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Middlemarch: Dramatizing Psychological Dynamics of Bodies and Surroundings

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Abstract

Middlemarch (1872), novel by George Eliot projects weather, atmosphere, landscape, architecture, and other environmental elements. These environmental elements in the novel construct shape and participate in plot and significantly are functioning as dynamic participants in it affecting the lives of inhabitants of *Middlemarch* in the background. Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* under this study, exhibits a defining role between characters and their environments at the center instead of the periphery. As a literary text, *Middlemarch* represents literal exchanges and interactions between bodies and their material surroundings. In Eliot's *Middlemarch*, descriptions of weather, landscape, and atmospherics significantly dramatize psychological projection on the characters and their actions in the plot in contact with their surroundings. The denotative, literal function of ambient description works as a characterizing force in the text. This study examines the role of ambient description as author's tool because it dramatizes psychological dynamics, as well as literal, material interactions between physical bodies and their surroundings. This study illuminates the notion how Victorian novelists especially George Eliot used the description of physical surroundings as a means of medium to establish debates of mutual effects on one another in context of organism-environment interaction.

***Keywords**: psychology, environment, medium, atmosphere, landscape and bodies*

Introduction

Nineteenth-century novelists dealt description as a tool to dramatize the interactions between individuals and their environments. Having influences by scientific works of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's *Philosophie zoologique* (1809), Auguste Comte's *System of Positive Polity* (1851), G.H. Lewes' *The Physiology of Common Life* (1860), and Herbert Spencer's *Social Statics* (1851), Nineteenth Century writers knew techniques to portray the human relationship with its physical environment as a relationship that complicate and interact with plot. *Middlemarch (1872)* by George Eliot is a mastery exception in Victorian literary texts that shows

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that Eliot employs environmental concept—"correspondence," "medium," "environment," and "circumstance," respectively—in her extra narration to dramatize psychological dynamics of bodies and surroundings which are affected and interrogated by these environmental concepts. Eliot's evocative description of weather and landscapes reveals the ways in which she understood the environment or "medium" as a powerful force that mediates both sexual and social affect comprising human psychology. In *Middlemarch,* weather and atmospherics act as an ambient medium that facilitates sympathetic connection between characters, offering an alternative to the identification and abstraction-based theories of sympathy that dominate criticism of the Victorian novel.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

Comte defines biological life in his book *Principles of Psychology (1855)* as "the continuous adjustment of internal relations to external relations" (Comte, p. 374). Lewes called it, the "medium"—as benign and supportive, rather than solely deterministic, and to reimagine it as something dynamically involved in all life and development, even on the scaled-down level of the individual life span. From Comte's "milieu" to Lewes's "medium," from Lyell's "circumstances" to Darwin's "conditions of life" to Spencer's "environment,", George Eliot frequently referred to the circumambient social world of her characters as a "medium,". Robert Louis Stevenson would define romance as "the poetry of circumstance," identifying the individual's relationship with the physical world as the genre's defining object of concern (Stevenson, p. 250). As Lewes asserts in a paraphrase of Martineau's translation of Comte in 1852, that organism and medium are the two correlative ideas of life (Stevenson, p. 666). Eliot uses the term "medium" in *Middlemarch* because she conjures an organic sense of physical surrounding. The term "environment" in contemporary usage tends to conjure either a sense of physical surroundings as deterministic pressure, or else as a vulnerable object requiring protection. Victorian writers envision the physical environment as an object of desire, as a medium of perception and communication, or as a limiting constraint that enabled creativity. According to Edmund Yates registered in an 1880 article entitled "Description in Novels", the conviction is gaining ground that man is not separated from his surroundings: he is part and parcel of the world he lives in a more intimate sense than the ancients appear to have imagined;

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and to separate him therefrom would be tantamount to depriving him of his best chance of being understood" (Yates, p. 607).

