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# George Eliot's *Middlemarch*: Victorian and Modern Critical Receptions

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## Abstract

Cultural study today has far surpassed Leavis, who endorsed George Eliot's *Middlemarch* in a concept that Eliot might not have agreed with. Our critical interests in language, interpretation, and identity politics are much more in line with Eliot's concern about democracy, knowledge of reality and its representation. Today's socio-political studies of *Middlemarch* enhance our understanding of the book's historical construct by scrutinizing the Era of Reform in side and outside the text. Feminist criticisms, who generally go beyond earlier disappointment with Eliot, now reaffirm her progressive position. There are brilliant analyses arguing how Eliot follows, yet eventually transcends the dialectic between liberal

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and evangelical feminisms in her days.

Yet a prevailing skepticism regarding narrative's referential possibility has also undermined sympathetic sensibility in many latter day critiques. Reading criticisms on the great works of the nineteenth-century realism these days, one no longer feels the reality the books invite us to experience. Before we make any new critical engagements, we must first get that feeling back. In comparison with post-structuralists, the earlier critics may seem naïve, but their sympathetic readings retain precisely that sense of reality that we are incapable of grasping. This article traces back through *Middlemarch* the critical heritage of to see how far we have come along. It compares Victorian reviews with modern criticism before the 1980's, when radical skepticism gradually gained currency.

### Key Words

George Eliot ; *Middlemarch* ; Critical Reception ; Victorian ;  
Modern .

## **George Eliot's *Middlemarch*: Victorian and Modern Critical Receptions**

Scholarly studies of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* over the past two decades have gone through a significant change of attitude from the earlier times. Looking back through our century to Eliot's England, we may divide the history of the book's critical reception into three stages: the Victorian, the Modern, and what has come along since J. Hillis Miller's and Neil Hertz's deconstructive spin on Eliot. To be sure, the contemporary proliferation of the interpretive perspective on *Middlemarch*, bringing out insights in so many contexts unimaginable to earlier critics, has tremendously enriched our understanding of the text. Yet a cursory look at present-day critiques, in comparison with critiques dating before the 1980s allows one to detect a dwindling of sympathetic sensibility. Reading many of today's criticisms on *Middlemarch*, one no longer feels the book. The more we invent new ways to enter the book, the farther away we seem to deviate from what Eliot beckons us to experience. If indeed, as I believe, the great nineteenth century realism aims to vivify representation so that readers may get the feeling of the reality in the novel, we may have to reexamine our critical engagement before we proceed any further.

Cultural Study and Deconstruction have far surpassed Leavis, who endorsed *Middlemarch* in a concept of culture that Eliot may not agree with. I also believe that our interests in language,

interpretation, and identity politics are in line with Eliot's devoted concern of democracy, knowledge of reality, and its representation. As has been noted, a good part of the charm of *Middlemarch* comes from Eliot's dexterous fabrication of shifting perspectives. Characters are juxtaposed in terms of their ways of looking at life, while Eliot looks and interprets them with different angles and attitudes. Miller's focus on the issue of interpretation is an immanent critique deep into the grain of the text. His aggressive reading of the optical metaphors of the "mirror" and the "candle," and the analogy he draws between the author (Eliot) and the heroin (Dorothea), are entirely justifiable because they follow Eliot's central concern. But while a sympathetic close reading brings together the shifting perspectives to make sense of them, Miller's goes the opposite way, showing to us instead a monster of "totalization." In doing so, as Baruch Hochman says, Miller "embroils us in a skeptical scrutiny of language that segments the text in radical ways and problematizes reading itself."<sup>1</sup> The referential level of *Middlemarch*, so masterfully orchestrated by Eliot, is finally undermined by an overwhelming attention to linguistic duplicities.

