MIDDLEMARCH AND MORALITY: A STUDY OF THE DEVELOPMENT
OF GEORGE ELIOT'S ETHICAL CREED
by
PATRICK ANTHONY CHARLES CAMPBELL

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This thesis is a study of George Eliot's moral philosophy as revealed in her novels.

Since the novelist's ethical creed did not undergo any radical change after 1850, I have devoted the initial chapter to a discussion of her early training and reading.

In Chapter two, an analysis is made of George Eliot's early works of fiction. As a result, both of her religious training and her avid reading of moralistic literature, she is too prone to pass judgement on her characters. Sometimes sympathetic to her creations, she is often intolerant of moral laxity in these novels.

In Middlemarch, this ambivalence of moral vision is no longer noticeable; the voice of the austere moralist, judging by inflexible standards, is muted. This development is partially attributable to a more skilful and less frequent use of didactic devices than hitherto. Chapter three is therefore devoted to an analysis of the novelist's didactic technique in Middlemarch.

The final chapter shows that George Eliot the moral philosopher has also developed in Middlemarch. Her views have not altered radically, but her outlook is more catholic, and the elements in her ethical creed are blended more effectively than in her early novels.
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Department of English

The University of British Columbia, Vancouver 8, Canada.

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Introduction

Though George Eliot is one of the most discussed of novelists, no twentieth century critic has attempted a full-scale assessment of her moral philosophy. Yet her own age regarded her as an ethical teacher and it was her consciously held aim as a writer of fiction to widen the reader's moral sensibility. In a letter of 1859, she remarked:

... The only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings is, that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the hard fact of being struggling, erring, human creatures.¹

This essay discusses the controlling ideas in the novelist's ethical creed as displayed in her works of fiction. Since George Eliot's moral outlook did not undergo any radical change after 1850, I have devoted the initial chapter to a study of her early life. The formative influences brought to bear on her during these years were diverse and even conflicting; as a result her adolescence and early womanhood were periods of conflict and soul-searching.

¹ J. W. Cross, ed., George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals, Edinburgh, Blackwood, 1885, p. 279. (subsequently referred to as Cross, Life.)
In Chapter two, an analysis is made of George Eliot's early novels. They are the work of an artist and thinker who is not fully mature. As a result of studying so much didactic and moralistic writing, she is too prone to instruct and edify the reader. More important, the elements in her moral philosophy are not fully blended, an ambivalence which can be attributed to the varied nature of George Eliot's early reading and training. Sometimes she responds to her characters sympathetically, or suggests that good and evil are relative; all too often, she judges her creations harshly and insists on Puritanic standards of conduct.

The second half of the thesis seeks to show that *Middlemarch* is relatively free from these faults. In Chapter three, I have suggested that George Eliot, the artist, has matured; she is now more willing to let her imaginative creation speak for itself. Though none of the force of its moral teaching is lost, *Middlemarch* is artistically more satisfying than the early novels. Moreover, the novel presents a less critical view of humanity than the preceding works, for George Eliot is most indulgent when she forgets her "message" and allows her emotions full sway.

In Chapter four, I have indicated that in *Middlemarch*, George Eliot, the moral philosopher, has developed. She is less dogmatic than before, and her outlook is
more comprehensive. Her views have not altered radically, but she does not emphasize the austere aspects of her ethical creed so frequently as in her previous works. Middlemarch, then, is the product of an accomplished artist and an enlightened mind; it is little wonder that the novel conveys a consistently sympathetic view of life.
Chapter I

In the early nineteenth century, Griff was a typical Staffordshire village. Here, as in most of rural England, the social, political and religious upheavals of the day had as yet made no significant impact. The villagers knew nothing of the Evangelical revival stemming from the oratory of Wesley and Whitefield; or of the demand for economic and political reform being made by the pioneering radicals in the mushroom towns of Birmingham and Manchester. In Griff life went on its unhurried way, much as it had done for centuries.

It was in this tranquil atmosphere that Mary Ann Evans was born on November 22nd, 1819. Her parents were unexceptional people. Robert Evans, warmhearted and industrious, was an estate manager - an obvious model for Caleb Garth in his daughter's Middlemarch. Her mother, a woman of higher social position, was likewise an indulgent parent, though the portraits of Mrs. Poyser and Mrs. Hackit, inspired in part by Mrs. Evans, suggest that she could be caustic when the occasion demanded it. There were two other children, both older than Mary Ann. As we learn from a series of sonnets entitled Brother and Sister and written many years later, George Eliot worshipped
her brother Isaac:

I thought his knowledge marked the boundary
Where men grew blind, though angels knew the rest.
If he said "Hush"! I tried to hold my breath;
Wherever he said, "Come"! I stepped in faith.¹

These early years were of great importance in
the development of Marian's personality. She was a very
sensitive child, endowed with an emotional nature. Such
happy experiences at Arbury Farm must have convinced her
of the value of affection; certainly she was to maintain,
in adulthood, that a sympathetic outlook should be culti­
vated by everyone. As Deakin insists: "There is no
doubt that the sweet, sunny calm of these early days and
places has much to do with the quiet, reposeful strength
which characterizes so much of her work."² Moreover,
during her vacations from boarding school, Mary Ann, or
Marian as she preferred to be called, drew in those
impressions of rural and provincial life which she would,
one day, incorporate in her novels.

When Marian was sent to Nuneaton, other influences
were brought to bear on the impressionable girl. Here,
at Miss Lewis's school, she was able to satisfy her grow­
ing desire for knowledge. Even at this early age,

¹ George Eliot, Brother and Sister Sonnets, Privately printed, 1869, Cited in Mary H. Deakin, The Early Life of
² Ibid., p. 11.
moralistic literature attracted her, for she read Aesop's Fables and doubtless imbibed many of its moral truths. At the age of eight, she began reading Scott, and the references to Waverly in Middlemarch are indicative of the life-long fascination that its author held for her.

Much more significant than the influence of books, however, was the personal influence exercised on Marian by Miss Lewis. Like Maggie of The Mill on the Floss, Marian was early possessed of intense moral earnestness and a passionate nature which tended toward self-mistrust and self-mortification. Religious zeal, however, was not inculcated at home, and it was Miss Lewis who canalized the girl's yearnings in the direction of Evangelicalism.

Marian's religious convictions were strengthened when she was sent, at the age of twelve, to a boarding school run by the Franklin sisters. Yet though Marian's work of fiction were later to indicate how deep an impression her teacher's Calvinistic moral views had made on her, she did not accept their opinions without considerable inner strife. For a girl who needed both to give and to receive affection, Calvinism was a rigorous creed. We may rightly question whether it was wise for Marian to shun all worldly pleasures and to brood over moral problems. As Mathilde Blind infers, Marian's state of mind was hardly that of a normal young girl at this time:
Inner solitude was no doubt the portion of George Eliot in those days . . . Strong religious convictions pervaded her life at this period and in the fervid faith and spiritual exaltation which characterize Maggie's girlhood, we have a very faithful picture of the future novelist's own state of mind.

In fact, Marian must have been less happy at this time than most of her biographers would have us believe. When George Eliot talks of Maggie's "painful collisions," she is surely drawing on the experience of her own childhood, and thinking of her own attempts to reconcile the austere morality of Calvinism with her forgiving nature. Yet George Eliot always insisted that her early training at Miss Franklin's school had been valuable. Long after, we find her writing to Mrs. Bray on hearing of the death of her old tutor: "Thanks for sending me word of poor Miss Rebecca Franklin's death. It touches me deeply."

During these years at Coventry, Marian continued to read extensively. She found little satisfaction in secular books, preferring such works as Paradise Lost and Pilgrim's Progress. Such was her zest for theology that she even carried Paley's Evidences of the Existence and

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5 Cross, Life, p. 513.
Attributes of the Deity up to her room on one occasion, and devoured it as she lay on her bed. Just as Maggie found consolation in Thomas à Kempis' *De Imitatione Christi*, so Marian derived similar satisfaction from Calvinist works.

Marian, however, still yearned for family affection, and the death of her mother in 1836 must have come as a rude shock to a mere girl of seventeen. She had already left school; she now insisted on taking charge of the household affairs. Such an existence did not come easily to her. In a rather melodramatic letter of November, she compared her "besetments" to those of Wilberforce.⁶

1836 probably marks the high point of Marian's religiosity. Her letters are studded with biblical texts and frequently reveal the Puritanic bias of her mind. Nevertheless, the scope of her reading was slowly becoming broader. By September of the following year, we find her writing:

My mind presents just such an assemblage of disjointed specimens of history, ancient and modern; scraps of poetry picked up from Shakespeare, Cowper, Wordsworth and Milton; newspaper topics; morsels of Addison and Bacon, Latin verbs, geometry, entomology and chemistry; Reviews and metaphysics, - all arrested and petrified and smothered by the fast thickening everyday accession of actual events, relative anxieties, and household cares and vexations.⁷

Yet Marian was still interested mainly in religious and moral tracts. It was through her reading of Taylor's *Ancient Christianity and the Oxford Tracts* that the seeds of religious uncertainty were sown. Apart from the author's convincing arguments concerning the venality of the Early Church, arguments bound to affect a moralist such as Marian, Taylor's views also caused her to question some of her ethical assumptions. For him, a system of factitious and superhuman piety was impractical; he made her doubt the value of mere self-repression unless it promoted the welfare of others:

"Let the same mind be in you as was in Christ Jesus who pleased not himself." This sovereign rule of behaviour may make a man a martyr, or may induce him to lead a single life, or may impel him to traverse the globe having no certain dwelling place - when the doing so shall clearly, and in the judgment of good sense, tend to promote truth in the world.8

Such ideas made a deep impression on Marian; she referred to Taylor in a letter to Miss Lewis as "one of the most eloquent, acute and pious of writers."9 But when she moved away from the placid Staffordshire countryside in 1841, her agnosticism was still embryonic. Coventry, however, was to hasten her progress along the


9 Cross, *Life*, p. 35.
road to free-thinking. The Evanses found themselves next door to Mrs. Pears, a sister of Charles Bray. Bray was a frequent visitor to his sister's home and met Marian almost immediately. In his autobiography he comments:

We became friends at once. We soon found that her mind was already turning towards greater freedom of thought in religious opinion, that she had even bought for herself Hennell's "An Inquiry" and there was much mutual interest between the author and herself in their frequent meetings at our house.\textsuperscript{10}

Marian had probably begun to read Hennell's book some months before she met Bray; certainly he, a free-thinker, encouraged her to continue with it. Any remaining tendencies to regard her life as a religious pilgrimage vanished; she saw the limitations of her position - that of a Calvinist with a stern belief in predestination and a horror of all worldly delights.

In Hennell's \textit{An Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity}, Christ was represented as an enthusiast, a mere assumer of the role of Messiah. The gospels were not, he maintained, the work of eye-witnesses and the stories had even, on occasions, been altered to accord with Old Testament prophecies. Such accounts might be valuable as a statement of faith, but when subjected to a scientific investigation, they could not be accepted

\textsuperscript{10} Charles Bray, \textit{Autobiography}, p. 76, cited in Deakin, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 41.
Hennell was not, however, merely a destructive researcher. His agnosticism laid just as strong an emphasis on certain moral ideas as did Marian's Calvinism. She therefore eagerly embraced at least two tenets of Hennell's philosophy and, many years later, repeatedly incorporated them in her novels. He, like Bray, believed in the doctrine of consequences as one of the laws of the universe, and he applied this theory to the incidents of the New Testament. Christ, argued Hennell:

...by raising the widow's son at Nain, removed the natural penalty of the youth's own ill-regulated conduct, or that of his fathers. But if he had taken that occasion to make known the connection established between imprudence and suffering, by explaining the causes which led to the young man's premature death, he would have acted in accordance with the divine laws, he would have saved many widows' sons from the same fate, and would have given a more permanent and convincing proof of his being a man sent from God.11

Yet Hennell insisted that Christian doctrine was valuable as a moral stimulus despite these shortcomings. People, he believed, would find a substitute for the supernatural in the privileges and duties of this life; in the advance of science, in the strengthening of character by adversity, and by discovering "in all the natural beauty

and moral excellence which meet us in the world an ever-present Logos, which reveals the grace and truth of its invisible source.\textsuperscript{12}

While Hennell's views on religion were not immediately accepted by Marian, his moral outlook coincided at many points with hers. His belief in the existence of a moral law in the universe, and his respect for the ethical code furnished by Christianity were ideas which were fully acceptable to the most orthodox Calvinist.

The influence of Bray during this period must not be underestimated. Certainly none of his writings made such a deep impression on Marian as Hennell's \textit{Inquiry}. But Bray's personal influence was, as he himself recognised, considerable. The home at Rosehill, the residence of the Brays, was often visited by Marian. Though such distinguished intellects as Combe, Emerson and Froude met there too, Bray himself was her firmest friend. While his brother-in-law's book gave her an acceptable account of the origin of her earlier beliefs, Bray was at hand to give intellectual and moral support when she openly renounced Christianity. As late as 1843, she was

writing to him: "Your words of affection seem to make this earthly atmosphere sit less heavily on my shoulders."\(^\text{13}\)

The whole group was sympathetically disposed towards Marian when she decided to reject religion. It was a change amounting almost to a revolution, and it is unfortunate that there are no letters which give direct information about this crisis. However, a letter written by Mrs. John Cash to J. W. Cross throws some light on the actual date of Marian's "conversion":

It was not until the winter of 1841, or early in 1842, that my mother first received the information that a total change had taken place in the gifted woman's mind with regard to the evangelical religion which she had obviously believed in up to the time of her coming to Coventry . . . .\(^\text{14}\)

Marian was obviously encouraged in her decision by the fact that she was living among people, who, though refusing to call themselves Christians, were more concerned about morals than most people of religion. She had found little joy in a severe, ascetic Christianity, which involved a degree of masochistic self-repression; and though her refusal to attend church led to strained relations with her father, she never wavered from her chosen path. The road of enlightenment was, nevertheless, thorny and steep. Mrs. Bray's sympathy must have been a

\(^{13}\) Cross, *Life*, p. 102.

great help. We find Marian writing to her in February, 1842: "A heart full of love and gratitude to you for all your kindness in thought and act to me undeserving."\textsuperscript{15}

Thus Marian, though but twenty-three, and with a rich and varied future before her, had already experienced the profoundest spiritual change of her life. Her code of ethics, if somewhat embryonic at present, would not undergo radical change in the coming years. Joan Bennett says in her critical biography of the novelist:

\begin{quote}
There was no subsequent revolution in her ideas; the standpoint of Herbert Spencer, of G. H. Lewes, of the writings of Auguste Comte and of Feuerbach tended to confirm and enlarge, not to alter, the conception she developed at Coventry.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Though this period was one of inner conflict, Marian's emotional and sympathetic nature was unchanged. She was soon reconciled with her father. Indeed, until his death in 1849, she was to keep house for him at Foleshill, attending church simply to satisfy his feelings. Her circle of friends was expanding, however, and through her friendship with a Dr. Brabant, she came to translate Strauss's \textit{Leben Jesu}. The task occupied her from 1844 to 1846. This was the first intellectual assignment of her life, and though it was a far cry from such painstaking scholarship to the imaginative writing which was to prove

\textsuperscript{15} Cross, \textit{Life}, p. 66.

\textsuperscript{16} Bennett, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 25.
her vocation, the experience was valuable. It was her apprenticeship to letters, and it helped to clarify her own views on moral and religious issues.

Strauss was, in fact, engaged in work similar to that of Hennell. Part of his Leben Jesu was little more than an erudite expansion of many of Hennell's theories. The treatise, compiled with typical thoroughness, consisted of an examination of the Gospels, and a refutation of their claims to historical accuracy. Strauss wrote with confidence concerning the impact of his book:

The boundless store of truth and life which for eighteen centuries had been the aliment of humanity, seems irretrievably dissipated; the most sublime levelled with the dust; God divested of his grace, man of his dignity; and the tie between earth and heaven broken.17

Like Hennell, however, Strauss professed a veneration for all religions and especially for Christianity. If he maintained that the Bible was a carefully contrived imaginative product rather than a piece of history, he did identify the "substance" of Christianity with deep philosophical truth.

