

“Art Works for All Whom it Touches”:

Interpreting the use of High Renaissance Art and Dutch Realism in *Middlemarch*

by

Katelyn Hahn

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Abstract

This thesis examines the relationship between art and life in George Eliot's novel, *Middlemarch*, in order to refute what many critics have said about the importance of the visual arts to Eliot's work. These critics have claimed that Eliot harbors only an amateur knowledge and appreciation for the visual arts and this is manifest in her novels. In contrast, I argue, through a comparative examination of Eliot's use of painting and sculpture in the novel, that these critics have misinterpreted Eliot's relationship to the visual arts and ignored the importance she places in a humanistic portrayal of life. This comparison will be divided into two parts addressing the two types of visual arts most important to Eliot's writing: High Renaissance and Dutch Realism. By tracing the symbols, analogies and literary techniques that Eliot borrows from these types of painting and sculpture, I argue that it is possible to come to an understanding of Eliot's overall philosophy of art: the belief that art must reflect the world in which it is created and be a positive force in that world.

The introduction will provide an overview of the conversation surrounding Eliot's relationship to the visual arts. It will also introduce the reader to the influential forces-- George Henry Lewes, her travels in Europe-- which acted upon Eliot's artistic conscience. These forces motivate Eliot's ideas of the "epic" and "modern" life in relation to the visual arts discussed in the body of the thesis.

Chapter 1 will discuss Eliot's experiences with and use of High Renaissance and Baroque imagery in *Middlemarch*. The chapter seeks to define Eliot's notion of the "epic life" and the way in which visual representations of that life become a degrading force upon her characters. Eliot believed that religious and mythic subjects rendered High Renaissance and Baroque art irrelevant as the undercurrent of religious life dissolved. Thus religious art could no longer be a positive force in an increasingly modern world. I argue that Eliot's treatment of High Renaissance art is not evidence of an unsophisticated appreciation of that art, but rather a call for a different kind of art which could reflect her world and her faith in the religion of humanism. This chapter will also examine Eliot's artist figures--Adolph Naumann and Will Ladislav-- and the way in which they become representative figures for the development of the novel and Eliot's artistic philosophy.

Chapter 2 will focus on seventeenth century Dutch Realism and the difference and significance of Eliot's use of Dutch Realism versus High Renaissance and Baroque styles. In Dutch Realism, Eliot found a humanistic and realistic portrayal of "modern life" and a visual representation for her philosophy of art. In contrast to her analogies and symbols involving High Renaissance art, Eliot's use of Dutch Realism is far more subtle. It is integrated into her narrative style rather than referenced explicitly. I argue that this is evidence of the way in which Eliot has internalized the forms of Dutch Realism and uses them as a visual model for the construction of her novel in particular, and for the creation of art in general.

I will conclude by reviewing the connections between visual art and life and the how they are related to larger arguments about faith and humanism in Eliot's work.

CONTENTS

Short Titles.....	i
Figures.....	ii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One- Art and the Epic Life: High Renaissance and Baroque.....	10
I. Portraiture and Epic Identity.....	15
II. The Artist Figure.....	20
Chapter Two- Art and the Modern Life: Dutch Realism and Domestic Reality.....	28
I. Modern Life in Landscape, Portraiture and Genre Painting.....	33
II. The Physiognomy of Objects.....	44
Conclusion.....	46
Works Consulted.....	48

Short Titles

Adam Bede: Eliot, George. *Adam Bede*. Ed. Stephen Gill. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.

Journals: Eliot, George, *The Journals of George Eliot*, eds. Harris, Margaret, and Judith Johnston. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Letters: George Eliot, *The Letters of George Eliot*. Ed. R Brimley Johnson New York: The Dial Press, 1927.

Middlemarch: Eliot, George. *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*. Ed. George Maertz. Toronto: Broadview Press, 2004.

Modern Painters: Eliot, George. "Review of John Ruskin's *Modern Painters*", *Westminister Review* 65, (April 1856).

Witemeyer. Witemeyer, Hugh. *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.

Figures

Figure 1. Gian Lorenzo Bernini. *The Ecstasy of St. Theresa* (1644-47), Cornaro Chapel, S. Maria della Vittoria, 12

Figure 2. Unknown. *Sleeping Ariadne* (c. 240 BCE). Museo Pio Clementino, Vatican Museum, 22

Figure 3. Peter Paul Rubens. *Peasants Returning From the Fields* (c.1963-63). Pitti, Florence, 36

Figure 4. Meindert Hobbema. *Avenue at Middelharnis* (1689). National Gallery, London, 39

Figure 5. Gerrit Dou, *Girl Chopping Onions* (1646). Royal Collection, London, 43

Figure 6. Fran Mieris, *Inn Scene* (c. 1658-59). Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague, 43

Introduction

George Eliot once related her belief to the painter Edward Burn Jones that “art works for all whom it touches”.¹ Among Eliot’s novels, it is her penultimate novel, *Middlemarch*, which embraces this belief most fully. It’s vast but detailed narrative opens itself up to a multitude of discussions on the nature of art and life. Critics, however, have generally focused on Eliot’s belief in the power of written art forms to the exclusion of the visual arts such as painting and sculpture. While it is true that Eliot privileges the written word over all other artistic forms—the novel is, after all, her chosen medium—I will argue that these critics have all underestimated the importance of the visual arts to Eliot’s work and to her entire philosophy of art.

For the author of this expansive novel, art is not a series of solitary rooms wherein literature, painting and sculpture exist alone, but rather a collaboration of these things working toward the same end: the representation of life. The critic Joseph Weisenfarth notes that because the novel begins with a prelude and ends with a finale it, would be reasonable to conclude that something musical will occur in between.² Yet although the formula suggests the outline of a grand symphony or concerto, *Middlemarch*’s “in between” is not constructed of musical notes, but of layers of brush strokes. The visual arts are not merely a unifying thread in the novel but a governing force for the construction of *Middlemarch*’s larger themes. Thus, it is possible to trace Eliot’s philosophy of art and ultimately the novel’s *raison d’être*—

¹ George Eliot, *The Letters of George Eliot*, Ed. R Brimley Johnson (New York: The Dial Press, 1927), 165. Hereafter cited in the text as “Letters”.

² Joseph Weisenfarth, “Middlemarch: The Language of Art,” *PMLA*, Vol. 97, No. 3. (May, 1982): 363-377.

the representation of life— through her repeated allusions to painting and sculpture.

This thesis will focus on a comparison of Eliot's analogies, symbols and literary techniques in order to refute the claims critics have made when discussing the relationship between *Middlemarch* and the visual arts. This comparison will be divided into two parts addressing the two types of visual arts most important to Eliot's writing: High Renaissance and Dutch Realism.

* * *

The error critics have made in trivializing Eliot's relationship with the visual arts begins with the notion that she lacked a sophisticated knowledge of painting and sculpture. Many critics including Henry James, Lord Acton, Charles Norton and Virginia Woolf, have commented on the extent of George Eliot's knowledge of the visual arts. Often, these critics focus on Eliot's discriminating approach to High Renaissance styles, saying, as Charles Eliot Norton put it, that she "lacked artistic feeling" and "good culture on the part of the occupant"³. Henry James's criticism of Eliot also takes on a cynical tone when he comments on her amateur knowledge of the visual arts, and especially the mannerist and baroque styles which follow the High Renaissance.⁴ Collectively, these critics represent a common view of George Eliot's relationship with the visual arts, postulating that she is unable to appreciate painting and sculpture with a sophistication that would prevent the "wooden" quality of her

³ Hugh Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 22-24. Hereafter cited in the text as "Witemeyer".

