

Sympathy and Historical Distance:

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and A.S. Byatt's *Possession*

by

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Abstract

A strong tension exists between sympathy and the detached realism Eliot subscribes to in her work. Wary of the distancing effects, yet insistent upon a new narrative form of realism in art, Eliot struggled in her work against the themes of both detachment and sympathy. Using the idea of “cultivated detachment” as defined by Amanda Anderson in *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (2001), as well as the idea of sympathy as explored in Audrey Jaffe’s *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Repression in Victorian Fiction* (2000) this thesis argues that Anderson’s metaphor for detachment could be literally applied temporally. While Anderson specifically references the “cultivation of detachment” as the *aspiration* to a distanced view, the idea of distance can also be applied to situations where the aspiration for cultivating detachment is unnecessary: for instance, in the circumstance of historical distance. When used in this sense, detachment is inherently cultivated. Historical distance works as a form of detachment against sympathy in *Middlemarch*; in their search for vocation, Eliot’s characters must attempt to reconcile the tensions between sympathy and historical distance.

The failure of Eliot’s characters to achieve a successful vocation through sympathy with the past displays her point in regards to historical distance. Eliot’s characters are unable to formulate their identities in terms of past heroes, due to the historical distance in this application: history has altered the medium in which these characters live. Relative to heroes of the past, their ability to define their vocation against this historical distance is rendered obsolete. This is the major obstacle put before Eliot’s characters, and her most important argument throughout her novel. Sympathy with the past fails, and historical distance is the cause of this failure.

So then, if sympathy with the past fails in the novel, where does *Middlemarch* leave the contemporary reader? If Anderson’s metaphor of cultivated detachment and sympathy is literalized in regards to contemporary readers does it still hold weight? Abstractly, reading Eliot today creates its own form of historical distance between the reader and the work itself. The tension between sympathy and historical distance apparent in Eliot’s characters in *Middlemarch* could be examined as a parallel to that occurring with regards to the twenty-first century reader. Does an historical distance somehow change the reader’s response to the question of vocation, its effects on the characters in the novel, as well as the readers themselves? How can present-day readers, sympathize with characters and conditions so remote from their own times? In other words, is the effect of *Middlemarch* diminished for contemporary readers due to their heightened historical distance from the work?

To explore these questions, I propose to use A.S. Byatt’s novel, *Possession* (1990), as an example of how current readers of *Middlemarch* may transcend historical distance in order to sympathize and associate with the past. I will argue that one possible answer to the issues at hand is that the act of reading itself may be a means of transcending the gap created by historical distance, allowing for sympathy to be successful between modern readers and the text.

CONTENTS

Short Titles	i
Introduction	1
I. Vocation in <i>Middlemarch</i> : Sympathy and Historical Distance	12
II. Dorothea Brooke—A Modern-Day St. Theresa?	19
III. <i>Possession</i> : Investigating Sympathy and Historical Distance	35
Conclusion	53
Works Consulted	56

Short Titles

MM: Eliot, George. *Middlemarch*. London: Penguin Books, 1994.

PS: Byatt, A.S. *Possession*. New York: Random House, 1990.

VB: Byatt, A.S. *Vintage Byatt*. New York: Vintage Books, 2004.

Introduction

During the period between 1837 and 1901, the world was rapidly changing, from new advances in science and evolutionary theory, to advances in technology, including factories and railroads, to social transformation, including the creation of the “middle-class.” Each of these transformations greatly influenced the novel writing of the time. As George Levine explains, “It is clear that changes in material culture simply transformed life in Victorian England and in so doing transformed the way people could think about themselves and their relations to others.”¹ George Eliot, like her contemporaries and perhaps more seriously so, was intensely interested in social identity and its formation.

Eliot has been described as being “peculiarly addicted to moral preoccupations,” including her insistence in regards to moral duty, and this didactic addiction pervades throughout her writings.² One element of Eliot’s moralizing focus is the issue of morality versus egoism. Eliot was greatly influenced by German high criticism, including Wilhelm Riehl and his work on realism in art and natural history, Ludwig Feuerbach and his beliefs on religious humanism, faith and love, and David Strauss and his critical analysis of the Bible. Their work helped formulate her early beliefs on religion and art which would influence her entire body of future work.

In fact, beginning with her earliest essays whilst working at the *Westminster Review*, Eliot continuously examined the pitfalls of egoism and immorality. In her essay, “Worldliness and Other-Worldliness,” she writes on the poet, Edward Young. As a young woman, Young’s *Night Thoughts* had been a favorite reading of Eliot’s, “but now, in

¹ George Levine, *How to Read the English Novel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 17. Hereafter cited in the text.

² F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Penguin Books, 1962), 39.

maturity, she saw it as the shallow reflection of ‘a mind in which the higher human sympathies were inactive.’”³ Young’s writings struck the mature Eliot as strongly lacking genuine emotion and sympathy. She felt that he presented himself in his writings as a shameless flatterer, using his religion to advance himself in terms of wealth and power. Eliot complained that “Young has no conception of religion as anything else than egoism turned heavenward.”⁴ This belief against egoism and in favor of doing well for others formed the basis of Eliot’s humanism, an underlying aspect of her writings.

Eliot’s humanism deeply affected her writing, because as an author she felt a strong, moral duty to portray to her readers the realism of life and the importance of the ordinary and the common. As Eliot herself explains,

Art must be either real and concrete, or ideal and eclectic. Both are good and true in their way, but my stories are of the former kind. I undertake to exhibit nothing as it should be; I only try to exhibit some things as they have been or are, seen through such a medium as my own nature gives me. The moral effect of the stories of course depends on my power of seeing truly and feeling justly; and as I am not conscious of looking at things through the medium of cynicism or irreverence, I can’t help hoping that there is no tendency in what I write to produce those miserable mental states. (Haight 240)

In her writing, Eliot focuses on the common man, and on everyday trivialities, with the sense that it is her duty as the author to portray to the reader an accurate picture of the

³ Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: a Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1968), 216-217. Hereafter cited in the text.

⁴ George Eliot, *Essays and Leaves From a Notebook* (2nd ed. London: W. Blackwood and Sons, 1884) 67.

reality she creates. Eliot's comment also illustrates the problem of author-as-originator Eliot faced in her writing. The fact that all things in her novels are created and described by her brings round the question of obligation of Eliot as an author, and her task of relaying to the reader a certain reality in the text. As J. Hillis Miller explains:

The value of the novel, for Eliot, as for her contemporaries generally, lies in its truth of correspondence to things as they are, objectively. On the other hand, what is represented in the words of the novel is not the objective things as they are but those things as they have already been reflected in the mirroring mind of the novelist. That mirror, as Eliot here explicitly affirms and as her contemporaries agreed, always distorts.

Subjectivity is like a mirror in a fun house, concave, convex, or wavy . . .

The truth of correspondence in realism is not to objective things, or only indirectly to objective things. It is rather subjective reflections.⁵

The author cannot alter her own subjectivity, and the way in which a novel is a mirroring of the novelist's mind. This problem of subjective reflections is ever-present for Eliot. In fact, she frequently notes this mirroring effect even within her writing. Eliot is constantly trying to ground her writing in reality, a struggle which leads her to focus on everyday activities and the close observation of her characters in order to attempt to circumvent the effect of the "mirror in a fun house."

Eliot uses the narrative form of realism as a means for counteracting such subjectivity in an attempt to portray a true reality for her reader. At the same time, her humanist ambitions require that her writing stress the importance of sympathy and care

⁵ J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia UP, 1987), 65.

for community. Audrey Jaffe's *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Repression in Victorian Fiction* (2000) is helpful in defining sympathy and its significance for Eliot. As used here, sympathy is the ability to enter into another's feelings, to put oneself in another's position—socially, culturally, ideologically. Sympathy is the ability to provoke narratives of self-representation, and the influences these inner narratives have on the creation of social identity and community.

However, just as Eliot's attempt at narrative realism has its own subjective traps for her as an author, so sympathy has its own traps rooted in egoism. As Jaffe explains:

Sympathy in [Eliot's texts] enables the formation of cultural bonds and solidarities on the basis of a conjoined similarity and desire: these texts describe an ineffable and inexplicable attraction between individuals, so that a sympathy that might challenge identity gives way to (is exchanged for) a sympathy that seems unequivocally to affirm it, and sympathy with the other gives way, explicitly, to what in one way or another it has always been: sympathy with the self—the subject's attempt to identify with his or her idealized image.⁶

The evocation of sympathy creates a space for self-definition in the attempt to place oneself in the position of another. As Jaffe explains, "Society becomes a field of visual cues and its members alternative selves: imaginary possibilities in a field of circulating social images, confounded and interdependent projections of identity" (Jaffe 3). The circulating motion of sympathy, moving away from oneself to identify with others only to return to further evaluate the identity of oneself, is a troubling aspect in terms of Eliot's

⁶ Audrey Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Repression in Victorian Fiction* (London: Cornell UP, 2000), 22. Hereafter cited in the text.

humanist viewpoint, as the return to self indicates an action of egoism. However, to counter this action, sympathy in Eliot's works is most successful and important when used as a means for creating communal identities and for better understanding and associating with others, rather than used primarily as a return of focus to the self. Thus, it is in the context of society that sympathy comes into play for Eliot: social identity is revealed (and circulated, as Jaffe explains) through the use of sympathy.⁷ Sympathy for Eliot was an outgrowth of her humanism and her sense of duty towards community. The creation of sympathy both between her characters in her novel as well as between her readers and her novels were thus of the utmost importance in her work.

