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**George Eliot and the ‘Social Problem  
Novel’: Individualism, Politics and Class in  
*Middlemarch, Daniel Deronda* and *Adam  
Bede.***

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## George Eliot and the 'Social Problem Novel': Individualism, Politics and Class in *Middlemarch*, *Daniel Deronda* and *Adam Bede*.

Kay Henderson

### 1. Introduction

Many critics studying George Eliot's novels acknowledge her 'commitment to realism as a literary genre'.<sup>1</sup> Eliot herself emphasised the mode's centrality to her works, writing in a letter to her publisher: 'I undertake to exhibit nothing as it should be; I only try to exhibit some things as they have been or are'.<sup>2</sup> Such a distinction between the ideal and actual is not as clear cut as this self-evaluation would suggest, however. Amigani defines realism as 'an attempt to tell and explore the truth through the inventive power of fiction'.<sup>3</sup> As 'truth' is an abstract and often subjective concept, complex personal perceptions may colour an individual's understanding of what constitutes realism. As a result, Eliot's 'faithful account of things as they have mirrored themselves in [her] mind', while personally realistic, may not provide a universally accurate reflection.<sup>4</sup> Instead, a specific realism is created, centred around Eliot's sympathies, allowing her to mould truth to her own emotional, moral and intellectual view-point. The resulting world-representation is almost faithful, but with an interpretive edge that causes slight distortion. This inescapable bias is the source of the realist's ongoing battle: the inevitable separation of art and life. Thus, despite Eliot's efforts to minimise that gap, her realism unavoidably becomes a vehicle for progressing her own moral, social and political perceptions.

In light of this, the following essay aims to explore how Eliot's realism relates to her treatment of fictional individuals, in turn impacting on her representation of Victorian social problems. As all of Eliot's novels were written with retrospective temporal settings, her commitment to realism restricts her means of suggesting any significant social progression; if the reader understands the historically prevalent attitudes, any incorporation of Eliot's ideals would be easily identifiable as inaccurate. Bissell suggests that Eliot was 'more prepared to examine the past carefully than to speculate about the future'.<sup>5</sup> While her preference for depicting the earlier half of the nineteenth century would seem to endorse this, I would instead like to suggest that Eliot's examination of the past provides a sense of removal, allowing more daring allusion to her hopes for the future of society. The environment she creates for her characters, while not a speculative one, often seems to allow the deserving an escape into the future she idealises; those who exhibit the aptitudes and values Eliot views as socially, morally or politically advantageous are rewarded within the fiction. I hope to illustrate and support this thesis through an analysis of three of George Eliot's works in particular: *Middlemarch* (1871-72), *Daniel Deronda* (1876) and *Adam Bede* (1859). Ultimately this evaluation will suggest that Eliot is able to explore and comment on contemporary social problems through her imagined individuals, though not necessarily without compromising the realism she so highly valued.

### 2. Social Symbolism

To validate claims that Eliot's treatment of fictional individuals holds a deeper significance, it is first important to understand her use of symbolism more generally. Griffith suggests that Eliot was 'aware of the unconscious use that an artist makes of a symbol in prose fiction'.<sup>6</sup> In light of that cognizance, instances of symbolism in the works of Eliot herself seem more deliberate and self-conscious; she claims nothing she included was 'irrelevant to [her] design'.<sup>7</sup> With each symbol holding such importance, and Swan proposing that each 'important word [finds] its sum of meaning increased to the pitch of symbolism', Eliot's works arguably revolve around underlying meaning.<sup>8</sup> In turn, the perception of those meanings relies heavily on the reader's awareness of a wider significance behind each observation and event. If such interpretations are made, elements of the ideal become fused with the real, allowing hopes of a different actuality to exist beneath the fiction's surface. By, as Swan suggests, treating 'the

<sup>1</sup> Rohan Maitzen, 'Realism and Research in *Adam Bede*', *Discovering Literature: Romantics and Victorians* (British Library, 2004) <<http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/realism-and-research-in-adam-bede>> [accessed 27 February 2016].

<sup>2</sup> George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), II, 362.

<sup>3</sup> David Amigani, *Victorian Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 62.

<sup>4</sup> George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994), p. 174: all further references are to this edition.

<sup>5</sup> Claude Bissell, 'Social Analysis in the Novels of George Eliot', *English Literary History*, 18:3 (1951), 221-239 (p. 223).

<sup>6</sup> Philip Mahone Griffith, 'Symbols of the Arm and the Handclasp in Eliot's *Adam Bede*', *Studies by Members of SCMLA*, 33:4 (1973) 200-202 (p. 200).

<sup>7</sup> Eliot, *George Eliot Letters*, IV, 168.