Marian found the translation of this scholarly work a monumental, and at times frustrating, task. As she intimated in a letter to Sara Hennell, Strauss's

views did not coincide at all points with her own:

I am never pained when I think Strauss right - but in many cases I think him wrong, as every man must be in working out into detail an idea which has general truth, but is only one element in a perfect theory - not a perfect theory in itself.18

Nevertheless, Marian found much to admire and ponder in Strauss. Both his veneration for Christianity, and his view that clergymen should attempt to lead their listeners in the right moral direction, she enthusiastically endorsed.

After this long and tedious task had been completed, Marian plunged, almost immediately, into the work of translating Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Such work, however, did not prevent her from reading voraciously. Her diet no longer consisted of pious memoirs or works of religious exhortation. Now it was less restricted and included such authors as Schiller, Emerson, Richardson, Rousseau and even George Sand. Such varied fare must have considerably broadened Marian's outlook, though the moral values of Calvinistic Methodism were too deeply ingrained in her to be wholly erased.

The emotional side of Marian's nature was never repressed by so much intellectual endeavour. Indeed, her powers of sympathy and endurance were being tested to the full by the long illness of her father, an illness

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18 Cross, *Life*, p. 79.
to which she often referred in her correspondence with Sara Hennell. A typical comment is found in a letter of June 23rd, 1849. "My heart bleeds for dear father's pain, but it is blessed to be at hand to give the soothing word and act needed." 19

During this period, Spinoza undoubtedly influenced Marian. Her letters reveal her awareness that a mere translation of his ideas into English would be inadequate. She wrote in this vein to Bray on December 4th, 1849:

What is wanted in English is not a translation of Spinoza's works but a true estimate of his life and system. After one has rendered his Latin faithfully into English, one feels that there is another yet more difficult process of translation for the reader to effect, and that the only mode of making Spinoza accessible to a larger number is to study his books, then shut them and give an analysis. 20

From such a passage, it seems clear that Spinoza played a scarcely less significant part than Bray, Hennell and Strauss in freeing her from the "Procrustean bed of dogma." "How exquisite," she remarked enthusiastically in a letter of April, 1849, "is the satisfaction of feeling that another mind than your own sees precisely where and what is the difficulty - and can exactly appreciate the success with which it is overcome." 21

19 Cross, Life, p. 104.
20 Ibid., p. 127.
21 Ibid., p. 110.
Spinoza's influence on George Eliot, the moral philosopher, has, I believe, been underestimated. In two specific ways, he modified her views. Firstly he confirmed her growing conviction that mere self-denial was, in itself, valueless. Congenial indeed was Spinoza's insistence that:

It is the part of a wise man, I say, to refresh and invigorate himself with moderate and pleasant eating and drinking, with sweet scents and the beauty of green plants, with ornament, with music, with sports, with the theatre and with all the things of this kind which one can enjoy without hurting one another.22

Of course, Marian could never fully accept Spinoza's position. Sometimes indeed, in her novels, she harps unrealistically on the value of complete self-abnegation. But on other occasions, she does, like the philosopher, allow that man's emotions must be given free rein.

Secondly, Marian noted with interest Spinoza's belief in the relativity of evil, a doctrine which Spencer and Comte were to impress upon her later. As Spinoza insisted, "one and the same thing may at the same time be both good and evil or indifferent."23 Even if she did not immediately or completely accept such a view of

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23 Ibid., p. 179.
things, Spinoza's theory must have made her see more clearly the dangers of a rigid morality.

When her father died in May, 1849, Marian Evans was twenty-nine. Now she was tied no longer by family bonds to any one place. Her vision of life had expanded, her unusual gifts as a translator had been amply revealed, but as yet she had not tried to embody her views in imaginative writing. For the moment, however, she was depressed and rundown. She therefore left England with the Brays for an extended holiday. The change of scene had the desired effect. At Campagne Plongeon and then at Geneva, she shook off her fits of melancholia. Her letters reflect this change of mood. To Mrs. Bray she wrote in December:

My good friends here only change for the better. Mme. D'Albert is all affection; M. D'Albert all delicacy and intelligence; the friends to whom they have introduced me very kind in their attentions.\(^{24}\)

The craving for sympathy, so strongly developed in the adolescent girl, was still an ever-present need. At this time, as during the period of her creative labours, she placed the virtues of understanding and affection high on her list of desirable moral attributes.

Early in 1850, Marian returned home. Cross says little about the next four years — we learn elsewhere

\(^{24}\) Cross, *Life*, p. 127.
that they were not particularly happy. Back in London, she accepted the position of assistant editor of the Westminster Review, and started boarding at the editor's house in the Strand. She was leaving the Midland scene which she knew so well and which was to provide the setting for her early novels, for the intellectual atmosphere of the metropolis. Most of the material she was to use in her novels was already gathered, but it needed ripening and mellowing by time and still more by distance.

The Westminster Review had been founded by the Benthamites in 1824. Among its contributors were Herbert Spencer, Harriet Martineau, J. S. Mill, Froude, Mazzini and G. H. Lewes. The prevailing tone of the periodical was positivist at the time and both Mill and Lewes were admirers of Comte. During the three months that Marian boarded at Chapman's home, it was the editor himself that she saw most often. Chapman, a handsome and conceited man, in fact believed that Marian was violently in love with him. Most early biographers, indulging their penchant for the sentimental and melodramatic, have endorsed this view. Haight in his George Eliot and John Chapman is more guarded:

There is little question that she was guilty of some indiscretion, which was probably magnified by the exacerbated feelings of the other ladies.
Whatever it was, I feel sure that Chapman provoked it.\(^{25}\)

In any event, Marian's friendship with Herbert Spencer was of much greater significance in the formation of her moral outlook. His soothing influence is revealed in one of Marian's letters to Sara Hennell:

> My brightest spot, next to my love of old friends, is the deliciously calm new friendship that Herbert Spencer gives me. We see each other every day and have a delightful "camaraderie" in everything. But for him my life would be desolate enough. What a wretched lot of old shrivelled creatures we shall be by and by.\(^{26}\)

It seems unlikely that Spencer's views made any lasting impression on Marian save where they coincided with her own. The friends disagreed, for example, with regard to Comte; Marian was inclined to go further in agreement with the French philosopher than was Spencer. In fact the latter denied that he influenced Marian's outlook, and even published a letter to this effect. However, it was understanding rather than erudition that she required during these years on the *Westminster Review*, and Spencer helped to soothe a mind which lacked repose. Moreover, he introduced her to George Henry Lewes, later to become her partner in life.

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Editorial work, concerts and discussions might well have engrossed all her time; yet during these first years in London, Marian read and translated Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*. Such work added weight to her already firm convictions concerning the validity of Strauss's and Hennell's viewpoints. Basil Willey in his *Nineteenth Century Studies* gives a concise account of Feuerbach's main argument:

Feuerbach's work belongs to that powerful stream . . . flowing from Hegel to Marx, which was driving men deeper and deeper in upon themselves, and teaching them to discover in their own needs and longings as individuals, but above all as members of human society, the source and indeed the whole reality of the ideal worlds of thought and faith.27

In a passage strangely Swinburnian in tone, Feuerbach himself emphasizes this natural religion:

The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or rather the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective - i.e. contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being. All the attributes of the divine nature are, therefore, attributes of the human nature.28

Though Marian Evans, mindful of her Puritan training, could never talk, as Feuerbach did, of "the evil being of religious fanaticism,"29 she did agree with his

27 Willey, *op. cit.*, p. 231.
controlling ideas. The supercession of God by Humanity; and the subordination of the intellect to the heart, and thought to feeling, were ideas which were to find expression in her novels. Yet Marian, always fair-minded, was distrustful of merely arrogant or destructive scepticism. Years later, while at work on *Scenes of Clerical Life*, she wrote:

... I have a growing conviction that we may measure true moral and intellectual culture by the comprehension and veneration given to all forms of thought and feeling which have influenced large masses of mankind - and of all intolerance, the intolerance calling itself philosophical is the most odious to me.\(^30\)

Before Marian had finished her work on Feuerbach, her friendship with Lewes had deepened into love. Lewes's marriage was already irreparably damaged, for his wife was living with his friend Thornton Hunt. It was not until 1853 however, that Marian's letters evidenced her strong feelings for the author of the *Biographical History of Philosophy*:

People are very good to me. Mr. Lewes especially is kind and attentive, and has quite won my regard, after having a good deal of my vituperation. Like a few other people in the world, he is much better than he seems. A man of heart and conscience wearing a mask of flippancy.\(^31\)

She began to help Lewes correct proofs for *The Leader*, a

\(^30\) Cross, *Life*, p. 213.

magazine with which he had connections, and told Chapman that she wished to leave the Review. Chapman persuaded her to stay until April, but by this time she and Lewes had decided to live together. In July, 1853, they left England for Weimar.

Since Lewes was to influence Marian as no one else, a few words about him should not seem out of place. George Eliot's biographers have usually dismissed him in rather summary fashion. However, Lewes was not only a gifted scholar, but also a charming man. Besides assisting in the editorship of the Classical Museum, he had written for a number of periodicals. After publishing his Biographical History of Philosophy in 1846, he had written two novels, Ranthorpe and Rose, Blanche and Violet. Moreover, he helped as much as any Englishman to disseminate the ideas of Comte; he had been one of the founders of The Leader; and he was then writing a life of Goethe.

In fact, both Marian and he thought long and hard before acting as they did. It required no little courage to flout the accepted code of morality. That they did reveals the strength of Marian's convictions. Neither ever doubted that they were justified in their action, and their blissful life together shows how right they were. Their temperaments were complementary: he needed her sympathy; she his optimism and courage. In one of her most famous letters, Marian explained to the Brays
just what the relationship meant to her:

If there is any one action or relation of my life which is and always has been profoundly serious, it is my relation to Mr. Lewes.

... Light and easily broken ties are what I neither desire theoretically nor could live for practically. Women who are satisfied with such ties do not act as I have done. That any unworldly, unsuperstitious person who is sufficiently acquainted with the realities of life can pronounce my relation to Mr. Lewes immoral, I can only understand by remembering how subtle and complex are the influences that mould opinion... We are leading no life of self-indulgence; except indeed that, being happy in each other, we find everything easy. 32

To those critics who maintain that Marian acted in a fashion contrary to her beliefs, and to the ethical code outlined in her novels, it is easy to make reply. She acted sincerely and in the knowledge that her action would incur the scorn of society. It made her poorer since she was willing to help support Lewes's children; it meant a less independent life; and worst of all, it led to the alienation of some of her best friends. It is true that, as a result of her Calvinist upbringing, Marion was to denounce adulterous love and yielding to physical desires in her novels; she was, however, to insist that enduring love and affection were among the noblest qualities. To her, as to Romola, had come "one of those moments in life when the soul must dare to act

32 Cross, Life, p. 169.
on its own warrant, not only without external law to appeal to, but in the face of a law that is not unarmed with Divine lightening."\textsuperscript{33}

Lewes influenced Marian in other ways. She shared his admiration for Comte, and for the philosopher's theory that social questions should be treated on the same footing with all other scientific questions. Though her reading of Spinoza and her friendship with such evolutionists as Spencer must have helped, Comte was probably most responsible for instilling in her the concept of the relativity of morals.

Certainly George Eliot never accepted implicitly all Comte's ideas; so much is shown by the way in which she fluctuates between an absolutist and relativist position in her novels. Indeed, we find her writing to Miss Hennell in 1861: "I quite agree with you - so far as I am able to form a judgment - in regarding Positivism as one-sided."\textsuperscript{34} However, she does conclude by saying that "Comte was a great thinker, nonetheless, and ought to be treated with reverence by all the smaller fry."\textsuperscript{35}

Just how fully she had assimilated the ethical


\textsuperscript{34} Cross, \textit{Life}, p. 341.

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Loc. cit.}
notion of man developing toward greater knowledge can be seen by her comments on Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, which came out in 1859:

> It makes an epoch, as the expression of his thorough adhesion, after long years of study, to the Doctrine of Development . . . . It will have a great effect in the scientific world, causing a thorough and open discussion of a question about which people have hitherto felt timid. So the world gets on step by step towards brave clearness and honesty.  

Marian had by now read most of the significant moral and philosophical treatises of the day. She was happily united with Lewes; she had acquired a full knowledge of the rural and urban aspects of the English scene; and her work on periodicals had developed her prose style. Consequently, when she began experimenting in the genre of the novel, the approval of Lewes and the reviewers/acclaimed Amos Barton; her future avocation was clear.

Her early training, however, was hardly ideal for a prospective writer of imaginative literature. Both before and after her "conversion" to rationalism, she had spent most of her time in reading didactic and reflective, rather than imaginative works; as a result of pondering

Taylor, Bray, Hennell, Strauss, Comte and Feuerbach, she had become even more preoccupied with moral problems.

The "message" which Marian proposed to convey to her audience was, moreover, surprisingly inflexible and rigorous; the austere doctrines instilled during her youth were still firmly impressed on her mind. Not until the period in which she wrote *Middlemarch* would her moral vision become consistently catholic; and her tendency to preach be fully subordinated to her imaginative talent.
Chapter II

Though she continued to read widely for the rest of her life, George Eliot's moral philosophy did not alter radically after 1856, the year in which she began and finished her first novel. Nevertheless, the elements in her ethical creed are not always blended in the novels which she wrote before *Middlemarch*. As the preceding chapter has shown, she attempted to reconcile, in her youth, the austere morality of Calvinism with her craving for sympathy and love of humanity. Her acceptance of rationalism did not lead to the eradication of the rigorous elements in her ethical creed. While her reading of Strauss, Feuerbach and Comte made her realize the importance of environment and tradition in determining moral attitudes, their belief that the supernatural was beyond the range of human knowledge only caused her to seek all the more ardently for moral guidance within the natural world. Her agnosticism in fact laid almost as rigorous a demand on morals as had the dissent of her youth.

Two different voices are thus heard in George Eliot's early novels: on one hand, the intellectual voice of a stern preacher and moralist; on the other, the emotional plea of a sympathetic and understanding woman. Joan Bennett has noted this alternation. After commenting on the author's unfortunate tendency to judge people
judicially rather than compassionately, she adds:

But whenever her reflective powers are used in due subordination to her creative gift, whenever . . . she responds to her characters rather than thinks about them, the reader feels with them and the total effect of her novel is an increase of understanding and compassion."

Though the novelist's "reflective powers" are usually subordinated in Middlemarch, this is less often the case in the works which precede it. As a result, the stern unrelenting aspects of George Eliot's ethical creed are frequently prominent.

The novelist is most inflexible in her attitude towards evil. In this respect, her theory of consequences, which we can attribute partly to her early Calvinist training, and partly to Hennell and Bray, is important. For George Eliot, all evil is injurious to man and destructive of the integrity of his life. Such a belief in an absolute moral law is implied, if nowhere explicitly stated, in her earliest story, Amos Barton, where Amos's lack of sympathy hastens his wife's end and ensures his own unhappiness. Yet Amos is unthinking rather than sinful, and the self-centred Wybrow of Mr. Gilfil's Love Story provides the novelist with more suitable material for the illustration of this idea. Gilfil, who like Dr. Kenn and Mr. Irvine,

often speaks for the author herself, thus says to Tina, the innocent victim of Wybrow's advances: "No, Tina; the fault has not all been yours; he was wrong; he gave you provocation. And wrong makes wrong."  

In Janet's Repentance, George Eliot openly reveals her opinions for the first time. After describing the slow physical disintegration of the drunkard Dempster, she warns the reader of the inevitable consequences of sin: "Nemesis is lame, but she is of colossal stature, like the Gods; and sometimes, while her sword is not yet unsheathed, she stretches out her huge left arm and grasps her victim."  

It is significant that Dempster, intended by his creator to be an exemplar of brutality, should inspire this comment. George Eliot makes sure that her villain does come to an unhappy end.