⁴ Henry James, "Review of George Eliot's Life", *Atlantic Monthly*, 55 (May 1885): 449.

approach toward the visual arts (Witemeyer, 22-24).

One contemporary critic, Hugh Witemeyer, rightly notes that many others have underestimated George Eliot's appreciation for the visual arts. He explains that she tends to privilege portraiture over the other genres because portraiture has the most in common with her role as a novelist: namely, the representation of life and human beings. Yet following this assertion, he resorts to a rather traditional hierarchy of painting⁵, rearranged to conform to what he understands to be Eliot's own preferences. According to Witemeyer, after portraiture, Eliot values history painting, genre, and landscape respectively (Witemeyer, 24). While Eliot does write of High Renaissance styles with great regard—at times bordering on awe—Witemeyer misses the conflicted nature of Eliot's admiration for history painting. Thus Witemeyer, among other critics, has only partially explained Eliot's relationship to the visual arts. I want to posit that George Eliot's approach to art is neither dry nor unsophisticated, but that Eliot views the visual arts from the standpoint of a need to represent living, breathing life— not only to understand the reality of the world, but to influence it for the better in observable ways.

Consider, for example, George Eliot's discussion of Rubens, in which she remarks that the painter "gives me more pleasure than any other painter, whether that is right or wrong—his are such real, breathing men and women—men and women moved by passions, not mincing and grimacing and posing in mere apery of passion!" (As quoted in Witemeyer, 22) The locus for George Eliot's praise is found

⁵ I refer here to the idea of a hierarchy of visual genres codified in the seventeenth century. First came history painting, followed by portraiture, genre, landscape and still-life respectively.

not in the grandness of Ruben's subject, nor in the "statuesque and monumental" as Witemeyer claims, but rather in the vital nature of Ruben's human figures and in the fact that they represent an active kind of passion and seem to possess real breathing life (Witemeyer, 23). Furthermore, Eliot's statement about whether it is "right or wrong" to feel pleasure in viewing Ruben's painting indicates an inner struggle involving aesthetic and moral judgments with respect to the visual arts. Here Eliot reveals an underlying layer of uncertainty over whether it is morally right to feel so much pleasure in Ruben's colorful, voluptuous, and ephemeral paintings. This uncertainty is not indicative of a "woodenness" in Eliot's attitude toward art, but rather in a larger interest in truthful representation. Although doubt remains, Eliot ultimately justifies her pleasure in Rubens by uncovering the realism and naturalism of his art.⁶

Eliot does not consider all forms of idealism to be antithetical to realism or naturalism. On the contrary, Eliot is a disciple of Ruskinian principles extolling the art historian's "grand doctrines of truth and sincerity in art, and the nobleness and solemnity of our human life" (*Letters*, 95). Along these lines, both Eliot and George Henry Lewes—from whom she learned much about the visual arts—recognized and appreciated the realism in some High Renaissance painting. Addressing Raphael's Sistine Madonna in his 1858 essay, "Realism in Art", Lewes issued these remarks about the painting:

⁶ I use the term "naturalism" in the art historical sense, meaning the realistic portrayal of objects in a natural environment.

Here is a picture which from the first has enchained the hearts of men, which is assuredly in the highest sense ideal, and which is so because it is also in the highest sense real... a divine child...a striking contrast to the ineffectual attempts of other painters to spiritualize and idealize the babe— attempts which represent no babe at all.⁷

Eliot agrees with Lewes on this point, believing in the imagination's power to fill in for the limits of reality. Because art can never reproduce verbatim the reality it seeks to represent, it must always appeal to the imagination. In Eliot's opinion, however, the imagination should at least be grounded in a reality that portrays "exemplary moral or religious norms which find successive incarnations in history" or which "reveals a want that has not hitherto been met" (As quoted in Witemeyer, 73). In other words, the imagination engaged in the creation of art must fulfill a need for the age it is in. Christianity is not sufficient to meet these criteria for it is this type of pure Christian or mythic idealization of character—which is wholly symbolic and pays no respect to nature— that is problematic.

It is important to note, however, that Eliot's interests in the visual arts are a product of more complex issues than whether or not a painting or sculpture was true to life. As previously mentioned, Eliot believes art is not exempt from issues of

7 George Henry Lewes, "Realism in Art: Recent German Fiction," *West Minister Review* v. 66 (1856): 493-94.

morality. In an essay entitled, *George Eliot, George Henry Lewes, and the Novel*, Alice R. Kaminsky writes that Lewes “accepted as his basic premise the belief that art is as much a product of society as it is an individual creation, originating in great part out of social needs and in turn modifying social life”⁸. This belief had a profound influence on the development of George Eliot's intellectual conscience. She too came to believe that art was inextricably a part of the world of its origins and thus, it had “moral value” in the sense that it helps “enlarge the sympathies and understandings of man” (Kaminsky, 999). If the main purpose of art is to represent life, then the artist also has a responsibility to influence the world for the better through a truthful representation of that life. Witemeyer, on the other hand, seems to be equating admiration and value with morality. For Eliot, aesthetic and moral principles can never be mutually exclusive, but when postulating about George Eliot's artistic preferences, one must not equate her natural appreciation for skill and aesthetic beauty with valuations of morality. In order to understand Eliot's relationship to the visual arts, it is important to consider the synthesis of her knowledge of aesthetic quality and moral principles, gained over years of firsthand experience during her travels through Europe.

* * *

It was in 1854—seven years before the publication of *Middlemarch*—that George Eliot and George Henry Lewes embarked on a journey across Europe to visit

⁸ Alice R. Kaminsky, “George Eliot, George Henry Lewes, and the Novel”, *PMLA*, v. 70, no.5 (December, 1955), p. 999. Hereafter cited in the text as “Kaminsky”.

the “greatest centres of art” as Eliot referred to them.⁹ This journey would be the first in a long line of successive trips spanning the years between 1854 and 1867. During this time, George Eliot visited many of the most important galleries of Europe, traveling through Antwerp, Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Berlin, Dusseldorf and across most of Germany, recording their experiences in “Recollections of Berlin”. In 1860, the Lewes turned their interest toward France and Italy, traveling to Paris and then on to Turin, Milan, Florence and Siena, Pisa, and of course Rome. In July of that year, Eliot wrote of her travels in a letter to her friend Sarah Hennel: “We have had an unspeakably delightful journey—one of those journeys that seem to divide one's life in two by the new ideas they suggest and the new veins of interest they open” (As quoted in *Journals*, 327). This letter is certainly a reaction to the profound influence that Italy had on George Eliot. Eliot considered the trip through Italy as part of a larger pilgrimage to the great galleries of Europe and once again she recorded her first impressions of art in a journal entitled “Recollections of Italy 1860”.

Through her travels with Lewes, Eliot acquired extensive firsthand knowledge of the visual arts, and while she is no art historian, it is obvious from her journals that she approaches the visual arts with a precision and intelligence that is both reverent and critical. Indeed, her journals are rich reservoirs of information pertaining to her travels and her ideas about the visual arts. Within them, she continually interweaves richly detailed descriptions of architecture, sculpture and painting with observations of people and Italian experience, so that even in these early writings, visual art and life

⁹ George Eliot, *The Journals of George Eliot*, eds. Harris, Margaret, and Judith Johnston, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 337. Hereafter cited in the text as “Journals”.

coexist. These journals would be an important source, if not the most important source, from which George Eliot would extract material for her novels.