A strong tension exists between sympathy and the detached realism Eliot subscribes to in her work. In fact, it is this tension that exists at the heart of Eliot's writing. As the Victorian world was rapidly changing and heading towards modernity, "many Victorians were wary of certain distancing effects of modernity, including the overvaluing and misapplication of scientific method as well as the forms of alienation and rootlessness that accompanied modern disenchantment, industrialization, and the globalization of commerce."⁸ Wary of the distancing effects, yet insistent upon a new narrative form of realism in art, Eliot struggled in her work against the themes of both detachment and sympathy.

⁷ More specifically, Jaffe explains that George Eliot writes about identity politics, particularly in *Daniel Deronda*, where the creation of identity is vitally linked to national identity and ideology. However, in *Middlemarch*, this use of sympathy as a form of self-representation is not an issue of identity politics, and is not associated with national identity and ideology. Instead, sympathy in *Middlemarch* is vitally linked with vocation, rather than ideology.

⁸ Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), 4. Hereafter cited in the text.

In *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (2001) Amanda Anderson explores this idea of detachment and its effects for Eliot as an author, working against her equally strong aim of sympathy. Anderson defines detachment as the aspiration for distance through socially defined viewpoints. She claims that the “cultivation of detachment” is an issue of the utmost importance to Eliot.⁹ In terms of Eliot’s use of detachment, Anderson argues:

Eliot’s critique of social knowledge focuses on inadequacies not simply of method or principle but also, and fundamentally, of stance ... Eliot shares with many of her contemporaries a preoccupation with the distinctly moral dimensions or consequences of modern detachment.

(Anderson 10-11)

Anderson argues that Eliot’s response to the tension between detached realism and sympathy is a sort of “cultivated detachment,” which remains wary of the negative aspects of aspiring for a distanced viewpoint. She explains that Eliot subscribed to the “prevalent Victorian preoccupation with distinctly modern practices of detachment, a preoccupation characterized by ambivalence and uncertainty about what the significance and consequences of such practices might be” and yet also continued to work towards achieving a sense of detachment in her realism (Anderson 3).

One primary goal of this project is to question Anderson’s conclusion through an analysis of Eliot’s renowned novel, *Middlemarch* (1871). The tension between sympathy and detachment is prevalent throughout the novel, and as Anderson explains, Eliot must “attempt to mediate between sympathetic immersion and detached analysis” (Anderson

⁹ Anderson discusses the way in which Eliot attempts to explore the relation between social identity and cultural heritage in *Daniel Deronda* using this idea of detachment.

15). Yet while Eliot must work to mediate this tension, this project will argue that in *Middlemarch* this mediation does not result in a form of “cultivated detachment” as described by Anderson. Rather, sympathy in fact fails against the form of detachment seen in the novel.

The novel, *Middlemarch*, is focused on vocation and the internal conflict and growth of Eliot’s characters. Or as Levine explains, “The highest morality in this narrative lies in the quest, at whatever cost, to make one’s individual life both internally coherent and coherent with the community in which it moves” (Levine 130). The “provincial” story of the town of Middlemarch, the novel is a multi-plot narrative, paying close attention to the psychological turmoil within the characters and the connectedness between them. It is a sort of *Bildungsroman*,¹⁰ a coming-of-age story, at least in the case of Dorothea Brooke, a young, naïve girl who the reader follows through her first failed marriage and her second romance. But *Middlemarch* also incorporates the stories of Lydgate, a highly ambitious doctor, and his broken marriage to the town beauty, Rosamond Vincy; the pious Mary Garth and her suitor Fred Vincy; Bulstrode, the town banker; and numerous other, marginal characters who constitute the town. For each character, but most particularly with Dorothea, Eliot strenuously examines the matters of vocation and identity, and the problems which issue forth when characters attempt to formulate these matters. In terms of the tension between sympathy and detachment, it would appear that in *Middlemarch* sympathy ultimately survives through Eliot’s intense earnestness towards the minute and the quotidian, yet is balanced by her close observation and detached analysis.

¹⁰ For a more complete discussion of *Middlemarch* as a *Bildungsroman* novel see George Levine’s *How to Read the Victorian Novel*.

However, though Eliot's serious close observation of her subjects and her focus on a detached analysis are a means for creating what Anderson describes as "cultivated detachment," I would argue that the particular form of detachment seen in *Middlemarch* is a detachment which occurs temporally over history, a detachment so forceful that sympathy in this instance actually fails. While Anderson specifically references the "cultivation of detachment" as the *aspiration* to a distanced view, the idea of distance can also be applied to situations where the aspiration for cultivating detachment is unnecessary: for example, in the circumstance of historical distance. In this instance, there is no need for aspiration to a distanced view; in fact, a distanced view is the very starting point. When used in this sense, detachment is inherently cultivated. Historical distance works as a form of detachment against sympathy in *Middlemarch*; in their search for vocation, Eliot's characters must thus attempt to reconcile the tensions between sympathy and historical distance.

The failure of Eliot's characters to achieve a successful vocation through sympathy with the past displays her point in regards to historical distance. Eliot's characters are unable to formulate their identities in terms of past heroes, due to the historical distance in this application: history has altered the medium in which these characters live. Relative to heroes of the past, their ability to define their vocation against this historical distance is rendered obsolete. This is the major obstacle put before Eliot's characters, and her most important argument throughout her novel. Sympathy with the past fails, and historical distance is the cause of this failure.

So then, if sympathy with the past fails in the novel, where does *Middlemarch* leave the contemporary reader? If Anderson's metaphor of cultivated detachment and

sympathy is literalized in regards to contemporary readers, does it still hold weight? Abstractly, reading Eliot today creates its own form of historical distance between the reader and the work itself. The tension between sympathy and historical distance apparent in Eliot's characters in *Middlemarch* could be examined as a parallel to that occurring with regards to the twenty-first century reader. Does an historical distance somehow change the reader's response to the question of vocation, its effects on the characters in the novel, as well as the readers themselves? How can present-day readers sympathize with characters and conditions so remote from their own times? In other words, is the effect of *Middlemarch* diminished for contemporary readers due to their heightened historical distance from the work?

I will argue that one possible answer to the issues at hand is that the act of reading itself may be a means of transcending the gap created by historical distance, allowing for sympathy to be successful between modern readers and the text. To explore this point, I propose to use A.S. Byatt's novel, *Possession* (1990), as an example of how current readers of *Middlemarch* may transcend historical distance in order to sympathize and associate with the past.

The reason for using *Possession* in order to substantiate this argument is two-fold. Firstly, Byatt is not only a critical reader of Eliot's work, but her novel, *Possession*, is a prime example of a contemporary reworking of the Victorian novel—a novel written with the purpose of paralleling and repeating those themes, beliefs, and associations prominent throughout Victorian novels. The novel also involves the issues of vocation and the search for identity similar to *Middlemarch*. Secondly, the plot of the novel itself illustrates the ability of reading to transcend historical distance: two literary scholars set

out to solve and research the lives of two historically famous poets, and eventually gain sympathy to those past characters through their research. The mechanism of the detective story allows the characters to delve directly into the past. The novel exemplifies my argument of transcending historical distance through the close observation of reading.

To begin my analysis of sympathy and historical distance, I will attempt to closely examine the character of Dorothea Brooke, and then use *Possession* in order to further my analysis of *Middlemarch*, the character of Dorothea, and Eliot's assertions therein. In choosing this path of analysis, I do recognize that the scope of my study is somewhat limited by excluding discussion of the other characters in *Middlemarch*, particularly of the character Lydgate. I understand what Levine means when he says, "But it is insufficient to read *Middlemarch* as though it were all about Miss Brooke. The novel, like almost all multiplot novels . . . requires that every narrative be read in the light of the others" (Levine 136). And yet for my purposes I would argue that in order to make my analysis most forceful and my argument most robust, my focus should be on Dorothea, since she is the character most wholly involved in wrangling with her own vocation and identity. Also, the parallels between Eliot's character Dorothea and the novel, *Possession*, are the most useful and appropriate for this analysis.

Virginia Woolf judged *Middlemarch* to be "one of the few English novels written for grown-up people."¹¹ One reason *Middlemarch* might be thought of in this way is because of the seriousness in which Eliot and her narrator address the reader and the difficult tensions between sympathy and historical distance. I hope to use *Possession* as a

¹¹ Virginia Woolf, "George Eliot," in *The Common Reader*, 1st series (New York: Harcourt, Grace and Janovich, 1953), 172.

means for better understanding the problems Eliot poses for her readers in *Middlemarch*, and the broader utility this understanding may offer for us today.

I. Vocation in Middlemarch: Sympathy and Historical Distance

The Prelude to Eliot's *Middlemarch* begins with the question:

Who that cares much to know the history of man, and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the life of Saint Theresa, has not smiled with some gentleness at the thought of the little girl walking forth one morning . . . to go and seek martyrdom in the country of the Moors?¹²

This long and complex question immediately introduces the issues of time, history, and vocation as well as the identity of a historical heroine whose image will be conjured again and again—along with many other heroic historical figures—throughout the rest of the novel.¹³ After asking this question of the reader, the narrator continues to expand on these themes in following passage:

That Spanish woman who lived three hundred years ago was certainly not the last of her kind. Many Theresas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action; perhaps only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity; perhaps a tragic failure which found no sacred poet and sank unwept into oblivion. With dim lights and tangled circumstance they tried to shape their thought and deed in noble agreement; but after all, to common eyes their struggles seemed mere inconsistency and formlessness; for these

¹² George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 3. Hereafter cited in the text as *MM*.

