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Eliot's Use of Contemporary Political Events in Middlemarch

Sara Winstead
Western Kentucky University

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ELIOT'S USE OF CONTEMPORARY
POLITICAL EVENTS IN MIDDLEMARCH

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in English

by
Sara C. Winstead
May 1979

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ELIOT'S USE OF CONTEMPORARY
POLITICAL EVENTS IN MIDDLEMARCH

Recommended April 18, 1979
(Date)

Roy W. Miller
Director of Thesis

Charmaine Allmar Massey

James Flynn

Approved April 23, 1979
(Date)

Elmer Gray
Dean of the Graduate College

discussion of the background provided by the times. In a paper dealing with the political elements of a novel, this aspect of research is particularly important. To aid the reader in understanding Eliot's use of politics, Chapter I explains the political set-up in effect during the years covered by the action of Middlemarch and the events generated either by that situation or by efforts to alter the arrangement.

The novel itself provides the point of focus in Chapter II in determining Eliot's purpose for using political events. Each reference is studied to find what contribution it makes to the development of the story. Several events, such as the Reform Bill of 1832 and Catholic Emancipation, are referred to repeatedly; these running allusions are examined to see how they pertain to the overall idea of the novel.

Various critical and scholarly works on Middlemarch, George Eliot, and the Victorian period are utilized in Chapter III to reach a conclusion regarding the novel's right to be considered a valid political or historical novel of the times. This determination rests on other factors, including comparison with other political and historical literature of the period, both by George Eliot and by other authors.

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ELIOT'S USE OF CONTEMPORARY
POLITICAL EVENTS IN MIDDLEMARCH

Middlemarch was subtitled A Study in Provincial Life by its author, George Eliot, and by this device the reader is given early notice of the scope of the novel. The concerns of the period covered by the action of the work are depicted with such completeness and such clarity that many scholars consider Middlemarch to be a catalog of the Victorian era. References to all aspects of the culture, including the practices of society, the economic situation, and the activities of Parliament, are found in this novel, and the study of any one of these elements and its position in respect to the historical framework can be considered a worthwhile investment of time and scholarship.

Of particular interest is the relationship between Middlemarch and the actual political situation of the time. The time of the events of the book is 1829 to 1832, the period immediately preceding the enactment of the First Reform Bill. This important step toward greater equality for all English citizens plays an important role in Middlemarch; the turmoil surrounding this law is reflected by the characters of the novel. The present study is an effort to understand the purpose of

Eliot's many references to contemporary political events. Some examination will be made of the actual historical events and persons to which the references pertain. The specific references as they appear in the book will be discussed with particular attention to their contributions to the action and the characterizations. The critical viewpoints held by Victorian and Eliot scholars on the political element of Middlemarch will be considered, and some conclusions regarding the genre classification of the work will be drawn.

The entire Victorian period was marked by change. Traditions and beliefs that had served the English people for generations were being challenged by new scientific discoveries, new religious sects, and new directions in philosophical thought. The early part of the century, from 1800 to 1832, saw this change spread from the cities to the more remote rural areas; the people in all levels of society were having to adjust their minds and ways of life to accommodate themselves to this new approach. The feeling of being between two cultures, of watching as traditional ways fell aside for "new-fangled" practices resulted in uneasiness and doubt on the part of all people, and the Middlemarchers reflect their share of distress in this unsettled and unsettling situation.

The political system was a prime target for reform, and most of the references to contemporary public events can be connected to the national effort toward some measure of equality and stability in parliamentary and

economic matters. For the reader to understand better the purpose of these references, he must understand the actual political situation to some degree. From the Reform Bill of 1832, Catholic Emancipation, and Parliamentary activity to rotten boroughs, rick burning, and poaching laws, the entire period was marked by efforts to change the system; the system itself and those efforts at change will be examined in some detail.

Middlemarch itself will furnish the resources necessary to determine the purpose of Eliot's political references. The situation in which each comment appears will be studied, as will the function of the allusion in the overall purpose of the book. Reform and the political situation are seen by some scholars as major themes in the novel; these aspects will be considered in the light of the specific references. Throughout the study conclusions will be drawn regarding Eliot's intent in using references to contemporary political events; these conclusions will be based primarily on the references as they can be placed into an historical framework and secondarily on the opinions expressed by various critics.

Much of the criticism regarding the political aspect seems to range itself on one side or the other of the question of the classification by genre of Middlemarch. The designation of the work as a novel is never doubted, but its further consideration as a valid political or historical novel raises some opinions both for and against this particular designation. By weighing the

evidence presented by these scholars and by comparing the novel to certain established criteria and conventions, this paper will venture to draw its own conclusions regarding the classification of Middlemarch. Some of Eliot's other novels are widely acknowledged as political or historical novels; comparison of Middlemarch with those works will form part of the basis for this judgment.

This investigation has been undertaken with much the same attitude that one would approach a treasure hunt. Middlemarch provides such a broad coverage of the social, economic, and political tempers of the Victorian period that the serious student can dig anywhere and uncover more than he ever expected to find. As one vein, the contemporary politics of the period, is explored, other deposits are opened, each of which sheds more understanding on the book, the author, and the times. By concentrating on this one example of change as it appears in a provincial village, the student gains more insight into not only the inhabitants of that village, but the conditions of the country as a whole.