Literature Review

Landmark study *The Prose of Things* by Cynthia Wall (2007) locates in the eighteenth-century novel the earliest efforts to capture what we now call "setting," attributing the development of novelistic description to the rise of commodity culture and the emergence of new visual technologies. As Wall notes, eighteenth century fiction describes 'things' only whereas its nineteenth-century counterpart presents us with settings and visualized spaces (Wall, p. 1). In the Victorian novel, we see something closer to what might be called "atmosphere"—not just individual objects but a sense that the physical spaces between bodies and objects is full rather than empty, suffused with detail and substance rather than an airless vacuum. For Alison Byerly (2013), the nineteenth-century novel seems to spawn an almost physical sense of presence within the fictional world, a sense of presence for Victorian writers' ability to create "a multisensory environment, that extends the participant's own sensory participation so as to minimize the sense of boundary between self and environment" (Byerly, p. 13).

Advent of industrial revolution and urbanization led British writers to project the physical world for the first time as something alien and alienable from human life and society, even as it was influenced and shaped by human activities and industry more visibly than ever before. As Jonathan Bate (1996) asserts that the alienation of city-dwelling as a social context provoked writers to use term 'environment' in a social context as an increasing awareness of industry's tendency to alter the quality of our surroundings, even to influence the air we breathe. The word 'environment' emerged as a sign of that difference (Bate, p. 431).

Hatice Yurttaş (2017) in her essay "A Desire in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*" asserts that the female protagonists, in opposition with their environment, have to compromise with their dwellings because their desires can never be fulfilled within the exhibited conditions. While marriage and love can be depicted as pessimistic as that of Rosamond and Lydgate's in Middlemarch, there is also the implication that certain characters of a certain bent are more deserving of marital bliss as much as it can be gained in society as such (Yurttas, p. 131).

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George Eliot's Art and *Middlemarch*

Eliot's description as an art annexes and fuses seamlessly to her fiction's narrative and psychological pull that to call the content of her descriptions "natural" in any ecological sense seems willfully perverse. Her descriptive passages focusing on plants, trees, or landscape are ostentatiously filtered through individual or cultural consciousness that it seems more accurate to read them as representations of consciousness for which the content of the representation is relatively arbitrary. The clash of the physical worlds with their characters in Eliot works dramatize the relationship between physical life and the material fabrics and substances that support and interact with it that take a psychological turn. George Eliot expressed a similar conviction in an 1868 letter, asserting as the habit of her imagination to strive after as full a vision of the medium in which a character moves as of the character itself. To the advent of a conception of environmental phenomena as both in dynamic flux and intimately tied to the life of the individual, Eliot in her fictional works responded with a newfound sense that the described backgrounds of the novel—phenomena like landscape, weather, and atmosphere—were no less vital to the unfolding of narrative than character or psychology.

Eliot's description of the environs of Dorothea and Lydgate are less a collection of discrete visual details than a multisensory evocation of an ambient surround that strains towards a condition of total immersion with that surround, a merging of the narrating self with the very "moistness" of a surrounding environment. This sense of the individual's relationship with a described environment as a relationship of immediate, sensory immersion is palpable at the conclusion of *Middlemarch*, when Dorothea's epiphany of the landscape outside her window leads her to press beyond the visual towards a similarly immersive intimacy with the ambient world where the largeness of the world is felt and the narrator tells about her as a part of that involuntary palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining (Eliot, p. 788). This immersive quality of a described world was considered as environmental immediacy of its own aesthetic category as immersive, dynamic, multi-sensory environments in which both reader and character are immersed. This multisensory immersiveness is Eliot's art that was generated by a descriptive apparatus that imagines the novel's action occurring in a totalized physical surround. Sense of psychological or

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symbolic over determination is an aspect of Eliotic description that critics have frequently remarked upon, both positively and skeptically.

Eliot used frequently the idea of a "medium" in which individuals move and live. The fluid atmospheres of Middlemarch act as an ambient medium that is more communicative and complicates the environmentally-constricted model of agency outlined in the narrator's aphoristic discourse in the novel's final chapter. Instead, it moves towards a model of interpersonal sympathy that is predicated on an awareness of a shared medium or environment. Eliot's descriptive practice is significant, both in its emphasis on the idea of a biological-sounding "life" as the goal of her representational aims, and especially in its insistence on the link between the static detail of description and the dynamic development of plot.