<sup>8</sup> Brian Swan, 'Middlemarch: Realism and Symbolic Form', *English Literary History*, 39:2 (1972), 279-308 (p. 281).

symbolic as if it were an adjunct of the ideal', a potential is created for different readers to categorise Eliot idiosyncratically; those discerning symbolic meaning are more likely to interpret her works as idealistic.<sup>9</sup>

It is the contrast between implicit and explicit expression, inherent in the formation of symbolism alongside literalism, that allows these opposing approaches to exist simultaneously within Eliot's texts. Interestingly, the variation of their effects resonates with Eliot's understanding of the likelihood of social progression: 'the more deeply we penetrate into the knowledge of society in its details, the more thoroughly we shall be convinced that a universal social policy... can never be carried into successful practice'.<sup>10</sup> Through its ability to indicate social progression without exploring the details of that change, symbolism seems to become Eliot's means of overcoming the dangers of pessimism that accompany an in-depth exploration of society. Schorer suggests that Eliot's metaphors 'tend always to be, or to become, explicit symbols of psychological or moral conditions...'.<sup>11</sup> Consideration of the interrelation of individual and social ethical systems thereby seems particularly relevant to a symbolic analysis. Swan provides an example of the potential consequence of such evaluations:

When, for instance, we note in *Middlemarch* the... stories of Lydgate and Dorothea, each an orphan with a continental education, each well-born but disregarding rank, each a reformer, are we falsifying our reaction to say that literal plot pattern becomes symbolic of some ideal George Eliot had in mind?<sup>12</sup>

Having discounted the existence of redundant meaning in her works, such clear correlations as this indicate the undeniable existence of underlying meaning. The following sections identify aspects of Eliot's works in which the treatment of individuals seems to carry this symbolic weight, while analysis will allow an understanding of their significance.

### 3. The Individual

Eliot's article 'The Natural History of German Life', reviewing the work of Wilhelm von Riehl, is held by Guy to be 'the starting point for explaining her views on civil society'.<sup>13</sup> Here Eliot explores the contrast between individual and social values, associating 'the cultured man' with individual actions and 'the peasant more as one of a group'.<sup>14</sup> It does not necessarily follow, however, that Eliot deemed peasants lacking in the capacity for individuality. While preaching, *Adam Bede*'s Dinah Morris declares: 'Why, you and me, dear friends, are poor. We have been brought up in poor cottages, and have been reared on oat-cake...' (*AB* 35). The first person plural 'we' here serves to illustrate the commonality of rural life; a group identity is established not through lack of individuality but through the confinements of shared necessity. This sense is reiterated later in the same speech: 'when anybody's well off, they don't much mind about hearing news from distant parts; but if a poor man or woman's in trouble... they like to have a letter to tell 'em they've got a friend as will help 'em' (*AB* 35-36). Thus the 'cultured' man's individuality, rather than an indication of personal potential, suggests distinction from others to be achievable through lack of dependence on them.

Despite the communal dependence of the working classes, Eliot warns against the 'noxious' assumption that they are in a position to implement an ideal system, 'wherein everyone is caring for everyone else, and no one for himself'.<sup>15</sup> Having declared this order of society non-viable, Eliot cannot use it in a realistic representation; making her ideal order attainable in fiction would severely question the authenticity of that depiction. *Adam Bede*, 'a country story- full of the breath of cows and the scent of hay', is Eliot's most dedicated look at peasant life, and therefore most at risk of falling foul of that idealism.<sup>16</sup> Eliot does not allow an all-encompassing tendency for altruism to overrun the reality, however, instead alluding to her social beliefs by creating antitheses between selfless and self-serving characters. This contrast is particularly striking when the reader considers Adam alongside his father, a comparison which highlights the moral superiority of the former. Adam's sense of family duty supersedes the hopes he has for his own future; he reflects on an occasion he ran away from 'the vexations of home' to 'seek his fortune', only to turn back at the thought of 'his mother and Seth, left

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 287.

<sup>10</sup> George Eliot, 'The Natural History of a German life' in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. by E.D. Pinney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 166.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Schorer, 'Fiction and the Matrix of Analogy', *Kenyon Review*, 11:4 (1949) 539-550, (p. 550).

<sup>12</sup> Swan, 'Middlemarch: Realism and Symbolic Form', p. 306.

<sup>13</sup> Josephine Guy, *The Victorian Social Problem Novel* (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), p. 187.

<sup>14</sup> Eliot, 'The Natural History of a German life', p. 274.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>16</sup> Eliot, *George Eliot Letters*, II, 387.

behind to endure everything without him' (*AB* 58). Thus he embodies the biblical notion he quotes: 'they that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of those that are weak, and not to please themselves.' (*AB* 58) His father, meanwhile, rejects all sense of social duty, neglecting his work in favour of personal pleasure: 'he went aff to Treddles'on this forenoon, an's niver come back' (*AB* 50). These opposing notions of responsibility can be read alongside the characters' respective ends; while Thias Bede meets an early and gruesome death, Adam eventually finds himself 'content' (*AB* 501). This is just one example of a pattern that I will continue to explore in the course of this study: Eliot's belief in the eventual reward of virtue.

