

GEORGE ELIOT AND MIDDLEMARCH:  
BEYOND THE NOVELIST

George Eliot and Middlemarch:

Beyond The Novelist

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My original intention in writing this thesis was to present to the reader a critical examination of the literary techniques which George Eliot employed in the composition of her novel, Middlemarch (1871-2). Sufficient attention has already been devoted to investigating her philosophical and religious views, therefore a thorough examination of her literary techniques is a valuable project. In the course of preparing to write this thesis I soon realized two facts which were too important to ignore. The first was that Eliot's literary style is ultimately dependent upon her philosophies and religious convictions. These beliefs dictated to Eliot the fashion in which she was to write and construct her novels. To critically consider her literary skills apart from an investigation of her views of life would eventually suffocate and kill any effort to do justice to her talents and art.

The second obstacle to my primary motives for writing on George Eliot's Middlemarch was that one cannot do George Eliot or her novel enough justice by simply isolating Middlemarch from her other works in an attempt to explore its grounds. In terms of plot and theme Middlemarch was not original to Eliot. She had been expounding the ideas she presents in Middlemarch since the first story she wrote. The greatest significance of Middlemarch is that of all her works it is the most successful, the one in which Eliot fulfills her intentions as skillfully as she ever could. To appreciate this one must always keep

in mind the organic nature of Eliot's talents. Middlemarch is part of an artistic development which can be clearly traced through Eliot's work. A consideration of her earlier works becomes mandatory.

In a project of this nature it is, of course, impossible to even attempt to do justice to Eliot's mind, her talents and all her works. Compromise is necessary. Therefore, the first chapter of the thesis is devoted to some discussion of Eliot's earlier works and the problems or successes she experienced with them. Chapters II and III follow more closely the lines of my original motives for writing the thesis: a study of Middlemarch with special attention paid to the role Eliot, herself, played in the novel. The focal point of this thesis lies in a consideration of the mid-nineteenth century. The thesis is ultimately a study of Eliot's own relationship to her novel, Middlemarch, and how it is her presence, her voice which finally accounts for the literary success of the work and the satisfactory fulfillment of her motives for writing it. I have attempted to indicate a consistent development and maturation in Eliot's artistic awareness and to show how these attributes affected her work.

I regret not having been able to study more closely Eliot's artistic progress or to include a discussion of all the various novels and stories which lead up to her masterpiece, Middlemarch. Hopefully in this thesis

I have, at least, been able to show something of what Eliot's maturation as an artist consisted of and why Middle-march is the celebrated novel it is.



## Chapter I

### Eliot 's Conception of the "Spiritual Tree"

The immediate occasion for Tennyson's In Memoriam (1850) was his mourning for the death of his friend, Arthur Hallam. The **reason for** writing the poem was that Tennyson might better come to terms with the loss of his beloved friend through the cathartic experience of writing poetry. But in reading In Memoriam one soon realizes that Tennyson, from the very start of the poem, couples this simple motive for writing with a grander concern: the search for faith. And it is quite obvious that by the end of In Memoriam Tennyson had found what he was seeking when he was able to declare confidently, "And like a man in wrath the heart / Stood up and answered 'I have felt'". (cxxiv, ll. 15-16)<sup>1</sup> The poem becomes a testimony to Tennyson's search for faith, chronicled through his experiences of utter despair to his final realization of a spiritual awareness. Tennyson struggles against the rationalizations of science and objective truth which strip man of his spiritual and emotional dimensions; he rejects the temptation to accept total chaos and emptiness as an answer in itself, and most importantly, he refuses to indolently indulge in the too easily adaptable existence of despair. Architecturally and in terms of its

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, The Poems of Tennyson, Christopher Ricks, ed., (London:1969), lyric cxxiv, p.974.

emotional solidarity, the whole poem depends upon lyrics  
lvii and lix where Tennyson, for an instant, totally surrenders  
to his grief and his doubts:

Peace; come away: the song of woe  
Is after all an earthly song;  
Peace; come away: we do him wrong  
To sing so wildly: let us go.

Come; Let us go: your cheeks are pale;  
But half my life I leave behind:  
Methinks my friend is richly shrined;  
But I shall pass; my work will fail.

Yet in these ears, till hearing dies,  
One set slow bell will seem to toll  
The passing of the sweetest soul  
That ever looked with human eyes.

I hear it now, and o'er and o'er,  
Eternal greetings to the dead;  
And 'Ave, Ave, Ave,' said,  
'Adieu, adieu' for evermore.

(lvii)<sup>1</sup>

only to recover from this spiritual lapse when immediately  
in the next lyric, Urania, the heavenly muse, chides him:

'Wherefore grieve  
Thy brethren with a fruitless tear?  
Abide a little longer here,  
And thou shalt take a nobler leave.'  
(lviii, ll.9-12)<sup>2</sup>

By the end of In Memoriam Tennyson emerges as a man of faith.  
Through constant reflection on life and death and the  
persistent spiritual struggle he faced in writing the poem,  
Tennyson found that he was able to perceive the presence  
of a divinity. This godhead always remains amorphous and

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.912.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.913.

private to the poet, not to mention almost indiscernible to the reader, but for Tennyson it is a definite being in which his hopes might be placed and his griefs succoured.

Thomas Carlyle's Sartor Resartus, (1833-34) with its biography of the 'pilgrim', Teufelsdröckh, reveals a personal struggle curiously similar to the one which Tennyson experiences in In Memoriam; Carlyle, however, is more careful to record the actual steps with which Prof. Teufelsdröckh is able to reach his point of spiritual awareness. Carlyle describes the crisis of Teufelsdröckh's spiritual dilemma in a few short chapters in the second book of Sartor Resartus. In The Everlasting No, one finds Teufelsdröckh an outcast from the then flourishing industrial system, a failure in love, and an infidel to the faith which his parents had nurtured in him:

'To me the Universe was all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb. O, the vast, gloomy, solitary Golgotha, and Mill of death! Why was the living banished thither companionless, conscious? Why, if there is no Devil; nay, unless the Devil is your God?<sup>1</sup>

Carlyle records that it was only Teufelsdröckh's "genuine Love of Truth" which saved him from completely succumbing to the ever enclosing world of despair. Finally, just as

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, (New York: 1970), p.104. Page references will be given in brackets after future quotations.

Tennyson's heart was able to proclaim itself, the Professor in a last battle against the "everlasting no" declares that "'I will meet it and defy it!'"<sup>1</sup>

In The Centre of Indifference, Teufelsdröckh explains how he had to transcend himself, to turn to the 'Not-me' so that he could become an organic part of a never-staid universe. Having been able to lose himself to the greater consciousness of the universe, Teufelsdröckh finds himself spiritually revived and able to enjoy life once again in all its aspects. He calls this transcending of the self and its merging with the greater movement of the universe, his "Baphometric Fire-Baptism". It is at this point that Teufelsdröckh, like Tennyson, is also able to acknowledge the presence of a personal, living God. Once again this God remains undefined and personal to the beholder, but for the Professor what is important is that there is no doubt that the divinity exists.

But there is a similarity even more striking than the almost identical plots of In Memoriam and Sartor Resartus. In lyric after lyric, Tennyson repeats how it was only through his poetry that he was able to relieve his sorrow and constructively come to terms with life. In The Centre of Indifference, Teufelsdröckh informs his readers that in

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.166.

his exploration of the organic nature of man,

Visible and tangible products of the Past, again, I reckon-up to the extent of three: Cities, with their Cabinets and Arsenals; then tilled Fields, to either or to both of which divisions Roads with their Bridges, may belong; and thirdly -- Books. In which third truly, the last invented, lies a worth far surpassing that of the two others. Wondrous indeed is the virtue of a true Book. Not like a dead city of stones, yearly crumbling, yearly needing repair; more like a tilled field, but let me rather say, it stands from year to year, and from age to age (we have Books that already number some hundred-and-fifty human ages); and yearly comes its new produce of leaves (Commentaries, Deductions, Philosophical, Political Systems; or were it only Sermons, Pamphlets, Journalistic Essays), every one of which is talismanic and thaumaturgic, for it can persuade men. O thou who art able to write a Book, which once in the two centuries or oftener there is a man gifted to do, envy not him whom they name City-builder, and inexpressibly pity him whom they name Conqueror and Victor; but of the true sort, namely over the Devil: thou too hast built what will outlast all marble and metal, and be a wonder-bringing City of the Mind, a Temple and Seminary and Prophetic Mount, whereto all kindreds of the Earth will pilgrim. --Fool! why journeyest thou wearisomely, in thy antiquarian fervour, to gaze on the stone pyramids of Geeza, or the clay ones of Sacchara? These stand there, as I tell thee, idle and inert, for the last three-thousand years: but canst thou not open the Hebrew Bible, then, or even Luther's Version thereof?<sup>1</sup>

And it is with this discovery of the magnificent power and magic of books that Teufelsdröckh decides to devote his life to the writing and perusal of them.

This comparison of two great works by two great writers may seem somewhat irrelevant to the subject of my

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.170.

thesis, yet I wish to demonstrate in this initial chapter that the novels of George Eliot are related in a very specific way to the kind of writings Tennyson and Carlyle give us in In Memoriam and Sartor Resartus. Furthermore, I hope to be able to show how the question of George Eliot's technical abilities may be quite naturally explained if considered in the light of what she was trying to do with the novel in the mid-nineteenth century.

In reading George Eliot's novels one does not only enjoy the fruits of an exuberant imagination but one is also quite literally challenged to consider the philosophy of a very exacting, Victorian mind. And certainly, as far as George Eliot was concerned, if these two things cannot be experienced by the reader simultaneously, then both her works and her readers suffer the consequences. In approaching George Eliot's works the reader must be constantly aware of certain motives which the novelist entertained in writing her books. Eliot was constantly aware of that wonderful ability of the artist to instruct and delight, and of the audience to learn and enjoy all in one breath. Consequently, in Eliot's works she constantly demands that the reader not only be well aware of what she is writing but also of why she writes, and of how it is important that she write what she does. This intention of Eliot's, however noble, led to a narrative technique which many critics found peculiarly and often uncomfortably dogmatic;

and many felt that her works suffered aesthetically because of this. It is one of my motives for writing this thesis to show that George Eliot realized that she was doing something new with the art of fiction, and that her role, as she felt it to be, was not only to present a new mode of fiction to the public but also to explain it.

George Eliot's main problem with her art was one of wanting to strip the classical norms of tragic drama of their grandeur and apply them in a more humble, Wordsworthian sense to the novel. To do this successfully and at the same time to impose this technique benignly upon her own views of life, meant that George Eliot had to overcome various obstacles before she could finally be content with what her conceptions of art could achieve.

After reading the first pages of the Silas Marner manuscript, John Blackwood, Eliot's editor, commented upon "the want of brighter lights and some characters of whom one can think with pleasure as fellow creatures". Eliot's response to the criticism was:

I don't wonder at your finding my story, as far as you have read it, rather sombre: indeed, I should not have believed that any one would have been interested in it but myself (since William Wordsworth is dead) if Mr. Lewes had not been strongly arrested by it. But I hope you will not find it at all <sup>intended</sup> a sad story, as a whole, since it set -- or is <sup>intended</sup> set -- in a strong light the remedial influences of pure, natural human relations. The Nemesis is a very mild one.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon S. Haight, George Eliot: A Biography, (Oxford, 1969), p.341.

John Blackwood had, indeed, hit upon one of Eliot's weakest points when he criticized the assembly of characters which Eliot had created for Silas Marner. But this problem was characteristic of all Eliot's earlier works, and was not simply exceptional to Silas Marner. The crux of this difficulty was simply that Eliot was determined to apply to "pure, natural human situations" a highly sophisticated sense of tragedy. Wordsworth's influence upon Eliot is instantly recognizable upon reading any of her works, for it was partly her aim, as it was his

. . . to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as possible in a selection of language really used by men, and at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect.

(Preface to Lyrical Ballads)<sup>1</sup>

Eliot's use of dialect has been thoroughly examined elsewhere. It is sufficient for this thesis simply to mention that George Eliot demonstrates an admirable proficiency in presenting various dialects of the English tongue in a realistic and unpedantic way. But what is more pertinent here is that Eliot in all her works was attempting to define a new form of tragedy. Aristotle had demanded that tragic figures be personages of grand stature, so that when they fell their losses would be all the more vivid and dramatic. The tragic figure had to inspire within

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<sup>1</sup> English Romantic Poetry and Prose, Russell Noys, Sel., and Ed., (New York, 1969), p.358.



his audience the dual emotions of terror and pity through which the audience might experience the gravity of his fall and cathartically sympathize with him. Eliot's conception of tragedy was very different. Tragedy did not simply involve great people of lofty stature but also touched people of common, rural life. The result of this view is what Barbara Hardy labels "The Unheroic Tragedy"<sup>1</sup>. What Eliot did, in fact, was to combine two vastly different points of view to create a singular one of her own. Eliot tempered the Aristotelian definition of tragedy so that it no longer needed to carry with it an aristocratic and elevated attitude towards its tragic characters. Keeping the role which pity plays in the process, and at times as the reader shall see, almost having to exaggerate it to keep her subject alive, Eliot wished to inspire in her reader a different sense of terror from that which classical views on the subject commanded. Without intending to make her theory appear more sober and unromantic than need be, Eliot wanted to induce in the reader more of a sense of respect and sympathy for her characters than anything else. As for Wordsworth's wanting to tint "situations from common life" with "a certain colouring of [the] imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect", this most certainly jarred with Eliot's conceptions of realism in prose. For Eliot the

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Hardy, The Novels of George Eliot, (New York, 1963). pp. 1-14.

life of the ordinary man was as imbued with colour and tragedy as the life of any other man, and she felt that it needed no external leaven to give it its significance.

Yet Eliot's mistake was to take Wordsworth's philosophy too literally. She adopted a much too simplified formula for what constituted the "common life". Drastically, for Eliot, she insisted that her heroes and more often heroines be poor and unworldly in their life styles. This may seem excusable but Eliot carried this conception much too far. She began to idealize poverty and asceticism, and to endow her characters with a Dickensian kind of innate virtue and wisdom which were not compatible with the realistic vision she was trying to present in her works. One may well imagine the difficulties Eliot encountered in organizing her somewhat conflicting views of what her novels ought to express and how they ought to express it. Because her heroes and heroines were to be drawn from ordinary life they could not be grand or glorified; consequently their tragedies were not as easy to depict dramatically. Because Eliot firmly believed in being true to the nature and essence of common life, she could not afford to adorn her characters with <sup>extraneous</sup> strange or superfluous life-styles. It is for these two main reasons, and one other, that her early novels suffer from harsh or defensive criticism. As I shall later try to show, it was not until Eliot freed herself of her insistence upon characters being drawn from

low life and allowed her characters to assume their own personalities, regardless of social status or individual idiosyncrasies, that she was finally able to portray the kind of moral consciousness she was interested in presenting to the reader. For the third reason, I would like to return to my brief discussions of Tennyson and Carlyle; and I shall try to show why I feel that there is a definite parallel between what they were doing in In Memoriam and Sartor Resartus and what Eliot actually does in her novels.

Without going too deeply into Eliot's biography, I think it is necessary to mention a few facts about her life before she established herself as a novelist.<sup>1</sup> It is well known that the earliest outside influence on George Eliot's life was Miss Maria Lewis, an ardent evangelist, who taught her at Mrs. Wallington's Boarding School in Nuneaton. When Eliot first came into contact with Miss Lewis she was nine years old, and for at least the following ten years Miss Lewis remained the major guiding principle of Eliot's life, especially of her spiritual life. When, about ten years later, Eliot's father, Robert Evans, moved to a house on the Foleshill Road near Coventry taking his daughter with him, the future author began to enlarge her social

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<sup>1</sup> All biographical data is here drawn from Haight's biography of Eliot.

circle to include such people as Charles Bray, the author of The Philosophy of Necessity (1841) and his brother-in-law, Charles Hennell, author of Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity (1838). Later, in 1843, when Mrs. Hennell was unable to complete the translation of Strauss' Leben Jesu which she had been working on, Eliot was persuaded to take over the work and finish the task. Contact with such intelligent and vital people as these and with their works influenced the young woman. Slowly Eliot began to move away from the religion of her family, causing much concern and distress to her relations. When family and friends asked Reverend Francis Watts, Professor of Theology at Spring Hill College, to reason with the prodigal young woman, he is recorded as having come away from his conversation with her saying, "She has gone into the question."<sup>1</sup> But to the end of her days, Eliot never ceased to be interested in the concepts and teachings of Christianity, and it is a well known fact that she never ceased to read her Bible constantly. In reading Eliot's letters and works it is easily discernible that she continued all her life to sincerely believe in the moral instruction set forth by Christianity, even when she had ceased to have any faith in its God. Nietzsche understood this, as is evident in his

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<sup>1</sup> Haight, p.41.

little note on George Eliot in The Twilight of the Idols (1889). He dramatically and sardonically writes:

They have got rid of the Christian God, and now feel obliged to cling all the more firmly to the Christian morality: that is English consistency, let us not blame it on the little blue-stockings à la Eliot. In England, in response to every little emancipation from theology one has to reassert one's position in a fear-inspiring manner as a moral fanatic. That is the penance one pays there.<sup>1</sup>

Nietzsche was right in saying that Eliot was not alone in her beliefs, and this tendency towards a personal religion based on Christian ethics, instead of on actual Christian theology, was an experience similar to that which Tennyson wrote of in his In Memoriam and which Carlyle fantasized upon in his Sartor Resartus. But where Tennyson and Carlyle never ceased to believe in a divinity, Eliot brought her "Baphometric Fire-Baptism" one step further. Eliot's baptism could no longer celebrate any divinity except man himself. It is in her novels that Eliot attempted to describe this new kind of baptism and the concept of life it carried with it. Tennyson had employed poetry and Carlyle an ambiguous literary form to describe their search for meaning in a world which appeared to be constantly losing its spiritual and emotional worth. Both ended up portraying two different experiences of a soul's profound immersion in despair and the soul's eventual success in soaring above it. But where Tennyson had to almost deify

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols: the Anti-Christ, (Harmondsworth: 1972), p.69.

his lost friend before being able to renew his spiritual existence, and Carlyle had to create Teufelsdröckh almost as a myth to replace the myth of Christianity, Eliot firmly decided to use the ordinary man and his everyday experiences to investigate the validity of the personal religion she herself had acquired. It is worth noting that Carlyle's Teufelsdröckh takes the same route as all George Eliot's heroes and heroines. The conversion which Teufelsdröckh experiences is the same conversion which Eliot's successful heroes and heroines struggle through. Quite simply it is the idea of man being able to release himself from a romantic preoccupation with the self (it is interesting to note that Teufelsdröckh, Maggie Tulliver, and later, Esther Lyon all decide to close their Byrons), in order to understand his place in a natural, organic, and changing universe and to finally become one with it. It is for these reasons that I stress Tennyson's preoccupation with poetry as a means of spiritual renewal and Teufelsdröckh's preoccupation with the book, "a spiritual tree,. . . it stands from year to year, and from age to age." Eliot, too, attempted to use literature as a spiritual guide, exploring the ideas of the religion of "Experience". As Carlyle writes, "Experience is the grand spiritual Doctor; and with him Teufelsdröckh has been long a patient, swallowing many a bitter bolus."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Carlyle, p.176.

