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Middlemarch: Eliot's Spencerian Sociological Study of Provincial Life

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of Arts and Humanities

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Kellie M. McKinney

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Abstract

Through the novel *Middlemarch*, George Eliot fulfills the intention of her subtitle and uses sociological theories to conduct *A Study of Provincial Life*. Eliot's letters, journals, and various essays provide evidence of sociologist Herbert Spencer's influence on her own writings. Spencer's specific opinions and contributions not only strengthen the sociological message of Eliot's novel, but a handful of his ideals shape the narrative voice of her novel. Variations of Spencer's theories are seen in Eliot's "authorial narrator's" comments and observations of the *Middlemarch* couples. With her narrator, Eliot applies Spencer's theories on "belief" and on the correlation of an individual's worldview to his or her society. Furthermore, Eliot creates an emotionally-based connection between her narrator and her readers which allows her to lead her audience through her sociological study and ensures her authorial narrator's voice provides reliable expertise on the provincial life of *Middlemarch*.

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Introduction

For England, the Victorian era is often noted as a time of change. New industrial, philosophical, and scientific concepts were rapidly being introduced. As a result, Victorian writers, philosophers, and scientists began discussing these new theories with one another as well as developing them in their own writings. Novelists too began to incorporate new narrative conventions to reflect their society's changing beliefs. Robyn Warhol discusses these changes in her *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel*. She notes the Victorian novelists' tendency to reflect the "real world," becoming "realist novelists [who] often tried to make genuine changes" through their works (Warhol xii). This aspiration to reflect the "real world" in fiction led to the exploration and incorporation of new theories in order to ensure that novels accurately depicted reality. George Eliot's *Middlemarch* not only reflects the "real world" of a provincial town in Victorian England, but her narrative structure also uses pieces of new sociological theories in order to successfully help her readers to a larger understanding of this "real world."¹

Eliot primarily was introduced and exposed to concepts of sociology through her acquaintance with Herbert Spencer. Sociology was a new science carried over from France and published in England's journals. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, sociology is "the study of the development, structure, and functioning of human society." Not only was Eliot exposed to this new philosophical and scientific concept through

published papers, but also through the fellow writers to whom she was intellectually close with. This new scientific term was used by her friend, Herbert Spencer, as well as frequently noted in papers such as *The Westminster Review*, *The Fortnightly Review*, *Fraser's Magazine*, and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. The *OED* believes the term was first introduced to England, published anonymously, by the 1842 issue of *Fraser's Magazine*. Although this was its first notation in England, it was first coined by French essayist, Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès (1748-1836). Later, the French Philosopher Auguste Comte (1798-1857) used the term to introduce his sociological theory of positivism to England. Soon after Comte's work uses the term, individuals like Spencer continued the conversation of sociology throughout England and Eliot, as a novelist, read all that was written about this new science.

While sociology's link to literature has been retrospectively noted in recent literary theory by individuals such as Raymond Williams and James F. English, studies of sociology only began in England at this time. Therefore, clarifying what I mean by sociological study as well as its importance for Eliot's use of the various aspects of both is vital to understanding the narrative structure of *Middlemarch*. In his *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams states that the term sociological "has two senses: a reference to the forms of this science [sociology], and a looser and more general reference (in which it often replaces *social*) to some social fact or tendency (cf. 'sociological factors'...)" (Williams 232). I will often later use the term "sociological study" when referring to any "social fact or tendency" of Eliot, her narrator, or her

characters. Most importantly, I use these terms to signify any one statement in relation to the concepts of Eliot's study of sociology in *Middlemarch*.

Since Eliot remained close friends with Spencer, there is strong evidence that his works on sociology directly influence the third-person narrative of her novel. The letters between Eliot and Spencer have disappeared, but proof of Eliot's exposure to Spencer's theories is found in her letters and journals, in the journals of her partner, George Henry Lewes, and in Gordon Haight's biography of Eliot. According to Haight, Eliot and Spencer were introduced in August 1851; soon after their friendship blossomed into what many believed to be the start of a romance (112). Although there was a rumored engagement, the couple only remained friends. Despite the loss of their letters, other sources such as Eliot's, Spencer's, and Lewes' journals mention Eliot's constant correspondence with Spencer. These secondary sources provide evidence that show how Spencer's sociological works influenced her sociological ideals. I will argue that Spencer not only provided Eliot with sociologically-based imagery, but that Eliot often agreed with his ideals, developing them into her own theories which are mirrored by her narrator's authorial voice. While almost all her novels can be connected to sociological ideals, I believe *Middlemarch's* full title makes it the strongest example.

Eliot's chosen title, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, is a focus for many. Yet when critics praise her for her "Study of Provincial Life," they rarely clarify the type of study she creates. The definitions of "province" and "provincial" clarify the purpose of Eliot's subtitle along with help define her study as sociological. According to the OED, the more literal meaning of province is "British colonies" situated in country-sides, which

were “distinguished from the capital,” separate from the “chief seat of government.” The second and most important definition is easily applied to Eliot’s above purpose. It refers to the “provincial” characters of individuals who may reside in these provinces as “parochial” or “narrow-minded.” Eliot uses her narrator’s commentary to observe the “narrow-minded” tendencies of her characters in order to study how they are shaped by the provincial society in which they are raised. The title not only hints at Eliot’s purpose but when it is paired with Spencer’s written contributions to nineteenth-century sociology, it becomes evident that Eliot intended her novel to be a *sociological* “Study” of a “Provincial” town.

Unfortunately, the current relationship between sociology and literature has been pushed aside in favor of theories that have branched off of sociology. Psychology often developed and still constructs their ideals out of sociological concepts. As a result, novels such as *Middlemarch* are often only viewed from a psychoanalytic perspective. Despite the benefits of this approach, I have found little that attempts to recognize the original effects Spencer had on Eliot’s *Middlemarch*. Few refer to sociological works like Spencer’s to explore how the psychology of Eliot’s characters ties to the society around them. More often than not, sociology is only briefly mentioned. In the article, “Everywhere and Nowhere: The Sociology of Literature After ‘The Sociology of Literature,’” James F. English addresses the diminishing discussion on the sociology of literature within literary studies. He states,

We have now passed beyond the whole question of accepting or rejecting the sociology of literature. There are so many intersections and openings, so many parallel projects of research, so many forms of literary study that

rely on sociological thought...that the real question today is not whether or even why but how. (English xx)

The same question can be applied to Eliot's integration of "sociological thought" within this novel. Simply saying that Eliot meant her novel to be *A Study of Provincial Life* is not enough to prove this theory true. Showing *how* Eliot accomplishes this is key to proving the above argument. Yet, this is not to say that none address Eliot's sociological thought within the novel through their focus on the many intersecting theories that overlap with society. The connection these various studies tend to overlook is how Eliot's heterodiegetic narrator uses her Spencerian sociological theories in order to guide readers to change their "own notions of their moral and social selves" (Warhol xii).²

A rich discussion about the narrator's purpose in *Middlemarch's* also exists. Critics who focus on her narrative structure often equate Eliot's experiences and personal self with the opinions, beliefs, and values of her "authorial narrator."³ Feminist writers like Elaine Showalter and Virginia Woolf have claimed that Eliot successfully creates realism in this novel by writing characters from her own experiences. Showalter refers to Woolf's opinions along with her own in her article, "The Greening of Sister George." She responds to Woolf's belief that there were "traces of that troubled spirit, that exacting and questioning and baffled presence who was George Eliot herself" (Showalter 297). Woolf and Showalter are not the only two who parallel Eliot's personal life to the perspectives in her novel. Others such as Edward Dowden praise her for exposing inner psyches through "the spectacle of human joy and human sorrow," as well as for her understanding of other human emotions ("George Eliot" 100). While it is important to understand why Eliot uses a narrator, separate from the plot of the novel, it is equally important to

understand how the narrator's role in Eliot's sociological "study" of this town reflects her sociological voice. Just as Showalter and Woolf see Eliot in her characters, the voice of Eliot is also seen in her narrator's use of sympathy in order to foster a relationship between the reader and the characters in her novel.

Warhol comments on the narrative convention that many Victorian writers, including Eliot, use: adopting an outside narrator in order to maintain a close relationship to the reader as well as to the text. She states,

Not every Victorian novel conforms to this aim of realist fiction---to change the world by representing it. But a realist novel that does attempt to alter the world it strives to represent requires special relation between reader and text. For readers to act upon the novels' fictions as somehow true. Narrative interventions help to position the reader in relation to the text, at the same time expressing the novelists' own goals, either ironically or explicitly. (Warhol xii)

Eliot's narrator imposes her opinions to ensure the reader remains in a "position" that allows Eliot to accomplish her own goal of the novel as a sociological study. The particular tactics the narrator uses within her expressed opinions reflect Eliot's sociological theories and *show* readers the effect society has on the individuals within it. The narrator's reported observations, comments, and interpretations throughout *Middlemarch* demonstrate *how* Eliot presents her Spencerian sociological concepts through their application to the real life interactions of Middlemarch characters.

Although Eliot's narrator is in a position separate from readers and characters, she acts as the "unraveler" of the societal web of *Middlemarch*. While she unravels society through scientific-like observations, the narrator also addresses the reader in order to guide him or her to a bigger understanding. This is made possible by her use of Eliot's

societal beliefs to defend the actions and beliefs of each character. The narrator's interjected defenses are most clearly revealed in her responses to any miscommunication among characters. She uses tactics to provoke a reader's sympathetic understandings of the novel's characters. The emotional bond of the reader creates a constant connection and allows the narrator to guide her listeners through a sociological study, to a wider perception of the ways of the world. By examining how the narrator uses particular imagery and diction to study various characters' perspectives, one can see how the narrator leads readers through a study of Middlemarch society. Most importantly, the narrator uses the above two tactics to create a sympathetic link to all characters in order to ensure a deeper knowledge of *Middlemarch's* complex social system.

In addition, Eliot's ability to understand every perspective allows her to sympathize and use sympathy as a tool to connect her reader to the narrator. She manipulates her reader's emotions so they consider *all* perspectives of *Middlemarch* characters. As W.J. Harvey states in his book, *The Art of George Eliot*, Eliot's novels are

contrived as to demand of the reader that kind of sympathy which is based on his own deepest and most mature understanding. This George Eliot achieves by controlling our vision of her fictional world so that we see it through a series of interconnected but ever-enlarging perspectives which demand of us greater and greater knowledge, sympathy and insight. By this means each of her characters is seen in a number of interacting relationships—man in relation to himself, his family, trade, local community and to the whole of his historical society. (41)

Eliot wants her readers to consider every character's perspective, to examine the effects a society has on individual minds and how this relationship in turn affects the way one relates to another.

Robert Langbaum's *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* also breaks down the role of sympathy in literature. Although he discusses sympathy and judgment strictly within dramatic monologues, his theories are still valuable in understanding the relationship of Eliot's readers to her narrator. Langbaum explains how "A monologue helps to determine" the reader's sympathy for whoever is speaking at the time (78). He believes the reader then must "adopt" the speaker's perspective which ensures the reader maintains a "sympathetic relation" to the story once they are given "facts from within" (78). Since Eliot's narrator is providing the "facts from within," through her detailed explanations of Middlemarch citizens, the characters' viewpoints are what are "adopted" by readers. Most importantly, Langbaum discusses the effect sympathy has on a reader's judgment. He states, "Sympathy adapts the dramatic monologue...dealing with the forbidden region of the emotions because we must suspend moral judgment, we must sympathize in order to read the poem" (Langbaum 92-93). In other words, sympathy allows readers to consider the various emotionally- based perspectives of characters but only if moral judgment is placed on hold. Through her sympathetic explanations of each character, Eliot's narrator is able to create this temporary release of personal judgment for readers. Yet, the narrator is not forcing the reader to adapt and maintain her suggested sympathetic interpretations. She exemplifies Langbaum's theory of sympathy because she, as the speaker, "makes it possible or the reader to participate in a position, to see what it feels like to believe that way, without having finally to agree" (105). As a result, the narrator maintains a neutral position throughout the entire novel, encouraging her reader's to do the same. While the

narrator's manipulations are often seen as a way of instructing, it is clear that Eliot only wants readers to recognize the unspoken reasons behind every action. She places her readers in the shoes of every character, but allows them to choose whether they agree with that point of view or not.

When illustrating all sides, she provides reasons for why each Middlemarch character remains "the centre of his own world," and is not able to understand any point of view outside of him or herself (Eliot 54). For example, the narrator often comments on the interactions of the married couples of Dorothea and Casaubon, Rosamond and Lydgate, and Mary and Fred. The narrator's detailed studies of each character's inner and outer workings allow the narrator to provide justifications for the self-centered tendencies that have caused marital issues. Her ability to provide reasons as to why characters act as they do not only demonstrates the narrator's refusal to favor any character over another, but also places the blame on something other than the characters themselves. The narrator shows the reader how individual beliefs are shaped by the society he or she is raised in. More specifically, how socially constructed concepts like class, education, and gender influence an individual's actions. No individual character is seen as the antagonist according to their actions. Instead, the study of Middlemarch society reveals that the antagonist is provincial society itself. The couples' individual as well as mutual misjudgments, misunderstandings, and miscommunications are all an outcome of societal conventions. As a result of the narrator's sociological observations, the miscommunication between couples contributes to Eliot's in-depth study of sociology. While the first two couples exemplify how miscommunication occurs due to differing

assumptions, Mary Garth and Fred Vincy's ability to communicate contradicts the others. They ultimately demonstrate how acknowledgment of society's misleading ways and truthfulness lead to a successful marriage.

This thesis will look at specific similarities between Spencer and Eliot to demonstrate how Eliot utilized parts of his sociology to create her own narrator's sociological study of *Middlemarch*. Eliot acknowledges that readers as well as characters are not always fully aware of their own socially-influenced inner motivations, let alone another's. Therefore, as Eliot creates the complex world of Middlemarch, her narrator fills in the un-spoken gaps to *show* how society is the underlying cause of conflict between characters. Through the examination of Spencer's influence on her narrative structure, one can see Eliot's intended purpose for *Middlemarch* as a sociological "Study of Provincial Life" in a provincial town.

Sociology: Herbert Spencer & George Eliot

Not only did Eliot edit and write for *The Westminster Review*, but she also worked closely with George Lewes and Herbert Spencer. Her relationship with both men kept her in touch with the newly forming ideas of sociology. While Lewes' studies only dabbled in sociological theories, Spencer is considered a foundational voice of sociology in England.⁴

Eliot's relationship with Spencer was long and complicated. At moments, their relationship faltered, disconnecting her from his later theories of sociology. Yet, Eliot remained connected to any discussions of sociology since her partner, Lewes, was also involved in philosophical, sociological, and psychological studies. The loss of Spencer and Eliot's letters to one another is an added reason to question anyone who believes their relationship was close. However, Eliot often refers to Spencer in a number of her journal entries and in a handful of her other letters.⁵ Lewes also mentions Spencer frequently in his journals, demonstrating that all three were a consistent and influential presence in each others' lives. Eliot's correspondence with others provides plenty of evidence that she was exposed to, and even read, Spencer's earlier sociological writings. Biographer, Gordon Haight notes Eliot's exposure to Spencer's works, specifically *Social Statics* and *Principles of Psychology*, in his volumes of Eliot's letters and journals.