According to Eliot's philosophy, morality in art could be found in different but ultimately related goals: the truthful representation of life and the fulfillment of some social or humanistic need. The former goal is a reworking of the old ideology that art must conform to life. In this case, however, "life" stands for something more expansive and encompassing than simply the narratives of individual characters. It is a vision of the shape of the world and of the intellectual, historical, psychological and emotional space the characters inhabit in the novel. In Eliot's own terms, "life" could be separated into two main categories: "epic" and "modern".

What then is the "epic life" (*Middlemarch*, 31)? The epic life is concerned with those spiritual, mysterious forces which govern the world of grandiose mythical history. To live the epic life in Eliot's novels is to seek out some purpose on par with those of religious and mythical characters. This is achieved through Eliot's expansive knowledge and repeated illustrations of the visual arts in *Middlemarch*, such as the allusions to Bernini's *Saint Theresa* in the Prelude and to other classical works. Throughout the novel, George Eliot returns to this theme and uses it as a visual emblem of meaning—an icon for the way in which her characters imagine themselves and are imagined by the narrator and other characters, that makes continual reference to art.

The epic life is undermined by and contrasted with modern life which is filled with what Eliot calls "domestic reality" (*Middlemarch*, 31). In *Middlemarch*, it is

exemplified by Farebrother, the Garths and by the cottagers whom Dorothea makes her life's mission. Domestic reality, however, is not simply the loss of a grander and more purposeful way of life. It is an inevitability that might reveal great potential if only one can embrace the small and material detail of the world. Domestic reality, as imagined by George Eliot, is concerned with the representation of the minutia of the world, with the smaller scale of everyday life and with what she calls a Natural Idealism in art "which accepts the weaknesses, faults, and wrongnesses in all things that it sees but so places them that they form a noble whole."¹⁰

Out of all her novels, *Middlemarch* is the one in which Eliot employs her knowledge of the visual arts and contends with her own philosophy of art most fully. Life infuses and informs all of art in *Middlemarch*. Yet the nature of the discussion of life and art is inevitably one of conflict. *Middlemarch* is a novel which portrays the consequences of living those two forms of life-- the epic life, lived as a myth or a story, and the modern life, lived as a human being-- through the symbolic use of visual objects.

¹⁰ George Eliot, "Review of John Ruskin's *Modern Painters*" *Westminster Review* 65(1856): 628-33. Hereafter cited as "*Modern Painters*".

Chapter One: Art and the Epic Life: High Renaissance and Baroque

It was most likely during her 1860 journey through Italy that George Eliot first went to see Gian Lorenzo Bernini's masterpiece *The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* [Figure 1] in the Cornaro Chapel at Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. The importance of the visual arts as a theme in *Middlemarch* begins in the Prelude when Eliot uses her knowledge of Bernini's masterpiece as a symbol and an illustration of Dorothea's attempt to live a life reduced to "a fine quotation from the Bible" (*Middlemarch*, 33). Through the symbolism of Bernini's sculpture, we come to understand that there is a certain philosophy, which embraces the notion that art must reflect the world in which it is created. In this way, Bernini's *Saint Theresa* becomes a visual artistic representation of the "epic life". These are the forces of the epic life that Saint Theresa wrote of in her biography:

I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God. The pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it. It is a caressing of love so sweet which now takes

place between the soul and God, that I pray God of His goodness to make him experience it who may think that I am lying.¹¹

For seventeenth century viewers of *The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*, the statue was a visual reminder of the connection between God, the body, and the soul of which Theresa writes. Aside from aesthetic value, the value of painting and sculpture were found in their ability to communicate religious stories that were otherwise inaccessible to the illiterate masses. The purpose of High Renaissance art was to motivate people toward piety, to refocus them on those propositions “which are indispensable to salvation” so as to appease any experience of suffering with the notion of something beyond the reality and materiality of this world.¹² Art therefore, acted— in ways that words could not— as a reflection of the world infused with all its spiritual potential. A world that was entirely real and relevant to the seventeenth century artist and his audience.

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- ¹¹ Saint Theresa, *The Complete Works of St. Teresa of Jesus*, trans. and ed. E. Allison Peers, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1946), 192-93, as quoted in Hilary Fraser, “ St. Theresa, St. Dorothea, Miss Brook in Middlemarch” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 40, No. 4. (Mar., 1986), pp. 400-411.
- ¹² George Eliot, “Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming”. *Westminster Review*, October 1855, quoted in James A. Haight, *2,000 Years of Disbelief: Famous People with the Courage to Doubt*, 1996.



Figure 1: The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa

As an agnostic—if not, at times a staunch atheist—Eliot once wrote that “so long as belief in propositions is regarded as indispensable to salvation, the pursuit of truth *as such* is not possible.”^{13, 14} The pursuit of truth, as Eliot speaks of it, underlies her valuations of all forms of art, visual or literary, for it is only in truth and in realism that salvation is possible. Thus, to live the epic life in the nineteenth century, as portrayed in Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*, is to seek out a way of life in order to “reconcile self despair with the rapturous consciousness of life beyond self”—a goal which is problematic and largely fruitless within an increasingly irreligious society (*Middlemarch*, 23).

Whatever is responsible for the pain and pleasure of ecstatic experience infused into Saint Theresa's words are also translated into Dorothea's overreaching quest to do something good for the world. When she meets resistance to her efforts, she pursues a new calling through her marriage to Casaubon. In both cases, like the child Theresa and her smaller brother seeking martyrdom in the country of the Moors, domestic reality meets her along the way and obstructs her path.

Interestingly, it is not in England but in Rome that Dorothea, begins to understand the nature of art and the epic life:

13 Much has been written about George Eliot's religious convictions. She was raised by a strict religious father and was educated at schools run by Baptists. In her later years she had several brushes with Unitarianism, but ultimately abandoned formal religion. For my purposes, it is simply important to know that Eliot's personal religious convictions waivered between belief in an unnamed Creator figure and the espousal of moral principles for which no deity was responsible. She always retained however a respect for the humanism of religious faith as it was practiced by people in small ways. This is discussed in greater detail in chapter two.

14. See note 20.

At first I enter a room where the walls are cornered with frescoes, or with rare pictures, I feel a kind of awe—like a child present at great ceremonies where there are grand robes and processions; I feel myself in the presence of some high life than my own. But when I begin to examine the pictures one by one the life goes out of them, or else is something violent and strange to me. (*Middlemarch*, 189)

It is not music or poetry, but visual art and specifically the art of Rome that ushers in this moment of recognition for Dorothea. She rejects whatever life is present in the painting and sculptures she encounters in Rome. That life—the epic life—is not one she can reconcile with her own world. In Eliot’s opinion, the consequences for art in this environment were drastic. The High Renaissance and Baroque religious art which depict the epic life cannot bear the weight of its own meaning. Even Dorothea, the Puritan, whose very existence pulses with religious conviction, cannot reconcile these images— “these severe classical nudities and smirking Renaissance-Correggiosities”—with her own world since “she had never been taught to bring them into any sort of relevance to her life” (*Middlemarch*, 86). It is not just that her particular brand of Christianity has nothing in common with the art of Rome—she is after all a figure of St. Theresa—it is more that the loss of an epic undercurrent has rendered these works aesthetically beautiful but morally empty

fragments of spiritual life.

