

George Eliot's Classic Pattern of Characterization in *Middlemarch*

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Abstract

George Eliot's complex art of character portrayal has drawn wide-applause. Critics have analyzed her profound and subtle psychological probing into the psyche of her fictional personae, besides drawing their parallelism with actual persons she might have come in contact with. They have also studied the spiritual and ethical solidity or emptiness as well as the moral, mundane, intellectual and transcendental concerns of her characters. To this already adequate and varied studies on Eliot's art of character portrayal I wish to add another dimension, a structural one, which has hitherto escaped critical scrutiny. In the present paper an attempt has been made to show that sometimes Eliot uses, unconsciously though, the structural pattern of classical tragedy in her delineation of some of her chief protagonists. The theoretical critical framework for this presentation has been taken from Francis Ferguson,¹ and the character chosen for analysis is Dorothea Brooke in Eliot's fictional masterpiece, *Middlemarch*.

Keywords- Fiction, Suffering, Structure, Realization

Francis Ferguson has outlined this classical pattern in terms of three "P's."² These three "P's" are 'purpose,' 'passion' and 'perception.' 'Purpose' means the decision taken, the choice made, and the initial deed or a series of deeds performed by the protagonist. 'Passion' is the struggle and suffering undergone by the protagonist as a consequence of this 'purpose.' Suffering leads to the 'perception' of the truth. The element of the ignorance of truth in the choice made by the hero or the inadvertent step taken or deed done by him is implicit in Ferguson's concept of 'purpose.' 'Perception,' leading to the realization of the truth or the initial ignorance, brings in a sense of resignation or acceptance.

The initial step taken or choice made by a character or what Ferguson calls 'purpose' is also the starting point of a conflict which is a sine qua non of any tragic literary composition, be it drama or fiction. The conflict may be between one individual and another, or between an individual and some external forces or between two incompatible forces in the mind of the

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protagonist himself.³ This force is insurmountable, yet the character confronting it shows extraordinary resolution, determination, doggedness and perseverance in continuing his fight with it and in his refusal to compromise, lucid or zirconic. This Contauo Ferguson's 'pn.' The concept of Fate or destiny in Attic drama, with which the protagonist comes in conflict with, either consciously (though unaware of the ensuing consequences) or involuntarily, persisted throughout the ages in Western literature. Only sometimes the label of this force has undergone change. For example, this force was identified with Fortune in medieval literature, with the morally ordered universe in Elizabethan tragedies and with social or political systems, or with psychological forces like heredity or libido in 19th century and 20th century drama and fiction. The confrontation is bound to result in the defeat of the character concerned because the force is, by nature, invincible, insurmountable and almost invariably inscrutable. 'Perception,' which the concluding part of a drama or a novel contains, is the confronting character's realization and perception of the true nature of his eventual reconciliation with and acceptance of it. To make Ferguson's theoretical framework more comprehensive we can add that there is-always a gap between the protagonist's aspirations and his potential or ability to achieve them. His predicament is characterized by his ignorance of this reality about himself. This aspect has been emphasized by units in their study of Ibsen's plays such as Brand, The Master Builder and Rosmersholm.

If we approach George Eliot's *Middlemarch* with reference to the above briefly sketched theoretical framework, we can discern a parallelism between the basic structural pattern of tragic drama and *Middlemarch* in regard to character portrayal. The most significant character who is modeled on this structural pattern is Dorothea Brooke. Brooke's tragedy results from her nourishing aspirations which her present potential and ability are inadequate to fulfill. Here we have the basic tragic pattern of an unbridgeable gap between aspiration and potential to achieve it. Dorothea harbours in her mind 'There a complex,' i.e. a yearning to do good in the world. At the tender age of nineteen, Dorothea is full of noble aspirations and high ideals. The loftily idealistic and honest Dorothea is, in fact, an exceptional and extraordinary girl, whose fate is Cast in a commonplace world. Because of having a great zeal and ardor for lofty aspirations, she is always preoccupied with such searching questions as, 'what can I do?' 'what do?' and 'what could I do?'"⁷ The contrast between 'can' and 'should' is a pointer to the direction in which her character is going to develop, i.e. based on the gap between the incompatibility of ideal and the potential to realise it. She has developed a compulsive philanthropic obsession with a desire of improving the lot of mankind. For example, she plans projects to improve the living standards of the tenants of Sir Chettam's estate.