Not all late twentieth-century readings of *Middlemarch* are obsessed with the dubious nature of the narrative. There are moral and psychological studies that follow the paths of the earlier critics. Those who are interested in the socio-political dimension of the book, in particular the new historicists who favor Eliot's "thick descriptions," continue to substantiate our understanding of the Era

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<sup>1</sup> Baruch Hochman, "Recon/Decon/Structing *Middlemarch*," *Approaches to Teaching Eliot's Middlemarch*, ed. Kathleen Blake (New York: The MLA of America, 1990) p. 43.

of Reform in and outside the text. The real achievement, however, comes from the feminist criticism quarter. Unlike the earlier feminists who felt disappointed with Eliot's submission to the status quo, latter day feminists historicize issues to make judgments. As Suzanne Graver testifies with her own revision, historians pinpoint the dialectic between liberal individualism and evangelical Christianity in a broader context of various feminist thoughts in the nineteenth century. In the "home epic" of *Middlemarch*, women's ethic of care is tested against the nurture/community concern. That, in turn, needs to be evaluated in a liberalism which strives for equal rights by emphasizing man and woman's similarities rather than differences, and an evangelicalism that empowers women with a sense of purpose and worth without providing guidance for action. Graver incarnates history to redeem Eliot's progressive position. Her work is sympathetic yet fair, the result convincing because she finely explores Eliot's limits in terms of the "limits inherent in the nineteenth-century women's movement," and claims that "*Middlemarch* incorporates a feminist vision of its own, anticipating in some remarkable ways significant developments in feminist thought today."<sup>2</sup>

Above is a brief overview of the recent works on *Middlemarch*. Having seen where we stand, we may now trace back to see how we have come along. This essay intends to review Victorian and Modern receptions of *Middlemarch*, Modern being that stage of the twentieth century before post-structural sensibility gained currency. A small critico-historical research this is indeed. It will suffice its purpose if it helps those interested to regain the feel of a past

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<sup>2</sup> Suzanne Graver, "Incarnate History: The Feminisms of *Middlemarch*," *Approaches to Teaching Eliot's Middlemarch*, pp. 65-74.

quickly forgotten.

The readers of *Middlemarch* in the Victorian age may be divided into two groups: the general reading public and the serious and sophisticated reviewers. The general readers, who read novels for entertainment, consider *Middlemarch* as providing the same old things that they used to get. They praise it for its detailed description of the settings, refined portraiture of characters, and complicated plots that are interesting. The serious reviewers, who are more or less able to perceive what George Eliot expects them to see, feel confused and uneasy about the new elements in *Middlemarch*. Some are puzzled by the author's shifting voices in the narration. Others find it hard to follow the over-schematic structure of the story. Still others are disturbed by the penetrating analysis of the characters' inner life. Above all, they are uniformly shocked by the new perceptions of man and universe that are alien to their own.

Modern critics welcome George Eliot as their contemporary. They find that in *Middlemarch* George Eliot already foretells the world that they presently live in. The richness of knowledge, experience and meaning in *Middlemarch* satisfies their critical interests. As scholarship increases in philosophy, psychology, and the rhetoric of fiction, modern scholar-critics revel in unprecedented number of ways the mystery of this masterpiece, leading to a boom of studies on *Middlemarch*.

In what follows I will compare Victorian and Modern critical receptions of the novel. I have no intention to conduct a thorough research, but will focus on aspects that will reveal the most significant changes of interest and perspective in these two historical periods.

Victorian reviewers are primarily bothered by the different

voices in the narration of *Middlemarch*. In addition to the narrator, these reviewers find that there is also a commentator constantly intruding into the narration. This commentator's voice becomes particularly disturbing when it lacks consistency. Tracing its tone and sentiment, the reviewers find that the commentator's voice is sometimes melancholic and sympathetic, sometimes ironical and cruel. An understanding critic such as R. H. Hutton thus complains about part of the narration on Rosamond as "a malicious stab of the critic's."<sup>3</sup> Victorian reviewers are generally sensitive enough to hear the subtle overtone of the narration, but few of them seem to be well-equipped enough to accept George Eliot's powerful, yet contradictory eloquence, which is sometimes objectively observatory, sometimes subjectively interpreting. As a result, Edward Dowden raises the notions of "second self" to distinguish the two voices in the narration. He then concludes that the author is impartial, being "cold and indifferent to none."<sup>4</sup>