CHAPTER I

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

CHAPTER I

Walter E. Houghton in his book The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870 characterizes the feelings of the Victorian period as those of an age in transition, not part of the past or of the future, but a time of change from one to the other.¹ The recognition of this concept of being between the old and the new was unique with the Victorians; never before had civilization seen itself as a bridge between two worlds. The insecurity of the period is well portrayed by Matthew Arnold, who sees the Victorian people as living in an age of doubt, suspended between two worlds, one which is dying and one which is struggling to be born.²

All elements of life, both internal and external, reflected this change. Religious beliefs and practices that had been cornerstones for almost all people for generations were being challenged by scientific discoveries which demanded new methods of thinking and by groups such as the Dissenters who demanded new methods of worship. The way of life required by a strictly agrarian society was being challenged by the Industrial Revolution, a challenge which demanded that thousands leave the land and go to live and work in the cities. The control of wealth and prosperity by a tiny minority

at the expense of the majority was being challenged by changing moral consciousness which demanded that all men have at least enough food to survive. The exclusive rule and accepted superiority of the aristocracy was being challenged by a rising middle class made of newly-rich industrialists and merchants who demanded a greater opportunity for participation in government. Houghton sums up the Victorian situation in the following words:

By definition an age of transition in which change is revolutionary has a dual aspect: destruction and reconstruction. As the old order of doctrines and institutions is being attacked or modified or discarded, at one point and then another, a new order is being proposed or inaugurated.³

The high point of greatest accomplishment and the low point of greatest doubt and unrest in the Victorian period occur at roughly the same time, about the middle of the century. But the signs of change were evident as early as the time covered by Middlemarch. In his article "History by Indirection," Jerome Beaty places the action of the novel as occurring between September 30, 1829, and the end of May, 1832.⁴ Beaty bases his conclusion on the various historical events and references in the book. At this time, as is true throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, political activities can be grouped under the broad umbrella called Reform. In an effort to find a firm footing for their shifting world, the British people, from members of Parliament to menial laborers, were calling for changes in law that would accommodate

the changes in life that they were experiencing. The Reform Bill of 1832 was the first major effort toward political reconstruction that would reflect the new order.

The importance of the Reform Bill of 1832 cannot be overstated. According to G. C. Broderick in The History of England, this first law opened the way for all the reform actions that followed; without the broader representation allowed by the redistribution of voting franchises, any further political changes would have been impossible.⁵ To realize better the impact of this voting realignment, it is necessary to understand the electoral system as it existed before 1832.

The selection of representatives to the House of Commons had for generations rested in the hands of the wealthy county landowners. In a system which combined geographical divisions held over from the Middle Ages with abused and misused royal discretionary powers, the election of Parliamentary members was controlled by a very small minority of the people. This problem was most evident in connection with the representation from boroughs. A town which had the right to send two burgesses to the House of Commons was termed a borough, but this designation was given only through 1677. After that time no new boroughs were created, and no accommodation was devised for the shift in population which occurred with the industrialization of the north.⁶ The practice of "once a borough, always a borough" resulted

in the existence of "rotten" boroughs, districts made up of very few or no voters; the representation of these boroughs was put up for sale to the highest bidder or reserved for some young man known by the proprietor. No real consideration was made regarding qualification, interest, or administration of a public trust.

The Reform Bill of 1832 sought to change this system of selection in two ways: through expanded voting privileges and through a more equitable distribution of representation. While suffrage was not granted to all citizens, it was broadened considerably. Not only did freeholders maintain the right to vote, but also copyholders, those holding tenure of property which could be proven by written records, and leaseholders gained a franchise. By the move which allowed all those householders paying rent or rate of ten pounds or more annually to become qualified voters, the number of lower class electors was greatly increased, almost overnight. Along with the extension of the voting privilege, the Reform Bill redistributed and reduced the number of seats in the House of Commons. Some boroughs, such as Penryn, were completely disenfranchised; others were deprived of one or more members or were combined with another borough to assure more equitable representation. This latter solution was followed to settle the difficult question of East Retford, one of the more notorious "rotten" boroughs.

The movement accompanying the Reform Bill of 1832 and its passage was marked by enthusiastic and sometimes

uncontrolled support from the middle class and by determined resistance from the landowners, the upper levels of the church, and most of the members of the House of Lords. The middle and working classes formed political unions which were prepared to use force, if necessary, to gain the passage of some measure of reform. Set at so high a pitch, these groups often reacted violently at the mere presence of an anti-reformer, as happened at Bristol; the result there was three days of rioting, during which much of the city was burned.⁷ Before the bill finally became law, Wellington, Peel, and the Tory party were replaced by the Whigs, led by Grey. Despite the efforts of the influential opposition, the bill became law in June of 1832.⁸ As with most momentous political events, the full impact of the Reform Bill of 1832 is best realized when seen with the perspective of succeeding years and experience. That George Eliot recognized the importance of the measure from a closer point of time is apparent in the extensive use of references to reform found in Middlemarch.

The period of 1828 to 1832 is so completely dominated by the reform question that no other political issues exist outside of reform and no events occur that can be disconnected from reform. Catholic Emancipation, a kind of reform, reaches its culmination in the spring of 1829, and its effects are strong throughout the span of Middlemarch. One king dies and another is crowned, normally events of great importance, but at this time

they are eclipsed by the battle in Parliament regarding reform. Machine breaking, "plug plots," and rick burnings occur, signs of the frustration resulting from bad economic conditions and indications of the need for reform. Wellington's war record does not uphold his reputation when he takes the unpopular side of the Catholic reform question. The need for the reform of the Game Laws becomes more apparent when those laws are seen as possible punishment for a young Middlemarch citizen. Such is the extent to which reform pervades all of Victorian life.