Evident enough in Scenes of Clerical Life, this doctrine is even more prominent in the full-length novels. George Eliot, now more assured, was also more anxious to incorporate her ideas in her work - though the moralist's gain is frequently the artist's loss. During these years she had no sympathy for the view that the artist should picture life as it is, without regard to moral obligations

2 George Eliot, "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story;" Scenes of Clerical Life, Edinburgh, Blackwood, 1913, vol. 2, p. 22. (All future references are to this edition.)

and the doctrine of Nemesis often appears in *Adam Bede*. Adam's father meets an accident because he is the worse for drink; Arthur Donnithorne ruins his life for, though he can foresee the consequences of his deeds, his passion overrides his reason; and Hetty's "vision of consequences" which is "at no time more than a narrow fantastic calculation of her own probable pleasures and pains,"\(^4\) proves totally inadequate in the world of real actions and events.

In contrast, Adam, Dinah and Irwine are people who think before they act; they find a measure of happiness. Adam's viewpoint, phrased in the language of the artisan, reveals a definite, if rudimentary knowledge of such an absolute moral law. He insists: "It's like a bit of bad workmanship - you never see th' end o' the mischief it'll do."\(^5\) Moreover, Irwine speaks for his creator and, at the same time, somewhat out of character, when he warns Arthur of the inexorable nature of that law which punishes the erring and the wicked: "Consequences are unpitying. Our deeds carry their terrible consequences, quite apart from any fluctuations that went before - consequences that are hardly ever confined to ourselves."\(^6\)

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\(^5\) Ibid., p. 163.

\(^6\) Ibid., p. 168.
This quotation illustrates another aspect of the novelist's theory of consequences. It reveals her awareness that a mere doctrine of compensation is unrealistic. Just as Macbeth's path is strewn with corpses before he himself meets his end, so the evildoers of George Eliot's world often injure others as well as themselves. In The Mill on the Floss, Tulliver's attack on Wakem leads to much bitterness, and unhappiness for his family; in Silas Marner, Dunstan Cass's blackmailing of his brother Godfrey causes a irreparable breach between them, and drives the latter almost to distraction. The voice of Puritan conscience is here heard once again as the novelist remarks, in a choral aside:

Favorable chance is the god of all men who follow their own devices instead of obeying a law they believe in . . . . The evil principle deprecated in that religion, is the orderly sequence by which the seed brings forth a crop after its kind."

In Romola, the work in which George Eliot's reflective powers are least often "in due subordination to her creative gift," the reader is given an even fuller exposition of the idea of an inexorable moral law. Tito is not a criminal in the accepted sense of the word; he is merely

7 George Eliot, Romola and Silas Marner, Philadelphia, University Library Association, n.d., p. 244. (All future references are to this edition.)
8 Bennett, op. cit., p. 101.
indifferent to the feelings of others. Nonetheless, one of the overt lessons of the novel is that such failings inevitably lead their possessor to ruin. Subtlety and cunning and a very plausible manner do not shield Tito from the consequences of his deeds. George Eliot, as usual intent on conveying her message, underscores her point by using the device of the omniscient author:

But our deeds are like children that are born to us; they live and act apart from our own will. Nay, children may be strangled but deeds never: they have an indestructible life both in and out of our consciousness, and that dreadful vitality of deeds was pressing hard on Tito for the first time.  

In *Felix Holt*, the novel which immediately precedes *Middlemarch*, the same theory can be traced. Mrs. Transome made a fatally self-indulgent choice many years before the opening of the story. As a result she gathers the bitter fruit of that choice throughout the book. In contrast, even Mrs. Holt adheres to a simple belief in a moral law, and Esther Lyon, in a moment of decision, thinks of Felix's warning: "But remember what I once said to you about a vision of consequences; take care where your fortune leads you."  

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As is indicated by her doctrine of Nemesis, there is no compromise with evil in these novels; George Eliot is anxious to show that all selfishness, wrong and crime come to their proper results. Of all the human failings which lead to downfall, egotism is most frequently blamed. As a result of her early schooling at Miss Franklin's, selfishness was a sin which George Eliot was quite unable to pardon, and the self-centred people in these novels invariably get their deserts. In her first work, *Amos Barton*, she reveals her belief that humanity in general suffers from this fault: "We are poor plants buoyed up by the air-vessels of our own conceit: alas for us if we get a few pinches that empty us of that windy self-subsistence."

Admittedly, the novelist is here being indulgent rather than severe, but in *Mr. Gilfil's Love Story*, Wybrow's selfish nature provokes a sarcastic comment from Gilfil. He informs Caterina, the innocent victim of the captain's advances, that it is "only from the most virtuous motives that he does what is convenient to himself."  

In *Adam Bede*, both Arthur and Hetty are exemplars of egotism. Their fates come about, not through any vicious acts or criminal tendencies, but because both think of themselves first and others afterwards. From delighting in the thought that Adam is "in her power," Hetty goes on to disregard his feelings entirely, and to indulge in pipe dreams of a future life as mistress of "The Chase".

That the deficiencies of Hetty's outlook shall not escape unheeded, George Eliot deliberately contrasts her with Dinah on a number of occasions. The most significant of these occurs when Dinah meets Hetty just after having told Seth that she can never marry him. The novelist compares Dinah's concern for others with Hetty's self-centredness:

Hetty answered with a dimpled smile, as if she did not quite know what had been said; and it made a strange contrast to see that sparkling self-engrossed loveliness looked at by Dinah's calm pitying face, with its open glance which told that her heart lived in no cherished secrets of its own, but in feelings which it longed to share with all the world.  

Yet such a comment also indicates that George Eliot's insistence on right moral conduct sometimes leads her to criticize her creations too harshly. Hetty is, at worst, a shallow and unthinking young girl, but the heavily ironic

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comments directed at her indicate the novelist's lack of sympathy for her.

In the novels which follow, George Eliot again reveals her abhorrence of unbridled selfishness. Tom, in the early chapters of *The Mill on the Floss*, provides us with a study in childhood egotism. He is soundly rebuked by Maggie: "You have always been sure you yourself are right: it is because you have not a mind large enough to see that there is anything better than your own conduct and your own petty aims." Yet Maggie, though here representing the author's views, herself falls prey to selfish desires when she elopes with the foppish Stephen. Though she repents of her folly, her sin cannot, in George Eliot's austere code, be expunged, or the forgiveness of her brother obtained, save through the melodramatic and totally unconvincing device of the flood.

Tito, in *Romola*, is the most complete exemplar of the self-centred man. We are never allowed to forget his deficiencies. Time and again, George Eliot denounces him for his selfish nature. Early in the action, she remarks:

> He had sold himself to evil, but at present life seemed so nearly the same to him that he was not conscious of the bond. He meant all things to go on as they had done before, both within and without him . . .

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Indeed the novelist is so anxious to invoke censure upon Tito that she never tries to excuse or forgive him; the reader, however, does not feel that he is so morally black as the author would have us believe. W.B. Yeats has commented perceptively on the characterization of Tito:

Great literature ... is the Forgiveness of Sin, and when we find it becoming the Accusation of Sin, as in George Eliot, who plucks her Tito in pieces with as much assurance as if he had been clock-work, literature has begun to change into something else. 17

While the first part of Yeats' statement is too sweeping a generalization, it is true that the novelist is too anxious to point out the moral weaknesses of her Arthurs, Hettys and Titos. While she is elsewhere capable of real understanding, her egotistical characters are invariably treated more harshly than is necessary in these novels.

As one might expect, George Eliot insists on severe penalties for her penitents. She believed that only by leading a life of renunciation could one's sins be completely expunged, an idea instilled into her both by her reading of theological works and by her early teachers.

Just how closely she adhered to this moral doctrine of Calvinistic Methodism can be gauged from a book published in 1881 by J.C. Brown, entitled The Ethics of George Eliot's

Works. This work attempted to prove that since the novelist was so preoccupied with the Christian doctrine of renunciation, she must herself be an ardent follower of Christ:

Even those who read novels more thoughtfully, who recognize in them a great moral force acting for good or evil in this age, may be startled to find George Eliot put forward as the representative of this higher toned fiction, and as entitled to take place beside any of those we have named for the depth and force, the consistency and persistence, with which she has laboured to set before us the Christian, and therefore the only exhaustively true, ideal of life.10

This conclusion is, of course, false. George Eliot desired men to renounce selfishness for the sake of humanity, not for the sake of a perfect union with God. Nonetheless her insistence on self-abnegation reveals how profoundly her early Christian training had influenced her.

The need for self-sacrifice is constantly asserted in George Eliot's early novels. In Janet's Repentance, the author, though criticizing religious attitudes in Milby, adds:

Nevertheless, Evangelicalism had brought into palpable existence and operation in Milby society that idea of duty, that recognition of something to be lived for beyond the mere satisfaction of self, which is to the moral life what the addition of a great central ganglion is to animal life.19

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All the characters in *Scenes of Clerical Life* that the author puts forward as exemplars of good do in fact accept without demur a life of self-abnegation. Yet George Eliot has set up such rigorous standards for her heroes and heroines that these figures seem a little unreal. Tryon, after sinning early in life, joins the Evangelists that he may "rescue other weak and falling souls." More­over Janet, though her soul struggles are of a different kind, is "rescued from self-despair," and in her old age can look back on "years of purity and helpful labour." The selfless devotion of Amos Barton's wife in the face of grave difficulties is likewise a quality that George Eliot expects the reader to esteem. Indeed a degree of over­sentimentalizing in the portrait only shows how highly the novelist prized this virtue.

Just as heavy a stress on self-sacrifice is laid in *Adam Bede*. Of the characters in this novel, Adam, Dinah and ultimately Arthur must choose a life which involves renunciation. Adam has a very strong sense of duty and to this he adheres unfailingy. His decision to leave home is immediately reversed when he considers his duty to his mother. Nonetheless there is an element of priggishness,

21 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 317.
distasteful to the reader, in much of what he says. Thus he comments: "It's plain enough you get into the wrong road i' this life if you run after this and that only for the sake o' making things easy and pleasant to yourself."  

Dinah, living the austere life of an Evangelical preacher, deliberately renouncing all thoughts of worldly happiness, most nearly approaches George Eliot's ideal. She gives up all thoughts of immediate marriage and thinks only of ministering to her flock. Nonetheless neither she nor Adam are characters that appeal to us. While Walter Allen goes too far in describing Adam as "a humorless, hectoring, loquacious prig," both he and Dinah suffer from being over-explained; they are frequently little more than symbolic creations illustrating the importance of moral truths. Indeed one can but feel that Dinah represses her feelings too completely; it is difficult to respond to a character who insists on complete self-abnegation and who is distrustful of all worldly delights.

The novelist makes her views equally explicit in the remaining novels of the period. Maggie of The Mill on the Floss clings with passionate attachment to the joy which, by George Eliot's austere code, must be renounced. Certainly the author's treatment of Maggie is, in the main,

22 Eliot, Adam Bede, p. 49.
sympathetic; she was well aware that the rejection of idealistic hopes was difficult for the romantically inclined. Even during Maggie's adolescence, we are told that "her brain would be busy with wild romances of a flight from home in search of something less sordid and dreary." ²⁴

Yet the novelist does allow her moral preoccupations to warp her judgment at the end of the novel. Maggie's final act of self-denial, her refusal to marry Stephen Guest, involves an unnecessary sacrifice. While Tryon's and Dinah's rejection of worldly pleasures means that they can devote all their time to helping ailing humanity, Maggie's masochistic renunciation benefits no one, least of all herself. It is all too easy to agree with Joan Bennett's view that the qualities needed on this occasion are not "self-sacrificing heroism, but patience and tact and delicacy of feeling." ²⁵ However, if the author's moral philosophy does cause her to be unrealistic, she holds to her viewpoint with firm conviction.

In Romola, this doctrine can be seen most clearly in a conversation between Romola and Savonarola. Though the latter's religion will be subsequently found to be tinged with egoistic desire, this fact is for the moment

²⁵ Bennett, op. cit., p. 127.
of no import as he replies to Romola's pleading. Never
is the voice of Puritan conscience more forcefully heard:

I say again, man cannot choose his duties. You
may choose to forsake your duties, and choose not
to have the sorrow they bring. But you will go
forth; and what will you find, my daughter?
Sorrow without duty - bitter herbs, and no bread
with them.  

Unlike Tito, who fails to act dutifully to Baldassarre,
Romola not only comforts her father in his old age, but
decides to go back to a husband for whom she has no affec-
tion. George Eliot shows this act of self-sacrifice as
one of the turning points in Romola's life, a significant
step in her progress towards moral perfection. While the
novelist's emotions may have prompted her to write other-
wise, her passionately held moral convictions would allow
of no other solution to Romola's dilemma.

Probably the clearest example of this kind of
thinking occurs in Felix Holt. Rufus Lyon's early indiscre-
tion is, the novelist informs us, an unforgettable error.
Nonetheless he is able to atone for his sad lapse from
moral grace by leading a life in which all his ardour is
sublimated to spiritual ends:

Once in his life he had been blinded, deafened,
hurried along by rebellious impulse; he had gone
astray after his own desires, and had let the fire
die out on the altar; and as the true penitent,
hating his self-besotted error, asks from all
coming life duty instead of joy, and service instead

of ease, so Rufus was perpetually on the watch lest he should ever again postpone to some private affection a great public opportunity...

Here, as in most of the previous novels, one can only feel that George Eliot is asking rather too much of her creations. She insists that Lyon, like all her heroic characters, accept an austere life from which all worldly pleasures are rigidly excluded.

George Eliot's persistent denunciation of physical passion reveals no less clearly than her stigmatizing of egotism and her insistence on complete renunciation, the Calvinistic element in her moral philosophy. Though passion is an emotion which she deigns to present in her earliest novels, she does intimate in Mr. Gilfil's Love Story that other kinds of love are more lasting and desirable. In a gnomic passage, the reader is informed that "Among all the many kinds of first love, that which begins in childish companionship is the strongest and most enduring." 28

One of the leading lessons of Adam Bede is that it is morally wrong to surrender to one's emotions. Since Arthur's 'love' for Hetty consists of little more than physical desire, it is decried on a number of occasions:

He was getting in love with Hetty - that was quite plain. He was ready to pitch everything else - no matter where - for the sake of surrendering himself to this delicious feeling that had just disclosed itself.²⁹

On the other hand, the novelist extols the virtues of Adam's affection for Hetty, a love which seems to us curiously unsexual. Hetty wakes in him feelings not of desire, but of "tenderness", "faith" and "courage":

He only knew that the sight and memory of her moved him deeply, touching the spring of all love and tenderness, all faith and courage within him. How could he imagine narrowness, selfishness, hardness in her? He created the mind he believed in out of his own, which was large, unselfish, tender.³⁰

It is this lack of feeling for any kind of physical love, indeed, this deliberate turning away from it, which makes Adam's marriage to Dinah difficult to accept.

The whole section of The Mill on the Floss entitled, rather melodramatically, "The Great Temptation," deals with the conflict of passion and duty. Physical desire is seen as "a glistening, green, slimy channel of a waterfall"³¹ which casts its victim into the flood water.

Moreover, in the long dialogue between Maggie and Stephen, the reader constantly feels that Maggie's views are those

²⁹ Eliot, Adam Bede, p. 130.
³⁰ Ibid., p. 341.
of the novelist. After deciding to return home, she warns Stephen of the dangers of unquestioning emotion and falls back on the assumption that all self-sacrifice is good:

It has never been my will to marry you; if you were to win consent from the momentary triumph of my feeling for you, you would not have my whole soul. If I could wake back again into the time before yesterday, I would choose to be true to my calmer affections, and live without the joy of love.32

George Eliot again refuses to condone passionate love in *Felix Holt*. She strongly disapproves of Lyon's feelings for Annette, the mother of Esther:

He dreaded, with a violence of feeling which surmounted all struggles, lest anything should take her away, and place such barriers between them as would make it unlikely or impossible that she should ever love him well enough to become his wife. Yet he saw with perfect clearness that unless he tore up this mad passion by the roots, his ministerial usefulness would be frustrated, and the repose of his soul would be destroyed.33

Surely, George Eliot is here once again being unduly severe; she is allowing her moral preoccupations to warp her view of things. To talk, in pejorative fashion, of Lyon's "mad passion," and to insist that he completely repress his real feelings, is surely as unnecessary as it is unrealistic.

