

THE VALUE OF GEORGE ELIOT'S WORKS FOR LITERATURE AND BRITISH CULTURE

Akhmedova Gavkharoy

Fergana State University

E-mail: ahmedovagavharoy@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

George Eliot was certainly one of the most influential women of her Era. George Eliot was known for her genius at writing intelligent novels that address societal and historical issues. Eliot began her career with all sorts of obstacles in her way: she was not rich; she was not pretty; she had no pedigree or social standing. But she wrote and developed as a writer even at a time when women were discouraged from intellectual work. This paper will demonstrate the importance of George Eliot's works for literature.

Keywords: style, novel, Victorian era, Eliot, Middlemarch, Daniel Deronda,

What is especially impressive about Eliot's literary career is the way it continually widened in scope as new projects provided more room for the exercise of her intellect and imagination. She began by doing translations of German philosophy and theology, "soul-stupefying work" that nonetheless taught her respect for the meticulousness required for good writing. She then moved to editing and reviewing, staying in the shadow of others but becoming versed in contemporary issues and literary styles. Finally, she began writing fiction—first short stories, then novels.

Among her most notable early novels is the autobiographical *The Mill on the Floss*, which is both a childhood joy and an unsettling exploration of childhood trauma. Her big books Henry James would refer to them as her "baggy Monsters"—came a few years later: *Romola*, a monumental historical novel, exploring the religious and artistic ferment of 15th-century Florence, and *Felix Holt, the Radical*, a background of the British labor movement of the 1830s. Her most important novels were her two final ones *Middlemarch*, a sprawling anatomy of English society, and *Daniel Deronda*, an attempt to reach beyond English society to embrace larger issues of identity and nationalism.

Middlemarch, which I will discuss later at greater length, established Eliot's place as the foremost literary figure of her age; *Daniel Deronda* tested her reputation by raising issues that many of her readers preferred to ignore. *Deronda* is an English aristocrat who discovers midway through the novel that he was born a Jew. With this

personal revelation comes a more general awareness of British intolerance, and this prompts him, at the end of the book, to leave England for Palestine.

When the novel appeared, many readers were offended by the idea of a Jewish hero and by the criticism of Britain, which was central to the plot. Others faulted the novel's structure, arguing that its "Jewish parts" lacked the coherence and realism of its "British parts." But Eliot's overreaching in this final novel her determination to attempt more than her society or even her talent could encompass reflects the enormous ambition that had propelled her career from the beginning.

A BBC adaptation of *Daniel Deronda* was broadcast a few years ago, so that more people are now familiar with the plot. Yet the adaptation had nothing to do with the book. Unlike Jane Austen, where so much of what counts resides in the dialogue, making her easily adaptable to the screen, Eliot's greatness lies not in her dialogue, but in her style, an element that cannot be separated from the written word.

Eliot's style has three principal facets. There is her use of startlingly original metaphors to encapsulate her characters and foreshadow their destinies. Thus, we get a vivid premonition of marital disaster, when Casaubon, the dryasdust scholar in *Middlemarch*, is said to woo his bride with a "frigid rhetoric . . . as sincere as the bark of a dog, or the cawing of an amorous rook." There is a similar sense of problems in store when, in the same novel, the superficially charming Rosamond Vincy is described as someone who "acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own."

Also central to Eliot's style is her phrasing, which often follows the path of her characters' pretensions, rising high, then falling in a heap at the end: "Mrs. Glegg paused, for speaking with much energy for the good of others is naturally exhausting".

The most important—though most derided—aspect of Eliot's style is her narrative voice, which frequently breaks into the action to philosophize or cast judgment on what is going on. In the following celebrated passage from *Middlemarch*, we are alerted to the countless sorrows that transpire around us without our noticing them:

That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.

The second line of this passage is often quoted alone, diluting the force of Eliot's meaning: for it is not only humanly impossible to absorb the tragedy of everyday life; it is also a function of human stupidity that this tragedy goes unnoticed. Eliot's genius is to show that the two ideas are both connected and distinct.

