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Agricultural Change and Rural Decline in the Deserted Village

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Abstract

This study will investigate the role that agricultural reforms had in the rural communities' demise in 18th-century England, as shown in Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*. A pastoral elegy *The Deserted Village*, penned by an Anglo-Irish writer Oliver Goldsmith, is a social commentary in which Goldsmith criticises urban moral decay, materialism, landscape gardening, rural depopulation, avarice, and the chase of profit through foreign trade. As human society transitions from an agrarian to an urban-industrial economy and then to a knowledge economy, rural decline is an unavoidable process. The village of Auburn, the narrator's deteriorating boyhood home, serves as the poem's dominant image and contains 430 lines. Due to regulations of enclosure act that encouraged enclosure, aristocracy sought to increase the size of their expansive estates by purchasing formerly owned by tiny private farmers. The villagers leave the village for the dismal urban life in England or America since they don't want to work for the landlords. It would look at how the village is portrayed in the poem, the effects of social and economic development on the neighbourhood, and how education contributed to the area's collapse. The paper would also explore *The Deserted Village's* influence on succeeding works and compare it to other literary works published at the same period. The comparative and analytical research methods would be used in this paper to fulfil its motif of revealing agricultural changes and their role in rural emigration and desolation in *The Deserted Village*.

Keywords: The deserted village, agriculture reform, rural depopulation, rural decline, emigration, enclosure act etc.

Introduction

The 18th century witnessed significant agricultural changes in England, resulting in the decline of rural communities. New technological innovations (e.g., mechanization, high-yielding crop varieties, improved animal breeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides) and the development of new markets have dramatically transformed subsistence-based farming into market-oriented commercial farming around the world ^[1] "Concurrently, rural agriculture is also experiencing a dramatic transition away from traditional farming systems towards increasingly mechanized, commercial farming systems." ^[2] "Scholars have developed various theoretical frameworks and offered a wide range of explanations for the dramatic changes in both migratory behaviour and rural agriculture in their respective fields. Generally, these frameworks and explanations have been dominated by socioeconomic explanations, emphasizing employment opportunities and wage differences between the place of origin and destination as drivers of migration and agricultural change." ^[3] Oliver Goldsmith's poem, *The Deserted Village*, is a literary work that reflects the impact of these changes on rural life. This paper analyzes *The Deserted Village* to explore how agricultural change contributed to the decline of rural communities. "Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* provides a powerful critique of the enclosure movement and its impact on rural communities in eighteenth-century England." ^[4]

"Rural decline is a worldwide issue affecting both developed and developing countries and probably it has not received a fulfilling attention by policymakers and researchers yet." ^[5] As widely known, along with the transformation of the global economy, a lot of rural areas have experienced depopulation, social degradation, local markets shrinkage and small business closure ^[6].

Historical Context

Agricultural methods saw a change in the 18th century. One of the most important innovations of the British Agricultural Revolution was the development of the Norfolk four-course rotation, which greatly increased crop and livestock yields by improving soil fertility and reducing fallow. ^[7] Agriculture's production and output grew because of new methods like crop rotation and selective breeding. The enclosure of common lands, the eviction of small farmers, and the emergence of industrial agriculture were all consequences of these changes, though. Many people relocated to urban regions in pursuit of employment, severely decreasing the rural workforce. The legal procedure of enclosing a number of minor landholdings to create one larger farm in England during the 18th century. The area was no longer considered common land for communal usage once it was enclosed, limiting use to the owner. The method that put an end to the traditional practise of cultivating arable crops in open fields is also referred to by

this name in England and Wales. As early as the 12th century, some fields in England tilled under the open-field system were enclosed into individually owned fields. The Black Death from 1348 onward accelerated the break-up of the feudal system in England. [8] "The enclosure movement was a major factor in the decline of small-scale subsistence farming and the rise of large-scale commercial agriculture in the eighteenth century" [9].

Analysis of the Deserted Village

The Deserted Village is set in the village of Auburn, which Goldsmith depicts as a once-thriving a community that has fallen into decline. Goldsmith uses Auburn to highlight the effects of agricultural changes in rural life. The village is described as a "sweet Auburn" that has been "lorn" and "left" due to the "enclosing hills" and "the land's poor reward." As the poet calls it "Sweet Auburn, loveliest village of the plain, Where health and plenty cheered the laborious ain." [10] Goldsmith's depiction of Auburn suggests that enclosure and the increasing emphasis on large-scale agriculture had detrimental effects on the village and its people.