Modern critics, thanks to their sophisticated knowledge of point of view and the whole narration as a coherent context in its own right, are readily immune from this confusion. A number of theorists of fiction take *Middlemarch* as a typical example of authorial intrusion. Few critics of *Middlemarch*, however, seem to be interested in the narration alone as a critical topic. Instead, modern critics would simply integrate the different voices and attitudes in the narration to derive a "vision" and refer it to other elements of

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<sup>3</sup> R. H. Hutton, Review in *Spectator*, *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Carroll (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited Broadway House, 1971), p. 295. Hereafter cited as *GECH*.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Dowden, "George Eliot's Second Self," *Contemporary Review*, *GECH*, p. 321.

the novel. For example, in his "George Eliot's Eminent Failure: Will Ladislaw," Gordon S. Haight closely examines irony and humor submerged in the metaphors, phrases and key-words in the narration of *Middlemarch* and claims that the narrator is not partial to Ladislaw, thereby leading to the conclusion that Ladislaw is the real hero of the book.<sup>5</sup> In his "Fusing Fact and Myth: The New Reality of *Middlemarch*," U. C. Knoepfelmacher's researches and interprets the mythical and historical origins of allusions in *Middlemarch* to discover "a more complex and multiform order of meaning."<sup>6</sup>

Victorian readers have an insatiable interest in fictional characters. In reading *Middlemarch* they heartedly enjoy the galley of portraits for its abundance and variety but find it hard to set forth their comments. What Victorian reviewers used to do is to interpret and judge the characters' behavior and personalities according to personal tastes and prevailing ideas of human nature. George Eliot's overall analysis of characters' motives not only leaves little space for further interpretation but also blurs the seeming good and evil held by traditional judgment. The reviewers praise the characters in *Middlemarch* as being very "real," for they cannot deny what George Eliot reveals in her characters. But they hesitate to accept her comments on the characters as the attributes to the characters. As Hutton remarks, "her characters are so real that they have a life and body of their own quite distinct from her criticism

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<sup>5</sup> Gordon S. Haight, "George Eliot's 'Eminent Failure,' Will Ladislaw," *This Particular Web*, ed. Ian Adam (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), pp. 22-42.

<sup>6</sup> U. C. Knoepfelmacher, "Fusing Fact and Myth: The New Reality of *Middlemarch*," *This Particular Web*, Adam, p. 50.

upon them.”<sup>7</sup> A prevailing interest among the reviewers is, consequently, to confront George Eliot’s delineation with her comment and to judge that she is unfair here or there to the offspring of her creation. Few of them are able to surpass the problem of impartiality to read the characters in terms of a larger scale of the author’s overall design of the book.

A similar lack of sophistication appears in Victorian readers’ reception of the plot of *Middlemarch*. Many reviewers commend highly the climax of Dorothea’s agony in the night (which some modern critics consider naive and clumsy). They regret Dorothea’s second marriage with Will Ladislaw, claiming it to be undeserving. Among the reviewers, Henry James is the only one who detects George Eliot’s prudent design of fiction when he remarks that *Middlemarch* is “an indifferent whole” and lacks “a weightier drama.”<sup>8</sup> James is correct when he says that Ladislaw is meant to be a light creature. But he misses George Eliot’s idea of “the gradual action of ordinary cause rather than exceptional,”<sup>9</sup> when he comments that “there is slender poetic justice in Dorothea’s marrying a dilettante.” He also likens Dorothea and Lydgate’s separate stories as “two suns ... each with its independent solar systems.”<sup>10</sup> It does not occur to him that these two solar systems are on the same zodiac, which is precisely what George Eliot intends to represent.

How modern critics would fulfill George Eliot’s expectation of her readers one can never tell. The way Barbara Hardy analyzes

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<sup>7</sup> Hutton, p. 303.

<sup>8</sup> Henry James, Review in *Galaxy*, *GECH*, pp. 353-355.

<sup>9</sup> David Carol, introduction, *GECH*, p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> James, p. 356.

the characters' emotional lives in her "*Middlemarch* and the Passions" surely demonstrates a significant difference from the Victorians' character analysis. In this essay, Hardy traces all of the lines in the relation of feelings between characters and characters, characters and author, and between conflicting feelings within characters. Pointing out that "George Eliot places the drama of Will Ladislaw's personal ecstasy in the peopled environment," Hardy concludes that "one passion is seen to occur in the world of everyone else's passion."<sup>11</sup> Light creature or not, Will Ladislaw is, to the clerk of the congregation, one who will make a figure in the singing, and, "if he is silent, it is because that he must have a cold."<sup>12</sup> Such an observation is surely nearer to George Eliot's realism of ordinary experience.