Analysis and Discussion

Middlemarch and Dynamics of Bodies and Surroundings

Eliot's *Middlemarch* as a study contains environmental description as a central role which shapes a fictional world as the creation of a described environment as the newfound emphasis in the mid-century sciences on the environment. Influenced by the theories of organism-environment interaction propounded by Comte and Spencer, Eliot's art is conjoining emotion with description works against the determinism associated with these positivist accounts by imagining characters' interactions with their environments in an affective, rather than a strictly causal, register. In *Middlemarch,* Eliot uses the descriptive representation of environment to reimagine the novel's central emotional categories, imagining environments that act alternately as objects around which emotion constellates or as conduits through which it travels. In *Middlemarch*, Eliot imagines a model of sympathy in which the recognition of a shared environment or "medium" plays a central role in the individual's ability to sympathize with another; an environment acts as a communicative medium for sympathetic connection. The most basic point of kinship between humans and other living things is, for Eliot, their dependence on a supporting environment—"the planetary organism" upon which human habitations look like barnacles, and which makes us aligned with environmental elements like building, burrowing house appropriating and shell-secreting" beings; beings that live by managing the boundary

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between the body and what lies outside it. For her, man is regarded as parasitic in front of huge limbs of Mother Earth (Eliot, pp. 241-42).

Eliot's detailed descriptions of the natural landscapes and small towns of the southwest coasts of England translate social and cultural existence into biological terms, re-naturalizing human habitations as an outgrowth of landscape, and comically reducing human existence to the level of invertebrate life. For Elaine Freedgood (2006), *Middlemarch* exhibits a surprising absence of objects that are "just there," as details of descriptions of domestic interiors—that nestle in the descriptive prose only to usher the observance of a fictional world without a symbolic or metaphoric plane. The objects that do appear—Dorothea's "poor dress," a pier-glass, a set of emeralds—are so over-freighted with symbolic meaning that they strain away from literal description and towards interpretation (Freedgood, p. 114). Freedgood identifies Eliot's treatment of objects and detail as the inauguration of a wider trend in realist fiction after 1870 in which "the distribution and therefore the interpretation of novelistic things in literary fiction becomes... less and less metonymic and contingent, and more and more metaphoric and apparently necessary" (p. 116).

Environmental Constraints and *Middlemarch*

Middlemarch is replete with the word 'medium' and Eliot frequently uses the word "medium" to convey an agonistic relationship between an aspiring or desiring protagonist and a constraining social environment. Thus, in an early chapter, Dorothea seems suffering with passionate desire of knowing and to think, which in the unfriendly mediums of Tipton and Freshitt resulted in crying and red eyelids (Eliot, p. 36). Coerced by Bulstrode into voting for Mr. Tyke against his better judgment, Lydgate likewise resents the medium of *Middlemarch* as a strength for him which proves petty (p. 175). Both of these instances designate an inhospitable milieu in which the self struggles to find traction for its desires and ambitions. Such positive instances of *Middlemarch*'s "media" appear most frequently in scenes where characters from the novel's multiple plot-lines momentarily cross paths, forging intense yet fleeting connections with people from outside of their immediate social universes.

The first convergence of Dorothea and Lydgate's plot lines during the first onset of Casaubon's illness, the two characters, barely acquainted, share an important moment of

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wordless, mutual understanding. Although the vaguely specified "medium" here is no less muddied and "embroiled" than in the earlier passages, it also harbors flickers of "life," and enables the transmission of feeling between individuals who would otherwise find one another opaque. While Dorothea and Lydgate's sympathetic connection is predicated in part on their "kindred natures," the narrator places much greater emphasis here on their "consciousness" of "the same embroiled medium" in which they move. The similitude that enables their sympathy is less the similitude of their natures, or their ability to imaginatively identify with one other's admittedly very different internal states, than their recognition of a shared medium that imposes different hardships on both of them but also links them together in a common world.