To the young and immature Dorothea, her life seemed "nothing but a labyrinth of petty courses, a wall-in-maze of small paths that led no whither."⁸ She is in search of a guiding star in her life, who can guide her through the ocean of ignorance Dorothea's yearning for 'some lofty conception of the world'"⁹ and her impetuosity in embracing whatever seems to her to

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have those aspects strikes a discordant resonance in her firm decision to marry the 'great soul' in Casaubon. She believes that "the really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father and could touch you even Hebrew... if you wished if In Casaubon, she believed, there was something "beyond the shallows of ladies' school literature. He was a living Bossuet. He was a modern Augustine who united the glories of doctor and saint."¹² Her ever unquenching thirst for knowledge magnifies the worth of Casaubon. She feels that Casaubon "thinks a whole world of which her thought is but a poor two-penny mirror. And his feelings, too, his whole experience--what a lake compared with my little pool"¹³ Dorothea looks upon Casaubon as an epitome of perfection and as an ocean of knowledge. Dorothea intently hears, absorbs and retains what Casaubon says with "the eager interest of a fresh young nature to which every variety of experience is an epoch."¹⁴ The 'reverential gratitude' with which she looked up to in 'Bossuet' and 'Pascal' is the consequence of her own unquenchable thirst for knowledge which would enable her to "learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it." She thinks that the province of masculine knowledge would be a standing ground, a threshold from which all truth could be seen clearly. She feels that her marital alliance with Casaubon "would deliver her from her girlish subjection to crown ignorance and give her the freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest path."¹⁶ The very thought that Casaubon made her feel that her "whole soul was possessed by the fact that a fuller life was opening before her. She was a neophyte about to enter on a higher grade of initiation. She was going to have room for the energies which stirred uneasily under the dimness and pressure of her own ignorance and the petty peremptoriness of the world's habits."¹⁷

Eliot's use of the classical structural pattern of tragedy is amply evidenced here. The tragic protagonist, at Ferguson's state of 'purpose,' makes a choice or takes a decision after convincing or self-deceiving himself into believing in the validity of the choice based on exclusiveness, logical analysis, and firmness. This attitude of the protagonist makes him blind to and skeptical of all other possibilities Marlowe's Faustus, Ibsen's Brand and Rosmer are the examples of this, which come to our minds readily.

In *Middlemarch* we see that Dorothea is so firm in her convictions that, despite the timely warnings of her uncle and other well wishers, she marries Casaubon who is seven and twenty' years older than her. Her decision to marry him equally vexes her sister, and Mrs. Cadwallader who envisions Casaubon as "no better than a mummy"¹⁸ and strongly feels that he is a 'great bladder for dried pear to rattle in.'¹⁹ Finally, Casaubon with 'one foot in the grave'²⁰ marries Dorothea. Thus because of her hamartia which is an excessive romanticism, a more realistic aspiration, she defies the practical sagacity and wisdom of her own people. Celia is provoked into a sisterly accusation at the short-sightedness of Dorothea. She says to her, "you always see what nobody else sees..., yet you never see what is quite plain."²¹ Dorothea sees people in the narrow world about her through rose coloured glasses. She looks

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before her but does not consciously see what is there, for she insists upon seeing with her mind's eye what she has imaginatively constructed.