From our discussion thus far, it would appear that

George Eliot's Calvinist training, and her later acceptance of a rigorous agnosticism, made her adhere to an austere, at times absolute moral code. However it would be unwise to see the early novels entirely in this light. On other occasions, and most often when she responds to her characters rather than uses them for the illustration of moral truths, she applauds sympathy and feeling, excuses the foibles of humanity, and asserts the relativity of morals.

If one is sometimes struck by her severity, on other occasions one is impressed by her sympathy for the unexceptional people who inhabit her novels. That the reader shall not pass unfair moral judgments on Barton, George Eliot remarks that "he was more apt to fall into a blunder than a sin."34 Moreover, as if to excuse her selection of characters, she insists that all her life she has "had a sympathy for mongrel ungainly dogs who are nobody's pets."35 In Janet's Repentance, George Eliot successfully manages to mingle sympathy and tolerance when describing the inhabitants of Milby. She suggests, "tongue in cheek," that "an ingenuous vice was what every man expected of his neighbour."36

34 Eliot, Scenes of Clerical Life, vol. 1, p. 93.
36 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 58.
Yet the author's sympathy is by no means directed exclusively at the peripheral figures in these works. In *Adam Bede*, the reader is exhorted to revere not only "the divine beauty of form," but to "love that other beauty too, which lies in no secret of proportion, but in the secret of deep human sympathy."37 She begs us, in *The Mill on the Floss*, not to "think too hardly of Philip Wakem, because "ugly and deformed people have great need of unusual virtues."38 Moreover Maggie's youthful experiences are described with a sympathy that suggests a personal acquaintance with the longings and fears of childhood and adolescence. Though the novelist later makes her heroine reject all worldly pleasures, she is, in the early part of the novel, at her most indulgent.

In *Silas Marner*, we again find George Eliot responding sympathetically to her characters. Through the author's gnomic asides, we are made to understand Silas Marner with all his miserly traits:

Do we not while away moments of inanity or fatigued waiting by repeating some trivial movement or sound, until the repetition has bred a want, which is incipient habit. That will help us to understand how the love of accumulating money grows to an absorbing passion in men whose imaginations, even in the very beginning of their hoard showed them no purpose beyond it.39

The moral philosophy that is conveyed to us by such choral comments is all too often that of an unrelenting Puritan. Here, however, the humanitarian instincts of the novelist are in evidence.

Just as George Eliot's tolerant and sympathetic outlook was developed partly by hardship in her own life, so many of her noblest characters become more sympathetic after sorrow. It is such people, capable of real compassion, that the novelist most admires. Both Janet Dempster's and Tryon's better natures are fostered by adversity; Gilfil's capacity for sympathy is likewise enlarged by his trials and tribulations; and Adam's sorrows constrain him to be more gentle and patient with his brother.

The author was of course aware, as she points out in *The Mill on the Floss*, that "uncultured minds . . . under the pressure of continued misfortune" may become, as does Tulliver's, embittered and disillusioned. Nonetheless, Maggie becomes even more understanding after enduring hardship. Her new feelings towards Mrs. Stelling reveal "the first sign within the poor child of that new sense which is the gift of sorrow - that susceptibility to

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the bare offices of humanity which raises them into a bond of living fellowship. In *Romola* too, it is the heroine's suffering and hardship that give her such a capacity for understanding. Her compassion towards the prisoners, towards Tessa and towards the pestilence-stricken villagers, indicates the extent to which her own woes have enlarged her already strong humanitarian impulses.

It is no coincidence that all George Eliot's heroes and heroines become more tolerant and understanding as they mature. She felt that humanity, if sympathetic, could alleviate the hardships which exist for everyone in this world. If George Eliot sometimes dogmatically stresses right behaviour, she just as frequently, like Matthew Arnold, rejects a morality without emotion.

A corollary to the author's belief in the value of sympathy is provided by what has been termed, for convenience, her doctrine of circumstance. She realised that even the strongest willed may fall a victim to temptation in exceptional circumstances. Indeed when George Eliot forgets her austere standards of moral conduct, she criticizes those who judge people according to a rigid code without attempting to acknowledge the mitigating circumstances of each case.

This ethical belief is less common in *Scenes of Clerical Life* than in the following works. In *Adam Bede*, however, it is much in evidence. On one occasion, the author emphasizes her point by using the omniscient author convention:

> Ships, certainly are liable to casualties which sometimes make terribly evident some flaw in their construction, that would never have been discoverable in smooth water; and many a "good fellow," through a disastrous combination of circumstances, has undergone a like betrayal."^{42}

The "good fellow" is the hearty, self-satisfied Arthur Donnithorne, and it is an unhappy combination of circumstances which places temptation in his path. There is irony in the fact that Irwine, ignorant of Arthur's misdeeds, expounds this very doctrine to him. The cleric concludes that "one may be betrayed into doing things by a combination of circumstances, which one might never have done otherwise."^{43} Though George Eliot usually judges Arthur all too harshly, at least she makes some excuse for him on this occasion.

In *The Mill on the Floss*, George Eliot partially condones the elopement of Stephen and Maggie in similar grounds. It is sheer force of circumstance that leads to their trip in the rowing boat. Lucy is away shopping at

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Lindum; Philip fails to arrive and is replaced by Stephen; it is, in Lucy's words, a "delicious morning for a row"; and once on the river, chance and the current are allowed to decide Maggie's inner conflict. Less obviously present in *Silas Marner* and *Romola*, this idea again occurs in *Felix Holt*. In this novel, the hero himself is caught up in a mesh of circumstances and accused of manslaughter. Moreover, Esther must choose or reject the "easy invitations of circumstance" and decide whether she will become mistress of Transome Court.

In thus pointing out how chance events influence our moral choices, George Eliot demonstrates her lack of faith in a rigid code of moral conduct. Nonetheless, as has already been suggested, she is often all too ready to denounce her characters for their misdemeanours.

It might be imagined that, because the novelist objected so strongly to physical passion, she would also underrate the importance of emotion and affection. However a study of the early works convinces us that this is not usually the case. Indeed, George Eliot must have realised, if less often now than later in life, that her writing suffered when she deliberately repressed her feelings.

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In *Scenes of Clerical Life*, the value of emotion is freely stressed. In *Mr. Gilfil's Love Story*, the novelist condones physical love and remarks that "when passion comes to unite its force to long affection, love is at its spring tide." George Eliot also asserts the power of love in *The Mill on the Floss*. Mrs. Stelling's "preoccupied air" and neat appearance "represent a great social power but it is not the power of love - and no other power could win Philip from his personal reserve." It is Maggie's affection that wins Philip over where other means have failed. Moreover the novelist realises how strong is the love of Maggie and Stephen. Though it is deficient in that it disregards the feelings of others, it does cause them to take a daring and irreversible step. In *Romola*, the heroine is fortified, in her struggle to obey her husband, by the memory of happiness in her early married life. After the death of her husband, the denunciation of the Frate, and the betrayal of her godfather, she longs for affection and love. In the words of the novelist, "she needed something that she was bound specially to care for; she yearned to clasp the children and to make them love her."

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Though George Eliot is herself prompted sometimes by a rational rather than an imaginative impulse, she usually emphasizes the uselessness of mere intellectualizing. The novelist's belief in the power of feeling in fact reminds one of Arnold's definition of religion as "morality touched by emotion," though this is not a phrase that can be applied unequivocally to her ethical code. In a reflective passage in Romola, we are thus told that "the great world-struggle of developing thought is continually foreshadowed in the struggle of the affections, seeking a justification for love and hope."

The novelist again stresses humanity's need for affection in Felix Holt. It is true that she rarely mentions love in a physical context, but that she should emphasize its importance so often is a little surprising. True love disregards all material hindrances in this novel. Just as Dinah ignores Adam's humble origins in Adam Bede and Eppie ignores Aaron's poverty in Silas Marner, so Esther realizes that, despite the social allurements of Transome, her real affections incline toward Felix. Nonetheless George Eliot was fully aware that these decisions are not always easy; "it is not true that love makes all


things easy: it makes us choose what is difficult."51 Certainly her own love for Lewes caused her to make a difficult, and as far as her friends were concerned, unpopular decision.

As has just been indicated, George Eliot's sympathetic nature frequently caused her to reject the austerities of a Calvinistic moral philosophy. Moreover she did not always insist in her early works that there were absolute moral standards, though her belief in a law of Nemesis would seem to suggest this. Indeed, such philosophers as Spinoza, Comte and Spencer had impressed on her their belief in the relativity of morals.

It is therefore to be expected that she should stress the role of environment and tradition in determining moral standards and codes of behaviour. Social pressures had helped to mould the novelist's own outlook: the twenty-two years at Griff House, the eight years at Coventry, and the long years in London both before and after her union with Lewes had all, in their different ways, influenced her ethical position.

Most of the people in the early novels thus adopt moral attitudes consistent with the society in which they live. It is Evangelicalism in general, and Tryon in parti-

51 Eliot, Felix Holt, p. 479.
cular, that modify the outlook of Janet Dempster in Janet's Repentance. It is society that decrees that Wybrow shall marry Beatrice Assher and not Tina in Mr. Gilfil's Love Story; that Hetty and Arthur, even if the latter desired it, shall never be united in Adam Bede. George Eliot's belief that our personal codes of ethics are largely determined by the attitudes of others is shown by a didactic passage in this same novel. "Our moral sense," the novelist remarks, "learns the manners of good society, and smiles when others smile." 52

In The Mill on the Floss, we have the picture of a yearning, idealistic soul struggling to throw off the bonds of environment. Maggie's home is not conducive to the full development of her moral sense, and as old Luke says, "Things out o' natur' niver thrive." 53 She attempts to escape from this cramping influence, first by running away to the gypsies, then by eloping with Stephen Guest. Yet the old loyalties and duties win - the pressure of the environment is too strong for her.

The viewpoint that man is a moral being because he is a social being finds its completest expression in Felix Holt. In one of her most celebrated passages,

52 Eliot, Adam Bede, p. 301.

George Eliot comments:

... there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life, from the time when the primeval milkmaid had to wander with the wanderings of her clan, because the cow she milked was one of a herd which made the pastures bare.54

Like his creator, Felix is convinced of the importance of public opinion and, like her, he is convinced that it is the great motive power to social and moral betterment:

I'll tell you what's the greatest power under heaven ... and that is public opinion - the ruling belief in society about what is right and what is wrong, what is honorable and what is shameful.55

Felix Holt then, provides perhaps the clearest examples of a viewpoint which is common in these works - the importance of the environment in determining our moral outlook. Yet while individuals are sacrificed to their social environment, not one of George Eliot's characters is a passive victim. To suggest, as Shaw has done, that her characters have no more volition than billiard balls is extravagant.56

If George Eliot believes that our surroundings

54 Eliot, Felix Holt, p. 53.
55 Ibid., p. 306.
largely determine our attitudes, she also insists that tradition and the past are important in this respect. She had, of course, through her friendship with Spencer, her reading of Darwin, and her association with Lewes, thoroughly imbibed the current doctrines of evolution and she was convinced that a large part of all our knowledge is brought to us by inheritance. It is for this reason that the novelist refers so frequently to the past, and makes family and race play so important a part in these novels.

Admittedly, George Eliot sometimes denounces her creations for failing to learn the lessons of the past: at one point in Romola, Tito is rebuked for his failure to respect tradition. Nonetheless, by blaming tradition, George Eliot can sometimes excuse the moral lapses of her characters.

The failure of Milby to accept Tryon is thus partly excused, since the people of the community are unable to reject their traditionalist attitude towards religion. So also Adam, like all people of his class, can "no more help believing in a traditional superstition than a horse can help trembling when he sees a camel." Moreover, after showing us how severe Mr. Poyser is in his denunciation of Hetty, the novelist continues:

57 Eliot, Adam Bede, p. 50.
We are often startled by the severity of mild people on exceptional occasions; the reason is, that mild people are most liable to be under the yoke of traditional impressions.\footnote{Eliot, \textit{Adam Bede}, p. 397.}

In \textit{The Mill on the Floss}, the past plays a more significant part in the story. However tradition is here seen primarily as beneficial; those people who neglect it are bereft of an important guide to moral conduct. George Eliot attributes the sordid and tedious life of St. Oggs to its neglect of the past and its inspiring memories. Early in the action, the reader is told that one's moral code is fashioned largely as a result of past experience:

But Heaven knows where that string might lead us, if our affections had not a trick of twining round those old inferior things - if the loves and sanctities of our life has no deep immovable roots in memory.\footnote{Eliot, \textit{The Mill on the Floss}, p. 141.}

As though in illustration of this belief, feeling for the ties of the past is strong in the Tulliver family. In none is it stronger than in Maggie. She says to Philip: "I desire no future that will break the ties of the past."\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 418.}

Indeed it is the "long deep memories" and the early claims on her love and pity\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 411.} which cause Maggie to reject Stephen's offer of marriage. George Eliot is not here
insisting that there are fixed standards of moral conduct; she is suggesting that the lessons of the past help us to determine what is right on particular occasions.

Thus far, I have attempted to show that all the principles of George Eliot's moral philosophy are not completely unified: first by showing that she can be austere and inflexible, then by demonstrating that she can be understanding and that she frequently adopts a pragmatic attitude towards morality. Her treatment of religious issues reveals both her sympathetic and her rigorous sides as a novelist. A discussion of her views on Christianity will therefore form a fitting conclusion to this chapter.

It has already been noted that George Eliot was influenced by evolutionary and rationalist ideas in her youth and early adulthood; she was the translator of Feuerbach, the German philosopher who accepted the psychology of the religious consciousness, but who abandoned theological metaphysics. That George Eliot also substituted naturalism for supernaturalism does not mean that she did not respect Christianity. Indeed she treats of religious themes with great fidelity and sympathy, aware that most people's moral values were derived from Christianity.

She therefore steadfastly refuses to denounce any religious sects in these novels. Tryon, Dinah Morns, Kenn, Savonarola and Lyon are all treated, at worst, with impartiality. Moreover the novelist is equally indulgent to
the lesser characters in her novels. She was aware that people need not understand theological dogma or accept the mystical aspects of Christianity to follow its code of ethics. Thus she saw the merits of the religion of Mrs. Raynor, a woman who "had her faith and spiritual comforts though she was not in the least evangelical and knew nothing of doctrinal zeal." Her beliefs do, after all, provide her with a sensible code of conduct. Moreover, while Evangelicalism is criticized because it tends to be too theoretical and is often tinged with the asceticism of Puritanism, its very real merits are recognised:

They might give the name of piety to much that was only puritanic egoism; they might call many things sin that were not sin; but they had at least the feeling that sin was to be avoided and resisted . . . .

In Adam Bede, Evangelicalism becomes Methodism, but the treatment is even more sympathetic; it is doubtful whether the ardent Methodist could find fault with the presentation. Adam's view, though rudimentary, is completely acceptable to George Eliot. He remarks that "It isn't notions sets people doing the right thing, - it's feelings." In a choral aside, the author concludes, more-

63 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 163.
64 Eliot, Adam Bede, p. 176.
over, that "it is possible, thank Heaven, to have very erroneous theories and very sublime feelings." 65

At other times, however, George Eliot reminds one of a Calvinist preacher rather than a tolerant agnostic. She adopts a rather sanctimonious attitude towards Hetty in *Adam Bede*, and criticizes her for having "never appropriated a single Christian idea or Christian feeling." 66 Yet Hetty is, after all, but a young and thoughtless girl. The reader does not feel, as does her creator, that such criticism is really necessary; we can see her faults without having them pointed out for us.

