

# GEORGE ELIOT AND THE TECHNIQUES OF THE NOVEL IN MIDDLEMARCH

Daniel René AKENDENGUÉ,  
Omar Bongo University  
English Department,  
Brazzaville-Gabon

## ABSTRACT

The article deals with George Eliot's techniques of the novel in *Middlemarch*. After defining the method of approach of his analysis, the author of the article deals with the sources and composition of that novel. Then he tries to discover and analyse the different methods used by George Eliot in the building up of her masterpiece.

## INTRODUCTION

*Middlemarch*<sup>1</sup> is the story of Dorothea Brooke who wants to help the others. Unfortunately, she cannot find a way of satisfying her wishes in that town. The object of the present article is to deal with George Eliot's techniques of the novel in *Middlemarch*. By «technique of the novel» one has to understand the set of processes carried out by the novelist to create his work. What we want to show is how the artist organizes all this set of different but complementary elements, which constitute the novel.

### Method of approach

At first, we suggest to list the different elements of analysis present in the text. Then we shall see how they are knit together and what their functions are. The aim of the analysis is to discover the various methods used by the author.

## I. BEGINNINGS AND COMPOSITION OF THE NOVEL

Thanks to the existence of George Eliot's letters and journals as well as the manuscript and the notebook

she kept when writing *Middlemarch* we can have an accurate idea of the origin and composition of her novel. *Middlemarch* was not what George Eliot originally conceived. In the beginning, it was to be not one novel but two. We know from her letters that about the New Year's Day of 1869, George Eliot decided to write a novel. She would call it *Middlemarch*. It was to be a novel about provincial life and the hero was to be a physician. We know from the letters that by 11 September 1869, she had completed an introduction and three chapters and that by May 1870 she had written some more, though as she told her publisher John Blackwood, she was 'not so far along as she intended to be'. In November 1870 George Eliot began another story. Her journal entry for 2<sup>th</sup> December 1870 reads:

*I am experimenting in a story which I began without any serious intention of carrying it out lengthily. It is a subject which has been recorded among my possible themes ever since I began to write fiction, but will probably take new shapes in the development. I am today at p.44.*<sup>2</sup>

Her journal entry for 31 December 1870 reads: «I have written only 100 pages - good printed pages - of a story which I began about the opening of

November, and at present mean to call 'Miss Brooke.' »<sup>3</sup> The next significant journal entry in connection with *Middlemarch* occurs on 19 March 1871: «I have written about 236 pages (print) of my novel, which I want to get off my hands by next November. My present fear is that I have too much matter, too many 'momenti' »<sup>4</sup>

With the evidence that we have, it can be stated with relative certainty that the novel George Eliot refers to is *Middlemarch*, that by that date George Eliot had written the first eighteen chapters of *Middlemarch* plus what is now Chapter 23 and that these chapters consisted of a fusion of the original 'Middlemarch' story with the 'Miss Brooke' story as well as some material that would link the two stories. Evidence also leads us to believe that the first nine and a half chapters or ninety-six pages belonged to the 'Miss Brooke' story, which in the manuscript, ended on page 96 midway through the present Chapter 10. The next sixteen pages of the manuscript have been established as bridging pages written to link the two stories. The dinner party scene in Chapter 10 links 'Middlemarch' with 'Miss Brooke' by introducing 'Middlemarch' characters into the world of «Miss Brooke». What follows these bridging pages is without doubt the hundred or more pages George Eliot had written of 'Middlemarch'. For example, the present Chapter 15 is likely to have been the original introduction. What George Eliot did was to rewrite these pages to fit them into the new *Middlemarch*. There is no evidence that any of the chapters after Chapter 16 were written as part of 'Middlemarch' or 'Miss Brooke' while, from Chapter 18 on, the two worlds and two stories become more and more interrelated.

## II. STRUCTURE AND PLOT

The difficulty to define the word structure appears in the definition that Marlies K. Danziger and W. Stacy Johnson propose in *An Introduction to Literary Criticism*:

*The term does not refer only to the formal aspects the parallels or contrasts of scenes, the climactic*

*or anticlimactic ordering of the plot - but includes the whole of a literary work. In other words, each work not only has a structure but is a structure*<sup>1</sup>.

Raymond Boudon underlines the trouble one has to define this notion:

*Parmi les concepts clés des sciences humaines le concept de structure est sans doute un des plus obscurs...S'il s'agissait d'une notion dépourvue d'équivoque, on ne prendrait sans doute pas tant de peine à la définir*<sup>2</sup>.