I. Portraiture and Epic Identity

Throughout the novel, the epic life that Dorothea discovered in Rome is reworked through the association of certain characters— particularly Dorothea and Causbon—with images of historical, mythical or religious figures including Thomas Aquinas, Saint Barbara, the Virgin Mary and a number of figures from Greek and Roman mythology. For instance, Eliot uses the eroticism of Bernini's statue as a model for Dorothea's attempts to live an epic life. Like St. Theresa, she seeks out those forces that would allow her to fulfill the “common yearning of womanhood,” that same grand and painfully sweet connection between her soul and God as Saint Theresa had (*Middlemarch*, 24). For George Eliot, these ecstatic forces have dissipated over time, so that living the epic life in the nineteenth century means imagining oneself being imagined within a framework of religious and historical mythologies that, if they ever existed in some form, no longer do.

Following the allusions to Bernini's “The Ecstasy of St. Theresa” in George Eliot's preface to *Middlemarch*, and given the centrality of visual images throughout the novel, it is not surprising that she opens the first book of the novel with these descriptive lines:

Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown
into relief by poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely
formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than

those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters.

(*Middlemarch*, 33)

In this first encounter with the heroine of *Middlemarch*, the narrator focuses initially on the detail of Dorothea's hand, her wrist, and her dress, elements which are not simply presented to the reader, but also concurrently painted on the page. The narrator's focus is then expanded outward, away from such exacting detail, to reveal an iconographic image of Dorothea as a Madonna figure and also juxtaposed against the Italian paintings of the "Blessed Virgin".

The skill with which Eliot creates this original image of Dorothea is drawn directly from the nineteenth century tradition of word painting mediated by visual artists. Through her narrator, Eliot effectively crafts a portrait of *Middlemarch's* heroine set against those of the Madonna, whereby Dorothea assumes some of those mythic and aggrandizing characteristics embodied in the Italian painting. Moreover, it is not only the narrator, but Dorothea who imagines herself in the iconographic mold of St. Theresa or the Blessed Virgin. After finding no fulfillment in religious faith, she instead turns to extremes, shunning everything material that does not serve some higher purpose to which she is called. She rejects her mother's jewels and more elaborate fashions. She wears her hair in a simple braid and refuses gifts from the dull, but well intentioned Sir James Chettham. She attempts to inhabit the space of the epic life outside the "many volumed romances of chivalry and the social conquests of a brilliant girl" (*Middlemarch*, 31). These grand gestures in the crusade against the modern life seem futile and impractical without the spiritual

grandeur of the epic life. Thus, Dorothea's initial failure occurs in part because of the epic idioms imposed upon her and in part because she herself cannot envision doing good in the world on a smaller scale without extreme religious asceticism or grand visions of herself as a modern day St. Theresa. Speaking with Sir James Chettham in the third chapter, Dorothea proclaims her belief that "we deserve to be beaten out of our beautiful houses with a scourge of cord--all of us who let tenants live in such sties as we see around us" (*Middlemarch*, 54). At this early point in the novel, Dorothea uses only the excessively antiquated language of martyrdom and is unable to accept a world without the religious notion of scourging. Eliot's designs for her heroine are thus of a highly moral character who is trapped between the epic and the domestic life because she is denied access to truth and realism (and thus to real salvation) as part of the modern world.

For George Eliot, the disparity between the actions of so many modern St. Theresas and the world they found themselves born into constituted nothing short of a crisis, even an epidemic. In her review of G.H.'s Lewes *Life and works of Goethe*, Eliot compares this crisis to a disease which has not yet found its cure:

These were symptoms of a disease; the social organization was out of order; a crisis, evidently imminent, was heralded by extravagances in literature, as elsewhere. The cause of the disease was want of faith. In religion, in philosophy, in politics, in morals, the eighteenth century was ostentatious of its disquiet and disbelief. The old faith, which for so long had made

European Life an organic unity, and which in its tottering weakness had received a mortal blow from Luther, was no longer universal, living, active, and dominant; its place of universal directing power was vacant; a new faith had not arisen.¹⁵

This disease of faith, which in essence was a loss of epic potential, only leads to excesses without a social order in which to constrain them. Life retained nothing but an anemic version of its former mythologies, and there was little justification for any sort of noble or illimitable actions, whether in religion, philosophy, politics, painting or literature. Since it no longer maintained these epic qualities, the world was also, according to Eliot, unable to maintain the bond between everyday realities and the mythic, spiritual visions of life. Sculpture and painting could no longer act as vehicles for the “universal directing power” of faith, because that world no longer existed.

It seems that women were especially vulnerable to the consequences of the disease of faith. This is not to say that men were immune to the crisis—as George Eliot makes clear with Casaubon and Lydgate— but those women who sought to live in the mold of a Saint Theresa but found “no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action,” instead fell into a “life of mistakes....a tragic failure” (*Middlemarch*, 31). For Victorian women, the passionate eroticism manifest in Bernini’s sculpture could find no outlet in a mystical union with the Holy Spirit as it had for St. Theresa. Marriage inevitably became the only outlet for passionate

15 George Eliot, “Review of G.H. Lewes *Life of Goethe*” *Leader* 6 (3 November 1855): 1058-1061.

expression.

It is relevant to note the disjunction between Dorothea's and Casaubon's notions of marriage. While it would be disingenuous to hold Casaubon entirely responsible for Dorothea's failures— to do so would deny Dorothea the moral growth she exhibits in the novel—he is a major factor in the world that imposes an epic idealization on Dorothea while simultaneously prohibiting her from constructing a space for herself in Domestic reality. The disappointments of their marriage and of Dorothea's failures arise out of the fact that neither Dorothea nor Casaubon know where the other's aspirations—at times overreaching and narcissistic—could be found. "She was as blind to his inward troubles" the narrator notes, "as he was to hers" (*Middlemarch*, 185). They both idealize marriage and want something more from each other, but do not understand how to get it.

Dorothea for her part, envisions their marriage as a kind of sacred vocation through intellectual exchange; her greatest wish for marriage is that her future husband be a kind of father and mentor figure who would "teach her Hebrew if she wished it" (*Middlemarch*, 36). There is a hint of something epic even in this simple wish to have Latin, Greek and Hebrew at her disposal as Dorothea compares her relationship with Casaubon to that of Milton and his daughters—figures whose stature overshadows their lives as real people. And yet, Casaubon has no interest in allowing her free reign to speak, much less teaching her to do so in Hebrew or any other ancient tongue. His interest in a relationship with her is limited to that of a secretary who will save his eyesight by reading to him verbatim. There is simply no

room for intellectual creativity in this relationship, no room for Dorothea to create a life for herself.

In a way, this denial of language prohibits Dorothea from creating a full and vivid self portrait-- an identity apart from the idealized image imposed on her that would permit her to remove herself from the epic life and allow her to live her own life. "Language gives a fuller image" notes Will Ladislaw later in the novel. This line is not just an admission of the superiority of language over painting, but also of Dorothea's inability to construct her own image. At this point in the novel, however, Dorothea's portrait is dependent on the narrator and on the other (usually male) characters like Will's artist friend Adolf Naumann, in Rome (*Middlemarch*, 178).