Moreover, the novelist's religious heroes and heroines are frequently too Puritanical for the reader's comfort. Dinah's is indeed a joyless and ascetic religion. She rebukes Bessy Cranage for wearing earrings:

> Ah! tear off those follies! cast them away from you, as if they were stinging adders. They are stinging you - they are poisoning your soul - they are dragging you down into a dark bottomless pit, where you will sink for ever and ever, and for ever, further away from light and God. 67

We are further irritated by Dinah's semi-biblical idiom; it is a self-conscious mode of speech. As Walter Allen has observed:

66 Ibid., p. 368.
67 Ibid., p. 32.
... for the modern reader she is almost fatally handicapped by the dialogue she has to speak, what the eighteenth century called "Methodistical cant": the words put into her mouth are of a kind that has been parodied and burlesqued so many times in fiction before ... 68

The doctrines propounded by Savonarola in Romola are unduly rigorous. It is ironic that George Eliot is most successful in convincing us of the value of religion when she does not go all out to do so; the preachings of the Frate savour too much of the austere Calvinist priest. Romola, he insists, must renounce all thoughts of leaving her husband: "My daughter, if the cross comes to you as a wife, you must carry it as a wife." 69 Moreover, he tells her of the existence of a "Divine Law" 70 before which she must bow.

As Bullett has suggested, Romola is an example of what happens when "a novelist wilfully insists on writing against the grain of her true genius." 71 Yet George Eliot does this, in greater or lesser degree, in all of her early novels; it is thus inevitable that all the elements in her moral philosophy should not be fully

68 Allen, op. cit., p. 259.
70 Ibid., p. 380.
71 Bullett, op. cit., p. 201.
blended, and that the austere aspects of her creed should be prominent.
CHAPTER III

In almost all respects, Middlemarch constitutes the novelist's most mature work. Twentieth century critics have not been slow to recognise its merits. Leavis writes in The Great Tradition that "Only one book can, as a whole (though not without qualification), be said to represent her mature genius. That, of course, is Middlemarch."\(^1\) Joan Bennett agrees with him, commenting that "today Middlemarch is commonly agreed to be the author's masterpiece."\(^2\) So also does Gerald Bullett, whose opinion is the most outspoken of all. For him, "Both in range and quality, conception and treatment, Middlemarch is, by any reckoning, George Eliot's greatest work."\(^3\)

In two particular respects, both significant for our purpose, Middlemarch is superior to the works which precede it. Adhering to the moral philosophy of the early novels, George Eliot has managed to blend more successfully the various elements. As a result, the voice of the austere moralist is muted. Moreover this change in

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1 Leavis, \emph{op. cit.}, p. 80.
2 Bennett, \emph{op. cit.}, p. 160.
3 Bullett, \emph{op. cit.}, p. 215. 
emphasis coincides with, and is even partly attributable to, a more skilful use of didactic devices. The final two chapters will deal with these developments in Middlemarch. This chapter will consist of an analysis of the techniques used to convey the author's moral viewpoints; the next, of a discussion of the novelist's ethical creed as seen in the novel.

Perhaps the most important, and certainly the most obvious device that George Eliot uses in Middlemarch for conveying her views on moral issues, is that of the omniscient author.

One must be aware that modern critics tend to view the pre-Jamesian novel in the light of James's view of the novel. Inevitably therefore, George Eliot, who uses this convention freely and sometimes uncritically, comes in for a good deal of criticism. Joan Bennett objects to these intrusions of discourse in Adam Bede on the grounds that "they often contain matter which seems platitudinous to the modern reader and at best they interrupt the narrative and set it at a distance." Arnold Kettle is doubtful of the value of such passages in Middlemarch and asks the reader:

4 Bennett, op. cit., p. 107.
Can we, perhaps, in these sentences in which George Eliot turns her moral gaze direct upon the reader and beckons to his personal conscience, isolate a weakness in her method . . . ?

Mrs. Bennett's comment on *Adam Bede* is a justifiable one, since the fictional illusion is frequently destroyed in the early novels by too much overt moralizing on the author's part. Mr. Kettle's criticism is, however, less defensible, for George Eliot's handling of the convention in *Middlemarch* is much more skilful than in the preceding works.

To begin with, such omniscient passages are found less often and therefore obstruct the narrative less obviously. In *Adam Bede*, the convention occurs approximately once every ten pages, and in *The Mill on the Floss*, once every fourteen. But in *Middlemarch*, the ratio of instances to pages in one to thirty-three.

Moreover she refrains from pointing the moral in long, and for the reader, arduous didactic passages. An extreme example of this kind of defect occurs in *Adam Bede* in Book II. Here the author, recalling herself to her duty of instructing and edifying the reader, discourses at at unnecessary length about her aims. 6 In *Middlemarch*,


6 This particular passage begins on p. 171 and goes on for seven pages. The chapter is entitled, appropriately enough, "In which the story pauses a little."
the gap between the artist and the thinker is narrowed; no omniscient passages are more than a paragraph in length. In fact the majority of asides last for only two or three sentences, and with rare exceptions are surely passed over by the impetus of any normal reading.

It might be argued that still more of these brief passages of moralizing could be omitted in *Middlemarch*. Yet precisely because most of them are truisms and platitudes, sober statements of the great moral commonplaces of life, they only infrequently impede either the action or the imagination. As Harvey in his article on the novelist has suggested:

> This is one way in which George Eliot's handling of the omniscient author convention is superior to that of most nineteenth century novelists: her intrusive comments are neither dramatic gestures, rhetorical embellishments demanding an overwrought emotional response from the reader nor the dogmatic assertions of a particular philosophy . . . . 

> While Harvey over-simplifies the issue, I agree that few of the didactic asides in *Middlemarch* startle or irritate the reader. When talking of Featherstone, George Eliot unobtrusively remarks:

> ... I must observe that goodness is of a modest nature, easily discouraged, and when much elbowed in early life by unabashed vices, is apt to retire into extreme privacy . . . .

> On the occasion of Dorothea's meeting with Lydgate

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after his disgrace, the novelist once again skilfully inserts a sober reflection:

The presence of a noble nature, generous in its wishes, ardent in its charity, changes the lights for us: we begin to see things again in their larger quieter masses and to believe that we too can be seen and judged in the wholeness of our character. ̇

It is true that George Eliot sometimes forgets the effectiveness of such short, simple remarks and uses abstruse scientific analogies. Fortunately for the reader however, such comments as the following one, inspired by Mrs. Cadwallader, are rare:

Even with a microscope directed on a water-drop we find ourselves making interpretations which turn out to be rather coarse; for whereas under a weak lens you may seem to see a creature exhibiting an active voracity into which other smaller creatures actively play as if they were so many animated tax-pennies, a stronger lens reveals to you certain tiniest hairlets which make vortices for these victims while the swallower waits passively at his receipt of custom. ̇

Here, indeed, the novelist is unforgivably long-winded and pedantic. Such a comment confuses rather than aids the reader; he becomes impatient long before he discovers the full significance of the analogy. It is to the author's credit that she does not display more often in these asides the scientific knowledge which makes her something

10 Ibid., p. 144.
of a nineteenth-century Aldous Huxley.

In the novels which precede Middlemarch, the choral comments by the author sometimes reveal condescension or more often, a desire to make dogmatic assertions. A good example of the latter tendency occurs in the Introduction to Felix Holt:

For there is seldom any wrong doing which does not carry along with it some downfall of blindly climbing hopes, some hard entail of suffering, some quickly satiated desire that survives, with the life in death of an old paralytic vice, to see itself cursed by its woful progeny - . . . .

Such assertions occur less often in Middlemarch precisely because the novelist is judging less by abstract moral considerations. Indeed, an attitude of tolerance and sympathy is sometimes displayed by these omniscient passages. Thus Dorothea's desire to see Ladislaw after Casanbon's death is not condemned; instead it is seen as a simple human need. "Life" we are told, "would be no better than candlelight tinsel and daylight rubbish if our spirits were not touched by what has been, to issues of longing and constancy." Moreover, George Eliot emphasizes the value of sympathy in another reflection. After describing Casaubon with his complete lack of warmth or ardour, she ventures a general comment:

11 Eliot, Felix Holt, p. 11.

12 Eliot, Middlemarch, p. 393.
There is hardly any contact more depressing to a young ardent creature than that of a mind in which years full of knowledge seem to have issued in a blank absence of interest or sympathy.\textsuperscript{13}

In one other respect, George Eliot handles the omniscient author convention more skilfully in \textit{Middlemarch}. As Dorothy Van Ghent has observed, those omniscient passages in her novels which criticize the attitudes of certain characters, unfairly load the dice against these people before we have ourselves made up our minds concerning their moral worth.\textsuperscript{14} Common enough elsewhere, examples of such a practice are less easy to find in \textit{Middlemarch}. Only in the case of Rosamond, and then only sometimes, does one feel that the author is deliberately trying, by way of derogatory comments, to influence the reader's opinion.

Of course the sparser use of this convention in \textit{Middlemarch} means that the reader will find the business of assessing the novelist's moral outlook less easy. The author is now revealing her opinions more extensively through character; the reader must therefore make adjustments because of the idiosyncrasies of the character. Yet

\textsuperscript{13} Eliot, \textit{Middlemarch}, p. 146.

the artistic gain is immense; while omniscient passages do obstruct the narrative and bore the reader in the early novels, this is seldom the case in *Middlemarch*.

The characters are used as vehicles for their creator's views in several ways. Most simply, there are those people who represent some norm and who are, in effect, touchstones or points of moral reference. Thus Tryon and Kenn, Dinah and to some extent Adam, are exemplars of good in the earlier works; their decisions are, almost invariably, the right ones. Yet precisely because these characters approach perfection, they are difficult to believe in. Here the novelist's imagination is sharply curbed by her intellectual, which are her moral, preoccupations. As Walter Allen says of the characterization of Adam Bede: "The good characters set in contrast to Donnithorne and Hetty, they are too good to be true."\(^\text{15}\)

In *Middlemarch*, the novelist's character portrayal is more realistic; no characters are wholly good or wholly bad. Nonetheless, Caleb and Mary Garth, Farebrother and, in the latter half of the novel, Dorothea, are usually exemplars of right moral conduct. Yet if they are sometimes too good to be true, they do not seem artificial to the reader because their foibles are also indicated by the novelist.

\(^{15}\) Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 259.
Caleb Garth, the honest workman, believes in the Carlylean doctrine of hard work as a panacea for most of our ills. "His virtual divinities" are "good practical schemes, accurate work and the faithful completion of undertakings," and he has "a reverential soul with a strong practical intelligence." His philosophy of life is a rather limited one, but we do not respect him any the less for that. His daughter, Mary Garth, also represents a norm in the novel; a plain Jane, intolerant of egotism or indolence, she is nonetheless a woman of industry, common sense and deep feeling. That George Eliot comes close to over-sentimentalizing her is sufficient evidence that her creator thought very highly of her and intended her to be the embodiment of certain moral qualities. Her rebuking of Fred, her caring for Featherstone, her refusal to alter the will, and her unselfish decision to leave home, are all acts which mark her as a person of sympathy and sense.

Farebrother, like Kenn before him, is a cleric whose actions are, on most occasions, those of a "good" man. Yet even he is not an idealized creation in the way that Dinah is; he has his weaknesses and we therefore respect him for his virtues all the more. Our reactions, moreover, are not determined for us in the case of

Farebrother; there is less overt comment from a novelist out to convince us of a character's moral worth. He is the practical, unselfish village parson, a man willing to renounce all thoughts of marriage to Mary in order to give Fred a chance. Likewise his interview with Fred in the billiard room is actuated by his desire to save the young wastrel from moral decay. Brown's comment on him, while revealing a strong vein of Victorian sentimentality, is substantially true and echoes our own feelings:

His true and deep appreciation of Mary Garth, and tender, devoted and unselfish love for her, more clearly reveal his innate manliness, self-denial and simplicity of character.  

Dorothea is the only other character who is intended as an exemplar of right moral conduct, and then only in the second half of the novel. Nonetheless, she is idealized to some extent, if much less completely than Dinah. Leavis criticizes the novel for this reason:

Aren't we here, we wonder, in sight of an unqualified self-identification? Isn't there something dangerous in the way the irony seems to be reserved for the provincial background, leaving the heroine?  

This judgment is not wholly accurate; George Eliot does allude to Dorothea's weaknesses in the early part of the novel. But it is true that, even in Middlemarch, these more or less exemplary characters, compounded largely, if

17 Brown, op. cit., p. 100.
18 Leavis, op. cit., p. 93.
no longer exclusively, of qualities the novelist is resolved to admire, are sometimes too good to be true. This use of exemplars, then, if a less obvious way of indicating one's position than the method of the omniscient author, is still relatively unsubtle, despite the fact that the noblest figures are less exemplary in Middlemarch.

Most of the characters are, of course, anything but models of goodness. Nonetheless, it is a measure of George Eliot's ability as an artist that she is able, in Middlemarch, to use almost all her creations as vehicles for her views; she realises that every conceivable type of human being can contribute to our total view. Holloway, in his chapter on the novelist in The Victorian Sage, recognises this ability:

... instruction by exemplar proceeds not through portraits of perfection, but through a complex system of characters good within their limits or in some significant respect. The method thus acquires vastly more adaptability, conviction and power. 19

In none of the earlier novels is this method used so effectively as in Middlemarch. Though we must exclude such obvious caricatures as Featherstone, Raffles, Rigg and the Waules, we can observe some moral principle at work in almost all of the characters. Fred Vincy has many undesirable characteristics. He is indolent, gullible and

self-satisfied. But his complete freedom from hypocrisy is always in evidence. Mary reinforces our conception of Fred by saying that "wisdom is not his strong point but rather affection and sincerity." Ladislaw suffers from romantic illusions, but his exquisite sensibility contrasts markedly with the dry intellectualism of Casanbon. If he is too much the victim of his emotions, he can still teach us the value of feeling. "Romanticism," says the novelist with Ladislaw in mind, "has helped to fill some dull blanks with love and knowledge." Lydgate serves a like function in the novel. Even though he strikes the reader as vain and contemptuous of others, we are expected to admire his devotion to the cause of medicine. Admittedly, many of the author's observations are tinged with irony or humour, as when she talks of his concern "not only for 'cases', but for John and Elizabeth, especially Elizabeth." However, Lydgate's desire to do "great work for the world" stands in direct contrast to the petty rivalries of Minchin and Sprague, who conceal "with much etiquette their contempt for each other's skill." Despite his failings we can admire his

20 Eliot, Middlemarch, p. 378.
21 Ibid., p. 140.
22 Ibid., p. 108.
23 Ibid., p. 110.
24 Ibid., p. 135.
ambition and idealism.

In the early novels, characters are often used as authorities for views that the novelist wishes to expound. Adam Bede provides the most obvious example of this device; he is even introduced in total abstraction from the story to argue with his creator about religious problems. While in the early works, these authorities are usually the morally upright characters, in Middlemarch this is no longer so. Thus George Eliot's viewpoint becomes far more catholic and comprehensive; it is expressed by a variety of characters in a variety of situations and not solely or even primarily by author or heroine in long general reflections.

A few examples will elucidate this argument. One of George Eliot's controlling ethical ideas in Middlemarch, the notion that life is a shifting, dynamic process and that absolute standards count for little, is revealed through the mouth of pompous, egregious Mr. Brooke. "Life isn't cast in a mould," he remarks, "not cut out by rule and line, and that sort of thing." Moreover he acquaints the reader with another important lesson of the novel, the lesson that Casaubon fails to learn, when reflecting that "human reason may carry you a little too far - over the hedge, in fact." Most of Brooke's remarks are so absurd as to be

humorous, but there is little doubt that, even he, on occasions such as these, can represent the views of the author. Mrs. Cadwallader's views on politics are also somewhere near the truth, and even the obnoxious Hawley becomes something of an authority when denouncing Bulstrode at the Town Hall meeting:

There are practices and there are acts which, owing to circumstances, the law cannot visit, though they may be worse than many things which are legally punishable.\(^2^7\)

The mature artistry of the novelist is revealed by this ability to use even the least pleasant characters in the novel as mouthpieces for her views. One can hardly imagine Dempster, Hetty or Tito in such a role, but in Middlemarch even Bulstrode is, on occasions, a spokesman for the beliefs of his creator. When speaking to Vincy, he therefore tells him that "it is not an easy thing even to thread a path for principles in the intricacies of the world - still less to make the thread clear for the careless and the scoffing."\(^2^8\) Casaubon too, in his letter to Ladislaw, emphasizes, in his usual condescending way, George Eliot's belief in the importance of the past:

That I have some claim to the exercise of a veto here, would not, I believe, be denied by any reasonable person cognisant of the relations

\(^2^7\) Eliot, Middlemarch, p. 533.