¹³ The martyr is Saint Theresa of Avila (1515-1582), a Spanish mystic and founder of a religious order (*MM* n.1).

later-born Therasas were helped by no coherent social faith and order
 which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing
 soul ... Here and there is born a Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing,
 whose loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble
 off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centring in some long-
 recognizable deed. (*MM* 3-4)

These other Therasas, the ones without an “epic life” are the characters of the most profound interest to Eliot, for in their search for a meaningful vocation, and attempts to “shape their thought and deed in noble agreement,” they almost invariably meet with failure. The religiosity of the original Saint Theresa is no longer active for those present, and their social circumstances leave them without a means for adequately envisioning a life exempt from “inconsistency and formlessness.” This initial passage highlights the problems associated with attempts at transcending history in order to mediate vocation. Present-day characters are left without the tools and means previously available to those in the past, leaving them unable to replicate the life of Saint Theresa, or any previous and equivalent heroic life.

For Eliot, the vocation referred to here through the guise of Saint Theresa is a secular extension of her humanism, and her strong attitudes about duty and its relationship to morality. In fact, there is an oft-mentioned quotation by Eliot, from May of 1873, when Fred Myers, a Fellow of Trinity College at Cambridge, met with George Eliot, and described their meeting on that rainy evening:

She, stirred somewhat beyond her wont, and taking as her text the three words which have been used so often as the inspiring trumpet-calls of

men,—the words, *God, Immortality, Duty*,—pronounced, with terrible earnestness, how inconceivable was the *first*, how unbelievable the *second*, and yet how peremptory and absolute the *third*. Never, perhaps, have sterner accents affirmed the sovereignty of impersonal and un-recompensing Law. (Haight 463-464)

In *Middlemarch*, this sense of duty takes the form of the vocation and social identity of the characters. Vocation can be defined in terms described by Alan Mintz:

The lineaments of this secularization are clear: instead of God doing the calling, it is society or duty which beckons . . . if in the classical vocational ethos a man is ambitious both for his own salvation and for the glory of God, in the new scheme he is ambitious both for his own self-realization and for the betterment of society.¹⁴

The theme of vocation defined above is prevalent throughout *Middlemarch*. As Mintz further explains, “the call is itself experienced as a sense of inner conviction rather than as a spiritual prompting” (Mintz 18). That is to say, the search for the kind of vocation described is independent from religious or spiritual guidance. However, Eliot makes the point to define vocation still more narrowly. To her, ambitions for vocation should be centered most strongly on the “betterment of society,” that is to say altruistic goals, not for one’s own self-realization. At the root of her novel is the question of vocation and the role which ambitions and egoism play in its determination. As Jeanie Thomas explains:

Through all the ups and downs of George Eliot’s reputation with her readers, her identity as a moralist has held firm. Virtually unchallenged is

¹⁴ Alan Mintz, *George Eliot and the Novel of Vocation* (London: Harvard UP, 1978), 18. Hereafter cited in the text.

the assumption that her novels press a persistent theme and purpose—to expose the egoism in us all, character and reader alike, and to dissuade us from our “moral stupidity” through sympathy with the suffering of others with whom we share our lives.¹⁵

The distinction between altruism and egoism pivots on the question of interest, with the author stressing interest in social identity and the community, rather than the individual. The key point in terms of this distinction is the emphasis on “sympathy with the suffering of others,” once again stressing Eliot’s focus on the altruistic aspects of sympathy, rather than its more self-serving aspects.

In fact, egoism is a central issue throughout the novel. At one especially famous and important part, Eliot illustrates her point about egoism by the following passage:

Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a house-maid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent. (*MM* 403)

¹⁵ Jeanie Thomas, *Reading in Middlemarch: Reclaiming the Middle Distance* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research P, 1988), 7. Hereafter cited in the text.

The character in question is largely erroneous in her supposition that the events occurring in life are framed around her own self. The light is the egoism of this character, creating those “concentric circles round that little sun.” Egoism manipulates random events, bending them around the self, mistakenly categorizing everything as causally related to the character. The scratches surrounding the light are random events and occurrences, certainly not finely figured or created for the sole purpose of the self. In this way, Eliot illustrates the error in egoism, focused on self-interest rather than the interests of others. More generally, this passage also works as a parable for the narrative and the development of the characters in general. With the shining light of the narrator upon the events of the novel, the story at hand may appear to center around one character or one viewpoint. Yet, to understand completely and correctly what is occurring, is to observe closely each of the small, connected “scratches” on the pier glass. Further, this parable of narrative corresponds to Eliot’s deeper struggles as a novelist between subjective and objective analysis. The multitudinous scratches relay Eliot’s belief in the importance of close observation and minute detail in order to ground her realism and create sympathy for both her characters and readers. At the same time, the candle’s light exemplifies both the illuminating and the distorting effects of detached analysis which are also central to her realism. Thus this passage works as a means for illustrating both Eliot’s views on egoism for her characters, and her own struggles with detachment and sympathy as an author.

Eliot not only stresses in her writing that vocation should be for the betterment of society, but also that its determination should also be fitting for each particular person. As Thomas further explains, “[Eliot] knows that to be certain of one’s vocation can be an

incomparable blessing, for one thereby possesses a sense of identity, an ordering of the self and a channeling of energy that can be profoundly gratifying and productive (Thomas 14). This stress on the determination of vocation agreed with Eliot's views on kinship and the ties that bind us together as social groups. Vocation here is a means for identifying one's purpose and work which will be most productive and fitting in line with the community. In explaining the epiphany when "the moment of vocation [has] come" the narrator says:

Most of us who turn to any subject we love remember some morning or evening hour when we got on a high stool to reach down an untried volume, or sat with parted lips listening to a new talker, or for very lack of books began to listen to the voices within, as the first traceable beginning of our love. (*MM* 143-144)

For Eliot, the proper vocation is one that is natural, fitting and inherent. Each person has a calling which will ultimately be the one most practical and appropriate—a vocation in harmony with the community and society.

Eliot further expresses the inevitability of modest ambitions, rather than grand schemes. She offers the example of how many eventually lose their initial spark of ambition towards altruism to the homogenizing force of conformity of the everyday. The narrator explains:

For in the multitude of middle-aged man who go about their vocation in a daily course determined for them much in the same way as the tie of their cravats, there is always a good number who once meant to shape their own deeds and alter the world a little. The story of their coming up to be

shapen after the average and fit to be packed by the gross, is hardly ever known even in their consciousness, for perhaps their ardour in generous unpaid toil cooled as imperceptibly as the ardour of other youthful loves, till one day their earlier self walked like a ghost in its old home and made the new furniture ghastly. (*MM* 145)

This is the all-too-common story of those who envision their vocation as the key to changing the world, the grandest possible scheme, and yet ultimately fail. Their change is almost unrecognizable, yet it happens to “the multitude of middle-aged men.” With this example, Eliot describes the inevitable shaping “after the average” and stresses a focus on the minutiae of everyday life, and the importance of modest endeavors. The quotidian is the key to understanding the ultimate failure of grand ambitions, because the force of the everyday binds human character and conduct.

In *Middlemarch*, Eliot employs sympathy as a means for her characters to attempt to create for themselves their own vocation. In this attempt, however, tension arises between sympathy and the problematic issue of detachment. Oftentimes in the novel, Eliot’s characters attempt to sympathize with the past in their search to define a vocation. Her characters will aspire to replicate the lives of martyrs, saints, even great poets, writers, and professionals, like the Saint Theresa character described previously. However, her characters all ultimately fail in their attempts to sympathize with such figures from the past. Eliot displays the inability of her characters to define their vocation by aspiring to lives of greatness, similar to those of heroes and heroines past, in order to show the inadequacy of sympathy in this regard.

II. Dorothea Brooke—A Modern-Day Saint Theresa?

Dorothea Brooke, one of the main characters of *Middlemarch* is, in essence, one of the “many Theresas” first described by the narrator in the prelude, and the clearest example of the tension between sympathy and historical distance. As Levine writes of the first chapter of *Middlemarch*, “It is an easy move from Saint Theresa to the austere and naïve ‘Miss Brooke,’ whose name makes the first words of the first chapter, but that transition implies a history, an entrance into modernity, a falling away from spiritual grandeur into something, as George Eliot implies, even harder – a life of spiritual striving that has ‘no sacred poet’ to describe it and that sinks into ‘oblivion’” (Levine 156).

Dorothea is a “young lady of some birth and fortune” who is both plain-dressed and simple, and bewitchingly charming (*MM* 9). She is described as loving extremes, her large eyes and her religion “too unusual and striking” (*MM* 9). Throughout the novel, Dorothea endeavors to find her own vocation through the reproduction of the lives of heroines like Saint Theresa. In describing Dorothea’s search for her own vocation, the narrator says:

For a long while she had been oppressed by the indefiniteness which hung in her mind, like a thick summer haze, over all her desire to make her life greatly effective. What could she do, what ought she to do?—she, hardly more than a budding woman, but yet with an active conscience and a great mental need, not to be satisfied by a girlish instruction comparable to the nibblings and judgments of a discursive mouse. (*MM* 28)

While Dorothea aims to do great things in her life, the narrator emphasizes that Dorothea’s aims for a grand life are misguided, particularly in their hope to duplicate

those lives already lived. Dorothea cannot become a modern Saint Theresa, because as the narrator puts it, “the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is for ever gone” (*MM* 838). The constraints of historical distance here are much too strong to allow Dorothea the ability to formulate her vocation through attempts at sympathy with the past. Dorothea attempts to surpass historical distance, to model her own life after women who led great, ambitious lives defined by their grandness, only to end in failure, just like the other modern-day Saint Theresas.