In a letter to Charles Bray, Eliot mentions reading and lending *Social Statics* (Haight 1: 364; 2: 14). This discussion occurs soon after the book was published and long

before the start of *Middlemarch*. More importantly, her letters provide evidence which indicates her own impact on Spencer's theories. Eliot wrote to her friend, Sara Hennell, discussing how she had spoken with Spencer about "his work on Psychology" (Haight 2: 145). She explains how an idea of hers "had given him just the bridge he wanted etc.— and that he should put a *long note* in his book explaining how he came by the idea" (Haight 2: 145).⁶ Gordon Haight mentions in a footnote that Spencer had, in fact, credited Eliot for her idea in *Principles of Psychology*.⁷ Eliot understood Spencer's sociology and kept her own theories similar to his own. Her exposure to and early understanding of sociology had time to grow and develop into the sociological theories that are found in *Middlemarch*. As we have seen, Eliot's relationship to these works is evident; therefore, an easy connection can be drawn from Spencer's writings to her own sociological ideals throughout *Middlemarch*.

Further investigation into Spencer's particular theories, and how they contribute to the sociological aspects of *Middlemarch*, reveals a clear overlapping of ideas between writers. Spencer strongly believed sociology and psychology were linked and could not or should not be separated from each other. He stresses the cyclical relationship between an individual mind to the mind of a whole society, as well as explains the influence society has on an individual's mind. This theory is briefly introduced in *Principles of Psychology*, but more clearly developed in the later publication of *Principles of Sociology*. Spencer states,

As soon as a combination of men acquires permanence, there begin actions and reactions between the community and each member of it...The

control exercised by the aggregate over its units, tends ever to mould their activities and sentiments and ideas into congruity with social requirements; and these activities, sentiments, and ideas, in so far as they are changed by changing circumstances, tend to re-mould society into congruity with themselves...mutual modification becomes a potent cause of transformation in both. (11-12)

Eliot demonstrates this relationship through Middlemarch society's influence on its citizens. It is evident through the "mutual modification" of the characters' slow changing effect on their provincial society. She shows the "actions and reactions between the community" to each character and then uses her narrator to demonstrate how provincial society "mould[s] their activities sentiments and ideas" to conform to the ideals it creates. She expands upon this relationship by showing characters who cannot find harmony between what they actually want and what their society expects. They begin to form notions and beliefs about who they think they *should* be in accordance with the socially constructed rules they were raised in. These misled beliefs create a disconnection and lack of communication between characters like Dorothea and Casaubon and Rosamond and Lydgate. Later character analyses of both relationships will demonstrate how society molds individuals' beliefs which cause them to misjudge themselves and others.

Although *Principles of Sociology* was not published until 1874, it is probable that Eliot, Lewes, and Spencer previously discussed the mutual relationship of inner psychology to outer society. Spencer also mentions this relationship in *Principles of Psychology*, a year before the publication of "Book I: Miss Brooke." He writes,

A moment's introspection will now make it clear to the reader, that he cannot frame any psychological conception without thus looking at internal co-existences and sequences in their adjustments to external co-

existences and sequences...The life of every organism is a continuous adaptation of its inner actions to outer actions. (Spencer 133-34)

Spencer values the reciprocal correlation between an individual's mind and external society. Since Eliot had a direct influence on its contents, it is safe to say that, before writing *Middlemarch*, she inevitably discussed and read the above theory with Spencer (Haight 2: 145). Critics have analyzed this inner-outer relationship of inner-mind to outward-social interactions from a psychological standpoint in order to acknowledge Eliot's psychologically driven characters.⁸ However, a sociological connection to her characters' psychological motivations is lacking.

Critics such as David Carroll, Benjamin Kilborne, W.J. Harvey, and Gordon Hirsch, all analyze how the characters' inner thoughts and emotions motivate their outward actions. All, with the exception of Harvey, focus on driving emotions like shame, pride, and egoism, but they never travel beyond the inner mind to explain the origins of such emotions. Unlike Spencer and Eliot, they do not place the blame for miscommunication on society. Rather, they explain how a single character's actions, driven by their inner-emotions, are the main cause for any misjudgments or miscommunications. Spencer and Eliot take this explanation a step further by revealing where an individual's inner emotions and beliefs originate. Both see society as the driving influence on any individual's inward and outward misjudgments.

Eliot creates psychologically driven characters to demonstrate *how* each individual character's inner and outer actions are a result of a bigger societal force. Through her authorial narrator, Eliot reveals numerous socially constructed concepts that

influence the citizens of Middlemarch society. However, she demonstrates how these concepts also mislead a character's judgment. Eliot uses *Middlemarch* to explain how a surrounding and influential community is often the cause of an individual's conflicting emotions. She uses this relationship to create dramatic conflict throughout the novel. Eliot clearly understands Spencer's theory of internal and external action and experiments with this theory throughout *Middlemarch*.

Spencer expands upon his initial theory when he states, "The life of every organism... a complete interpretation of the inner actions involves recognition of the outer actions" (*Principles of Psychology* 134). However, Spencer also understands very few people are able to recognize this relationship in order to prevent the negative misjudgments it causes. Eliot often uses her narrator to shed light on her characters' success or failure to understand fully their "inner" thoughts in relation to their "outer actions." This gap between inner self and outward actions is what creates the complexity of Eliot's characters. She demonstrates the miscommunication of a character to his or her self as well as to others. Her narrator shows the citizens of Middlemarch's ability or, more importantly, their inability to recognize how society prevents them from understanding one another. Just as Spencer discusses, Eliot, through her narrator's commentary, confirms a person's frequent failure to interpret their conflicting emotions or outward actions as socially influenced. The narrator's opinion of society's negative influence is strongest in her comments surrounding the married couples of the novel. Eliot uses her narrator to illustrate how social concepts like class distinctions, gender

roles, educational standing, and opinions of career choice, create the problem of marital miscommunication.

W.J. Harvey recognizes society's influence within *Middlemarch*, and mentions the sociological relationship discussed above. Although he mainly discusses Eliot's narrative voice, he makes a similar point to Spencer's. Harvey discusses the many connections Eliot uses throughout her novels. He often praises *Middlemarch* for being her most successful novel, composed of multi-layered, fragmented connections that together, form a wholesome picture of society. Harvey further comments, "Within the subject matter, the actual life portrayed, they include the relation of private life to public society...and also the relation of private to public within the individual" (*The Art of George Eliot* 62). By "private life and public society," Harvey means the relationship between the characters' selves to the whole of society and by "private to public within the individual," he means the relationship between a character's external image and his or her true self. The narrator's choice to comment on the individuals within each marriage allows the reader to see how society affects both inner and outer forms of private and public relationships. Although Harvey never connects Eliot's tendency to Spencer's sociological theory, his belief that she writes about "actual life" mirrors the societal influence that Spencer often theorizes. Eliot's ability to understand society's influence allows her to write a sociological study. She not only demonstrates the connection of individuals to their society, but she also creates a psychological web to demonstrate how society affects her characters' inner psyche and actions.

The continuous miscommunication among characters throughout the novel is a direct result of the characters' ignorance of society's effect on them. As noted above, Eliot understands how society's influence often goes unnoticed by those within it. She then uses this major flaw to spin the web of provincial Middlemarch and uses society to drive the dramatic plot of the novel. Eliot's narrator is her way of showing readers how Middlemarch society is the main antagonist of the novel.

Each couple faces communication problems but never understands why they cannot communicate with one other. Instead, they blame each other for marital issues. Many characters do not see how society has led them to their close-minded and biased beliefs about class or gender roles. They are then left to frequently misunderstand themselves as well as each other. Luckily for the reader, Eliot's narrator points out that society and not any individual character, is to blame for the various moments of misunderstanding within her novel. The narrator's purpose to portray society as the antagonist is not only apparent in her descriptions and comments, but also in her use of web and microscopic imagery.

Since *Social Statics* was Spencer's only sociological work published before *Middlemarch*, it is useful to examine its metaphorical links to Eliot's sociological study of *Middlemarch*. Both works use the images of the microscope and the web as alternative ways of looking at society in order to help readers better understand the many complex connections within Middlemarch society. Spencer uses the image of

“microscopic organisms” to further demonstrate a person’s place within the whole of society, as well as to explain the inward to outward actions of each person:

Still more clearly seen is this ultimate identity of personal interest and social interests when we discover how essentially *vital* is the connection between each person and the society of which he is a unit...when we learn that the human body is itself compounded of innumerable microscopic organisms, which possess a kind of independent vitality, which grown by imbibing nutriment from the circulating fluids, and which multiply...by spontaneous fission. (Spencer 403)

Spencer then applies this image to the larger analogy of societal patterns. The reader can understand from this statement that he or she, as an individual, is one of “innumerable microscopic organisms” who grow and develop from the “circulating fluids” of society. The mutual relationship of society and individual is better illustrated through the metaphor of microscopic organisms who are connected together by the “nutriment” which surrounds them all. Eliot similarly uses a biological metaphorical analogy so her readers can see the nature of society’s influence on an individual.

Eliot’s Quarry for *Middlemarch* consists of many texts about biological science. However, most of her scientific research is aimed to help explain Lydgate’s line of work in greater detail. Like Spencer, Eliot’s narrator uses the metaphor of the microscope to explain characters’ romantic relationships to one another through “spontaneous fission” (Spencer 403). The narrator comments on Mrs. Cadwallader’s reaction to the news that Miss Brooke was to be married to Casaubon. She allows the reader to recognize the ambiguous nature of why characters react in particular ways to societal gossip. She remarks,

Now, why on earth should Mrs Cadwallader have been at all busy about Miss Brooke's marriage and why...should she have straightway contrived the preliminaries of another? Was there any ingenious plot, any hide-and-seek course of action, which might be detected by a careful telescopic watch? Not at all: a telescope might have swept the parishes of Tipton and Freshnit, the whole area visited by Mrs Cadwallader in her phaeton, without witnessing any interview that could excite suspicion...Even with a microscope directed on a water-drop we find ourselves making interpretations which turn out to be rather coarse; for whereas under a weak lens you may seem to see a creature exhibiting an active voracity into which smaller creatures actively play as if they were so many animated tax-pennies, a stronger lens reveals to you certain tiniest hairlets which make vortices of these victims while the swallower waits passively at his receipt of custom. In this way, metaphorically speaking, a strong lens applied to Mrs. Cadwallader's match-making will show a play of minute causes producing what may be called thought and speech vortices to bring her the sort of food she needed. (Eliot 38)

The above quotation not only allows the reader to see society from afar with a telescope, but a little closer through the use of "a microscope." The reader begins to understand that each Middlemarch character is an individual linked to all others by the "water drop" of mutual society they all reside in. The narrator uses the same metaphor to direct her readers to an understanding of how characters' reactions are inwardly driven. With a "stronger lens" the narrator and reader see how a character's inner needs lead to their outward actions. However, according to any encyclopedia, a microscope with a stronger lens only tunnels-in to see a small area up close. The image is less distorted in comparison to a weaker lens, but if moved, an image with a stronger lens almost instantly loses its clarity (theodora.com/encyclopedia). Therefore, any specific societal beliefs that influence a character's misjudgments go unseen. Like Mrs. Cadwallader, every character has "speech vortices" which are motivated by their "thought...vortices" that work

together to bring each the “food” he or she needs. Mrs. Cadwallader’s match-making has the potential to consist only of inner misjudgments that cannot be seen even with the strongest of lenses because they are only part of the bigger establishment of society.

The narrator also uses this image to remind readers that despite their up-close view, they will be observing from afar, separate from the situation, and therefore, will be unable to understand what motivates each character from the inside. As a result, like Mrs. Cadwallader, they place themselves in danger of “making interpretations which turn out to be rather coarse” (Eliot 38). The narrator calls attention to a society that is full of individuals who need to be fed by “thought and speech”; individuals who are all victims of their own imaginations, yet all influenced by society. Eliot’s microscopic metaphor then travels beyond Spencer’s more basic explanation by using it to show the various types of inner and outer relationships in a single community.

Like Spencer, Eliot uses the scientific metaphor of the microscope to better show the dangerous effect society can have on an individual’s beliefs. Eliot’s use of the image still incorporates Spencer’s opinions about “belief,” in order to surpass it. In his article “Mill vs. Hamilton: The Test of Truth,” published in 1865, he states that belief is what humans try to “give confessedly inadequate proofs or no proofs at all for the things we think” (Spencer 531). He relates this concept to “indissoluble connections in consciousness,” stating that even a person’s inner-most feelings, sensations, and emotions, cannot be fully identified by his or herself or by anyone outside their experience. Therefore, by going unrecognized, these individual feelings, beliefs, and

reasons cannot be rid of. In clearer terms, if we “believe a person on whose face we look is good-natured,” our minds will not be altered until a personal event happens to us to change our initial inward opinion (Spencer 531). This concept is seen in multiple circumstances where various assumptions are prompted by characters’ beliefs.

The assumptions made by Middlemarch couples do not go unnoticed by the narrator. The narrator shows that it is often the character’s beliefs and opinions of one another that misguide or create errors in initial judgments. The narrator uses a microscope to examine the couples Dorothea and Casaubon as well as Rosamond and Lydgate. Her commentary almost always reveals false beliefs which end in a character’s disappointment once his or her initial opinion slowly deconstruct.

David Carroll also uses the image of the microscope to discuss how the citizens of Middlemarch deal with “external fact” in his essay, “*Middlemarch* and The Externality of Fact.” He explains how individuals like Mrs. Cadwallader react to a factual truth of which they were unaware of or not prepared for. He states,

We need to get closer to the facts than this. So we switch from the telescope to the microscope...you can easily, she [the narrator] says, mistake an active creature for a passive one and *vice versa*. What is needed is a ‘stronger lens.’ Then the terms active and passive become irrelevant for now you discover, between the two creatures, the hidden medium which controls the relation. (Carroll 75)

A “stronger lens” is what allows the narrator and reader to examine together the liquid space between two characters; a space that often contains unspoken, unheard, and unseen perspectives. This “hidden medium” is where many of Eliot’s characters cannot communicate due to their lack of understanding. Eliot sees how her characters’ wrongful

interpretations about each others' class standings, thoughts, actions, and careers "turn out to be rather coarse" (Eliot 38). Eliot's narrator then encourages her readers to examine what misleads characters' actions as well as where each goes wrong in their assumptions.

The metaphor of the web is another image that allows us to better understand how Eliot creates a Spencerian sociological study through *Middlemarch*. In Spencer's "Introduction" to *Social Statics* he explains the flaws of "expediency philosophy," he goes onto discuss the "complex whole" of society and how humans cannot fully reach happiness because of society's construction of law.⁹ He comments, "it [expediency philosophy] nevertheless continues to place confidence in the unaided judgment of the statesman. It asks no guide; it possesses no eclectic principle; it seeks no clue whereby the tangled web of social existence may be unraveled and its laws discovered" (Spencer 12). He proceeds to discuss how English government and expediency philosophers see human nature as easily definable. They simply "estimate" the connection of an "individual character" to numerous societal constructions such as values, beliefs, religions, and prejudices. However, Spencer clearly believes that the "tangled" and "complex" nature of social existence is not easily solvable through the above generalizations.