But it is not long that her 'purpose' gives birth to her 'passion.' Her 'passion' works out in her complicated nature of suffering. Her sensitive being comes to realize the existence of things as they are in relation to as they ought to be. She comes to the belated realization that "the large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamt of finding in her husband's mind were, 'n reality, only anterooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhere."²² David Carroll has aptly observed that "her quixotic idealism is shattered on their honeymoon when Rome, the Key to European civilization, simply becomes the backcloth to marital disappointment and disagreement."²³ It is here that she comes to perceive that Casaubon is a prig, an arid pedant and a wooden character, incapable of love and mutual understanding. Casaubon, too, is bitterly disappointed by his marital life, and seeks escape in malicious jealousy, aroused by his suspicion regarding Dorothea's relationship with his cousin Ladislaw. He provides in his will that if his wife, after widowhood, marries Ladislaw, she would lose right to his property. Thus, the very pillar of faith on which the foundation of marriage is erected crumbles. However, Henry James has remarked that 'the impression once given that Casaubon is a dilettante is never properly removed, and there is slender poetic justice in Dorothea's marrying a dilettante.'²⁴ In the world of Eliot, character is destiny, hence Dorothea, who, despite all opposition, made her own choice of Casaubon, must face the music. In fairness to Eliot's artistic integrity, it can be argued that Dorothea's choice was made after careful and convincingly valid analysis of the causes of other decisions. In such a situation the charge of poetic justice meted out to her is not wholly correct. When a resolution follows firm conviction, based on objective assessment of situation, however subjectively rooted it may be, the pang of self-responsibility loses its retributive sting and is in consonance with a tragic perception when the painstakingly edifice of the desired fructification of an ideal falls through. Dorothea, through undergoing suffering, does not only recognize the true worth of Casaubon, but also develops an altogether changed perception on her assessment of everything connected with Casaubon: "The very furniture in the room seemed to have shrunk since she saw it before... The earlier heights where she expected to walk in full communion had become difficult to see even in her imagination."²⁵

The first stirring of a pitying tenderness, at the revelation of the pedantry of Casaubon and the hollowness of his scholarly pursuits, brings out one of George Eliot's well-known ruminations:

We all are of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to teed our supreme selves: Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it has been easier to her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr Casaubon. and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling—an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of

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objects that he had an equivalent center of self, whence the tights and shadows must always fall With a certain difference.²⁶

In order to forget Casaubon, she indulged herself in working out diverse philanthropic projects: Even after Casaubon is dead, she does not recognize the needs of the flesh, and thus shows her attempt to transcend the reality of mundane living. But when she 'S confronted with Ladislaw's flirting with Rosamund, a sort of reversal takes place. She discovers her own attraction towards him. This newly awakened or belatedly realised feeling in confronting Ferguson's theoretical point of view will now act as a new 'purpose.' But this time the purpose relates to a woman who is liberated from the cell of her ego and is transformed into a being for others' welfare and happiness. The stage of 'passion,' therefore, is brief and the conflict and struggle almost negligible. She rises above her selfish concerns and decides to save the life of the three— Ladislaw, Rosamund and her husband Lydgate. He succeeds eventually in her new resolve to "clutch my own pain and compel into silence and think of those three." She now starts realizing the sufferings of others, and resolves to help them out.

It is relevant to point out that in spite of Casaubon's indifferent attitude she had remained faithful in her wifely devotions. She did pity her husband's "lonely labour," "ambition breathing hardly under the pressure of self-distrust," his "goal receding and the sword of death visibly trembling over him."²⁷ It is only when Casaubon suspects the integrity of her character that her hurt ego is forced to assert itself. Through undergoing the misery and torture of broken-heartedness she has finally came to have a sense of relatedness with his other co-sufferers. Searching for meaning in life she comes to the realization: "what do we live for if it is not to make life less difficult to each other."²⁸ Dorothea "had waked to a new condition: she felt as if her soul had been liberated from its terrible conflict,"²⁹ and hence she indulges into the act of making life less difficult for others. While the personal sorrows get mingled with common miseries, Dorothea attains a humanitarian vision of where the microcosmic merges with the macrocosmic whole and identifies its related with the macrocosm. In this way Dorothea's Bildungsroman, i.e. "the ritual of initiation into a higher form of being" is now complete. Her realization of fellow feelings brings out not only psychological but also a spiritual transformation. She could now identify herself with "the largeness of the world and the manifold workings of men to labour and endurance she was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining."³¹ Thus, we see that the shaping and development of Dorothea's personality and character are artistically manipulated by Eliot through the dramatic structural technique of 'purpose', 'passion', and 'perception', discussed by Ferguson in his book referred to above. `

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