bede*, Chap. XVI.
George Eliot explicitly tells us:

"Arthur's as you know was a loving nature. Deeds of kindness were as easy to him as a bad habit: they were the common issue of his weaknesses and good qualities, of his egoism and sympathy. He didn't like to witness pain, and he liked to have grateful eyes bearing on him as the giver of pleasure".6

The balloon of self-esteem is highly inflated and he had 'an agreeable confidence that his faults were all of a generous kind: impetuous, warm-blooded, leonine, never crawling, crafty reptilian'.7

Arthur presents an excellent study in weak-willed egoism.8 Once his indulgence to enjoy himself in a flirtation with Hetty has caught him in its irrevocable net, he becomes a helpless victim. As Harvey remarks:

"His tragedy is in part caused by this desire; the misguided perception within himself of a reflection of what he thinks the world sees in him prevents true self-knowledge and thus prevents and obscures true moral judgment".9

6 Adam Bede, Chap. XXIX.
7 Ibid., Chap. XII.
8 Arthur is a prototype of self-satisfying wickedness; his self-deceptions and self-justifications and the rationalizing away of doubt and guilt — are features of a recurrent character in the novels.
Though Arthur is never willingly doing any harm to anybody and is willing to make amends for any harm he may have incidentally done, he underestimates the strength of his impulse to meet Hetty. And this weak-willed nature brings about the trouble, for all along Arthur knows, while making love to Hetty, that marriage between them is impossible:

"He couldn't imagine himself in that position; it was too odious to be unlike him... No gentleman, out of a ballad, could marry a farmer's niece."

Thus his affair is not supported by any real sense of social responsibility. Instead, we have a moral vacuum which is masked but not filled, by a graceful observance of traditional forms and by lavish promises to the future.

Arthur's irresponsibility, his easy optimism, his evasion of guilt and his sense that the future can be bribed with good intentions, — all derive from a familiar aspect of George Eliot's egoists, one that is most fully developed later in Bulstrode, but which is present from the beginning:

10 Adam Bede, Chap. XIII.
11 V.S. Fritchett: The Living Novel (London, 1946), p. 86. V.S. Fritchett imagines what George Eliot would accuse Arthur of: "Your sin is that your will is weak. You are unstable. You depend upon what others say. You depend upon what others say. You are swayed by the latest opinion. You are greedy of approbation. Not lust, but a weak character is your malady."
Arthur told himself that he did not deserve that things should turn out badly — he had never meant beforehand to do anything his conscience disapproved — he had been led on by circumstances. There was a sort of implicit confidence in him that he was really such a good fellow at bottom, Providence would not treat him harshly.12

But Arthur has a moral dimension lacking in Hetty:

'Moral chaos that takes possession of the mind after wrong has been done she exposes all the complex writhing of a spirit striving to make itself at ease on the bed of a disturbed conscience, the desperate casuistry by which it attempts to justify itself, its inexhaustible ingenuity in blinding itself to unpleasant facts, the baseless hopes it conjures up for its comfort...’13

Arthur had not been at ease about his affair with Hetty. His conscience does feel the pinch of guilt:

'struggles and resolves had transformed themselves, into compunction and anxiety. He was distressed for Hetty's sake and distressed for his own....'14

He differs from the absolute egoists in being capable of feeling the damage his egoism has done to others, and is magnanimous enough to do what he can to alleviate the suffering of his victims. He gets the repreive for Hetty; but he has

12 Adam Bede. Chap.
13 Ibid., Chap. XXIX.
14 Ibid.
appropriate nemesis for his lawless actions. His dream of becoming the good Young Squire is shattered; falling in the esteem of Hayslope people, and instead of bringing them happiness and prosperity he has all but disrupted Hayslope society and brought suffering on many. The perception of this hard reality is the experience of disenchantment for Arthur, resulting in a change of attitude, "I'm going away for years...it cuts off every plan of happiness I've ever formed..." and "I make no schemes now".15

Arthur has his moment of repentance and his share of remorse, subjecting Adam, Hetty and Foysers to suffering. He fully that nothing could be done now for Hetty and nothing to undo the evil already committed. The repentance comes too late in the novel and he realises that the evil consequences of its past wrongdoing can be only partially mitigated.