Eliot also does not look to solve each relationship but instead to demonstrate how they are all constructed; creating ties from the individual to the self, individual to individual, and individual to society. Eliot's intricate connections are just as complex and difficult to demonstrate as they are to define. Eliot borrows and adapts Spencer's image

of the web to provide clarity for her readers and give her “authorial narrator” more authority. As with the image of the microscope, Carroll analyzes Eliot’s web imagery to explain characters’ interactions with the “outer world” (78). He notes,

This is the crucial area of interaction. In one sense, this *is* the reality of the novels—not the mind, not the external—but their meeting place. This is what George Eliot means when she refers repeatedly to the ‘medium’ of Middlemarch society. It is the combination of all those intermingled webs spun between the mind and the external world...it determines subtly and firmly the way in which life is interpreted. (Carroll 79)¹⁰

Eliot utilizes this image multiple times in *Middlemarch* to provide an effective way of interpreting Middlemarch society and also to further establish the purpose of the novel as a sociological study.¹¹ The image is first used in reference to the narrator’s purpose in Book II, Chapter XV, when Eliot’s narrator comments,

I at least have so much to do in the unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe. (91)

Not only does Eliot borrow a metaphor similar to Spencer’s to explain how the narrator plans on “unravelling” her study of Middlemarch society, but she also applies the exact vocabulary Spencer uses in his metaphor. Though considerable time passes between Spencer’s *Social Statics* and Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, it gave her a chance to develop her sociological metaphors. Later in the novel, she uses the image of the web to represent the inner imagination in relation to “young love” (Eliot 216). She expands the image to encompass more specific connections within the broader relation of character to society (Eliot 216). She links it to the inner-emotional beliefs of characters’ love for one another:

Young love-making—that gossamer web! Even the points it clings to—the things whence its subtle interlacings are swung—are scarcely perceptible: momentary touches of fingertips, meetings of rays from blue and dark orbs, unfinished phrases, lightest changes of cheek and lip, faintest tremors, The web itself is made of spontaneous beliefs and indefinable joys, yearnings of one life towards another, visions of completeness, indefinite trust. (Eliot 216)

Once again, Eliot not only uses Spencer's image of the web to paint a clearer picture of a provincial town's society, but she incorporates Spencer's theory of belief to better define one character's misunderstanding of another. She ties together all of her Spencerian theories of sociology and illustrates them through the metaphor of the web. More specifically, she uses it to foreshadow how young love is nothing but a "scarcely perceptible" web of "spontaneous beliefs" and "indefinable joys" which leads to disappointment when the imaginary is replaced by reality. She spins a web, places hidden psychological motivations in its spaces, and uses sociological theories to help her narrator conduct a sociological study in order to unravel and explain all that she has created.

Spencer's friendship with Eliot allowed her understanding of sociology to grow throughout her writing career. Despite Eliot's other connections to this new science, Spencer was one of the strongest influences on *Middlemarch*. His specific opinions and contributions not only strengthened the sociological message of Eliot's novel, but shaped the narrative voice of her novel. The narrator within this novel demonstrates how Eliot applied Spencer's specific theories of "belief" and the mutual relationship between an individual's mind and his or her society to the structure of her novel. The next section

explores how Eliot creates a strong emotional connection between her narrator and readers in order to lead her audience through her study of sociology.

Eliot's Constructivist Narrative Perspective

As stated above, Eliot had time to read, discuss, and evolve Spencer's sociology to include her own opinions. Eliot's narrator is not only a result of her own sociological concepts, but also a tool that allows her to conduct a study of Middlemarch society. By considering previous discussions and definitions of Eliot's narrator, one can see how her narrator functions as the "unraveler" of Eliot's societal web. Since she does not focus on any singular moral point of view, she can guide her readers to a greater understanding of *all* the strings that link together the town of Middlemarch. Most importantly, the narrator is the voice of her author, showing Eliot's sociological theories through her analysis of Middlemarch and its citizens.

Eliot's personal opinions on subjects such as art, Victorian readers, and Victorian society reflect her own sociological beliefs as well as deeply influenced her narrator's voice within the novel. Examining Eliot's own opinions about the art of writing is helpful in understanding why Eliot creates a narrator who observes, comments, interprets, and reports on Middlemarch society from the outside. The nature of her narrator's commentary can almost always be linked to Eliot's own sociological opinions about the purpose of writing.

Eliot's "The Natural History of German Life" sheds light on her personal outlook on the function of writing and directly exemplifies her sociological worldview. The above article was published in 1856, soon after Spencer's *Social Statics*. It clearly

expresses some similar theories about society. While Spencer discusses principles of sociology, Eliot discusses society's relation to art in order to clarify that, like a metaphor, art should *show* in order to *tell*. She then uses her narrator to show sociological theory in action through the interactions of the characters within the novel. Eliot expresses her philosophy about the goal of demonstrative art in the following statement:

a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment...Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow men beyond the bounds of our personal lot. All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the People. (Eliot 520)

She believes artists should "paint" the "life of the People" in order to "extend" life experience "beyond the bounds of our personal lot." To Eliot, an author has a sociological obligation to lead readers to a larger moral and social understanding of the world through his or her explanation of perspectives "apart from themselves" (Eliot 520). In other words, Eliot values all lives within a society, holding all in equal importance. Yet, she stresses how impossible this task is to complete. The complexity of life is too much for any artist wholly to understand, let alone recreate through his or her art. She comments that this happens because of the human "tendency created by the splendid conquests of modern generalization to believe that all social questions are merged in one economical science" (Eliot 520). Like Spencer's statement against expediency philosophy, Eliot also speaks against any individual's "tendency" to make "generalization[s]" about others. While Spencer sees how this process limits society,

Eliot discusses how it prevents writers from effectively capturing the true reasons behind anyone else's actions. These actions are apart from their own and therefore, limit their creation from becoming a wholesome "picture of human life" (Eliot 520).

In order to avoid this mistake, Eliot creates a narrator who knows and expresses the limitations that generalizations place on a society. The narrator not only comments on this human habit to make generalizations, but she also shows how these socially constructed assumptions and beliefs are often wrong through her characterizations of *Middlemarch* characters. Her negative opinion is seen in the statement, "this power of generalizing which gives men so much the superiority in mistake over the dumb animals, was immediately thwarted" (Eliot 323).¹² Even though forming generalizations separates men from other animals, the narrator sees this ability as restrictive since it prevents Middlemarch citizens from reaching a bigger "moral understanding" of themselves or others. Not only do generalizations prevent characters, but they also prevent readers (as humans) from reaching a complete understanding of the provincial society within the novel. Because of this tendency to presuppose, the narrator addresses the reader specifically in order to bring him or her to this realization, "But how little we know, what would make paradise for our neighbours! We judge from our own desires, and our neighbours themselves are not always open enough to throw out a hint of theirs" (Eliot 323). Through her narrator, Eliot presents a sociological problem in her characters' inability to know the reality of situations or recognize who the individuals they interact with really are. However, Eliot does believe this problem is solvable "with a real

knowledge of the People, with a thorough study of their habits, their ideas, their motives” (Eliot 521). She continues to provide a more detailed solution as to whom and what should be studied in order to reach “a real knowledge of the People:”

If any man...would devote himself to studying the natural history of our social classes, especially of the small shopkeepers, artisans, and peasantry,--the degree in which they are influenced by local conditions, their maxims and habits, the points of view from which they regard their religious teachers, and the degree in which they are influenced by religious doctrines, the interaction of the various classes on each other, and what are the tendencies in their position towards disintegration or towards development,--and if, after all this study, he would give us the result of his observations in a book well nourished with specific facts, his work would be a valuable aid to the social and political reformer. (Eliot 521)

She stresses that the only way to overcome or help others overcome blind generalizations is to understand all individuals from all classes and all degrees of society or culture. In other words, to research, record, understand, and write about “all points of view[s]” (Eliot 521). *Middlemarch* is proof of Eliot’s own solution to this problem. Her narrator is the outside presence who uses her authorial voice to guide readers through every aspect of a provincial town as she unravels it. Her own “study” is then “well nourished” with all perspectives of a provincial town.

In the same quotation from the previous section, the narrator acknowledges her purpose in studying this town:

I at least have so much to do in unraveling certain human lots, and seeing how they are woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be centrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe. (Eliot 91)

The narrator, through careful inspection with a microscope, “examines” how all citizens are “woven and interwoven” by revealing the reasons behind their beliefs, thoughts, interactions, actions, and reactions in relation to one another. The narrator acts as a guide through Eliot’s own web-like “picture of human life” (Eliot 520). Although the “The Natural History of German Life” instructs other writers as to what their art should do, Eliot takes her own advice and uses her narrator to apply it to her own writing.

Even though some critics believe her intention is to use her narrator to instruct her readers to a larger, moral understanding of *Middlemarch*, Eliot’s ability to understand her readers’ minds leads to her true purpose to *show* instead of *teach*. Eliot often wrote to her friend Mrs. Caroline Bray in order to share their writings with one another. In one letter, Eliot comforts her friend after Mrs. Bray expresses disappointment about her readers’ reactions. Eliot responds, “in writing any careful presentation of human feelings, you must count on that infinite stupidity of readers who are always substituting their crammed notions of what ought to be felt for any attempt to recall truly what they themselves have felt under like circumstances.” (Haight 5: 471). This comment shows Eliot comprehends that readers cannot always see or understand what a writer is trying to illustrate. Like most people, they have fallen victim to generalizations and cannot see past their own selves or experiences. This misunderstanding of how (in similar situations) another’s feelings can differ from their own, is reflected in Eliot’s previous comment concerning the flawed “tendency” for individuals to assume through “generalization[s],” instead of staying open to other “point[s] of view” (Eliot 520-21). Eliot’s ability to accept, like

Caroline Bray, the fact that she cannot fully control her own readers' reactions leads her to create a narrator who does not *tell* her readers what to think, but, through the use of perspective, *suggests* they keep an open mind.

Eliot also discusses the demonstrative purpose of writing in numerous letters to publishers. She often expresses the true intentions of her novels when corresponding with her publishers. In a letter to her editor John Blackwood, she shares her opinion about the purpose of Mr. Alexander Main's *Wise, Witty, and Tender Sayings in Prose and Verse: Selected From the Works of George Eliot*. She writes,

Unless my readers are more moved towards the ends I seek by my works as wholes than by an assemblage of extracts, my writings are a mistake. I have always exercised severe watch against anything that could be called preaching, and if I have ever allowed myself in dissertation or in dialogue [anything] which is not part of the *structure* of my books, I have there sinned against my own laws...Unless I am condemned by my own principles, my books are not properly separable into 'direct' and 'indirect' teaching. (Haight 5: 458-459)

Eliot believed that her novels were not written to be dissected as teachings but instead to be understood as "wholes." She does not want her novels to be extracted or separated to defend one moral lesson over another. Instead, she wants her readers to see her novels as complete works of art that do not preach about life, but illustrate the entirety of it. This further strengthens the theory that Eliot intended *Middlemarch* to be a study of provincial society as a whole; a complex web that cannot function when separated or broken apart. Her narrator ensures that she is not seen as one who claims to know more than anyone else but instead, as someone who tries to encourage others to think openly in order to come to a broader understanding of life. Eliot's principle is also seen in her abrupt and

curt response to Mrs. Clementia Taylor, a woman's rights activist and feminist, when she notes,

My function is that of the *aesthetic*, not the doctrinal teacher—the rousing of the nobler emotions...however strongly moved by social sympathy, is often not the best judge. It is one thing to feel keenly for one's fellow-beings; another to say, 'This step, and this one alone, will be the best to take for the removal of particular calamities. (Haight 7: 44)

This is another example where Eliot believes it is not her responsibility to teach her readers, especially those who feel, think and react according to their individual experiences. As an artist, she feels her purpose is to expose her audience to other perspectives, separate from their own, in order to lead them to a larger, more wholesome understanding of a society. She does not want readers to see only one answer and "one alone" to her novel. Eliot wants her readers simply to *consider* all that her narrator is proposing.

With all of the evidence above, it is safe to say that Eliot wanted to lead her readers through her sociological study of a provincial town by showing them all sides of a community in order to guide them to a truer understanding of the function of life within it. Simply telling her readers what to think and do according to her own perspective, instead of freeing them to see a single society from all angles, would only contradict her own philosophy.

The narrator of *Middlemarch* allows Eliot to show her readers all points surrounding any conflict or event within the novel. For the purpose of Eliot's intended sociological study, the narrator remains unbiased. By unbiased I mean that the narrator

does not portray any one character's actions more immoral than another. The narrator's commentary often exposes reasons for characters' blind judgment or faults, proving that she does not favor. This also informs readers that the villain of the novel does not lie in any single character, but lies in society as the main origin of all wrongful assumptions. The narrator fills in the gaps in order to tell readers why characters act the way they do and to show what societal concepts have influenced their reactions. Her unbiased and outside view-point is previously noted through numerous studies of narratology and is seen specifically through her commentary on the miscommunication of Middlemarch couples.

Critics like Harvey, label Eliot's narrator as "omniscient," which defines the relationship between Eliot and her narrator to the novel as "all-knowing." Harvey addresses the relationship of the "all-knowing" author to the novel. He discusses how omniscient authors, through narration, were a convention often used by Victorian novelists. Eliot was no exception to this rule. He explains how readers "accept her [George Eliot's] opinions about the 'real' world" because it parallels and often borrows from the actual society of Victorian England (Harvey 71). The relationship and tendency for an author to create a fictional work similar to reality and then to comment on it creates an omniscient role for the author. However, other definitions of "omniscient narrator" do not admit that this type of narrator is truly "all-knowing." In *New Perspectives on Narrative Perspective*, an omniscient narrator is defined as "a narrator who seems to know all about the characters' inner thoughts and feelings" (Van Peer &

Chatman 358). Instead of crediting the narrator as a true omniscient being, this definition stresses that the narrator only *seems* to know all that is within a character. According to Harvey, Eliot is “omniscient” because readers trust and listen to her. I believe the same applies to her narrator considering she only parallels Eliot’s own outlook.

Just as the world of *Middlemarch* is similar to an actual provincial town, the narrator’s philosophy is similar to that of George Eliot herself. However, I do not agree that her narrator is necessarily “omniscient,” and I do not think Eliot would prefer this term. Eliot understands every person is an individual. Therefore, she understands any one individual experiences or interprets a single point differently from anyone else. Since she strongly believes that it is not her right to preach, I do not think the term “all-knowing” fits in with Eliot’s philosophy or with the true purpose of her novel. In order to lead without teaching, the narrator uses certain tactics, such as sympathy and empathy to keep readers interested in her analyses of Middlemarch citizens. The use of sympathy allows the reader to see the narrator as a fellow person who shares his or her observations on a subject about which he or she understand a little less about. The narrator simply invites them to join in on her sympathetic interpretations.