II. The Artist Figure

If critics have underestimated the role the visual arts play in Eliot's novels, then so too have they wrongly dismissed the role her artist figures— Naumann and particularly Will—play in the development of *Middlemarch*. Much of the criticism surrounding Will focuses on his character flaws and his unsatisfying relationship with Dorothea. Little has been said, however, about the significance of his role as an artist in the novel. Furthermore, while Naumann is a minor character who experiences little growth, he can also be read as an important figure for understanding Eliot's approach to the visual arts.

When we meet Naumann in the novel, he is described as belonging to those nineteenth century German artists called the Nazarenes who allowed Romanticism to

“ferment as a distinguishable vigorous enthusiasm.” As such he represents much of what Eliot opposed in contemporary art: pure religious sentiment and an interest in beauty without naturalism (*Middlemarch*, 173). The principles of the Nazarenes are clearly manifest in his first encounter with Dorothea:

There lies antique beauty, not corpse-like even in death, but arrested in the complete contentment of its sensuous perfection: and here stands beauty in its breathing life with the consciousness of Christian centuries in its bosom. But she should be dressed as a nun; I think she looks almost what you call a Quaker; I would dress her as a nun in my picture.

(*Middlemarch*, 176)

Naumann’s thoughts upon Dorothea are invasive. Comparing her to the “marble voluptuousness” of the Vatican’s ancient Ariadne sculpture [Figure 2], he undresses and re-dresses her, repainting her in his own simple Christianized Romantic image (*Middlemarch*, 176). This is what Eliot calls the “False Ideal” in her review of Ruskin’s *Modern Painters*. In essence, Naumann is committing the same offense as religious painters who “attempted to express not the actual fact” of their subject, “but their own enthusiasm about the fact”. These artists “covered the Virgin’s dress with gold” to prove their feeling for her and not to represent her “as she was or ever will be seen” (*Modern Painters*, 656).



Figure 2: *Sleeping Ariadne*

Here Naumann is actually operating within his own epic mindset, envisioning himself as an artist creator figure. There is a self-important religiosity in Naumann, a god complex which elicits from him the question “my existence presupposes the existence of the whole universe-does it not?” (*Middlemarch*, 177). He imagines himself as an omnipresent artistic deity, turning his subjects into either saints or sinners who find fulfillment only in him and in his art. Will, however, renounces such religious artistic egoism and warns Naumann against believing that Dorothea’s life may find its apogee in the “obscure significance” of his painting (*Middlemarch*, 177). Such a disjunction robs the subject of any connection to reality and reduces her to a figure of the unfulfilled epic life.

Comparisons to Saint Clare, Ariadne, St. Theresa, the Blessed Virgin, or a “Christian Antigone” are ultimately a degrading force. Next to these figures, Dorothea

becomes merely a dim conception of the epic heroine. At this juncture in the novel at least, Will refuses to reduce her to a symbolic character or a false Ideal. Yet Will is not entirely innocent of such idealizations himself, as is evident in chapter twenty-two. In this scene, Will takes Dorothea and Casaubon on a tour of artists' studios in Rome, including Naumann's studio where the elder artist asks Dorothea if she would be willing to be a model for his portrait of Saint Clara and she obliges. Will resents Naumann for his request of Dorothea, partly out of jealousy and longing, and partly out of the understanding that to use Dorothea as a figure for Saint Clara is an act which imposes on her certain artistic constraints that ultimately leave her no room for her own intellectual and moral growth:

Will was divided between the inclination to fall at the Saint's feet and kiss her robe, and the temptation to knock Naumann down while he was adjusting her arm. All this was impudence and desecration, and he repented that he had brought her.

(*Middlemarch*, 197).

At this point in the novel, Will is struggling to reconcile his admiration for Naumann with his beliefs against reducing Dorothea to a symbolic ideal. He is also under the artistic direction of Naumann—an apprentice of sorts— and is compelled to follow Naumann's example in the studio. Naumann, as one of the “renovators of Christian art” who is responsible for making “the great souls of all periods...contemporaries”, is actively engaged in the practice of history painting, which perpetuates the epic at the expense of realism or naturalism (*Middlemarch*,

197). Will, on the other hand, wants to take Dorothea out of the epic life and let her live her own life. Yet he worships Dorothea in a way—as the picture of Saint Clara—that does not allow him to fully think of her as a person and not an idea.

Misunderstanding Dorothea's feelings about Rome and its art, Will asserts that it is as if she “had a vision of Hades in [her] childhood, like the boy in the legend” and “has been brought up in some of those horrible notions that choose the sweetest women to devour—like Minotaurs.”¹⁶ Unable to extract Dorothea from the epic life in his mind, even while lamenting Naumann's similar treatment of her in his painting, he places her right back in the epic idiom.

In this way, Will is a true transitional character, a middling figure caught between the epic life and the modern life. He understands the nature of his struggle, but it isn't until he gives up painting, and more specifically, the brand of classical painting which the Nazarenes espouse, that he is able to come to terms with it. It is only then that he is able to embrace Dorothea as a human being and not as his own idealized portrait of her. This recognition of her humanity is important, as it is this moment in the novel which separates him from Naumann and the Nazarenes.

As a transitional figure, Will is also a representative figure for *Middlemarch* and for Eliot's own approach to the visual arts. We meet him in Rome with his “not immoderately long” hair, turning his back on the Belvedere Torso, that monument to

¹⁶ At the urging of his mother, Aphrodite, the boy Eros shot his arrows at Hades, causing him to fall in love with Persephone, whom he carried off to the underworld”
 “Before being slain by Theseus, the Minotaur of Crete had subsisted on a diet of young virgins”
 (See footnotes 2 and 3: *Middlemarch*, 200)

all things classical and academic (*Middlemarch*, 174).¹⁷ Instead, his gaze wanders outside the confines of the Vatican walls and toward the “magnificent view of the mountains from the adjoining round vestibule” (*Middlemarch*, 175). Will’s actions foreshadow Dorothea’s own several lines later in which she ignores the sculpture of Ariadne and instead fixes her “large eyes...dreamily on a streak of sunlight which fell across the floor” (*Middlemarch*, 176). Like Dorothea, Will’s interests lie not with the monumental contents of the Vatican museum and symbolic conventions of the classical schools, nor with the medieval Romantic idealism of the Nazarenes, but with naturalism.

These are some of the first hints of Dorothea’s and Will’s growth as characters in the novel, slowly revealed through the symbolic use of the visual arts. It is perhaps more important, however, to note the similarities between these passages of *Middlemarch* and those concerning George Eliot’s personal experiences in her journal. In one passage, George Eliot describes in precise and delicate language, her observations of people at the Vatican: “I was pleased one day to watch a group of poor people looking with an admiration that had a half childish terror in it at the sleeping lion, and with a sort of daring air, thrusting their fingers against the teeth of the waking “mane bearer”(*Journals*, 344). Many have singled out this passage in George Eliot’s journal as proof of her petty knowledge of the visual arts. Lord Acton, claimed that for George Eliot “ Italy was little more to her than a vast museum...She surveys the grand array of tombs in St. Peter’s and remarks nothing but some peasants feeling the teeth of Canova’s lion” (*Journals*,30). But it is perhaps in these

17 Nazarenes were known for their long hair.

few lines that we learn more about Eliot's inspirations for *Middlemarch* and her philosophy toward the visual arts than any other.

In a way, these lines offer up an alternative portrait of the Italian scene that foregrounds the human presence rather than the classical refinement of the sculpted lions. In this portrait, Eliot chooses to avert her gaze away from the lions and instead shows interest in the childlike wonder of peasants—not with scorn, but with intense sympathy and admiration.