\(^2^8\) Ibid., p. 96.
between us: relations which, though thrown into
the past by your recent procedure, are not
thereby annulled in their character of determin­
ing antecedents.29

To say that the good characters in Middlemarch
often expose the novelist's views is to state the obvious.
Caleb's views concerning the value of work are those of
George Eliot in simplified form. Moreover both Mary's
denunciations of egotism and Farebrother's insistence on
the value of affection are views which carry with them
the authority of the author.

It has already been noted that George Eliot's char­
acters are authorities for the author's own moral views
and that, as in Adam's case, they may speak "in vacuo"
and not on specific occasions when others are present.
More often, however, it is in particular situations and
through conversations with others that their views are
expounded. Sometimes this technique is used rather crudely
in the early works; the upholder of right moral conduct
is opposed to the upholder of wrong. Thus in The Mill on
the Floss, the protracted arguments between Maggie and
Stephen reveal two different views of love - Stephen's
egoistic, and Maggie's altruistic one.

Yet George Eliot had matured sufficiently by the
time that she came to write Middlemarch to realize that
few moral problems can be solved by such black and white

29 Eliot, Middlemarch, p. 272.
reasoning. Holloway makes a perceptive remark on this very issue:

But the full range of George Eliot's treatment, the breadth of front upon which she assails the reader's outlook, is missed if we think of these discussions between characters as mere expositions in dialogue form of the abstract "pros" and "cons".

Though such praise cannot be heaped unequivocally on the early novels, Holloway's remark does hold true for Middlemarch. What is so significant about this work is that few of the characters fully express the views of their creator, but they nonetheless contribute, because of the way they react in particular situations, to the value of the novel's ethical teaching. The arguments about debts between Lydgate and Rosamond illustrate this point. Admittedly, Lydgate is less inconsiderate than his wife, but he too is aware of his own rights, of their infringement, and of the other's failings. Neither can see that a hyper-critical attitude is valueless; that they are in a situation in which they must swallow personal pride, and overlook each other's deficiencies. It is by seeing both the tactless anger of Lydgate, and the selfishness of Rosamond that the reader learns.

Even the background figures are employed in this way. In a discussion between Mrs. Tom Toller and Mrs.

30 Holloway, op. cit., p. 145.
Plymdale, opposed views are presented concerning Mrs. Bulstrode. Yet both are totally inadequate because they are based on the premise that religion consists, at least in part, of wearing the right clothes to church. Once again the reader learns through the ignorance of the characters; he realises the inadequacies of their outlooks.

Of course, George Eliot does occasionally revert to the simple method she employs elsewhere of allowing two characters, one exemplary and the other not, to converse together. Thus Mary, who has a fund of common sense and who is as unselfish as Fred is demanding, argues with young Vincy in order that we may see the merits and demerits of their respective outlooks. Yet such dialogues are less common in *Middlemarch*; the novelist avoids such obvious devices wherever possible.

To present her moral philosophy, George Eliot relies, then, mostly upon character, situation, dialogue and, though less than formerly, the device of the omniscient author. However, plot, incident, and even setting and imagery can and do contribute to our total impression of the novelist's ethical creed.

Plot and incident are used to illustrate the author's belief in a moral law at work in the universe. Perhaps the most obvious instance occurs in *Silas Marner*. Here Eppie arrives, seemingly from nowhere, as a consolation to Silas for the loss of his gold. Dolly Winthrop informs the
reader of the significance of this incident:

... it's like the night and the morning, and
the sleeping and the waking and the rain and
the harvest - one goes and the other comes, and
we know nothing how or where.  

Moreover, at a later stage in this novel, Dunstan Cass's
skeleton is found with Silas's gold in the pond. Such a
discovery comes at an opportune time. Eppie is about to
marry, and Silas sees the climax to these events as an
act of Providence. "The money," he tells Eppie, "was
taken away from me in time; and you see it's been kept -
kept till it was wanted for you."

Incidents are likewise shown to be a part of the
moral law in Middlemarch, if less obviously than in Silas
Marner. Indeed, since overt comment by the author is less
common, this use of plot and event assumes a greater
importance.

Sometimes the novelist demonstrates that a kind
Providence is at work in the world. Mary's refusal to alter
Featherstone's will, though morally right, makes the reader
wonder if it would have been better, (under the circum-
stances,) to obey him. But when, in a later incident, we
are informed that such an action would have been legally
invalid, we realize that virtue has been rewarded.

32 Ibid., p. 384.
Things also move according to a hidden plan where human vices are concerned. Bulstrode believes that the past incidents of his life have been forgotten, but his youthful crimes, revealed by Raffles when he meets the banker, come into the open at the Town Hall meeting. Events may move slowly but they move upon us nonetheless. Rosamond's loss of her baby after a riding fall, Bulstrode's public exposure, and Lydgate's bankruptcy, are all the results of previous blunders or crimes. By showing that one incident is the result of another, the novelist can evince her belief in a moral law at work in the world.

Since there are fewer choral asides and fewer exemplary characters in *Middlemarch*, other less obvious devices assume a greater significance. Thus George Eliot uses carefully described settings to emphasize the importance of moral decisions that her characters are taking. It is in the musty boudoir with the bow windows and the faded blue chairs that Dorothea sees the need to approach life more realistically. George Eliot indulges in such scene painting to help evoke a mood of pathos in the reader:

> The very furniture in the room seemed to have shrunk since she saw it before: the stag in the tapestry looked more like a ghost in his ghostly blue-green world.33

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More important, however, is the symbolic significance of this setting. The room, narrow and musty, suggests cloistered virtue and theoretic goodness; it is an objective correlative of Dorothea's former state of mind. When Dorothea ceases to contemplate her immediate surroundings and becomes aware of the open fields and the active people outside, we recognise a change in her attitude. Her humanitarian instincts are now more strongly developed; she yearns more ardently than before to help others:

Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining.\(^3\)

That the scenery is here employed in a very evocative way is obvious enough; it is also clear that the moral development of the heroine is made even more explicit by this use of setting.

Since the author allows her imagination freer rein in *Middlemarch*, it is not surprising that even the imagery helps to convey the artist's view of life to the reader. Our feelings toward Casaubon are largely determined by the images that George Eliot uses to describe him. We seem to know much more about him than the few slight glimpses could have told us, and our moral response to him is at least

\(^{34}\) Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 578.
partly determined by George Eliot's use of words with emotional connotations. We condemn him almost at once as a narrow, egotistical pedant, but this judgment is constantly reinforced by the novelist's descriptions of him. Again and again in reference to him, we come upon metaphors of narrow, dark, enclosed places, locked drawers and small closets. His memory is a "dark closet," his studies consist of "groping about in woods with a pocket compass." At best, his smile is like "pale wintry sunshine."

By comparison, Ladislaw's appearances are connected with "sunny brightness," his very smile is like "a gush of inward light." While Ladislaw is by no means a flawless character, such images suggest freshness and exuberance, qualities which stand in direct contrast to the dry intellectualism of Casaubon. Such images are not mere clichés; they grow out of fundamental conceptions of the characters concerned. They help us to determine the novelist's attitude towards the opinions expressed by her creations, and assist in moulding our own conceptions of

these characters.

Images are also used to emphasize the novelist's belief that our moral attitudes are largely determined by the society in which we live. In a book which attempts to trace the relations between apparently isolated lives, there are, appropriately, many metaphors of weaving, linking and binding. The very setting is one in which "municipal town and rural parish" have "made fresh threads of connection." Lydgate is seen as a man enmeshed by the web of Rosamond's plans and unable to make decisions for himself. He had intended to keep free of her, for "Mrs. Bulstrode's hints had managed to get woven like slight clinging hairs into the more substantial web of his thoughts." But from the outset, Rosamond has woven a little future for herself in which Lydgate must play the major role. Moreover, when he becomes involved in the Bulstrode scandal, he realises that telling his wife will constitute "another weight of chain to drag." That Lydgate, like the rest of the characters, cannot remain uninfluenced by external pressures, is a lesson the more forcibly brought home by this skilful use of imagery.

One other way in which George Eliot reveals her

41 Ibid., p. 221.
42 Ibid., p. 543.
views and attitudes in *Middlemarch* is by prefixing a short quotation, usually from one of her own poems, to each chapter. While George Eliot employed all the other techniques already discussed, if less skilfully, in all her early novels, only in *Felix Holt* did she begin this practice. Most of her poems are conspicuously inferior to her novels, for the idea and the matter do not really interpenetrate; in Dowden's words, "for the mystery of life there is substituted a problem of moral dynamics." It is therefore to be regretted that in this respect, George Eliot should allow the moralist to get the better of the artist.

Admittedly few of these quotations are annoying to the reader in the same way that long omniscient passages are; some, indeed, are merely used as plot devices to foreshadow events. Nonetheless one inevitably feels that George Eliot is including such passages in order that the moral of the ensuing chapter shall not go unheeded.

Such quotations are freely interspersed throughout the work. Laziness, hypocrisy and egotism, three human failings which the novelist found it difficult to excuse, are all mentioned in extracts from her poems. The reader

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is told, moreover, that true love "hath high price,"\textsuperscript{45} that the human soul thirsts "after order and a perfect rule"\textsuperscript{46} and that: "Our deeds still travel with us from afar, and what we have been makes us what we are."\textsuperscript{47}

The novelist's belief in a moral law is revealed in another passage from her poetry at the beginning of chapter four. Here the first Gentleman says:

\begin{quote}
Our deeds are fetters that we forge ourselves.
His companion replies:
Ay, truly: but I think it is the world
That brings the iron.\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}

These quotations are not drawn solely from George Eliot's own verse. Nonetheless she makes sure that the passages which are culled from other poems all point a definite moral. In order to give weight to her belief that love can be either egotistical or self-renouncing, she quotes a passage from Blake's \textit{Songs of Experience} in which both the view that "Love seeketh only self to please," and the opposite notion that "Love seeketh not itself to please,"\textsuperscript{49} find expression. To illustrate her view that mere intellectual activity stultifies the feelings, she quotes from Goldsmith; to record her belief in the value of obedience

\textsuperscript{45} Eliot, \textit{Middlemarch}, p. 315.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., p. 53.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p. 515.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., p. 25.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., p. 186.
to duty's call, she quotes from Wordsworth's famous "Ode to Duty", and to impress on the reader the value of honesty, she quotes Sir Henry Wotton's lines:

How happy is he born and taught,
That serveth not another's will?
Whose armour is his honest thought,
And simple truth his utmost skill?50

These quotations invariably have some connection with the characters or plot of the ensuing chapter. Sir Henry Wotton's lines on honesty thus have an added significance since they occur at the beginning of the chapter in which Caleb, the honest workman, is contrasted with the unscrupulous and mercenary Featherstone. There are many such examples. George Eliot's comment that "Our deeds still travel with us from afar"51 occurs at a point in the action when Bulstrode's past transgressions have been revealed and are about to win him utterly; a quotation about "Law thirsty"52 souls precedes a description of Casabon with his regimented existence; and the couplet: "Oh, sir, the loftiest hopes on earth Draw lots with meaner hopes . . . "53 is followed by a passage in which Lydgate's desire to discredit his fellow physicians stands in direct

51 Ibid., p. 515.
52 Ibid., p. 53.
53 Ibid., p. 131.
contrast to his enthusiasm and ambition.

Yet if this use of quotations constitutes a rather obvious and ill-advised didactic device, it must be remembered that this is but one technique and a relatively unimportant one at that. Indeed, in most respects her handling of moral issues in Middlemarch shows a tact and restraint previously lacking. Certainly she is still aware of herself and her "message". But she does not point the moral so incessantly or so dogmatically; she allows her imaginative creation to speak for itself much more frequently.
CHAPTER IV

Since *Middlemarch* presents the most complete study of the novelist's mature outlook, it merits a detailed analysis. In Chapter three, I have indicated that the gap between artist and moralist has narrowed; in this final chapter, I hope to show that there is a less obvious concern with austere, at times inflexible, moral standards. While I cannot entirely agree with Dowden's view that "her sympathy spreads with a powerful and even flow in every direction,"¹ it is true that the novelist is more willing to tolerate and less ready to dogmatize. There are two main reasons for this development, one connected with her art, one with her personal outlook.

George Eliot was now a more accomplished artist; she was aware that the inculcation of moral truths could often best be accomplished by more subtle and less direct means. Indeed, she expressly states in *Middlemarch* that she intends to concern herself less with abstract moral problems, conveyed to the reader by didactic asides. After commenting on Fielding's penchant for the moral

digression, she adds:

We belated historians must not linger after his example; and if we did so, it is probable that our chat would be thin and eager, as if delivered from a camp stool in a parrot-house. I at least have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe.2

George Eliot, as already suggested, is often more dogmatic and less sympathetic when she is aware of her message; when, to borrow Joan Bennett's phrase, her "reflective powers" are not "in due subordination to her creative gift."3 Since George Eliot does intellectualize less in Middlemarch, there is an increase of understanding and compassion in the novel.

Moreover the novelist's own outlook was now more consistently sympathetic and realistic; there is in her later letters none of the harping on self-sacrifice that is noticeable in her early correspondence. The Calvinist doctrines which had coloured her early thinking were no longer held so uncompromisingly. Moreover, her extensive reading on a wide variety of topics, and her long and uniformly happy relationship with Lewes had done much to broaden her outlook. Just how content she was at this period of her life can be gauged from a letter of 1868:

2 Eliot, Middlemarch, p. 105.
3 Bennett, op. cit., p. 101.
We are increasingly happy, although the years carry away with them some of our strength and buoyancy. Our life is absolutely untroubled and I grow much more cheerful as I grow older. . . . We are so happy now as to be independent of all monetary considerations . . . .

For these reasons, George Eliot expounds a more tolerant philosophy in *Middlemarch*. This development is revealed most explicitly by her determination to give less emphasis to the harsher elements in her moral vision.

The theory of consequences is, of course, present again in the novel; one could hardly expect George Eliot to reject out of hand one of the cardinal principles of her ethic. Nonetheless, the doctrine is not incessantly reiterated in choral asides as it is in the earlier novels. Only on three occasions does the author take the reader aside to acquaint him with this law of life. Moreover, she sounds much less like a stern moralist in these passages. When describing Lydgate's wooing of Rosamond, she remarks:

> It was not more possible to find social isolation in that town than elsewhere, and two people persistently flirting could by no means escape from "the various entanglements, weights, blows, clashings, motions, by which things severally go on."

The following aside, taken from *Felix Holt* would seem

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out of place in Middlemarch:

But our deeds are like children that are born to us; they live and act apart from our own will. Nay, children may be strangled but deeds never: they have an indestructible life both in and out of our consciousness.°

This doctrine of Nemesis does not consist, as it does in Scenes of Clerical Life and to a lesser extent in Adam Bede, of an idealistic conception of compensation which measures out a punishment for each sin, and a reward for every noble action. It is true that Bulstrode's crimes are discovered; that Rosamond's persistent disregard of her husband's advice results in her humiliation; and that Dorothea's unfortunate marriage to Casaubon is the direct result of her own nearsightedness. Yet only Bulstrode has his life irreparably ruined as a result of his transgressions; all the other characters achieve a limited measure of happiness, in spite of their mistakes.