For us, the structure of the work is its composition, that is, the way its elements are ordered. In other words the structure of the literary work is at first «... the manner in which it (the literary work) is made »<sup>3</sup>. But structure is also the disposal, the layout of parts.

As regards the novel, structure comprises the introduction, the parts, the chapters, their disposal as well as the conclusion. Structure includes its plot, the disposal of stories and many other elements such as epigraphs and suspenses.

A plot is a succession of events in a novel, a play or a film. Laurence Perrine asserts in *Literature: Structure, sound and Sense*: «Plot is the sequence of incidents of which a story is composed»<sup>4</sup>. Edwin Muir writes in *The Structure of the Novel* about the plot: «It designates...the chain of events in the story and the principle which knits it together »<sup>5</sup>. In *Aspects of the Novel*, E.M. Forster gives a definition of the plot:

*A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. 'The king died and then the queen' is a story. «The king died, and then the queen died of grief» is a plot.*<sup>6</sup>

In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot creates a plot centred around four stories. First, we have the story of Dorothea Brooke and her wedding with Mr Casaubon. Then, we have the plot of her union with Will Ladislaw who is Mr Casaubon's cousin. Thirdly, there is the story of the ambitious Doctor Tertius Lydgate and his union with the beautiful and materialistic Rosamond Vincy. His marriage with the young lady almost leads him to bankruptcy. Finally, we have the story of Fred Vincy and Mary Garth who get married at the end of the novel. The writer makes Dorothea go from one story to another. She consequently assures the unity of the novel. The main characters help each other and prevent each other from falling into tragedy. So, Dorothea saves

### (Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Our quotations are taken from the edition of 1999, © Rosemary Ashton.

<sup>2</sup> Haight Gordon, *George Eliot: A Biography*. London: Blackwell, 1904, p. 432.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 433.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 434.

Lydgate. She also saves Ladislav in inviting him in *Middlemarch*.

It is a novel which is composed of one Prelude, eight books, eighty-six chapters and a Finale. The first book goes from chapter I to chapter 12 (pages 7 to 120). The second one begins in chapter 13 and ends in chapter 22 (pages 123 to 225). Book III starts in chapter 23 and ends in chapter 33 (pages 229 to 319). Book IV goes from chapter 34 to chapter 42 (pages 323 to 427). Book V extends from chapter 43 to chapter 53 (pages 431 to 531). Book VI begins in chapter 54 and ends in chapter 62 (pages 535 to 636). The last but one book goes from chapter 63 to chapter 71 (pages 639 to 730). The last book starts in chapter 72 and finishes in chapter 86 (pages 733 to 831). The «Finale» goes from pages 832 to 838. George Eliot has the concern of making the books of her novel balance. That is why she makes the books have an average of ten chapters, except book IV which has only eight chapters. For example, book II contains ten chapters, book III comprises eleven chapters, book V has eleven chapters. Furthermore, the woman novelist makes the effort of building books composed of about one hundred pages each. We come to the conclusion that *Middlemarch* is a well balanced work of fiction.

### III. NARRATION AND FOCALISATION

#### A. NARRATION

##### - An omniscient Narrator

*Middlemarch* is, generally speaking, told by a narrator who is omniscient, heterodiegetic and extradiegetic at the same time. That narrator is omniscient because he knows all the characters of the story. He knows everything about them. In the text, there are many passages which show that the narrator has the mastery of narration. For instance when the narrator says on page 399 of the novel: «*The group I am moving towards...*», he shows us that he directs the narration. We follow the narrative or the story according to what he wants to show us. We are in front of a narrator-guide. In addition, when the narrator appears through the personal pronoun «I» that he uses on pages 84 (twice), 85, 141 (twice), 142, 166, 192, 194 (three times), 241, 242, 278, 280, 281, 299, 301, 331, 334, 350, 363, 399, 409, 412, 413, 418 and 581, we have the certainty that it is the narrator who is

the main responsible for the story. We are conditioned by what he says or infers. The narrator confirms his status as the chief of the narration when he declares in chapter 15 concerning Lydgate: «*At present I have to make the new settler Lydgate better known to any one interested in him than he could possibly be even to those who had seen the most of him since his arrival in Middlemarch.*» (pp.141-142) In other words, he takes the responsibility of presenting Lydgate and telling us his story. We can conclude at this stage that *Middlemarch* is the story of Dorothea Brooke, explained and commented by the omniscient narrator. We also have the proof that the narrator manages narration when he says: «*...and as I began to say a little while ago...*» (p. 281). Another certitude that he manages narration is when he affirms: «*Mr Bulstrode paused a little before he answered...*» (p. 130). Furthermore, he says in chapter 15: «*I repeat there was a general impression that Lydgate was something rather more uncommon than any general practitioner in Middlemarch.*» (p.142) The narrator is omniscient. Many other examples prove that. On page 177, the narrative instance makes us see his authority on the narration of the story when he affirms: «*Some weeks passed after this conversation...*» On page 194, we read: «*...in some general words as I have already used...*» And on page 229, the instance tells us: «*Fred Vincy, we have seen had a debt on his mind...*»