I do not here stress the works of either Tennyson or Carlyle for their influence upon Eliot's work. One is only able to deduce from her personal writings that Eliot read In Memoriam often and was wont to take solace from this poem at various tragic points in her life. Carlyle would seem to have had a more pronounced effect on Eliot's writing. Of her novel Adam Bede, she wrote to John Blackwood: "If he [Carlyle] could be urged to read a novel! I should like to give him the same sort of pleasure he has given me in the early chapters of Sartor,"<sup>1</sup> but it is otherwise impossible to speak of any particular debt Eliot owes to his writings. What I do wish to emphasize here is the literary concern which either consciously or unconsciously typified many of the major writers of the nineteenth century. By this I mean particularly to stress the trust Victorian writers and their readers put in the literature of their century, confident that they would discover there an affirmation and a unity of vision which was largely lacking in their century on all other fronts, especially scientific and spiritual ones. It is perhaps best exemplified in Eliot's Middlemarch how fervently the Victorian artist tried to overcome this fear of the approach of the scientific and industrial age, which brought with it for many people a complete breakdown in their religious

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<sup>1</sup> Haight, pp. 273-274.

beliefs. In Middlemarch, through such a generally intelligent and trustworthy figure as Dr. Lydgate, Eliot was able to take a creative and objective view of science and what it might constructively achieve. But it is with the more difficult problem of dealing with the vacuum created by the loss of faith in a god that Eliot is most interested. It is in Middlemarch that she most clearly defines what came to be for her a religion based on personal experience. Man must strive to live for his fellow man and the moral and spiritual improvement of his society. To understand life and its mysteries he must investigate life fully and actively with his fellow beings. Finally, any question of a god superior to man becomes futile and remote. It is man who has the potential to be spiritually and morally supreme, and it is towards realizing this potential that each member of the human race should aspire.

Eliot's desire to justify the novel as a valid recorder of the new religion of experience, coupled with her speculations about how she wished to write her novels, required much experimentation in order for theories to finally work out smoothly. With the possible exception of Silas Marner (1861), I do not feel that Eliot's attempts at writing fiction based on her personal conceptions of what she wanted the novel to be were finally successful until the writing of Middlemarch (1871), the novel with which



this thesis is, in the main, concerned. But in the light of what I have just discussed, I would like to briefly investigate some major criticisms of Eliot's earlier novels and attempt to show what difficulties existed in her fiction before she came to write Middlemarch.

Most students of George Eliot will agree that the greatest controversy concerning her novels takes place over the question of her narrative technique. Strangely aggressive as her narrative voice is, especially in such works as Scenes of Clerical Life (1857) and Adam Bede (1859), one wonders how to cope with this voice, which is at times quite annoying and, to some readers, even detrimental to the success of the novels. Various theories have been developed about Eliot's obtrusive narrator, but at best these theories tend to explain away the author's method of narration instead of actually establishing what it was that Eliot was attempting to do.

In her study of Eliot's novels, Joan Bennett classifies Eliot as a novelist influenced by the eighteenth-century tradition of fiction writing, which would explain her lack of inhibition in interrupting her narration as she saw fit. But even as a follower of that tradition, Miss Bennett adds that Eliot was not quite successful.

Writing of Adam Bede Miss Bennett says:

The principal defect of this kind is that the didactic essays, explaining the characters or the

moral import of their stories, are too long and of too frequent occurrence. Later novelists have succeeded in eliminating this element altogether; but in the eighteen-fifties, they were a traditional part of the art of fiction.<sup>1</sup>

She continues in this manner by explaining that Eliot was working along the same lines as Fielding and Thackeray and adds that, "It is unfortunate, though it was also natural, that George Eliot should, in her first novel, accept a method of presentation that was current and that was used by the author she most admired [Thackeray]." (p.106) This kind of criticism leads to a rather harmful and negative attitude on the part of the reader towards Eliot's technical abilities, and almost tends to make him ignore them altogether. Surely in reading Adam Bede one is quite aware that the artist is far from being a Fielding or a Thackeray. In her asides she is not interested in the leisurely entertaining of the reader or in expounding her views of the moment. Rather it is more fruitful to consider that Eliot was writing a new kind of novel. It dealt with ordinary people, who were not meant to shed a new light on the journey of man's spiritual life. Miss Bennett is, I think, closer to expressing the problems Eliot was experiencing when she writes:

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Bennett, George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art, (London: 1966), p.105. Page references will be provided in brackets after further quotations.

Her manner of using the asides to the reader is also partly the result of distrust in her own creative power. She is not convinced that the fruits of her imagination will convey to the reader all that her own intelligence discerns. . . . She reminds us that we are merely reading a story of which she is the narrator and she lets us know that she suspects us of being incapable of understanding the experiences she has been at pains to give us.<sup>1</sup>

I doubt that Eliot was that jaundiced about the intelligence of her readers, yet she was probably lacking in confidence in presenting her first works in which she tried to synthesize her views of art and life. She realized that her unheroic, tragic hero was someone whom the reader was not quite accustomed to, and no doubt she felt that her creative imagination was not sufficient to explain, by itself, what she was trying to suggest. Also, the reader would in all probability not really understand what her works essentially expressed. These two attitudes of Eliot, on the one hand an oblique humility about her own talents and, on the other hand, an almost condescending inability to trust what is happening in the minds of the reader, are characteristic of the tone of her earlier novels. In all probability she felt that her fiction alone was not capable of inspiring the emotions necessary for tragedy in her readers, and she made it a function of her narrating voice to not only supply this stimulant but also to initiate her readers into the type of novel she was writing and to prove its validity. And there are times when in doing

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.106.

this her superior voice becomes almost inexcusable and even offensive. This can only be proof that Eliot was really uncertain of how her fiction was going to evolve and whether or not it was going to succeed, and being the sensitive person she was, she began to defend it before anyone else's eyes had even seen it.

It is also worth noting that there are occasions where Eliot adopts a very superior tone towards her own characters which is often quite harmful to the success of her work. It is not in the scope of this thesis to explore the reasons behind this, but the problem must nevertheless be acknowledged since it has the tendency to exaggerate the already heavy, moral tone of Eliot's voice in her novels. Perhaps the most flagrant example of this behaviour is Eliot's treatment of Hetty Sorrel in Adam Bede. The reader is constantly aware that the narrator speaks of Hetty in a very critical fashion. It is only when Hetty is enduring the crisis of her trials that the narrative tone changes and Hetty is viewed in a less harsh light. The same comment might be made about Eliot's treatment of Lucy Deane in The Mill on the Floss (1860). The narrator constantly refers to her as "poor Lucy", describing her qualities in a most frivolous and almost snobbish manner. What is more, this attitude toward Lucy is more questionable than that adopted towards Hetty, for Lucy does nothing to deserve her "tragedy". It is almost as though Eliot could not possibly conceive

of moral awareness and a love of pink calico being mingled in the same person. Strangely enough this narrow-mindedness of Eliot's also affected her male characters. If they are not cardboard mouthpieces like Adam Bede or Felix Holt or mythical like Silas Marner, Eliot appears to have a difficult time portraying them. One of the only successfully human, early male characters of Eliot's is Philip Wakem and she had to present him as a cripple. Furthermore is there any real need for Stephen Guest to be such a shallow figure? Philip Wakem and Stephen Guest are two good examples of that tendency in Eliot to oversimplify the personalities of her characters which I referred to earlier in this chapter. In her earlier works Eliot, quite naively, saw fit to equate an obvious physical beauty with moral and spiritual feebleness. On the other hand, the more strange or questionable a character's physical attraction is, the likelier it becomes that that character is morally superior to his peers.

It is quite indicative of Eliot's artistic maturation that in Middlemarch she presents Dorothea as being not only beautiful but even attracted to jewels, although she will not wear them. And certainly the progression from Philip Wakem to Will Ladislaw is, in terms of naturalness, for the better. In Middlemarch, Eliot's characters have the human touch and are much more approachable because of it.

To all this must be added another important fact. As discussed earlier in this chapter, an important element of

Eliot's art, and one that she must have been quite consciously aware of, was that she was writing the kind of books which were being embraced as a new religion by many of her Victorian readers. The writer was taking over the role of priest at many times in the nineteenth-century, and Eliot must have realized that her fiction at times took the place of scripture for many of her readers. Another side to this coin was that Eliot considered herself to be an historian besides being a writer of fiction. This, of course, is most obvious in Adam Bede and The Mill on the Floss, where she refers to herself as an historian, providing a medium between the past and the present. She still sees herself in the same role in Middlemarch, but there this function is somewhat less exaggerated. Thus, in two ways Eliot considered herself to be in the correct position to explain her works, almost to teach them: first, she was a witness to the attaining of spiritual and moral freedom, having experienced Teufelsdröckh's "Baphometric Fire-Baptism" herself as well as having to fight for her spiritual liberty -- this struggle in various forms being the moral content of all her works; and secondly, she was a witness to the past, when things were different and, she argues, at times even better. It is in these two ways that Eliot establishes what the contents of her novel and her narrative style are going to be, based on her conception of a religion

of experience. A few examples will help to clarify what I have been discussing thus far.

In each of her fictional works the first thing that Eliot sets out to do is to establish a definite sense of time. Inevitably her motive is to challenge the realities of a present age with the realities of a past:

Shepperton Church was a very different-looking building five-and twenty years ago. To be sure, its substantial stone tower looks at you through its intelligent eye, the clock, with the friendly expression of former days; but in everything else what changes!<sup>1</sup>

More than a quarter of a century has slipped by since then, and in the interval Milby has advanced at as rapid a pace as other market-towns in her Majesty's dominions. By this time it has a handsome railway station, where the drowsy London traveller may look out by the brilliant gas-light and see perfectly sober ~~peas~~ and husbands alighting with their leather-bags after transacting their day's business at the county town. . . .

But pray, reader, dismiss from your mind all the refined and fashionable ideas associated with this advanced state of things, and transport your imagination to a time when Milby had no gas-lights; when the mail drove up dusty or bespattered to the door of the Red Lion; when old Mr. Crewe, the curate, in a brown Brutus wig, delivered inaudible sermons on a Sunday, and on a week-day imparted the education of a gentleman -- that is to say, an arduous inacquaintance with Latin through the medium of the Eton Grammar -- to three pupils in the upper grammar-school.<sup>2</sup>

It is in Scenes of Clerical Life that Eliot presents

<sup>1</sup> G. Eliot, "Amos Barton", Scenes of Clerical Life, Harmondsworth: 1973), p.41.

<sup>2</sup> G. Eliot, "Janet's Repentance", Scenes of Clerical Life, (Harmondsworth: 1973), p.253.

not only a concrete sense of the past but also a nostalgia for it. One senses the author wincing in the face of modernity, longing "with a fond sadness for Shepperton Church as it was in the old days."<sup>1</sup> But Eliot's motives for conjuring up the past were not sentimental, and in her subsequent works she quickly learned to curb these sentimental allusions to the past. More important was her resolve, one that she had in common with other Victorian novelists, to describe an ever evolving society and its essential nature. Change was absolutely necessary and much too dangerous to be avoided. The Victorians were especially suspicious of the scientific and industrial break-throughs which were so violently upsetting many of their conservative sensibilities. Dickens' portrayal of Miss Havisham in Great Expectations is the most explicit expression of what occurs when one attempts to stop time and avoid change. Time cannot be arrested, and when one tries to suppress it, it simply begins to ferment, and finds more obscure and often evil channels through which to release itself. But what Eliot did with a keener eye than all her contemporaries was to describe as painfully as she could the organic nature of the moment as it pertained to individual beings. Thus, it is less important that she sets her fictions back a quarter

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<sup>1</sup> Amos Barton, p.43.



of a century in time to allow herself objectivity and the chance to give time a definite structure, than that she subordinates these time elements to the more important moral and spiritual developments of her characters. In Adam Bede, one is less concerned that Eliot sets her story in 1799, when she herself is writing in 1859, than that the griefs that Adam experiences concerning Hetty's unfortunate life are not without their own merits:

Deep unspeakable suffering may well be called a baptism, a regeneration, the initiation into a new state. . . . It seemed to him [Adam] as if he had always before thought it a light thing that men should suffer, as if all that he had himself endured and called sorrow before was only a moment's stroke that had never left a bruise. Doubtless a great anguish may do the work of years, and we may come out from that baptism of fire with a soul full of new awe and new pity.<sup>1</sup>

Eliot is interested in revealing not only the characteristics of suffering but also its importance, and the diverse effects it has on various individuals. As Henry James wrote of Hetty Sorel in Adam Bede, the sorrows she experiences do not change the basic nature of her personality. No doubt she has learned much from her experiences, but one senses that Hetty's grief does not necessarily alter her attraction to the superficial and the extravagant. But in the character of Adam himself Eliot describes the influence grief can have on one's life:

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<sup>1</sup> G. Eliot, Adam Bede, (New York, 1961), p.405.

For Adam, though you see him quite master of himself, working hard and delighting in his work after his inborn alienable nature, had not outlived his sorrow -- had not felt it slip from him as a temporary burden, and leave him the same man again. Do any of us? God forbid. It would be a poor result of all our anguish and our wrestling if we won nothing but our old selves at the end of it -- if we could return to the same blind loves, the same self-confident blame, the same light thoughts of human suffering, the same frivolous gossip over blighted human lives, the same feeble sense of that Unknown towards which we have sent forth irrepressible cries in our loneliness. Let us rather be thankful that our sorrow lives in us as an indestructible force, only changing its form, as forces do, and passing from pain into sympathy -- the one poor word which includes all our best insight and our best love. <sup>1</sup>

Eliot goes on to say that Adam had not yet reaped the full extent of his suffering, that he was still slowly coming to terms with it, and describes the languid process of the soul having to face and be instructed by pain and sorrow. But at the end of the novel the reader's last glimpse of Adam is of a new man, a man better for the decisions he had to make, better for the trials he had to endure, and better for the heartaches he had to tolerate:

The growth of a higher feeling in us like the growth of a faculty, bringing with it a sense of added strength. We can no more wish to return to a narrower sympathy than a painter or a musician can wish to return to his crude manner or a philosopher to his less complete formula.

Something like this sense of enlarged being was in Adam's mind this Sunday morning, as he rode along in vivid recollection of the past. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.460.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp.498-99.

This new sense of what again seems to be the religion of experience, which enabled Adam to grasp a greater insight into the "Unknown," is the basic philosophy ~~from~~ which all George Eliot's plots are constructed. From "The Adventures of the Rev. Amos Barton" (1858) to Daniel Deronda (1876), it is this message of the paramount importance of experience and sorrow, of change and compromise, which Eliot reiterates again and again. If Eliot's prose style at times becomes somewhat preachy (as it does even in the excerpts I have just quoted from Adam Bede, which are considerably less so than are other parts of that book or of Scenes From Clerical Life) it is because this is a definite part of what Eliot was engaged in throughout many of her earlier works. It is through her narrative voice that Eliot's works are unified. As I shall attempt to prove, even in Middlemarch, where Eliot's direct voice is seldom heard within the novel, it is still her presence which weaves the various aspects of the novel together, as though it is only she who knows the way through its maze.

What Eliot does in her earlier works is to build up a philosophy of change and to constantly present it to her audience. There are occasions on which she almost crudely reapplies the same formula to various characters, the embellishments of the story providing the only difference from story to story. In "Janet's Repentance", after being brutally thrown from her home by her husband:

Janet felt she was alone: no human soul had measured her anguish, had understood her self-despair, had entered into her sorrows and her sins with that deep-sighted sympathy which is wiser than all blame, more potent than all reproof -- such sympathy as had swelled in her own heart for many a sufferer. And if there was any Divine Pity, she could not feel it; it kept aloof from her, it poured no balm into her wounds, it stretched out no hand to bear up her weak resolve, to fortify her fainting courage.<sup>1</sup>

Later, taking refuge at Mrs. Pettifer's "her [Janet's] ideas had a new vividness, which made her feel as if she had only seen life through a dim haze before; her thoughts instead of springing from the action of her own mind, were external existences, that thrust themselves imperiously upon her like haunting visions."<sup>2</sup> What Janet experiences alone at Mrs. Pettifer's is that breakdown of the self which is necessary for the birth of a greater and better self. Being faced with realities, and being forced to study them on her own, leads Janet into a new awareness and endows her with a strength not known before. Mr. Tryan, the minister of Milby, is also there to help. Recounting something of his past to Janet, he only reaffirms from his own experiences the universality of her sorrows and indicates that all who wish to be spiritually, emotionally and "devotedly" a positive part of humanity must struggle to disengage the self from its egoism in order to be blended with the greater

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<sup>1</sup> "Janet's Repentance", p.344.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.348.

consciousness of mankind. Mr. Tryan found his comfort in devoting himself to Christ and thereby to man, but previous to this he had felt, like Janet, totally abandoned and degenerate:

"The faith which puts the sinner in possession of salvation seemed, as I understood it, to be quite out of my reach. I had no faith; I only felt utterly wretched, under the power of habits and dispositions which wrought hideous evil"<sup>1</sup>

Comforted by Mr. Tryan, and seeing that faith and hope can still emanate from darkest despair, Janet begins to work for her spiritual rejuvenation. Eliot had described the climate as in sympathy with Janet's suffering, and on the morning after her conversation with Mr. Tryan, a Sunday, "the rain had ceased, and Janet, looking out of the bedroom window, saw above the house-tops, a shining mass of white cloud rolling under the far-away sky."<sup>2</sup> Overcome with the glory of the day Janet

felt a buoyant courage that surprised herself, after the cold crushing weight of despondency which had oppressed her the day before: she could think even of her husband's rage without the old overpowering dread. For a delicious hope -- the hope of purification and inward peace -- had entered into Janet's soul, and made it spring-time there as well as in the outer world.<sup>3</sup>

The spiritual awakening which Janet experiences can

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.360.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.365.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.365.

be directly paralleled to the story of Maggie Tulliver, Appropriately, in a chapter called "Waking", Eliot describes Maggie after her elopement with Stephen Guest. Having slept on a barge all night, Maggie awakes the following morning to face her conscience and her sense of morality. She can only think of the people she has hurt, and she becomes determined to sacrifice her love for Stephen and return to her family. Upon her return her brother refuses to admit her into his house and she is sent away to find what lodgings she can. Accompanied by her mother, who willingly leaves her son's home to be with her daughter, they find a place to stay at an old friend's, Bob Jakin's. It is there, after days of seclusion with her thoughts, that Maggie is able to come to terms with herself and to once again face life. Refusing to escape in a cowardly fashion from St. Ogg's, and knowing that she will be mocked and frowned upon, Maggie, with the help of St. Ogg's minister, Dr. Kenn, begins to reconstruct her life, having chosen to devote herself to her sense of duty rather than indulge herself in her passions.