Rural life is portrayed by Goldsmith as a peaceful and healthy place. He draws emphasis to the numerous moral qualities, such as humanism, friendliness, and caring nature, that were shared by residents of Auburn. The terms "labouring swains," "sheltered coat," "never-failing brook," "decent church," and "busy mills" all allude to these ideals and emphasise the honourable nature of the villagers as well as to the environment that sustains and enhances them. The poet's formerly cheerful outlook abruptly changes to one that compares the oppressive dictators who exploited the enclosure legislation with the labouring swains. They are seen by Goldsmith as trespassers who violate the countryside's vegetation and commit molestation of rural life there. The Deserted Village condemns rural depopulation, the enclosure of common land, the creation of landscape gardens and the pursuit of excessive wealth. [11] "These were thy charms-But all these charms are fled. Sweet smiling village, loveliest of the lawn, Thy sports are fled, and all thy charms withdrawn; Amidst thy bowers the tyrant's hand is seen, And desolation saddens all thy green." [12] In Goldsmith's vision, wealth does not necessarily bring either prosperity or happiness. Indeed, it can be dangerous to the maintenance of British liberties and displaces traditional community. [13] The poem's main claim is that villages are becoming less populated and are on the verge of being destroyed as a result of the riches accumulation of middle and aristocratic classes. According to Goldsmith, The Deserted Village is a real description of the depopulation-related eviction, pauperization, debasement, and dishonour. In making this argument, some have regarded Goldsmith not as a political radical, but as a socially-concerned "conservative" [14].

The village square, which was once a hub of activity, is now in ruins. The weeds have overtaken the broken cobblestone walkways. Ruined structures with deteriorating facades serve as quiet testimonies to a bygone past. Broken windows and worn-out doors emphasise the location's desertion even more. The once-fertile and verdant fields in the area are now untidy and bleak. Crops that have been neglected, wilted, and dying, remain as evidence of failed agricultural efforts. The soil, which was once cultivated and fruitful, now seems dry and sterile, its potential having been wasted. Life is missing. Due to the absence of any signs of human activity, the village's residents seem to have abandoned it. Only the sporadic

creaking of an old windmill, its blades barely spinning in the breeze, breaks the calm. Land reclamation has started by nature. Invading the rooftops, weeds and vines have wrapped themselves around chimneys and facades to reclaim the buildings for themselves. With their branches reaching out as though to touch the abandoned settlement, trees have grown erratically. Furthermore, Alfred Lutz has commented that Goldsmith's attacks on landscape gardening have a wider political significance, because enclosure's defenders sometimes compared enclosed fields to gardens [15].

Goldsmith explored various causes of rural decline including the following ones:

Enclosure Act: The poem claims that a set of laws known as the enclosure acts were put into effect in England and caused the consolidation of land into larger estates. The outcome was the eviction of small farmers and peasants, who lost their means of subsistence and disrupted the rural economy. "Goldsmith's poem captures the sense of loss and dislocation that many rural people felt as their traditional ways of life were disrupted and displaced by the enclosures and the rise of the market economy" [16]

Agrarian Changes: The collapse of smaller agricultural operations may have been facilitated by the adoption of new agricultural practises, such as the move towards large-scale farming and the consolidation of landholdings. For the villagers, this might have meant fewer job options and financial hardship.

Migration and Displacement: The expulsion of villagers from their homes and the end of their customary way of life probably led many of them to look for better opportunities elsewhere. Residents of the abandoned village may have been forced to leave in order to find work in urban areas or other rural areas, which may have contributed to the downfall of the neighbourhood.

Social and Cultural Changes: The poem emphasises how these changes have affected the abandoned community. The breakdown of social cohesion, loss of local spirit, and loss of traditional values are all portrayed as contributing to the village's desolation. The deterioration is further exacerbated by the lack of active social institutions like the church and the school.

Economic Hardships: According to the poem, the villages experienced financial difficulties as a result of changes in the agricultural environment. Poverty, less chances for trade and commerce, and a lack of economic success was probably caused by the decrease in crops and the loss of the farming lifestyle. The Deserted Village is a poignant reminder of the social and economic dislocation that accompanied the enclosure movement and the transformation of the rural economy in the eighteenth century" [17]

Bell comments that while Goldsmith criticises enclosure in an indirect manner, he does not attribute Auburn's decline to it. However, Bell also argues that commerce is clearly the "arch-villain of the piece", and it is the riches that a small minority have accumulated from international trade that allow rural people to be displaced from their lands so that country estates can be created. [18] In addition, migration research on environmental determinants has focused on the influences of environmental conditions such as a decline in agricultural productivity, land-use and land-cover change, deforestation, natural calamities and natural disasters on out-migration. From a policy perspective, in many rural agrarian societies-which are home to a majority of the world's population-both agriculture and labour out-migration are considered the two primary livelihood strategies [19].