As J. Hillis Miller (1975) notes in his classic essay on *Middlemarch's* dominant metaphors, the novel's processes of figuration develop to describe the subjective life of the individual, the relations of two persons within the social 'medium,' and the nature of that medium operates (Miller, p. 132). The novel's dominant metaphors, he points out, imagine the world of The novel and everything it includes as temporally deployed material complex—'a labyrinth', or flowing water, or a fabric, all of which work to imply that "a society is in some way like a material field" characterized by a "strict homogeneity between the large-scale and the small-scale grain or texture of things" (p. 129). The wide-ranging similitude implied by a society that can be compared to continuous, homogeneous "material complex" is difficult to reconcile with the strenuous negotiation of difference that is at the heart of Eliot's representations of sympathy, a negotiation that Eliot's narrators so often insist is no easy thing.

An interest in the ability of milieu to accommodate difference is visible in Eliot's persistent emphasis on the media that surround characters—weather, physical landscape or more abstracted or figurative atmospherics—in scenes where characters from *Middlemarch*'s different plot-lines meet for the first time. The atmosphere-suffused scenes between Lydgate and Casaubon, and between Dorothea and Lydgate, discussed above are both scenes of first meeting between their respective characters, indicating a connection between heightened atmospherics and the mechanics of the multi-plot novel. This connection between fluid media and multiplottedness is further enhanced by the narrator's striking description of the scene, in the opening pages of Book IV, in which the lonely Dorothea views Featherstone's funeral from afar,

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seeing for the first time the motley group of Middlemarchers with whom her story is to become entangled like a morning of May of burial of Peter Featherstone when a chill wind was blowing and locality of Middlemarch where month of May was not frequently warm and sunny and the green mounds of Lowick churchyard where the visible things were remarkably different, for there was a little crowd waiting to see the funeral (Eliot, p. 303).

The shifting sky and landscape here emphasize the material linking together of variety, providing a topography of dynamic, boundary-crossing flows. The limits of individual property are rendered permeable by the wind blowing, a motion that suggests both the erasure of individual boundaries, as well as a complex weaving together of social and biological life, as the garden and the churchyard bleed into one another. The airy medium of May air is a living, shifting atmosphere that links discrete locales and individuals, resisting confinement to any local or individual perspective. The vantage point actually belongs to Dorothea, who views the scene from an upper window of Lowick. The scene marks an important moment in Dorothea's developing sense of her relation to an outside world in that it is her first moment of visual contact with the world of *Middlemarch* and its plots. The scene does remain with her psychologically, though, as the site of a dawning awareness that she exists in a multi-plot novel. The narrator strangely characterizes the effects of the scene on Dorothea's dawning awareness of her proximity to and potential involvement in other people's lives by comparing it to the effect of vistas of landscape on perception and emotion. For her these scenes which make vital changes in our neighbors' lot are but the background of our own. They are turned as associated for us with the epochs of our own history, and create a part of that unity which lies in our consciousness (p. 306). Eliot's superimposition of natural landscape onto an image of social relations collapses culture into nature, figuring the lives that unfold around our own as a natural environment or ecosystem. It also strangely substitutes the image of a pastoral landscape devoid of human figures working as an "aspect of the fields and trees" for the more specifically-described vista of the cemetery, the overarching sky, and the human figures that populate it. This elision of the distinction between natural and social environments works to suggest that responsiveness to material surroundings, including even such seemingly neutral phenomena as weather, constitutes a first step, a kind of ground tone, to the establishment of sympathy with other minds.