The Catholic relief question culminated approximately six months before the action of Middlemarch begins. Although the problem was one dealing with religious beliefs, its application regarded public office holders, and its solution had to be legislated through Parliament. As a political reference, Catholic Emancipation and Sir Robert Peel's part in it appear several times in Middlemarch.

Various measures had been in effect for several years as attempts to suppress insurrection among the Catholics in Ireland and to exclude other Catholics from any positions of authority in government. Just as persistent had been movements of one sort or another to relieve this suppression of the Catholics and to gain some redress for their grievances. In this period of reform it seems inevitable that efforts would again be made to remove the barriers to full citizenship built against

Roman Catholics; and in 1822, Canning, at that time the British foreign secretary, introduced a bill to enable qualified Catholic peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords. This proved to be the opening move in a series of proposal and counter-proposals, defeats and reconstructions, debates and rebuttals that finally ended in April of 1829 with the passage and enactment of the Catholic relief law, more often referred to as Catholic Emancipation.⁹ By this law, members of the Roman Catholic church were allowed to hold public offices on both local and national levels, and much of the opposition to the Church and its practices began to diminish.

The role played by Robert Peel in the drive for greater Catholic freedom must be understood if Eliot's references to the movement are to be clear. Peel served as Secretary of the Home Office from 1822 until the Tories went out of office in 1830. This was an influential post, equivalent to that of a cabinet member in the United States government, and Peel was responsible for improvement in the physical conditions of the jails, reduction in the number of offenses punishable by death, and establishment of a metropolitan police force for London.¹⁰ His original position in regard to Catholic reform was one of opposition, the same position held by all Tories toward any Parliamentary reform. However, following the Clare election in which Daniel O'Connell, a Catholic incapable of serving in Parliament, overwhelmingly defeated the Protestant freeholder candidate, both Peel and Wellington began to recognize that

nothing short of political equality for the Irish Catholics could avert the risk of civil war.¹¹ Both men used all their influence to persuade the King and the ruling party of the measure's importance; they succeeded in convincing enough members of Parliament to pass the bill, but the question caused the Tory party to split. This division allowed the Whigs to take control; Wellington and his secretaries, including Peel, were voted out of office, and a new ministry under Lord Grey was formed. Wellington's reputation and popularity were particularly damaged by his stand on the Catholic issue. His position there, combined with differences of opinion with Huskisson and the Canningites, caused a great deal of enmity toward Wellington, enough that even his record as a military hero could not redeem him in the eyes of many British citizens.¹²

The extent to which reform dominated the early nineteenth century can be well illustrated by the lack of attention paid to the death of George IV and the lack of pomp attending the coronation of his successor, William IV. George Broderick characterizes George IV as a man with many royal gifts but few personal attributes. His intelligence and kingly abilities were off-set by selfishness and heartlessness that caused his death to be regretted by very few. His reign did mark the beginning of England's great reform and prosperity. His opposition to Catholic reform was honest and kept within constitutional limits, but the prolonged struggle with his

ministers regarding this question seemed to further weaken an already sinking physical condition. George IV died on June 26, 1830, in the heat of the debate culminating in the Reform Bill of 1832.¹³

Still in that same heat and marked by very little more fanfare, William IV was enthroned as King of England. During the period between his coronation on September 8, 1831, and the passage of the Reform Bill in June of 1832, William IV made no real contribution to the reform movement. He had been given no political training and had taken no public position before he became King, and the Reform Bill moved toward its completion with neither help nor hindrance from the new ruler. The overwhelming interest caused by the Reform Bill made the King and Parliament consider dispensing with a coronation ceremony altogether, but the expectations of the public had to be met, and the time-honored formalities offered a brief rest from the tensions surrounding the reform efforts.¹⁴ Thus the loss of one king and the gain of a new one were submerged in the movement toward reform, and an occasion usually momentous in the history of a country became simply another element of change.

The need for reform could be seen at levels of society far below Parliament. The agricultural laborers were passing through a period of transition of their own as the threshing machines took the place of hand labor. Rising prices were seen to be the forerunners of another bad farm year, and workers who had just endured two poor

harvests began the agrarian equivalent of the city workers' machine breaking. Not only were the farm machines destroyed, but barns and corn ricks storing the produce of the farms were fired. The precedents for this action had been set by the frame breakers in the Luddite riots of 1811, and the pattern of secrecy and ingenuity in destruction followed closely the earlier violence. The farm destruction spread back into the cities, and some warehouses and factories were destroyed. This was the first situation which the Whig-controlled government of 1830 had to meet.¹⁵

The Home Office under the leadership of Lord Melbourne struck hard at the labor disturbances, levying heavy penalties of transportation and imprisonment on those involved. Two writers, Richard Carlile and William Cobbett, were prosecuted for having encouraged the peasants to adapt such violent measures.¹⁶

One of the positive actions taken for the benefit of the lower classes was the moderation of the Game Laws. As conditions worsened for the rural population, greater numbers turned to poaching as an alternative to starvation. By the common law as it was generally interpreted, the landowner had proprietary interest in game on his own land, this interpretation blocking his tenants from hunting on land for which they were in every other respect responsible. Such was the concern for the right of ownership that landlords, in addition to prosecuting to the fullest, felt justified in rigging man-traps and spring-guns,

contraptions both unique and cruel, to catch poachers. Prosecution often included punishment by transportation for as long as fourteen years or imprisonment for varying periods of time. The alteration in these Game Laws reduced considerably the penalties for those charged with poaching. Spring-guns were prohibited, and a system of licensed hunting and selling was established, reducing the profits to be made on illegally killed game by making legal game available for sale.¹⁷ Licensing made hunting open to all those who could afford the license fee and removed at least part of the risk that had been involved when the landowners held the monopoly on game. This move was one of several which served to alleviate the oppression of the lower classes, actions indicative of the general feeling of reform present at all levels of society in the Victorian period.