Part of Dorothea’s failure stems from the relationship between her religiosity and her reality. Dorothea’s nature longs idealistically for grand paths, and she struggles against the narrowness of her life, the petty, “small paths” which appear to be the only routes allowable to her:

The intensity of her religious disposition, the coercion it exercised over 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, a walled-in maze of small paths that led no whither, the outcome was sure to strike others as at once exaggeration and inconsistency. (*MM* 29)

Dorothea’s intense religiosity is at odds with the world in which she inhabits in as far as the world she inhabits disables her attempts to recreate the life of a saint. Her world is one of narrow doctrine; a world where the homogenizing force of conformity first introduced with the many “multitude of men” is too strong a force against her religiosity. While such a “religious disposition” might have worked in the time of the original Saint

Theresa, this aspect of Dorothea's nature is disconnected from the other aspects of her life, including and especially the social world she inhabits.

Dorothea's putative ambition to seek the life of a martyr exemplifies the disconnection between religion and reality. In talking with Dorothea, Will Ladislaw says to her:

"I suspect that you have some false belief in the virtues of misery, and want to make your life a martyrdom ... You talk as if you had never known any youth. It is monstrous—as if you had had a vision of Hades in your childhood, like the boy in the legend. You have been brought up in some of those horrible notions that choose the sweetest woman to devour – like Minotaurs." (*MM* 220)

Will is horrified by Dorothea's nature to "give up" and suffer misery, as if she were a martyr. Criticizing her religious notions of misery, he claims she envisions herself as if she were "the boy in the legend." Ladislaw's comment draws a parallel between Dorothea's efforts at martyrdom and her visions of past legends, adding to the discussion of disconnection between Dorothea's religious notions and reality. She exists just as Will describes her: devoured by those horrible notions.

This point is again stressed with the discussion of Dorothea Brooke and her ambitions for martyrdom at the beginning of the novel. As the narrator explains:

Her mind was theoretic, and yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world which might frankly include the parish of Tipton and her own rule of conduct there; she was enamoured of intensity and greatness, and ... likely to seek martyrdom. (*MM* 8)

Dorothea's ambitions are too "lofty," imagining herself as a prominent citizen of Tipton parish, and she envisions herself as a future martyr. Dorothea seems bound to be a part of the multitude of humankind, forced into conformity with the shape of the average and the everyday.

Not only is Dorothea "likely to seek martyrdom," she also embodies the "inconsistency" which the narrator describes to be a major downfall for the modern Saint Therasas. There are two major instances at the beginning of the novel which identify this weakness of inconsistency in Dorothea. One of these instances is when Dorothea and her sister Celia decide to look at and divide the jewels of their deceased mother. As the two young women admire the jewels, Dorothea insists that she shall wear no jewelry, explaining to Celia her qualms about wearing the amethyst cross, she says, "If I were to put on such a necklace as that, I should feel as if I had been pirouetting" (*MM* 13). In their talk, Dorothea applies herself to taking a higher road than most women, and makes this positioning very clear to her sister. She claims that while Celia and other women are free to wear jewelry, she herself finds it distasteful. Yet, when the girls uncover a fine emerald and diamond ring and bracelet, Dorothea is immediately taken with them and tries them on, "all the while her thought was trying to justify her delight in the colours by merging them in her mystic religious joy" (*MM* 13).

At this point, Celia quite rightly interprets inconsistency on the part of Dorothea: "Celia thought that her sister was going to renounce the ornaments, as in consistency she ought to do" (*MM* 14). However, Dorothea does not renounce the jewels, and instead decides to keep both the ring and the bracelet for herself, thinking of keeping them always by her so as to "feed her eyes at these little fountains of pure color" (*MM* 14).

Dorothea's actions are conflicting here. Celia's conscience tells her, "[E]ither she should have taken her full share of the jewels, or, after what she had said, she should have renounced them altogether" (*MM* 14). In this case, Dorothea is clearly vacillating between extremes. As Dorothea Barrett explains, "She will either wear no jewelry at all, and distinctly condescend to the desire to wear jewelry, or she will choose something outlandishly exotic. The image of Dorothea bedecked with emeralds at the end of the chapter is slightly grotesque, which would not be the case had she chosen the cross or the amethysts."¹⁶ In this example, Dorothea's religiosity forms her views of things, such as wearing jewelry, and yet the reality of her desires does not conform to these views.

Dorothea's views in relation to the emeralds are echoed in her feeling about horseback riding. Horseback riding is an "indulgence" which Dorothea allows herself "in spite of conscientious qualms" believing that she enjoyed it in a "pagan, sensuous way" (*MM* 10). While horseback riding, Dorothea does not conform to her strong religiosity: "[H]er eyes and cheeks glowed with mingled pleasure she looked very little like a devotee" (*MM* 10). Dorothea loves horseback riding, and yet recognizes this activity as unfitting with her religious representation of herself. She considers the activity of riding a recreation she "always looked forward to renouncing" (*MM* 10). In fact, Dorothea is repeatedly described throughout the novel as always loving to readily renounce all sorts of ideas and activities. As Celia explains Dorothea to their family friend, Sir James Chettam: "She likes giving up" (*MM* 19). Dorothea's need to "give up" those activities and ideas which are naturally pleasing to her, and her attempts to modify her choices in order to fit with her religious zeal illustrate the larger issue at hand: Dorothea's inability

¹⁶ Dorothea Barrett, *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot's Heroines* (London: Routledge, 1989), 126-127. Hereafter cited in the text.

to mold herself and her views in the form of a modern-day Saint Theresa. The irregularity of viewpoint illustrated by Dorothea in these two examples is similar to that first described by the narrator in the prelude, clearly indicating Dorothea as a failed Saint Theresa figure.

Another cause for Dorothea's failure to sympathize with the past and become a modern-day Saint Theresa is her own egoism. Although Dorothea has great moral ambitions as seen with her inner desire to become a modern martyr, throughout the novel these aims are still based in egoism. For example, at one point in the story, Dorothea tries to help Rosamond Vincy and Will Ladislaw. However, in her attempt to help them, her aims are still self-serving. Dorothea has romantic feelings for Ladislaw, and though she helps Rosamond, as the critic Barrett explains, "It cannot be denied that Dorothea's action is firmly on the side of self-interest. When she goes to plead with Rosamond, one cannot forget that, from Dorothea's point of view, if Rosamond can be persuaded to give Will up, he will again be free for Dorothea" (Barrett 143-144). It is this weakness of motive, rooted in Dorothea's egoism, which acts as a barrier to her achievement of the vocation of a modern-day Saint Theresa.

Dorothea wants her life to follow a grand path, and so to further this end she seeks to marry a sort of spiritual guide, one who will add credence to her beliefs. In describing Dorothea's view of marriage, the narrator says:

[T]he union which attracted her was one that would deliver her from her girlish subjection to her own ignorance, and give her the freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest path. (*MM* 29)

Dorothea's first husband, Edward Casaubon, entirely fits this qualification of a spiritual guide for Dorothea.

Dorothea envisions her vocation through her dutifulness to her wedded "guide." She has an idyllic view of her marriage as the means for defining her vocation. As she thinks about her marriage, she characterizes it in relation to great lives once lived.

All her eagerness for acquirement lay within that full current of sympathetic motive in which her ideas and impulses were habitually swept along. She did not want to deck herself with knowledge – to wear it loose from the nerves and blood that fed her action; and if she had written a book she must have done it as Saint Theresa did, under the command of an authority that constrained her conscience. But something she yearned for by which her life might be filled with action at once rational and ardent; and since the time was gone by for guiding visions and spiritual directors, since prayer heightened yearning but not instruction, what lamp was there but knowledge? Surely learned men kept the only oil; and who more learned than Mr. Casaubon? (*MM* 87)

Dorothea yearns to act as a Saint Theresa under her husband, "under the command of an authority that constrained her conscience." Yet she does realize at least that the method for acting in such a way is not entirely possible for her as it was for the Saint Theresa of the past. She recognizes that the "time was gone by for guiding visions and spiritual directors." However, while she acknowledges the fruitlessness of attempting such endeavors, she simply replaces this form of religiosity with that of another kind: the "lamp" of knowledge. Further, this "lamp" has strong echoes of the pier glass discussion,

clearly connecting Dorothea's form of religiosity with egoism. Dorothea will still attempt to find her vocation through sympathetic interactions with the past, however she believes the best way to accomplish this goal is through knowledge, and as she asks herself, "[W]ho [is] more learned than Mr. Casaubon?" (*MM* 87). Though Dorothea does see some disconnection between her search for her wedded vocation and that of Saint Theresas past, she simply alters her means in order to still accomplish the same goal.