The narrator of *Middlemarch* is heterodiegetic, that is to say, he was not a witness of that story. In other words, he was not a character of that narrative. In addition, he is extradiegetic, that is, he does not belong to the same universe than the story he is telling us. In other words, he is out of the diegesis.

#### (Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Marlies K. Danziger and W. Stacy Johnson, *An Introduction to Literary Criticism*, Boston, D.C. Heath and Company, 1961, p.14.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Boudon, *A quoi sert la notion de «structure» ?*, Paris, Gallimard, 1968, p.13

<sup>3</sup> J.A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1976, p. 277.

<sup>4</sup> Laurence Perrine, *Literature, Structure, Sound and Sense*, 2d edition, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Atlanta, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich inc. 1974, p. 43.

<sup>5</sup> Edwin Muir, *The Structure of the Novel*, London, the Hogarth Press, 1957, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Penguin Books, Oliver Stallybrass editor, 1974, p. 87

## B. FOCALISATION

### - A narrative led in zero focalisation

*Middlemarch* is a narrative with zero focalisation in which the focaliser sees everything. The focaliser of this story is a focaliser subject not delegated, that is to say, a focalising instance who assumes the quasi totality of the focalisation and who does not, in principle, delegate focalisation to characters. *Middlemarch* being a novel with a focalisation subject not delegated, the subject focaliser of this narrative has the possibility of making us imagine the universe of the story with its characters, its space, etc... thanks to his use of zero focalisation, internal focalisation and external focalisation. In that novel, we come across many passages in zero focalisation. We can say that it is a novel led, generally speaking, in zero focalisation. The first passage is met on page 8, when the focaliser avers: «*It was hardly a year since they had come to live at Tipton Grange with their uncle, a man nearly sixty, of acquiescent temper, miscellaneous opinions, and uncertain vote.*» On page 9, the zero focalisation appears again through the following quotation: «*And how should Dorothea not marry? – a girl so handsome and with such prospects? Nothing could hinder it but her love of extremes, and her insistence on regulating life according to notions which might cause a wary man to hesitate before he made her an offer.*» The third focalisation intervenes on page 27 in which we read: «*It was three o'clock in the beautiful breezy autumn day when Mr Casaubon drove off to his Rectory at Lowick, only five miles from Tipton; and Dorothea, who had on her bonnet and shawl, hurried along the shrubbery and across the park that she might wander through the bordering wood...*» Those passages in zero focalisation are, in total, found eighty four times in the diegesis (pp 8, 9, 10, 27, 28, 29, 33, 34, 48, 60, 61, 62, 63, 85, 117, 123, 142, 143, 163, 164, 165, 178, 179, 190, 192, 200, 209, 211, 267, 268, 275, 278, 299, 300, 301, 314, 315, 341, 360, 371, 375, 417, 418, 419, 420, 421, 427, 432, 478, 479, 497, 498, 547, 586, 587, 614, 615, 635, 647, 655, 677, 678, 679, 697, 698, 737, 738, 739, 740, 745, 757, 769, 770, 771, 772, 773, 795, 804, 818, 833, 834, 835, 836, 838) So, passages in zero focalisation are found in one tenth of the novel. Most of the time, the reader feels their presence through verbs such as «to feel» and «to think». On page 737, for example, the focaliser says: «*He felt himself becoming violent and unreasonable as if*

*raging under the pain of stings...*» On the same page, the focalising instance affirms: «*Lydgate thought of himself as the sufferer and others as agents who had injured his lot. He had meant everything to turn out differently...*» A third example is found on chapter 76, the moment when the focaliser says: «*Dorothea on her side had immediately formed a plan of relieving Lydgate from his obligation to Bulstrode, which she felt sure was a part... of the galling pressure he had to bear.*» (p.769) The verbs «to feel» and «to think» are found again on pages 770, 772, 795, 804 and 818. The first function of those verbs is to make us know what characters think or feel. The second function is to make the reader realise the power the focaliser has in seeing and reading in the consciousness of characters.