It was definitely this theme of conversion that Eliot was trying to express in all her works and this never changes. Even in Middlemarch she resorts to the very same formula that she applied to Janet and Maggie, and this occurs in the most important chapter of the novel, chapter LXXX. But unlike Janet or Maggie, Dorothea is not advised by a member of a religious sect. Rather it is she, alone, who comes to

realize that "she was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining."<sup>1</sup> It is of great importance that Dorothea's conversion occurs without the aid of theological advice, but I will return to this matter in my discussion of Middlemarch, itself. What is significant for the moment is the fact that Eliot's underlying theme never varies from one work to another. Their plots change, the characters are different, but the message remains firm throughout. It is only logical to conclude that Eliot felt deeply the relevance of what she was attempting to express. This also helps to explain her eagerness to imprint upon the reader's mind the reality of what she was saying. Henry James validly criticizes George Eliot for having sacrificed plot and structure to her philosophical speculations, but allows that "she is a thinker, -- not perhaps a passionate thinker, but at least a serious one" and admits that

The constant play of lively and vigorous thought about the objects furnished by her imagination animates these latter with a surprising richness of colour and a truly human interest. It gives to the author's style, moreover, that lingering, affectionate, comprehensive quality which is its chief distinction; and perhaps occasionally it makes her tedious. George Eliot is so little tedious, however, because

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<sup>1</sup> G. Eliot, Middlemarch, (Harmondsworth, 1965), p.846.

if on the one hand, her reflection never flags, so on the other, her observation never ceases to supply it with material.<sup>1</sup>

In her study of George Eliot's novels, Barbara Hardy writes that the reasons for Eliot's obtrusive narrative method is that the author is interceding for her characters. Having chosen characters from common life, like Hetty Sorrel or Adam Bede, or characters who are too pitiful to be able to really express their situations, Miss Hardy feels that it was up to Eliot to "articulate" for the "inarticulate", to fend for her characters, especially where they could not realistically or validly comment upon their tragical states. If taken too literally this theory only helps the reader to escape deliberation upon Eliot's early narrative techniques. The omniscient voices of Scenes of Clerical Life and Adam Bede are strikingly different from those of Silas Marner or Felix Holt, yet many of the characters in each of these works are from the working class. Eliot's problem was not so much that they couldn't speak for themselves, but that she had not yet allowed them to speak for themselves. She was so anxious and so intent upon communicating her radical interpretation of the tragic hero to her readers that she failed to present her characters

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<sup>1</sup> Henry James, Views and Reviews, (New York, 1959), p.25.



as well as she could. Eliot had to learn to study her subjects more closely and to become more familiar with them before she could begin to be comfortable with what each one was expressing. She had to learn to sculpt her characters, to chisel the block as Michelangelo once said, always realizing that the form was already there only needing to be shaped by the artist. The important difference between Adam Bede and Felix Holt is that the latter is educated and eloquent, and yet critics' chief criticism of Felix Holt is that he is too rigid a character (a comment frequently made concerning Adam); he continually offers speeches instead of naturally talking with people; he represents maxims rather than the natural word. He is full of words instead of being full of the spirit of life. Eliot had to search for just the right subject matter, the correct situation and the suitable manner. With the exception of Silas Marner, ~~she~~ did not find this until Middlemarch.

What Miss Hardy's remark does reaffirm is the idea that Eliot in her early works did not quite trust her art, nor did she know how to develop it to its fullest extent. She was suspicious of the impression made by her stories upon the minds of her readers and had to take refuge in impressing her thoughts upon her audience herself. It was only as an experienced novelist that Eliot was finally able to trust confidently in her abilities to dramatize her message rather than declaim it. As she became more adept

in her art her role as commenting and omniscient narrator decreased. In Scenes of Clerical Life she achieves a sense of realism by making the reader feel that she as writer was actually a part of the life she presents. She writes about attending Shepperton Church and walking along the roads of Milby. In Middlemarch she is no longer writing a pseudo-journal; her characters account for their own realities.

In a very fine essay in which he studies the narrative technique in Eliot's novels, W. J. Harvey justly defends Eliot's style against those modern critics who hold that Eliot's art improved as she approached closer and closer to a Jamesian sense of the poetics of the novel. He wisely questions the infallibility that has been attached to James' standards and reminds us that James does not hold the monopoly on novel criticism:

Certainly, and this is another aspect of the same problem, the analytic critics tend to stress the autonomy of the fictional microcosm and to resent any manifest connection within the novel between microcosm and macrocosm (the presence within the novel of the omniscient author is, of course, the most obvious of such connections).<sup>1</sup>

Although I feel that what Harvey is arguing is absolutely true, I think he errs in applying his conceptions directly to Eliot. Ironically George Eliot was all along moving towards what was to be the Jamesian view of the art of the novel, and in considering the two authors it is easy to

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<sup>1</sup> W. J. Harvey, "George Eliot and the Omniscient Author Convention", Nineteenth-Century Fiction, (September, 1958) XXIII, 83.

see how the elder one influenced the style of the younger. In 1866 in a letter to a friend Eliot discussed the manner of her art and its creation:

I should like to suggest to you [Frederic Harrison] all the miseries one's obstinate egoism endures from the fact of being a writer of novels. . . and I think you see its difficulties, though they can hardly press upon you as they do on me, who have gone through again and again the severe effort of trying to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate, as if they had revealed themselves to me first in the flesh and not in the spirit. I think aesthetic teaching is the highest of all teaching because it deals with life in its highest complexity. But if it ceases to be purely aesthetic -- if it lapses anywhere from the picture to the diagram -- it becomes the most offensive of all teaching. . . . Well, then, consider the sort of agonizing labour to an English-fed imagination to make art a sufficiently real background, for the desired picture, to get breathing, individual forms, and group them in the needful relations, so that the presentation will lay hold on the emotions as human experience -- will, as you say, "flash" conviction on the world by means of aroused sympathy.<sup>1</sup>

Surely there is not much difference between these words of Eliot's and those with which James prefaced his Portrait of a Lady:

Trying to recover here, for recognition, the germ of my idea, I see that it must have consisted not at all in any conceit of a 'plot', nefarious name, in any flash, upon the fancy, of a set of relations, or in any of those situations that by a logic of their own, immediately fall, for the fabulist, into movement, into a march or a rush, a patter of quick steps; but altogether in the sense of a single character, the character and aspect of a particular

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<sup>1</sup> George Eliot Letters, ed. Gordon S. Haight, (London: 1954-56, pp.300-307.

young woman, to which all of the usual elements of a 'subject', certainly of a setting were to be superadded. Quite as interesting as the young woman herself, at her best, do I find, I must again repeat, this projection of memory upon the whole matter of the growth, in one's imagination, of some apology for a motive. . . .

I seemed to have waked up one morning in possession of them -- of Ralph Touchett and his parents, of Madame Merle, of Gilbert Osmond and his daughter and his sister, of Lord Warburton, Caspar Goodwood and Miss Stackpole, the definite array of contributions to Isabel Archer's history. I recognized them, they were the numbered pieces of my puzzle, the concrete terms of my 'plot'. It was as if they had simply, by an impulse of their own, floated into my ken, and all in response to my primary question: 'Well, what will she do?'<sup>1</sup>

Eliot's style was definitely not James', but in many respects she was only a few steps away from him, and one cannot deny the rather obvious fact that, as her art matured and her novels improved and gained more strength, she came closer to what were to become the Jamesian ideals.

Before beginning my study of Middlemarch, it would seem only just that there be further discussion of Silas Marner, a novel whose fine qualities make it almost as great a work of Eliot's as Middlemarch itself.

In creating the character of Silas, Eliot writes with striking confidence -- especially when we consider him in the light of her earlier works -- the story of a man who embodies all the traits that Eliot felt were necessary

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<sup>1</sup> Henry James, Portrait of a Lady, (Harmondsworth, 1973), pp.vi, xiv.

for gaining spiritual and emotional stability. I have said earlier that for a long while one of Eliot's major problems was her search for an appropriate subject matter. One repeatedly gets the impression that she was trying to draw water from a rock and was finally forced to supply the life-giving liquid herself. In Silas Marner, one feels that she has, at last, found a subject matter which could carry the weight of her demands upon it. Eliot's narrative presence is felt as much as ever, but she is no longer descending upon the novel, rather she is working through it:

I suppose one reason why we are seldom able to comfort our neighbors with our words is that our good will gets adulterated, in spite of ourselves, before it can pass our lips. We can send black puddings and pettitoes without giving them a flavour of our own egoism, but language is a stream that is almost sure to smack of a mingled soil. There was a fair proportion of kindness in Raveloe, but it was often of a beery and bungling sort, and took the shape least allied to the complimentary and hypocritical.<sup>1</sup>

One does not sense here that Eliot's voice is the shadow falling between what she set out to do and what she actually did. Furthermore, the character of Silas Marner and his story contained all the potentialities that Eliot could have wished for, and she successfully developed them to their fullest. We sense her great effort in distilling a formidable philosophy from each word of the novel. Silas is constantly referred to as an insect, spinning his own web at his loom after his loss of faith. Eliot refers to his life as a

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<sup>1</sup> G. Eliot, Silas Marner, (Harmondsworth, 1973), p.130.

"history and a metamorphosis," and once Eppie arrives bringing with her the warmth of human intimacy and the sense of something vital and evolving, so too "his [Silas] mind was growing into memory: as her life unfolded, his soul, long stupified in a cold narrow prison, was unfolding too, and trembling gradually into full consciousness."<sup>1</sup>

The parable effect of the novel is best exemplified in Eliot's symbolic treatment of Silas. The gap in his life made by his fall from spiritual vitality is superficially filled by the meaningless and mechanical satisfaction of hoarding gold and silver pieces. Finally, this is once again replaced by a different kind of spiritual awakening, represented by Eppie. It is important to note that Silas only returns to formal religion once he has accepted Eppie into his life. It is the symbolic treatment in this novel which accounts for its success. Eliot had been attempting something of this sort all along but without the suitable material. Silas is intelligent; he has loved; instead of being a great speaker he is a man of silence quite resigned to his own sense of solitude. Eliot describes him as of a "dis-inherited race" and indicates that one could sense his strangeness simply by glancing at him. These qualities lend themselves to the parable. One can depend on the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.185.

sense of the mystical and the exotic, as Eliot does here, to supply the necessary impetus of the work. One refrains from questioning too closely the logic of the tale simply because one takes it for granted that the mystic elements in the novel account for any incredibility in terms of plot and story. But it is here that Eliot fails in Silas Marner. One is too aware that what one is reading at times is supernatural. What is behind, as G. D. Leavis writes in her preface to the book, those "convenient fits"? Why must Silas be strange and almost myth-like for so long in the novel? Although Eliot found the suitable subject matter and the potentially right story, she lost an element of realism in Silas Marner which was too important a part of her philosophy for her to forsake. She was finally able to blend all these elements satisfactorily in that work which is the main interest of this thesis, Middlemarch.

## Chapter II

### Middlemarch

An eminent philosopher among my friends, who can dignify even your ugly furniture by lifting it into the serene light of science, has shown me this pregnant little fact. Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a handmaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo, the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent.<sup>1</sup>

Critics, from George Eliot's contemporaries to our modern ones, have consistently worried themselves over the problem of what constitutes the seemingly undefined structure of Middlemarch. Eliot has been accused of having failed to construct a unifying form for her novel, of including superfluous threads of plot simply for their own sake, of having sacrificed the art of the novel to her more personal and philosophical views of life. It is James' statement which perhaps best represents much of what the earlier critics of Middlemarch concerned themselves with: "Middlemarch is a treasure house of detail, but it is an indifferent whole."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Middlemarch, p.297.

<sup>2</sup> Henry James, Reviews of Middlemarch for the Galaxy, Collected in Middlemarch: A Selection of Critical Essays, Patrick Swinden, ed., (Tiptree, Essex, 1972), p.61.



More modern critics of the novel are less perturbed by the overall structure, or rather lack of overall structure of the novel, and instead tend to question who or what actually constitutes the moral and fundamental basis of Middlemarch. They adopt this as an approach to the labyrinth-like novel. The majority seem to agree that it is in the character of Dorothea Brooke that Eliot has placed the raison d'être of her work, and, of course, add that the story of Tertius Lydgate coupled with that of Dorothea together make Middlemarch aesthetically a satisfying whole. Yet one cannot be too smug in defending this position. David Daiches and other critics have claimed with undeniably good reason that it is not the Dorothea or Lydgate stories which lay the moral foundations of the novel, but rather that the Garth family holds this special position. In his study of Middlemarch, Daiches demonstrates how it is through Caleb Garth, and especially his daughter Mary, that Eliot projects her ideas of moral and spiritual solidarity. His argument is not easy to attack.<sup>1</sup>

Without a doubt, this change of attitude from the Victorian to the modern critic makes an important comment on how we have come to consider novels such as Middlemarch. Where early critics were troubled over the apparent lack of unity within the novel, modern readers of the book are seldom disturbed by this. We have become accustomed or, perhaps more pejoratively, resigned to a fragmented view of

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<sup>1</sup> David Daiches, George Eliot: "Middlemarch" (London: 1968).

society and of an art which actually mirrors this. Patrick Swinden, commenting upon early studies of Middlemarch, notes that critics contemporary with Eliot were dismayed at the overall "melancholy" tone of the novel.<sup>1</sup> For them, Eliot, in her study of provincial life, seemed to be unable to say anything of positive value, which resulted in a rather jaundiced and disparaging view of life. Needless to say no one could accuse her of being totally without hope, but as one critic wrote in 1872:

George Eliot never makes the world worse than it is, but she makes it a shade darker. She paints the confusions of life no worse than they are, but she steadily discourages the hope that there is any light for us behind the cloud. She is large in her justice to the visible elements in human nature, but she throws cold water with a most determined hand on the idealism, as she evidently thinks it, which interprets by faith what cannot be interpreted by sympathy and sight.<sup>2</sup>

Eliot's apparent inability to salvage any really positive value from life in the mid-nineteenth century, coupled with what appeared to be her abandonment of the unified structure of the novel, no doubt greatly upset her Victorian audience no matter how much it was overwhelmed by the artistry of the work.

One other important aspect of Eliot's novel must be added to this. Eliot was writing an historical novel set back at least thirty years from the time in which she was

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<sup>1</sup> Swinden, see "Introduction" to Middlemarch: A Selection of Critical Essays.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.35

actually composing it. Frank Kermode in his essay on Middlemarch demonstrates how Eliot infused her novel with an historical consciousness and how important it is to recognize this.<sup>1</sup> It was something she had tried to do in Felix Holt but had failed to achieve, having floundered in a too dogmatic and static view of the novel. In Middlemarch, Eliot is a more experienced artist and is careful not to surrender her novel as a whole to secondary concerns such as the political situations of the era, but still she manages to create a powerful sense of time and the concern with it throughout Victorian society. The result is that Middlemarch became in a sense a pseudo-prophecy of Eliot's own time. This brought greater poignancy to the satire in the novel along with a more powerful stress on the ironical narrative tone so often present in the book. It is no wonder that the Victorians felt the depression of the novel more profoundly than they were able to conceive its humanistic vision. At a time when social moralities were swiftly changing, when people were experiencing distrust in orthodox religions and were trying to seek a more personal and valid form of faith, when the indifferent voice of science was coveting more and more attention even in daily living, so that the question of progress and its moral validity was becoming a genuine threat to spiritual survival, the bleaker aspects

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.131.

of Eliot's novel might easily have overshadowed its more affirmative elements.

It is the modern reader who, having the objectivity of time and experience, is able to balance the novel's "melancholy" with Eliot's professions of hope in the "Dorotheas" of society. The Victorians were too close to the evils which Eliot depicted in her study of provincial life to take due notice of what she advocated as a release from these threats, something which the more distant reader is able to appreciate. And yet it would appear that the Victorian critic, with his concern for the organization of the novel, holds the upper-hand over the modern reader with his appreciation of the various components of the work, for it is through the structure of her novel that Eliot establishes the import of Middlemarch and is able to carry forward the more positive ideas she wishes to express.

As evidenced in her earlier works, George Eliot was particularly mindful of the relationship of her art to life, of the realistic tragedy of common life, and it is most probable that she meant her study of provincial life to be as flexible and open and as representative of life as her art could allow. It is not, therefore, that Eliot neglected to organize her novel as a single and unified structure, but that the structure she perceived was not as neat as the anxious Victorian reader would have liked it to be. One clue to Eliot's view of organization in the

novel is its sub-title: A Study of Provincial Life. Eliot is suggesting that her novel is not going to necessarily focus on one particular aspect of life in Middlemarch, but rather she is interested in exploring all the minute details that make a provincial society operate. She is curious about the effect which one person, one aspect of society, or even the lack of some particular element in a society, can have upon a body of people. It is here that the reader must be wary of being too attracted to the idea of a "star-system" whereby one or two characters become the centre about which all of Middlemarch society orbits.

Recent critics have qualified the search for a sole and central moral force in Middlemarch. After the work of Barbara Hardy and W. J. Harvey one begins to consider the value of approaching Eliot's novel from a specific aspect and then working outward to encompass the whole work, instead of employing a general idea of the novel to work into its more particular intricacies. Thus, criticism becomes finer instead of broader, precise instead of ambiguous, focusing upon the intricate and more minute aspects of the book. In place of the question "What did Eliot actually produce in Middlemarch?" critics such as Hardy and Harvey explore how she produced it, investigating the image, the language, the moment, the instance, as these accumulate to become a final whole. It is this kind of criticism which I feel is closest to doing justice to

Eliot's vision.

Eliot makes it quite clear in the novel that Lydgate's failure as a person does not stem from his vocational ambitions but rather from a faulty social consciousness. It is his extravagant and patronizing attitude towards women which becomes the bane of his life though his scientific ambitions always remain admirable. Early in Book II, Eliot is anxious to describe the nature of Lydgate's work and investigations and what he hopes to accomplish. One particular passage is of paramount importance, not only for the light it sheds on Lydgate's studies, but also because Eliot is perhaps alluding to the nature of her own work as a novelist and to how the reader should appreciate her art. The passage is a lengthy one but essential to an understanding of the novel.