Far from being wooden or trivial, these lines reveal the great understanding Eliot had for the role art could play in society, bringing together the two strains of Eliot's thinking in relation to the grandiose styles of the High Renaissance. Furthermore, this passage exposes the personal feelings and failures Eliot uncovered in Rome, which she would later translate into various scenes from *Middlemarch*. In the Rome chapters, both Will Ladislaw and Dorothea are beginning to grow in that same category of the modern life in which George Eliot found herself after her 1860 journey to Rome. At one point in the novel, Dorothea seems to bear the weight of Eliot's disappointments in Rome, but also her faith in a different type of art which might actually do some good in the world:

And in Rome it seems as if there were so many things which are more wanted in the world than pictures. But if you have a genius for painting, would it not be right to take that as a guide? Perhaps you might do better things than these—or different, so that there might not be so many pictures almost all alike in the

same place. (*Middlemarch*, 190)

These words reveal a respect for the living world and the artist's responsibility to do some good for it. Eliot's own relationship with art is at the heart of this passage; it is a call for an interest in a new art that would synthesize morality and aestheticism. This art must appeal to the small details of life, and to the reality and materiality of the world and the people in it.

Chapter Two: Art and the Modern Life: Dutch Realism and Domestic Reality

Henry James once remarked that *Middlemarch* was 'a treasure house of details, but an indifferent whole'.¹⁸ Perhaps it is unfair to criticize James for this not uncommon opinion about the novel. *Middlemarch* is indeed a sweeping novel, epic in its scope but full of the seemingly insignificant minutia of life. This statement however, ultimately undermines itself, for it is through detail that the novel escapes becoming an "indifferent whole".

Eliot's attention to detail once again stems directly from the nineteenth century tradition of word painting. Unlike her word paintings of Dorothea in the novel's first one, many of the techniques she uses in the novel to express detail are drawn not from High Renaissance, but from an art that reflected her philosophical and moral principles: Dutch Realism. In Dutch Realism, she recognized the ability to "enlarge the sympathies" of man through the realistic and naturalistic portrayal of everyday people and things. Thus, James falls victim to an underestimation of Eliot's relationship with the visual arts, because it is in the detail of the novel, appropriated from various forms of Dutch Realism, that Eliot fulfills her purpose as a novelist.

Eliot found in seventeenth century Dutch Realism, and in artistic movements drawn out of Dutch Realism, a visual representation of her views about art and life. For Eliot, Dutch Realism echoed all the philosophical and moral principles she espoused as a novelist, namely the focus on real people and everyday life. The

¹⁸ Henry James, "Unsigned Review of *Middlemarch*", *Galaxy* 60 (March 1783): 424-28.

techniques of Dutch painting are appropriated in the novel as a way to describe common people and objects with an attention to detail that is sympathetic and which elevates the domestic reality of their lives.

As with High Renaissance styles, Eliot's experience with Dutch and Flemish painting begin with her travels through Europe. In 1854, she and Lewes took an extended stay of seven months in Weimar and Berlin and her notes from this time would lead to the first entry in her series of "Recollections". Then in early April of 1858, Eliot and Lewes would set off again, this time setting their sights on the German cities of Nuernberg, Munich and Dresden. She had already submitted her novel *Scenes of a Clerical Life* to Blackwood's¹⁹ in 1856 and had begun writing *Adam Bede* in 1857. This last fact is significant because it was during her second stay in Germany that her interest in Dutch Realism was developed and came to have a significant impact on her writing style in general. Consider for example, her descriptions of the city of Nurnberg, of which she speaks with rich painterly language:

How often I had thought I should like to see Nurnberg and
had pictured to myself narrow streets with dark quaint
gables! The reality was not at all like my picture, it was ten
times better. No somber colouring, except the old
churches: all was bright and varied, each façade having a
different colour—delicate green, or buff, or pink, or lilac—
every now and then set off by the neighborhood of rich

¹⁹ The Edinburgh based magazine published by William Blackwood in which many of Eliot's novels were first published.

reddish brown. And the roofs always gave warmth of colour with their bright or rich purple tiles. Every house differed from its neighbor and had a physiognomy of its own, though a beautiful family likeness ran through them all, as if the burghers of that old city were of one heart and one soul, loving the same delightful outlines and cherishing the same daily habits of simple ease and enjoyment in their balcony windows when the day's work was done. (*Journals*, 306)

Clearly, George Eliot has begun to think and write with a view toward Dutch and Flemish painting by this moment in her travels. The substantial detail of Eliot's "picture" of Nurnberg, underscored by the attention paid to the simple behaviors and everyday movements of its people suggest many of the aesthetic and moral issues she would address in her novels. Yet while her language and modes of description have clearly changed in Germany to reflect upon her knowledge of Dutch realism, George Eliot has frustratingly little to say in her journals about many of the artists that appear in her novels. She provides a few simple remarks on the fact that she "she not half satisfy [her] appetite for the rich collection of Flemish and Dutch pictures here—for Teniers, Ryckaert, Gerard Dow, Terburg, Mieris, and the rest" (*Journals*, 326). Of Rembrandt she says only that she prefers his portraits but "likes none of the other pictures by him" and that "the Ganymede is an offense" (*Journals*, 326). It isn't until the novels themselves that the full weight of Dutch realism's power on Eliot is

revealed.

Indeed, while she was documenting her travels, she was simultaneously completing parts of her newest novel. "On the 7th of I sent off the 2nd volume of *Adam Bede* to Blackwood" she remarks in her last journal entry in Germany, "and tonight, the 27th of October, as I am finishing this fragmentary story of our travels, I am not far from the end of my third volume" (*Journals*, 326). Significantly, it is in the second volume of *Adam Bede*, that one finds the famous chapter 17 heralding the truth and sympathy of Dutch Realism. With high minded language, Eliot not only declares her belief in Dutch Realism's capacity to represent her particular vision of the world, but also elevates the common life and domestic reality above the status of the prosaic and merely vulgar. It is in this passage more than any other in all of her novels that she expresses her philosophy of art. Furthermore, the voice she gives to her narrator is clearly her own: "All honour and reverence to the divine beauty of form!" proclaims the narrator, "Let us cultivate it to the utmost in men, women, and children—in our gardens and in our houses. But let us love that other beauty too, which lies in no secret of proportion, but in the secret of deep human sympathy".²⁰

In this passage, Eliot presents, with painterly attention to detail, a series of images of common people in everyday life, or in what might be called "domestic reality", to illustrate her philosophy of art. She writes that she "turns without shrinking" from a number of epic characters, angels, warriors and prophets, to "an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner, while the noonday light,

20 George Eliot. *Adam Bede*. Ed. Stephen Gill. (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), pg . 224.
Hereafter cited in the text as "Adam Bede".

softened perhaps by a screen of leaves, falls on her mob-cap” and then to a “village wedding, kept between four brown walls, where an awkward bridegroom opens the dance with a high-shouldered, broad-faced bride.” This image is not traditionally idyllic or classically beautiful. Eliot presents the subjects of her word paintings in all their flawed realism. They are old and often ugly with “irregular noses and lips” and “quart-pots in their hands,” but she is also quick to note that these characters all have an “expression of unmistakable contentment and goodwill” (*Adam Bede*, 223). What is important to Eliot in art is conveyed in the beginning of these passages and in the images of the old woman and the country wedding—truth and compassion for real life, not the life of mythologies and epic histories:

In this world there are so many of these common coarse people, who have no picturesque sentimental wretchedness! It is so needful we should remember their existence; else we may happen to leave them quite out of our religion and philosophy and frame lofty theories which only fit a world of extremes. (*Adam Bede*, 225)

She rejects any aesthetic principles which would strike out “the faithful representation of common things”—domestic reality— because to accept these principles would be to simultaneously do away with those moral principles that were so important to Eliot’s artistic philosophy (*Adam Bede*, 225). For Eliot, morality and aestheticism could never be entirely divorced and it was in the school of Dutch Realism and its cousins (Flemish and Victorian genre painting), where she found these aesthetic and

moral principles most fully unified.