Others who focus on Eliot’s narrative construction do not see the narrator as “omniscient” and define her narrative placement in relation to characters. Robyn Warhol borrows Gérard Genette’s terminology in her book *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in The Victorian Novel* to define Eliot’s narrative style as “heterodiegetic (that is, where neither narrator nor narratee functions as a character)” (29). For Warhol, the

narrator is a third party separate from the characters of the novel. This defines the type of narrator Eliot creates for *Middlemarch* as well as a number of her other novels. Warhol discusses how a number of Victorian writers constructed narrative structures that “employ distancing narrative interventions” (Warhol 29). Their narrators often directly address their readers while simultaneously distancing themselves from the text itself. I agree with Warhol when she states that Eliot adapts this convention within her own writing, but I believe she utilizes it differently. Her narrator does not distance herself from her text but instead uses her position to engage her reader while simultaneously keeping a close relationship to all characters and their interactions. Eliot is the spinner of this story, and her narrator, through her microscopic examination of Middlemarch citizens, the “unraveler.” Eliot’s intended purpose and use of her narrator accordingly allows both to maintain a close relationship to their audiences’ involvement with the text.

The narrator uses various tactics in order to reach and keep readers’ sympathetic attachment to the action of the novel. While other Victorian authors also chose an omniscient narrator for their novels, they address their audience as “you” in order to maintain their attention. Eliot too follows this convention and uses “you” to address her readers; however, her narrator also uses “we,” “our,” or “us” when reaching out to her readers. For example, in the above quotation the narrator states, “how little we know... We judge...” (Eliot 323). By using first person plural pronouns, Eliot and the narrator include themselves in the world of *Middlemarch* as well as in their reader’s world. If “you” is used it is only in the form of a question or in the phrase “if you.” This

use of “you” then does not teach, but rather encourages the reader to explore his or her inner thoughts in relation to all characters. Soon after the narrator uses “you,” she switches back to first person plural pronouns to deter the reader from feeling any negative pressure. By switching to “we,” “our,” or “us” the narrator includes herself into any of her critical observations or impressions to ensure her readers are not discouraged from continuing. When questioning the readers’ reaction to Lydgate’s profession she asks, “Does it seem incongruous to you that a Middlemarch surgeon should dream of himself as a discoverer?” and then states, “Most of us, indeed, know little” (Eliot 94). By posing a question to readers as an inclusion strategy, the narrator is able to invite readers while also pushing them to reinterpret any original misled assumptions. The narrator grabs readers’ attentions by questioning their possible judgments of Lydgate’s values and then quickly alters her approach with the use of “us” to ensure her reader is not too offended by the accusatory nature of her commentary. This tactic also ensures the reader forms a sympathetic attachment to any characters that are less-likeable.

The narrator also switches her pronouns when trying to encourage a more sympathetic connection to a character’s unfortunate situation. After listing all of Dorothea’s questioning thoughts about her husband’s life work, she uses “you” to allow the reader to place themselves in Dorothea’s shoes. Soon after she establishes this connection the narrator switches to the use of “we.” She states, “And it would be astonishing to find how soon the change is felt if we had no kindred changes to compare it.” and “in these cases too we begin by knowing little and believing much, and we

sometimes end by inverting the quantities” (Eliot 125). By switching from “you” to “we,” the narrator engages her readers and then slowly pulls the attention away from them to include herself in order to provoke a sympathetic understanding towards a character’s point of view.

Eliot uses her “engaging” narrator to “move actual readers to sympathy for real-life slaves, workers, or ordinary middle-class people” (Warhol 29). Eliot’s use of sympathy as a tool to “move” her audience is what keeps the narrator’s relationship constant with the reader as well as with the novel itself. She constructs her narrator to show consideration for and understanding of all perspectives through the characters’ inner emotions. This method creates a sociological study which demonstrates all points of view while creating a trustworthy narrator.

Ansgar Nünning’s essay, “On the Perspective Structure of Narrative Texts: Steps towards a Constructivist Narratology” provides a better explanation for the purpose and structure of *Middlemarch*’s heterodiegetic narrator. Although Nünning stresses that he is only making a connection between “Constructivist Narratology,” to “character-perspectives” and “narrator-perspectives” for others to expand on in their own research, his theories fit in defining *Middlemarch*’s “authorial narrator” (207).¹³ Through a sympathetic narrator, Eliot is able to demonstrate to her readers all perspectives, guiding them through the characters and actions of Middlemarch society. Since the concept of perspective is only mentioned as a narrative tactic, it is important to explore the effects of

Eliot's ability to create a successful sociological study through the use of numerous points of view. Nünning notes this ability and explains what he means by the term:

By perspective, I do not mean the acts of narration and focalization, but more generally a character's or a narrator's subjective worldview. Such character-perspectives and narrator-perspectives are conditioned by the individual's knowledge, mental traits, attitudes, and system of values. (207-8)

Not only does this quotation apply to the numerous points of view of all Middlemarch's citizens, but it also applies to Eliot as the author and narrator. While Warhol simply defines the distancing techniques and relationships of Victorian narrators to their characters or readers, Nünning breaks down how Eliot's third-party narrator utilizes perspective to involve herself within the action of the novel as well as to simultaneously maintain a relationship to her readers.

Nünning's Constructivist interpretations are valuable in analyzing specifically what Eliot's narrator does to create and use a sympathetic understanding through perspective. Nünning states, "Constructivism proceeds from the... assumption that human beings do not have access to an objective reality and that they cannot know anything that lies outside their subjective cognitive domains" (209). Therefore,

constructivist narratology explore[s] what proponents of narrative semantics have called "the world-making activity" (Ryan 1991: 110) through which characters or narrators shape the subjective world-models that constitute their individual perspectives... More specifically, a constructivist approach to the problem of perspective focuses on the structural devices used in narrative texts for foregrounding the subjectivity, perspectivity, and constructivity of experience, recollection, cognition, and emotion. (Nünning 209-10)¹⁴

By searching Eliot's narrative structure for specific "structural devices" that provoke a sympathy, one can tie her back to Nünning's theory to see how she creates a provincial town for her sociological narrator to unravel. He breaks down the various types of narration in novels and places Eliot under the field of "authorial narration" which

usually involves a hierarchical arrangement of perspectives...with the narrator functioning as a controlling, coordinating, and integrating instance. Often...[the narrator] is particularly interested in (and amused by) what the characters think, feel, believe they know, or do not know. (Nünning 220)

He goes on to examine how Eliot accomplishes this structural effect within *Middlemarch*. It is a more obvious conclusion to also see the narrator as a constructor of perception; However, I believe it is Eliot who constructs the various perceptions throughout the novel and her narrator who unravels them by studying each character through Eliot's own sociological system of values. To connect narrative and sociological perspectives, one might argue the narrator's amusement with how every individual functions and reacts within a society reflects Eliot's fascination with sociology. It has already been established that Eliot uses many of Spencer's sociological theories through her narrator's commentary and scientific observations of the characters within Middlemarch society. Her sociological narrator demonstrates Spencer's theories about point of view, belief, and the mutual relationships of individuals to their society. This is further proven through closer examination of the narrator's expressed opinions. Just as the narrator's use of "we" places herself inclusively into society, perspective ties Eliot's "system of values" to both the narrative and character perspectives of *Middlemarch*.

Eliot and Spencer held similar beliefs about the influence of society and its “system of values” which often “conditioned” an individual’s “worldview” (Nünning 207-208). So why not come full circle and assume that *Middlemarch* was shaped by Eliot’s sociologically influenced “world view?” As suggested above, Eliot influenced and was influenced by the many sociological theories circulating in discussions around her. For example, Spencer’s belief, “that he [the reader] cannot frame any psychological conception without thus looking at internal co- existences and sequences in their adjustments to external co-existences and sequences” (“Mill vs. Hamilton”133-34) is one of the many circulating ideas. Spencer believes that the examination of these “psychological conception[s]” is vital to a reader’s interpretation. However, in order to understand their psychological motivations in relation to society, characters’ psychological states cannot be studied without consideration of their individual perspectives. Eliot takes on Spencer’s theory and exposes psychological motivations in relation to society through her characters’ points of view. It is evident that she adapted her narrator’s perspective to reflect her own beliefs. Although Nünning does not relate his narrative theories to Spencer’s Victorian concepts of sociology, he holds very similar ideas on the concept of perspective. As Eliot shows Spencer’s sociological concept of psychological perspective, Nünning’s theories analyze how Eliot constructs a study of provincial life through her narrator’s use of sympathetic perspective.¹⁵

As previously noted, Eliot uses sympathy to lead readers to a more accepting and open opinion of all *Middlemarch* characters. Like many other Victorian novelists, Eliot

creates gaps, often in moments of conflict when characters cannot communicate or when one character misunderstands another. Many Victorian novelists create these gaps to strengthen the dramatic plots of their novels. However, Eliot differs from most for two reasons. First, the vast number of perspectives she creates and explains within the novel demonstrates a much more complex social system. Nünning explains, “The greater spectrum of social, moral, and/or ideological differences between the various character-perspectives, the more diversified and complex is the perspective structure that emerges” (215). *Middlemarch* consists of characters from various backgrounds who demonstrate this “complex structure” of contradictory character perspectives. Second, Eliot chooses to explain any self-created gaps through her narrator’s sociologically influenced opinions. She explains how and why these “social...differences” occur (Nünning 215).

Eliot’s narrator accomplishes this task in diverse ways. As mentioned in the letters and essays quoted above, Eliot values human emotion. She is able to understand and use the complexity, as well as the reasoning attached to people’s emotions, to create a realistic version of society. Through her “authorial narrator,” she fosters a sense of sympathy within her readers. By shedding light on the various sides of a single conflict she is able to show readers why characters have reacted or acted as they have. She believes that “We want to be taught to feel, not for the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant, but for the peasant in all his coarse apathy, and the artisan in all his suspicious selfishness” (Eliot 520). Eliot uses sympathetic understanding as a way for her readers to “feel” for all individual points of view throughout the novel. We have already seen how

Eliot is able to produce a trustworthy and credible narrator through the use of first and second person plural pronouns, which allows the narrator access to readers' emotions or vice versa. Her narrator also often uses exclamatory phrases such as, "Poor Dorothea!" to reach out to her reader's emotions. These pronouns and repetitive phrases foster a sense of sympathy in readers to encourage their sympathetic understanding. Once the reader is emotionally tied to the characters, the narrator can then expose all sociological reasons for conflict between the couples of the novel. At times, readers have internal and external reactions. The narrator touches upon these emotional responses and reacts as a reader would. She uses the above phrases to mimic any thoughts that a reader might experience when reading a novel. Langbaum believes that "sympathy is the specifically romantic way of knowing" (79). By using emotionally provoking expressions, the narrator guides her audiences' sympathy to a more open and knowledgeable understanding of Middlemarch society.

Like Spencer, Eliot understands that society constructs ideals that influence citizens differently according to their individual life experiences and exposure. Eliot does not just provide conflict for dramatic effect but explains how society acts as a leading antagonist behind all disagreements. She uses Spencer's theory that society constructs an individual's values and beliefs which influence how that individual acts or reacts in any situation. Her narrator demonstrates the societal reasons for the problem of communication between characters by explaining to the reader how socially constructed concepts like class, gender, age, shame, pride, jealousy, trust, and various others create

individual differences within the couples. As already established by Nünning's concepts of Constructivism and Spencer's theories of sociology, it is a common notion that these social standards give rise to numerous misunderstandings. More specifically, how each character is unable to understand any belief, concept, or value outside of his or her own experiences. Examining the failure or success of each relationship is the best way to analyze Eliot's narrative tactics and establish how her narrator's sociological perspective creates a sociological study of *Middlemarch*. Most importantly, the three couples' relationships, as examined by the "authorial narrator," provide fruitful evidence of how individual differences are a direct result from society's constructed, preconceived assumptions.

Dorothea & Casaubon

In order to show perspective on the institution of marriage, the narrator comments on all characters' personal opinions concerning marriage in the novel. Eliot demonstrates how society influences both participants within a marriage separately and differently, creating a divide between their inner thoughts and their outer actions. This divide is what then causes miscommunication between the couple. Specifically, Eliot applies Spencer's sociological concepts to explain Dorothea's and Casaubon's conflicting opinions on the subject of marriage. The narrator not only points out the couple's constant misjudgments, but also provides insight as to why they occur. By examining the narrator's descriptions of Dorothea and Casaubon, one sees how Eliot *enacts* a handful of sociological theories through the couple's unhappy union.

It is important to examine Dorothea's and Casaubon's personal reasons behind their actions to see how Eliot uses miscommunication to put Spencer's as well as her own written theories into action. Eliot utilizes Spencer's idea that belief is often an illusion that contradicts reality in her narrator's description of each character's thoughts ("Mill vs. Hamilton: The Test of Truth" 531). The reality of their situations rarely matches up with what they think of each other. The expectations they each hold for themselves are also unreachable and illusory. Each seldom meets the image they create for him or herself. Their expected self-image is inconsistent to the person they really are and simultaneously counteracts what they really want in life. Both characters' beliefs continue to contradict

the reality of the moment because they also consist of unreachable expectations for the other. Since there is no harmony between what they think their self-image should be or even what their marriage should be and reality, the marriage is affected.

Early on, the reader notices that Dorothea's own image of what she should be is not who she really is; nor are her imagined hopes of a marriage to Casaubon based on truth. The narrator demonstrates her denial of inner self in the first chapter. Dorothea initially rejects her sister Celia's offer to try on their deceased mother's jewels. She believes joining in is an empty act of vanity. However, she is soon admiring a ring and bracelet. While her submission makes it seem Dorothea has accepted her true desires, she fights her secondary reaction. The narrator explains, "All the while her [Dorothea] thought was trying to justify her delight in the colours by merging them in her mystic religious joy" (Eliot 9). From the very beginning, the narrator illustrates Dorothea's conflicted character, revealing her tendency to forcibly fit herself into an image of the individual she believes she should be. Dorothea is caught "checking" herself against her own self-image numerous times throughout the novel. Whether it is while trying on jewels or rationalizing her overpowering emotions in response to Casaubon's neglectfulness, Dorothea is always fighting her true inner emotions, denying who she really is as well as ignoring her personal needs. The narrator does not directly state a reason why Dorothea does this. Rather, she continues to lead her readers through her study and examination of Dorothea's contradictory actions.

The separation of Dorothea's actual self from her idea of self is not the only divide that Eliot creates. Dorothea's misjudgment of what a marriage to Casaubon would be like is demonstrated in her assumptions about his character as well as in her desire to correspond with his idea of what a wife is. Dorothea imagines Casaubon to be her savior; a husband who "was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew if you wished it" (Eliot 7). Sadly, Casaubon is not this father figure, nor does he wish to perform this role. Dorothea's expectation is not one formed from Casaubon's true character. The narrator continues to illustrate Dorothea's idealized concepts of marriage through explanations of her inner thoughts about her own role within her marriage. Although Dorothea sees her own role in the marriage as that of a devoted wife who fulfills her "duty" by helping her husband to complete his life's work, she still believes she can benefit from this selflessness. The "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" (Eliot 19). Dorothea wants to marry an individual who would save her from the narrow and restricting "labyrinth" of her young, inexperienced mind (Eliot 19). She believes that Casaubon's life-work and intelligent demeanor will grant her this personal enlightenment. However, like most beliefs (which Spencer often stresses), this belief is based on "inadequate proofs" (Spencer 531). While Dorothea places Casaubon on a pedestal and compares him to widely respected scholars like John Locke, she could not be further from the truth. Her formed impression of his character is formed from her own assumptions of what he

should be for her. Dorothea's self-constructed image of Casaubon is nothing but a series of illusions that directly influence her own assumed role within the marriage.