. . . Lydgate was ambitious above all to contribute towards enlarging the scientific, rational basis of his profession. The more he became interested in special questions of disease, such as the nature of fever or fevers, the more he keenly felt the need for that fundamental knowledge of structure which just at the beginning of the century had been illuminated by the brief and glorious career of Bichat, who died when he was only one-and-thirty, but, like another Alexander, left a realm large enough for many heirs. That great Frenchman first carried out the conception that living bodies, fundamentally considered, are not associations of organs which can be understood by studying them first apart, and then as it were federally; but must be regarded as consisting of certain primary webs or tissues, out of which the various organs -- brain, heart, lungs, and so on -- are compacted, as the various accommodations of a house are built in various proportions of wood, iron, stone, brick, zinc, and the rest, each material

having its peculiar composition and proportions. No man, one sees, can understand and estimate the entire structure or its parts -- what are its frailties and what its repairs, without knowing the nature of the materials. And the conception wrought out by Bichat, with his detailed study of the different tissues, acted necessarily on medical questions as the turning of gas-light would act on a dim, oil-lit street, showing new connections and hitherto hidden facts of structure which must be taken into account in considering the symptoms of maladies and the action of medicaments. But results which depend on human conscience and intelligence work slowly, and now at the end of 1829, most medical practice was still strutting or shambling along the old paths, and there was still scientific work to be done which might have seemed to be a direct consequence of Bichat's. This great seer did not go beyond the consideration of the tissues as ultimate facts in the living organism, marking the limit of anatomical analysis; but it was open to another mind to say, have not these structures some common basis from which they have all started, as your sarsnet, gauze, net, satin and velvet from the raw cocoon? Here would be another light, as of oxy-hydrogen, showing the very grain of things, and revising all former explanations. Of this sequence to Bichat's work, already vibrating along many currents of the European mind, Lydgate was enamoured; he longed to demonstrate the more intimate relations of living structure and help to define men's thoughts more accurately after the true order. The work had not yet been done, but only prepared for those who knew how to use the preparation. What was the primitive tissue? In that way Lydgate put the question -- not quite in the way required by the awaiting answer; but such missing of the right word befalls many seekers. And he counted on quiet intervals to be watchfully seized, for taking up the trends of investigation -- on many hints to be won from diligent application, not only of the scalpel, but of the microscope, which research had begun to use again with new enthusiasm of reliance. Such was Lydgate's plan of his future: to do good small work for Middlemarch, and great work for the world.<sup>1</sup>

Eliot's concerns in her novel are basically the same as Lydgate's concerns for his work. By examining the

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<sup>1</sup> Middlemarch, pp.177-178.

particulars of a provincial society she was attempting to study the nature of society as a whole, to watch how a body of people change in terms of the individual as well as in terms of how this would affect the society the individual lives in. These are Eliot's concerns in the writing of Middlemarch. If the reader compares Middlemarch to another Victorian novel, Vanity Fair (1847-48), it will be easier to see this point. In Vanity Fair, Thackeray was greatly concerned about his novel being a novel. His sub-title to the book, "A Novel Without a Hero" is the reader's chief clue to this. The sub-title implies something about the work itself as an art form. Throughout the novel, Thackeray plays upon the concept of the hero. At one point he will allude to Amelia as the heroine, at another moment Becky enjoys this role. He makes it quite clear from the start that his book is not about military heroism, and so the reader is constantly confused about what Thackeray is trying to express in his work. Finally, patching various clues from the novel together, one must come to the conclusion that Thackeray was interested in the mock-heroic, which was hinted at in his sub-title, and that Vanity Fair is not about heroism of any sort but rather about anti-idealism. Thackeray was especially interested in avoiding a too ideal use of contemporary literary motifs into which both his characters and his readers could escape. He wished to imbue his work with



somewhat more realism than conventional literary methods were capable of expressing. In Vanity Fair Thackeray fuses his philosophical outlook on life with his novelist's self-consciousness and manages to create a work whose themes and manners seem to imply the very things they set out not to say. It is in discovering this disparity that the reader takes his greatest delight from the novel.

Eliot was not worried about Middlemarch belonging to any specific form and consequently does not set out to make it belong to one. She intended that Middlemarch, in every way possible, reflect the organization and qualities of a Victorian society, and therefore by its very nature it tends to resemble society in its structure and themes. Needless to say, of course, Eliot was aware of herself as a novelist and had to ask herself what constituted her responsibility as the author of Middlemarch. As I shall try to demonstrate later, Eliot interpreted her role as novelist in a manner unusual to the novel up to this point in its history.

Like Thackeray, albeit for very different reasons, it is quite obvious that Eliot too was interested in the concept of the hero, but what Eliot wished to explore was the various points of view in one society and how they manifest themselves. It is this which decided the structure and organization of Middlemarch and, as I shall discuss later, it is her own voice, her own point of view,

which finally and actually unify the various threads of diversified life in Middlemarch.

It is up to the modern reader to retain his ability to objectively realize the positive values of Middlemarch, which Eliot's contemporaries overlooked. He must attempt to understand how far the totality that Eliot creates is from being fragmented or from having a concentration on any one specific aspect of the novel. It is difficult to resist the temptation of claiming Dorothea as the sole heroine of Middlemarch. Indeed, she is one character whom Eliot treats with obvious intimacy and understanding. Eliot's often too zealous affinity with Dorothea throughout the novel consistently makes one suspicious of her importance in the work. In The Great Tradition, F. R. Leavis suggests that the relationship enjoyed between the novelist and her personage is so close that it becomes too uncomfortable for the reader and that it is here that the work fails to become a whole. He admits that Eliot's distance from Dorothea at the start of the novel seems sufficient to prevent literary disaster, but that Eliot quickly loses her objectivity to become herself ensnared in the role of Dorothea Brooke, just as she was once before in The Mill on the Floss in the case of Maggie Tulliver. By chapter viii, according to Leavis, Eliot's ego has become fatally intertwined with Dorothea's and the latter's autonomy as a functional character is never recovered. But perhaps

with a little more patience the reader is able to see that this never quite happens. Indeed, Eliot does to some extent indulge herself in her characterization of Dorothea, but one can sense at all times Eliot's critical eye being just as energetic as her affection for Dorothea. Dr. Leavis quotes the passage from chapter lxxvi where Dorothea lends her sympathy to Lydgate's grief, passionately idealizing his potential as a doctor and scientist and naively, yet effectively, attempting to elevate his feelings and inspire his energy:

'Oh, it is hard!' said Dorothea. 'I understand the difficulty there is in your vindicating yourself. And that all this should have come to you who had meant to lead a higher life than the common and to find out better ways -- I cannot bear to rest in this as unchangeable. I know you meant that. I remember what you said when you first spoke to me about the hospital. There is no sorrow I thought more about than that -- to love what is great, and try to reach it, and yet to fail.'

'Yes,' said Lygate, feeling that here he had found room for the full meaning of his grief. . . . 'Suppose,' said Dorothea meditatively. 'suppose we kept on the hospital according to the present plan, and you stayed here though only with the friendship and support of the few, the evil feeling towards you would gradually die out; there would come opportunities in which people would be forced to acknowledge that they had been unjust to you, because they would see that your purposes are pure. You may still win a great fame like the Louis and Laennec I have heard you speak of, and we shall all be proud of you,' she ended, with a smile.

Dr. Leavis comments:

We are given a good deal in the same vein of winning simplicity. Such a failure in touch, in so intelligent a novelist, is more than a surface matter; it betrays a radical disorder. For Lydgate, we are told, the 'childlike grave-eyed earnestness

with which Dorothea said all this was irresistible  
 -- blent into an adorable whole with her ready  
 understanding of high experience.'<sup>1</sup>

Here Leavis fails to quote sufficiently. Immediately after writing the passage in question Eliot adds a parenthetical aside. "(Of lower experience such as plays a great part in the world, poor Mrs. Casaubon had a very short-sighted knowledge, little helped by her imagination.) But she took the smile [Lydgate's] as an encouragement of her plan."<sup>2</sup> Here Eliot actually steps in to break the trance which Leavis accuses the novelist of being under. Furthermore, Dorothea in her "childlike grave-eyed earnestness" misjudges the nature of Lydgate's smile. Lydgate with his experience of the world, his knowledge of his wife, Rosamond, realizes that he cannot stay in Middlemarch in the manner which Dorothea so idealistically depicts. Lydgate smiles at Dorothea's eagerness, her enthusiastic attempts at maintaining an order which she does not quite have the required knowledge of. He tells her that "You have the goodness as well as the money"<sup>3</sup> to help re-establish his honour and also the operation of the hospital. He at no point says that she has the wisdom or the experience. Furthermore, Dorothea's elevating of Lydgate to a "Louis or Laennec" is already part of a

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<sup>1</sup> F. R. Leavis, The Great Tradition, (Harmondsworth, 1967), p.91.

<sup>2</sup> Middlemarch, p.822.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 822.

formula which is consistent throughout the novel and which the reader immediately recognizes as being ironic yet at the same time gently humorous. In the first chapter of the novel we learn of Dorothea's attitude towards marriage:

She felt sure that she would have accepted the judicious Hooker, if she had been born in time to save him from that wretched mistake he made in matrimony; or John Milton when his blindness had come on; or any of the other great men whose odd habits would have been glorious piety to endure; but an amiable handsome baronet, who said "Exactly" to her remarks even when she expressed uncertainty, -- how could he affect her as a lover? The really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it.<sup>1</sup>

The satire is sharp, but the truth of Dorothea's incompatibility with the art of the courtly lover just as poignant. It is this manner of revealing Dorothea's character which Eliot adopts and employs throughout the novel. Dorothea sees in Mr. Casaubon the reflections of Bossuet, Augustine and Pascal. Needless to say, Casaubon's failing eyesight makes him an appropriate shadow of Milton, and his wife often makes the association. What makes the satire all the more intense in these instances is the manner in which Eliot strengthens it with direct comments of her own. In the heading to chapter ii she draws the parallel between Mr. Casaubon and Raphael in Paradise Lost; and Dorothea, musing that Casaubon might have the intention

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.32.

to make her his wife, thinks to herself, "How good of him -- nay, it would be almost as if a winged messenger had suddenly stood beside her path and held out his hands towards her!"<sup>1</sup>

The reader might turn to Mr. Brooke for even more humorous examples of this kind of irony. We can sense Casaubon wincing under Mr. Brooke's praise of Ladislav as the latter says to Casaubon and Mrs. Cadwallader:

'Well, you know,' interposed Mr. Brooke, 'he is trying his wings. He is just the sort of young fellow to rise. I should be glad to give him the opportunity. He would make a good secretary, now, like Hobbes, Milton, Swift -- that sort of man.'<sup>2</sup>

On another occasion, Mr. Brooke, still overcome by Ladislav's talents and intelligence, is yet shown to be more infatuated with his own wisdom than with any one else's. Concerning Ladislav's advice as to how Mr. Brooke should enter politics in Middlemarch

Mr. Brooke always ended by agreeing with Ladislav, who still appeared to him a sort of Burke with a leaven of Shelley; but after an interval the wisdom of his own methods reasserted itself, and he was again drawn into using them with much hopefulness.<sup>3</sup>

Lydgate's allusion to Dorothea as a "Virgin Mary", which Dr. Leavis criticizes, is a variation of the formula.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.50.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.364.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.542.

He is referring to her childlike ability for goodness and optimism, sequestered from the knowledge which results from actual contact with life. Lydgate wonders :

She evidently thinks nothing of her own future, and would pledge away half her income at once, as if she wanted nothing for herself but a chair to sit in from which she can look down with those clear eyes at the poor mortals who pray to her. She seems to have what I never saw in any woman before -- a fountain of friendship towards men -- a man can make a friend of her. Casaubon must have raised some heroic hallucination in her. I wonder if she could have any other sort of passion for a man? Ladislav? -- there was certainly an unusual feeling between them. And Casaubon must have had a notion of it. Well -- her love might help a man more than her money.<sup>1</sup>

It is true that Dorothea is being compared to the Virgin Mary, but one can sense that this is not what Eliot is trying to express to the reader. Dorothea is at that stage of sympathetic understanding which is the kind of ideal and abstract state the Virgin usually represents -- but Eliot suggests that further evolution is needed. Through Lydgate, the reader, too, is gratified and overcome by Dorothea's sympathy and understanding. But one also realizes that her aptitude for sympathy is much more profound than the near-naiveté of her understanding. Lydgate's remark about Casaubon having inspired "some heroic hallucination" in Dorothea is more painfully ironic than it is noble. His wondering if she could ever enjoy a relationship with a man which was not abstract and functional is a valid

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.826

consideration, one which Eliot obviously wishes to stress. Throughout the novel, Dorothea's intelligent and sympathetic personality has been highlighted and still the reader senses the incompleteness of her character. Without a doubt Eliot also felt the precariously rarefied nature which Dorothea exudes in the work, and the novelist makes no attempt to hide this deficiency. Early in the novel, Mr. Brooke makes the very understated observation to his eldest niece that Casaubon is "a little too buried in his books." Dorothea replies: "When a man has great studies and is writing a great work, he must of course give up seeing much of the world. How can he go about making acquaintances?"<sup>1</sup> What Dorothea has to learn is that great works of art are of, for and with mankind and not beyond it. It is a lesson that she suffers in order to learn, and Eliot is keen not to idealize Dorothea's nature too much, so that although one senses the obvious sincerity of her way of thinking, yet one sees the foolhardiness of it too. Lydgate's remark that Dorothea's "love might help a man more than her money" becomes prophetic in terms of her future relationship with Will Ladislaw, and Eliot is here suggesting that Dorothea has yet to experience life as a complete human being.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.62.



I will return to a fuller discussion of Dorothea later, but for the present I hope to have shown that if Middlemarch fails as a novel, it is not through the mis-handling of Dorothea as the moral centre of the work as Leavis indicates, but rather that a danger arises when the reader puts Dorothea in this position in the first place. The problem with considering Dorothea the moral centre of Middlemarch is that this immediately confuses the design of the character studies Eliot sets up in her novel. It is at the start of chapter xxvii, which I have quoted as a heading for the present chapter, that Eliot reveals how on one level her novel matured and, indeed, how the reader might constructively view the panorama of people and events which she describes. Each of the characters in Middlemarch effects the structure of the novel. Each is responsible for the stasis, the rapid changes, the suspense which one discovers in the work. It is the individual person who brings an explanation of order to what appears to be a very loosely and randomly planned novel. This is the closest approximation to reality that Eliot could embody in a novel, which shows how one person could affect the careful and tenuous balance of any society. This is her structure and in these intentions she definitely does not fail.

Middlemarch is about the convergence of egos -- as varied as they can be. Eliot attempts to describe

them as meticulously as possible, as though they were each irreducible atoms in an enclosed vessel to which heat has been applied. Eliot as artist, scientist, historian records the various speeds of these atoms, their reactions to their collisions, to their passing of each other, even to their merely touching each other. She watches their formation into molecules, even their attempts at escape only to be arrested by the sides of the enclosure they are in. And it is here that Eliot does something extremely significant. She allows her characters to either consciously or unconsciously create their own limits, downfalls, successes. There are no actual rules to this, simply the decisions or failure to make the decisions which each character in Middlemarch is responsible for. It cannot be denied that there is no logic or order here, yet the artist merely supplies the heat, the initiative, at times the encouragement. It is left for the character to effect his own way.

Yet one must still account for the strong centripetal force with which Dorothea attracts the readers of Middlemarch to her person. Although I do not believe that Dorothea is the moral centre of the novel I do suggest that she provides the structural frame of the work as a whole. It is through the two marriages of Dorothea that Eliot is able to establish the thematic progression of her novel, to exemplify her vision of what love should be. It is

important to realize that the complete work is not about love, but rather about what goes into the making of a provincial society. Yet by firmly planting her central concern against the story of Dorothea and her two marriages, Eliot endows the novel first of all with a sense of progression, with the feeling that in Dorothea there is a spirit being nurtured and matured. Secondly the development of Dorothea's life becomes a sounding-board for the other stories in the novel, and either challenges or echoes various views which are set forth. But most importantly through the story of Dorothea, Eliot is able to unify the various concerns of Middlemarch, the convergences of egos which, I have tried to show, are on the simplest level the structure of Middlemarch itself. Consequently Eliot presents to the reader a novel which can begin by introducing one major character and end by discussing the same particular character without ever really allowing the role of that person to lord it over the roles of the other characters in the book. In such a manner Eliot employs the story of Dorothea as a literary technique to help unify her work and also as a thematic ploy to support various concepts in the novel, and yet Dorothea by no means becomes the focus of the novel, nor does she stand in relief as its paramount character.

Besides the study of the various points of view within the novel, the use of the Dorothea-Casaubon-Ladislaw

plot is again only one major aspect of how Eliot is able to unify Middlemarch and make it a satisfying whole. The last major technique I will investigate will be the function of Eliot's own narrating voice. This will be the major concern of the following chapter. What must be noted here is the structural significance of Dorothea's story and how it becomes the foundation upon which Eliot can build her novel.

George Eliot does not depict within Middlemarch any of the four marriages which take place in the book. Obviously it was not the union of Dorothea to Casaubon or Ladislaw, of Lydgate to Rosamond or of Mary to Fred that she is directly interested in. The emphasis is placed on the reasons why each character marries the other, and Eliot shows how it is that these reasons logically produce the various kinds of relationship of each respective couple. One is again reminded that Eliot is concerned with investigating the "primary tissue" of an organism as a whole.

It is the two marriages of Dorothea which I believe become the structural backbone of the novel and which help to set the limits within which the rest of Middlemarch evolves. From the start of the novel Eliot meticulously depicts the character of the young Dorothea. In the first chapter the reader sees her reluctance to wear the jewels bequeathed to her and her sister by their mother. She

snobbishly chides Celia for ever thinking that she could be so common as to wear unnecessary adornment in dress, and when she finds herself attracted to some particular emeralds, she typically tries to transcend the banal beauty of the jewels for a more elevated appreciation of them:

. . . She was opening some ring-boxes, which disclosed a fine emerald with diamonds, and just then the sun passing beyond a cloud sent a bright gleam over the table.

'How very beautiful these gems are!' said Dorothea, under a new current of feeling, as sudden as the gleam. 'It is strange how deeply colours seem to penetrate one, like scent. I suppose that is the reason why gems are used as spiritual emblems in the Revelation of St. John. They look like fragments of heaven. I think that emerald is more beautiful than any of them.' . . .

'They are lovely,' said Dorothea, slipping the ring and bracelet on her fine-turned finger and wrist, and holding them toward the window on a level with her eyes. All the while her thought was trying to justify her delight in the colours by merging them in her mystic religious joy.<sup>1</sup>

The George Eliot who is writing here is quite different from the novelist who created Maggie Tulliver in The Mill on the Floss. The imaginative energy of Maggie is still obviously evident in Dorothea, but at least Dorothea is going to be allowed to appreciate through experience instead of simply rationalizing what beauty can be. Maggie Tulliver, for the purpose of Eliot's then less mature vision, had to be poor and materialistically undefiled; whereas, in Dorothea, Eliot is able to create a Dorothea of independent wealth whose sense of moral

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp.35-36.

justice is just as keen as that of her former heroine and who, like Maggie, remains imaginatively unfettered by the world about her. The symbolic poverty is no longer necessary but the basic philosophy has remained unchanged. Eliot, as is evident in the above passage, can now be critical of her prized character where she could not be previously. Dorothea is trying to "justify her delight" in the jewels as though their own attraction were not enough. Furthermore, she finds that she can mitigate her admiration by transforming her admiration for them into a "mystic religious joy", suspicious that the mere physical qualities of the emeralds are not enough to inspire awe.

In the same chapter the reader learns that:

Most men thought her bewitching when she was on horseback. She loved the fresh air and the various aspects of the country, and when her eyes and cheeks glowed with mingled pleasure she looked very little like a devotee. Riding was an indulgence which she allowed herself in spite of conscientious qualms; she felt that she enjoyed it in a pagan sensuous way, and always looked forward to renouncing it.<sup>1</sup>

and in the very next chapter Dorothea tells Sir James Chettam that she shall not ride anymore, to everyone's dismay. It is her sister's curt, precise and almost rude response to Dorothea's announcement that best represents the reader's response at this point in the novel: "She likes giving up."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.32

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.41.

Dorothea's nature is not a materialistically extravagant one, a quality which is obviously admirable, but she is not yet mature enough to trust the physical realities and the experiences of those realities which one must go through to understand one's place in the universe. Instead of discriminating among the worldly pleasures she disposes of them all in one instant, intent on remaining in a more real but precariously rarefied world. She does not yet know the difference between living life and idealizing it, between imagining a better world and actualizing her imagination. Her attitudes towards becoming Casaubon's wife and dutifully helping him with his work clearly demonstrate this:

. . . Dorothea said to herself that Mr. Casaubon was the most interesting man she had ever seen, not excepting Monsieur Liret, the Vaudois clergyman who had given conferences on the history of the Waldenses. To reconstruct a past world, doubtless with a view to the highest purposes of truth -- what a work to be in any way present at, to assist in, though only as a lamp-holder! This elevating thought lifted her above her annoyance at being twitted at her ignorance of political economy, that never-explained science which<sup>1</sup> was thrust as an extinguisher over all her lights.

