

Crimes of Inaction: Death by Neglect in George Eliot's Novels

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ABSTRACT: The four novels by George Eliot discussed here present killing by neglect. They move from easier to harder cases: first, neglect of a newborn; then, two cases of neglecting an inconvenient adult who needs aid; then, the hardest case, a malicious, abusive person who asks his victim for help. Eliot's personal life provided strong motives for sympathy with the negligent killers, but she mustered the artistic integrity to face the consequences of killing by inaction. Psychological and social damage follows neglecting fragile lives. Aware of the burdens involved in respecting life, Eliot warns readers against failing at this most basic act of human community.

THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH NOVELIST who called herself George Eliot is famed for both her moral insight and her dissent from traditional Christian values in many areas. “[A]justere” and “unflinching” in her rejection of religious tradition,¹ she believed that “the soul must have no guide but the voice within it.”² Yet even Queen Victoria prized her novels for their moral power. Eliot is one of the great voices of moralism unconnected to theism. It is a testimony, then, to what we may call “a ‘universality of values’ and ‘the simpler relation of the human being to his fellow-men,’”³ for she demands that people take responsibility for even the most fragile or unwelcome life. Speaking from far outside a religious context, Eliot is a strikingly clear voice in opposition to what we now call euthanasia.

Eliot did not unequivocally think that life was a blessing. She just thought that nobody had any call to refuse to take up his station in life. One visitor to her house recalled, “Something was said about ‘Assuming life to be a blessing.’”

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I asked if we were entitled to assume that, and she said, ‘Certainly not, in talking to people who deny it,’ and that she knew several people who think it a curse.”⁴ But Eliot was firm about duty. One must not take one’s own life; one must not neglect one’s duty to another’s.

Four of the major works of this novelist present killing by what Yale critic Stefanie Markovits calls “crimes of inaction.”⁵ In considering the morality of abandoning someone when it is possible to provide the necessities of life, Eliot moves from easy to hard cases. She faces, first, the question of whether mere refusal of aid is murder in the case of an innocent child. Then she examines, in two different works, the harder case of neglecting an ailing adult of unpleasant character. Then she moves on to the hardest case of all. A powerful and abusive person is in danger of death and turns for assistance to the person he has most abused. If he lives, the abuser will likely victimize her again. Must she help him? In all these cases Eliot examines not just the external circumstances but the conscience of the person who fails to give aid.

Eliot’s personal life and her relationship to various political allies gave her ample opportunity for feeling a sting personally under the very difficulties that she imagined for her characters. In her own moral choices she was willing to challenge traditional ethics from her position of non-religious humanism. Yet Eliot’s integrity as an artist made her carefully delineate the guilt attached to willing the death of any human being. She did not merely structure her plots for the sake of making sure that she did not shock the public. She deeply inhabited and explored the suffering connected with evil and its repercussions in the social world. In all four novels, even though she fully acknowledges the burdens that one assumes by respecting life, she takes care to awaken her readers to the destructive effects of failing in this most basic act of human community.

At the age of twenty-two, when she was still called Mary Ann Evans, Eliot rebelliously allied herself to a coterie of radical progressives who practiced open marriage. By the time she was in her mid-thirties she had escaped pregnancy, but she had been involved in several messy, failed relationships. She strove to keep her lifestyle secret because revealing it would have humiliated her and damaged the progressive cause. She was clever in concealing her lovers from her family, but the secrecy came at a price. There were two aspects of the cost: familial and financial. She had to hide her emotional life from her blood relatives. Hurt and rejection erupted when the deception was unmasked. Her brother did not communicate with her for twenty

years after he discovered she had been lying to him about her already-married lover. Before that familial price was paid, however, there was even a financial price.

Eliot's lover, George Henry Lewes, had become embittered in his open marriage. Biographers agree that his wife Agnes became pregnant several times by his business partner, also an advocate of open marriage. By the time Lewes abandoned Agnes, she had six living children. He had registered her children as his own and was obliged to pay their upkeep. Moreover, no one in the situation wanted the publicity that always attended a legal action of separation. Indeed, there is some legal question as to whether divorce would even have been possible, considering the open marriage arrangement.