As doubt and insecurity are the outward signs of a period in transition, so political reform is an outward sign of a culture making that transition. The political activity of the early nineteenth century reflected the concern felt by all people, concern resulting from the attempt to reconcile new discoveries and practices with old beliefs and traditions. The methods of parliamentary selection and rule then in effect were no longer applicable. Those classes of people, including laborers and Catholics, who had been suppressed and neglected for generations were no longer willing to settle for such treatment. The political system that had been followed

for years had to change to match the changing temper of the age, and the political events of Middlemarch are examples of a society moving through a shifting, transitional period in an attempt to reach some point of reconciliation between practice and belief.

CHAPTER II

THE NOVEL

CHAPTER II

The first reading of Middlemarch often leaves an impression of many characters and actions, both major and miscellaneous, blended and set against a background of major and miscellaneous details, all working together to create an extensive mural or tapestry, covered with activities and emotions and relationships. It is only after several readings that the individual strands of character and movement begin to separate enough to allow the reader to appreciate the craftsmanship involved in holding together all the disparate strings that make up this picture of provincial life.

One major filament in the Middlemarch weaving is that of contemporary politics. References are made throughout the book to persons and events prominent in the history of that period. An understanding of why and how George Eliot used these current affairs, including some consideration of the results she achieved by using them, will contribute to both the comprehension and the enjoyment of the novel.

One word will suffice to answer the question of why Eliot chose to include references to political events, and that word is "completeness." For a novel set in the early nineteenth century to be considered complete and

thorough, the political element would have to be included. The very atmosphere from 1829 to 1832 was pervaded by political reform, political transition, and political realignment. Parliamentary reform was the only topic of national interest, and to have omitted its treatment in a novel subtitled A Study of Provincial Life would have left an obvious gap running throughout the tapestry.

Other reasons for including political references in Middlemarch are less apparent, but no less important; and they reflect personal attitudes held by the author. John Holloway writing in The Victorian Sage considers George Eliot's habit of linking a story to known historical events and conditions to be one way in which she expresses her basic philosophy of life. That philosophy consists of a belief that man is a part of nature, and Nature is a vast, complex system in which the parts are subordinate to the whole.¹ Middlemarch serves as a clear example of this belief; all details are important because they support the whole. Social, economic, and political patterns are part of the whole, as are the slow historical changes that often result in remote consequences. In his article "Social Analysis in the Novels of George Eliot," Claude T. Bissell sees all of George Eliot's novels as being oriented around one of two historical centers: England at the turn of the century, as depicted in Adam Bede and Silas Marner, and the England of the late twenties and early thirties, the England of Mill on the Floss, Felix Holt the Radical, and Middlemarch.² Since this latter

period was dominated by political change, references to events such as Catholic Emancipation and the First Reform Bill must be included to create the whole picture.

In spite of their importance and the necessity of their presence, the references to political events in Middlemarch play more of a supportive role. Middlemarch is a novel and, as such, is primarily concerned with the development of characters and their relationships. As part of the background material, the political element helps to shape the world inhabited by those characters. This function, if viewed with the statement of Eliot's philosophy of life in mind, is not an unimportant one. Sumner J. Ferris titles his article "Middlemarch, George Eliot's Masterpiece" and comments on the unobtrusive and general way in which topical references are made in the novel. The reader is never bored by erudition, but the action is firmly located in time and place.³ In the instances that national affairs do occupy a more prominent position, according to A. O. J. Cockshut in Middlemarch: Notes on English Literature, their application to the local situation is affected quickly and easily.⁴ Erwin Hester elaborates on this point in "George Eliot's Use of Historical Events in Daniel Deronda" by indicating the close relationship between historical events and events of the fictional world. Even comments of a political nature made in casual conversation often serve to illuminate some aspect of the moral situation of the characters.⁵ One critic, Robert Coles, reports a

parallel between the structure of the novel and Britain's political progress in his book Irony in the Mind's Life. Coles compares the first five hundred pages of "almost stately progression" to "England's remarkable nineteenth-century capacity for gradual but significant political transformation."⁶

Unobtrusive and secondary the use of political references may be, but the results of that usage are significant. The picture of a world in transition is clearer when details from every aspect of life are included. A. O. J. Cockshut thinks the effect gained is one reflecting a sense of the slow growth and decay of ideas and feelings. Through her words Eliot shows the old world gradually producing the new.⁷ By selecting certain features of the time period, those that are prophetic or germinal, Eliot builds a feeling of forward movement, progress toward a better world.⁸

Possibly the most important result gained by the frequent allusions to political events is a clearer delineation of character. Historical fact is so skillfully woven into the total fabric of the novel that, in most instances, political references to national figures and events reveal more about the persons making the references than they do about the things being referred to.