By introducing this sense of cosmic justice, Eliot suggests that individuals can improve their immediate surroundings and circumstances by making changes to their own attitudes and behaviours. In turn, this possibility gives rise to the hope that such transformations might amass, that 'the little waves [will] make the larger ones'.<sup>17</sup> As Guy suggests, 'a universal human nature has to be acquired or learned by individuals for themselves. It is only with the gradual accumulation of such willed individuals' transformations that society may eventually evolve into a better state'.<sup>18</sup> Instances in which Eliot reforms a character from their former faults serve as encouragement that she believed in the worth and power of such individual transformations. Evans notes that, within the Victorian Era, 'the political system was becoming increasingly representative'.<sup>19</sup> Correspondingly, the sum of individual transformations within the span of Eliot's novels accumulate, offering a sense of potential reform. *Middlemarch's* Fred Vincy is a prime example of personal change: he begins reliant on the generosity and common sense of others, an 'addict[ion] to pleasure' prompting him to 'publically speculate on his expected inheritance from Featherstone' (*M* 229).<sup>20</sup> By the close of the novel, however, Fred has learnt he must 'work hard' to 'deserve' the good opinion of others. (*M* 562) It is only through self-evaluation of his own capabilities and wants that he is able to progress towards a reformation of his character; an internal goodness has been kindled, driven by a desire 'not to disappoint himself' (*M* 567).

Fred's long-sought-for personal resolve also acts as a catalyst for change in the lives of those around him; the narratives of Mary and her family, Mr and Mrs Vincy, Farebrother and Bulstrode, are all influenced by his choices. Mrs Garth's 'vexed and disappointed' response to hearing that Fred had 'used [Mr Farebrother] as an envoy', thus putting 'an end to that better prospect', is just one example of this 'woven and interwoven plot' (*M* 141, 564). The resultant narrative 'web' seems to indicate that change at an individual level cannot be overlooked; reformation of one person may prompt the necessary initial step of self-examination in others (*M* 141). In a letter to Charles Bray, Eliot suggests that 'our moral progress may be measured by the degree in which we sympathize with individual suffering and individual joy'.<sup>21</sup> In light of this, her works seem to encourage self-examination in real-world individuals, prompting each reader to consider their own moral priorities. Capacity for compassion may be discerned by assessing the extent to which the reader feels they sympathise with the novel's individuals, allowing the text itself to become a catalyst for personal and, by extension, social progression. Beyond instructional influence, Eliot's works may therefore play a more practical role in implementing her social ideals.

*Adam Bede* gives specific reference to the potential power resting with supposedly insignificant individuals:

The existence of insignificant people has very important consequences in the world. It can be shown to affect the price of bread and the rate of wages, to call forth many evil tempers from the selfish, and many heroisms from the sympathetic, and, in other ways, to play no small part in the tragedy of life. (*AB* 74-75)

The reactionary system implied by the phrase 'call forth' shows personal interaction to heavily influence individual change. This complements Eliot's vision of an ideal society that survives solely on reciprocal exchanges of goodwill, refuting the notion of any individual as truly insignificant. Rather than illustrating, as Guy asserts, 'how asocial such a concept of sociability could be', Eliot's brand of individualism instead sets personal acts of moral progress alongside a conviction that those changes will affect others, thus introducing an aspect of the communal to independent improvement.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), p. 461: all further references are to this edition.

<sup>18</sup> Guy, *The Victorian Social Problem Novel*, p. 191.

<sup>19</sup> Eric Evans, 'Overview: Victorian Britain, 1837-1901' in *BBC History* <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/overview\\_victorians\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/overview_victorians_01.shtml)> [accessed 21 January 2015].

<sup>20</sup> J. Jeffrey Franklin, 'The Victorian Discourse of Gambling: Speculations on *Middlemarch* and the Duke's Children', *English Literary History*, 61:4 (1994), 899-921 (p. 906).

<sup>21</sup> Eliot, *George Eliot Letters*, II, 403.

<sup>22</sup> Guy, *The Victorian Social Problem Novel*, p. 201.

#### 4. The Peasant and The Gentleman

##### 4.1. Education

Eliot takes pains to ensure that the moral extension of a character is not linked to a furthering of conventional education; her untaught peasants are just as capable of internal transformation as her well-schooled gentry. In 'The Natural History of German Life', she declares attempts to "enlighten" the peasant' as 'disintegrating and ruinous to...character', suggesting a respect for the values and traditions of the poor.<sup>23</sup> Eliot's re-creation of regional dialect in *Adam Bede* supports this, illustrating an attempt to combat 'the still lingering mistake, that an unintelligible dialect is a guarantee for ingenuousness'.<sup>24</sup> In fact, intellectual ambition is sometimes even shown to hinder the attainment of moral fortitude. This effect can be seen in *Daniel Deronda*, where Daniel's decision to leave university closely precedes his first meeting with Mirah. Casting aside formal education thus seems a qualifying factor in the commencement of Daniel's social enlightenment. It is Mirah's near-suicide that initiates the 'new phase' in his journey of personal discovery; their meeting exposes him to Judaism and is central to the fulfilment of his need to 'understand other points of view'.<sup>25</sup> These circumstantial associations reiterate the notion that Eliot often chose to represent individuals as having the power of prompting change in their companions. Here a relay of influence passes its force to Daniel, who hopes he in turn 'may awaken a movement in other minds, such has been awakened in [his] own' (*DD* 803, 195).