Agnes had been ghostwriting for Lewes when he published translations early in his career, but in time she ceased to do work for him. The family's whole financial burden fell on his shoulders, and he resented it.⁶ Meanwhile, Mary Ann Evans (not yet called George Eliot) had a respectable inherited income. She sometimes contributed review articles and free editing services to the progressive press. In the six years between 1846 and 1852, she wrote eleven articles or reviews – not quite two a year. From the time she took up with Lewes in 1853 there was a tenfold increase. In five years she wrote fifty-four articles and reviews, besides ghostwriting for Lewes when he fell ill. This was paid work. Her trust kept paying her. Still she complained of “poverty.” The financial burden brought with it a silent emotional price. When Eliot's sister Chrissey was widowed with six children, the family expected help from their maiden aunt Mary Ann. She angered her brother by contributing far less than expected to help Chrissey. She could not explain why, to the chagrin of her family.

Two years after Chrissey lost her husband, Eliot began her first novel project, after moderate success with short stories. During a planned trip to Germany with Lewes, she was intending to present herself as his wife. They wanted to receive her inheritance through his bank. Eliot requested that her brother Isaac remit her inheritance payments to Lewes. The letters seem to show that Isaac had never heard of this man. Eliot knew that Isaac would raise questions. Lewes was still married to Agnes, who was raising their three sons, plus the three other children. Eliot understood the cultural convention that punished adultery with social isolation: an honorable person did not associate with public and active adulterers. Eliot writes of her decision to live with Lewes as a courageous moral choice, not a “light” decision, but the tradition

of respect for marriage was then still strong enough that even friends in progressive circles ceased to visit her after she moved in with Lewes. Eliot called such people “false, narrow-hearted friends” and scorned them as cowards. Still, she had not expected Chrissey to follow the convention. Eliot was devastated when even Chrissey withdrew from her, and she counted Chrissey’s silence as a sin against her.⁷ Meanwhile, two of Chrissey’s children died of bacterial infections.

The social cost of illicit sexual relations was on Eliot’s mind when she wrote her first novel, *Adam Bede*. In this story a dairymaid named Hetty is seduced by a young captain, heir to the local estate. He is serving in Ireland by the time she realizes that she cannot hide her pregnancy. Hetty flees from shame by pretending that she never had a baby. She runs away and gives birth in the house of an unknown woman in a strange town. As soon as she can, she leaves with her newborn, finds a lonely spot, and abandons the child in a hole under some bark and chips. The baby dies. Hetty is tried and condemned for murder.

The death of this nameless child has wide repercussions. The devastated father exiles himself from his inheritance. He had hoped to be a kindly landlord and to improve his tenants’ farms, but instead he throws himself into the Napoleonic Wars. The fiancé whom Hetty deceived goes to great lengths to help her but, finding that she had given birth, is unable even to consider another relationship with a woman for two years. The family she fled is changed forever and even considers abandoning the ancestral farm out of shame. Only with difficulty are they induced to stay. But the worst effect is upon Hetty herself. She first becomes cold and stubborn, lying about her baby, and then she begins to have recurring memories, akin to post-traumatic stress. Finally, after her sentencing, she becomes weakly dependent and unable to function alone. We are not to see any aspect of Hetty’s desertion of her baby in the light of relief for her or good done for anyone else.

George Eliot herself had endured the shame that tempted Hetty to abandon her child to death by neglect. Hetty cannot face the social rejection consequent on sexual misbehavior. The pregnancy, the death of the infant, and the subsequent trial were central to Eliot’s first conception of the story. One would expect, then, that she would seek to arouse her readers to have sympathy with Hetty’s desperation and to take her side in the trial. The very opposite occurs. Although readers are subjected to the full emotional pain of a killer facing death in Hetty’s condemned cell, Eliot has taken pains to alienate her readers

from Hetty herself throughout the novel.

By the time Eliot wrote *Silas Marner*, the care-crushed Chrissey has died of tuberculosis. Chrissey struggled with poverty even though Eliot's brother provided her with a house rent-free and helped place her sons in apprenticeships. Chrissey contacted Eliot in her last weeks of life, seeking to renew their bond. They exchanged two letters on Chrissey's side and one on Eliot's.⁸ But Lewes resisted Eliot's going to visit Chrissey. A letter shows how his pressure worked:

If she expresses a wish to see me, I shall go – as soon, that is, as I can leave Mr. Lewes for two days, of which he stoutly resists the mere notion so long as the present servant is in the house. It is a terrible sacrifice to me to leave home at all – quite like the prospect of a tooth-drawing.... People who have been inseparable and found all their happiness in each other for five years are in a sort of Siamese-twin condition that other people are not likely to regard with tolerance or even with belief.⁹

In the end, Eliot did not see Chrissey alive. This did nothing to assuage her longstanding feeling of guilt about neglecting the sickly family, expressed in an earlier letter: “Yet how odious it seems that I, who preach self-devotion, should make myself comfortable here while there is a whole family to whom, by renunciation of my egotism I could give almost everything they want.”¹⁰

Adam Bede was immensely successful. Eliot became so famous as a novelist that important people such as Charles Dickens not only sent mail but visited her. Despite her irregular relationship, she achieved full social acceptance. Her status rose so high that the daughters of Queen Victoria vied for invitations so that they could meet her.