Haight's "George Eliot's 'Eminent Failure,' Will Ladislaw" is another character study on Will Ladislaw, which makes him stand somewhere between James and Hardy. Quite contrary to James, Haight considers Ladislaw as the real hero of *Middlemarch* for the reasons that, in the plot, Ladislaw is the only male character who has a connection with every other character, major and minor, and, in the light of the historical convention of the novel, Ladislaw's social standing and heritage of property qualify him to be a hero.<sup>13</sup>

What George Eliot's contemporaries fail to follow is, in fact, less of the "formal" aspects than of the new realities she reveals in *Middlemarch*. The psychological world in *Middlemarch* is one of these new realities. Most Victorian critics feel profoundly

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<sup>11</sup> Barbara Hardy, "*Middlemarch* and the Passions," *This Particular Web*, Adam, p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Hardy, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> Haight, pp. 22-42.

disturbed by her penetrating analysis of the characters' motives. Holding the belief that "the analytical mind is logically driven into disparagement,"<sup>14</sup> an anonymous reviewer says that George Eliot "too keenly enters into her creations not to become attached to them, and therefore, sympathetic."<sup>15</sup> "It is not natural to most men to know so much of their fellow-creatures as George Eliot shows them," says Edith Simcox, "to penetrate behind the scenes in so many homes, to understand the ambiguous motives of ambiguous conduct, to watch, 'like gods knowing good and evil,' the tangled course of intermingled lives, the remote mainsprings of impulse and the wide-eddying effects of action."<sup>16</sup> But what George Eliot reveals and articulates is so real that Victorian reviewers bitterly find that they cannot but accept it with "painful bewilderment."<sup>17</sup>

To study characters in terms of the unconscious is one of the distinct contributions modern critics have made to the criticism of *Middlemarch*. In her *George Eliot's Creative Conflict*, Laura Comer Emery provides a Freudian reading of Dorothea's growing process, analyzing the character's fantasies and defense mechanism. Emery also explores Dorothea's sexual and idealized selves, and their interactions with other characters' in terms of "the oral," "the anal," "the Oedipal," and "the superego." She elaborates in details "the minutely differentiated stages of Dorothea's movement toward self-knowledge and self-acceptance," and claims that Dorothea's union with Will Ladislav is the result of her final equilibrium.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Unsigned review in *Saturday Review*, *GECH*, p. 316.

<sup>15</sup> Unsigned review in *Saturday Review*, *GECH*, pp. 316-317.

<sup>16</sup> H. Lawrenny (Edith Simcox), Review in *Academy*, *GECH*, p. 324.

<sup>17</sup> Lawrenny, p. 324.

<sup>18</sup> Laura Comer Emery, *George Eliot's Creative Conflict* (California:

Some modern critics start with, but eventually go beyond, the pigeonhole of psycho-analysis. In his *Irony in the Mind's Life*, Robert Coles, himself a well-trained psychoanalyst, takes his study of the psychological themes in *Middlemarch* to a theological level. He singles out a quality of the "indefiniteness" that goes through the entire novel and gives particular credit to George Eliot's handling of this "indefiniteness" in the scene of Ruffles in which Bulstrode struggles severely with himself.<sup>19</sup> There is no way of telling the exact condition of Bulstrode's inner and outer experiences in that scene so the significance of the whole event is suspended. To Coles, George Eliot's handling without answer is the best answer to the complexity of humanity. What used to bother the Victorians now becomes viewed as artistic and philosophical achievements to modern critics.

