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Critics note that amidst the many characters in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, perhaps the most memorable one remains George Eliot, the pen-named narrator herself. Ostensibly omniscient, Eliot (Mary Evans) intrudes into the narrative to an extent mostly unseen in twentieth-century novels. Frequently, Eliot pierces the fictional dream of her novel with first person and even second person rhetoric, declarations, allusions, and metaphors. With the exception of the rogue ruffian Mr. Raffles, the surface of the novel is placid—like the soothing splash of an oar, enjoyed by Lydgate in repose. However, Eliot plumbs the depths of her narrative voice by commenting upon characters and relating them to the world of metaphor. In these moments, the novel has a poetic pathos, and then even an oracular quality. Eliot stirs timeless depths.

Characters such as Dorothea, Casaubon, and Lydgate suffer from universal maladies—idealism unwittingly wedded to a more limited reality, and the passing of ambitions private and passionate, unlamented by others. But many of the exterior pressures on these characters could seem perishable as old pears, dated to a more reserved Victorian era. For instance, twenty year-old Dorothea does not revel in some pretty jewels offered to her by her sister, Celia. She brandishes a nun's hesitancy and stringency: "All the while her thought was trying to justify her delight in the colours by merging them in her mystic religious joy." (9) Beyond this moment, Dorothea's wedded devotion to Casaubon seems oddly corseted, even "child-like" (46). Sensual love never captures her imagination. Instead, she longs to find access to an intellectual world too often denied to women of that era. Dorothea resembles a Virgin Mary painted by an old master; Casaubon has the sexuality and charisma of a closed book.

Lydgate's chilled wooing of Rosamond, meanwhile, seems furtive and ephemeral. He seems to realize he is in love. But on the page, the reader never encounters palpable camaraderie between him and Rosamond. Of Rosamond, Lydgate had "found it delightful to be listened to by a creature who would bring him the sweet furtherance of satisfying affection—beauty—repose—such help as our thoughts get from the summer sky and the flower-fringed meadows." (340) Eliot knows how to write more tangible romances, as seen in the charmed bantering of homely but emotionally vivacious Mary Garth, and her good-natured but graceless blonde troubadour, Fred Vincy.

Yet Eliot elaborates upon the subtleties of pious Dorothea's psychology, and then Lydgate's fascination with the high calling of science. In this way, their initial marital devotions, neutered and blinded, begin to seem quite reasonable—even if musty Casaubon and prim, shallow Rosamond hardly allure many modern readers. Dorothea's lack of cynicism earns the ardent devotion of Casaubon's cousin: cynical, wayward Will Ladislaw. And Eliot writes of Lydgate's love of biological science with an unusual tenderness, which belies his clinical profession. He seeks love in his work and simple admiration from his wife. Here, with subtlety Eliot marries her penchant for metaphor with Lydgate's point-of-view: "No man, one sees, can understand and estimate the entire structure of its parts—what are its frailties and what are its repairs, without the nature of its material." (140) Eliot, the novelist, and Lydgate, her creation, merge: both seek to find the depth of focus attained by the minutest lenses. Eliot's body of study is literature and its animating spirit.

A more expansive metaphor further highlights Eliot's keen, incisive scientific studies. She often opens chapters with metaphors that frame the pettier trials of the

narrative, and give the story proper distance from its audience. Chapter 27, for instance, opens with a metaphor offered directly by the narrator: “Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be scratched by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination...the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun...The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent...” (251) This metaphor is scientifically true: Lydgate could have dog-eared it in one of his books. At the same time, the narrator describes the art of the novel itself, taking the random events of life and giving them order so that the reader can come to an understanding of unusual depth. The reader knows that the narrator illuminates certain moments and events to reveal the true nature of human relationships—their rationalizations, motivations and disappointments.

Indeed, the text of *Middlemarch* provides the connective material for its less than omniscient fictional community. Eliot’s written words are like currency, creating interchange between diverse characters. She constructs parallel characters who don’t realize they are polarities: Rosamond and Mary; Bulstrode and Caleb Garth; Fred and Casaubon. For a novel about one community’s unseen internal connectivity, one framing metaphor seems especially apt: “When the animals entered the ark in pairs, one may imagine that allied species made much private remark on each other...the same sort of temptation befell the Christian Carnivora who formed Peter Featherstone’s funeral procession.” (315) A phantom, biblical Ark waits at a feisty old Englishman’s funeral. The narrator includes all of us in this metaphorical boat.

In *Middlemarch*, a broader social undercurrent rushes just beneath the shimmering subtleties of well-to-do characters in the English countryside. A spirited narrative voice propels us along this current. In the end, the narrator is not merely intrusive, but all-inclusive: "...the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs." (799) George Eliot leads the blind reader back from the common current of death to life, the pages of her novel. Here her narration often pushes away from the intricate but narrow channels of plot. Eliot shows us a surprising vista of life. Her voice has many octaves; her characters, a common pulse, beating restlessly even within Victorian constraints.