The political climate treated in Middlemarch has been well defined as one of reform in all applications of the term. Agitation for religious liberty, extension of the franchise, improvement in farming methods, and the

inauguration of the transportation revolution through the establishment of the railroad were among the forces being marshaled in an effort to support progress and gain stability for society.⁹ All were manifestations of reform which involved some political activity, and many examples of each aspect appear in prominent positions in the novel. Richard S. Lyons pursues this idea of the importance of reform even further in "The Method of Middlemarch" when he calls the problem of reform in its multiple aspects one of the three main themes of the novel, along with the questions of the nature of true religion and the proper intents of art.¹⁰ The frequent use of political reform as the basis for action, as the motivation of the characters, and as an integral part of the background material seems to bear out Lyons' idea. More than fifty references to political events or personages are made in the text of Middlemarch, and all of these can be connected to reform. Eleven other separate instances deal with the Pioneer, a newspaper bought by Mr. Brooke with a definite political purpose in mind: to support his candidacy in the general elections, elections brought about by the reform debate in Parliament.

Even as a major theme of the novel, the topic of political reform serves its chief function in supporting the characters. Often the thread appears as a comparison of the relative merits of different modes of action considered by either some individual character or the community as a whole. In all instances throughout the

novel, the treatment of political reform is as a foil to other pursuits more directly significant to the development of the characterizations.¹¹

The references to political events in Middlemarch will serve in their own support to illustrate the importance of current politics and reform in the novel. The allusions fall into eight broad groupings, the historical significances of which have been discussed in Chapter I. Entries in each classification will be located by page number and examined by concentration upon the situation in which the reference is found and the purpose the reference serves in that particular instance.¹²

In view of the strong emphasis placed on the reform question, it is not surprising to find comments regarding the First Reform Bill attributed to members of all levels of society. The tenant farmer Dagley calls it "Reinform" (p. 291), and the hamlet of Frick is mainly concerned about Reform's ability to fatten Hiram Ford's pig (p. 404), but the movement is the same one that rearranged the make-up of Parliament and allowed thousands of English citizens to vote for the first time. On the other hand, the church at Lowick, composed of sturdy, decent farmers under the pastorate of Mr. Casaubon, is conscious of reform but no more agitated by it than by the Sunday sermon (p. 346). References such as these, made through a single word or phrase, serve to illustrate the all-pervading nature of reform; no one is immune to its presence. Of more importance, these allusions reinforce

the pictures being drawn of the various characters. Dagley's concept of reform consists of a vague knowledge that things will somehow be better when "Reinform" comes; Mr. Brooke will have to be a better landlord. Richard S. Lyons views the visit to Dagley's cottage as an illustration of two kinds of reform: the cottage itself in a condition of neglect and disrepair is a symbol of the needs for reform on Brooke's estate and for social reform in general, and Dagley's outburst, fueled by bottled courage, is symptomatic of the wide-spread hopes raised by the prospect of political change.¹³ Both Dagley and Mr. Brooke stand as examples of their classes, and one incident involving two people serves to reveal the positions held by a whole society.

Mr. Mawmsey, a Middlemarch grocer, discusses reform from an economic point of view. When Mr. Brooke approaches the merchant about backing reform, and incidentally his candidacy, the grocer immediately pulls the question into a personal perspective. "Will it [Reform] support Mrs. Mawmsey, and enable her to bring up six children when I am no more?" he asks (p. 367). Again, George Eliot has taken an event of national importance, moved it into a position of local application, and added to the characterization of Mr. Brooke. This same technique of subordinating national events to local interest is used in regard to Middlemarch's reaction to the Bulstrode scandal:

"...all public conviviality, from the Green Dragon to Dollop's, gathered a zest which could not be won from the

question whether the Lords would throw out the Reform Bill" (p. 528).

Short references and comments add to the depiction of the atmosphere of the times. All people, "that is, all people in those ante-reform times," would have thought Dorothea's aesthetic beauty more interesting if they could have seen her as a romantic heroine (p. 20). Ante- or pre-reform carries a connotation of innocence, of medieval conventions of romantic love, a condition that might have existed before the events and discoveries that moved the Victorians into a more realistic age. In one of Mr. Brooke's conversations with Ladislav, he refers to "these ten-pound householders," but adds no further explanation (p. 366). The enfranchisement set up in the First Reform Bill granted the vote to all freeholders, leaseholders, copyholders, and householders paying a rate of ten pounds or more annually. So widely known was this provision that Mr. Brooke felt no need to elaborate on its meaning. In the uneasy period immediately following Raffles' death, Lydgate and Bulstrode spoke of innocuous things, "chiefly cholera and the chances of the Reform Bill in the House of Lords, and the firm resolve of the Political Unions" (p. 522). These were topics of general interest, and no insult or inference could be drawn from them. The reform question sets the time and explains the action in one instance: "It was just after the Lords had thrown out the Reform Bill: that explains how Mr. Cadwallader came to be walking..." (p. 595).