A discontinuity between formal and moral education is also evident in *Middlemarch*; Edward Casaubon, while described as 'a man of profound learning', lacks an understanding of 'the world' (*M* 11, 484). This deficiency inhibits his human sympathy; his 'ungentlemanly' and 'abominable' codicil is written with no regard for the emotional impact it will have on others (*M* 484, 490). Casaubon's 'jealous' attitude is mirrored in Hans Meyrick, who expresses a self-interested reaction to the ever-increasing intimacy between Daniel and Mirah: 'he wants to do everything he can to encourage Mirah in her prejudices' (*M* 484; *DD* 579). Both responses illustrate delayed, covert and indirect methods of dealing with intense emotion. Following his outburst, Meyrick's sister comments: 'I should like to know what is the good of having gone to the university and knowing everything, if you are so childish, Hans' (*DD* 580). Thus Eliot differentiates emotional and scholastic intelligence, suggesting that the latter alone is insufficient in forming a socially sound individual. As expressed in *Adam Bede*: 'the figures tell us a fine deal, and we couldn't go far without 'em, but they don't tell us about folk's feelings' (*AB* 142). Captain Donnithorne's praise of Adam- 'life has been a better school to you than college has been to me'- acts as recognition of the danger of not valuing experience alongside academic prowess. As a result, the peasant is shown not to be morally disadvantaged by a restricted access to education. Even those who 'haven't been to school, nor read books' are granted the opportunity to improve the state of society through 'private efforts of will' (*AB* 35).<sup>26</sup>

Being artistically compelled towards realism, Eliot considered it vital that both knowledge and feeling be present in her writing. As the value placed on each of these virtues varies throughout society, an understanding and incorporation of both is needed to represent a cross-section of humanity with verisimilitude. Their mutual inclusion is also acknowledged as an important feature of assimilating art and life. In an article for *The Westminster Review*, George Henry Lewes suggested that 'accuracy in presentation' is likely when 'emotional sympathy is keen and active'.<sup>27</sup> In turn, George Eliot shows that this emotional understanding is not innate, but a product of meticulous observation: 'the higher nature commands a complete view of the lower. But I think the higher nature has to learn this comprehension... by a good deal of hard experience' (*AB* 160-161). Even beyond realism, artists are bound by the necessity of this dual approach; Ladislav suggests that the poet conceives ideas by 'knowledge pass[ing] instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flash[ing] back as a new organ of knowledge' (*M* 223). He uses his own talent for this process when writing for 'the Pioneer', an experience through which he gained 'a great deal of fresh knowledge in a vivid way and for practical purposes' (*M* 461). Thus a sense of inter-relation is created which champions the benefits of combining knowledge and experience, the fictional success of 'The Pioneer' indicating Eliot's endorsement of such an approach.

<sup>23</sup> Eliot, 'The Natural History of a German life', p. 158.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>25</sup> George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 183: all further references are to this edition.

<sup>26</sup> Guy, *The Victorian Social Problem Novel*, p. 191. Original emphasis.

<sup>27</sup> George Henry Lewes, 'Realism in Art: Recent German Fiction' in *A Victorian Art of Fiction: Essays on the Novel in British Periodicals 1851-1869*, ed. by John Charles Olmsted (London: Routledge, 1979), p. 351

## 4.2 Charity

Alongside Eliot's appraisal of emotional and factual intelligence, a parallel assessment of moral and financial generosity can be discerned. Just as a high level of education does not equate to a social conscience, significant charitable giving does not strictly indicate greater moral awareness. *Middlemarch's* Mr Bulstrode, for example, 'spends large sums on useful public objects', but uses the resulting social influence to his own advantage (*M* 175). The matter of Mr Tyke's Chaplaincy is decided predominantly by the 'crawling servility' owed to Bulstrode by many of those voting, who 'could not afford either morally or financially to avow' a contrary opinion (*M* 183). Through his 'legacies to worthy causes' Bulstrode fulfils the expected duty of a 'Christian gentlemen', but does not otherwise satisfy the social and moral expectations of that title, 'do[ing] more to make [his] neighbours uncomfortable than to make them better' (*M* 175).<sup>28</sup> The resultant duality of his social standing embodies the Victorian Era's changes to the definition of a 'gentleman', which shifted the notion to a moral basis, no longer depending on 'special breeding, talent, sensibility or even money'.<sup>29</sup> By exposing Bulstrode's past deeds and dismantling his reputation, Eliot seems to question the basis on which he could be considered a gentleman, using the 'public feeling... that everyone would avoid a connection' with Bulstrode to invalidate his social title (*M* 825).

The rejection of Bulstrode's financial aid, by both Lydgate and Ladislaw, reinforces Eliot's classification of him. Lydgate hopes to clear his debts, enabling him to continue pursuit of medical advancement, while Ladislaw plans a building project 'likely to be largely beneficial' to others (*M* 801). Despite these good intentions, the history surrounding Bulstrode's 'dirtied' money, to use Ahilen's term, is so socially repugnant that the entailments of accepting it cannot be outweighed.<sup>30</sup> By applying this moral reasoning above their material wants, both Lydgate and Ladislaw escape the social exclusion suffered by Bulstrode. In addition, they are each rewarded for their acts of conscience: Dorothea is able to provide Lydgate with the money he requires and Ladislaw is married to Dorothea, whom he values above wealth: 'to have within him such a feeling as he had towards Dorothea, was like the inheritance of a fortune' (*M* 469). However, the intentions of these *Middlemarch* characters to affect the common good remain worryingly dependant on financial facilitation. The help offered in *Daniel Deronda*, meanwhile, often revolves around compassion, rather than practical or financial input. Deronda in particular understands and responds to the emotional needs of others: intervening in Mirah's suicide, reconnecting her with her brother, and joining the plight of the Jews. Continual indication of his morality suggests Eliot further refining the classification of a gentleman; to do good is not reliant on Christianity or even the provision of tangible aid, but simply requires, as expressed by Himmelfarb, 'common, everyday virtues, within the capacity of everyday people'.<sup>31</sup>