## IV. SPACE

*Middlemarch* essentially takes places in the town of Middlemarch. But in that town, there are some districts and localities such as Tipton Grange where Dorothea lives with her uncle Mr Brooke. That place is quoted on pages 8, 59, 61, 63 and 97. A second place is Stone Court which is cited on pages 104, 105, 252, 256, 304, 535 and 697. Another important district of Middlemarch is Lowick where Mr Casaubon lives. The reader encounters that locality on pages 104, 105, 273, 278, 409, 483, 484, 485, 486, 493, 571, 760 and 773. Furthermore, the names of some countries and towns are present in the diegesis. Most of the time, they recall the places where characters passed by or lived. For instance, we have the names of French towns or localities such as Porte St Martin (p.152), Lyons (p.152), Avignon (p.152), Paris (p.153), Chambers (p.153). Rome, the capital of Italy is seen on pages 192, 204, 215, 276 and 282. All those places symbolise open spaces. Other open spaces are represented by nature and gardens (pp.513, 730). *Middlemarch* abounds in enclosed spaces. The most important ones are rooms that we come across on pages 97, 123, 192, 260, 267, 273, 290, 314, 624, 650, 654, 726, 727, 749, 755, 771, 777 and 788. Then, we have drawing or sitting rooms that the reader meets on pages 48, 132, 284, 296, 346, 350, 362, 432, 435, 541, 542, 543, 579, 644, 735, 746, 781 and 791. We also have libraries or studies cited on pages 38, 53, 274, 275, 280, 281, 282, 283, 284, 287, 387, 426, 455, 475, 480, 483, 484, 485, 486 and 761. Sometimes, the novelist gives us an image of these spaces through descriptions. Open spaces are portrayed on pages 73, 74, 104, 168, 323 and 513.

On page 73, for instance, the narrator presents the Manor house, saying: «*It had a small park, with a fine old oak here and there, and an avenue of limes towards the south-west front, with a sunk fence between park and pleasure ground...*» On page 104, he speaks of the midland landscape when he says: «*...a pretty bit of midland landscape, almost all meadows and pastures, with hedgerows still allowed to grow in bushy beauty and to spread out coral fruit for the birds...*» Finally, on page 323, we have the description of an open space located in Middlemarch. The narrator says: «*...a chill wind was blowing the blossoms from the surrounding gardens on to the green mounds of Lowick churchyard.*» Enclosed spaces are described on pages 74, 75 and 541. On page 74, for example, it is about the description of Mr Casaubon's house: «*...the dark book-shelves in the long library, the carpets and curtains with colours subdued by time, the curious old maps and bird's eye views on the walls of the corridor...*» On page 541, we have a description of the drawing room: «*The drawing-room was the most neutral room in the house to her (Dorothea)...the damask matched the wood-work, which was all white and gold; there were two tall mirrors and tables...*» As far as the functions of spaces are concerned, open spaces are sometimes seen as tragic places. The illustration is given on page 482 in which Mr Casaubon is found dead by her wife. The narrator reports: «*...she thought that he must be fast asleep. She laid her hand on his shoulder...Still he was motionless, and with a sudden confused fear; she leaned down to him, took off his velvet cap, and leaned her cheek close to his head, crying in a distressed tone...*» As for enclosed spaces, they are sometimes seen as places where characters ask for forgiveness. It is the case on page 701 in which Lydgate asks his wife Rosamond to forgive him because he is bankrupt, and because he has brought her to misery. The novel reads: «*He (Lydgate) sat down by the bed and leaning over her said with almost a cry of prayer – 'Forgive me for this misery, my poor Rosamond! Let us only love one another.'*» Sometimes, enclosed spaces are viewed as places where characters discover secret things. It is the case on page 775 in which Dorothea surprises Rosamond and Ladislaw that she loves, holding hands. Dorothea sees them in the following passage:

*...she saw Will Ladislaw: close by him and turned towards him with a flushed tearfulness which gave a new brilliancy to her face sat Rosamond...while Will leaning towards her clasped both her upraised hands in his and spoke with low-toned fervour.»*

Dorothea is so disappointed that, once back at her bedroom, the narrator tells us: «*...she lost energy at last even for her loud-whispered cries and moans: she subsided into helpless sobs, and on the cold floor she sobbed herself to sleep.*» (p.787)

In the following sub part, we intend to deal with time and see how it is treated by the novelist.