References to reform help draw the picture the reader has of the community of Middlemarch. Before the activities associated with political and social reform had begun to develop the consciousness of the citizens of Middlemarch, there had existed clearer lines of class and rank and less distinction by party; now Mr. Brooke's miscellaneous and more democratic guest lists for dinner parties seemed somehow out of order (p. 65). Will and Mr. Brooke reflect the new awareness felt by Middlemarchers in their plans for Mr. Brooke's political campaign (pp. 336-337). Quentin Anderson argues in his article "George Eliot in Middlemarch" that what looks like increased interest and awareness on the part of Middlemarch voters is nothing more than additional evidences of self-advancement and personal foibles:

Politics share the same obscurity [as moral convictions]. Middlemarch knows how to manipulate the Middlemarch voter, how to discomfit the bumbling Brooke on the occasion of the nominations for Parliament, but it has no sense of the national meaning of the Reform Bill.¹⁴

At least part of Anderson's argument seems to be supported by the discussion of local politics and political theory that occurs between Ladislaw and Lydgate in Chapter 46 of the novel. Will comments, "Do you suppose the public reads with a view to its own conversion?" At another point he observes, "When the people have made up their mind as they are making it up now, they don't want a man--they only want a vote." Ladislaw supports a pro-

gram that would use what resources are available at the present time in an effort to move forward toward a better society, rather than waiting for candidates whose motives and actions are unquestionable. This is the type of thinking that has caused Will to be labeled reactionary and "foreign" by Middlemarch citizens in other parts of the book. Lydgate, even though an outsider, seems to illustrate Anderson's point. His political thinking is muddled and submerged in his own interests; he can be manipulated by Ladislaw's questions, and he shows no real understanding of the national needs and issues (pp. 340-342). George Eliot again proves her ability to subordinate large issues to her own purposes; the national parts serve to create the provincial whole.

As revealed in his article "George Eliot: Politics and Personality," William Myers feels that, in the novels after Middlemarch, Eliot treats the Reform Bill of 1832 and the furor it created as a national waste of energy.¹⁵ On the other hand, Michael York Mason warns that the allusions to the Reform Bill must not be ignored because they serve as valuable signs of a communal change that is very complicated, doubtful, and real to George Eliot.¹⁶ Whatever the feelings held by the reader regarding the purpose of the political references to the Reform Bill, there can be no doubt as to the importance of those comments. The thread of the Reform Bill appears and reappears, as casual conversation, as an aid to character definition, as the pivot for complete scenes. Since the passing of the Bill

was a turning-point for great social changes, so it also serves the novel as a symbol for all the shifts in social structure, in knowledge, in the conditions of humanity that George Eliot saw as the course of slow improvement.¹⁷

References to political events, figures, and practices other than the Reform Bill appear throughout Middlemarch. Some topics, such as Sir Robert Peel and the activities of Parliament, receive extensive treatment. Other subjects, such as rick burning and rotten boroughs, are given less attention but still serve an important purpose. One element, the Pioneer, stands as a fictional composite of the actual political publications of the day.

Sir Robert Peel's political career touches Middlemarch through his part in the issue of Catholic emancipation. While serving as Home Secretary in the Tory administration of Wellington, he reversed his position from that of the Tory party which opposed any Catholic relief to one which advocated some measure of equality for Catholics wishing to hold public office. His decision was based on his belief that the only alternative to Catholic freedom was civil war, but his actions caused him to lose both favor and position. This part of the reform movement culminated shortly before the action of Middlemarch begins, recently enough that Peel's conduct is still topic for everyday conversation in those provincial families which are just a little behind the times, not quite aware of the coming emphasis on material wealth and necessities (p. 6). Peel's most

direct connection with the community is through Mr. Casaubon who "...did a very good pamphlet for Peel" (p. 211), good enough to qualify the clergyman to be a bishop "...if Peel stays in" (p. 29). Support of Peel and Wellington in the Catholic issue has made both Mr. Brooke and Mr. Casaubon suspicious characters, according to Mrs. Cadwallader's lighthearted accusations (p. 39). Once again this man and his part in an event of national importance seem to make very little impression on the people of Middlemarch. The current representative may be turned out because he is a Peelite, but that is little more than speculation (p. 277). Peel's name is only a catch word for Mr. Borthrop Trumbull, who feels that "the celebrated Peel, now Sir Robert" would surely recognize the importance of the Middlemarch auctioneer on sight (p. 229). Here is another clear example of Eliot's preference and skill in using bits and parts to create the whole. Individually the references are insignificant; taken together they contribute much to the novel.

Not only did Peel's part in Catholic Emancipation draw comments from the Middlemarch citizenry, but the issue itself was still food for comment. The opinion of the community regarding any consideration for the Catholics is well expressed by Mr. Limp, the shoemaker, who says in response to a statement made by Mrs. Dollop, "...that was what the Duke of Wellington said when he turned his coat and went over to the Romans" (p. 529). Again a major issue is seen only from the narrow viewpoint of the

villagers' own interests and prejudices. Middlemarch appears to take less interest in the Catholic question itself than in the local connections with the question, and, as with Sir Robert Peel, the local connection is Mr. Casaubon. His support of Peel is seen as a support of the Catholic church, an action that is unexpected (p. 52) but seasonable and worth at least a deanery (p. 49). Eliot's references to the Catholic relief question seem primarily to be occasioned to point up Casaubon's character and personality. As the novel progresses, Casaubon emerges as a person who is careless of what others think of him, a non-conformist given to support of losing causes. To the people of Middlemarch, his position on the Catholic question is definitely non-conforming; his opinions are not those of his neighbors, and his backing of Peel became a lost effort when Peel was voted out of office with Wellington. The public events in respect to Catholic Emancipation parallel the private development of Mr. Casaubon's character and delineate the make-up of the man.

The activities of Parliament during this period of political change draw some attention from the Middlemarch citizens. These people are not too insulated in their own interests and activities to realize that changes are occurring. Their conversation is peppered with names and events of national prominence, and though they profess, like Timothy Cooper, to expect no benefits from "...the new King George, an' the new un as has got a new ne-ame"

(p. 408), these country people are aware that the world, their world, is changing.