Just as various charitable acts hold a symbolic value, Eliot gives considered presentation to those deserving and accepting charity. Evans suggests that 'most Victorian charities were aimed at those sections of the working classes disposed towards helping themselves'.<sup>32</sup> This sentiment is echoed in *Adam Bede*, where Bartle Massey expresses the danger of expecting benefit 'without... taking any trouble', instead encouraging men to 'strive' as if trying 'to get out of a dark hole into broad daylight' (*AB* 240). Adam himself follows this principle, acting under the notion that 'God helps them as helps theirsens' (*AB* 55). A lesson seems inherent in these examples; Eliot deems a charitable recipient worthy of the goodness of others only when satisfactory effort of self-help has been exerted. Her desire to reward virtue acts as a self-commentary on this phenomenon. By deciding who has earned a satisfactory ending, Eliot takes control of a form of charity, her own judgements governing whether characters deserve the provision of external help. As Martin highlights, any 'excessive tolerance' therefore risks the reader believing she has 'be[en] too good to a character', consequently 'compromising the moral fairness and realism to which she was committed'.<sup>33</sup>

## 5. Politics and The Legal System

Eliot's concern for the individual does not, however, imply that those individuals should be concerned only for themselves. Nancy Henry illustrates Lydgate's hopes 'to remain above such trivial concerns' as

<sup>28</sup> Eric Evans, 'Overview: Victorian Britain, 1837-1901' in *BBC History* <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/overview\\_victorians\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/overview_victorians_01.shtml)> [accessed 21 January 2015].

<sup>29</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Poverty and Compassion* (New York: Knopf, 1991), p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> Joe Ahilen, 'Bulstrode, Raffles and the Money Pit', *Middlemarch Blog* (2005) <<http://middlemarchblog.blogspot.co.uk/2005/11/bulstrode-raffles-and-money-pit.html>> [accessed 2 February 2016].

<sup>31</sup> Himmelfarb, *Poverty and Compassion*, p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> Evans, 'Overview: Victorian Britain'.

<sup>33</sup> Bruce K. Martin, 'Fred Vincy and the Unravelling of Middlemarch', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 30:1 (1994), 3-24 (p. 3).

local politics, instead showing him to concentrate on the more personal issues of 'his medical research and practice'.<sup>34</sup> This inclination highlights a flaw in his character: the absence of wider awareness. In turn, this blindness manifests itself in issues beyond politics; his 'scandal[ous]' dealings with Bulstrode, ill-considered marriage to Rosamond and ever increasing financial difficulty, all arise from the same failing (*M* 719). By thus aligning personal and political concerns, Eliot uses the individual to illustrate the potential counter-productivity of using others only in advancement of the self, seeming to teach that no one should neglect their social duties. In her short story *Brother Jacob*, Eliot observes that 'when a man is not adequately appreciated or comfortably placed in his own country, his thoughts naturally turn towards foreign climes'.<sup>35</sup> While, in context, this statement applies literally to a person considering relocation, it also resonates with a lack of self-surety; some individuals look to others to instigate the progression they hope for, overlooking the possibility that they, themselves, hold the means of improvement.

Alongside the belief that social duty extends beyond the self, Eliot seems to endorse expression of, and action upon, the political principles arising from that awareness. Mr Klesmer's passion for politics withstands high society's discouragement of it; he expresses his opinions in a contested environment, where he is considered 'hardly... a serious human being who ought to have a vote' (*DD* 241). Miss Arrowpoint's reaction to Klesmer's outburst about 'the lack of idealism in English Politics' begins a conversation that ultimately ends in their engagement (*DD* 241). This sequence presents political frankness as a virtue; a correlation is created that rewards Klesmer for being forthright with his opinions. By concluding the contest between Klesmer and Bult as romantic suitors in this way, Eliot parallels their opposing social beliefs, accentuating the allure of idealistic politics over an uninspiring or 'tiresome' approach (*DD* 242). In itself, this development is not strictly realistic; as Henry suggests, Eliot's tendency to 'punish egoism and reward virtue' is a 'refus[al] to admit that calculating political players do sometimes win'.<sup>36</sup> Klesmer's reward also arguably endorses the political views he espouses. It is, therefore, not only Eliot's mode of presentation that strays into the idealistic, but also her depiction of politics within that vision. By symbolically aligning herself with Klesmer's view of politics as an institution lacking in idealism, Eliot undermines not only the reality of the Victorian political system but also the value she herself places on the connection between realism and life; if political policies are to be practically implemented, they cannot be overly idealistic.