As Dorothea talks with Casaubon about his work, *Key to All Mythologies*, she becomes more and more convinced that he is just the sort of man who would want to marry. The narrator says:

For to Dorothea, after that toy-box history of the world adapted to young ladies which had made the chief part of her education, Mr. Casaubon's talk about his great book was full of new vistas; and this sense of revelation, this surprise of a nearer introduction to Stoics and Alexandrians, as people who had ideas not totally unlike her own, kept in abeyance for the time her usual eagerness for a binding theory which could bring her own life and doctrine into strict connection with that amazing past, and give the remotest sources of knowledge some bearing on her actions. (*MM* 86)

In discussing Casaubon's work, Dorothea is attracted to his knowledge, and more importantly, his connection to "that amazing past." She views Casaubon and his work as doorways into "new vistas" giving her the feeling of "revelation" and spiritual expansion. It is this connection to the past which allows Dorothea to overlook the lack of a "binding

theory” present in Casaubon’s ideas— a problem which will later resurface in their marriage.

Dorothea is so overwhelmed by Casaubon’s ability to recreate for her the vision of a life in relation to the greatness of the past that she is blinded from seeing other signs foreshadowing the painful, empty marriage to come. Dorothea says, “It would be my duty to study that I might help him the better in his great works. There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday-things with us would mean the greatest things. It would be like marrying Pascal” (*MM* 29). Not only does Dorothea envision herself as Saint Theresa, she even includes Casaubon in her visions of greatness, with him reenacting the life of Pascal. In this way, Dorothea’s attempt at sympathy with the past thwarts her usual eagerness for practicalities that will come to fruition later in the novel.

As Dorothea quickly realizes, Casaubon’s work is not a means of opening up new vistas, nor is her life with him exempt from everyday trivialities. In fact, her marriage to Casaubon soon becomes empty and cold. “She longed for work which would be directly beneficent like the sunshine and the rain, and now it appeared that she was to live more and more in a virtual tomb, where there was the apparatus of a ghastly labour producing what would never see the light” (*MM* 475). Just as Dorothea cannot replicate the life of a Saint Theresa, so Casaubon cannot replicate the life of a modern-day Pascal. Not only is his work outdated by the current work being done in Germany, but his scraps and mummified articles of thought are not so near a cohesive whole to even be considered any sort of “Key to All Mythologies.” Casaubon’s Key is not the work of Pascal, and Dorothea’s attempt to parallel her life to one of previous greatness leaves her pointedly disappointed.

However, even this great disappointment in her marriage to Casaubon does not entirely change Dorothea's outlook or attempts at sympathizing with the past. After Casaubon's death, when the terrible effects of his will are realized, Dorothea's life goes through a process of outward change:

Everything was changing its aspect: her husband's conduct, her own dutiful feeling towards him, every struggle between them—and yet more, her whole relation to Will Ladislaw. Her world was in a state of convulsive change; the only thing she could say distinctly to herself was, that she must wait and think anew. (*MM* 490)

And yet her inward resolve remains the same. This becomes apparent in a conversation between Dorothea and Mrs. Cadwallader after Casaubon's death:

"I never called everything by the same name that all the people about me did," said Dorothea, stoutly.

"But I suppose you have found out your mistake, my dear," said Mrs. Cadwallader, "and that is a proof of sanity."

Dorothea was aware of the sting, but it did not hurt her. "No," she said, "I still think that the greater part of the world is mistaken about many things. Surely one may be sane and yet think so, since the greater part of the world has often had to come round from its opinion." (*MM* 537)

Dorothea still insists that her viewpoint on the world is different, and more to her own terms. She has not changed her attempts to live the life of a Saint Theresa. In fact, Eliot again reinforces the similarity of Dorothea's actions with those of a saint, in her

description of Dorothea during her stay with Celia and James Chettam at Freshitt Hall after the death of Casaubon. Such continual references to Dorothea acting as if she were a saint repeat the notion of Dorothea attempting to live her life by sympathizing with lives of the past:

Dorothea had again taken up her abode at Lowick Manor. After three months Freshitt had become rather oppressive: to sit like a model for Saint Catherine looking rapturously at Celia's baby would not do for many hours in the day, and to remain in that momentous babe's presence with persistent disregard was a course that could not have been tolerated in a childless sister. (*MM* 535)

Dorothea is not the modern-day equivalent of a saint, and therefore cannot bear to sit for over three months, acting as if she were entirely entertained and absorbed by the vision of Celia's baby. As the narrator explains, this action "would not do."

To be fair, there is some sense that Dorothea recognizes a change in her ability to shape her own life and ambitions after her marriage to Edward Casaubon and his subsequent death. She says to Will Ladislaw at one point,

"Sorrow comes in so many ways. Two years ago I had no notion of that—I mean of the unexpected way in which trouble comes, and ties our hands, and makes us silent when we long to speak. I used to despise women a little for not shaping their lives more, and doing things. I was very fond of doing as I liked, but I have almost given it up," she ended, smiling playfully. (*MM* 545)

Here Dorothea acknowledges her experiences with marriage and her previous, unforgiving, contempt of those unlike herself who did not wish to shape their own lives as somewhat unreasonable. However, although she does say she has almost given up doing as she pleased, she says this in a playful, and somewhat insincere, manner. Though Dorothea may have realized some things about the reality of marriage and the perils which come from imagining herself as a modern-day martyr, she has not entirely changed her view on life and on her own religiosity.

In fact, Dorothea continues to remain consistently *inconsistent* throughout the entirety of the novel. She says to her sister Celia, “I shall never marry again” (*MM* 550). And yet she does eventually go back on her word and decide to marry Will Ladislaw. “It is very dreadful of Dodo, though,” said Celia ... “She said she *never would* marry again—not anybody at all” (*MM* 817). Once again Celia recognizes Dorothea’s inconsistency—her insistence on absolute claims and enjoyment of “giving things up.”

By the end of the novel, Dorothea has realized some of the limitations set upon her by her own faults as well as by the reality of the modern world she inhabits. In talking to her sister Celia she says:

“It is quite true that I might be a wiser person, Celia,” said Dorothea, “and that I might have done something better, if I had been better. But this is what I am going to do. I have promised to marry Mr. Ladislaw; and I am going to marry him.” (*MM* 821)

Dorothea recognizes that she “might have done something better” with her life, that by marrying Will Ladislaw she is in effect, failing to live the life of a modern-day Saint Theresa she has imagined herself to be. And so by the end of the story, she is resigned to

this fact. Ultimately, just as the multitude of men gradually lose sight of their grand ambitions for something much smaller and trivial, so has Dorothea been molded and constrained by the force of the everyday.

The final significant instance clearly exhibiting the tension between historical distance and attempted sympathy, in relation to vocation for Eliot's characters, occurs in the final portion of the novel. The narrator discusses Dorothea's marriage to Will Ladislaw, and her preceding marriage to Edward Casaubon, ending with some final words about Dorothea's search for a meaningful vocation. In the end of the novel, Dorothea has given up high moral ambitions and instead has contented herself with playing the muted, more humble role. The narrator says:

Certainly those determining acts of her life were not ideally beautiful.

They were the mixed result of a 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 lies outside it. A new Theresa will hardly have the opportunity of reforming a conventual life, any more than a new Antigone will spend her heroic piety in daring all for the sake of a brother's burial: the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is forever gone. But we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas, some of which may present a far sadder sacrifice than that of the Dorothea whose story we know. Her finely-touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely

visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength,
 spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. (MM 838)

Dorothea's abandonment of her lofty ideals of vocation and her acceptance of a more "unspectacular" form of vocation is the final message the narrator leaves with the reader. Dorothea does not become a modern Saint Theresa. In fact, it is the "relinquishing of vocation and the settling for something unspectacular but comfortable that we feel brooding beneath the surface of Dorothea's story" (Barrett 126). Dorothea plays only a small part; she is only ". . . the nameless river, spent in many channels: the irrigating version of the labyrinth."¹⁷ In the instance of Dorothea, Eliot appears to stress the inadequacy of Dorothea's grand ambitions, insisting that she is better suited for a more humble part than that of a Saint Theresa.

By the end of the novel, Eliot leaves the reader with a terrible conundrum: sympathy with the past inevitably fails due to the problem of historical distance, eliminating the means for recreating a past heroic life, and yet it is human nature to perceive one's life as an attempt at grander ambitions than those of the everyday. The reader is left almost with a sense of loss; there is no adequate answer given of the means to transcend historical distance, nor any guidance offered for how the contemporary reader should respond to this issue.

Given Eliot's argument about Dorothea and vocation, there are two major questions that arise. The first of these focuses on Eliot's narrative structure, and the

¹⁷ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: ARK Paperbacks, 1983), 180. Hereafter cited in the text. Beer introduces the idea of the "web of affinities" which is created through the relationships in *Middlemarch*, and the importance of these relationships in the forming of communal identity. Her discussion here of the labyrinth plays into this metaphor.

purpose behind Eliot's intense focus on the importance of the everyday. For Eliot, the act of close observation and attention to the small, less heroic actions of the quotidian man operate as the best means for creating sympathy between readers and characters. Eliot focuses on the everyday, multitudinous and miniscule aspects of her characters because in order to understand the human condition one must see the apparently inconsequential actions of the everyday. It is the small and insignificant that is the true force behind a character and a story.