This passage exudes Eliot's characteristically ironic tone. There is no real significance in reconstructing a past world unless it in some way links up with the movement of present or future time, and it is quite clear that this is not what Casaubon is doing. One need only

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.40.

consider Eliot's concept of time in her earlier works to realize how far Casaubon lies outside her vision, Eliot saw each man as he stands in his present state as being the result of the past coupled with the potentialities which could be realized in his future life. Adam Bede's references to his "roots", to all peoples' "roots", is a call for each person to understand himself and who he is -- and not to be ashamed of himself. Time is not static and if used well will result in an accretion of experience. The moral or humanistic person will be able to overcome the results of his bad decisions and learn how to live with and yet beyond them, instead of in spite of them. After Maggie temporarily elopes with Stephen Guest and has returned to St. Ogg's she must come to that point of awareness where she accepts her past and transforms it into that kind of experience which brings strength and wisdom. Silas Marner, who severed all relations with his past when he came to Raveloe, began to lead a life there which, to borrow T. S. Eliot's phrase, was "living and partly living." It was only through his relationship with the child, Eppie, and his final acceptance of the realities of his past that Marner was able to constructively enjoy a full life, and become trustful of time and experience.

Casaubon's life project, to find the Key to All Mythologies, which will illuminate a past but will in no manner be organically connected with a present or a future,



would also place him among the "partly living". Dorothea's admiration for his work suggests that she too has not yet learned the true significance of time and experience, and that she must either come to an awareness of both or become like Casaubon, an alienated creature beyond humanity and not of it. But Eliot indicates that since Dorothea is young and her contact with the world limited, it has been left to her imagination and emotions to expand her little world as well as they could. Of the philosophy behind Casaubon's work the reader is told:

Dorothea was altogether captivated by the wide embrace of this conception. Here was something beyond the shallows of ladies'-school literature: here was a living Bossuet, whose work would reconcile complete knowledge with devoted piety; here was a modern Augustine who united the glories of doctor and saint.<sup>1</sup>

It is Dorothea's enthusiasm for knowledge which attracts her to Casaubon, and she is yet too ignorant of the world, too self-centred -- a trait which Eliot seems to indicate is characteristic of youth -- and too fantastically idealistic to understand the realities of true life. When Dorothea is considering what marriage to Casaubon would be like, Eliot writes that Dorothea's

notions about marriage took their colour entirely from an exalted enthusiasm about the ends of life,

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.47.

an enthusiasm which was lit chiefly by its own fire, and included neither the niceties of the trousseau, the pattern of the plate, nor even the honours and sweet joys of the blooming matron.<sup>1</sup>

Dorothea has not yet learned to depend upon the inspiration of the universe to spur her imagination. She, herself, is, to too great an extent, her foremost reference point, and in terms of Eliot's vision of the sympathetic imagination, that imagination in tune with the needs and motions of the universe, Dorothea is yet an unknowing novice. If the reader considers Dorothea's reasons for wanting to marry Casaubon, he will see how sharp Eliot's perception of Dorothea's ignorance actually is:

'I should learn everything then,' she said to herself, . . . 'It would be my duty to study that I might help him the better in his great work. There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday things with us would mean the greatest things. It would be like marrying Pascal. I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by. And then I should know what to do, when I got older: I should see how it was possible to lead a grand life here -- now -- in England. I don't feel sure about doing good in any way now: everything seems like going on a mission to a people whose language I don't know; unless it were building good cottages -- there can be no doubt about that. Oh, I hope I should be able to get the people well housed in Lowick! I will draw plenty of plans while I have time.'<sup>2</sup>

One need only count the "I's" in this passage and notice the use of similes to get an idea of the energy behind

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.50.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.51.

Dorothea's ambition. She is overwhelmed by the possibilities life might open to her and which she might open for others. It is through time and experience that she will shed this self-absorption to recognize other people's subjectivity as well as her own. Dorothea expects life with Casaubon to be a succession of high points where "nothing trivial" can enter, where she will share that exalted sense of awareness enjoyed by superior minds. In his letter of proposal to Dorothea, Casaubon writes of his work being "unsuited, I am aware to the commoner order of minds."<sup>1</sup> What both Casaubon and Dorothea are here guilty of is something far worse than mere snobbery. They both castrate life by depriving it of its physical and spontaneous reality. Dorothea's realization of her admiration for the emeralds, her ~~prose~~ sacrifice of horseback riding, because she felt pagan in this pleasure, are only earlier examples of this.

Casaubon's proposal to Dorothea speaks of affection only once in the whole letter, and even then he undercuts the whole notion of love by speaking of it in quantitative terms, offering her an "affection hitherto unwasted". He then offers to share with her

the faithful consecration of a life which, however short in the sequel, has no backward pages whereon, if you choose to turn them, you will find records such as might justly cause you bitterness or shame.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.66.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.67.

Casaubon does not offer her a future life, but rather the history of a past. He has made a "consecration" of his days in which he asks Dorothea to share. This lack of physical vitality and emotional warmth is rather startling to all except Dorothea. She is attracted to this dedication where one is sequestered from the banalities of life and elevated to the altars of what Tennyson in In Memoriam called the "cold baptismal font". Her response to his letter is an important one, and Eliot's immediate comment upon it seems to emphasize the significance of it, as well as the tragedy:

Dorothea trembled while she read this letter; then she fell on her knees, buried her face and sobbed. She could not pray under the rush of solemn emotion in which thoughts became vague and images floated uncertainly, she could but cast herself, with a childlike sense of reclining in the lap of a divine consciousness which sustained her own. . . .

How could it occur to her to examine the letter, to look at it critically as a profession of love? Her whole soul was possessed by the fact that a fuller life was opening before her: she was a neophyte about to enter on a higher grade of initiation. She was going to have room for the energies which stirred uneasily under the dimness and pressure of her own ignorance and the petty emptoriness of the world's habits.<sup>1</sup>

The effect of these lines is superb. The reader is made to sense Dorothea's absurd yet admirable approach to life, her untainted idealism and her ability to want to give herself totally to another person. The suggestion is that she is young, and here is the first chance that has ever

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.67.

been offered to her in which she feels that she will be able to actually live the vision she has always enjoyed in her mind. Eliot adds that now Dorothea felt that her "inclination" could become "resolutions", the world was to be opened for her by this intelligent, articulate and understanding man who seemed to know the deepest nature of all her thoughts. This is not love, but Dorothea felt that Casaubon was offering her the kind of intellectual freedom which had never been granted to her before this. The reader cannot blame Dorothea for accepting Casaubon's hand. Through Eliot's understanding of the predicament of her heroine, the reader is made to see the inevitable logic of Dorothea's choice, but at the same time Eliot clearly reveals that Dorothea brings the tragedy of her marriage upon herself -- and, to be more precise, in spite of herself:

. . . she had not reached that point of renunciation at which she would have been satisfied with having a wise husband; she wished, poor child, to be wise herself. Miss Brooke was certainly very naive with all her alleged cleverness.<sup>1</sup>

And Dorothea does prove to be naive, especially once the reader sees her married to Mr. Casaubon. If Dorothea cannot, at least, recognize the illusions of her life, Casaubon has come to know his only too well. His tragedy is never having been able to begin anew, to courageously discard the emptiness of his life's work and seek a more fulfilling one. For Casaubon half realizes the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.88.

inanity of his lifetime project and has forced himself into leading a life which scorns its own reasons for existing:

Mr. Casaubon had many scruples: he was capable of a severe self-restraint; he was resolute in being a man of honour according to the code; he would be unimpeachable by any recognized opinion. In conduct these ends had been attained; but the difficulty of making his Key to all Mythologies unimpeachable weighed like lead upon his mind; and the pamphlets -- or 'Paraerga' as he called them -- by which he tested his public and deposited small monumental records of his march, were far from having been seen in all their significance. He suspected the Arch-deacon of not having read them; he was in painful doubt as to what was really thought of them by the leading minds of Brasenose, and bitterly convinced that his old acquaintance Carp had been the writer of that depreciatory recension which was kept locked in a small drawer of Mr. Casaubon's desk, and also in a dark closet of his verbal memory. These were heavy impressions to struggle against, and brought that melancholy embitterment which is the consequence of all excessive claim: even his religious faith wavered with his wavering trust in his own authorship, and the consolations of the Christian hope in immortality seemed to lean on the immortality of the still unwritten Key to all Mythologies.<sup>1</sup>

Dorothea is unknowingly marrying a man whose intimate thoughts are constantly being plagued by obsessive suspicions of his own futility and purposelessness. She mistakes his attempts (and in many ways Eliot sympathetically describes these attempts as being somewhat heroic) at externally reinforcing the speculated interest of his work as being confidence in the value of his project. His disciplined life, his rigid sense of duty, his formalities

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp.313-314.

are all masks behind which he conceals the chaotic and miserable state of his Key to all Mythologies. It is this which Dorothea at first fails to recognize in Casaubon, and when she does so it is too late.

The nature of Casaubon's failure is of paramount importance in the novel and expresses a concept fundamental to Eliot's vision. Casaubon could collect his little tid-bits of information for his Key to all Mythologies. He could shuffle about his notes and classify them, but he was in no way able to conceive of them as a whole. Casaubon had none of the imagination of the artist or scientist in him by which he might have been able to synthesize his work into some sort of unified creation. He lacks the unifying capacity by which his dead, scattered details of mythology might become organic and whole. He is an analyst, a scholar, but he is no poet. This concept of the artist and the person who is imaginatively aware of the world about him as a great synthesizer is an important one in Victorian literature. In Sartor Resartus, Carlyle informs the reader that he received the biography of Professor Teufelsdröckh on scraps of paper randomly thrown into six paper bags. Out of these tiny papers he was able to organize and write Sartor Resartus. In The Ring and The Book (1868-69), Browning takes twelve different monologues, all views of the same story, and fuses them into what might be called

a lyrical-poem-novel. In the first monologue the artist himself is speaking, and he compares his art to the making of a gold ring. First one renders the gold malleable by working it with a hammer, then the

trick is, the artificer melts up wax  
With honey, so to speak; he mingles gold  
With gold's alloy, and, duly tempering both,  
Effects a manageable mass, then works.  
But his work ended, once the thing a ring,  
Oh, there's repristination! Just a spirt  
O' the proper fiery acid o'er its face  
And forth the alloy unfastened flies in fume;  
While, self-sufficient now, the shape remains,  
The rondure brave, the lillied loveliness  
Gold as it was, is, shall be evermore:  
Primenature with an added artistry --  
No carat lost, and you have gained a ring.<sup>1</sup>

The Victorians felt that fact could be brought to life through artistic imagination. It is one of the fundamental principles of Tennyson's poetry, and one sees how he was able to create the greatest poem of the Victorian era, In Memoriam, by fusing together over a hundred separate lyrical poems. Casaubon is incapable of such a feat and for this reason his Key to all Mythologies is never really born.

The inexperienced Dorothea too suffers somewhat from such a shortcoming. Her distrust of the spontaneous or the sensuous, her continual rationalization of all her emotions are symptoms of this. But Eliot is careful to make it quite clear that Dorothea suffers from an insensitivity to her own imagination rather than from a lack of

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<sup>1</sup> R. Browning, The Ring and The Book, (Harmondsworth, 1971), Bk.1, ll.18-30.



one. If Dorothea had been more attentive to her own sense of spontaneity and less inclined to intellectualize her emotions her tragedy would have been less severe. When Dorothea and Casaubon visit Rome, Eliot says that Dorothea lacked "the quickening power of a knowledge which breathes a growing soul into all historic shapes, and traces out the suppressed transitions which unite all contrast."<sup>1</sup> Eliot further explains that Dorothea is

a girl whose ardent nature turned all her small allowance of knowledge into principles, fusing her actions into their mould, and whose quick emotions gave the most ardent things the quality of a pleasure or a pain; . . . Ruins and basilicas, palaces and colossi, set in the midst of a sordid present, where all that was living and warm-blooded seemed sunk in the deep degeneracy of a superstition divorced from reverence; the dimmer yet eager Titanic life gazing and struggling on walls and ceilings; the long vistas of white forms whose marble eyes seemed to hold the monotonous light of an alien world: all this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual, mixed confusedly with the signs of breathing forgetfulness and degradation, at first jarred her as with an electric shock, and then urged themselves on her with that ache belonging to a glut of confused ideas which check the flow of emotion.<sup>2</sup>

At this point in her moral evolution Dorothea is only able to sense that the glory of Rome is past; that it had been corrupt and had failed. Her imagination cannot recreate Rome's splendour or envision the spirit in which it was built and so artistically wrought. She knows that it was

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<sup>1</sup> Middlemarch, p.225.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.225.

once glorious, but she cannot imagine it being so. In contrast to this, in the very next chapter, Eliot brings Ladislav once again into the novel. The reader had only caught a glimpse of him once before, but it was a vivid one and Will is no stranger. His understanding of art, of man's ability to create, is a welcome relief from Dorothea's ignorance. One senses that Will is at one with his own identity, whereas Dorothea is not yet at one with hers. Compared to Dorothea's experience of Rome, Eliot tells the reader that "Rome had given him a new sense of history as a whole; the fragments stimulated his imagination and made him constructive."<sup>1</sup>

When the reader initially meets Will Ladislav he is painting in the gardens at Lowick where his cousin, Casaubon, resides. His lively presence provides a significant contrast to the funereal estate over which Casaubon reigns. But although one is immediately attracted to Ladislav one is also reluctant to pass judgement upon his character. The reader learns that Will has no vocation and but for the generosity of Casaubon would not be able to live as self-indulgently as he does. The picture one receives of this young man is too alien to Eliot's conception of the importance of duty and a vocation to be altogether favourable, and yet immediately in the next chapter Eliot

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.244.

herself steps in to retaliate against the reader's distrust and to paint a more complete picture of Will and his ambitions. The reader learns that not only is Will unable to get his mind upon a vocation but also that he is now travelling to the Continent and had

declined to fix on any <sup>more</sup> precise destination than the entire area of Europe. Genius, he held, is necessarily intolerant of fetters: on the one hand it must have the utmost play for its spontaneity; on the other, it may confidently await those messages from the universe which summon it to its particular work, only placing itself in an attitude of receptivity towards all sublime chances. . . . The superadded circumstance which would evolve the genius had not yet come; the universe had not yet beckoned. . . . We know what a masquerade all development is, and what effective shapes may be disguised in helpless embryos. -- In fact, the world is full of hopeful analogies and handsome dubious eggs called possibilities. Will saw clearly enough the pitiable instances of long incubation producing no chick, and but for gratitude would have laughed at Casaubon, whose plodding application, rows of note-books, and small taper of learned theory exploring the tossed ruins of the world, seemed to enforce a moral entirely encouraging to Will's generous reliance on the intentions of the universe with regard to himself. He held that reliance to be a mark of genius; and certainly it is no mark to the contrary; genius consisting neither in self-conceit nor in humility, but in a power to make or do, not anything in general but something in particular.<sup>1</sup>

Critics have unanimously agreed that Eliot's portrayal of Will Ladislav is a rather unconvincing one which greatly undermines the power of the ending of the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 109-110.

novel and leaves the reader unsatisfied as to the fate of Dorothea. As strange as this may appear to be at first I would like to suggest that Eliot intended the reader to be dissatisfied with Dorothea's marriage to Will and that this disappointment is an important aspect of what Eliot is trying to express in Middlemarch. But it is first necessary to discuss the apparent unreality which the figure of Will seems to inspire in the reader.

The major reason that one is unable to accept Will as a valid character is, I think, an amusing one. Will Ladislaw is the first English male figure that Eliot portrays whom the reader is not asked to either sympathize with or scorn. In terms of physical beauty Will embodies all the previous male characters like Sir James Chettam who were handsome but male chauvinists, who could not conceive of the intelligence or autonomy of a woman or who patronized woman instead of recognizing her capabilities. One might think of Stephen Guest or Arthur Donnithorne, attractive characters in themselves but unsuitable for any woman who was at all socially aware of her capabilities and wished to be independent. In Adam Bede the reader was asked to "understand" why Adam should be attracted to such a girl as Hetty Sorel and one was constantly made to see that he would eventually grow out of such an attraction. Felix Holt is an inflexible, unrealistic, awkward mouth-piece who for three-quarters of the book appears to have been conceived of in marble, not in the flesh. Amos Barton

was an inarticulate and a sloppy character whom the reader is constantly asked to feel sympathy for; Mr. Gilfil was a passive, sober lover who was unable to gain the passion of the young Caterina and finally, in the most benign portrayal of a hero previous to Will Ladislaw, Eliot had to make Philip Wakem a lonely cripple. Consequently the reader finds it difficult to accept Will Ladislaw without qualification. Ironically one would be more content with him if he had a fault of some sort, if one could sympathize with him in some respect, sympathy being the essential aspect of Eliot's philosophy. Even with Dorothea the reader is asked to take into consideration her youth, her inexperience, her romantic nature. But in Will, Eliot presents a character who possesses an understanding<sup>of the universe</sup> as soon as he is introduced; who realizes that one's life must be related to "the intentions of the universe"; who is able to recognize not only the folly of Casaubon but the uniqueness of Dorothea. It is difficult not to distrust him. And yet he does not seem to change but rather to become a more positive figure as the novel progresses.

But Will does change, although in a much subtler manner than the other characters in the novel. He moves from being a person who has<sup>a partial</sup> knowledge of the significance of the ego and the universe, to one who is able to act according to this knowledge. The Will who is portrayed with Naumann discussing theories of art and searching for

suitable models for painting is different from the Will who helps Mr. Brooke with the Pioneer and who advises the latter in his dabble into politics. And Will too, like Dorothea, has to temper his ideals in order to fit into society. Of his work with Mr. Brooke the reader is told:

Ladislaw had now accepted his bit of work, though it was not that indeterminate loftiest thing which he had once dreamed of as alone worthy of continuous effort. His nature warmed easily in the presence of subjects which were visibly mixed with life and action, and the easily-stirred rebellion in him helped the glow of public spirit. In spite of Mr. Casaubon and the banishment from Lowick, he was rather happy; getting a great deal of fresh knowledge in a vivid way and for practical purposes, and making the Pioneer celebrated as far as Brassing (never mind the smallness of the area; the writing was not worse than much that reaches the four corners of the earth.)<sup>1</sup>

Will is attempting to find a position worth his taking while at the same time trying to remain close to Dorothea. But since his love for Dorothea is more powerful than his desire for a vocation, one tends to remember him more often resting languidly on the floor of the Lydgates' than retreating from Middlemarch to take up a position as a journalist in other districts. Eliot might better have defined Will's story so that there would be a balance between his sense of duty and his love for Dorothea, but this is not what she had in mind. Eliot wished to stress the aspect of love in Dorothea's and Will's relationship because love was so apparently and tragically lacking in Dorothea's first marriage.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.501.