It is only natural that Eliot's contemporary readers should feel uneasy about her psychological elaboration. Victorian England is a time of high mannerism, and mannerism in its very nature resists such exploration of human motives as does George Eliot. The psychological revelation is all the more poignant when Eliot's presentation of the story's setting is so powerfully realistic, making readers feel that those characters are people around them in everyday life and they are now forced to see these people in uncomfortable ways. To modern critics who know Freud, Eliot's close examination of human motives may not be surprising any more. But it is surely amazing that George Eliot foretells in a good thirty

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University of California Press, 1976), p. 182.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Coles, "Maturity: George Eliot's *Middlemarch*," *Irony in Mind's Life* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974), pp. 183-201.

years the unconscious and many other Freudian concepts in so many places in *Middlemarch*.

The real shock to Victorian reviewers, however, comes not from the psychological revelation but from the radical tragic vision of life which challenges their long-held assumption about the condition of man's existence in the universe. In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot deliberately combines stories in which noble aspiration is helplessly frustrated and ends up with ordinary life. In each story, the clash between the individual and his circumstances carries neither dignity nor indignation as is usually the case in traditional tragedy. As George Eliot sees it, the individual's aspiration is inevitably tinged with egoism. On the other hand, the circumstances man faces are deterministic and ridiculous, denying him any opportunities to take heroic action. Man is fated to make his passive choice between acceptance and resignation. The only spiritual outlet for man lies within himself. Man has to find new meaning and dignity in his "unheroic" sufferings.

Victorian reviewers do not seem well-prepared to accept such a theory of life. Or rather, it simply never occurs to them that the novel, as a form of art, is possible to carry such a theme. Many admit that they do not know what George Eliot really intends to tell in *Middlemarch*, thus vaguely concluding with impressionistic words like "depressing," "melancholy," or "philosophic."

When dealing with the St. Theresa allusion in the preface and the finale, many reviewers recognize the need to apply the case of human's ambivalent situation not only to Dorothea but to all the principal personages in the novel. However, they tend to treat the characters in the novel as static entities rather than minds with growing lives. How noble aspirations end up with ordinary lives is less a concern than is how fairly the author treats man and the

society he confronts, or what we can learn from the author's moral teaching in the design of the confrontation. Edith Simcox, herself a zealous social reformer, is most willing to accept George Eliot's encouraging remark: "If we had been greater, circumstances would have been less strong against us."<sup>20</sup> She thus believes that a main theme in *Middlemarch* is to show "the inadequacy of all other less arduous short cuts to the reformation of society."<sup>21</sup> A. V. Dicey, on the other hand, is inclined to settle with the idea that "there is no creature so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it."<sup>22</sup> To him, *Middlemarch* means to say that "Happiness depends on the adaptation of character to circumstances, and that therefore, in a commonplace world, commonplace characters alone have a fair chance of happiness."<sup>23</sup>

Some reviewers extend their concern to the "who is to blame?" question. Conjecturing that George Eliot means to deal with "women's question" in *Middlemarch*, R. H. Hutton argues that Eliot's attitude is not certain, if not unfair, toward some characters and, especially, toward Middlemarch society. In both Dorothea and Rosamond's marriages, Hutton assumes that George Eliot intends to blame society for "molding a bad public opinion about woman."<sup>24</sup> He then refuses to concur, for he does not "think it particularly well worked out."<sup>25</sup>

Sidney Colvin also has "that feeling of uncertainty and

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<sup>20</sup> Lawrenny, p. 325.

<sup>21</sup> Lawrenny, p. 328.

<sup>22</sup> A. V. Dicey, Unsigned review in *Nation*, *GECH*, p. 345.

<sup>23</sup> Dicey, p. 307.

<sup>24</sup> Hutton, p. 307.

<sup>25</sup> Hutton, p. 307.