The narrator's commentary on this couple foreshadows the couple's wrong assumptions about each other. It further demonstrates how one's contradicting belief of another produces marital issues. Soon after Dorothea decides Casaubon is her potential husband, the narrator remarks,

Signs are small measurable things, but interpretations are illimitable, and...every sign is apt to conjure up wonder, hope, belief, vast as a sky, and coloured by a diffused thimbleful of matter in the shape of knowledge...Because Miss Brooke was hasty in her trust, it is not therefore clear that Mr. Casaubon was unworthy of it. (Eliot 17)

This statement is very similar to Spencer's theory of "belief." While the narrator mentions how one cannot assume Casaubon is "unworthy" of Dorothea's love, the mere pointing out that Dorothea has not asked herself this question, plants a seed of doubt in the reader's mind. Dorothea's "interpretations" may be "illimitable," but this does not mean they are realistic or true. The narrator pushes readers to consider that both characters' expectations for a happy union may be unachievable because their actual needs are incompatible. The observation that Dorothea's decision may have been too "hasty," keeps readers' minds open to potential reasons for the couple's impending unsuccessful marriage.

Word choice within the narrator's descriptions of Dorothea's inner thoughts also point towards the possibility of an unhappy marriage. Right before Casaubon sends his proposal to Dorothea, the narrator remarks on her state of mind, "Dorothea had three

more conversations with him, and was convinced that her first impression had been just. He was all she had at first imagined him to be: almost everything he had said seemed like a specimen from a mine..." (Eliot 21-22). The narrator's use of phrases like, "was convinced," "first impression," "first imagined him," "almost everything," and "seemed like" all imply Dorothea's original impressions of Casaubon are incorrect. It all points to the possibility of conflict which further supports the sociological theory that belief without evidence almost always misleads an individual into false notions.

The narrator's language later demonstrates a deeper clarity, turning the original doubt into truth. There is no sudden switch, but a slow realization that exposes the psychological aspects of sociology so often noted in Spencer's studies. After the wedding, the narrator explains how Dorothea's "new real future which was replacing the imaginary dew" and all that was "gradually changing" forces Dorothea to recognize the bitter reality of her situation (Eliot 124-25). Her rescue from the web-like labyrinth of her own mind becomes unlikely. Instead, the "large vistas and wide fresh air" that Dorothea hoped to find through Casaubon are "replaced by anterooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither" (Eliot 125). By using similar spatial imagery in opposition to Dorothea's initial wishes, the narrator creates irony to justify her initial concerns about Dorothea's initial assumptions. The narrator also stresses that there was no "distinctly observed" evidence for Dorothea's realization, but that it was a feeling of "stifling depression" (125). The narrator's choice of words exemplifies the problems of blind belief and also connects the sociology of the novel to the emotional psychology of

characters. Just as the narrator often uses the metaphor of the microscope or web to define the nature of relations throughout Middlemarch society, the above imagery better defines the nature of Dorothea's inner psyche in order to explain how they motivate her actions within the marriage. This imagery also helps to create a stronger sympathetic understanding for the reader. In the growing distance between the couple the narrator makes sure the reader can see Dorothea's emotional and mental response in her slow recognition of who her husband really is. The reader then begins to see how she readjusts her actions to her new realizations. She soon begins to pity her husband, which still proves a problematic response as it pushes Casaubon farther away from his wife and continues to produce a rift between them.

Another way the narrator exposes marital issues due to individual differences is through the incorporation of outside characters. The narrator's commentary reveals the expressed opinions and beliefs of other characters which predict a separation between Dorothea's inner self as well as between the couple. For example, Celia's inner opinions are often noted in the narrator's observations. At numerous times throughout Book I of *Middlemarch*, Celia sees through Dorothea's imagined illusions. The narrator observes Celia's reaction when she states, "Miss Brooke was clearly forgetting herself, and Celia thought so" (Eliot 13). The contradiction of Dorothea's actions and Celia's belief that her sister is not accepting who she really is challenges Dorothea's constructed roles of herself, Casaubon, and marriage. Dorothea's position and opinions regarding marriage almost overpowers this small comment, but the narrator makes sure that Celia's

perspective is included. Celia's thoughts expose the insincerity of Dorothea's actions and predict the later conflict between her inner and outer self.

The same use of perspective as a foreshadowing tactic is seen in Sir James Chettam's reaction to Dorothea's engagement. The narrator notices, "...he was only shocked that Dorothea was under a melancholy illusion, and his mortification lost some of its bitterness by being mingled with compassion" (Eliot 43). Similar to Celia's, Chettam's response counters Dorothea's more positive outlook on her engagement to Mr. Casaubon. The reader begins to notice, along with the narrator, that her notions are nothing but "melancholy illusion[s]" which will inevitably end in disappointment. Amongst the narrator's illustrations of all perspectives she still incorporates her own point of view, to which she passively states from time to time, to further demonstrate the flaws in Dorothea's fascination. She states that Dorothea "was blind...to many things obvious to others—likely to tread in the wrong places, as Celia had warned her; yet her blindness to whatever did not lie in her own pure purpose" (Eliot 232). Like Celia and Sir Chettam, the narrator comments on Dorothea's tendency to be blind to reality. Yet, her observation is not meant to harshly critique Dorothea's blindness. Instead, she uses this observation to maintain her reader's sympathetic and emotional understanding of this character.

By showing all perspectives, including that of the narrator herself, Eliot provides the reader with all points of view in order to provide a complete picture of a single marriage within a society. While the above perspectives can easily go unnoticed, they

support Eliot's and Nünning's theory that all points of view should be heard and understood. Eliot uses both "narrator-perspective" and "character-perspectives" to contradict the numerous neighboring pages of Dorothea's more optimistic point of view.

The narrator's attitude to and portrayal of Casaubon's part in the relationship is also vital to the larger issues of the couple's marriage. The narrator similarly records his inner conflict as well as his inability to understand Dorothea's point of view. Like Dorothea, Casaubon remains blind to the reality around him. As Langbaum would most likely point out, his character remains oblivious to the actuality of his wife's wants and needs simply because he is "preoccupied with his own standard of judgment" (83). Respectively, Casaubon's assumed beliefs of himself as well as of marriage are disappointed with the growing presence of reality.

Throughout the novel, it becomes evident that Casaubon is a serious, devoted man who has worked his whole life to find the "Key to All Mythologies" (Eliot 54). He takes himself just as seriously as he takes his work and reacts defensively to anyone who questions the validity of either. From the very beginning the narrator makes it clear that he was "noted in the county as a man of profound learning...and having views of his own which were to be more clearly ascertained on the publication of his book" (Eliot 7-8). His need to finish his life's work fosters his opinion that a wife could help him with his publication. He then acts on the assumption that Dorothea is willing to perform this "duty" to "supply that need" which he needs fulfilled (Eliot 28). However, as we have noted, Dorothea expects intellectual enlightenment from her husband in return for her

service. The narrator exposes a small aspect of Casaubon's character to foretell the impossibility of either one's hopes being fulfilled. She notes, "Indeed, Mr. Casaubon was not used to expect that he should have to repeat or revise his communications of a practical or personal kind" (Eliot 17). Casaubon's intends Dorothea to be nothing but a reader of his notes or writings. Yet, this does not ensure that he will teach or enlighten his wife with the meaning of any of his work. If Casaubon does not intend to "repeat" or "revise" any "communications," then the fulfillment of Dorothea's wishes becomes impossible.

Additionally, the narrator magnifies Casaubon's serious nature through her recognition of his inwardly-based, self-conscious pride. It becomes clear that Casaubon is full of a "proud reticence" which "prevented him" from recognizing the truth of the situation (Eliot 235). His pride leads him to assumptions which push him to be

distrustful of everybody's feeling towards him, especially as a husband. To let any one suppose that he was jealous would be to admit their (suspected) view of his disadvantages; to let them know that he did not find marriage particularly blissful would imply his conversion to their (probably) earlier disapproval...All through his life Mr. Casaubon had been trying not to admit even to himself the inward sores of self-doubt and jealousy...Thus Mr. Casaubon remained proudly, bitterly silent. (Eliot 235)

Just as Dorothea denies her own inner feelings, denying herself in the process, Casaubon pushes away his true feelings, staying "bitterly silent." His silence is what expands the gap of misunderstanding between the newlyweds. The narrator recognizes that Casaubon's jealous and prideful tendencies blossom out of his own "self-doubt." She also realizes that Casaubon's introverted personality prevents readers from understanding let

alone liking him as a character. By revealing the reasons for Casaubon's inner struggles, the narrator pushes her readers to a more sympathetic standing of the reasons for his actions or for his lack of response to Dorothea's needs. Unfortunately, Casaubon's refusal to communicate ensures that his true self remains separate from his outward actions, hidden from all other characters up until the end of his life. The narrator ensures that only she and the reader are aware of the inner workings of his character to maintain a perspective that keeps them connected to his character through their sympathy for him.

Not only does Casaubon deny his own sense of self, but his slow realization that Dorothea is not the wife he expected leads to a greater conflict. As mentioned above, Dorothea readjusts to her realization and begins to feel pity for her husband's declining health and unfinished life's work. Due to his self-conscious nature, Casaubon tends to "shrink from sympathy," which further distances him from his wife (Eliot 55).

Dorothea's persistent presence and worrisome questioning begin to change her husband's impression of her. The narrator illustrates Casaubon's slow-changing opinion as the reality of his marriage becomes clearer. Dorothea is no longer that dutiful wife who supports him and praises his work. On the contrary, she is disappointed by the labyrinth of a husband she finds which leads Casaubon to become a more the self-conscious husband. He assumes his wife's hesitance is anything but "an offensive capability of criticism" (Eliot 225). Just as Dorothea becomes disappointed in her husband's unfulfilling role as her teacher, Casaubon begins to resent Dorothea for not living up to his expectations of a wife. While it can be argued that Eliot favors the character and point

of view of Dorothea because she discusses the heroine's perspective more, the narrator's use of emotionally provoking language and choice to comment on Casaubon's state of mind disproves this theory. She exemplifies Langbaum's concept of sympathetic perspective and studies all characters within the novel.

The narrator tends to use "Poor Dorothea" or "Poor Casaubon" which "claims some of our pity" for each character (Eliot 154). Not only do these words provoke sympathy in the reader, but they also demonstrate the unbiased nature of the narrator's superior position. Just when the reader begins to side with Dorothea's declining sense of hope, the narrator anticipates the direction of her readers' biased compassion and provides Casaubon's point of view by explaining all inner and personal reasons for his actions. The narrator exclaims,

Poor Mr. Casaubon! This suffering was the harder to bear because it seemed like betrayal: the young creature who had worshipped him with perfect trust had quickly turned into the critical wife; and early instances of criticism and resentment had made an impression which no tenderness and submission afterwards could remove. To his suspicious interpretation Dorothea's silence now was a suppressed rebellion; a remark from her which he had not in any way anticipated was an assertion of conscious superiority; her gentle answers had an irritating cautiousness in them. (Eliot 260)

Casaubon's reasons for distancing himself begin to seem just as worthy of attention as Dorothea's reasons for clinging to her husband more. Just as Dorothea's misled beliefs prove to be incorrect, the narrator, through the use of words such as "seemed like" and "made an impression," ensures that the reader understands how Casaubon's actions are driven by his own wrongful assumptions.

There is no truth to either one's beliefs. The narrator's ability to see all sides of the couple's disputes guides readers to question, "but why always Dorothea?" (Eliot 175). The narrator allows the audience to realize Dorothea's is not the singular "point of view" in "regard to this marriage" (Eliot 175). Most importantly, the narrator invites the reader to stand with her, on neutral ground, and join in studying the couples within Middlemarch society. Whether the reader continues to prefer one character over the other does not concern Eliot or her narrator; their aim is simply to provide the reason for each character's actions to widen perspective.

The narrator's use of perspective allows her to avoid placing the blame of conflict on any one individual. Eliot uses the narrator to carefully consider all sides. However, this balanced, neutral position between sides often leads to the question of who is to blame? The answer, along with the narrator's impartiality toward one point of view over the other, invites the reader to experience the same moral dilemma. Readers are then allowed to become a fellow sociological observer of Middlemarch society.

Because of this neutral position, Eliot can use her narrator to comment on the real reason for miscommunication. The study of Dorothea and Casaubon does not place blame on either character. Rather, the narrator places the blame on society itself. As discussed above, it was a common principle that society and each individual within it maintain a mutual relationship. The fact that society shapes an individual places the cause for Dorothea and Casaubon's misaligned inner thoughts and outer actions on society itself. Since society shapes and influences both a character's mind and his or her actions,

it serves as the antagonist of the novel; creating all problems of communication between Dorothea and Casaubon. Dorothea rushes into a hasty marriage with a man she only thinks she knows in order to escape “the intolerable narrowness and the purblind conscience of the society around her” (Eliot 24). Society is to blame for the quick decisions that lead to Dorothea’s unhappiness.

Additionally, the narrator explains how society is often the cause for Casaubon’s misled beliefs and actions. She writes, “Dorothea was not only his wife; she was a personification of that shallow world which surrounds the ill-appreciated or desponding author” (Eliot 129). It was not Casaubon who was to blame for leading Dorothea into an unfulfilling marriage, but the “world” in which society believes a marriage is the next step for a man, the expected “stages towards the completion of a life’s plan” (Eliot 28). The narrator further comments on Casaubon’s misled opinions about the nature of marriage. She believes he

had done nothing exceptional in marrying—nothing but what society sanctions...Society never made the preposterous demand that a man should think as much about his own qualifications for making a charming girl happy as he thinks of hers for making himself happy. (Eliot 176)

This speech plainly places the blame on society. It is what “society sanctions” that leads Dorothea and Casaubon to their frequently misled beliefs and actions. Both characters rush into an incompatible relationship because they are influenced to by conflicting societal conventions, and therefore, believe it is what will make their lives happier. Through the use of ironic statements such as the one above, one can see that the narrator does not blame individual characters, but rather the society they are raised in. The same

culture that teaches Casaubon not to think “about his own qualifications” in making a woman happy, but only of ways to make “himself happy” when Dorothea’s point of view is incorporated. (Eliot 176). The narrator makes sure the reader also understands that like Dorothea, Mr. Casaubon, too, only acted from his selfish sense of self; leaving both equally incapable of reaching a complete understanding of each others’ emotions, thoughts, and actions because each was outside of the other’s individual experiences.