## V. TIME

At the beginning of the novel, George Eliot tries to make us follow the chronology of the story. So, we have indications of months. On page 11, for instance, the reader knows that it is September because Celia, one of the characters, says: «*It is the last day of September.*» On page 27, the story is taking place in October. Indeed, the narrative instance states: «*The inclination which he had deliberately stated on the 2d of October he would think it enough to refer to by the mention of that date.*» Forty-six pages down, the story is situated on November. The story-teller says: «*On a grey but dry November morning Dorothea drove to Lowick in company with her uncle and Celia.*» (p.73) In chapter 28, the story reaches the month of January of the following year (p.273). In chapter 34, we are in May (p.323). In chapter 63, it is January of the third year of the story. The narrator alludes to that month when he states: «*That was the state of things with Lydgate and Rosamond on the New year's Day...*» (p.661). In chapter 67, the plot is situated in March (p.678). We can conclude, at that level, that George Eliot makes the effort of giving the reader some landmarks allowing the latter to find himself.

*Middlemarch* contains pauses. These are moments when the story stops to give way to the commentaries, descriptions and even the digressions of the narrator. At the end of chapter 6 for instance, the narrator discloses his personal reflections. He says:

*– We mortals, men and women, devour many a disappointment between breakfast and dinner-time, keep back the tears and look a little pale about the lips, and in answer to inquiries say, 'Oh, nothing!' Pride helps us, and pride is not a bad thing when it only urges us to hide our own hurts – not to hurt others.(p.62)*

Here, we do not have any direct link with the story. That passage is rather a digression. That novel is built on scenes. Let us just recall that it is in scenes that

the duration of the narration equals that of the story. These scenes occur during dialogues. Here, we would like to underline that *Middlemarch* is a dramatic novel, we mean, a novel which contains many actions, many dialogues or scenes. We find them in all the eighty-six chapters of the novel. Summaries are not absent. We find nine of them (pages 50, 83, 94, 117, 278, 535, 679, 760 and 824). There are ten ellipses (pages 83, 117, 278, 290, 300, 431, 535, 679, 760, 824) *Middlemarch* is an analeptic novel since the narrator tells us a story which had already taken place. Nonetheless, George Eliot inserts two small analepses within the diegesis (pages 97 and 443). She chooses not to include prolepses in that novel.

## VI. CHARACTERISATION

*Middlemarch* contains one hundred and fifty characters. There are seven main characters: Dorothea, Mr Casaubon, Tertius Lydgate, Will Ladislaw, Rosamond Vincy, Mary Garth and Mr Bulstrode. Dorothea is not the hero as such. She is rather the emerging character because she appears in the four main plots. What is noteworthy is that George Eliot uses the technique of the emblem to make us see what characterises some characters. Then, Dorothea wears a bonnet and a shawl most of the time she is seen in the diegesis. On page 27, the narrator says concerning her: «...and Dorothea, who had on her bonnet and shawl, hurried along the shrubbery...» On page 38, her bonnet is highlighted when the narrator affirms: «She threw off her mantle and bonnet and sat down opposite to him...» On page 52, the bonnet and shawl reappear the moment the instance states: «In spite of her shabby bonnet and very old Indian shawl, it was plain that the lodge-keeper regarded her as an important personage...» In chapter 47, Dorothea's is perceived through her bonnet: «Dorothea did at least appear... in her white beaver bonnet and grey cloak.» (p. 472) In chapter 62, the story teller alludes to her bonnet the moment he asserts: «...and Dorothea...took off her gloves and bonnet, while she was leaning against a statue in the entrance-hall...» (p. 630). Finally, on page 635, the instance tells us: «...her eyes were bright and her cheeks blooming under the dismal bonnet.» The novelist uses the same device to characterise Rosamond Vincy. That character is seen through musical and floral allusions. On page 94, she is described under musical allusions: «That is what a woman ought to be: she ought to produce the effect of exquisite music... But Rosamond Vincy seemed to have the true melodic charm...» On page

96, she is presented under the forms of a flower: «She was admitted to be the flower of Mrs Lemon's school...» The bringing together with music is perceived five lines down when the narrative instance says: «her musical execution was quite exceptional.» (p. 96) In chapter 12, Mr Featherstone asks Rosamond to sing for him (p. 116) On page 159, Lydgate tells Rosamond that he regrets that he could not come to hear her sing. On page 160, we are told that «Rosamond played admirably». On page 161, we are informed that she could also sing 'Black-eyed Susan'. And on page 166, the instance speaks of Rosamond and her music.

## CONCLUSION

The object of this article was to deal with George Eliot's techniques of the novel in *Middlemarch*, her masterpiece. We can retain that the narrator of that story is omniscient. The story is led in zero focalisation. The story is well organised. To expand the plot, George Eliot has been obliged to create new characters and invent new stories. Open and enclosed spaces have specific functions. The author uses the technique of the emblem in characterisation. All in all, *Middlemarch* deserves its place as one of the best English novels ever written in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century.

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