unsatisfiedness as to the whole fable.”<sup>26</sup> He detects the author’s intention as to illustrate “... a society not made to second noble aspirations in woman.”<sup>27</sup> More specifically than does Hutton, Colvin refers to Dorothea’s suffering as a result from delusion rather than from the pressure of public opinion. But to him, society should still be responsible, for “[i]t is society which so nurtures women that their ideals cannot but be ideals of delusion.”<sup>28</sup> Both Hutton and Colvin are, in different degrees, preoccupied with the expectation that novelists should present a moral attitude clear and emphatic, revealing either the evil in man’s nature or the imperfection of society. This expectation being denied, they are finally unable to untie the knot of this man-society dilemma. Being confused and unsatisfied, Hutton leads his discussion to the pointless. Colvin, somewhat aware of the author’s willful denial of clear answer, claims it “deficient in qualities of art.”<sup>29</sup> However, their keen sensibility enables them to perceive the subdued yet powerful tragic force in this massive work. Both Hutton and Colvin, like many other serious fellow-reviewers, agree that *Middlemarch* is one of the few peerless masterpieces in the history of the English novel. They finally concede that it is they who need adjustment; as Colvin testifies, it is presumptuous to value *Middlemarch* in terms of art<sup>30</sup> -their terms of art.

Modern critics, who have been exposed to the discourses of the absurdity and dilemma of modern society, at once find George

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<sup>26</sup> Sidney Colvin, Review in *Fortnightly Review*, *GECH*, pp. 337-338.

<sup>27</sup> Colvin, p. 337.

<sup>28</sup> Colvin, p. 337.

<sup>29</sup> Colvin, p. 338.

<sup>30</sup> Colvin, p. 338.

Eliot's new world familiar. A good deal of discussions thus focuses on the moral implication of George Eliot's tragic view of life. Jeannette King undertakes the job by comparing the difference between Eliot's stories and traditional tragedy. In her *Tragedy and the Victorian Novel*, King starts with the observation that George Eliot deliberately undermines any sense of crisis in the denouement of her stories. Deliberating on the suggestion of the finale in *Middlemarch*, King decides that Eliot means to stress the continuity of the ordinary routine of life. Whatever has happened to the individual, life would go on as usual. King also finds that, unlike the traditional heroes, George Eliot's characters are weak and reticent rather than strong and eloquent. Instead of alienating themselves from people to brood over their sufferings to death, George Eliot's ordinary heroes continue to live in a social world and may eventually accept the deterministic circumstances. To King, these characteristics are central to the novel, clearly demonstrating Eliot's "avowed intention to use novel to convey a realistic and contemporary tragic experience."<sup>31</sup>

Eliot's fidelity to the realism of everyday life does not hinder her capturing "contemporary tragic experience." In fact, modern critics find, it is precisely the unheroic and undramatic features that make George Eliot's stories tragic. As they see it, the modern world deterministically confines people to lead but an ordinary life. That is why Eliot, with her commitment to realism, refuses to cling to traditional heroism. Eliot finds at once a new form of suffering with new dignity in men's trivial daily life. Throughout her unconventional representation, King says, George Eliot means to

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<sup>31</sup> Jeannette King, *Tragedy in the Victorian Novel* (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 89.

suggest that “monotonous daily suffering is as great a tragedy as (if not greater than) death itself.” It is so because “having sacrificed all egotistical hopes and desires, having ceased to live as an individual, it seems relatively easy to die in fact.”<sup>32</sup> Since the theory applies to all the major characters in *Middlemarch*, the real hero of the story is not Cassaubon, nor Dorothea, nor Lydgate, but all of them together; or, in Eliot’s words, “the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”<sup>33</sup>

Felicia Bonaparte, who particularly favors the idea of a collective subject as the tragic protagonist, forwards this idea to the whole human race and calls Eliot’s novels “The Human Tragedy,” in contrast to Balzac’s “The Human Comedy.”<sup>34</sup> He thus praises accordingly: “Eliot was one of the first writers to wrest tragedy from the stronghold of elitism and concede it to the democratized future of the average man.”<sup>35</sup>

Few critics would follow Eliot’s new vision of life without yet being deeply touched by the moral sense. Like their Victorian antecedents, modern critics note Eliot’s grand sympathy and encouraging emphasis on human will in *Middlemarch*, but with much subtler comprehension. Jeannette King discerns that in Eliot’s novels the tragic conflict is “within as much as without the individual.”<sup>36</sup> Eliot’s stress on the vulnerability of character, to King, means to teach us the need to cultivate strength of will. If

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<sup>32</sup> King, pp. 46-47.

<sup>33</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, (N.Y.: Penguin, 1976), p. 896.