Tom, in The Mill on the Floss though very unlike Arthur, belongs to the group of repentant egoists. A self-righteous young boy, he is blind to the feelings of even his devoted sister. He is hard and unforgiving, but he is granted a last-minute understanding with his sister before they are drowned in each other's arms; for George Eliot explicitly tells us 'In their death they were not divided.'16

15 Adam Bede, Chap. XLVIII.
16 The Mill on the Floss, Conclusion.
Godfrey Cass, in *Silas Marner*, is another variant of the easy-going, impulsive egoist with the confident expectation that the realization of his desires, or escape from punishment for wrong-doing, will somehow be granted to him. He is gross enough to disown the woman he has dishonoured, and forsake her child. And because of his secret marriage, Godfrey is afraid of being disowned by his father and cut off forever from Nancy Lammeter. He conceals the truth from the loving Nancy and marries her deceptively for her superior status. He lives in dread of the disclosure of his secret which may come through his brother Dunstan or through his wife. Instead of confessing his guilt to the trusting Nancy, he continues to get himself more deeply involved in lies and debts.

When a crisis appears imminent Godfrey flees "to his usual refuge, that of hoping for some unforeseen turn of fortune, some favourable chance which would save him from unpleasant consequences — perhaps even justify his insincerity by manifesting its prudence." In as much as he reposes his trust in the throw of fortune's dice, he resembles the other egoists like Arthur.

The result is that Godfrey too has to suffer isolation all his life, and suffer the agony of being regarded childless.

17 *Silas Marner*, Chap. IX.
18 He resembles Casaubon and Tito in his alienation from their wives as a consequence of their egoism.
inspite of Eppie. The thought of Eppie is constantly there in his mind to torment him.

When Nancy gives her consent to Godfrey to adopt Eppie, he is confident that his wish will finally be realized:

"It seemed an eminently appropriate thing to Godfrey, for reasons that were known only to himself; and by a common fallacy, he imagined the measure would be easy because he had private motives for desiring it." 19

Retribution falls on the guilty, and Cass is punished for his youthful sin through his daughter Eppie's refusing to acknowledge him as her father and cleaving to Marner.

Through this experience, by having the true nature of things painfully impressed upon his consciousness, this egoist comes to repent for his unlawful wrongdoing:

"No . . . there's debts we can't pay like money debts, by paying extra for the years that have slipped by while I've been putting off and putting off, the trees have been growing — its too late now." 20

Though he tries to compensate to Eppie by doing the father's part, which he had shirked earlier, he is able to realize:

"Perhaps it is'nt too late to mend a bit there, though it is too late to mend some things, say what they will." 21

19 Silas Marner, Chap. XVII.
20 Ibid., Chap. XX.
21 Ibid.
Savonarola in Romola, is an interesting variation on this archetype. Like Arthur and Godfrey, he too displays an admixture of good and bad altruist qualities. He is an altruist—a friar, avowedly devoted to the cause of others, who is undone by the mischief of the hidden undercurrent of egoism. George Eliot describes his duplicity with masterly analysis:

'Perhaps no man has ever had a mighty influence over his fellows without having the innate need to dominate, and this need usually becomes the more imperious in proportion as the complications of life make self inseparable from a purpose which is not selfish.'

Barbara Hardy sees Tito and Savonarola as parallels:

"In Savonarola and in Tito there is the powerful egoism—though much more complex in Savonarola—and also the submission to expediency.

A reviewer elaborates:

'This concentration of self in the reckless pursuit of a personal gratification is the strongest expression of that tendency in our race which is uniformly decried throughout Romola... The same idea is prolonged into the treatment of Savonarola, whose personal aims and longings for the glory that he thought his due are made to be his ruin, and to furnish the road to his defeat and death.'

22 Romola, Chap. LXIV.
Savonarola overestimates his worth, and becomes ambitious in the course of the novel. His tragedy is the tragedy of spiritual ambition, and his temptation as Speaight points out, 'temptation of Mr. Eliot’s Becket, to do the right deed for the wrong reason'. It was the habit of his mind to conceive great things and to feel that he was the man to do them. He had like every great orator, a lucid streak of the histrionic, standing outside himself and observing his effects but obviously he lacked simplicity.

Savonarola has his flicker of moral awakening when it is too late to recover from the evil effects of his egoism. It is just before his wretched death that his conscience pinches him:

'God placed thee in the midst of the people even as of thou hadst been one of the excellent. In this way thou hast taught others, and hast failed to learn thyself. Thou hast cured others, and thou thyself hast been still diseased. Thy heart was lifted up at the beauty of thy own deeds, and through this thou hast lost thy wisdom, and become, and shall be to all eternity, nothing. . . .‘

Mrs. Transome in Felix Holt is another repentant egoist, who is a victim of the nemesis set in motion by her fatally self-indulgent choice of having adulterous relations with lawyer Jermyn. She had a child by him which her husband is

25 Romola, Chap. LXXI.
either too weak or too feeble-minded to know is not his. Over the years she has come to hate her former lover, for she knows, though too late the mettle of this man.