Some of the Middlemarchers' awareness is legislated, such as the act of Parliament which authorized towns to assess funds for sanitary measures in dealing with the outbreak of cholera and forced Middlemarch to act on this issue of urgent importance (p. 532). It is at a meeting of the board appointed to handle this problem that the scandal involving Bulstrode comes into public light. Here the banker finds that his worst fears have come true; the community has learned the secret of his past and has compounded his guilt by connecting him closely with the death of Raffles. The situation is prompted by a national event, but its purpose is strictly local. From a problem of grave national importance, the focus quickly and easily shifts to an individual and community issue.

Along with their interest in Bulstrode's troubles, the inhabitants of Middlemarch are caught up in national affairs. The noises of the dissolution of Parliament and the coming election are compared to the noises of the itinerant shows present at wakes and fairs (p. 364). Names serve as important indications of public interest. Draco and Jeffreys, Wellington, and the Duke of Clarence appear as topics of Conversation. Raffles boards the train in spite of Huskisson's recent experience. His support of Brougham and Useful Knowledge are considered detractions to Mr. Farebrother's qualifications for the Lowick living. Lord Grey's position on the balance of

of the constitution helps form Mr. Brooke's campaign for Parliament.

Mr. Brooke makes a point about the personality of Sir James Chettam when he states that the younger man has a soft spot in his heart and could never be a Draco or a Jeffreys (p. 596). Draco and Jeffreys were prominent in Brougham's efforts to reform the court system. By the notoriously corrupt administration of their judicial duties, they made prime examples of the need for court reform.¹⁸ Mr. Trumbull, the auctioneer, makes comments regarding the recent events which "enveloped our great Hero in a cloud" when selling an engraving of the Duke of Wellington (p. 443). Wellington's change of position of the question of Catholic relief caused him to lose favor with many British citizens, primarily because of their lack of understanding and sympathy with the Catholic position. The lawyer, Mr. Standish, is a minor character and appears only briefly in Middlemarch, but his capabilities are quickly perceived when he is described as a man of unvariable manners, one who could discuss the hay crop, which would be "very fine, by God!", the last bulletins concerning the King, and the abilities of the Duke of Clarence as the new ruler and still maintain the same deep-voiced, off-hand civility to everyone (p. 245).

After renewing his relationship with Rigg and his flask with Rigg's brandy, Mr. Raffles boards the train with the observation that he considers it well seasoned by Huskisson's experience (p. 305). William Huskisson

served the British government of president of the Board of Trade and as Secretaries of War and of Colonies; in these positions he was responsible for changes in the tariff system and the navigation acts and inaugurated a free trade policy. Raffles' reference is to the death of Huskisson, which occurred when he was run over by a train at the opening of the Manchester and Liverpool railway.

Early in Chapter 46 in a dialogue more revealing of Mr. Brooke and Ladislav than of the national situation, Brooke maps out the platform for his political campaign. That platform, as he describes it, supports both reform and Lord Grey (pp. 336-337). Investigation indicates that these are opposing planks of political principle. Lord Grey, prime minister in the administration which replaced Wellington in 1830, stated publicly that reform was radical subversion and not so strongly supported in the country that an administration could be formed upon that basis. There is some indication that his personal opinion was different from his public stand, but the public position would have been the one Mr. Brooke knew and supported.¹⁹ Mr. Brooke interprets Lord Grey's statements in his own lights, and his conclusion is that neither of them desires a change in the balance of the constitution, but both support some sort of Parliamentary reform. This formulation of a political belief based on unreconcilable tenets reveals more about Brooke than it does about Grey or the national situation. Another facet

of Brooke's personality and intelligence is exposed, and the characterization of a bumbling, half-informed country squire is advanced another step.

Other references to Parliamentary activity serve to advance the action of Middlemarch. Dorothea's wedding trip is dated by political reference. She went to Rome "when George the Fourth was still reigning...when the Duke of Wellington was Prime Minister, and Mr. Vincy was mayor" (p. 139). That same Mr. Vincy uses the dissolution of Parliament, machine breaking, and the general election as reasons not to give wedding money to Rosamund and Lydgate (p. 259). A certain unusual element in Mr. Brooke's manner when he approaches Dorothea after Casaubon's death is accounted for by his certainty that Parliament would soon be dissolved (p. 357). That noticeable alacrity shown by Mr. Brooke is more likely attributable to his knowledge of the terms of Casaubon's will in regard to Dorothea. The impact of current politics touches even the women of Middlemarch. Mrs. Cadwallader holds a strong opinion on the proposal by the cabinet to create enough new peerages to insure the passage of the Reform Bill (p. 595). Not only does Mrs. Cadwallader's statement of opinion help to place the action and time of the novel, but it reveals more about the woman herself. Earlier in the story Eliot makes this comment about the rector's wife:

Her life was rurally simple, quite free from secrets either foul, dangerous, or otherwise important, and not consciously affected by the great affairs of the world. All the more did

the affairs of the great world interest her...
(p. 44).

Much the same statement may be used in justification of all the political references in Middlemarch.

Less prominent references continue to build up the whole which constitutes the political background of Middlemarch. Machine breaking and rick burning, exploitation through rotten boroughs, and poaching were common practices of the period, and Eliot uses references to all three activities several times in her novel. Machine breaking and loom wrecking were part of the violence that resulted in legislation for better working conditions. Reacting out of frustration over inhuman work situations and insufficient pay, laborers in the factories, particularly those in the weaving industry, slowed or stopped production by rioting in which several factories and warehouses were completely destroyed and by less obvious methods in which individual machines were sabotaged. As threshing machines and other inventions began to appear on the farms, the fear of being replaced led the farm laborers to adapt the same tactics. Machines were demolished, and storage areas were burned, resulting in loss of revenue and much inconvenience to the land owners.