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Narrative Techniques and Projection of Environment as Medium

The unusual proleptic narration takes seemingly fleeting moments of interpersonal perception and elevates them above the temporal flow of plot, marking them as epochal events possessing a surplus of symbolic or affective significance that far exceeds their minimal function as narrative causes or effects. That these affectively-charged moments always involve a turn, not only towards another person or people, but also towards a physical environment, whether abstract in form of an "embroiled medium" or concrete as the "particular aspect of the fields and trees" to which the narrator compares the funeral scene. This indicates the extent to which responsiveness to environmental conditions figures in Eliot's understanding of the sympathetic connection that elevates momentary experience above the transient flow of everyday life.

*Middlemarch'*s descriptive techniques suggest a relationship to physical surroundings that do not correlate to ties of individual ownership or property, and which, moreover, is not in a dual relationship between a single individual and a landscape, but rather a relationship with multiple lines of connection, involving other individuals as well. Kevin Morrison (2011) has argued that *Middlemarch's* landscape description evokes a "dynamic of exchange between mind and landscape" that serves to create affective ties of affiliation for individuals with no indigenous, physical connection to a local community (Morrison, p. 319). In this sense, Eliot's evocation of a manifold bond between self, landscape, and other selves is structurally similar to the modern environmental sensibility that, in Harriet Ritvo's argument, became visible in Victorian Britain in which a collective indistinct new sense of possession arose that was distinguished by a sense that citizens of any nation should have some say in the constitution of prominent landscapes even if they held no formal title to the property in question (Ritvo, p. 4).

Eliot's use of environmental and atmospheric description to generate a sense of multiple relatedness is nowhere more evident than in her deployment of such description to coordinate *Middlemarch's* multiple plots. Eliot's narration of the scenes in which the novel shifts from one plot to another—particularly in the opening scenes of each book—frequently relies on invocations of the three-dimensionality of novelistic space through descriptions of weather and environmental conditions. The opening sentence of Book XI enacts a careful spatial and temporal coordination of Dorothea's and Raffles's plots by situating them within the shared

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medium of weather. Projecting weather in form of 'delightful morning' and Dorothea's abode at Lowick Manor is referring back to an environmental irony the narrator notes in the previous chapter, in which the undesirable presence of Raffles is discordantly welcomed by the exuberant beauty of Stone Court's environs. Although Eliot introduces the environmental conditions of Stone Court as a simple irony based on an inverted pathetic fallacy, her reference to it at the opening of Book Six takes on a more expansive significance. Writing about weather in Romantic poetry, Jonathan Bate (1996) claims that poetic weather works as both a mnemonic and an ecologic mean that works as prime means of linking spatiality and temporality (Bate, p. 444). This is no less true of novelistic weather, which in Eliot's hands works not only as a metaphoric means of reflecting characters' moods and feelings, but also as denotative evidence of multiple characters' spatial and temporal cohabitation of a specific place and time. In this passage, weather helps to coordinate Dorothea's and Bulstrode's plots temporally, as well as to create a spatialized sense of a common universe, a common air, in which the novel's multiple plots progress and converge. Whereas in earlier scenes of atmospheric connection, the differences mediated by an environment are often chiefly ethical (the gap between self and other, writ large), in this moment of plot-transition Eliot's narrator develops the capacities of atmospheric connection to bridge the grittier, more material particularities of sociological difference as well, subtly flagging Raffles's lower-class status by implying that he is decidedly not a "guest worthy of the finest incense." By choosing the language of diffusion and odors, the narrator knowingly erodes such distinctions, underlining the extent to which atmospheric scents, whether of hay or of incense, is spatially uncontainable and pervasive. Symbolically reserved for sacred purposes though incense may be, its diffusive physical properties defy efforts to confine it to sacred spaces or recipients. If Eliot's atmospherics in the single-plot The Mill on the Floss tend often to envelop and isolate characters such as Maggie and Stephen in clouds of desire, Middlemarch's multiplottedness means that atmospheres more frequently push "impartially" against such isolation, linking characters who don't necessarily wish to be linked and providing a tissue of connection that coordinates and contains multiple plots.