The second of these questions is broader, regarding how contemporary readership responds to these ideas of sympathy and detachment. As current readers, we are no longer proximate to the Victorian period and so have to work harder to find affective modes of identification with the narrative. In her discussion of sympathy and detachment, Amanda Anderson sheds some light on what contemporary readers might be able to take away from reading *Middlemarch*:

[For] Eliot acts of distancing produce a more primary effect, which is psychological: the underdevelopment of the moral faculties, particularly the faculty of sympathy. Only the close observation of situated subjects activates the sympathies of the scholar who studies them, and only forms of representation that duplicate that close observation activate the sympathies of the reader. (Anderson 10-11)

Anderson explains that Eliot believed sympathy could work with the aid of close observation; and reading could be an example of this. Reading and spending time studying the characters and their development in a novel could amount to the kind of close observation Anderson is talking about. Just as Eliot uses a narrative of realism in

order to portray the intricacies and realities of her characters, so can the reader use her narrative in order to closely examine them. Thus, one possible answer to both issues at hand is that the act of reading itself may be a means of transcending the gap created by historical distance, allowing for sympathy between modern readers and the text.

III. Possession: Investigating Sympathy and Historical Distance

It might be most helpful to start by looking at *Middlemarch* through the eyes of Byatt herself, in order to gain a better vantage point for using her novel. Byatt writes of Eliot's novel:

I perceived [*Middlemarch*] was about the growth, use and inevitable failure and frustration of all human energy . . . George Eliot's people were appallingly ambitious and greedy—not always for political or even, exclusively, sexual power, as in most of the other English novels I read. They were ambitious to use their minds to the full, to discover something, to live on a scale where their life felt valuable from moment to moment.¹⁸

Byatt strikes at the heart of the novel, namely, the ambition of Eliot's characters to make the most of their lives and the inevitable failure of their endeavors. Even further, Byatt takes note of the sympathy at work in Eliot's novel:

There is so much there, in the style. The magisterial authority of a Greek Chorus, or God, who knows Dorothea's fate before her drama has really begun. Sympathy, in the author, towards the character's ambitions, and a certain wry sense that, unfocused as they are, they are doomed. (*VB* 81)

Byatt explains that Eliot has sympathy with her characters in that she knows they are doomed, and yet she does identify with their ambitions towards a valuable life. Byatt's distinct mention of sympathy is significant here, because it shows that she is aware of the work of sympathy in the novel at an even broader level than that among the characters: that of Eliot herself as author towards them. Eliot's narrative form is one of realism and

¹⁸A.S. Byatt, *Vintage Byatt* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 79-80. Hereafter cited in the text as *VB*.

close observation, and this form allows her as an author to sympathize with her own characters. As Levine explains, “George Eliot’s kind of realism achieves its most intense feelings in the exploration of character and the deep tensions, psychological and moral, that develop internally” (Levine 140). Eliot’s sympathy to her own characters returns to the purpose behind her narrative structure, focusing on the everyday. Her act of close observation to her own characters is in itself an exercise in the creation of sympathy. This is an interesting double-play of sympathy, which can aid in the discussion of how the close observation of reading, and similarly also, writing, can be a means for contemporary readers to sympathize with characters successfully. Not only does the author work to sympathize with his or her characters through the very creation of them, but then the reader responds to such a narrative with an exercise of sympathy as well.

As illustrated with the issue of narrative purpose, Byatt makes an attempt to parallel aspects of Eliot’s work. She notes a very important focus on the everyday actions of the community in *Middlemarch*, and of the effect of these interrelated stories. Byatt writes:

Reading *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* I learned several primitive yet crucial lessons about writing novels—and these lessons were also moral lessons about life. It is possible, I learned, to invent a world peopled by *a large number* of interrelated people, almost all of whose processes of thought, developments of consciousness, biological anxieties, sense of their past and future can most scrupulously be made available to readers, can work with and against each other, can lead to failure, or partial failure, or triumphant growth. (VB 79)

Byatt's experiences reading Eliot give a strong insight into how her novel, *Possession*, might allow for a valuable exploration of Eliot's writing and its effect on contemporary readers. Byatt understands Eliot's narrative form as a means for creating sympathy between the author and the text, as well as allowing for sympathy between the reader and the text. This understanding of double-logic which occurs is vital to the discussion of sympathy in the text, for there are at once two sources of sympathy: that of the author and the text, and that of the reader and the text.

Byatt uses Eliot's ideas of sympathy to further investigate what is at stake for modern readers of Victorian literature, as well as to explore the tension between sympathy and historical distance Eliot raises in her novel. In terms of the issues modern readers face, Byatt says:

[Eliot] took human thought, as well as human passion, as her proper subject—*ideas*, such as thoughts on “progress,” on the nature of “culture,” on the growth and decay of society and societies, are as much actors in her work as the men and women who contemplate the ideas, partially understand them or unknowingly exhibit them. Part of the recent reaction against her, I suspect, is because her “ideas” have been too generally summed up as a belief in inevitable human progress, a gradual bettering of the human race, a slow movement upwards and outwards. This, with the fact that the societies she depicted were . . . static, constricting, rigid in form, has led people to believe she has less to offer modern novelists than may be true. (*VB* 84-85)

Byatt justly states that Eliot's ideas should be summed up to more than the "belief in inevitable human progress:" Eliot's work also moralizes that this minute focus on everyday actions can lead to a fitting vocation, positive ramifications, and can be a guide for a more productive and valuable life. In fact, Byatt's work acts as a means for investigating *Middlemarch*. As a novel, *Possession* works to uncover how close observation and a narrative form with a focus on everyday triumphs and tribulations allows for readers to transcend time and sympathize deeply with the characters and with the text.

Possession is the story of a scholarly researcher, Roland Mitchell, an expert on the fictional historical poet, Randolph Henry Ash, who finds a half-written note by Ash to an unknown woman, and continues to follow clues about the secret courtship in letters and journals. His hunt leads him to team up with a fellow scholar, Maud Bailey, an expert on Christabel LaMotte, the unknown poetess from Ash's note, and the two go on to form their own paralleled courtship all the while racing to discover the truth about Ash and LaMotte before their fellow colleagues. *Possession* exudes references to Eliot in a number of significant ways: through the issues of identity and vocation; through the discussion of the importance of the minute; through references to sympathy; and even through direct references to Eliot herself. Each of these parallels aids in the discussion of *Possession* and its usefulness as a reference for exploring the issue of modern readership and *Middlemarch*.

A shy and self-conscious Roland is utterly unsure of himself, and the issue of his identity and vocation as a scholar are continuously in the background as the novel progresses. On Roland's questions of identity, the narrator says:

It mattered to Randolph Ash what a man was, though he could, without undue disturbance, have written that general pantechicon of a sentence using other terms, phrases and rhythms and have come in the end to the same satisfactory evasive metaphor. Or so Roland thought, trained in the post-structuralist deconstruction of the subject. If he had been asked what Roland Mitchell was, he would have had to give a very different answer.¹⁹

While entirely capable of describing the identity of his scholarly pursuit, Roland cannot quite sum up himself without many “undue disturbances.” Roland devotes his entire life to studying Ash and yet his own formulation of his identity cannot compare to his understanding of his subject. The question of identity is further stressed by his disillusioned companion, Val, when she says to him, “I suppose I envy you, piecing together old Ash’s world-picture. Only where does that leave *you*, Old Mole? What’s your world-picture?” (*PS* 24). Not only does this excerpt illustrate Roland’s inability to describe himself, but also a frustration with his inability to create poetry and words with such mastery as Ash, an inability similar to that of Dorothea’s powerlessness to recreate herself as a modern day Saint Theresa.

Throughout the novel, Byatt makes references to Eliot’s feelings towards the importance of the everyday actions of life as well as those issues of identity facing her characters such as Roland Mitchell. At one point in the story, the narrator describes how a man is made up of such small details and everyday experiences. The narrator says:

¹⁹ A.S. Byatt, *Possession* (New York: Random House, 1990), 13. Hereafter cited in the text as *PS*.

A man is the history of his breaths and thoughts, acts, atoms and wounds, love, indifference and dislike; also of his race and nation, the soil that fed him and his forebears, the stones and sands of his familiar places, long-silenced battles and struggles of conscience, of the smiles of girls and the slow utterance of old women, of accidents and the gradual action of inexorable law, of all this and something else too, a single flame which in every way obeys the laws that pertain to Fire itself, and yet is lit and put out from one moment to the next, and can never be relumed in the whole waste of time to come. (PS 12)

Repeated by the narrator is the message that we have seen continuously throughout Eliot's *Middlemarch*: namely, the importance of the small actions and incidents of life which make up one's identity, and the ways in which a life cannot be reinvented or relived. The flame cannot be "relumed" as the narrator puts it. There are other points in the novel as well where the importance of a focus on the infinitely small is re-presented. During the exchange of letters between Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, Ash sends her a draft of his poem titled "Swadderdam" which is included in full for the reader. This is an interesting topic for a poem, for as Ash explains in his letter, Swadderdam is famous for his invention of the first optic glass. Ash writes:

[S]wadderdam, who discovered in Holland the optic glass which revealed to us the endless reaches and ceaseless turmoil of the *infinitely small* just as the great Galileo turned his optic tube on the majestic motions of the planets and beyond them the silent spheres of the *infinitely great*. (PS 174)

The fact that Byatt chooses the topic of Ash's poem to be a reference to the "infinitely small" clearly comes from her knowledge of Eliot's work. Swadderdam's optic glass echoes Eliot's pier-glass "minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions" (*MM* 403). Both Eliot and Byatt express the importance of the small and the minute, and the attention that such details should receive. This creates another link between Byatt and Eliot's goals for close observation as a means for creating sympathy.