The Portrayal of Village Life in the Deserted Village

In Goldsmith's poem, the village is portrayed as a tight-knit group that is rooted in the earth. The villagers cooperate and rely on one another to survive. "The poem's rural ideal is not the medieval village, but a self-sufficient agricultural community in which the population is tied to the land by a combination of custom, kinship, and economic necessity."^[20] The Deserted Village illustrates how many socioeconomic causes led to the collapse and abandonment of a formerly vibrant rural town. The poem paints a vivid image of the villagers' experiences and the effects of their departure. With descriptions of beautiful scenery, straightforward homes, and a tight-knit community, Goldsmith presents the Hamlet as a tranquil and ideal setting in the poem. The peasants are shown to be diligent and happy, leading tranquil lives in harmony with the natural world. To support their way of life, they work in farming, crafts, and other rural livelihoods. However, as the poem progresses, Goldsmith reveals the challenges faced by the villagers. Enclosures, a process in which common lands are privatized, disrupt the traditional agrarian way of life, displacing many farmers and forcing them into poverty. This leads to the migration of the villagers to seek better opportunities elsewhere, leaving the village deserted.

The impact of the villagers' departure is profound. The once-thriving community falls into a state of decay and neglect. The abandoned cottages become dilapidated, the fields lie fallow, and the village loses its vitality. Goldsmith mourns the loss of a way of life and reflects on the social and economic consequences of such changes. While the poem doesn't delve into the specific lives of individual villagers, it highlights the broader themes of rural depopulation, social inequality, and the disruptive effects of industrialization and economic shifts on traditional communities. It serves as a poignant critique of the societal changes occurring during the 18th century and the impact on ordinary people's lives. However, this manner of life was hampered by the agricultural developments of the 18th century. Many small farmers were uprooted by the enclosures, and the big estates that grew up were run by absentee landlords who were more concerned with their financial well-being than the welfare of the community. "Goldsmith portrays the village as a victim of the economic and social dislocation that accompanied the enclosure movement and the rise of large-scale commercial agriculture."^[21] Consequently a once-thriving rural community has become overtaken by a sense of desolation and deterioration in *The Deserted Village*. A bleak atmosphere and obvious indications of agricultural devastation and rural decline dominate the terrain. "Goldsmith's poem is both a lament for a disappearing way of life and a critique of the new economic order that was emerging in the countryside"^[22].

Comparison to other Literary Works

The literary work *The Deserted Village* wasn't the only one to draw attention to how rural areas were deteriorating. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge are two authors who wrote about the effects of agricultural change on rural life. Wordsworth comments on "the spread of this depravity among the urban poor in language that recalls and sharpens the language in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* regarding the effects of the "increasing accumulation of men in cities."^[23] He criticizes it for marring the "loveliness of Nature," which implies its ugliness. When he says that, "Nature doth embrace/Her lawful offspring in Man's art," it only comes after he has noted the lack of beauty in its "harsh features." Industrialization is not only ugly, but harsh.^[24] How

Goldsmith's poem captures the tight-knit community of Auburn and the negative repercussions of enclosure on the hamlet, however, makes it special. "Ultimately, *The Deserted Village* is a complex and nuanced response to the changing economic and social landscape of eighteenth-century England, one that recognizes the benefits of agricultural improvement but also laments the loss of a more communal and self-sufficient way of life."^[25] "Rather than being a lament for an idyllic rural past, *The Deserted Village* should be read as a commentary on the changing nature of rural society and the impact of agricultural change on the English countryside."^[26]

In "Urbanisation and English Romantic poetry," Stephen Tedeschi skilfully exhibits the effects of the agricultural revolution and reveals how "two major changes in the agricultural economy fed the gradual urbanisation of England from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries." First, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, yeoman farmers gradually but considerably increased the productivity per acre of land by toiling hard and employing best practises like greater crop rotations. Yeomen had long-term leasing agreements, which improved returns for both tenants and landlords. This increase in food production maintained up demand for food, which in turn supported the country's and London's growing populations. As yields rose and commerce advanced, farming gradually transitioned from a mostly subsistence economy to a predominantly capitalist one."^[27] After deep analysis, this paper reaches on the result that *The Deserted Village* provides an in-depth examination of agricultural changes and rural decline and depicts the difficult realities that rural communities must deal with in the face of agricultural transformation. Readers are reminded of the significance of comprehending the historical background and effects of rural decline by Goldsmith's poem, which acts as both a lament for the losses endured and a critical reflection on the socio-economic developments of the time. The negative impacts of enclosure and the emergence of large-scale agribusiness on rural communities are highlighted in Goldsmith's portrayal of Auburn. The poem's depiction of village life and the effects that social and economic changes have on the neighbourhood serves as a potent reminder of the significance of rural communities and their connections to the land. Goldsmith successfully draws attention to the negative effects of industrial agriculture and the enclosure movement, which resulted in the eradication of small-scale subsistence farming. Rural communities were made into marginalised groups as a result of the enclosures, which also caused communal land to be lost and changed land tenure arrangements. The poem laments the upheaval and loss endured by these communities while highlighting the negative social and economic effects of agricultural development.

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