In Lowick gardens, where they first met, Will was immediately impressed by the lyrical quality of Dorothea's voice, which reminded him of an aeolian harp. There is no mention here of her ability to file papers or read Hebrew. The reader is made to sense that the affection growing between Will and Dorothea has room for spontaneity and imagination:

. . . Will Ladislaw always seemed to see more in what she [Dorothea] said than she herself saw. Dorothea had little vanity, but she had the ardent woman's need to rule beneficently by making the joy of another soul. Hence the mere chance of seeing Will occasionally was like a lunette opened in the wall of her prison, giving her a glimpse of the sunny air; and this pleasure began to nullify her original alarm at what her husband might think about the introduction of Will as her uncle's guest.<sup>1</sup>

In chapter lvxxx, in a most powerful and vivid manner, Eliot brings to a crisis not only the relationship between Will and Dorothea, but also the climax of Dorothea's evolution as a loving human being. Dorothea had called upon Rosamond Lydgate to offer her encouragement concerning the unfortunate affairs which Dr. Lydgate had found himself in, only seemingly to discover in confirmation of her fears, that Rosamond and Will were lovers. Within the novel it is the first moment of Dorothea's life in which she is not able to rationalize her passion. And Eliot makes it clear that it is not her anguish at this scandal which so violently upsets Dorothea, but rather it is her jealousy which

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.396.

is inflamed by the idea that Will could choose Rosamond over herself:

. . . Why had he come obtruding his life into hers, hers that might have been whole enough without him? Why had he brought his cheap regard and his lip-born words to her who had nothing paltry to give in exchange? He knew that he was deluding her -- wished, in the very moment of farewell, to make her believe that he gave her the whole price of her heart, and knew that he had spent it half before. Why had he not stayed among the crowd of whom she asked nothing but only prayed that they might be less contemptible?<sup>1</sup>

In her despair, Dorothea adopts the same quantitative attitude towards love that Mr. Casaubon had displayed in proposing to her. Dorothea's cry, "Oh, I did love him" marks, without her knowing it, the maturation of her emotions. Where she could offer Casaubon duty, loyalty and companionship, she was able to offer Will all these crowned by love. And with this maturation of emotions comes the final development of her thoughts. After crying herself to sleep she awakes the next morning:

. . . with the clearest consciousness that she was looking into the eyes of sorrow. . . she had waked to a new condition: she felt as if her soul had been liberated from its terrible conflict; she was no longer wrestling with her grief, but could sit down with it as a lasting companion and make it a sharer in her thoughts.<sup>2</sup>

What Dorothea is experiencing is that transcendence of the ego which is the most traumatic step in Eliot's vision of human struggle. Unlike Casaubon, Dorothea cannot allow

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.845.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.845.



her jealousy to defeat her ideals. She had gone to the Lydgates to offer them assistance in their time of need and she awoke on this significant morning more determined than ever to carry out her intentions: "this vivid sympathetic experience returned to her now as a power: it asserted itself as acquired knowledge asserts itself and will not let us see as we saw in the day of our ignorance."<sup>1</sup> And the day of Dorothea's ignorance was truly over. She finally realized that it was she who sympathetically had a place in the universe and not the universe that existed for her;

. . . The objects of her rescue were not to be sought out by her fancy: they were chosen for her. She yearned towards the perfect right that it might make a throne within her, and rule her errant will. 'What should I do --how should I act now this very day if I could clutch my own pain and compel it to silence, and think of those three!'<sup>2</sup>

Dorothea's imagination is able to leap the confines of her needs and trials and embrace the sufferings of those about her. Eliot describes Dorothea's new sense of awareness in terms of rebirth, of a

light piercing into the room. She opened her curtains, and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view with fields beyond, outside the entrance-gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the fields she could see figures moving -- perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light: and she felt the largeness of the world and the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.846

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.846

manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance: she was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining.<sup>1</sup>

It is not a supernatural figure which prompts Dorothea to awareness of her kinship to man, but rather an archetypal man carrying on his back his own little affairs who reminds her of her relationship to the universe and the role she enjoys in it. When later Dorothea and Will are finally brought together their relationship is one of love and meant to inspire the development of love, the spontaneity and joy of which were sadly lacking in her first marriage.

George Eliot did not expect her readers to be satisfied and overjoyed with Dorothea's marriage to Will. Indeed, she indicates in the novel that this is not the ideal marriage for Dorothea, although of all the prospects offered to Dorothea it is the best. When Henry James grunts that "'Dorothea was altogether too superb a heroine to be wasted; yet she plays a narrower part than the imagination of the reader demands"<sup>2</sup> he is ironically making a valid complaint for the wrong reason. It is not Eliot who snubs Dorothea's imagination and growth, but rather the society in which Dorothea exists. The societies of the early part of the nineteenth century represented by Middlemarch were

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.846.

<sup>2</sup> Swinden, p.63.

not yet receptive to those secular "Dorotheas" whose ideals and energies were not to be channeled into the operations of a convent or other organized institutions of that kind. Those who feel that Dorothea should have been allowed by her author to soar above the commoner aspects of her society and to devote herself to some greater life than simply being the wife of Will Ladislaw and the mother of his children, performing the little, though not insignificant, acts of charity for the sick and needy, fail to understand what Eliot had been trying to express throughout the novel:

. . .for these later-born Theresas were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul. Their ardour alternated between a vague ideal and the common yearning of womanhood: so that the one was disapproved as extravagance, and the other condemned as a lapse.

Some have felt that these blundering lives are due to the inconvenient indefiniteness with which the Supreme Power has fashioned the natures of woman: if there was one level of feminine incompetence as strict as the ability to count three and no more, the social lot of woman might be treated with scientific certitude. Meanwhile the indefiniteness remains, and the limits of variation are really much wider than any one would imagine from the favorite love-stories in prose and verse. Here and there a cygnet is reared uneasily among the ducklings in the brown pond, and never finds the living stream in fellowship with its oary-footed kind. Here and there is born a Saint Theresa foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centering in some long-recognized deed.<sup>1</sup>

In her "Prelude" to the novel Eliot explicitly states

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp.25-26.

that Dorothea's ambitions will be "unattained" and "dispersed among hindrances". One might consider that she answered her own criticisms before even beginning her novel. The reader must not expect a beautiful success story of the cygnet among the ducklings here, but rather a stifling of any anticipated success story though not necessarily of the beauty of it. The frustration one feels at the end of Middlemarch concerning the potentialities of Dorothea that will remain unrealized is intentional, and once again supports the view that Dorothea is not Eliot's only interest in the novel. Eliot wished clearly to depict the fact that Dorothea was a special person, but more than this she wished to describe those forces in society which dwarf the development of people such as Dorothea, to the disappointment not only of the individual concerned but unfortunately also of the society that will never be able to reap a Dorothea's benefits.

The experiences of Dorothea provide a screen in front of which, and also with which, the spectacle of Middlemarch society can take its course. Through Dorothea, Eliot is able to instill into the various plots a greater movement -- that movement from simply accepting duty to accepting love and duty. It is a natural step and perhaps not necessarily a great one, but Dorothea had to suffer in this spiritual advancement, and by her sufferings the reader is made to appreciate the trials and spiritual ordeals of the

other characters in Middlemarch. In developing the Dorothea-Casaubon-Ladislaw plot Eliot controls the themes of the novel. The reader will find that the characters in Middlemarch are all men and women who are either in the process of learning to transcend their egoism, or have already learned to do this, or who will never be able to live sympathetically with the universe. Eliot describes Dorothea's development step by step, and by doing so creates a thematic model by which one can understand what the other characters in Middlemarch are struggling for or against.

The problem still remains of how Eliot was able to create in Middlemarch a morally and aesthetically satisfying work. The reader, like James, might be irritated by the abortive treatment which Dorothea's career is subject to, and yet one cannot but appreciate the novel as a whole. There has to be an element in the novel which really carries the spiritual weight of the work and which at the end of the work achieves fulfillment. It is through the marriage of Fred Vincy and Mary Garth that Eliot is able to project within the novel the sense that something valid and good has been accomplished in Middlemarch. Unlike Will Ladislav, Fred does search and finds a vocation. Unlike Dorothea, Mary's eyes are always open and sensitive to the man she loves.

The story of Fred and Mary is not presented on the

same scale as Dorothea's and Will's, or even Maggie Tulliver's and her intended husband, Philip Wakem's. Instead it can be compared more appropriately to the union of Adam Bede and Dinah Morris -- there is nothing supernatural about it, but the basis of the relationship is solid and we sense that it will endure.

Like Dorothea, Fred has to learn to overcome the burden of his own ego before he is able to see the world with clear and realistic eyes. At the start of the novel the reader is told that Fred expected much in the way of a legacy from Peter Featherstone. He was quite oblivious to the hints that Mr. Featherstone gave about the true nature of his will; and Eliot does not conceal that what kept him from being checked by these hints was his own vanity:

Fred fancied that he saw to the bottom of his uncle Featherstone's soul, though in reality half what he saw there was no more than the reflex of his own inclinations. The difficult task of knowing another soul is not for young gentlemen whose consciousness is chiefly made up of their own wishes.<sup>1</sup>

Having been educated for the Church, Fred realizes that he would not be able to put his soul into his work. Mary had forbidden him to enter the service of the Church, knowing that any reasons for doing so would be escapist and hypocritical on Fred's part. It is finally with the help of

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

Mary's father, Caleb Garth, that Fred is able to find work, constructive and suitable to his nature.

Caleb Garth is, as David Daiches has argued in his study of Middlemarch, one of the fixed moral centres of the novel. Within the novel he is certainly the person portrayed in the most completely idealized terms. There is a touch of comedy in Eliot's treatment of Garth. He is so good and so innocent that Eliot almost presents him as a person incapable of evil. This would remain true but for three reasons which make Garth a realistic character and one whose personality is totally rounded. The first is that Caleb's nature is firmly shaped by his family. Mrs. Garth's intelligent and keen eye, quick to spot laziness on anyone's part, especially Fred's, plus her acute sense of intuition -- she is the first to notice Mr. Farebrother's fondness for Mary -- make her a lively counterpart to her husband's quiet and predictable ways. Mary Garth, whose tongue "was inclined to sarcasm and to impulsive sallies",<sup>1</sup> represents that member of Caleb Garth's family in whom intelligence has kept deliberate control over the vanities and ambitions, and who is content with knowing what her work is and in doing it well. As one critic has phrased it, "Standing apart from the other characters is Mary Garth, whose very definite reality throughout the novel springs

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.274.

ultimately from her unique refusal to refashion the world according to her wishes"<sup>1</sup> This cannot be validly said of Dorothea.

With the rise of the industrial revolution the family unit had begun to disintegrate. Industry replaced the hearth and there was no longer a source for the morals and ethics which people had preserved through the family. Most of the scenes in which Caleb Garth and his family are presented represent domestic concerns separate from the capitalistic society then developing.

The second reason why Caleb Garth never becomes an insipid and predictable character is that he embodies so vitally the whole import of Eliot's philosophy. He says to Fred on the day he asks him to come work for him:

"You must be sure of two things: you must love your work, and not be always looking over the edge of it, wanting your play to begin. And the other is, you must not be ashamed of your work, and think it would be more honourable to you to be doing something else. You must have a pride in your own work and in learning to do it well, and not to be always saying, There's this and there's that -- if I had this or that to do, I might make something of it. No matter what a man is -- I wouldn't give two pence for him" -- here Caleb's mouth looked bitter, and he snapped his finger -- "whether he was the prime-minister or the rick-thatcher, if he didn't do well what he undertook to do."<sup>2</sup>

Blake's threats about the industrial revolution

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<sup>1</sup> David K. Carroll, "Unity through Analogy: An Interpretation of Middlemarch", Victorian Studies, Vol. 11, no.4 (June 1959),

<sup>2</sup> Middlemarch, p.606.



had by the 1800's proved to be true in England. Increasingly industry placed less stress on pride and more emphasis upon mass production of questionable quality. Applying Carlyle's conception of work -- work and pride in one's work being essential to the soul of man -- Eliot depicted in Caleb Garth a workman whose honourable sense of craftsmanship was rapidly disappearing in an industrial age. Caleb is an old, independent workman who accepts all kinds of jobs instead of being a narrow specialist as Casaubon was. His greatest dream is to complete everything that goes into the building of something. The emphasis here is on synthesis, which Casaubon fatally lacked and which Dorothea and Fred have to suffer to learn.

Finally, in Caleb Garth, Eliot expresses not only her ideal philosophy concerning work, but on a higher level she develops Garth's vocation into a religion of work, of experience which completes her vision:

Caleb Garth shook his head in meditation on the value, the indispensable might of that myriad-headed, myriad-handed labour by which the social body was fed, clothed, and housed. It had laid hold of his imagination in boyhood. The echoes of the great hammer where roof or keel were a-making, the signal-shouts of the workmen; the roar of the furnace, the thunder and plash of the engine, were a sublime music to him, the felling and lading of the timber, and the huge trunk vibrating star-like in the distance along the highway, the crane at work on the wharf, the piled up produce in warehouses, the precision and variety of muscular effort wherever exact labour had to be turned out, -- all these sights of his youth had acted upon him as poetry without the aid

of the poets, had made a philosophy for him without the aid of philosophers, a religion without the aid of theology. . . .

His classification of human employment was rather crude, and, like the categories of more celebrated men, would not be acceptable in these advanced times. He divided them into 'business, politics, preaching, learning, and amusement.' He had nothing to say against the last four; but he regarded them as a reverential pagan regarded gods other than his own. . . . Though he never regarded himself as other than an orthodox Christian, and would agree on convenient grace if the subject were proposed to him, I think his virtual divinities were good practical schemes, accurate work, and the faithful completion of undertakings: his prince of darkness was a slack workman.<sup>1</sup>

Caleb Garth's work relates to everyone in Middlemarch.

His work is necessary and concerns every member of society.

Dorothea's plans for better housing for her uncle's tenants come to nothing. She is fascinated by theory as much as by the actual completion of her intentions. Garth would shun such an attitude. When Fred informs his father that he is determined to go to work for Mr. Garth, a rather revealing conversation ensues:

'So you've made up your mind at last, sir?'

'Yes, father.'

'Very well; stick to it. I've got no more to say. You've thrown away your education, and gone a step down in life, when I had given you means of rising, that's all.'

'I am very sorry that we differ, father. I think I can be quite as much of a gentleman at the work I have undertaken, as if I had been a curate. But I am grateful to you for wishing to do the best for me.'

'Very well; I have no more to say. I wash my hands of you. I can only hope, when you have a son

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.283.

of your own he will make a better return for the pains you spend upon him.'

This was very cutting to Fred. His father was using that unfair advantage possessed by us all when we are in a pathetic situation and see our own past as if it were simply part of the pathos. In reality, Mr Vincy's wishes about his son had had a great deal of pride, inconsideration, and egoistic folly in them.<sup>1</sup>

Thackeray would have smiled knowingly at this passage. He had depicted much the same theme in the relationship between Mr. Osborne and his son, George, in Vanity Fair. Like Mr. Osborne, Mr. Vincy is more interested in being a father than in acting as one. Caleb Garth knows that the title of "father" is insignificant, that it is the actual deeds of being one that prove whether one is a true father or not. When Fred realizes that Garth is willing to have him come to work for him, he is both overwhelmed and ashamed at having to accept this favor at a time when he already owes so much to the man. Caleb's response is, "...my boy, you have a claim;' said Caleb, with much feeling in his voice. 'The young ones always have a claim on the old to help them forward.'<sup>2</sup> and later after telling his wife that "The children are fond of each other -- I mean Fred and Mary" he announces that he is:

determined to take him [Fred] and make a man of him. . .The lad is good at bottom, and clever

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.613.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.608.

enough to do, if he's put in the right way; and he loves and honours my daughter beyond anything and she has given him a sort of promise according to what he turns out. I say, that young man's soul is in my hand; and I'll do the best I can for him, so help me God. It's my duty, Susan.<sup>1</sup>

Caleb Garth not only has the convictions and beliefs that George Eliot so vigorously hailed, but he lives by them without bitterness or regret as no other person in Middlemarch does. Yet there is another figure who helps to shape the life<sup>of</sup> Fred and bring about the marriage between Fred and Mary and who shares the same kind of role as Caleb Garth, Mr. Farebrother.

The role which Mr. Farebrother plays in Middlemarch is one of the most important ones in the book, yet ironically Farebrother is generally overlooked by most critics of the novel. His whole life has been consistently eclipsed by materialistic wants which have led him to the small, yet much-frowned-upon, vice of petty gambling, the gains from which he is able to use to balance the expenses of his household. His family burdens consist of his mother and aunt who, much as one would like to resent their perseverance in living, if only for Mr. Farebrother's sake, are two ladies so totally charming, generous and eccentric that one cannot help but be fond of them. His sister, Winifred, who for lack of dowry was unable to marry a man suitable

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp.608-610.

to her, also counts on her brother's welfare for her sustenance. Having had to provide for himself and these three ladies for the whole of his mature life on the insignificant stipend allotted to a vicar, he has never been financially secure enough to marry in spite of the fact that he longs for marital companionship.

In terms of his vocation, if Farebrother's well-being had not been severely scorched, it was, at least, somewhat singed by his decision to enter the Church. In one of his initial interviews with Lydgate, Farebrother, much touched by the healthy enthusiasm the young doctor has for his profession, exclaims:

'Ah! you are a happy fellow,' said Mr Farebrother, turning on his heel and beginning to fill his pipe. 'You don't know what it is to want spiritual tobacco -- bad emendations of old texts, or small items about a variety Aphis brassicae, with the well-known signature of Philomicron, for the Twaddler's Magazine; or a learned treatise on the entomology of the Pentateuch, including all the insects not mentioned, but probably met with by the Israelites in their passage through the desert; with a monograph on the Ant, as treated by Solomon, showing the harmony of the Book of Proverbs with the results of modern research. You don't mind my fumigating you?'<sup>1</sup>

The reader is told that Lydgate was more shocked by the Vicar's frankness in this matter than by its implied meaning, for Farebrother makes no attempt to conceal the fact that divinity is not his natural element and that he has other interests closer to his heart. In his attempts

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.202.

to help Fred decide on a vocation, especially upon whether Fred should enter the clergy, Farebrother once again betrays his own unfavorable circumstances and the attitude he has had to adopt toward his profession:

'Have you any difficulties about doctrine -- about the Articles?' he said, trying hard to think of the question simply for Fred's sake.

'No, I suppose the Articles are all right. I am not prepared with any arguments to disprove them, and much better, cleverer fellows than I am go in for them entirely. I think it would be rather ridiculous in me to urge scruples of that sort, as if I were a judge,' said Fred, quite simply.

'I suppose, then, it has occurred to you that you might be a fair parish priest without being much of a divine?'

'Of course, if I am obliged to be a clergyman, I shall try and do my duty, though I mayn't like it. Do you think anyone ought to blame me?'