Corresponding disapproval of those who withhold their opinions can be discerned in *Daniel Deronda*, through a comparison of Deronda and Grandcourt. While Deronda is energised by enthusiasm for his ideals, 'possessed with [the idea] of restoring a political existence to [his] people', Grandcourt is guilty of 'a strong though repressed opinion of politics' (*DD* 803, 156). As 'the business of the country' could never be achieved 'if everybody looked at politics as if they were prophecy', Grandcourt's minimal contribution to his nation's politics symbolises the danger of mass in-action counteracting the promise of individual reformations (*DD* 383-84). Grandcourt's non-committal approach is mirrored in the circumstances of his death; just as Gwendolyn has the means of saving her husband but wastes that opportunity in confusion, indecisiveness and inaction, Grandcourt has the wealth, power and position to exert considerable political influence, but refuses to accept communal needs as his own responsibility. By refusing to satisfy the expectation that 'a man of his position should make his weight felt in politics', Grandcourt shows his inability to separate the needs of the outside world from his own selfish desires (*DD* 551). Loesberg suggests that, when Gwendolyn witnesses impending freedom from her husband, she is conversely able 'to see the egotism of [her] desires by seeing them outside [herself], outside the veils of ego...' (*DD* 696).<sup>37</sup> Thus Grandcourt's demise is partly facilitated by an ongoing reliance on the conceit which, in his wife, is beginning to subside. The 'guilt' and 'remorse' felt by Gwendolyn initiates her construction of a social conscience. Symbolically, this culmination of the ongoing battle between the egos of Gwendolyn and Grandcourt amplifies the importance of being able to see that each of us, as an individual, can contribute to the improvement of a larger, collective construct (*DD* 696).

The importance of maintaining this larger social construct has implications not only politically, but for all areas of social life. The legal system in particular is affected by the strength of the state, declared by Schramm to depend 'upon a stable constitution' for 'its efficiency and its fairness'.<sup>38</sup> Thus, by 'satiriz[ing] the injustice dispensed by the legal system', Eliot also seems to question the fairness of

<sup>34</sup> Nancy Henry, 'George Eliot and Politics' in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. by George Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 138.

<sup>35</sup> George Eliot, *Silas Marner*, 'The Lifted Veil' and 'Brother Jacob', ed. by Peter Mudford (London: Everyman, 1996), p. 231.

<sup>36</sup> Henry, 'George Eliot and Politics', p. 139.

<sup>37</sup> Jonathon Loesberg, 'Aesthetics, Ethics and Unreadable Acts' in *Knowing the Past: Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. by Suzy Anger (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 142.

<sup>38</sup> Jan Melissa Schramm, 'Eliot and the Criminal Law' in *A Companion to George Eliot*, ed. by Amanda Anderson and Harry E. Shaw (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2016), p. 320.

wider society.<sup>39</sup> When applying the law, discrimination against the lower classes was particularly prevalent, a bias that incorporated, according to Johnson, ‘the definition of crimes and misdemeanours... the prosecution of defendants from the different socio-economic backgrounds, and in the corrective treatment of offenders’.<sup>40</sup> The hardships faced by Hetty Sorrel act as a symbol of this unequal treatment; it is only through the intervention of the upper classes that she is saved from hanging: ‘Arthur Donnithorne, carr[ies] in his hand a hard-won release from death’ (AB 438). Despite her control over the legal verdicts within her fictional world, Eliot’s commitment to realism restricts her means of acquitting Hetty. If the character’s social stranding would, as Johnson warns, have ‘justified suspicion’ and ‘implied guilt’ in a real-world courtroom, offering an adverse fictional judgement would constitute inaccurate representation.<sup>41</sup> Hetty’s conviction and transportation go some way to mitigating that danger, but Eliot seems unwilling to claim justice’s ultimate price. Though punishment remains heavy, the dramatic and delayed nature of Hetty’s pardon, relieving the reader at ‘the last moment’, presents her eventual treatment in an idealistic light (AB 437). Here Eliot’s shows a need, for both herself and her reader, to calm a fundamental human fear: that the reality of existence unfolds wholly without reason or justice.

## 6. Industrial Revolution and The Media

Ludlow proposes that, prompted by the concerns surrounding The Industrial Revolution, ‘tension between ‘old’ and ‘new’ became a favourite theme of the nineteenth century novelist’.<sup>42</sup> Eliot capitalised on this trend, using past settings to address the social affairs of her own era. Through this combination, she implies that the same social problems persisted in each time frame, their continued relevance illustrating a lack of resolution in the intervening years. *Middlemarch*, in particular, utilises this temporal tension: the appearance of the first reform movement (1832), in a novel written subsequent to the second Reform Act (1867), stresses these social interventions as inevitably insufficient. By drawing attention to the absence of progress, Eliot again prompts self-examination; the reader is forced to question why they, and society as a whole, have not learnt from the mistakes of the past. As shown above, the provision of tangible support by the wealthy and the educated, such as ‘railways’ and ‘new hospital[s]’, is not tantamount to a reformed society in Eliot’s vision (DD 131; M 602). Such practical advances flourished in the wake of The Industrial Revolution, simultaneously seeming to encourage the social approach that Eliot warns against: the consideration of individuals as insignificant. This fear is symbolised in *Adam Bede*, where Adam uses an industrial metaphor to describe the plight of overlooked citizens: ‘In a piece of machinery too, I believe there is often a small unnoticeable wheel which has a great deal to do with the motion of the large ones’ (AB 172). In order to ensure the working order of the state, Eliot therefore suggests steps must be taken to provide for its smaller, inter-working elements.