I. Modern Life in Landscape, Portraiture and Genre Painting

As Hugh Witemeyer once again suggests, unlike George Eliot's earlier novels, *Scenes of a Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede*, it is possible to exaggerate the effect the genre had on *Middlemarch* (Witemeyer, 106). Yet any examination of the novel will reveal the extensive nature of Eliot's borrowings from Dutch painting in its diverse forms. Dutch Realism coheres with George Eliot's goals as a novelist and particularly with *Middlemarch* as a portrayal of the life of a community in 1830s England. This particular genre of visual art becomes a way to distinguish these characters and to evoke sympathy from the reader through its style of depiction. While scenes with Dorothea, Casaubon, Naumann and Will contain direct references to art of the High Renaissance or Baroque variety, the Garths are continually associated with various types of Dutch Realist art: landscape, portraiture and genre painting. These scenes—epic history paintings and Dutch painting—are subtly juxtaposed to one another. When one scene presents Dorothea as Saint Clare or as a virgin being devoured by a Minotaur, a few pages earlier, the narrator frames Mary Garth as a Rembrandt portrait, claiming that the painter “would have made her broad features look out of the canvas with intelligent honesty” (*Middlemarch*, 116).

The previous line is the most succinct example of Dutch Realism's influence on *Middlemarch*. While *Middlemarch* contains very few references to specific Dutch painters and does not contain any extended decree on Dutch Realism like chapter 17

in *Adam Bede*, it is important to recognize the ways in which George Eliot borrowed heavily from Dutch paintings, especially regarding subject and technique.

For example, in terms of subject, Eliot draws from traditions of many different kinds of Dutch Realism, including landscape. In the following passage, Eliot depicts yet another word painting of the land around Middlemarch that has its origins in seventeenth century landscape painting:

The ride to Stone Court, which Fred and Rosamond took the next morning lay through a pretty bit of midland landscape, almost all meadows and pastures, with hedgerows still allowed to grow in bushy beauty and to spread out coral fruit for the birds. Little details gave each field a particular physiognomy, dear to the eyes that have looked on them from childhood: the pool in the corner where the grasses were dank and trees leaned whisperingly; the great oak shadowing a bare place in mid-pasture; the high bank where the ash trees grew; the sudden slope of the old marl-pit making a red background for the burdock; the huddled roofs and ricks of the homestead without a traceable way of approach; the gray gate and fences against the depths of the bordering wood; and the stray hovel its old thatch full of mossy hills and valleys with wondrous modulations of light and shadow

such as we travel far to see in later life, and see larger,
but not more beautiful. These are the things that make the
gamut of joy in landscape to midland-bred souls.

(Middlemarch, 109)

The critic Gordon S. Haight wrote in his biography of Eliot that “ she seldom saw beauty in any terrain that was unsuitable for farming” a sentiment which reverberates in the previous passage.²¹ This extensive description of the English landscape surrounding Middlemarch is at once ideal and naturalistic. It seems that George Eliot identified in Dutch landscape painting many aspects of the English Midland countryside and incorporated these into her own depictions of Middlemarch. The pastures and meadows bounded by rows of hedges or trees outlining the path of the traveler, the town or homestead off in the distance, hinting at human presence, and the skillful variation of light and shadow are all among common features in seventeenth century Dutch landscape painting [Figure 3]. Furthermore, it is an image which appeals to a kind of rural, lower to middle class sympathy and sensibility. The land is pristine and fruitful. The human settlement is not of a vast city-scape, but of a small enclave of thatch- roofed homes where the cottagers live and make their living off the land. It offers both a highly stylized ideal and beautifully detailed natural depiction of the land.

21 Gordon S Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 3-4.



Figure 4: Avenue at Middleharnis

He found the [Garth] family group, dogs and cats included, under the great apple-tree in the orchard...Christy himself, a square-browed, broad-shouldered masculine edition of his mother not much higher than Fred's shoulder...was lying on the ground now by his mother's chair, with his straw hat laid flat over his eyes, while Jim on the other side was reading aloud from that beloved writer who has made a chief part in the happiness of many young lives.

Eliot was no exception when it came to the modern interest in landscape painting. Her qualification for the “pathetic fallacy” however is well placed for she certainly used the landscape genre in her own novels.

The inclusion of the landscape genre was a way for George Eliot to elucidate the differences between types of visual art in the novel. The focus on pastoral nature in landscape can be understood as the antithesis of a focus on high urban culture and its favored art forms, namely history painting. In contrast to Rome, “the city of visible history where the past of a whole hemisphere seems moving in funeral procession with strange ancestral images and trophies fathered from afar,” midland England is provincial and yet also very real and recognizable (*Middlemarch*, 179). There are no monolithic monuments to dead and decaying history in this pastoral landscape as in Rome, only trees and fields and mossy hills—natural structures of the living world. Furthermore, the sympathetic and sentimental portrayal of rural life in this landscape highlights by contrast the vast and superficial idealizations of characters as epic figures and thus their immorality in terms of Eliot’s artistic philosophy.

In contrast, metaphorical images in Eliot’s writing suggest the inherent morality of landscape. She claimed in letters that “to sow good seed in good ground, and not to root up tares where we must inevitable gather all the wheat with them” (*Letters*, 3). For Eliot, working the land was an occupation synonymous with moral aestheticism. Nineteenth century readers of *Middlemarch* would have seen the world Eliot was creating in her descriptions of natural elements, the cultivation of the

earth, and the thatched roof cottages, all of which were relevant because they were recognizable and realistic.

History paintings of mythological and religious figures could not carry the same kind of relevance for contemporary audiences, according to Eliot, because they required a fast fading religiosity to support their full weight of meaning. In this way, landscape in *Middlemarch* clearly privileges a different vision of the world—one which is small but by no means trivial. In every description of this type, whether in the novel or in her journals, Eliot injects human presence into her landscape word painting as a way to orient the reader in the appropriate time and place before moving them into and through images of domestic reality in churches, cottages and various scenes of family life:

The evening that Fred Vincy walked to Lowick parsonage
(he had begun to see that this was a world in which even
a spirited young man must sometimes walk for want of a
horse to carry him)

Here Fred travels through the midland landscape and happens upon the Garth family all at once, seated underneath the apple trees. The lone wanderer is a common motif of Dutch landscape painting [Figure 4] and in so drawing attention to this element of the scene Eliot moves the reader seamlessly from landscape painting to another Dutch style— group portraiture:



Figure 4: Avenue at Middleharnis

He found the [Garth] family group, dogs and cats included, under the great apple-tree in the orchard...Christy himself, a square-browed, broad-shouldered masculine edition of his mother not much higher than Fred's shoulder...was lying on the ground now by his mother's chair, with his straw hat laid flat over his eyes, while Jim on the other side was reading aloud from that beloved writer who has made a chief part in the happiness of many young lives.