<sup>34</sup> Felicia Bonaparte, *Will and Destiny* (N.Y.: N.Y. University Press, 1975), intro. XI.

<sup>35</sup> Bonaparte, Intro. XI.

<sup>36</sup> King, p. 29.

the individual can resist his baser motives and act rationally, like Mary Garth's refusing the dying Peter Featherstone's request that she burn his second will in *Middlemarch*, then there is still the possibility of getting rid of tragedy.<sup>37</sup>

Regarding the author's sympathetic attitude, Felicia Bonaparte remarks that Eliot's sympathy is not only democratic enough to reach to every single individual and profound enough to hear "that roar which lies on the other side of silence" in each individual, but also humanistic enough to acquiesce the individual's existence with his limitations. In *Middlemarch* Eliot deliberately illustrates how each person's perception of reality is limited by his own weakness. But even with a caricatured character such as Casaubon, Bonaparte points out, the narrator never forgets reminding his readers that "...the chief reason we think he asks too large a place in our consideration must be our want of room for him.... Mr. Casaubon, too, was the center of his own world." Mr. Casaubon is no more and no less than one of us and therefore should be understood and sympathized. The word "too," as King highlights for us, shows sympathy tinged with Eliot's typical moral criticism, reminding readers of their own egotism.<sup>38</sup>

An even more profound sense of morality, however, lies in the way Eliot demonstrates the possibility of leading a meaningful and happy life in a deterministic universe. Unlike the heroes in many modern existential tragedies who triumph through an awareness of their sufferings, Eliot's heroes lack such narcissistic introspection. Rather, the team of Casaubon, Dorothea, Lydgate and Ladislaw leads a passive yet positive life with knowledge. "Armed with knowledge

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<sup>37</sup> King, p. 28.

<sup>38</sup> Bonaparte, Intro. XI.

of themselves and the world,” Jeannette King observes, “Eliot’s heroes are able to distinguish what can be altered from what should be accepted. They concentrate their energy on the battles that can be won, beginning with the conflict within themselves.”<sup>39</sup> Many modern critics then further the case by singling out Dorothea Brooks as the perfect example of such heroism. Among them, Laura C. Emery’s engaging psychological study of Dorothea’s gradual awareness of her sexual self, as mentioned above, is most typical. Emery shows us a spiritual biography which resolves to be neither providential faith nor existentialism. What we witness is, rather, a process in which noble aspiration convincingly goes through conflict, awareness, acceptance, and finally, to equilibrium within one’s self.

Many modern critics remind their readers that the world “out there” may not always validate man’s knowledge of himself and the world. But they are so fond of Eliot that they cannot but try to search for what encouraging answers Eliot might provide to such a predicament. In “*Middlemarch* and the Externality of Fact,” David Carroll finds that answer in Dorothea. He discusses the climax scene in which Dorothea, after a lengthy conversation with Rosamond to learn all the facts regarding Will Ladislav, finally accepts her real situation with bravery, self-denial and faith. The outer world will become an extension of our wishes, Carroll concludes, as long as “the mind disengages itself from its own interest and tests its hypothesis impartially against the facts.”<sup>40</sup> Even for those who lack Dorothea’s merits, life is by no means disposable. Edward Casaubon, as Jeannette King enumerates, is a

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<sup>39</sup> King, p. 31.

<sup>40</sup> David Carroll, “*Middlemarch* and the Externality Of Fact,” *This Particular Web*, Adam, p. 90.

case in point. Having realized the futility of his devotion to the work, and the failure of his marriage life, Casaubon still lives to the natural end. Such a desire “to save all that they can of their wreck[ed] lives”<sup>41</sup> is the ultimate testimony to George Eliot’s pathetic humanitarianism.

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<sup>41</sup> King, p. 71.

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Eliot's work is, then, both the culmination of the panoramic Victorian novel as practiced by Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray and the beginning of the modern psychological novel as practiced by James, Lawrence, and many others. More than anyone else, Eliot was responsible for making the novel, a genre which had traditionally been read primarily for entertainment, into a vehicle for the serious expression of ideas. Few novelists can equal Eliot's depth of intellect or breadth of learning. Deeply involved in the religious and philosophical ferment of her time, Eliot was probably t