Rather than encouraging this concern for the individual, The Industrial Revolution contributed to a fusion of the lower classes. Wadsworth’s suggested ‘thickening of the population over the countryside’ lessened rural self-sufficiency, while the increasing ‘population movement’ between regions, recognised by Griffin, encouraged uniformity between previously enclosed areas.<sup>43,44</sup> By prying into the lives of private, secluded individuals, bringing with her the eyes of the wider world, Eliot’s writings arguably re-enact The Industrial Revolution’s unifying role. This sense of her contributing to universality is lessened, however, by marked separation of lower class characters. By discouraging the image of peasants ‘gathered in a knot’, instead describing their assembly as ‘by no means a close one’, Eliot allows lower class characters to be considered as individuals (AB 30). Her ‘detailed descriptions’ of the physical and mental attributes of many of these characters, noted by Warhol, encourage the reader to make the same distinctions.<sup>45</sup> Thus, rather than coalescing the poor into stereotypes, Eliot’s descriptive invasions rectify the problem she outlines in ‘The Natural History of German Life’: ‘How little the real characteristics of the working classes are known to those who are outside them, how little their natural history has been studied’.<sup>46</sup> As her individualised presentation contradicts the group-identity

<sup>39</sup> Nicholas Hagger, *A New Philosophy of Literature: The Fundamental Theme and Unity of World Literature* (London: John Hunt Publishing, 2012), p. 178.

<sup>40</sup> Paul Johnson, ‘Class Law in Victorian England’, *Past and Present*, 141 (1993), 147-169 (p. 149).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Ludlow, ‘English Class and Hierarchy’, *Crossref Info* <<http://crossref-it.info/articles/423/english-class-and-hierarchy>> [accessed 30 February 2016].

<sup>43</sup> Alfred Wadsworth and Julia de Lacy Mann, *The Cotton Trade and Industrial Lancashire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1931), p. 311.

<sup>44</sup> Emma Griffin, *A Short History of the British Industrial Revolution* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 53.

<sup>45</sup> Robyn Warhol, ‘It is of little use for me to tell you’: George Eliot’s Narrative Refusals’ in *A Companion to George Eliot*, ed. by Amanda Anderson and Harry E. Shaw (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2016), p. 59.

<sup>46</sup> Eliot, ‘The Natural History of a German life’, p. 142.

given to the poor in real-world society, however, Eliot's rejection of type-cast peasant depictions in some ways compromises her realism.

The Industrial Revolution particularly affected the reach of the media, allowing, as Ian St John suggests, 'an expanding national press [to carry] the deeds of politicians to a wider public while at the same time bringing a vocal public opinion'.<sup>47</sup> While historians, such as Gregg, have noted that 'thousands of peasants suffered complete ruin' in the wake of The Industrial Revolution, Eliot highlights the increased availability of local and national news, and the accompanying social awareness, as an exception to that destructive tendency.<sup>48</sup> In *Daniel Deronda*, Mrs Meyrick is identified as 'a great reader of the news, from the widest reaching politics to the list of happy marriages...' (*DD* 726). By contrast, Grandcourt shows a lack of interest in current affairs: he 'glance[s] over the best newspaper columns on' political topics (*DD* 584). This comparison is telling alongside the 'scarcity' endured by the Meyricks: it seems to be those who are not affected by the problems of the day that think themselves beyond the issues under consideration (*DD* 197). Eliot's fiction often provides an enlightening experience for these oblivious individuals, crafting for them a 'terrible moment... when the great movements of the world, the larger destinies of mankind, which have lain aloof in newspapers and other neglected reading, enter like an earth-quake into their own lives' (*DD* 803). Again, this complicates Eliot's realism, denying the inevitability that some individuals will remain untouched by social problems.

When describing the reading habits of Mrs Meyrick, Eliot isolates the wedding lists as providing 'the pleasant sense of finishing the fashionable novels without having read them, and seeing the heroes and heroines happy without knowing what poor creatures they were' (*DD* 726). The rest of the newspaper, concerning politics and other social affairs, does not seem to offer these same happy conclusions. This sets up an interesting commentary on Eliot's own means of approaching such affairs; her realism seems hopeful of including the factual input of newspaper articles without abandoning the satisfactory conclusions expected of 'fashionable novels' (*DD* 726). Mrs Meyrick's predilection for endings also highlights a distinction between moral and literal realism. 'Moral Realism', defined by Honderich, categorises 'true' morals as those 'discovered, not willed into existence nor constituted by emotional reactions'.<sup>49</sup> By skipping the process by which those morals are learnt, Mrs Meyrick sees only 'false' morality in her happy endings.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, Eliot's works do seem to satisfy the expectations of moral realism, achieved through the gradual and sustained transformation of her fictional individuals.