Many critics, even those as discerning as Henry James, have criticized her narrative voice as overly intrusive and sententious. But their criticism seems entirely wrongheaded. Eliot's voice, in its assumption of a wiser, juster, more all-encompassing perspective, is the ligament of her novels. It elevates them from ingenious storytelling to divine comedy.

I am not the first to compare Eliot to Dante, for all that these two epic imaginations delineated different worlds. Dante accepted a system of medieval hierarchy and predetermination while pointing toward a humanistic concept of character. Eliot clung to a humanistic conception while pointing toward a more modern, relativistic one she was, after all, a precursor of Sigmund Freud. But what Eliot shared with Dante was a compulsion to describe and evaluate the moral nature of human beings. And for all her understanding of interior, unconscious action, she retained a belief in the power of the human will to shape character.

Of all Eliot's novels, *Middlemarch*, about everyday life in a rural community around the time of the first Reform Bill of 1832, is the most comprehensive in creating a moral taxonomy of character that can serve as a guide for living. Set in a period some 40 years before it was written, its characters fall into established groups. There are the entrenched rich: the silly but enthusiastic Mr. Brooke; the solid if unimaginative Sir James Chettam; and the morally energetic but naïve Dorothea Brooke. There are those in the industrious middle class: the honest workman Caleb Garth; the sanctimonious banker Nicholas Bulstrode; and the potential recruit to committed work Fred Vincy. And there are the creative (or allegedly creative) spirits: the scientific Lydgate; the scholarly Casaubon; and the poetic Ladislav. These are only a sampling of the vast and variegated cast of *Middlemarch*.

While many of these characters are simple sketches meant to exemplify a singular trait or moral attribute, the most interesting ones Lydgate, Fred Vincy, Dorothea, Ladislav, Bulstrode have mixed natures. Eliot seems to have conceived of human character as resembling a chemical reaction in which a large number of potentially important variables are present but only some are activated. The direction a life takes becomes a matter of which variables are activated and which are not, something that lies, at least partially, within the individual's power to control. "The strongest principle of growth lies in human choice," she asserts in *Daniel Deronda*.

Here is where Eliot's greatest value lies for a culture. As one of the most clear-sighted inhabitants of *Middlemarch*, the clergyman Farebrother points out to the idealistic Dorothea: "Character is not cut in marble—it is not something solid and unalterable. It is something living and changing, and may become diseased as our bodies do." Eliot shows how a character's resolve can be weakened and aspects of human nature, endearing or harmless in youth, can become toxic later in life. By the

same token, she also demonstrates the reverse, expressed in Dorothea's rejoinder to Farebrother: "Then character may be rescued and healed." The novels acknowledge the possibility of change for the better.

But despite such hints at social critique, the novels never go so far as to attack established authority or convention. Eliot knew that revolutions could be dangerous—an awareness central to both *Felix Holt* and *Romola*. She plants germs of new ideas, under the assumption that a change in perception in small things is the safest and surest way to change large ones. Ultimately, her tentativeness and moderation with respect to social reform reflects her belief in the complex interconnectedness of private and public worlds: to pull too hard in one direction is to rent the fabric in the other. Life is a balancing act between what we desire and what we can do (here again, she anticipates Freud).

Her careful attitude toward change also relates to her attachment to the past. "There is no sense of ease like the ease we felt in those scenes where we were born, where objects became dear to us before we had known the labor of choice," she writes in *The Mill on the Floss*. We find meaning in the past, according to Eliot, because it is the world we know. By the same token, that world contains only the seeds of our future lives; their potential may or may not be realized. Mary Garth explains that she loves Fred Vincy "because I have always loved him," but she refuses to marry him until he can realize in some concrete way the potential goodness that inspired her early love. The tragic destinies in Eliot's novels are reserved for those who try to compartmentalize past and present, private and public. Lydgate never achieves his scientific aspirations because he is trapped in a marriage with a woman who cannot respect his work. Bulstrode is eventually toppled from his position of influence because his piety in the present is built on a denial of the past.

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