High status at a cost features in Eliot's third novel, *Silas Marner*. Godfrey, an aristocrat, fails to provide financial and medical support to the nasty low-class opium addict whom he had secretly married. Godfrey is afraid of being disinherited. Having lost contact, he does not directly know that his wife and child are in danger of death. As the addict tries to travel to Godfrey's opulent home, she freezes to death. Their daughter finds shelter with the lonely weaver Silas, who fosters her and names her Eppie. Although Godfrey finds out what happened to his child, he dares not claim Eppie, because he so brutally neglected her mother. He hides his guilt because he wants to marry again. Nemesis haunts Eppie's father; the new marriage is barren. Godfrey's second wife wants to adopt Eppie when she finally learns of her, but Eppie rejects Godfrey and his riches.

Like Godfrey, Eliot was burdened with supporting a woman who was an embarrassment: Agnes Lewes. After his relationship with Eliot was secure, Lewes sent his three unquestioned sons to a Swiss boarding school. Agnes could not travel to see her sons, and the boys spent all their vacations at the school. Lewes himself visited them for two or three days a year. Once George Eliot was a major novelist, Lewes brought Eliot to meet the boys in Switzerland. He explained his new living situation and insisted that they call her “mother.” Charles, the eldest, was dazzled by her fiction, and he cooperated with the couple; the other two were less pliable. Thornton Lewes, the second son, even wrote his father about his uneasiness with this new “mother.”¹¹ Lewes left the third son in Switzerland for another year. He sent the recalcitrant second son to a high school in Scotland, boarding him with a family whom he paid explicitly to act as substitute parents. “Thornie” indeed showed the stress from paternal neglect – for instance, he physically attacked his landlord in Edinburgh.¹² Meanwhile, Charles came to live with Lewes and Eliot in London. But, long separated from England, he nearly lost his job in the post office because his English had lapsed. Nevertheless George Eliot’s letters about the Lewes boys elide all problems: she glories that they call her “mother” and is determinedly cheerful about their fortunes. The burden of her guilt emerges in her art.

Eliot knew that Lewes was not fathering his boys but only keeping up appearances while hired help raised them. One might expect more sympathy for Godfrey in *Silas Marner*. Instead, he lives a long penance of tension with his wife, and she suffers. As an artist, Eliot makes it clear that even an unwelcome and embarrassing addict deserves the proper support of the community in the necessities of food and medical care. She presents an adoption that works out magically well. Yet she intimates in Godfrey’s rejection by Eppie that misery comes from neglecting the duty of personally caring for one’s relatives.

Eliot wrote another novel just after this, *Romola*, where important points in the plot turn on questions about whether one can voluntarily shrug off irksome family obligations. Life goes badly for those who try. After she wrote *Romola*, the two sons of Lewes who did not take to Eliot shipped off to Africa as colonists. There they endured war, broken promises, failed farms, bankruptcy, and illness. Eliot’s own letters about the family still present a cheerful face. At this time Eliot wrote *Middlemarch*. There she constructs not only a situation in which an unpleasant adult needs help, but one in which the refusal

of care is as direct as Hetty's abandonment of her infant. While Eliot was writing the early part of *Middlemarch*, the second son of Lewes, Thornie, returned from Africa, in agony from a spinal infection. By now enormously rich, Eliot and Lewes took him in from May to October and provided nursing care as Thornie lapsed into painful paralysis and died. Agnes, cut out of the boy's life when he was sent to Switzerland, was allowed to see her dying son,¹³ but Eliot would leave the house when Agnes visited.

In the novel *Middlemarch*, Eliot does not entirely alienate readers from the negligent person, a banker named Bulstrode. We are able to trace his deliberations as he decides to evade providing proper medical care to Raffles. Raffles, who used to work for him, is a repulsive drunk who is blackmailing Bulstrode with embarrassing, though not criminal, details about how he got rich. Readers learn Bulstrode's personal story and understand the origins of his hypocrisy in his early life. Eliot especially arouses sympathy for his unremittingly loyal wife.