## 7. Satisfactory Ends?

Eliot's creation of moral realism does not always align with her construction of eventual individual justice; some characters are not rewarded for their moral fortitude. Seth Bede and Mr Farebrother, in particular, seem mistreated in Eliot's scheme of virtue and reward. Each sacrifices his own wants to better serve the happiness of others; they both 'supress [the] pain' of rejection, leaving the wives they had hoped for free to marry their preferred men (*M* 517). In the case of *Adam Bede*, the choice of Adam over Seth as Dinah's husband has further consequences for the satisfaction offered by the novel's conclusion. In the epilogue, the reader learns that Dinah has 'given...up preaching', in accordance with both Adam's wishes and new church regulations. Seth had instead encouraged her to continue, to leave the place that put bonds on her expression and 'join a body that 'ud put no bonds on Christian liberty' (*AB* 506). As shown in relation to Klesmer, Eliot has elsewhere championed freedom of expression, her denial of it for Dinah suggesting an element of sacrifice to accompany satisfaction in other areas. David Daiches argues that the marriage between Adam and Dinah 'moves the story from the probable to the purely symbolic', allowing 'the bond of marriage' to mend Hayslope's broken community. The further implications of the marriage, however, are not entirely concordant; in the process of rewarding Dinah's virtues, Eliot rescinds the characteristic of open expression she had hoped to encourage.<sup>51</sup>

This highlights a paradox in Eliot's use of the individual to symbolise the direction she envisages for society's progression. Her provision of individual outcomes, while rewarding virtue, often undercuts the characteristics she has shown to be of benefit to wider society. As a further example, Dorothea's choice to give up her fortune in order to marry Ladislav prioritises her personal happiness. Jamie Cox

<sup>47</sup> Ian St John, 'Victorian Politics', *History on the Web* <[http://www.history-ontheweb.co.uk/topic/topic18\\_victorianpolitics.htm](http://www.history-ontheweb.co.uk/topic/topic18_victorianpolitics.htm)> [accessed 27 January 2016].

<sup>48</sup> Pauline Gregg, *A Social and Economic History of Britain 1760-1980* (Surrey: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1982), p. 27.

<sup>49</sup> R. W. Hepburn, 'Moral Realism', in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. by Ted Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 1523.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> David Daiches, 'George Eliot' in *Critics on George Eliot*, ed. by William Baker (Plymouth: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1973), p. 72.

contends that this sacrifice is at the expense of the 'opportunity to use... her money... for good'.<sup>52</sup> Dorothea resolves the sense of oppression that has pervaded her exalted life by choosing a marriage by which she quits that sphere. As a result, she refuses the alternative path of full commitment to, in Cox's terms, her 'philanthropic endeavours'.<sup>53</sup> Despite her disregard for money, Dorothea thus begins to represent 'the fragility of ideals in a materialistic society'; an over-consciousness of affluence, 'I hate my wealth', prompts her to abandon an opportunity of providing aid to others, a role which she had long considered her greater purpose (*M* 811).<sup>54</sup> Just as the reader never witnesses Dorothea successfully making the improvements she had envisaged, Gwendolyn's transformation in *Daniel Deronda* is left similarly incomplete. Though Gwendolyn 'may live to be one of the best women, who makes others glad they were born', that possibility is only presented in terms of 'if' (*DD* 801). It is left to the reader to construe the final steps in Gwendolyn's personal reformation, based on the moral progress she has made. As Eliot can only refer symbolically to progression, a parallel reader responsibility can be inferred: the potential attainment of Eliot's social ideals rests in the hands of her audience. In turn, this lack of resolution hints at Eliot's personal dissatisfaction; expressing ideals through symbolism is only necessary because society's failure prevents them being depicted as a reality.

## 8. Conclusion

Ultimately, the questionable satisfaction of Eliot's endings becomes fundamental to discerning her overriding intentions. Eliot's potential attainment of realism, the accurate representation of life through art, allusion to her social ideals, and portrayal of a reassuring wider justice, are all individual elements relying diversely on the final judgement she offers each fictional individual. Eliot is thus faced with an unwinnable battle; in the same way that *Middlemarch* tackles the theme of 'spiritual grandeur ill-matched with meanness of opportunity', the rest of Eliot's works attempt to achieve something for which there is no platform (*M* 3). Declaring art 'the nearest thing to life', she acknowledges that they are still inherently different, displaying an awareness of the impossibility of creating a true continuity between the two.<sup>55</sup> With her understanding of this inevitable shortcoming in mind, I would like to suggest that Eliot places deliberate elements of dissatisfaction within her broadly satisfactory endings, hoping to symbolically illustrate the frustrations she has faced as an artist. By making this discontent accessible to the reader, Eliot induces her audience to be party to that frustration. Those discerning Eliot's paradoxical dilemma are naturally prompted to consider the irreconcilable elements for themselves. Thus Eliot instils within the reader his own unsolvable problem, mirroring the sense of irresolution that challenges both Eliot and her fictional individuals. By encouraging readers to share in these conceptual and artistic struggles, Eliot shows that philosophical quandaries may benefit from the same approach she has encouraged for tackling social problems: independent attempts at greater understanding, which may combine to increase the potential for collective progress.

<sup>52</sup> Jamie Cox Robertson, *An Uncommon Heroine: Scarlet, Edna, Sula—and more than 20 other of the Most Remarkable Women in Literature* (Adams Media, 2010), p. 68.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>54</sup> Bissell, 'Social Analysis in the Novels of George Eliot', p. 234.

<sup>55</sup> Eliot, 'The Natural History of a German life', p. 145.

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