FR Leavis calls the Transome story a 'conflicts of egotisms', referr ing to the conflict between Mrs. Transome and Harold. But there is an equally powerful conflict of egotisms between Mrs. Transome and Jermyn. She is to be the lower in both the conflicts whatever the motive of her fall, she is to pay the price of a chronic fear that Jermyn might divulge her secret if it seemed to his advantage. The life of this sorrowful woman has been robbed of all its savour, the terrible secret crushing her heart. As a consequence, her whole nature gets hardened, and she emerges as a cold, embittered, and unloved person, 'the great story of the world reduced for her to the little tale of her own existence'.

But her lot is better than Hetty Sorrel's, for she gets the moment of bliss when Esther attends her. Mrs. Transome admits to Esther — the angel whose nearness brings some joy to her:

'More than twenty years I have not had an hour's happiness.'

---

26 FR Leavis in his Preface to the Everyman's edition of *Felix Holt*.  
27 *Felix Holt*, Chap. XXIV.  
Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch* is a worldly, unintelligent coquette. She is very self-centred, and resembles Hetty in having consciousness of nothing else but her own pleasures and pains. She is thoroughly discontented with the narrow, dull life of *Middlemarch*, and marriage with Lydgate means to her primarily an elevation in social status. She is extravagant, stubborn in the extreme, an utter snob, 'she never thought of money except as something necessary which other people would always provide.' David Daiches remarks:

'Rosamond was not sordid or mercenary, ... but to take money for granted is as kind of selfishness just as corroding to the character as to pursue it obsessively.'

Leavis has rightly pointed out,

"There is nothing else in Rosamond than her egoism, but this gives her a great advantage."

'The concentrated subtlety at her command is unembarrassed by any inner complexity. She always knows what she wants, and knows that it is her due.'

Rosamond is interested in her husband as a means to prestige and is blind to his armour for the more impersonal

ends of his profession and his scientific study. Her narrowness
of vision is seen in her utter incapability of even understanding
her husband's aspirations. She fixes her mind on the vulgar
kind of world/success which were considered refinements.
She is bitterly disappointed in her life with Lydgate due to
financial difficulties, and becomes:

'in her secret soul... utterly aloof from him. The
poor thing saw only that the world was not ordered to
her liking, and Lydgate was part of that world'. 31

In each conflict with his wife Lydgate learns to
recognise more clearly 'the terrible tenacity of this mild
creature'. What Rosamond liked to do she felt was to her the
right thing, and all her cleverness was directed to getting
the means of doing it. In 'the biting presence of a petty
degrading care', the piling of debts, Lydgate found Rosamond
uncomprehending and totally unwilling to give up anything.

Besides being unsympathetic and uncomprehending to
Lydgate, she acts as an effective torpedo to paralyse all his
efforts and energies. Her moral stupidity lies in her
incapacity to see beyond her own pitifully inadequate
standards. She is thoroughly unscrupulous, passing without
conscience to love affairs with her husband's friends. She
sees in Ladislaw 'the opposite of a husband with whom she has
quickly been disillusioned'.

31 Middlemarch, Chap. LXIV.
Her subjective picture of the world is broken, when Will tells her of his love of Dorothea:

'Her world was in ruins, and she felt herself tottering in the midst as a lonely bewildered consciousness'.32

Rosamond is slightly better off than Hetty in having a moment of moral vision under the salutary influence of Dorothea. Under this moral awakening, she confesses to Dorothea about Will's feeling for her, making possible the reconciliation between Will and Dorothea. She also becomes aware of her husband's sufferings, and a brief gust of fresh air penetrates her hard shell of selfishness and egoism.

We are told in the Finale of the Lydgate's leaving Middlemarch and of her husband becoming a fashionable doctor with rich patients — a complete victory for Rosamond. But the real end of this story of a marriage is in the subdued eloquence of the conclusion of chapter 81. Lydgate asks Rosamond if Dorothea's intervention had made her any less discontented with him:

"I think she has," said Rosamond, looking up in his face. "How heavy your eyes are, Tertius — and do push your hair back."

She is led back to Lydgate:

'Poor Rosamond's vagrant fancy had come back terribly scourged — meek enough to nestle under the old despised shelter.'

32 Middlemarch, Chap. LXXVIII.