The narrator maintains a mutual position which does not demonstrate any form of bias and allows the reader to consider all points of view. More importantly, the narrator-perspective exposes the ill-fated concept of early nineteenth-century marriage in England which, “Having once embarked on...it is impossible not to be aware that you make no way and that the sea is not within sight—that, in fact, you are exploring an enclosed basin” (Eliot 125). The narrator explains that society is to blame for its influence on individual minds. As Eliot’s creation, the narrator uses Eliot’s sociological concepts to examine, observe, and report on the effects society has on the unsuccessful couples. Just as society is the antagonist of Dorothea and Casaubon’s relationship, it is an even clearer antagonist of the very different opinions of Rosamond and Lydgate.

Rosamond & Lydgate

Like Dorothea and Casaubon, society's standards are equally antagonistic to Rosamond's and Lydgate's happiness. Eliot once again uses the narrator to explain how society is the cause for the couple's misunderstandings. However, unlike with the previous couple, the narrator does not simply point the finger at society. She blames specific social conventions society produces. The narrator uses Rosamond's and Lydgate's marriage to show how their differences create differences in both character's lifestyles and cause financial disagreements. The use of first person plural pronouns as well as sympathetically intoned phrases such as, "Poor Lydgate" or "Poor Rosamond" are still used to encourage readers' sympathy in order to maintain an equal understanding of both perspectives. Eliot's and Spencer's concepts of belief continue to demonstrate how and why couples initially misjudge the reality of what a marriage to each other will be. Examining what the narrator says about Rosamond and Lydgate as individuals, as well as what she says about their arguments, demonstrates how Eliot's authorial narrator ultimately places the blame on society for their failure to communicate.

Like Dorothea, Rosamond has her own beliefs about marriage and herself. As seen before, beliefs are nothing but assumptions and Rosamond's inner thoughts are no exception. From the beginning, Rosamond has an image of what "falling in love" will be like (Eliot 76). Soon after Lydgate's arrival, Rosamond begins to fantasize about Middlemarch's new guest. The narrator observes her fascination and records,

Ever since that important new arrival in Middlemarch she had woven a little future... Strangers, whether wrecked and clinging to a raft, or duly escorted and accompanied by portmanteaus, have always had a circumstantial fascination for the virgin mind... And a stranger was absolutely necessary to Rosamond's social romance, which had always turned on a lover and bridegroom who was not a Middlemarcher, and who had no connections at all like her own: of late, indeed, the construction seemed to demand that he should somehow be related to a baronet... She judged of her own symptoms as those of awakening love, and she held it still more natural that Mr Lydgate should have fallen in love at first sight of her... And here was Mr Lydgate suddenly corresponding to her ideal. (Eliot 76)

Unfortunately, Rosamond's "ideal" is only based on her own imagination. Not only does this passage convey an ironic tone, but it is followed by an explanation of who Lydgate really is, which makes Rosamond's initial assumptions even more ironic. While Lydgate is a "stranger," he is not related to a baronet nor had he "fallen in love at first sight."

Either way, Rosamond imagines a role which Lydgate is meant to fill. Yet, unlike with Dorothea, the narrator reveals that Rosamond was not interested in who Lydgate was but instead in what role he would play for her. The narrator also observes this character trait and notes that Rosamond "was entirely occupied not exactly with Tertius Lydgate as he was in himself, but with his relation to her" (Eliot 107). As Casaubon only perceives the role of Dorothea in relation to himself and his life's work, so Rosamond only sees Lydgate's romantic purpose in relation to her position. This reveals to the reader Rosamond's tendency to distance herself from the reality of the situation by living in her own imagination and seeing the world only according to herself.

This disconnection is also seen in Rosamond's self-image. We have seen that Dorothea often fought against who she really was; On the contrary, Rosamond does not

fight against a sense of identity because she is unaware of what it is. The narrator describes her as “by nature an actress of parts that entered into her *physique*: she even acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own” (Eliot 75). Not only does Rosamond expect Lydgate to fulfill a romantic role, but she pictures herself “a romantic heroine...playing the part prettily” (Eliot 187). What Rosamond wants is not based on reality. The romantic love she imagines is only a concept from a fairytale. Therefore, there is no truth to Rosamond’s beliefs. She becomes a more foolish character than Dorothea because she is not striving to any specific self-image, but instead, playing whatever role she envisions in that moment.

The narrator again uses character perspectives from outside of the marriage to produce a sense of doubt. The reader begins to understand that the marriage of Rosamond and Lydgate will not be as blissful as Rosamond imagines it. Soon after the potential match of Rosamond and Lydgate makes its way into Middlemarch gossip, Rosamond’s aunt, Mrs. Bulstrode, hears of it. However, her reaction is not as positive as others. The narrator explains that she “had a sisterly faithfulness towards her brother’s family, and had two sincere wishes for Rosamond—that she might show a more serious turn of mind, and that she might meet with a husband whose wealth corresponded to her habits” (Eliot 107). The reader begins to predict that Rosamond’s accustomed lifestyle is not compatible with Lydgate’s. As the marriage becomes a more concrete possibility, Mrs. Bulstrode attempts to express her concern to her niece. She states,

‘Oh, my dear, be more thoughtful...Remember you are turned twenty-two now, and you will have no fortune: your father, I am sure, will not be able

to spare you anything. Mr. Lydgate is very intellectual and clever; I know there is an attraction to that. . . . But the profession is a poor one here. To be sure, this life is not everything; but it is seldom a medical man has true religious views—there is too much pride of intellect. And you are not fit to marry a poor man.’ (Eliot 186)

The narrator uses the opinions of Mrs. Bulstrode to build an opposing side that is from more earthly matter than Rosamond’s. Her aunt’s perspective allows the narrator to foreshadow marital issues as well as invites them to contemplate the possibility of future financial distress. The narrator’s use of counter characters ultimately foreshadows her later assessment of the couple’s failure.

The narrator also uses specific diction when explaining each character’s state of mind which continues to foretell that with time, the truth will be revealed and the couple’s original beliefs will have to readjust themselves to a new reality. It is clear that like Dorothea and Casaubon, Rosamond and Lydgate create individual (yet separate) beliefs, hopes, and wishes regarding marriage and each other that only *seem* genuine. What is more important to note here is how Eliot uses irony to magnify the seriousness of any potential misunderstandings between the couple. Mrs. Bulstrode predicts that Rosamond’s usual living habits cannot be financially met with Lydgate’s salary. The narrator magnifies the growing issue by regularly showing the contradicting spending habits of the couple. For example, she observes, “Rosamond contented herself without the very highest style of embroidery and Valenciennes” (Eliot 221). She follows this with Lydgate’s present thoughts and actions, “Lydgate also, finding that his sum of eight hundred pounds had been considerably reduced since he had come to Middlemarch,

restrained his inclination for some plate of an old pattern which was shown to him” (Eliot 221). The irony lies in the comparison of the couple’s actions. While Rosamond is investing in the best and “highest style” of lace, Lydgate realizes his savings are disappearing and settles for an “old pattern.” Eliot uses her narrator’s observations to demonstrate individual differences and to widen the gap between each character’s lifestyles. While the couple ignores any pending financial issues, rushing into their marriage, it becomes clear their ironic and contradictory spending habits will cause later disagreements.

The anticipated issues become even more concrete when Lydgate’s nature, beliefs, and lifestyle are compared to Rosamond’s. At the start of the couple’s romance, Rosamond idolizes Lydgate and immediately pictures herself in love with him. As revealed above, she believes Lydgate’s point of view to be the same, assuming he has also fallen in love at first sight. However, the narrator provides a very different account of Lydgate through his inner thoughts. She states that Lydgate, “could not marry yet; he wished not to marry for several years; and therefore he was not ready to entertain the notion of being in love with a girl whom he happened to admire” (Eliot 105).

Rosamond’s imagined hopes are then moot when paired with Lydgate’s less urgent opinions of marriage. Yet, the narrator often reveals that Lydgate has “began to believe in her [Rosamond] as something exceptional” (Eliot 103). It is made clear that Lydgate’s opinions of Rosamond’s character, along with her determination to “capture” him, threaten to alter his initial decision to postpone marriage. The narrator maintains the

likelier possibility of marriage in her observation that Rosamond's character "seemed to have the true melodic charm" and "feminine radiance" that Lydgate hoped to marry (Eliot 60, 105). However, the narrator stresses that Rosamond only "seemed" to hold these attributes, further illustrating that Lydgate's beliefs are assumptions as well. When the engagement does happen, like Dorothea, his original beliefs are slowly deconstructed.

The narrator describes Lydgate as "an emotional creature, with a flesh-and-blood sense of fellowship," who is "young, poor, ambitious" (Eliot 93, 61). She also reveals that Lydgate had "always known in a general way that he was not rich, but he had never felt poor, and he had no power of imagining the part which the want of money plays in determining the actions of men. Money had never been a motive to him" (Eliot 114). When compared to Rosamond's dependency on money, Lydgate's lack of desire for it continues to predict future issues. When compared to Rosamond's belief, Lydgate's character contradicts her notion of a wealthy foreigner come to save her from her fellow provincial Middlemarchers. The reality becomes even clearer when the reader finds a man of earthly "flesh-and-blood." The opposing images along with the wrongful assumptions of each other's characters paint the probability of miscommunication. In addition, the narrator's commentary after the couple's marriage shows how this possibility becomes a reality.

After the marriage, the narrator's observations reveal Rosamond and Lydgate's slow and painful realization that their marriage is not the pleasurable experience they hoped it to be. The similar conscious transformation that happens to Dorothea and

Casaubon happens to Rosamond and Lydgate. Only a few months into married life and Rosamond “had begun to associate her husband with feelings of disappointment and the terribly inflexible relation of marriage had lost its charm of encouraging delightful dreams” and for both, the illusions were replaced with “everyday details” that had to be “lived through slowly...not floated through with a rapid selection of favourable aspects” (Eliot 409). The slow awareness of reality occurs again, but most importantly, a one-sided marriage seems to form. Like Casaubon, Rosamond is unmoving and like Dorothea, Lydgate finds himself having constantly to adjust his actions. He comes to the realization that

his marriage would be a mere piece of bitter irony if they could not go on loving each other...The first great disappointment had been borne: the tender devotedness and docile adoration of the ideal wife must be renounced, and life must be taken up on a lower stage of expectation, as it is by men who have lost their limns...In marriage, the certainty, ‘She will never love me much,’ is easier to bear than the fear, ‘I shall love her no more.’ Hence, after that outburst, his inward effort was entirely to excuse her. (Eliot 403)

The narrator shows the reader Lydgate’s gradual understanding of his wife’s character. Soon after Lydgate reveals their financial trouble, Rosamond becomes extremely upset, unable to understand, and unwilling to compromise peacefully. The narrator notes Lydgate’s ability to understand Rosamond’s point of view as reason for his inability to blame his wife for their financial problems. Lydgate is often seen “moderating his words” to avoid upsetting Rosamond further (412). As a result, a lack of communication grows, creating a larger distance between the two. Lydgate gives all of himself but his emotional needs are never met. His original amusement in “calling himself her captive, meaning, all

the while, not to be her captive” becomes ironic after he discovers that Rosamond “had mastered him” (Eliot 169, 413).

An adjustment in Rosamond’s character is not found, which leads to the obvious conclusion that the relationship is one-sided. This is also evident in the narrator’s study of silent communication between Rosamond and Lydgate. There are few moments of successful communication, but the two that do occur provide a more peaceful state of understanding between the couple. While the reader and narrator observe these moments of clarity, they still demonstrate the one-sided and difficult nature of the marriage. The first scenario leads to the couple’s engagement. Lydgate’s decision to wait for marriage creates a worrisome Rosamond, who impatiently awaits his proposal, becoming confused by his sudden lack of company. When Lydgate does return Rosamond begins to cry provoking him to ask what is wrong. The narrator remarks, “There could have been no more complete answer than that silence, and Lydgate, forgetting everything else, completely mastered by the outrush of tenderness at the sudden belief that this sweet young creature depended on him for her joy” (Eliot 190). The silent moment of understanding is one-sided. Rosamond ends up getting what she wants, but Lydgate must go against his initial life plan in order to make Rosamond happy. The narrator then acknowledges, “This was a strange way of arriving at an understanding, but it was a short way” (Eliot 190). While it seems important to note that the couple reaches an “understanding,” the narrator also wants the reader to see that it is at the expense of Lydgate’s initial plan. She uses irony to maintain a small sense of doubt even in this rare

moment of clarity. However, this “strange” form of silent, emotional communication does not explain the logic behind Lydgate’s initial decision against marriage.

The second moment of clear communication is soon after the when Will Ladislaw mistreats Rosamond. She is clearly distressed and when Lydgate returns home in the hopes that he can communicate their financial problems to her,

his perception that she was ill threw every other thought into the background. When he felt her pulse, her eyes rested on him with more persistence than they had done for a long while, as if she felt some content that he was there. He perceived the difference in a moment, and seating himself by her put his arm gently under her...Clinging to him she fell into hysterical sobbing and cries, and for the next hour he did nothing but soothe and tend her. He imagined that Dorothea had been to see her, and that all this effect on her nervous system, which evidently involved some new turning towards himself, was due to the excitement of the new impressions which that visit had raised. (Eliot 481)

Both examples show the narrator’s recognition that silence and body language are equally successful modes of communication. Yet, in both circumstances, Lydgate has to push aside his initial intentions in order to meet Rosamond’s needs. In the first, he must marry sooner than he wanted and in the second, he pushes aside what he planned to tell Rosamond in order to submit to her needs. In both, he misjudges why Rosamond is upset, but still successfully reads her body language. He correctly judges her emotional state, and adjusts his own actions to fulfill her needs. Unfortunately, Lydgate’s ability to reconnect with Rosamond seems to be out of his own acceptance that his marriage will always be one-sided. All his initial assumptions about marriage will never be met, but he continues to tend to Rosamond, finding little relief in his love for her and recognizing “that because she came short in her sympathy, he must give her more” (Eliot 468).

As the narrator provides both Dorothea's and Casaubon's perspectives within their unhappy marriage, the reasons for conflict between Rosamond and Lydgate are also revealed. The narrator maintains an unbiased opinion in order to invite the reader to a similar position. The reader becomes annoyed with Rosamond's stubborn and naïve character and begins to see her careless spending as the cause for her failing marriage. Eliot anticipates this reaction and uses her narrator to address the reader accordingly. The narrator states, "Think no unfair evil of her, pray: she had no wicked plots, nothing sordid or mercenary; in fact, she never thought of money except as something necessary which other people would always provide" (Eliot 169). When paired with the recognition that Rosamond's spending habit was in accordance with "the family habits and traditions, so that the children had no standard of economy, and the elder ones retained some of their infantine notion that their father might pay for anything if he would," it becomes evident that Rosamond is not to blame for any financial issues (Eliot 146). While her parents influence can be to blame, their flaws are molded by the higher power of social conventions; therefore, so are Rosamond's. The narrator fosters an apologetic tone for Rosamond's naivety. Her defensive statement explains the socially constructed reasons for Rosamond's actions and encourages the reader to reach a justifiable, sympathetic understanding of Rosamond in even her most unlikeable moments.