The connection between environmental description and the linking of characters belonging to different social classes is nowhere more evident than in the scene where Mr. Brooke

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confronts his tenant Dagley, a scene that contains both the narrator's most self-conscious reflections on her descriptive practices, as well as one of the novel's most painfully awkward scenes of cross-class contact. As in the funeral scene discussed above, the narrator turns to the language of visual tableau as a way of invoking the fine ethical distinction between recognizing and failing to recognize as real the other lives that hover in the background of our own. But whereas for Dorothea, the scene of her Middlemarch neighbors under a windy sky remains embedded in her mind as an intimation of the entwinement of her own plot with these of other characters, in this scene, Eliot's narrator explicitly warns of the tendency of such tableaux to have the opposite effect, by reifying other characters into picturesque works of art and placing them on the other side of an ontological distinction drawn between art and life rather than breathers of a common air. The narrator makes this point by describing Freeman's End with a visual specificity that many of her other descriptions in *Middlemarch* lack like the old house, dormer windows, choked chimneys, the blocked porch, mouldering garden, an aged goat, and all these objects under the quiet light of a high marbled clouds sky would have made a sort of picture which we have all paused over. (Eliot, p. 394)

Cataloging a list of discrete details that together compose the image of Freeman's End, narrator creates the most detailed description of any building, home, or landscape in Eliot's entire novel. This passage as an obstruction suggests that visuals of the description signify moral failure. Here, the sharp focus of the description privileges the visual over other senses, and reduces environmental cues that might otherwise form a medium of connection between viewer and object to static, represented surface.

Conclusion

As the concluding part of the study, this contrast between descriptions of the Featherstone funeral and Freeman's End suggests is a paradox in Eliot art of writing whereby aesthetic focus—directly and intently looking at or considering a person or object as the subject of an artwork—is somehow less productive of ethical recognition than is the vague awareness of other people as shadowy presences inhabiting the background of one's own, very real, world. If aesthetic focus is produced by detailed visual description, the auratic perception that draws no

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sharp ontological line between the real and the virtual is produced, in *Middlemarch*, by the evocation of a dynamic atmosphere that, however lightly, presses in upon the senses a feeling of one's own material continuity with the bodies of others, whether real or fictional. This sensation of multiplottedness, as said earlier, thrives on details that record the contact or interactions between a body and a shared environment. Thus the antidote Eliot's narrator offers to the illusory, picturesque description of the cottage is a set of details that replace the descriptions "quiet light of a sky marbled with high clouds" with a chastening sense of meteorological conditions as an ambient force that must be continually contended with. Dorothea, too, protests her uncle's disregard of the reality of his tenants' poverty by mobilizing the language of vague physical sensation against picturesque visual detail. In the novel's final pages, Eliot takes the biological idiom of the medium in which her characters live and extends it to her readers in such a manner as to further erode the boundaries between the novel's intra- and extradiegetic space. The narrator positions the reader in direct relation to Dorothea using the atmospheric language of diffusion and immersion. Yet Eliot's narrator compensates for this evaporated medium by employing a language of atmospheric surround that encompasses both Dorothea and a newly introduced "we". Situating reader and narrator in a common world with Dorothea, Eliot envisions her readers as the preparers of a new medium in which Dorothea and those like her will enact their struggles. Two sentences later, this relationship is inverted, and Dorothea is now the diffusive benefactor of "you and me." Averring that Dorothea's spirit that had still its fine issues, the narrator ends with a phrase that the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistorical acts (Middlemarch, p. 785). If this passage begins with a pessimistic statement about the determination of all creatures (Dorothea included) by external environments and "media," it nevertheless restores a version of historical agency by subsequently positioning Dorothea as an influential factor in other individuals' environments. The narrator's sleight of hand inverts figure and ground, organism and environment, so that the determined entity is now presented as a determining factor. Spirit, fine issues, incalculable diffusion: the atmospheric evanescence of Eliot's language at the novel's close progressively effaces the boundary between inside and

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outside, text and reader, fiction and reality. The sympathetic relay between Dorothea and "us" is dependent on a diffusion or suspension of fictional boundaries.

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