Of all the sins that invite disastrous consequences, egotism is again seen to be the most universal and the most pernicious. Rosamond apart, however, George Eliot does not castigate the egotistical characters in the novel nearly so earnestly as in earlier works. Indeed, she treats Brooke and Trumbull, both exemplars of this failing, with playful irony. The former's thoughts

are described in indulgent fashion:

    Mr. Brooke wondered, and felt that women were
    an inexhaustible subject of study, since even
    he at his age was not in a perfect state of
    scientific prediction about them.\footnote{7}

And Trumbull the auctioneer is, we learn, in a humorous
passage, "keenly alive to his own jokes and sensible
of his encyclopaedic knowledge."\footnote{8}

Admittedly George Eliot is usually indulgent
to the peripheral figures in her novels. Yet while most
of the major characters in \textit{Middlemarch} are self-
complacent in greater or lesser degree, none of them is
condemned out of hand. After all, the author informs
us, "all conceit is not the same conceit."\footnote{9} Lydgate's
pride is "of the arrogant sort, never simpering, never
impertinent, but massive in its claims and benevolently
contemptuous."\footnote{10} In fact, it is the kind of arrogance
which is consistent with his ambition and idealism.

Similarly, while the novelist criticizes Casaubon
with his "uneasy egotism,"\footnote{11} she never condemns him.

Even Bulstrode's self-esteem is partially excused:

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\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{7} Eliot, \textit{Middlemarch}, p. 30.
\item \footnote{8} Ibid., p. 141.
\item \footnote{9} Ibid., p. 111.
\item \footnote{10} Loc. cit.
\item \footnote{11} Ibid., p. 156.
\end{itemize}
This was not what Mr. Bulstrode said to any man for the sake of deceiving him; it was what he said to himself - it was as genuinely his mode of explaining events as any theory of yours may be, if you happen to disagree with him. For the egoism which enters into our theories does not affect their sincerity; rather, the more our egoism is satisfied, the more robust is our belief.  

Only when discussing Rosamond does George Eliot denounce self-centredness in a way reminiscent of the early novels. She, like Hetty, in *Adam Bede*, is unable and indeed unwilling, to see beyond her own immediate desires. Because her unbridled egotism is allied to feminine prettiness, shallowness and obstinacy, George Eliot is all the more anxious to reprove her. While the novelist can say that "pride is not a bad thing when it only urges us to hide our own hurts - not to hurt others,"¹³ she cannot condone Rosamond's selfishness, for Lydgate's life is made miserable because of her persistent refusal to take his advice. There is heavy irony in the following comment:

In fact there was but one person in Rosamond's world whom she did not regard as blameworthy, and that was the graceful creature with blond plaits and with little hands crossed before her, who had never expressed herself unbecomingly, and had always acted for the best - the best naturally being what she best liked. ¹⁴

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¹³ Ibid., p. 46.
¹⁴ Ibid., p. 487.
Yet while I cannot agree with Leavis's contention that "there is no animus in the presentment of Rosamond," Miss Vincy does sometimes minister to our amusement. One can hardly imagine the novelist poking fun at Hetty or Tito — she is too bent on exposing their shallow and selfish natures — but she can laugh at Rosamond's self-centredness. There is some fine comedy in the scene in which Mrs. Bulstrode calls to inquire about her niece's flirtation with Lydgate:

"Be open, my dear Rosamond; Mr. Lydgate has really made you an offer?"

Poor Rosamond's feelings were very unpleasant. She had been quite easy as to Lydgate's feeling and intention, but now when her aunt put this question she did not like being unable to say Yes. Her pride was hurt but her habitual control of manner helped.

"Pray excuse me, aunt. I would rather not speak on the subject."  

If George Eliot treats her self-centred characters leniently, she also refrains, save on rare occasions, from preaching on the dangers of egotism. Statistics usually count for little in aesthetic matters, but it is surely significant that the novel contains no more than three sermons on this subject. One of these omniscient asides follows a description of Casaubon. Certainly he is egotistical, we are told, but "this trait is not quite

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15 Leavis, *op. cit.*, p. 88.
alien to us and, like the other mendicant hopes of mortals, claims some of our pity." The voice here is not that of a dogmatic moralist, but that of a humanitarian recognizing and tolerating human weakness.

Another human failing that is treated more fully and yet less dogmatically is that of hypocrisy. By creating such characters as Arthur Donnithorne, Tito Melema, and Savonarola, George Eliot had already emphasized the dangers of hypocrisy. However, our knowledge of the author's views is greatly extended by a reading of Middlemarch.

At the beginning of Chapter thirteen, she indicates her interest in hypocrisy by including a dialogue between two gentlemen. The first speaker asks:

How class your man? - as better than the most, Or, seeming better, worse beneath that cloak? As saint or knave, pilgrim or hypocrite?

George Eliot was now enough of a realist to see that few people are always sincere. The ironic tone which informs the novelist's early descriptions of Dorothea stems from her amusement at the heroine's priggishness. Of Dorothea's fondness for riding, we are told:

Riding was an indulgence which she allowed herself in spite of conscientious qualms; she felt that she enjoyed it in a pagan sensuous way, and always looked forward to renouncing it.

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17 Eliot, Middlemarch, p. 62.

18 Ibid., p. 91.

19 Ibid., p. 7.
Lydgate's social posturing is likewise viewed in an indulgent light; the novelist does not intellectualize about his deficiencies, and then condemn him:

Lydgate, whenever he could, took his seat by Rosamond's side and lingered to hear her music, calling himself her captive — meaning, all the while, not to be her captive. 20

Though there is a want of complete honesty in Dorothea and Lydgate, George Eliot plainly regards their faults, at worst, as pardonable lapses. With Bulstrode this is not the case; he is the novelist's first complete study of the religious hypocrite. He has been prominent in unscrupulous money transactions, and has acquired a large fortune. Despite this, he is a model of respectability in Middlemarch, the first to stress the need for virtuous action. Indeed, his downfall is so complete because society condemns him as a hypocrite as well as a sinner. George Eliot refuses to be dogmatic or vindictive, however, even when criticizing Bulstrode. We are not allowed to forget that he is capable of real suffering; we are not expected to gloat uncharitably with Hawley and the townsfolk over his fall.

As in the preceding works, the voice of Puritan conscience stressing the desirability of self-sacrifice is heard in Middlemarch. Though the reader may justifiably question the necessity of such actions, Dorothea

20 Eliot, Middlemarch, p. 197.
must bow to a "sad necessity" in giving up Ladislaw, and Will himself must recognise the "necessity for renunciation."

Such comments are, however, rare in *Middlemarch* — much rarer than in the early novels. Usually, George Eliot does no more than suggest that we should try to help others, and think less of ourselves. Such a view is much more sensible than one which stresses self-abnegation for its own sake. Thus Farebrother's refusal to stand in Fred's way, though he is himself very fond of Mary, and Dorothea's decision to stay with a husband for whom she has no real affection, are acts of unselfishness which we can admire, because they serve some practical purpose.

The novelist is increasingly aware that such an outlook is not easily developed. While in *Adam Bede*, Dinah cheerfully and somewhat unrealistically accepts a life from which all worldly pleasures are rigidly excluded, none of the characters in *Middlemarch* finds it easy. Even Dorothea's early views concerning renunciation contain an element of romantic daydreaming and conscious martyrdom. But the heroine's cloistered upbringing does provide some excuse: "Our sense of duty must often wait for some work which shall take the place of dilletantism and make


22 Ibid., p. 588.
us feel that the quality of our action is not a matter of indifference."23

Dorothea matures apace after her marriage to Casaubon, and the novelist approves her compassion for an ailing husband. After his death, she comforts Lydgate, forgives Rosamond, and promises to give large sums to benevolent causes. To George Eliot, this recognition of a duty to others is evidence of a developing moral sense in which self-shrinks and vision expands. Mere theorizing about duty is not enough; through the character of Dorothea, as through Irvine and Kenn in previous works, the novelist emphasizes the value of unselfish action.

George Eliot is enough of a realist to see that her heroine is an exceptional character. She does not expect the other figures in the novel to lead wholly unselfish lives. Indeed, she smiles at their inadequate opinions concerning renunciation. For Ladislaw, duty constitutes a kind of self-conscious martyrdom; it is synonymous with "wailing and moralizing over misery."24 Solomon Featherstone's conception of duty is a farcical mockery of all the term implies. When he says, "I will do my duty,"25 he merely means that he will take good care

23 Eliot, Middlemarch, p. 338.
24 Ibid., p. 103.
25 Ibid., p. 227.
of his own interests. Rosamond's views on this subject are likewise deficient. There is playful irony in the author's comment that "beyond the absolutely necessary half-dozen, Rosamond contented herself without the very highest style of Valenciennes."  

As already suggested, there is less emphasis on theoretic virtue, and more on practical action in Middlemarch. For the less gifted members of society, work provides a way of satisfying their sense of duty. The man who is "wise in his daily work," and who does not ply "his utmost sense . . . to faiths or polity"  is, for George Eliot, as for Clough and Carlyle, a valuable member of society. Caleb Garth, like Adam Bede, is an exemplar of honesty and hard work. Yet unlike Adam, he never expatiates, out of character, about abstract moral problems. He insists, in forthright fashion, that "an idle man ought not to exist," for an idle man creates discord through his failure to fulfil his obligations satisfactorily. Because Caleb has always applied himself conscientiously and satisfied his clients, he is rewarded. Mrs. Garth remarks of her husband: "He is asked to take

26 Eliot, Middlemarch, p. 260.
27 Ibid., p. 292.
28 Ibid., p. 103.
a post again by those who dismissed him long ago. That shows that he did his work well, so that they feel the want of him."^{29}

Fred's idleness stands in direct contrast to the industry of the Garths. Indolence is, to George Eliot, another form of selfishness, since the lazy person could be better employed in contributing to the happiness of others. That Fred comes to understand the truth is shown by his agreeing to work under Garth. Yet even when discussing the unreformed Fred, the novelist does not constantly allude to his laziness. Farebrother, who usually speaks for his creator, is more concerned to applaud his virtues than decry his faults: "I wish Fred were not such an idle dog; he has some very good points and his father is a little hard upon him."^{30}

The value of practical action is indicated in other ways. Casaubon is a failure as a cleric precisely because he lets his life dribble away in a narrow rivulet of pedantry. Brooke too is criticized by Dagley for being a theoretical reformer: "You've got no call to come an' talk about sticks o' these premises, as you won't give a stick tow'it mending."^{31}

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30 Ibid., p. 296.
31 Ibid., p. 290.
Similarly, the attitude of the romantic idealist cannot be maintained in this world of real actions and events. Ladislaw's aim to worship all that is beautiful is clearly an impractical one. Even Lydgate's hopes, those of a nonconformist revolting from family tradition and dreaming of himself as a discoverer, soon founder on the rocks of Middlemarch society.

Thus far I have discussed those aspects of George Eliot's moral philosophy which seem to me austere. Not only are such rigorous views much less in evidence in Middlemarch than in her earlier works, but when the novelist does mention them, she does not preach dogmatically to the reader.

In fact, the impression we gain from the novel is not that of a moralist alternately being severe and indulgent, but that of a humanitarian allowing her real feelings full play. Though George Eliot is not able to feel much pity for such people as Dempster, Wybrow or Tito, in Middlemarch she always discerns, even in her least likeable characters, a human spirit that must be respected.

This sympathetic tolerance is even noticeable in her study of Raffles, though the portrait is suggestive of a Dickensian caricature. After his death, it is reported at "The Tankard" that he was "a lusty, fresh-coloured man as you'd wish to see, and the best of company - though
dead he lies in Lowick churchyard sure enough."32

The novelist's sympathy comes out clearly in her treatment of Bulstrode. A robber of widows and orphans, a religious hypocrite, he might easily have qualified as a major villain in a novel by Dickens, who is so blinded by pity for his oppressor's victims that he can feel no sympathy for the tormentors themselves. But with George Eliot in Middlemarch, to understand is to pity - perhaps even to forgive. Under her gaze, Bulstrode is less a tyrant, getting his deserts, than a beaten man, stripped of the respectability he prizes above all. Leavis comments in similar vein:

Unengaging as Bulstrode is, we are not allowed to forget that he is a highly developed member of the species to which we ourselves belong, and so capable of acute suffering; and that his case is not so remote from what might be ours as the particulars encourage our complacency to assume. When his Nemesis closes in on him we feel his agonized twists and turns too much from within - that is the effect of George Eliot's kind of analysis - not to regard him with more compassion than contempt.33

The novelist's compassionate view of humanity is revealed most explicitly in her study of Casaubon. As Gordon Haight has pointed out:

Thackeray would have found an irresistible temptation for ridicule in that honeymoon among the

32 Eliot, Middlemarch, p. 530.
33 Leavis, op. cit., pp. 90-91.
catacombs, the bride weeping alone beside the "Cleopatra" in the Vatican, her husband sitting for St. Thomas Aquinas in a historical painting - and buying it!34

There is no caricature or ridicule in George Eliot's portrait; she is too aware of the pain of human existence to wish to condemn or satirize its victims. What she feels about such a man is indicated by imagery no less than by other means. He is a dry pedant, living a tomb-like existence, and more interested in losing himself in the musty mists of antiquity than in being an affectionate husband. Yet his feelings and actions are not condemned, not even his unfounded jealousy of Ladislaw, and his lack of consideration for his wife. Leavis believes that George Eliot has never been more tolerantly disposed toward humanity:

It is not only an intellectual, it is a spirit profoundly noble, one believing in a possible nobility to be aimed at by men, that can make us, with her, realize such a situation fully as one for compassion.35

It has already been noted that George Eliot's treatment of the shallow and self-centred Rosamond reveals the novelist at her most uncompromising. But even here a degree of compassion is instilled in the reader, because he is made aware of her pitifully narrow outlook. She is rarely depicted as deliberately sinning; she is merely

34 Haight, op. cit., p. XII.
35 Leavis, op. cit., p. 84.
incapable of understanding any values more altruistic than her own.

To emphasize the fact that George Eliot is more uniformly sympathetic to her creations in *Middlemarch*, it is worth comparing her treatment of Fred Vincy with that of Arthur Donnithorne in *Adam Bede*. These young men have similar faults. Both think of themselves first and others afterwards; both adopt a "devil may care" attitude; both are supremely confident of their abilities. However, while the novelist's attitude towards Fred is, almost invariably, one of tolerance, she is less consistently forbearing to Arthur.

Admittedly, she does make excuses for Arthur in the early chapters of *Adam Bede*. "Many a good fellow," we are told, "has been betrayed because of "a disastrous combination of circumstances."^36 Moreover his first meeting with Hetty is accidental, "a mere circumstance of his walk, not its object."^37

Yet George Eliot is indulgent to Arthur only in spasms. Usually she adopts an uncompromising attitude towards him, pointing out his manifold weaknesses in order that the reader shall note them and take heed. Early in the action, the novelist intimates that she thinks little

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of him; "his eyes are not half so fine as Adam's."\(^{38}\) The latter in fact speaks for his creator when denouncing Arthur. After hearing of his affair with Hetty, he remarks caustically: "You think little o' doing what may damage other folks so as to get your bit o' trifling as means nothing."\(^{39}\)

Most of the descriptions of Arthur are tinged with heavy irony. His inner thoughts are frequently revealed to us, the reflections of a supremely self-satisfied man:

Now his real life was beginning; now he would have room and opportunity for action, and he would use them. He would show the Loamshire people what a fine country gentleman he was . . . . \(^{40}\)

Such an analysis is hardly disinterested. George Eliot is too anxious to use Arthur as a symbolic figure illustrating moral truths. It is all too obvious that his complacency will be shattered by a terrible revelation.