As for Lydgate, the narrator stresses, "The man was still in the making... and there were both virtues and faults capable of shrinking or expanding. The faults will not, I hope, be a reason for the withdrawal of your interest in him" (Eliot 96). Once again, Eliot

knows there is a possibility the reader will dislike Lydgate's "faults," so she uses the narrator's outside perspective to encourage the reader to not hold him accountable for his frequent mistakes. The narrator insists that any observer should not pick sides without first understanding the reasons for Rosamond's or Lydgate's disagreeable behavior. Her neutral position allows the reader and herself to place the blame on the larger force of society.

As society is to blame for Dorothea's and Casaubon's difficulties, the different belief systems it produces are to blame for Rosamond and Lydgate's unhappy union. The narrator and reader recognize that "Between him and her indeed there was that total missing of each other's mental track," but neither are at fault for it (Eliot 363). The narrator remarks, "Poor Lydgate! Or shall I say, Poor Rosamond! Each lived in a world of which the other knew nothing" (Eliot 106). This passing recognition is important because it does not place the fault on either member of the marriage. The separation of worlds is a separation of class, and class, along with the social rules each one contains, are, as Spencer and Eliot often point out, concepts created by society. All of Rosamond's and Lydgate's misled beliefs are influenced by the numerous concepts that are constructed by their society. Therefore, to Rosamond, it only "seemed to her" that no situation "could be so cruelly hard as hers" and to the outside observer, no situation could be more impossibly hopeless than Lydgate's (Eliot 467).

The narrator illustrates both sides and places the blame for Rosamond's nonexistent consideration of the value of money on her upbringing, which causes her

inability to see outside of herself. She then places the fault of Lydgate's indifference to money on his passion for his lower-paying work, which causes his inability to fulfill Rosamond's ideal role of a husband. Sadly, these conflicting concepts of preferable lifestyles are dictated by societal rules and lead the narrator to believe that "we cannot be sure that any natures, however inflexible or peculiar, will resist this effect from a more massive being than their own" (Eliot 468). Therefore, Rosamond was never able to meet Lydgate halfway. The narrator concludes that it was not due to a lack of effort that, "The beginning of mutual understanding and resolve seemed as far off as ever" (Eliot 468). Rather, the couple, "lived on from day to day with their thoughts still apart, Lydgate going about what work he had in a mood of despair, and Rosamond feeling, with some justification, that he was behaving cruelly" (Eliot 468).

Just like Dorothea and Casaubon, Rosamond and Lydgate do not find peace through communication. Instead, society remains the antagonist of their relationship until its end. Rosamond is from one of the wealthier families of the town. She has been educated and brought up accustomed to a wealthier lifestyle like her family before her. Yet, as explained above, it is not Rosamond's family who is to blame. She is only following what she was shown throughout her childhood. The society and culture she was raised in never taught her how to adjust to a lower-income household or how to recognize the need to do this. The reader then sees that the blame is not on Rosamond's family or Rosamond herself. It is society that has molded Rosamond's naïve beliefs and actions. Society is what influences Rosamond's own opinions of her self-image as well as her

marriage to Lydgate. It is society that also plays a role in Lydgate's personal values. As previously stated, Lydgate does not believe wealth is as necessary for happiness in life. Instead, his passion lies with his work. Each within the marriage is from a different society, influenced by different customs, causing their inability to communicate within their marriage.

The narrator uses the above couples to demonstrate how society becomes the antagonist through the differences it fosters in each character. Eliot and her narrator know how important it is to examine all threads of this web, so they make sure to demonstrate other, less negative reactions to society's influences. The first two couples demonstrate the negative influences of society, but Mary and Fred demonstrate what happens when both individuals in a marriage understand the ways society works. In response, both maintain a strong sense of self and each other by avoiding society's misleading tendencies.

Mary & Fred

Unlike the previous couples, Mary Garth and Fred Vincy stay true to themselves and each other. As a result, Eliot's narrator is not needed as much. Both characters replace her narrator's sociological voice of reason. With the first two couples there is a significant inability to communicate. The narrator is then required to *show* readers why through her study of each character's perspective. However, in-depth explanations of Mary and Fred's interactions are rarely required. Neither have serious issues telling each other their true feelings or thoughts, neither stray from committing to their true selves, and neither rush into marriage without first ensuring they communicate their expectations with one another. Mary and Fred serve as the foil for the other couples because they do not fall victim to society's antagonistic tendencies. The amount of dialogue between the couple demonstrates their ability to talk with one another, which simultaneously limits the need for the narrator's explanation of their individual states of mind.

While the narrator exposes society as the antagonist of the other marriages, Eliot replaces her narrative voice with the characters of Mary and Fred to take a similar swipe at society from a first-person point of view within the novel itself. It is seen through the other characters that Eliot's intention for her narrator is to bring her readers closer to her study of provincial life. Eliot manipulates the characters of Mary, Fred, Mr. Garth, and Mrs. Garth to project her own sociological opinions that the narrator previously expressed. Just as Langbaum explains, once the reader is asked to sympathize with a new

point of view, the reader's relationship to any other character is placed on standby. Once these four characters replace the narrator's voice, the reader's relationship to the novel changes as well. Eliot relies on her narrator to guide readers through various perspectives, but she uses these characters to produce an even stronger bond between the reader and her novel. She ensures that her narrator is a constant guide, but once guided by the narrator, readers find themselves directly in the novel itself through the first-person perspectives of these four characters. While they still may need the narrator to guide them through a few of these characters' inward beliefs, most of them are openly stated by these characters, creating a stronger bond between the reader and the actions of the novel.

Mary's honesty is seen through her blunt and sometimes hurtful statements to Fred. Yet, she knows who she is and often finds Middlemarch citizens foolish in their conflicting beliefs. As for Fred, he knows he loves Mary and is willing to find a career that will make them both happy. He takes Mary's straightforward opinions into consideration and factors in his own happiness when contemplating his prospective career. He is also aware that his own happiness is vital for the couple's future success. Both understand how society works and both avoid its misleading nature. They accomplish this by listening to their own needs as well as to each others' wishes.

Through the examination of the couple's dialogue and the narrator's use of perspective, it is evident that Eliot wanted to demonstrate all sides of a community. Mary and Fred serve as another side to Eliot's and her narrator's study by demonstrating a couple who achieves marital happiness. Mary is a product of her upbringing. Therefore,

the narrator's examination of her parents' commentary allows the reader to see a family who acts according to their understanding that society's often leads others into false generalizations. Not only do the Garths influence the way Mary sees the world, but their understanding also influences the expansion of Fred's understanding of society. This couple enables Eliot to explain how society can create cohesion as much as it can create discrepancies, but only if both individuals understand themselves and do not permit the interference of social conventions.

Mary is a unique character when compared to Dorothea and Rosamond because she is more synchronized with her inner beliefs. If Mary is ever contradicted she soundly defends her actions or beliefs with valid and logical reasons. Her character then becomes prideful, self-confident, and headstrong. However, Eliot does not let these traits shed Mary in a negative light. Mary's personal opinions further demonstrate her ability to stay true to her upbringing along with her inner self by clearly communicating her true wants, beliefs, and needs. This ability can be observed in her interactions with other characters, but most importantly in her dialogue with Fred.

Mary's personal understanding of how her society works mirrors Eliot's own understanding of society's functionality. Unlike Dorothea and Rosamond, who fall victim to their fantasies, Mary is very much in the real world. As soon as Mary is introduced into the action of the novel, the narrator comments on her character,

Rembrandt would have painted her with pleasure, and would have made her broad features look out of the canvas with intelligent honesty. For honesty, truth-telling fairness, was Mary's reigning virtue: she neither tried to create illusions, nor indulged in them for her own behoof, and

when she was in a good mood she had humour enough to laugh at herself.
(Eliot 73)

In order really to paint Mary as a foil to the other women, the narrator provides an “on the contrary” explanation for her character in comparison to Rosamond Vincy (Eliot 72). By comparing the two characters in a single moment, Eliot’s narrator produces an even bigger contrast between each individual’s inner thoughts. Mary’s “honesty” contrasts the other, less-honest and romantic-minded women of the novel. The narrator further comments on how Mary’s personal opinions are shaped by her parents’ understanding of the world, exposing the possibility that Mary could have been “cynical if she had not had parents whom she honoured” (Eliot 197-98). She continues on to reveal Mary’s inner thoughts,

people were so ridiculous with their illusions, carrying their fool’s caps unawares, thinking their own lies opaque while everybody else’s were transparent, making themselves exceptions to everything, as if when all the world looked yellow under a lamp they alone were rosy. (Eliot 198)

Mary’s personal feelings towards those who do fantasize provide an answer as to why she does not participate in this common tendency to falsely assume. As the novel progresses, Mary’s refusal to meddle with personal “illusions” continues; she does not value the selfish, illusory qualities of others. This creates a character whose borderline “cynical” attitude reveals an individual who is loyal to her own honest and more realistic beliefs.

The narrator also takes into consideration that her readers may have formed personal attachments towards the characters Mary harshly finds “ridiculous” (Eliot 198). As a result, the narrator provides more likeable validations for Mary’s opinions. This

ensures a reader does not feel personally insulted for their preference of any character who does indulge in illusions. She states, “Yet she [Mary] liked her thoughts: a vigorous young mind not overbalanced by passions, finds a good in making acquaintance with life, and watches its own powers with interest. Mary had plenty of merriment within” (Eliot 198). Mary’s passionate and prideful opinions then become justifiable because they allow her to successfully maintain inner-happiness. The reader sees Mary as a favorable character who makes “acquaintance with life” by understanding it and choosing to be happy in the reality of it. She does not deny herself worldly happiness by living in accordance to self-created illusions. On the contrary, she bases opinions of herself and of others in reality, ensuring she will never set herself up for disappointment. Mary’s honest character not only guarantees her own happiness, but also fosters a healthy habit of open communication with others. When it comes to Mary and Fred, the reader never witnesses miscommunication because Mary avoids any illusions that create them.

As for Mary’s honest opinions of Fred, they do not stray from her truthful nature. She openly expresses her impression of him to him and to those close to him. The narrator makes it evident that Mary does not wish to dabble in a romanticized image of Fred. When she speaks with Rosamond, Fred’s career is mentioned. As Rosamond is complaining about her brother’s idleness in accepting a position as a clergyman Mary states, ““He is not fit to be a clergyman.”” In response Rosamond says, ““But he ought to be fit.”” Mary’s retorts, ““Well then, he is not what he ought to be. I know some other people who are in the same case”” (Eliot 74). Her response to Rosamond’s opinion of

what Fred “ought” to be reflects Mary’s refusal to fall victim to the false notions which frequently mislead all those who surround her. Since Mary and Fred have grown up together, it is safe to say that she understands who he is. She knows he will be happy in a career that satisfies the type of person he is instead of in a position that he “ought to be fit” for.

Mary’s numerous voiced-refusals to accept anyone less than honest, selfless, and hardworking, make her seem to be the only opinionated individual within this relationship. While it may seem that Fred is lost without Mary’s guiding opinions, it is evident that Mary sees the honest potential of Fred’s character and seeks to encourage what is already there. She intends to set right all the “sense and knowledge” he already has in order to make him “respectable” (Eliot 321). The narrator understands the reader may assume that Fred was raised similarly to Rosamond and will never be able to be the honest man Mary wants him to be. However, Fred is a truthful man, and although he struggles to tell or commit to the truth, he understands it is the best way to maintain an honest and happy life. With Mary’s and her family’s guidance, Fred finds the strength to stand behind a career that suits him in order to secure a happy and stable future with Mary.

When Fred’s discussions with others are examined, the reader finds a character that is just as true to himself as Mary is to herself. For example, at the start of the novel, when Rosamond expresses that he makes himself disagreeable he responds, ““I don’t make myself disagreeable; it is you who find me so. Disagreeable is a word that describes

your feelings and not my actions” (Eliot 64). Like Mary, Fred understands the concept of belief. He knows a belief often “describes feelings” of the one who is judging, but does not properly or realistically explain another’s true actions. He is sure of who he is and does not allow others to shape this image. Anyone can argue that his initial uncertainty or lack of direction demonstrates a character who cannot communicate any more than the other characters of *Middlemarch*. However, the reader soon sees that the societal pressure for Fred to become a clergyman is what creates the conflict. Fred’s ability to communicate who he really is and to understand himself is not altered. There are many instances where the narrator reveals Fred’s displeasure with all he is expected to do. When waiting to receive money from Mr. Featherstone, the narrator reveals that “He [Fred] held himself to be a gentleman at heart, and did not like courting an old fellow for his money” (Eliot 86). Eliot understands the reader may assume Fred, like his sister, expects money to be handed to him. In response, the narrator makes sure the reader finds an honest, selfless man who dislikes all that he “ought” to be.

Fred’s ability to stay true to himself is also seen in his open communication with his father. He struggles with his wishes because it contradicts all that his family wants him to be. Yet he knows becoming a clergyman would be a mistake considering, “I don’t like divinity, and preaching, and feeling obliged to look serious. I like riding across country, and doing as other men do...I’ve no taste for the sort of thing people expect of a clergyman” (Eliot 318). Instead of committing to an image he would never be able to fulfill, Fred commits to a career where he can do all the “country” things he enjoys.

Despite knowing his father's "higher" intentions for his son will be disappointed, Fred enters into an apprenticeship under Mr. Garth in order to remain faithful to himself. He discusses his concern with Mr. Garth before telling his father, "I am very sorry to disappoint him, but a man ought to be allowed to judge for himself...How could I know when I was fifteen, what it would be right for me to do now?" (Eliot 348). Similar to Mary, Fred understands the flaws in a society that have affected him. Fred's justifiable complaint is what deconstructs his society's educational expectation for a boy of fifteen to know exactly what he will like once he is an adult. The narrator then uses Fred's perspective to ensure the reader also questions the initial social standard in which Fred was educated by. As Mary avoids any potential disappointments due to illusions, Fred avoids any disappointing career that others believe he "ought" to take. He shares this belief with his father in order to strongly defend his career choice. Mr. Vincy expresses his belief that his son has "thrown away" his education and therefore, has "gone down a step in life" (Eliot 351). In response to his father's expected disapproval Fred states, "I am very sorry that we differ, father. I think I can be quite as much of a gentleman at the work I have undertaken" (Eliot 351). This statement clarifies what many wealthier, middle-class individuals, like Mr. Vincy, believe a gentleman should be. It becomes ironic when compared to the reality of what a gentleman is. The irony lies in the fact that the "lowly" work Fred chooses is more honorable than the more respected work of a clergyman. Mr. Vincy's discriminatory opinion is typical of his social standing, but is deconstructed by the fact that the "lower-class" work Fred has chosen is more honest than

the work of his father. The irony that lies in the socially-constructed beliefs is seen in this couple's dialogue rather than in the narrator's commentary. As a result, the dialogue serves as proof of Eliot's ability to create characters who remain true to all that they are and find success in marital happiness by avoiding what society believes they should be.

The dialogue between the couple further demonstrates why and how they are able to reach marital bliss through the avoidance of societies influence. Mary and Fred are able to follow their inner voices and honestly communicate with each other in order to keep a constant understanding of each other's needs. The expression "I think" is often used in this dialogue, demonstrating the couple's success in expressing each other's opinions. When Fred asks for Mary's thoughts on marriage she tells him what she honestly thinks. Fred starts the conversation,

"I shall never be good for anything, Mary, if you will not say that you love me—if you will not promise to marry me—I mean, when I am able to marry."