While Raffles is sponging off of Bulstrode, he falls ill with *delirium tremens*. Bulstrode calls a doctor who needs his financial help. The doctor orders him to prevent Raffles from getting access to alcohol, but Bulstrode allows a servant to provide brandy. Bulstrode has room to doubt that he actually killed Raffles, who might have died on his own, but he has certainly neglected proper vigilance for another's safety. Bulstrode escapes prosecution, but not the burdens of guilt and rejection, the natural consequences of his failure to do his duty. He loses his place in society. His wife must leave her home. He brings down with him an innocent doctor who had done charity work at a local hospital and conducted potentially lifesaving research. Eliot demonstrates very clearly that Bulstrode's neglect of the sick drunkard is evil. The repercussions degrade the whole community of Middlemarch. One cannot know the cost of the evil that one does.

As George Eliot was beginning her last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, she learned that the youngest son of Lewes, Bertie, had died in Africa. He was in his twenties. After years of poverty, his death came slowly, with agonies like Thornie's. Lewes hid the death from even his close friends. Eliot pushed on with *Daniel Deronda*, where the morally weak Gwendolen marries Mr. Grandcourt from financial desperation. Harsh, manipulative, and controlling, Grandcourt is delighted that Gwendolen is squeamish about marrying him and finds herself complicit with his vicious ways. Before the wedding, his lackey Mr. Lush acquaints Gwendolen with the mistress and children that Grandcourt

is abandoning because he wants a respectable wife to dominate. Her husband is cruel to Gwendolen for the pleasure of seeing her distressed and humiliated. One day, as they are boating together, he falls into the water. He calls to his wife to throw him a rope. She sits frozen with indecision. She had not intended to harm him, but now she watches him drown. She knows that she wanted him dead. This is the hardest of the four cases. Gwendolen is not prosecuted, or even disapproved, but Eliot gives us harrowing pages of mental anguish as intense as that of Hetty in *Adam Bede*. Gwendolen is haunted by the “fear of an avenging power.”¹⁴ The novelist gives her readers no permission to participate in willing the death even of someone truly malicious.

Hetty had natural responsibility for her child. Godfrey had obligations to his dying wife and to his endangered daughter. Bulstrode has little objective responsibility to a former employee but did accept Raffles as a guest – if only to control his loose talk. Raffles posed only a threat of embarrassment, not a legal or physical threat, and Bulstrode clearly assumes a duty to tend to Raffles’s welfare. In *Daniel Deronda*, Grandcourt oppresses Gwendolen, and she witnesses him ruining someone else’s life as well. Gwendolen knows that Grandcourt will continue to bully people and especially to cause her misery. He is not, however, endangering her life. Even in this extreme case, Eliot does not allow private judgment over life and death. She treats death as a common enemy that the human community ought to resist. It does not matter if Grandcourt is an evil man. It does not matter if he is asking for help from a woman against whom he has committed appalling offenses. Eliot knew by analogy with her own life what it was to indulge Gwendolen's rage, and she knew the cost of taking a vengeful course. Perhaps because she understands these resentments so well, she is deeply concerned with pressing for readers to respect life at all costs. She reminds them “of the impossibility of controlling consequences.”¹⁵

George Eliot was no model of virtuous conduct, even in her own eyes. She regretted her treatment of Chrissey. Both sons that Lewes sent away to Africa died before they reached thirty. Once Lewes also died, Eliot took responsibility for the African-born grandchildren. She knew that in the service of her own emotional needs, she had countenanced neglect and brought irreparable damage upon the families of others. She had spread lies. She had colluded to disregard the needs of inconvenient people. She had acted like Hetty, Godfrey, Bulstrode, and Gwendolen. She could have acted defensively when she created characters that mirrored her own misdeeds. But as an artist she drew upon the hurt and

guilt that had become familiar through these actions and was able to face these things with a true eye. She could endure them through the screen of fiction. She respected the responsibility of the artist and told moral truths in her novels, even when the telling made her uncomfortable: “my own books scourge me,” she wrote.¹⁶

Thus George Eliot as a novelist, despite her failures in her own life – or perhaps because of them – supports the cause of defending life. It does not matter if the victim is very young, or already dying, or even a person who delights in evil. Eliot knows intimately (and writes books to tell anyone who will listen) that if one fails to defend human life against death even by neglect, the damage to oneself and to one’s community spreads uncontrollably.