George Eliot is not nearly so critical of Fred. She does not constantly point out his failings; rather, she extols his virtues and smiles at his transgressions. His arrogance is viewed in an indulgent light:

Considering that Fred was not at all coarse, that he rather looked down on the manners and

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speech of young man who had not been to university, and that he had written stanzas as pastoral and unvoluptuous as his flute-playing, his attraction towards Bambridge and Horrock was an interesting fact. 41

Moreover the novelist is not slow to indicate Fred's excellencies. Though he is self-centred and indolent, he has, in Farebrother's words, "many good points." That he is sincere is shown by his conversation with the vicar, in which he tells him that he can never be a cleric; that he is capable of sympathy is evinced by his compassion for the miser Featherstone— he has "kindness enough in him to be a little sorry." 42

Had Fred appeared in Adam Bede, one may be sure that he would have been treated much less leniently; almost certainly he would have been constantly held up as an example of moral laxity.

The way in which George Eliot applauds compassion in her own characters is a further indication of her outlook. Sympathy breeds sympathy; for Sir James "the mere idea that a woman had a kindness towards him" spins "little threads of tenderness from out his heart towards her." 43

41 Eliot, Middlemarch, p. 173.
42 Ibid., p. 83.
43 Ibid., p. 45.
Tenderness melts pride in a way nothing else can. It is because Rosamond lacks warmth that Lydgate remains somewhat aloof; it is because Dorothea is sympathetic to him that the barrier of pride is immediately destroyed:

The searching tenderness of her woman's tones seemed made for a defence against ready accusers. Lydgate did not stay to think she was Quixotic; he gave himself up, for the first time in his life, to the exquisite sense of leaning entirely on a generous sympathy, without any check of a proud reserve. 44

A noble nature, "generous in its wishes, ardent in its charity," 45 can sustain us in adversity. But it is also one of the novelist's beliefs, expounded just as explicitly in Middlemarch as in the preceding works, that one becomes most compassionate through having suffered oneself. Casaubon is a man who has deliberately shunned human contacts and who has never been in need of succour himself; as a result, he cannot be warm, affectionate, or understanding. The same is true of Vincy and his daughter. Rosamond has no compassion for Featherstone. "I would rather not have anything left to me if I must earn it by enduring much of my uncle's cough and his ugly relations," 46 is her comment on the miser. Because she

44 Eliot, Middlemarch, p. 559.
46 Ibid., p. 75.
has never known hardship or sorrow, she will find it very difficult to sympathize with Lydgate after they are married.

On the other hand, Dorothea's capacity for sympathy, already strongly developed, is enlarged by her tribulations. Just as her creator came to see the ineffectuality of masochistic self-repression, so too Dorothea becomes more compassionate and less Puritanical. Admittedly she is, by nature, a far more understanding woman than Rosamond, but her own hardships do enable her to be more understanding to both her husband and Lydgate.

It was noted in Chapter two that though George Eliot insists, in her early works, that one should not disregard the emotions, she does despise mere passion. Even in Middlemarch, passion is occasionally seen as a disruptive force. Ladislaw often errs because he acts on impulse; Fred Vincy is likewise too much a slave to his feelings. There is one omniscient aside on the dangers of passion; in this passage the author merely warns that our desires sometimes cause us to break our vows.

On the other hand, the novelist constantly affirms that the emotional side of man's nature must not be repressed. For the mature George Eliot, as for Henry Lewes, man's life is of little value apart from sentiment. Through her portrait of Casaubon, she is able to demonstrate this belief more effectively than ever before. Even the
pedantic Brooke sees the deficiencies in the antiquarian's
outlook. The novelist's early descriptions of the author
of *The Key to All Mythologies* are tinged with irony:

Hence he determined to abandon himself to the
stream of feeling, and perhaps was surprised
to find what an exceedingly shallow rill it
was . . . . Mr. Casaubon found that sprinkling
was the utmost approach to a plunge which his
stream would afford him; and he concluded that
the poets had much exaggerated the force of
masculine passion.47

George Eliot stresses the importance of feeling
and sentiment throughout the novel. She even insists
that "Our good depends on the quality and breadth of
our emotion."48 Mary, we are told, might have become a
cynic, but for the "well of affectionate gratitude with
her."49 Caleb insists, like Adam before him, that one
should follow the voice of "clear feeling." After informing
his wife that he intends to help Fred, he adds:
"I've got a clear feeling inside me, and that I shall
follow."50 The novelist is certainly prepared to admit
that one can have an excess of sensibility, but even
Will's hedonist outlook is preferable to the ponderous
intellectualism of Casaubon. It is Dorothea's humility
and naïveté that imagines the latter as a lake in compar-

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ison with her own little pool of feelings.

In *Middlemarch*, the novelist's views concerning love and marriage are clearly presented. Her beliefs on this subject have not changed significantly. Yet she insists, even more frequently than in her early works, that love has a therapeutic effect on everyone. Caleb remarks of Fred's affection for his daughter: "The lad loves Mary, and a true love for a good woman is a great thing, Susan. It shapes many a rough fellow." Farebrother, who is usually seen in the role of an authority, comments: "But it is the easier for a man to wait patiently when he has friends to love him, and ask for nothing better than to help him through, so far as it lies in their power."

The truth of this statement is proved by the events of the story. Lydgate and Dorothea are disillusioned by marriage; they find that life is harder to bear without the affection of another to support them. Just how powerful love can be is shown by the romance of Dorothea and Ladislaw; theirs is a love which defies all barriers and conventions.

Such examples indicate that George Eliot's handling of human relations and emotions is now more assured.

Seldom does she allow her intellectual preoccupations to override her real feelings; she thinks about her creations less and responds to them more readily. Though she never suggests, as Hardy does, that physical love is the primary motive force in man, she does, in Middlemarch, more freely admit that it is an essential part of human life.

When discussing the early novels, it was noted that though George Eliot sometimes stresses her belief in fixed standards of conduct, on other occasions, she asserts that morals are relative. In Middlemarch, the latter view predominates; in this work, she strikingly demonstrates her belief that environment and tradition mould our moral attitudes. She realises that the noblest actions are hindered and baulked by the society in which we live, and frequently excuses the aberrations of her creations by stressing the inadequacies of their social milieu. As Cooke says, she applies "agnosticism to morals, by regarding good and evil as relative and as the results of man's environment." 53

In the Prelude to the novel, George Eliot emphasizes the role of environment by indulging in one of her infrequent didactic asides, commenting that "these later-born Theresas were helped by no coherent social

53 Cooke, op. cit., p. 257.
faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul." Early in the novel, George Eliot indicates that the neighbourhood of Tipton and Middlemarch will provide the stultifying environment in which Dorothea's exalted enthusiasm will come to grief:

The intensity of her religious disposition, the coercion it exercised on her life, was but one aspect of a nature altogether ardent, theoretic, and intellectually consequent: and with such a nature, struggling in the bands of a narrow teaching, hemmed in by a social life which seemed nothing but a labyrinth of petty courses . . . which led no whither, the outcome was sure to strike others as at once exaggeration and inconsistency.55

However, George Eliot's most revealing statement on the influence of society is reserved for the end of the novel. When passing judgment, she is careful to excuse her heroine's past actions. Though the novelist's early descriptions of Dorothea are often ironic in tone, there is no sarcasm here:

Certainly those determining acts of her life were not ideally beautiful. They were the mixed result of young and noble impulse struggling amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state, in which great feelings will often take the aspect of error, and great faith the aspect of illusion. For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what is outside it.56

54 Eliot, Middlemarch, p. 3.
55 Ibid., p. 21.
56 Ibid., p. 612.
Though the prejudices, the materialism, and the customs of Middlemarch strangle the aspirations of Dorothea, society is usually seen, not as a destructive agency, but simply as an influence that none of us can disregard. "Anyone" remarks the novelist, "watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots, sees a slow preparation of effects from one life on another."57

Not a single character is able to remain uninfluenced by the people around him. Though Lydgate attempts to find "social isolation,"58 he soon feels "the hampering threadlike pressure of small social conditions, and their frustrating complexity."59 Later he is pictured as a disillusioned man, admitting that living in Middlemarch has changed his whole outlook. He has fallen, "not simply to their level, but to the level of soliciting them."60

Even Rosamond's pitifully narrow outlook is partially excused; she has lived too long in a cramping moral environment. Though she can say that "The town's talk is of very little consequence,"61 she invariably thinks along conventional lines. More truthful is her comment to her husband: "It cannot answer to be eccentric; you should think what will be generally liked."62

57 Eliot, Middlemarch, p. 70.
58 Ibid., p. 216.
59 Ibid., pp. 133-134.
60 Ibid., p. 563.
61 Ibid., p. 218.
62 Ibid., p. 475.
Nonetheless, George Eliot is far from being a pessimist. Cooke's judgment that "her work is limited, her genius cramped and her imagination crippled" by a philosophy which is "narrow" and a creed which is "inexpansive," is an unfair one. Admittedly Bulstrode and Lydgate are defeated by Middlemarch. But all the other characters compromise with their environment. Indeed, Dorothea, with her aspiration to a life nobler than that of Middlemarch, is one of the positive forces of the novel.

George Eliot lays some stress in her early novels on tradition and the past as furnishing legitimate sources of the moral and spiritual life of man. For the novelist, as for Comte and Spencer, ethical improvement will only come with a further development of the social order, and this can best be done by learning from the lessons of the past.

This belief is again expounded in Middlemarch. In Chapter two, the reader is informed that "a kind Providence furnishes the limpest personality with a gum or starch in the form of tradition;" it provides a coherent system of ethics which even Sir James can appreciate. Both the past experiences of the race, and the memories of individuals help to determine our actions. It is

64 Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 16.
Dorothea's recollection of previous encounters that makes her desire a meeting with Ladislaw. George Eliot does not lose the opportunity to indulge in a general reflection: "Life would be no better than candlelight tinsel and daylight rubbish if our spirits were not touched by what has been, to issues of longing and constancy."  

Tradition is usually, but not always, an influence for good. Just as the Dodsons in *The Mill on the Floss* have an irrational faith in all that is traditional, so a number of people in Middlemarch cling to outmoded conventions. Lydgate, an idealistic innovator, vows to reform the corrupt and traditional practices of the town's doctors: "One of these reforms was to act stoutly on the strength of a recent legal decision, and simply prescribe, without dispensing drugs or taking percentage from druggists." He fails because the forces of tradition are too strong in Middlemarch; but that he should try at all demonstrates that he is not a slave to convention.

When analysing George Eliot's ethic in Chapter two, it was noted that the novelist frequently makes excuses for her characters by outlining the circumstances

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surrounding their deeds.

In *Middlemarch*, this "doctrine of circumstance" is again propounded. "Unwanted circumstances," we hear, "may make us all rather unlike ourselves: there are conditions under which the most majestic person is obliged to sneeze, and our emotions are liable to be acted on in the same incongruous manner."\(^{67}\) Indeed, most of the members of *Middlemarch* society are hindered, at one time or another, by "unwanted circumstances." As Hackbutt the tanner says: "A crawling servility is usually dictated by circumstances."\(^{68}\)

Though George Eliot is aware that "if we had been greater, circumstance would have been less strong against us,"\(^{69}\) most of her creations are the victims of misfortune. While she is not, like Hardy, an out and out determinist insisting that man is completely at the mercy of Destiny, she does realize that events often conspire against man.

Events thus conspire against Bulstrode. The novelist cares less to describe what he does than why he does it. Bit by bit his past life is laid before us: his childhood in an orphanage, his conversion to a sect

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of Evangelists, his innocent involvement in a shady pawnbroker's business, and his marriage to the owner's rich widow. Chance circumstances have affected Bulstrode's actions; perhaps his only real crime is that he conceals from his wife the fact that her daughter is still alive.

In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot's views on religion are again much in evidence. While she is, in the early novels, alternately sympathetic and severe to the bigoted or the irreligious, she is consistently tolerant in this work, and makes less rigorous demands on her religious characters.

She applauds, even more enthusiastically than before, any faith which places strong emphasis on right conduct. In fact, Farebrother is perhaps her most likeable and realistic cleric, because he is less of a theorizer than any of his predecessors. He is invariably performing good deeds rather than arguing about theological dogma; as a result he is never pompous or aggressively earnest in the way that Savonarola and even Dinah sometimes are.

Mrs. Cadwallader, despite her garrulity and her mercenary outlook, is a useful member of the community. "A much more exemplary character with an infusion of sour dignity," the novelist maintains, "would not have
furthered their comprehension of the Thirty-nine Articles, and would have been less socially uniting."\textsuperscript{70}

Nowhere in fact does George Eliot allow those characters whose religious beliefs are austere and inflexible to speak as authorities. Certainly the principles that Bulstrode expounds are theoretically sound enough; sometimes he puts forward views which are remarkably similar to those propounded by clerics in earlier novels. Yet his belief that "trial is our portion here and is a needed corrective"\textsuperscript{71} is a view too austere and pessimistic for George Eliot to accept completely.

Moreover the novelist does not have much admiration for a man like Tyke. A morally upright and erudite parson, he would undoubtedly have been cast in a more heroic mould in an early novel. But Dorothea speaks for the novelist when discussing Tyke and the religious attitude which he epitomizes:

\begin{quote}
I have been looking into a volume of sermons by Mr. Tyke: such sermons would be no use at Lowick - I mean about imputed righteousness and the prophecies in the Apocalypse. I have always been thinking of the different ways in which Christianity is taught, and whenever I find one way that makes it a wider blessing than any other, I cling to that as the truest - I mean that which takes in the most good of all kinds,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{70} Eliot, \textit{Middlemarch}, p. 39.

\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 501.
and brings in the most people as sharers in it. It is surely better to pardon too much, than to condemn too much.\textsuperscript{72}

This passage is a very important one, the more so because it is spoken by Dorothea, the heroine of the novel. It clearly sums up George Eliot's attitude towards erring humanity in Middlemarch; she does indeed pardon more and condemn less. In fact she achieves that comprehensiveness of moral vision which, in an essay entitled "Moral Swindlers," she exhorts the reader to seek:

But let our habitual talk give morals their full meaning as the conduct which, in every human relation, would follow from the fullest knowledge and the fullest sympathy - a meaning perpetually corrected and enriched by a more thorough appreciation of dependence in things, and a finer sensitivity to both physical and spiritual fact.\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{72} Eliot, \textit{Middlemarch}, p. 363.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In this study, I have attempted to outline George Eliot's moral philosophy as revealed in her novels. The emphasis on *Middlemarch* can be justified, for in terms both of didactic technique and maturity of outlook, this novel represents the apex of George Eliot's art.

It is true that her ethical creed did not undergo radical change after 1850. However, it is easy to detect inconsistencies in her moral vision in her early works of fiction, inconsistencies which can be largely attributed to the rigorous nature of her early training. Though she was a sensitive girl, she adopted an austere and inflexible attitude towards ethical problems. As a result, the elements in her moral philosophy are not fully synthesized in her early novels; sometimes tolerant and sympathetic, she is often dogmatic and intolerant of moral laxity.

In contrast, *Middlemarch* is the work of a more sympathetic and less dogmatic maturity. George Eliot was, at this time, enjoying a more serene personal life, and she was no longer preoccupied with the moral doctrines of Puritanism. As a result, she is no longer
alternately severe and indulgent; she has achieved a catholicity of moral vision which enables her to be uniformly sympathetic to her creations, and to refrain from dogmatizing save on rare occasions.

George Eliot was also a more accomplished artist as well as a more mature thinker when she wrote *Middlemarch*. In the novelist's early works, the reader tires of her habit of insistently pointing out her "message" in overt asides. In *Middlemarch*, there is a marked decrease in direct didactism; the author does not allow her intellectual preoccupations to warp her artistic judgment. In fact, she is aware that the inculcation of moral truths can best be achieved by allowing her imaginative creation to speak for itself. Not only does she resort much less to the device of the omniscient author, she also refrains from creating ideal characters who always act impeccably and whose views coincide with those of their creator.

These two developments cannot be treated in isolation from each other. George Eliot is most understanding when she ceases to moralize and responds to her characters. In *Middlemarch*, we find this growth of imaginative insight; it is partly as a result of this artistic development that the novel should strike the
reader as the product of a humane and enlightened moral thinker. E. M. Forster's epithet of "preacher" is not a fair title to ascribe to the author of *Middlemarch*.  

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