'For going into the Church under the circumstances? That depends on your conscience, Fred -- how far you have counted the cost, and seen what your position will require of you. I can only tell you about myself, that I have always been too lax, and have been uneasy in consequence.'<sup>1</sup>

Fred tells Farebrother how Mary, the woman he intends to marry, has forbidden him to enter the Church, insisting that his reasons for doing so would be far from admirable. The irony here is twofold. Farebrother too wishes to marry Mary, but even if she were able to return his love, Farebrother's attitude toward his vocation would disgust her as much as Fred's would. Farebrother realizes this and humbly refrains from telling Mary of his affection

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.556.

for her, though he does not lack the chances to do so. In his total unselfishness he even attempts to bring about as good a marriage as possible between Fred and Mary by keeping a watchful eye on the former's activities and by advising both as wisely as he can. One one occasion, finding that Fred had momentarily slipped back into his idle and frivolous ways, Farebrother sternly warns Fred that he will lose Mary if he is not careful and adds that he himself is interested in claiming Mary's heart if Fred should not prove honourable enough. The challenge which this news gives Fred inspires him to resolve to lead a life which would please Mary and her father, as well as making him aware of the noble generosity of Farebrother's nature. As to the Vicar's response to the knowledge that he will never win Mary, but instead will live to see her happily married to Fred, Eliot suggests that

Perhaps Mr Farebrother's rumination might be concentrated into one little shrug and one little speech. 'To think of the part one little woman can play in the life of a man, so that to renounce her may be a very good imitation of heroism, and to win her may be a discipline!'<sup>1</sup>

Caleb Garth and Mr. Farebrother both contribute much to making Fred's and Mary's marriage a success. Mr. Farebrother's concerns are more personal and at times less practical than

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.729.

Garth's but nevertheless he helps to strengthen Fred's youthful character and direct him towards maturity. Of course, Fred and Mary play the most important roles in creating their own happiness, yet Eliot wishes the reader to be aware of the communal effort involved in their maturing process, especially in Fred's. She stresses the need for human community and shows how one person is constantly able to help and inspire another. To be able to do this properly one must have some knowledge of oneself and understand what one's capacities and responsibilities are, both to oneself and to society. With the exception of one other person, only the elders of the Garth family and Mr. Farebrother are really aware of who they are, and only they, when the novel opens, have come to an understanding of the relationship of their life to the greater life of society. These characters provide the moral basis of the novel and help to control the moral confusions which arise within Middlemarch.

Mrs. Bulstrode is the person whom I have not until now mentioned, who despite her brief appearance in the novel becomes one of its major forces along with the Garths and Mr. Farebrother. My discussion of Mrs. Bulstrode will be limited to her importance in Middlemarch, but not including her at this point would be an even grosser injustice to Eliot's noble portrayal of this character.

Harriet Bulstrode, the sister of Mayor Vincy, had become the second wife of Nicholas Bulstrode, a wealthy



man of business whose keen, and at times fanatic, sense of religious honour had long ago earned for him the label, often resentfully given, of "moral lantern" among his associates in Middlemarch. Throughout the novel his obscure past, which Mr. Bulstrode trembles at any allusion to, begins to define itself for the society of Middlemarch through various coincidences and revelations. Mr. Bulstrode is exposed as a man whose materialistic ambitions lead him into immoral and evil dealings to gain his wealth. He protected himself psychologically from realizing the true nature of his rise to riches by believing his motives for his actions to be morally necessary for God's glory. His greatest tragedy is that for about three decades he had never admitted the true character of his life even to himself.

Eliot's description of Mr. Bulstrode's character in the novel is, I feel, her most masterful and her most morally and artistically satisfying portrait. Her sensitive and imaginative approach to the portrayal of this religious hypocrite, in which the reader is constantly aware of the vulgarity, yet the pathetic tragedy, of his life, is one of the finest features of the novel. The reader is never allowed to attend to the keenly critical voice of Eliot as she writes of Mr. Bulstrode without also feeling her profound concern for such a character. Mr. Bulstrode's hypocrisy is so sophisticated and so deeply a part of his being that it is even hidden from his own psyche. Just

as the nature of his evil is profound, so is the nature of his downfall. Eliot's account of Bulstrode's nemesis is painfully exact and is presented without direct judgement. For these reasons it is most poignant:

The quick vision that his life was after all a failure, that he was a dishonoured man, and must quail before the glance of those towards whom he had habitually assumed the attitude of a reprover -- that God had disavowed him before men and left him unscreened to the triumphant scorn of those who were glad to have their hatred justified -- the sense of utter futility in that equivocation with his conscience in dealing with the life of his accomplice, an equivocation which now turned venomously upon him with the full-grown fang of a discovered lie:-- all this rushed through him like the agony of terror which fails to kill, and leaves the ears still open to the returning wave of execration. The sudden sense of exposure after the reestablished sense of safety came -- not to the coarse organization of a criminal but -- to the susceptible nerve of a man whose intensest being lay in such mastery and predominance as the conditions of his life had shaped for him.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Bulstrode's confidence in the sincerity of her husband's moral and spiritual convictions was unquestioned. She trusted beyond a doubt the motives of all his actions, enough not to be curious about the haziness of his past life or to be suspicious of the severity of the present manner of his life, as many citizens of Middlemarch were. She only became aware of the mysteries of his actions when she began to note the emotional uneasiness which overcame

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.781.

him with each new threat that promised to reveal his past life. Unable to learn what was causing the emotional discomfort in her husband, she learns from her brother the tragedy that has beset him, and as Bulstrode's tragedy is unqualified in its severity so the love and concern that Mrs. Bulstrode holds for her husband are not arrested but confirmed. She understands realistically that her trust in him has been ignobly abused, and yet she is able to escape self-concern and go beyond the shame and pride of her own predicament to comfort her husband in his greatest time of need:

But this imperfectly-taught woman, whose phrases and habits were an old patchwork, had a loyal spirit within her. The man whose prosperity she had shared through nearly half a life, and who had unvaryingly cherished her -- now that punishment had befallen him it was not possible to her in any sense to forsake him. There is a forsaking which still sits at the same board and lies on the same couch with the forsaken goul, withering it the more by unloving proximity. She knew, when she locked her door, that she should unlock it ready to go down to her unhappy husband and espouse his sorrow, and say of his guilt, I will mourn and not reproach. But she needed time to gather up her strength; she needed to sob out her farewell to all the gladness and pride of her life. When she resolved to go down, she prepared herself by some little acts which might seem mere folly to a hard onlooker; they were her way of expressing to all spectators visible or invisible that she had begun a new life in which she embraced humiliation. She took off all her ornaments and put on a plain black gown, and instead of wearing her much-adorned cap and large bows of hair, she brushed her hair down and put on a plain bonnet-cap, which made her look suddenly like an early Methodist. . . .

It was eight o'clock in the evening before the door opened and his wife entered. He dared not look up at her. He sat with his eyes bent down,

and as she went towards him she thought he looked smaller -- he seemed so withered and shrunken. A movement of new compassion and old tenderness went through her like a great wave, and putting one hand on his which rested on the arm of the chair, and the other on his shoulder, she said solemnly but kindly --

'Look up, Nicholas.'

He raised his eyes with a little start and looked at her half amazed for a moment: her pale face, her changed, mourning dress, the trembling about the mouth, all said, 'I know'; and her hands and eyes rested gently on him. He burst out crying and they cried together, she sitting at his side. They could not yet speak to each other of the shame which she was bearing with him, or of the acts which had brought it down on them. His confession was silent, and her promise of faithfulness was silent. Open-minded as she was, she nevertheless shrank from the words which would have expressed their mutual consciousness as she would have shrunk from flakes of fire. She could not say, 'How much is only slander and false suspicion?' and he did not say, 'I am innocent'.<sup>1</sup>

The reader is, of course, reminded of how Dorothea shed her mourning clothes for her everyday apparel after her traumatic, transcendent experience:

to acknowledge that she had not the less an active life before her because she had buried a private joy; and the tradition that fresh garments belonged to all initiation, haunting her mind, made her grasp after even that slight outward help towards calm reserve. For the resolve was not easy.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Bulstrode's resolve was not easy either. She too is to begin a new initiation into life, and symbolically

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp.807-808.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.847

dresses herself to show her awareness of it. The parallels with Dorothea's transcendence of her ego are all too apparent here, and yet for significant reasons one does not feel that Eliot is being redundant nor that she is simply reiterating an already fully developed theme. Dorothea can conceivably live without Will. It is for this reason that their marriage does not make that much of an impact on the reader. When Dorothea gives up Casaubon's estate to marry Ladislaw, few will feel that it is a profound sacrifice. Casaubon's home had been depicted in the most funereal and burdensome manner from the start of the novel. Dorothea is independently wealthy. Her sacrifices are never as painful as the sacrifice that Mrs. Bulstrode makes, surrendering her exploited ego and dignity to the man responsible for her tragedy as well as for the tragedy of their family; nor is Dorothea's sacrifice necessarily as pathetic as Mr. Farebrother's, who surrendered his love to a man more youthful and handsome, though in some ways less deserving of true happiness, than himself. Dorothea will always survive. Her strength is innate and unconquerable. Unlike Farebrother or Mrs. Bulstrode, it is Dorothea herself who was her own biggest obstacle. Mrs. Bulstrode's sacrifice is one that demanded unfailing integrity in spite of quite fearful and demanding odds. She knew she was embracing sorrow and shame for the rest of her life and accepted this trial willingly. In the novel she stands out as a woman who does

find "the living stream in fellowship with [its] own oary-footed kind".<sup>1</sup> As for Dorothea, Eliot attempts to suggest not only that society, as represented by the Mr. Brookes, Sir James, Mr. Casaubons, cannot yet imagine a woman of Dorothea's nature undertaking major roles in the practical realities of the world, but also that the Dorotheas themselves are not yet ready for such ventures, although Eliot suggests they are preparing themselves; and herein lies the optimism of the novel.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.26.

### Chapter III

#### Novelist-Priest

In the writing of Middlemarch, George Eliot was able to benefit from the maturation of her artistic powers. She was, by the late 1860's, confident of her talents as a novelist and much more certain of her ability to communicate what she desired to her readers. Comparing Middlemarch with her earlier works one is most impressed with the apparent ease and calm with which Eliot was now able to write. No longer does the reader find Eliot writing from the pulpit or the lectern as she frequently did in such works as Adam Bede or Felix Holt. In Middlemarch the fruits of Eliot's experience as a novelist flourish. Instead of her great voice awkwardly descending upon the scene to reconcile some situation or establish some point, there are relatively few instances in Middlemarch where Eliot directly and blantly intervenes in the novel. Instead she displays an admirable ability to allow characters and their situations to describe and define themselves, immediately resulting in a novel which flows and progresses much more smoothly than any of her earlier works. We might again consider the opening chapter of the novel which introduces the two Brooke sisters and see how subtly revealing their meeting is. Celia is determined to own and wear some of the jewels the girls had inherited from their mother. The ornaments were in Dorothea's care and she had never once spoken about distributing them between her sister

and herself, Celia, well aware of Dorothea's aversion to jewelry or anything superficial, has obviously been patient and rather timid in bringing up the topic with her sister. But finally the jewels are arranged in front of the two young women. Dorothea eyes a necklace of purple amethysts and as she fastens it on Celia's neck the following conversation ensues:

'There, Celia! you can wear that with your Indian muslin. But this cross you must wear with your dark dresses.'

Celia was trying not to smile with pleasure.

'O Dodo, you must keep the cross yourself.'

'No, no, dear, no,' said Dorothea, putting up her hand with careless deprecation.

'Yes, indeed you must; it would suit you -- in your black dress, now,' said Celia, insistingly.

'You might wear that.'

'Not for the world, not for the world. A cross is the last thing I would wear as a trinket.' Dorothea shuddered slightly.

'Then you will think it wicked in me to wear it,' said Celia uneasily.

'No, dear, no,' said Dorothea, stroking her sister's cheek. 'Souls have complexions too: what will suit one will not suit another.'

'But you might like to keep it for mamma's sake.'

'No I have other things of mamma's -- her sandalwood box, which I am so fond of -- plenty of things. In fact, they are all yours, dear. We need discuss them no longer. There -- take away your property.'

Celia felt a little hurt. There was a strong assumption of superiority in this Puritanic toleration, hardly less trying to the blond flesh of an unenthusiastic sister than a Puritanic persecution.

'But how can I wear ornaments if you, who are the elder sister, will never wear them?'

'Nay, Celia, that is too much to ask, that I should wear trinkets to keep you in countenance. If I were to put on such a necklace as that, I should feel as if I had been pirouetting. The



world would go round me, and I should not know how to walk.<sup>1</sup>

Here Eliot permits Dorothea and Celia to uncover the faults and virtues of each other. However simple and childish Celia is, she nevertheless does not deserve the condescending tone Dorothea adopts towards her in defending her own character, and yet one is still made to detect the seriousness and sincerity in Dorothea's personality, which helps to make her self-righteousness less severe. We sense that now Eliot can smile at her characters in a way she never could previous to the writing of Middlemarch. She is much more detached in her perceptions of her characters, yet her presence is still always felt in the novel at every turn, although in a much different manner than in her earlier works. The reader may once again consider the first chapter of the novel to find an example of what Eliot's presence in Middlemarch involves, Dorothea has finally selected a few articles of jewelry which she will keep for herself. In answer to Celia's question whether or not she will 'wear them in company' Dorothea snaps: 'Perhaps. . . I cannot tell to what level I may sink.' There is an awkward silence which follows this painful remark until Dorothea kindly invites her sister to come and examine the architectural work she has been studying:

As Celia bent over the paper, Dorothea put her cheek against her sister's arm caressingly. Celia understood the action. Dorothea saw that she

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp.34-35.

had been in the wrong, and Celia pardoned her. Since they could remember, there had been a mixture of criticism and awe in the attitude of Celia's mind towards her sister. The younger had always worn the yoke; but is there any yoked creature without its private opinions?<sup>1</sup>

It is really Eliot's own words here which punctuate the chapter. The reader's attention is immediately shifted from the intimacy of the scene then being enjoyed by Dorothea and Celia to a more general consideration of the right of each one's mind to entertain its particular thoughts. Needless to say, Eliot's question here becomes one of the central concerns of the novel; the search and discovery of each character's self. Casaubon will try to 'yoke' Dorothea. The Vincy sense of pride will 'yoke' their son Fred just as Lydgate's own self-esteem and carelessness will 'yoke' himself. Of course, ultimately, it is society which 'yoke[s]' its members with its false demands and pretenses. This question of Eliot's at the end of the first chapter is perhaps just a gesture, and yet Eliot manages to imbue it with the kind of meaning and power which is the mark of a writer scrupulous with his words. I will return to a consideration of Eliot's presence in Middlemarch later in this chapter.

Eliot's conception of how to reveal the psychological awareness of her characters only really matures in Middlemarch. Previous to this she had not yet been able to totally trust her characters to develop for themselves and out of their

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.37.

situations. One can remind oneself of the first occasion in Middlemarch where Rosamond Vincy and Mary Garth meet at Peter Featherstone's house, or of any scene involving the courtship of Lydgate and Rosamond, to discover how vital, and independent of herself, Eliot has allowed her characters to become. There are probably two paramount reasons why Eliot should have felt more secure and able to write the kind of novel she did in Middlemarch at the time when she did. Eliot had finally found a subject matter and a set of characters to whom she could relate in order to effectively create the kind of novel which she wanted to produce. In my first chapter I discuss how Eliot tried to conceive of a tragic novel which involved lowly persons and the common life. She had tried in such works as Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss and Felix Holt to write such a tragedy, but was never totally successful in her attempts. She had attempted in these earlier novels to allow her characters to be mouthpieces for her philosophical speculations. But Eliot's perceptions were, on the whole, too sophisticated and acute for the common reader to have grasped them. To try to overcome this problem Eliot often decided to have those characters who were to best represent her thoughts stand apart from their peers -- in terms of education and imagination. The results were much too often artificial. Felix Holt and Maggie Tulliver ended up being too large even for life, not to mention the way in which

they unbalanced the microcosm of realism which Eliot was trying to portray in these works. As was mentioned in the first chapter, it was with her portrayal of Silas Marner that Eliot achieved her first success in terms of creating a realistic character who was naturally able to advocate her philosophy of life without too much strain. Yet in Silas Marner, Eliot portrayed a character who became too distant from the reader because of the mystical aura which seemed to surround him from his first appearance in the novel. Silas was too charming a figure, too symbolic of a certain enchanted frame of mind for the reader not to feel distant and rather puzzled with him and his life. Once Eppie had found her way into his life Silas became a more approachable person. Yet Eliot was too careless in her sentimental treatment of Silas' conversion or, perhaps rather, reversion, and Silas' life with Eppie exuded once again too much charm to be accepted realistically by the reader. By the time that Eliot wrote Middlemarch, it was not so much that the mystical element had ceased to have a possible role in life, since it definitely plays an intrinsic part in George Eliot's vision, but rather that in Middlemarch the mystical element is a part of reality, not above or beyond it.

For Middlemarch, Eliot conceived of a group of characters who had a knowledge of life or who were acquiring a knowledge of life regardless of their social class or their vocation. The reader watches as each character

finds his own way in Middlemarch society and learns to come to a moral recognition of himself and the society around him through his individual experience. Consequently, although a person like Dorothea Brooke, who is financially independent and free to pursue the kind of physical or mental activities which attract her, reaches a moral consciousness which Eliot obviously celebrates, a workman like Caleb Garth also attains a similarly valid and moral, personal philosophy of life without having delved into the academic mysteries Dorothea had been introduced to. Eliot's conception of her characters in Middlemarch is more flexible than in her earlier works. Instead of making each figure fit a moral pattern which Eliot had first envisioned, each personage is made to embody his own personality. Once the moral conception of a character and the character itself are created simultaneously, one emanating from the other, Eliot is able to depict situations and a society of people who behave more naturally and realistically than any of her earlier figures had ever done. One senses in Middlemarch that however unhappy one might be at times with Eliot's handling of plot, for the most part her characters are not tortuously contrived and controlled as such figures as Philip Wakem and Adam Bede had been. In Middlemarch characters are allowed to evolve and develop naturally as individuals and rarely exemplify that kind of unreal moral stasis which one can accuse Felix Holt or Dinah Morris of having. Eliot's

attitude in Middlemarch towards her characters also ceases to be as radical and formulaic as in her earlier works. Dorothea can like jewelry. Eliot hints at Dorothea's nonsensical attitude towards her renouncing of horseback riding simply because she enjoys it. Furthermore Dorothea enjoys an impassioned love for Will Ladislaw that Eliot would never have allowed Adam Bede to feel for Dinah Morris, or Maggie Tulliver for Philip Wakem. By Middlemarch Eliot has achieved a respect for individual personality and a tolerance for idiosyncrasies in her characters which provided for the novelist a better chance of successfully and realistically portraying the philosophical views she has been forwarding since her first works.