In fact, Byatt references Eliot directly a number of times throughout her novel. For example, the narrator refers to Eliot when she speaks of the "heavy, solemn thoughtfulness of George Eliot" (*PS* 112). This reference does not strike the reader as a particularly positive one, yet Byatt herself has expressed her reverence for Eliot's work. One reason the narrator speaks of Eliot's solemnity is possibly as a reference to the feeling of the reader at the end of the novel when faced with the question of sympathy in the face of historical distance and given no answer towards a resolution.

Although there are references to Eliot and her ideas about vocation and sympathy in passing throughout the novel, there are a number of passages and plot twists in which the narrator seems almost to be referencing *Middlemarch* directly and the issues at hand there. One of these plot points is the portion of the novel dedicated to the journal of Sabine de Kercoz. Sabine is the Breton cousin of LaMotte, with whom LaMotte visits during the time of her pregnancy with Ash's child. Sabine is not one of the major characters in the novel; however, she does play an important role in terms of her intimacy with the reader. While LaMotte lives with Sabine and her family, Sabine writes of her experiences in her journal which are recreated for the reader. Young, innocent and naïve, the character of Sabine and her thoughts in her journal echo the thoughts and persona of

the young Dorothea Brooke. Sabine, dedicated to becoming an author, looks to the older LaMotte as a mentor, and begins her journal on LaMotte's advice. Sabine says to LaMotte:

“Cousin Christabel, it is *true* that I have a great desire to be a writer.”

“If that is true, and if you have the gift, nothing I can say will change the outcome.”

“You know that cannot be true. That is a sentimental thing to say, cousin, forgive me. Much could prevent me. Solitude. The lack of sympathy. That lack of faith in myself. Your contempt.” (*PS* 377)

Sabine speaks from the start of the importance of sympathy as a means of finding her vocation; she recognizes the need for sympathy on her part, and connects sympathy also to a “lack of faith,” her cousins contempt, and solitude—all aspects that are connected to the success of the finding vocation. At the same time, Sabine begins her journal by writing:

This daily recording, [LaMotte] said, would have two virtues. It would make my style flexible and my observation exact for when the time came—as it must in all lives—when something momentous should cry out—she said “cry out” to be told. And it would make me see that nothing was in fact dull in itself, nothing was without its own proper interest. (*PS* 364)

Sabine speaks of the particular again, and the importance for a writer to notice the infinitely small of the world. Indeed, the crying out that LaMotte describes to Sabine may be the connection that arises through sympathy, after close and “exact” observation.

Then Sabine goes on to write the following passage in her journal:

What comes next? My history. The family history. Lovers? I have none, I see no one, I have not only formed no attachment and rejected no offer, I have never been together with anyone who could be thought of in that light. My father seems to think it will all settle itself by some gentle and inevitable process “when the right time comes,” which he believes is still far off—I believe, already almost past and lost. I am twenty years old. I will not write of that. I cannot control my thoughts, and Christabel says that this journal must be free from “the repetitious vapours and ecstatic sighing of commonplace girls with commonplace feelings.” (*PS* 264)

The mention of “commonplace girls with commonplace feelings” is provoking. It immediately references back to *Middlemarch* and the struggles of the character Dorothea. Specifically, it returns to Dorothea’s fearful need “not to be satisfied by a girlish instruction comparable to the nibblings and judgements of a discursive mouse” (*MM* 28). Both girls compare themselves to other women around them, and find themselves wanting more than what they see as commonplace.

Such a remark also reverberates with Dorothea’s similar worries against all those things she is so insistent upon “giving up.” Sabine is a young girl, struggling to control her thoughts and deeds in a way similar to that of Dorothea’s struggle to remain constant in her actions and not inconsistent. Both girls feel the sense of the need to be better than

“commonplace.” Though, in Sabine’s experience this belief is instilled in her by the foreboding LaMotte. The character of Christabel LaMotte represents a similar struggle of consistency and inconsistency, and yet her character would not be described as simply a post-Casaubon replication of Dorothea. LaMotte does not contain the naïveté and freshness of a Dorothea; she is displayed as too cynical a character to believe that she herself could become a modern-day Saint Theresa. However, the reader is not privileged to see Sabine in the latter days of her life, possibly after the realization of the smallness of her endeavors. Thus Sabine acts as a young Dorothea, and LaMotte must act the part of experience and relinquishment. Sabine continues in her journal entry:

What is clear is that I have described the house, in part, but not the people. Tomorrow, I shall describe the people. “Action, not character, is the essence of the tragic drama,” Aristotle said. My father and cousin were disputing about Aristotle over dinner last night; I have rarely seen my father so lively. I think *inaction* is the essence of tragic drama, in the case of many modern women, but I did not venture upon this near-epigram, as they were disputing in Greek, which Christabel learned from her father, but I do not know. (PS 269)

The first point to notice is Sabine’s description of inaction as “the essence of tragic drama, in the case of many modern women” (PS 269). Sabine makes this point, and yet does not elaborate nor does she participate in the discussion between LaMotte and her father. Not because she chooses to not participate, but because she is literally unable to do so. Sabine explains, “I did not venture upon this near-epigram, as they were disputing in Greek, which Christabel learned from her father, but I do not know” (PS 269). Once

again, Sabine represents the unknowing child, while LaMotte the voice of experience. Also, the stress on *inaction* is significant, as Sabine seems to realize that in the grander scheme of things her actions will be modest. What is interesting here especially is the mention of the “modern woman.” Sabine is speaking as a young girl in the Victorian era, and yet her knowledge of her modest endeavors seems far above the range of Dorothea’s thoughts in this regard. Though Byatt uses Sabine as a Victorian character, her underlying point reverberates most with the modern reader, the present-day modern woman.

In her journal entry, Sabine then goes on to make a comment that both echoes and complicates the thoughts of Dorothea:

When I think of medieval princesses running their households during the Crusades, or prioresses running the life of great abbeys, of St Theresa as a little girl going out to fight evil, as George Sand’s Jacques says, I think a kind of softness has overcome the modern life. De Balzac says the new occupations of men in cities, their work in businesses, have turned women into pretty and peripheral toys, all silk, perfume and full of the *fantasies* and intrigues of the boudoir—but I do not want to be a relative and passive being, anywhere. I want to live and love and write. Is this too much? Is this declaration vapouring? (*PS* 369)

The parallels between Sabine’s thoughts and Dorothea’s are striking here. The mention of Saint Theresa and the softness of modern life are exquisite echoes of Eliot. Just like Dorothea, Sabine responds to those stories of past heroines with a sense of idolatry and reverence. She does not want to be a passive being, and responds to De Balzac’s

comments about women as peripheral toys with a sense of exasperation and desperate longing. She yearns to be more than a “relative and passive being.” One important complication in Sabine’s viewpoint to take notice of, however, is that she recognizes the softness of modern life, whereas Dorothea entirely does not. Dorothea responds to figures of the past by attempting to recreate herself as a modern-day Saint Theresa. Sabine responds to these figures with longing, but also a stronger sense of sadness with the realization that a time for such a life is long past. Her only wish is that she somehow manages to create a space for herself in the modern world that is not completely exempt from some sort of action and importance.

Using Sabine’s journal entries, Byatt both echoes and further complicates the idea of the modern Saint Theresa, and the problems of distance which arise with the attempt to recreate the past in modern life. While Byatt’s character imagines past heroines, she also has a greater understanding of the complexities involved in her attempts to sympathize with those past women, while Eliot’s character, Dorothea, did not. The complications Byatt instills in her character, Sabine, as well as in the broader discussion of sympathy more generally, illustrate the ways in which Byatt is both working with Eliot’s ideas, and also reworking them in her own way. Byatt’s reworking culminates in her ultimate presentation of an argument for a resolution to the tension between historical distance and sympathy. This resolution is the key part of using *Possession* to further understand *Middlemarch*.

At a later point in the plot of *Possession*, the main modern-day character Roland Mitchell also ponders the issue of repetition of lives and re-living of the past. He sees his increasingly romantic relationship with his colleague, Maud Bailey, as a parallel to the

romantic relationship between Ash and LaMotte that they are uncovering through their detective research:

Somewhere in the locked-away letters, Ash had referred to the plot of fate that seemed to hold or drive the dead lovers. Roland thought, partly with precise postmodernist pleasure, and partly with a real element of superstitious dread, that he and Maud were being driven by a plot or fate that seemed, at least possibly, to be not their plot or fate but that of those others. He tried to extend this aperçu. Might there not, he professionally asked himself, be an element of superstitious dread in any self-reflexive, inturnd postmodernist mirror-game or plot-coil that recognizes that it has got out of hand? That recognizes that connections proliferate apparently at random, apparently in response to some ferocious ordering principle, which would, of course, being a good postmodernist principle, require the aleatory or the multivalent or the “free,” but structuring, but controlling, but driving, to some—to what?—end. Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable. But they are always both frightening and enchantingly desirable. “Falling in love,” characteristically, combs the appearances of the world, and of the particular lover’s history, out of a random tangle and into a coherent plot. Roland was troubled by the idea that the opposite might be true. Finding themselves in a plot, they might suppose it appropriate to behave as though it was that sort of plot. And that would be to compromise some kind of integrity they had set out with. (*PS* 456)

Once again, Byatt's characters examine the issue of sympathy with the past and the attempts to recreate it. But here, especially with her modern character, he is much more wary of creating such a connection or parallel. In some sense, Roland understands that a conscious attempt to believe his relationship with Maud is a parallel of Ash's relationship with LaMotte would "compromise some kind of integrity they had set out with." Roland wants to understand and sympathize with Ash and LaMotte and their experience, but he also realizes that this sympathy need not necessarily double as his own means for identity or his life in any real parallel. His modern-day view is much more conscious of the perils of attempting to create sympathy through recreation than Eliot's characters ever would be. An understanding of the problematic notion of re-creation is vital to Byatt's implication that there are other means of creating sympathy, that is to say through reading and close observation. Roland gauges correctly that reliving a parallel plot to his hero of the past is not the correct means of sympathizing with him. After this realization, the next step is to uncover what a plausible means could be. Here is when Byatt's notion of reading adeptly comes into play: the ability of reading to allow Roland to both sympathize with Ash and also fulfill his search for a vocation.