"If I did love you, I would not marry you: I would certainly not promise ever to marry you."

"I think that is quite wicked, Mary. If you love me, you ought to promise to marry me."

"On the contrary, I think it would be wicked in me to marry you even if I did love you."

"You mean, just as I am, without any means of maintaining a wife. Of course: I am but three-and-twenty."

"In that last point you will alter. But I am not so sure of any other alteration. My father says an idle man ought not to exist, much less, be married." (Eliot 89)

Mary and Fred state what they think and give each other personal reasons to back up their opinions. Nothing is left unsaid and as a result, they fully understand each other's wants and needs.

The narrator demonstrates how their success in communicating comes from experience; from growing up together and learning to read each other's body language to provide the other with what he or she emotionally needs in the moment. This is evident in Fred's confession of using Mrs. Garth's savings to settle a debt. Fred begins to tell to Mary, "I know you will never think well of me any more. You will think me a liar. You will think me dishonest. You will think I didn't care for you, or your father and mother." She responds with, "I cannot deny that I shall think all that of you, Fred, if you give me good reasons. But please to tell me at once what you have done. I would rather know the painful truth than imagine it," and Fred tells her the truth (Eliot 160). This conversation demonstrates Fred's ability to recognize Mary's sincere nature. She prefers honest communication, and he knows that telling the truth is best to ensure her happiness. The only way to maintain her respect is to be truthful. While the truth may make her unhappy, it is what Mary will value long-term. Although this is one of the couple's ugliest moments, the lasting outcome is a successfully trusting and honest relationship.

Mary also effectively responds to Fred in order to give him what he needs. While it is often seen that Mary is Fred's guide, there are moments where Fred reveals to Mary her own faults. Soon after the previous conversation, Mary agrees with Fred's negative opinions of himself. In response to her harsh agreement, Fred tells Mary, "And you think that I shall never try to make good anything, Mary. It is not generous to believe the worst of a man. When you have got any power over him, I think you might try and use it to make him better; but that is what you never do" (Eliot 161). Fred's honesty reveals to

Mary the hurtful nature of her judgments. Most importantly, Mary listens to him and recognizes the unfair pain her reaction is inflicting. She notes his ill complexion and asks him to sit; instantaneously changing her harsh words into the “half-soothing, half-beseeching tone” that Fred needs (Eliot 161). Just as Fred listens to Mary’s opinions to ensure her happiness as well as his own, Mary reads Fred’s wants and needs because they are openly expressed for her to perceive.

The interactions of the couple are easily read through dialogue. As a result, readers do not need the narrator to provide them with the couple’s inward reasons or personal opinions of each other. While each is from a different societal upbringing and disagreement is expected, their ability to communicate ensures society is never the reason for permanent miscommunication. Unlike the other Middlemarch couples, Fred and Mary are the combined voice of Eliot and her narrator. Through communication they remain in constant harmony with themselves and each other. Together, they demonstrate the result of a couple who understands the role society plays and its negative effect on the people within it. This acknowledgment is also seen through Mr. and Mrs. Garth’s perspectives.

Just as the narrator demonstrates how Rosamond and her parents are products of their class beliefs, the same applies to Mary and her family. The narrator uses Mr. and Mrs. Garth’s personal opinions to support Mary and Fred’s individual beliefs as well as to defend the couple’s actions. Their perspective strengthens Mary’s and Fred’s role as the opposing string that completes Eliot’s web of Middlemarch society.

Mr. and Mrs. Garth's opinions also reflect many of the sociological concepts that the narrator demonstrates through the misunderstandings of the other couples. They further exemplify the concept of belief and join Mary and Fred as foils who function in the reality of society by recognizing society's antagonistic relationship to those within it. As with Fred's and Mary's conversations, the sociological theories found in the narrator's commentary are replaced with Mr. and Mrs. Garth's conversations. The narrator no longer needs to *show* through her own opinions because the Garths openly state the ideas that are illustrated through the misunderstandings of other couples. Eliot allows the perspectives of the Garth's and Fred to speak for themselves in order to represent certain sociological points that the reader may not have realized through the lives of the other couples. Society has no effect on Mary and Fred because they understand its purpose. Therefore, there is little the narrator can say about this couple that they have not already revealed themselves.

Mr. Garth's as well as many of Mary's statements further exemplify Eliot's ability to utilize her concept of belief. It becomes clear that they think belief is a nonsensical concept in which many Middlemarchers foolishly indulge in. Yet, with the characters Dorothea, Casaubon, Rosamond, and Lydgate, the concept of belief is usually only a topic the narrator comments on. More importantly, Mr. Garth often discusses the ways of their world with his wife. In comparison to Eliot's demonstration of the separation of classes in the couple of Rosamond and Lydgate, many of his statements more obviously cover the topic of class within society. When discussing the possibility of

Fred working with Mr. Garth, Mrs. Garth reminds her husband, ““His father and mother wanted him to be a fine gentleman, and I think he has the same sort of feeling himself. They all think us beneath them”” (Eliot 255). The word choice within this response strongly demonstrates the Garths’ refusal to accept that they are below or above what others believe them to be. Rather, they acknowledge the way the world thinks and understand that the nature of Mr. Garth’s work is not “below” others, but that others only “think” his work is beneath theirs. The narrator does not need to comment on the flawed concept of belief when Mr. and Mrs. Garth simply discuss it amongst themselves. Caleb’s response to what other’s may “think” even shows his own refusal to accept these class beliefs. He states,

Life is a poor tale, if it is to be settled by nonsense of that sort...I call it improper pride to let fools’ notions hinder you from doing a good action. There’s no sort of work...that could ever be done well, if you minded what fools say. You must have it inside you that your plan is right, and that plan you must follow. (Eliot 255)

Like his daughter, Mr. Garth refuses to participate in “fools’ notions” since they only hinder an individual from following what he or she has “inside” that they believe is “right.” He knows society’s tendency to lead his neighbors into discriminatory notions which only prevents them from finding happiness with themselves and with life. As Mary’s father, he makes sure she avoids choices that will deny herself happiness. Both know that their “plan is right” and stick to it with more passion and less indecision than any other Middlemarch citizen (Eliot 255). Neither falls victim to foolish notions and, in

turn, they free themselves from any social concepts that may separate their actions from their inner selves. Eliot is manipulating characters to take over her narrator's function.

Mrs. Garth's opinions also often replace the narrator's and reveal the reason for miscommunication between Middlemarch couples. She comprehends how the actions of others inadvertently affect those around them. When Fred apologizes for the taking of her savings, Mrs. Garth quickly accepts his apology and states, "Yes, young people are usually blind to everything but their own wishes, and seldom imagine how much those wishes cost others'" (Eliot 355). When applied to all the couples, the reader finds this wise declaration to be true. Not just the "young people" of Middlemarch, but all citizens, with the exception of the Garth's, never consider how their personal beliefs influence their actions or how their self-driven actions affects those around them. Most cannot reach a proper understanding of each other because they cannot find harmony with themselves or their partners. However, they are not to blame. Just as Mrs. Garth does not blame Fred for not calculating others into his actions, Eliot does not blame any individual over the other for his or her selfish choices. Instead, Eliot and her narrator make sure society is to blame for the self-centered habit of Middlemarch characters. It is society which creates "fools' notions" and separates each couple from one another.

By implementing the perspectives of Mr. and Mrs. Garth, Eliot can effectively state what she tries so hard to illustrate through the unsuccessful marriages of the other couples. The successful love of Mary and Fred also contradicts the rest because they acknowledge what society can do and they understand the ways it can prevent their

happiness. They maintain open and honest communication with each other, adjusting their actions as well as choices to ensure their own as well as each other's marital happiness. The minor issues, arguments, and interactions of the couple are seen through dialogue instead of in the narrator's commentary which further demonstrates Mary and Fred's roles as foils to the previous couples. Mary and Fred's perspective (with the help of Mary's parents), separately and together, complete Eliot's web of society. The analyses of their points of view, in contrast to the narrator's analyses of the other couples, provide a more-complete sociological study of a provincial town.

Conclusion

By examining the narrator's study of the Middlemarch couples, one can see how Eliot intended *Middlemarch* to be a sociological study of provincial life. However, in order to perceive this, one must comprehend how Eliot uses her narrator to reflect her own Spencerian influenced concepts in order to foster a relationship between her readers and her novel. She uses her narrator to pick apart and guide readers through every point of view through the incorporation of sociological theories of belief and inward to outward action. Through the use of these theories, each character's individual value, belief, action, and interaction is studied to foster a broader sympathetic understanding of provincial life. Eliot is able to execute this study through her narrator's interfering opinions to expose how Middlemarch society influences the development an individual according to the socially-constructed beliefs of his or her class, gender, careers, or educational standing. Sympathy then plays a major role in the suspension of a reader's judgment in order to better grasp every point of view. Langbaum states, "In the same way, we understand the speaker...by sympathizing with him, and yet by remaining aware of the moral judgment we have suspended for the sake of understanding" (Langbaum 96). Therefore, sympathy is what "frees us," as the reader, "for the widest possible range of experience" (Langbaum 96). Eliot then uses sympathy throughout her narrator's commentary. Her narrator's use of phrases such as "Poor Mr. Casaubon!" or "Poor Lydgate!" ensures her readers sympathize with every character

Eliot uses her narrator not only to reflect her sociological worldview, but to create a constant emotional bond. The reader is able to form broader sympathetic understanding of Middlemarch society because her narrator guides them through the reasons behind each character's inability to communicate. The study of Middlemarch couples is key in seeing how society is to blame for any conflict. While Fred and Mary maintain an honest and happy relationship, Dorothea and Casaubon's as well as Rosamond and Lydgate's fail to communicate due to their individual differences. The narrator's invitation to examine each couple permits the reader to see the reasons behind each couple's ability or inability to reach marital harmony. Yet, since the narrator justifies each character's personal flaws by showing how or why they developed, the blame of conflict on something much larger, society. The narrator's justification for each character strengthens the argument that society is the sole antagonist.

This third-person narrative is not an uncommon convention for Victorian novelists; however, the purpose of Eliot's heterodiegetic narrator is what separates her from the rest. The sociological concepts incorporated in the narrator's study of Middlemarch link Eliot to the changing times of nineteenth-century England. It is evident that, in one way, Eliot is no different from her fellow Victorian novelists in her aim to continue, through her writing to inspire further change by "inspiring readers to transform their own notions" (Warhol xii). Her "authorial narrator" serves as the sociological voice of her author to unravel the complex web of *Middlemarch* and simultaneously guide readers to a larger understanding of how provincial society works. When one examines

the underlying Spencerian theories that Eliot's narrator uses, the novel becomes a *sociological* study of provincial life instead of simply *A Study of Provincial Life*.

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Notes

¹ Eliot's *Middlemarch* was serialized in bi-monthly sections. It was published from 1871-1872.

² Heterodiegetic is later defined in relation to Nünning's, "On the Perspective Structure of Narrative Texts: Steps Toward a Constructivist Narratology." However, it is defined in the back of the collection, *New Perspectives on Narrative Perspective*, as "a narrator who tells a story not about him-/herself;" usually, in third-person narrative form (Chatman & Van Peer 357). Refer to endnote xiii to see how Nünning relates this definition to his definition of "authorial narrator."

³ Ansgar Nünning borrows from F.K Stanzel's definition of authorial narrator:

'authorial narration,' one does encounter an omniscient and usually omnipresent narrator endowed with an individuated perspective. Such a heterodiegetic, overt, and personalized narrator surveys the whole of the action, he conventionally knows everything, and the values he propounds provide a normative standard according to which all the character-perspectives are judged. (219)

This definition was borrowed from Stanzel's *A Theory of Narrative* (1979). Also refer to endnote ii.

⁴ A brief list of Spencer's sociologically relevant works are, *Social Statics: or, The Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified, and the First of Them Developed* (1851), *Principles of Psychology* (1855), *Principles of Psychology* in two volumes (1870, 1880), *The Study of Sociology* (1873, 1896), *Principles of Sociology* (1874-75, 1879, 1896), *Descriptive Sociology; or Groups of Sociological Facts* (1873-1881), and "Mill vs. Hamilton: The Test of Truth" (1865). Each is important in tying Eliot to sociology. However, I will mainly use *Social Statics*, *Principles of Psychology*, *Principles of Sociology* and the article, "Mill vs. Hamilton: The Test of Truth," since they were published prior or close to *Middlemarch*.

⁵ Gordon Haight wrote Mary Ann Evan's biography as well as edited the volumes of her letters. He often comments on the nature of her relationship with Spencer, as well as discusses the missing letters of the two.

⁶ These letters were dated 4 Oct. 1851, 6 March 1852, and 2 March 1854 respectively. Her involvement in sociology was decades before the publication of Book I in 1871.

⁷ Haight's footnote states:

Spencer was as good as his word. *Principles of Psychology*, 1855, p. 162: "I ought here to mention that some year and a half since, in the course of a conversation in which the axiom—'Things that coexist with the same thing coexist with each other,' was referred to; it was remarked by a distinguished lady—the translator of Strauss and Feuerbach—that perhaps a better axiom would be—'Things that have a constant relation to the same thing have a constant relation to each other.'" In the 2nd, 1872, and subsequent editions, though no longer believing that a formula with only three terms could express ordinary ratiocinations, Spencer kept his acknowledgement to the "distinguished lady—the translator of Strauss and Feuerbach (now universally known as George Eliot)." (New York, 1893, II, 107-108.)

⁸ Joseph Adamson, Hilary Clark, and Joseph D. Lichtenberg are others who analyze from a psychoanalytic perspective by discussing how the characters' inner emotions such as shame, pride, sympathy, and empathy effect their outer actions.

⁹ Spencer often discusses the concepts of philosopher, John Stuart Mill. i.e. the article "Mill vs. Hamilton: The Test of Truth." Spencer's term, "expediency philosophy," is a term which refers to Mill's philosophy of ethics which often raises questions of morality, duty, and expediency within society as well as within society's politics.

¹⁰ By "This," Carroll is referring to the space Eliot creates "where the mind meets the outer world" (78).

¹¹ The use of web imagery is found in The Norton Edition of *Middlemarch* on pages 15, 91, 189, 216, and 510.

¹² This quote was in relation to Lydgate's personal realization that his generalizations concerning the marriage of Dorothea and Casaubon were entirely wrong. The narrator is successfully showing how this tendency to generalize is a flaw of human habit.

¹³ Nünning defines the authorial narrator-perspective in relation to character perspectives:

The authorial narrative situation usually involves a hierarchical arrangement of perspectives, with the character- perspectives being embedded in the narrator-perspective and with the narrator functioning as a controlling, coordinating, and integrating instance. Often, an authorial narrator is particularly interested in (and amused by) what the characters think, feel, believe they know, or do not know. (220)

¹⁴ Nünning uses Marie-Laure Ryan's definition from *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*, (1991) in order to better define his own definition of "constructivist narratology."

¹⁵ What I mean by "sympathetic perspective" is Eliot's ability to provide the reader with in-depth descriptions of all Middlemarchers that encourage a reader's sympathy for each character's situation or inner state of mind.