The second reason why Eliot is able to depend less upon her own intrusions into the novel, and become more devoted to portraying a realistic set of characters in transition coincides with her having discovered the suitable personages with whom to stage her vision. In her earlier works Eliot's attitude towards her characters and readers was for the most part aristocratic and elevated. This tended to be a defensive play on Eliot's part, a matter which was discussed in the first chapter. One might consider the novelist's relationship with Hetty Sorel in Adam Bede for an example of this. In chapter xv of this novel, "The Bed Chambers", Eliot describes how two different women, Hetty Sorel and Dinah Morris, prepare for bed. Towards Hetty one notices

a blantly condescending tone. The scene easily reminds the reader of Pope's Belinda and the rituals which are carried on in her honour in front of her vanity table. The few minutes before bed time are for Hetty a time of fantasy. She need no longer consider herself a poor milk-maid without special social status. Eliot describes Hetty as she sits herself down in front of her mirror and prepares to transform herself into the women of her dreams:

. . . she [Hetty] could see a reflection of herself in the old-fashioned looking-glass, quite as distinct as was needful, considering that she had only to brush her hair and put on her night-cap. A queer old looking-glass! Hetty got into an ill temper with it almost every time she dressed. It had been considered a handsome gift in its day, and had probably been bought into the Poyser family a quarter of a century before, at a sale of genteel household furniture. Even now an auctioneer could say something for it: it had a great deal of tarnished gilding about it; it had a firm mahogany base, well supplied with drawers, which opened with a decided jerk and sent the contents leaping out from the farthest corners, without giving you the trouble of reaching them; above all, it had a brass candle-socket on each side, which would give it an aristocratic air to the very last. But Hetty objected to it because it had numerous dim blotches sprinkled over the mirror, which no rubbing would remove, and because, instead of swinging backwards and forwards, it was fixed in an upright position, so that she could only get one good view of her back and neck, and that was to be had only by sitting down on a low chair before her dressing-table. And the dressing-table was no dressing table at all, but a small old chest of drawers, the most awkward thing in the world to sit down before, for the big brass handles quite hurt her knees, and she couldn't get near the glass at all comfortably. But devout worshippers never allow inconvenience to prevent them performing their religious rites, and Hetty this evening was more bent on her peculiar form of worship than usual.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Bede, pp. 149-150. (the underlining is mine for the sake of emphasis.)

Eliot continues in this vein for almost the length of the chapter until she begins to describe Dinah's preparations for bed. The contrast could not be sharper.

. . . the first thing she [Dinah] did on entering her room was to seat herself in this chair and look out on the peaceful fields beyond which the large moon was rising, just above the hedgerow elms. She liked the pasture best where the milch cows were lying, and next to that the meadow where the grass was half-mown, and lay in silvered sweeping lines. Her heart was very full, for there was to be only one more night on which she would look out on those fields for a long time to come; for, to her, the bleak Snowfield had just as many charms. She thought of all the dear people she had learned to care for among these peaceful fields, and who would now have a place in her loving remembrance for ever. She thought of the struggles and the weariness that might lie before them in the rest of their life's journey, when she would be away from them, and know nothing of what was befalling them; and the pressure of this thought soon became too strong for her to enjoy the unresponding stillness of the moonlit fields. She closed her eyes, that she might feel more intensely the presence of a Love and Sympathy deeper and more tender than was Dinah's mode of praying in solitude. Simply to close her eyes and to feel herself enclosed by the Divine Presence; then gradually her fears, her yearning anxieties for others, melted away like ice-crystals in a warm ocean.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of this chapter the reader finds Dinah entering Hetty's room in an effort to help Hetty spiritually prepare for her trials which Dinah predicts the younger woman will one day have to face. The exposure of the two women, first side by side and then together, in the same chapter is so startling as to be just shy of crude. Although her perceptions

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.157.



are as acute as they will ever be, Eliot is guilty of having coloured the chapter not simply through her own imagination but through her own moral judgements. The result is that the reader finds himself including Eliot too closely in the scene, painfully aware of where, for Eliot, the true moral standards lie. Eliot becomes more of a character in the novel at these points than the author of it. The greatest harm this does is that one tends to parry Eliot's severe and obvious judgements; which is not, of course, what Eliot intended us to do. When the novelist makes it quite evident that a looking-glass is more 'aristocratic' and has more dignity and honour than a human being, she is revealing her thoughts much too strongly. This betrays an immaturity on Eliot's part. She is unable to restrain herself from being too persistent in her display of certain ideals. The chapter, though well conceived, lacks subtlety. By the time Eliot depicted Mary Garth and Rosamond Vincy meeting at Peter Featherstone's she had to a great extent learned to be discreet in attaining the effect she desired. In the scene between Mary and Rosamond, Eliot is still concerned with portraying the difference between an artificial, vain and ambitious mind and that mind which is sensitive to sympathetic responsibility to others as well as to one's self. But in Middlemarch the novelist is not as eager to reveal her own prejudices as she is to allow the characters to expose themselves and each other.

Eliot is still intent upon suggesting that Mary is the more admirable person of the two and ultimately gives her opinion away when she says that "Rembrandt would have painted her [Mary] with pleasure, and would have made her blond features look out of the canvas with intelligent honesty."<sup>1</sup> -- and yet she does not necessarily idealize Mary as she did Dinah, nor judge Rosamond with as condescending a tone as she did Hetty. Each girl is made to personify her own self and her own character. The conversation between Mary and Rosamond is ingeniously revealing. A short example will suffice to show how masterfully Eliot is able to create characters in Middlemarch. Both girls are, characteristically for Eliot, standing in front of a mirror:

'What a brown patch I am by the side of you, Rosy! You are the most unbecoming companion.'

'Oh no! No one thinks of your appearance, you are so sensible and useful, Mary. Beauty is of very little consequence in reality,' said Rosamond, turning her heads towards Mary, but with eyes swerving towards the new view of her neck in the glass.

'You mean my beauty,' said Mary, rather sardonically.

Rosamond thought, 'Poor Mary, she takes the kindest things ill,' Aloud she said, 'What have you been doing lately?'

'I? Oh, minding the house -- pouring out syrup -- pretending to be amiable and contented -- learning to have a bad opinion of everybody.'

'It is a wretched life for you.'

'No,' said Mary, curtly, with a little toss of her head. 'I think my life is pleasanter than your Miss Morgan's.'

'Yes; but Miss Morgan is so uninteresting, and not young.'

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<sup>1</sup> Middlemarch, p. 140.

'She is interesting to herself, I suppose; and I am not at all sure that everything gets easier as one gets older,'<sup>1</sup>

Confident that her characters can now themselves carry the import for which they were created, Eliot need no longer depend upon her own voice to be the official commentator on what occurs in the novel. Events and figures can now speak for themselves and for the most part Eliot can trust that they are able to faithfully depict the kind of philosophical vision she possesses. Stylistically Eliot becomes more importantly the creator of *Middlemarch* and its society rather than its all-knowing judge. For the reader, the vision of *Middlemarch* is much more complete than in any of Eliot's earlier novels because one is able to imagine the society Eliot creates not as being a contrived metaphor for her own moral prejudices but rather as a stage for her perceptions.

All this does not mean to say that in *Middlemarch* one is not still constantly aware of Eliot's presence at every turn in the novel. One is at all times conscious of Eliot as she holds up her candle to those 'scratches' on the polished steel which 'seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun'. The reader is always made mindful of the fact that Eliot is in a very important sense bringing the world of *Middlemarch* to him, and that he might not necessarily have been able

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp.140-141.

to discover it on his own. It is the most essential aspect of Eliot's style in Middlemarch that she remind the reader that she, as a novelist, is presenting her work to him for specific and highly serious reasons. It is she who holds up the candle to the Middlemarch world so that one might be able to watch its activity by her light. At the start of chapter xv, Eliot makes it clear that she recognizes her presence in the novel and knows exactly what it is doing there. She is not interested in employing the style of a Fielding or a Thackeray in writing her own work or in using her art as a soap-box from which to divulge to the reader her opinions of the world in the form of tangents to the main concern of the novel. Instead she proudly proclaims:

. . .I at least have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe.<sup>1</sup>

Although the tone of this passage is light-hearted one can still easily discern how seriously Eliot took her vocation as novelist. The concentration of 'light' imagery throughout the novel is by itself strongly indicative of how Eliot felt that she was in some manner revealing something to the reader that might have been undefined, in the dark, for

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 170.

him before. It is as though she means to 'enlighten' the reader with her vision, to illuminate what might not previously have been clear.

That Eliot takes her motives for writing Middlemarch seriously and expects the intelligent reader to do likewise is clearly evident throughout the novel. Perhaps the best example of this is a passage from chapter xxxv which deals with the reading of Peter Featherstone's will at Stone Court, a will which disappointed many and inspired much bitterness and pettiness on the parts of those who expected to gain by Featherstone's death. Eliot sardonically suggests how the reader might reconcile himself to the fact that Featherstone's will had not rewarded those whom he had anticipated would be rewarded but, instead, shockingly favoured the unlikely and despicable figure of Joshua Rigg.

And here I am naturally led to reflect on the means of elevating a low subject. Historical parallels are remarkably efficient in this way. The chief objection to them is, that the diligent narrator may lack space, or (what is often the same thing) may not be able to think of them with any degree of particularity, though he may have a philosophical confidence that if known they would be illustrative. It seems an easier and shorter way to dignity, to observe that -- since there never was a true story which could not be told in parables where you might put a monkey for a margrave, and vice versa -- whatever has been or is to be narrated by me about low people, may be ennobled by being considered a parable; so that if any bad habits and ugly consequences are brought into view, the reader may have the relief of regarding them as not more than figuratively ungenteel, and may

feel himself virtually in company with persons of some style. Thus while I tell the truth about loobies, my reader's imagination need not be entirely excluded from an occupation with lords; and petty sums which any bankrupt of high standing would be sorry to retire upon, may be lifted to the level of high commercial transactions by the inexpensive addition of proportional ciphers.

The suggestion made is that the art of the novel for Eliot is not meant to be a buffer for the reader against the sting of reality. Although a great part of Eliot's motives for writing, as with all great artists, is to entertain, Eliot meant her novels to be a witness to life, not a pillow for it. Eliot was not interested in fantasizing upon life, or in making it into a parable. Her subject was life, which was to be celebrated and criticized in her novels. But for Eliot, life as a subject was much more important than simply being material for a novel. The subject of Eliot's atheism has been briefly discussed in the first chapter. It is at this point essential to bring the topic up again. Eliot did not simply reject all theology only to be left stranded when it came to any question of the spiritual nature of man. Her friendships with Charles Bray and his brother-in-law, Charles Hennell, and her study of their works, earlier referred to, gave Eliot a spring-board with which to begin a new kind of belief for herself. Her own translation of Strauss' Leben Jesu (1846) and the investigation of his other works also made an imprint upon Eliot's

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.375.

mind. One must also consider the influence of the writings of Auguste Comte upon Eliot's views, since it was in reaction to his works that Eliot spent much time reflecting upon the views of positivism and the relationship between man and faith and god.<sup>1</sup>

Although there were many other factors involved, the literature of the leading philosophers of her day, without a doubt, played a role of paramount importance in George Eliot's rejection of Christianity. She emerged from her reflections upon these thinkers as well as upon her own personal experiences and thoughts with a philosophy of man which became the main concern of all her works. It is for this reason that the plots of Eliot's novels are so suspiciously similar, a matter discussed in my first chapter. Eliot was attempting to define the fundamental values and moral consciousness of a new faith -- a faith which had its beginning and its ending in man. Eliot had earlier tried to show through such figures as Amos Barton, Mr. Gilfil, Mr. Tryan, Mr. Irwine, and later in such figures as Dr. Kenn and Mr. Farebrother, just how much her philosophy of man depended upon the teaching and moral standards of Christian thought. But, in the final analysis, as reflected

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<sup>1</sup> One might refer to Haight's biography of Eliot, Chapter II: "The Holy War" and Basil Willey, Nineteenth Century Studies, (Harmondsworth, 1973), Chapters 7,8,9 for short yet incisive discussion of the influence of these authors on Eliot's thinking.

in all of these characters, Eliot could not accept the Christian belief in a supernatural, divine being who was lord to man. Like many of the thinkers of her day, Eliot felt that only mankind could be considered man's god and that it was belief and sympathy in one's fellow beings which ultimately would save man. Man for Eliot is a mystical being having the power to transcend despair and selfishness. In Silas Marner, Eliot made the mistake of being too ambiguous about the mystical ambience which constantly surrounds Silas. There is always the question whether or not there is some divine force which intrudes upon Silas' life and helps him to achieve a spiritual happiness. One might consider that in such works as Janet's Repentance or The Mill on the Floss, Janet and Maggie require the spiritual aid of Mr. Tryan and Dr. Kenn respectively, two men of the Church with enough knowledge of mankind to be able to advise these women wisely through their time of spiritual and emotional despair. In Middlemarch it is Caleb Garth who is most influential in helping Fred Vincy to achieve a satisfactory and meaningful relationship with life. Mr. Farebrother, too, plays an important role in the stabilizing of Fred's career, but it is through Garth that he learns the satisfaction of loving one's work and one's life as a complete human being. Yet it is without a doubt Dorothea who most idealistically achieves what Eliot's philosophy was advocating. Dorothea has no one to really turn to in



her severest hours of despair. She is only able to trust herself and her experience to bring her through her sufferings. Finally, it is the images of a man with a pack on his back, a woman and her child, and a shepherd and his dog in the field, outside her window which most reminds her of her responsibility and love towards mankind and the beauty of the human race. It is not the orthodox religious transcendence of her ego towards a divine being, but rather the transcendence of her ego for humanity, that it might be shared by all mankind. Eliot goes much farther in her new faith than Tennyson or Carlyle ever did. She completely rejects the idea of a divine god only to embrace the divinity and supremacy of man and his wisdom.

It is this new religion of experience which Eliot had been presenting since her first work and which found its most successful expression in Middlemarch for reasons already discussed. It is within Middlemarch that the reader finds evidence for the necessity of the writing style which Eliot adopted in all her works and which was perfected in this novel. By this I refer to Eliot's constant presence throughout the novel, so unlike that which Fielding or Thackeray enjoyed in their books and yet so similar. I have tried to show how obvious it is that as Eliot's artistic powers matured the nature of her presence in her work became progressively more subtle. Eliot must have been aware that she was becoming less blatantly a lecturer and a moralist in each of her works. By Middlemarch she is most conscious

of what she is attempting to do and how she ought to go about accomplishing it. I think Arnold Kettle speaks wisely of Eliot's narrative technique when he writes:

I do not think that the continuous moral concern in Middlemarch is abstract concepts on a recalcitrant chunk of life. For all the deep moral pre-occupation the novel has little of the moral fable about it.

On the contrary her method is to present most concretely a particular situation and then draw to our attention the moral issues involved in the choices which have to be made.<sup>1</sup>

In the light of Kettle's statement one might consider a passage from Middlemarch where Eliot is speaking directly to the reader. It will be found that in its intention it is remarkably similar to that passage quoted from Carlyle's Sartor Resartus on page three of my first chapter:

Who shall tell what may be the effect of writing? If it happens to have, cut in stone, though it lie face downmost for ages on a forsaken beach, or 'rest quietly under the drums and trappings of many conquests', it may end by letting us into the secret of usurpations and other scandals gossiped about long empires ago: -- this world being apparently a huge whispering-gallery. Such conditions are often minutely represented in our petty lifetime. As the stone which has been kicked by generations of clowns may come by curious little links of effect under the eyes of a scholar, through whose labours it may at last fix the date of invasions and unlock religions, so a bit of ink and paper which has long been an innocent wrapping or stop-gap may at last be laid open under the one pair

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold Kettle, An Introduction to the English Novel, (New York, 1968), p.173.

of eyes which have knowledge enough to turn it into the opening of a catastrophe. To Uriel watching the progress of planetary history from the Sun, the one result would be just as much of a coincidence as the other.<sup>1</sup>

Eliot, needless to say, on the most obvious level is alluding to the plot of Middlemarch. But she is also referring to the fact that, as Carlyle wrote in Sartor Resartus, a book is 'like a spiritual tree' which 'stands from year to year, and from age to age' and that every book, whatever its nature is 'talismanic and thaumaturgic, for it can persuade men.' Carlyle concludes that the man who is searching for self-discovery and is pursuing the study of mankind should look into books, such books as the 'Hebrew Bible, then, or even Luther's Version thereof'. Carlyle wrote this well aware that in suggesting that his readers turn to books, especially the Bible, for insights into the mystery of man, he as a writer was, in fact, taking on a role similar to that of the priest or religious minister. He perceived early how the Victorian reader seemed to be searching for solace and escape from a seemingly barren world in the literature he was pursuing. One need only consider the importance of Tennyson's In Memoriam to the Victorian public, including such a person as Queen Victoria, to be reminded of how emotionally and spiritually important certain kinds of literature had become in the

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<sup>1</sup> Middlemarch, p.448.

nineteenth century. Eliot herself, at the time of George Lewes' death is reported to have 'turned to the poets' for solace, 'reading In Memoriam over and over and copying long sections of it into her dairy'<sup>1</sup>

Eliot knew and well understood the emotional and spiritual worth of good literature. She too, although having become anatheist, never ceased to read the Christian Bible. Through her art of writing Eliot felt that she too might 'yield a spiritual tree', but unlike most of her contemporaries Eliot was interested in writing a literature for those whose imaginations and hearts were no longer able to believe in the existence of any spiritual being besides man. She tried to create a literature which positively portrayed how a faith in oneself and in mankind could lead to 'the growing good of the world.'<sup>2</sup> and to the attainment of an intelligent and responsible happiness for man. Of this kind of thought, Eliot, having totally rejected the possiblility of a god, was the most extreme spokesman among her contemporaries. In preparing and presenting her literature to the reader for spiritual reflection she was in effect acting out, as Carlyle had predicted writers would do, the role of the priest or minister. Perhaps she was, for some, replacing the priest or minister.

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<sup>1</sup> Haight, Biography, p.516.

<sup>2</sup> Middlemarch, p.896.

It is ultimately for this reason that Eliot's omniscient presence is essential to her novels. She as author, must constantly be there to guide the reader. As pejorative as this may sound, Eliot's interpretation of herself as novelist included a picture of herself as moral advisor. Consequently it is through her voice that the vision she creates in each of her novels is finally realized. It is her voice which joins together the hiatus 'between the idea and the reality' not necessarily of the novel itself, but of the novel as literature and as 'spiritual tree'. It is this which Eliot had been trying to do since she wrote "Janet's Repentance" and which she finally successfully accomplished in Middlemarch.

## Epilogue

In his book, Love and Will, Rollo May writes that since

art is communication springing from unconscious levels, it presents to us an image of man which is as yet present only in those members of the society who, by virtue of their own sensitized consciousness, live on the frontier of their society-- live, as it were, with one foot in the future. . . The arts anticipate the future social and technological development by a generation when the change is more superficial, or by centuries when the change, as the discovery of mathematics, is profound. . . The artist presents the broken image of man but transcends it in the very act of transmuting it into art. It is his creative act which gives meaning to the nihilism, alienation, and other elements of modern man's condition.<sup>1</sup>

George Eliot's concern for her own "modern man's condition" was her paramount motive for writing her works. While I refuse to speak for Eliot's unconscious concerns, her conscious ones were obviously aimed at helping mankind, especially those who found themselves in spiritual vacuums because of their alienation from orthodox religions. Eliot intended her works to be taken not necessarily as a mirror for life in the mid-nineteenth century but more importantly as an indication of the direction in which life was headed. As Rollo May would claim for all artists, Eliot was sensitive to the need to inspire man to be creative and positive in the face of undeniably bleak odds.

The maturation of Eliot's skills as a writer allowed her lucidly and successfully to reveal her highly

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<sup>1</sup> Rollo May, Love and Will, (New York, 1969), pp.21-23.

personal thoughts in Middlemarch as she had been able to do in no other novel before it. Her role as artist, as she had intended it, reached much farther than that of an entertainer or even a novelist. George Eliot understood her place in the world as she perceived it and took serious steps to help other Dorotheas or perhaps even Mr. Bulstrodes, to understand and responsibly live up to theirs.

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