As the aged Professor Blackadder remembers the old days of learning in his youth, the narrator explains, "But in the best English tradition he did not consider it his business to equip his deficient students with tools they had not got. They must muddle through in a fog of grumble and contempt" (*PS* 30). Interestingly enough, this is exactly what Eliot does in her novel. She presents the reader with the issues of sympathy and identity and then leaves them with no illumination for any sort of resolution to these problems. The narrator sounds humorously self-deprecating in this passage, and this

could be an insight into Byatt's position of how Eliot leaves the reader, and further, her point to allow the reader to find some sort of resolution in her own novel.

At the end of *Possession*, all of Byatt references and repetitions of Eliot's ideas and issues come to a head in her discussion of reading itself. The narrator discusses reading and its ability to create sympathy through intense close-observation:

It is possible for a writer to make, or remake at least, for a reader, the primary pleasures of eating, or drinking, or looking on, or sex. Novels have their obligatory tour-de-force, the green-flecked gold omelettes *aux fines herbes*, melting into buttery formlessness and tasting of summer, or the creamy human haunch, firm and warm, curved back to reveal a hot hollow, a crisping hair or two, the glimpsed sex. They do not habitually elaborate on the equally intense pleasure of reading. (PS 510)

Eliot, Byatt's work is an attempt at a realistic viewpoint, and her effort is exuded in this excerpt. However, the narrator then goes on to further the issue of realism and a connection between fiction and sympathy. The narrator discusses Roland's experience as a reader:

Think of this, as Roland thought of it, rereading *The Garden of Proserpina* for perhaps the twelfth, or maybe even the twentieth, time, a poem he "knew" in the sense that he had already experienced all its words, in their order, and also out of order, in memory, in selective quotation or misquotation—in the sense also, that he could predict, at times even recite, those words that were next to come, or more remotely approaching, the place where his mind rested, like clawed bird feet on a

twig. Think of this—that the writer wrote alone, and the reader read alone, and they were alone with each other. True, the writer may have been alone also with Spenser's golden apples in the *Faerie Queen*, Proserpina's garden, glistening among the place's ashes and cinders, may have seen in his mind's eye, apple of his eye, the golden fruit of the Primavera, may have seen Paradise Lost, in the garden where Eve recalled Pomona and Proserpina. He was alone when he wrote and he was not alone then, all these voices sang, the same words, golden apples, different words in different places, an Irish castle, an unseen cottage, elastic-walled and grey round blind eyes. (PS 511)

Writer and reader are alone together through the medium of the text. This idea is vital to an understanding of what is at stake here: historical distance and time can be surpassed, sympathy can be created successfully, reader can be present, can closely observe the characters in a novel, through the act of reading itself. Further, not only can reader and writer sympathize, but the reader can sympathize with all those other Proserpinas and gardens and apples repeated by the writer in their work. Reading, here, allows for sympathy to be successful. Not only this, but the writer, as well as the reader, are active participants in this creation of sympathy. Once again returning to Byatt's understanding of Eliot's sympathy with both her characters and her audience, the narrator speaks of the intimately personal connection between writer and reader and between reader and text.

Byatt placates those readers left unfulfilled by Eliot's refusal for a decisive, cohesive means for creating sympathy with her idea of the connection between reader and text as the means for this creation. After this assertion, the character Roland then

goes on to literally gain his identity and personal vocation through this act of reading and sympathizing with Ash's text:

Roland read, or reread, *The Golden Apples*, as though the words were living creatures or stones of fire. He saw the tree, the fruit, the fountain, the woman, the grass, the serpent, single and multifarious in form. He heard Ash's voice, certainly his voice, his own unmistakable voice, and he heard the language moving around, weaving its own patterns, beyond the reach of any single human, writer or reader. He heard Vico saying that the first men were poets and the first words were names that were also things, and he heard his own strange, necessary meaningless *lists*, made in Lincoln and saw what they were. He saw too that Christabel was the Muse and Proserpina and that she was not, and this seemed to be so interesting and *apt*, once he had understood it, that he laughed aloud. Ash had started him on this quest and he had found the clue he had started with, and all was cast off, the letters, the letters, Vico, the apples, his list.

(PS 512)

Throughout the novel, Roland has seen his lists that he writes as a useless activity, and has struggled with his identity and his vocation in this world. Rereading Ash, hearing his voice, and sympathizing with the author through the text, Roland finally realizes that he too can become a poet. He successfully finds his own vocation through sympathizing with a past hero, Ash, in ways that other characters like Dorothea had been entirely unable to do so, and the vocation Roland finds is a fitting one. Yet, the only means for Roland to sympathize successfully is through his act of reading. Thus, the act of reading

and of close observation are the means for creating sympathy and as such are the only reasonable ways for a person to discover their vocation by looking at the lives of others.

Conclusion

In *Possession*, Roland Mitchell is finally able to formulate his identity and contrive his vocation through successfully sympathizing with the past. Thus, Byatt illustrates the means for modern-day characters to surpass historical distance through the act of reading, resolving the tension between sympathy and historical distance left to the readers of *Middlemarch*. However, *Possession* does not stand as simply a similarly functioning work as *Middlemarch*, but rather uses the tools Eliot gives the reader and reworks and re-questions them. “It is a richly complicated awareness of the dynamics of sympathy that George Eliot asks us to share,” and Byatt is insistent upon exploring the complexities of this awareness and experimenting in her novel a number of the ways in which the dynamics of sympathy could be put to use for the reader (Thomas 13). As a modern-day reader of Eliot, Byatt is aware of the problem of sympathizing with Eliot’s characters across historical distance. As a novelist, Byatt uses such an awareness in order to experiment with answers and responses to the issues of vocation and identity, as well as sympathy, ultimately using the character of Roland Mitchell to offer up the answer of reading and close observation as the means for transcendence.

Byatt’s assertion of reading as a means for creating sympathy has greater implications for the readers of *Middlemarch* and *Possession*, and in fact for readers of other works of fiction as well. Not only are readers thus able to connect with the characters in the text through their close-reading, but they are also able to connect with the author and use such a sympathetic connection for the creation of their own identity. In this way, an analysis of *Possession* can help us, as readers, better understand

Middlemarch and the issues of sympathy and vocation involved there as well as ourselves and our own identities.

There are, however, still a number of limitations to the success of sympathy across historical distance. It is important to remember that the act of formulating one's vocation by attempting to replicate exactly the life and views of past figures still fails. The reason for this failure is that this attempt is a superficial means and does not lead to the sort of intimacy necessary for the creation of sympathy. The reason reading allows readers to transcend historical distance is the emphasis on close observation, leading the reader to better understand themselves and their fitting vocation, not simply a flat replication of another's. Further, the issues of narrative form and the ever evasive subjectivity inherent in fictive realism still remain in tension with the creation of sympathy. However, although the tension between sympathy and realism exists, it does not mean that it must prevent the creation of sympathy altogether.

Both Eliot and Byatt are deeply invested in the novel as a means for understanding human nature, and strive in their writing to relay this understanding to their readers. To both authors, the purpose of fiction is to explore and further this understanding, yet their modes for representing human nature differ greatly in their fictional discourse. Their notions on detachment and sympathy are crucial elements in the understanding of these differences. Eliot begins in the middle of things, as the title of *Middlemarch* suggests, working through the detailed lives of her various characters in an attempt to understand human nature. The fears of the detachment caused by modernity and her struggles with subjectivity as an author are the underlying reasons for her insistence on close observation; they act as a way for her to root her fiction in reality.

Byatt, on the other hand, begins from the end of things, and works backwards in time in order to formulate an understanding of human nature. In her novel, the fear of detachment from history is diminished, and as the title of *Possession* suggests, in the end her characters are able to possess a connection to the past. Byatt's writing represents a reworking of Eliot's fiction, uncovering new ways for understanding human nature through sympathetic immersion.

While Eliot grapples with the issue of creating sympathy across distance, particularly in her own narrative form, Byatt shows us that while realism as a narrative is still very much a fiction, and in that sense a sort of certain subjective deception, it need not be bereft of true emotion or connection for the reader. Eliot and her contemporaries worried that modernity would lead to an insurmountable detachment and failure of sympathetic connection; Byatt illustrates the modern realization that this need not be so—sympathy and historical distance need not be at such an impasse. Eliot's focus on the quotidian and the everyday as a means for rooting her fiction in reality can also aid the reader in sympathizing with the novel's characters, and it is this connection which Byatt shows us can lead to our own self-understanding of identity. Byatt shows us that as modern-day readers we must not ultimately be left out in the cold detachment created by historical distance, but can create, imagine, and construct new modes of identity and connection between ourselves and others through such an activity.

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