The volume was "Ivanhoe," and Jim was in the great archery scene at the tournament, but suffered much interruption from Ben, who had fetched his own old bow and arrows, and was making himself dreadfully disagreeable, Letty thought, by begging all present to observe his random shots, which no one wished to do except Brownie, the active-minded but probably shallow mongrel, while the grizzled Newfoundland lying in the sun looked on with the dull-eyed neutrality of extreme old age. Letty herself, showing as to her mouth and pinafore some slight signs that she had been assisting at the gathering of the cherries which stood in a coral-heap on the tea-table, was now seated on the grass, listening open-eyed to the reading. (*Middlemarch*, 453-54)

Moving from pure landscape with only a suggestion of the human life involved in the natural world, Eliot now presents the reader with a group portrait of the Garth family, in a kind of idyllic but natural setting. This is not a static portrait; each member of the family is engaged in something: reading, shooting arrows or gathering cherries. The orchard itself is not just the background for this portrait, but symbolizes the fruitfulness of their simple life as a product of their own labor. The evidence of that labor—the stains on Letty's mouth and pinafore—are presented as part of the idyllic

naturalism of the portrait, like dirt under the fingernails of a Caravaggio subject, and are never edited out to avoid imperfection.²² Imperfections are in fact essential to the Natural Idealism—in Ruskinian terms— of the image and are thus essential to its domestic reality.

Group portraits like that of the Garth's underneath the apple tree, mediate between landscape and domestic reality, focusing on the family in a naturalistic setting. In other scenes, Eliot moves the reader from landscape through the interior of the house and into the setting for another kind of Dutch realism, the genre painting which is defined by a focus on the spaces and behaviours of everyday life:

The Rev. Camden Farebrother, whom Lydgate went to see the next evening lived in an old parsonage, built of stone, venerable enough to match the church which it looked out upon. All the furniture too in the house was old, but with another grade of age—that of Mr Farebrother's father and grandfather. There were painted white chairs, with gilding and wreaths on them, and some lingering red silk damask with slits in it. There were engraved portraits of Lord Chancellors and other celebrated lawyers of the last century; and there were old pier-glasses to reflect

²² Caravaggio was an influential painter of the late 16th and early 17th centuries. He became famous for presenting both secular and religious or mythological subjects in naturalistic settings, a practice that was seen as vulgar. His famous portrait of Bacchus includes the dirty fingernails of his model. He embraced a kind of naturalistic chiaroscuro technique alternating bands of light and shadow and the lasting influence of his artistic style can be found in the work of Rembrandt, Vermeer and even Rubens.

them, as well as the little satin-wood tables and the sofas resembling a prolongation of uneasy chairs, all standing in relief against the wainscot. This was the physiognomy of the drawing-room into which Lydgate was shown; and there were three ladies to receive him, who were old fashioned and of a faded but genuine respectability.

(*Middlemarch*, 159)

This is genre painting in its purest form, with its attentive focus on the accoutrements of everyday life. Maps, other paintings, collections of household items, food, fabric and furnishings highlight the materiality of interior space [Figures 5 and 6]. Critic Barbara Handy has noted that the objects Eliot includes in her narratives “recall the solid sensuous particulars of real lost yesterdays,” but they are also like still-life paintings hinting at the material and temporal status of things²³. Food is eaten or it decays; clothe and furniture wear through; candles burn out. These seemingly insignificant things can rely on no grand mythologies or epic history for their meaning. They are the objects of a particular moment and thereafter would never be exactly the same except for the fact that Eliot has described them on paper. They are simply everyday items that have significance only as Eliot paints them in words in that particular moment of the novel in relation to her characters.

23 Barbara Handy, *George Eliot: A Critic's Biography*, (New York: Continuum Press, 2006): 147.



Figure 5: Girl Peeling Onions

Figure 6: Inn Scene



II. The Physiognomy of Objects

Often, in her novels and other writings, George Eliot uses the term “physiognomy” in relation to physical objects and surroundings. This occurs in the group portrait of the Garths, the genre scene at the Farebrother cottage and even in the description of Nuernberg in her travel journals. As a firm believer in the science of physiognomy, Eliot is implying that the background for these word paintings and the objects they contain provide important insights into the way of live of the people she meets and the characters she creates In Nuernberg, she says that the houses were evidence that their inhabitants were of “one heart and one soul” (*Journals*, 306). The physiognomy of the midland landscape instills the “ gamut of joy” into the people who live off it and the physiognomy of Farebrother’s cottage is evidence of the humble, but “genuine respectability” of those people who make it their home (*Middlemarch*, 109 and 159) . In this latter scene, Eliot describes these characters— Mrs Farebrother, Miss Noble and Miss Winifred Farebrother—with a sensitive attention to detail that elevates their character as it elaborates it.

Thus, Eliot's purpose is not just to represent an English community in 1830s England, but to advocate for the power and nobility of everyday things. In order to enlarge the sympathies of her readers toward that ideal it was necessary not only to present a portrait of her subjects that was true to their lives, but to cast that portrait in a noble light. The genre scenes in *Middlemarch* contain little of the cynicism that

clouds the portraits of other characters as saints or mythological characters. The historical portraits are singular, conscious, purposeful. They are meant to isolate their subjects from the world around them. In comparison to the use of High Renaissance art in *Middlemarch*, the appropriation of Dutch Realism in its diverse forms is very different: it is subtle, and seamless—dissoved into the very fabric of the novel rather than consciously set forth in the narrative. This is more the case in *Middlemarch* than in any of her earlier novels. While Adam Bede recalls Dutch Realism explicitly, by this point in her writing career, Eliot has internalized the forms of Dutch Realism, integrating this style of visual art with the art of her novel. The boudaries between art and life are blurred and it is as if Eliot is actually reversing the notion that art must conform to life. She is, in effect, saying that life should conform to art and a very specific type of art. Not to the epic portraits of saints, but to the depictions of the Farebrothers, the Garths and the cottagers.

Conclusion

When George Eliot wrote that “art works for all whom it touches” she was not only asserting that art had the power to effect the world, but that it had a moral imperative to do so through the truthful representation of life. For Eliot, there was more at stake in art than aesthetic beauty. If it is indeed true that art works for all whom it touches, then in Eliot’s opinion, art in service to the church was able to touch fewer and fewer people as the undercurrent of the epic life dissolved.

Like Dorothea, who had to give up the epic life in order to fulfill her potential in the world, art in all its forms must yield its epic qualities to a naturalistic and realistic portrayal of life in order to “enlarge the sympathies of man. What was needed was a new art that could work in service to a new religion: humanism. This new art, modeled on the realism of seventeenth century Dutch painters, could fill in for the loss of faith that had become, for Eliot, nothing short of a crisis.

These beliefs the unsophisticated musings of someone with only an amateur knowledge of the visual arts, as some critics have suggested, but part of a larger philosophy of art and life. If we are too fully understand Eliot’s novels then we must look closely at her symbols, analogies and literary techniques in connection with the visual arts. The visual arts are part of the fabric of her novels and they motivate her designs for her characters. But there is more at stake in this question of the connection between the visual arts and humanism than simply an interpretation of one single work. What is at stake is an understanding of Eliot’s self imposed imperative as a novelist, not just to represent the world she saw around her, but to

do some good for it. For if "the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts," perhaps too it is owing the artists who have sought to represent, in words or in paint, those who have "lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs" (*Middlemarch*, 640).

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