Eliot's treatment of this violence takes several forms. In one reference Mrs. Cadwallader condemns Mr. Vincy as "one of those who suck the life out of the wretched handloom weavers" (p. 239). On the other hand, conditions at Lowick are good because there are "no looms

here, no Dissent...not much vice" (p. 57). Mr. Brooke's contribution to a literary discussion with Mr. Casaubon is his collection of documents on machine breaking and rick burning (p. 19), but his lack of real knowledge and interest in the subject surfaces later when he instructs Will to compile information for articles on machine breaking and general distress, the feeling of the country (p. 337). A. O. J. Cockshut sees Mr. Vincy's use of machine breaking as an excuse to avoid providing a dowry for Rosamund (p. 259) to be one of Eliot's characteristic examples in which a great public question, the issue behind the Luddite riots, is presented as no more than part of the data used in making a private decision.²⁰

References to rotten boroughs and poaching laws are made in the treatment of Mr. Brooke's candidacy for Parliament. A rival newspaper, the Trumpet, characterizes Mr. Brooke as one who rails at rotten boroughs, but maintains rotten gates (p. 281). The Rector adds some additional rumor, that East Retford, a particularly notorious rotten borough, is "nothing to Middlemarch, for bribery" (p. 281). Mr. Brooke defends himself from these charges, but he later wishes for a pocket-borough to bestow on Ladislaw (p. 337). Mr. Brooke considers himself an especially lenient landlord when Dagley's son kills a young rabbit, but the references reveal a system in which a boy can be prosecuted for killing one rabbit (p. 285) and a minister charged for knocking down another (p. 288). The true revelation made by these allusions is

of Brooke's character; little by little the picture of society is built up through this one man, who serves as an example of one whole stratum of the system. Eliot's method of applying the parts of create the whole is evident again.

References to Mr. Brooke's campaign appear throughout Middlemarch. Its presence allows for introduction of the Middlemarch Pioneer, a newspaper "purchased to clear the pathway for a new candidate" (p. 215). The Pioneer serves as a fictional composite of the political organs which flourished during the period of reform, organs whose only functions were to support a particular issue or a particular individual. By adding such a device, Eliot has a logical vehicle from which to launch her viewpoints of the current political situation. The campaign for Parliament serves as an equally effective vehicle for the development of Brooke's character. That development culminates in Mr. Brooke's speech to the Middlemarch voters, an event which finally reveals the man to be hopelessly inept and unfit for public office (p. 371). Along the way, the social and political systems have been clearly depicted, and the reader emerges with a definite idea of both the good points and the bad points of both systems.

The string of contemporary politics runs throughout Middlemarch. It is only one such string, but its function is an important addition to the novel. The political activities of the early nineteenth century were dominant

over all other considerations. At that point the first moves were being made toward social and economic reforms more sweeping than ever before contemplated. From the King to the lowest laborer, every citizen was aware of reform and its application, both actual and imagined, to him. The Reform Bill of 1832 was the most comprehensive and pervasive action undertaken during the period, and the individual elements of that bill, ranging from Parliament and Sir Robert Peel to the poaching laws as applied to young Dagley, carried an impact to the citizens of Middlemarch.

The use of political references in the novel supports George Eliot's philosophy that the whole picture is the important thing, and the parts are necessary to create that whole picture. The political situation is only a part of the Middlemarch world, but for the study of that world to be complete, all the parts must be included. The primary aim of any novel is to develop the characters and their relationships; the political references in Middlemarch maintain that aim. National events and persons are subordinated to local interests and applications, and in that process both major and minor characters are delineated for the reader.

CHAPTER III
THE CRITICISM

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A great amount of scholarly criticism has been written regarding George Eliot as author and Middlemarch as novel. As might be expected from the consideration of a novel, most of the critical approach focuses on character and the development of personal relationships within the work itself. A considerably smaller group of books, articles, and notes are devoted to the political and historical content of the novel and Eliot's purpose for including these aspects. The question the writers of most of the smaller body of criticism address is the classification of Middlemarch. Is the book a true political novel or an historical novel, or neither? Are the reflections of society complete enough and the uses of historical events accurate enough to qualify the work in one of the sub-divisions of the genre? By a comparison of Middlemarch with several definitions of the political novel and the historical novel, this study will attempt to answer these questions. A brief comparison of this novel and some works acknowledged to be political and historical will give some perspective to the conclusions reached.

As is the case with most genres, the designation of political novel carries with it the expectation of several

characteristics. According to C. Hugh Holman's definition in A Handbook to Literature, the political novel is one which deals directly with the significant aspects of political life; these aspects are essential ingredients of the work and do not serve merely as background material or secondary concerns.¹ An example of this type novel is John Dos Passos' District of Columbia trilogy, the central theme of which is the inevitable corruption of the individual character by contemporary civilization and its excessive commercialism. Holman's definition is supplemented by Claude T. Bissell's comment in "Social Analysis in the Novels of George Eliot" on one of the conventions of the political novel. Such a work

has as its hero a young, incorruptible man of the people who has pledged himself to a career of selfless devotion to a programme of reform. The action springs out of a political situation and follows the vagaries of party allegiance.²

Little about Middlemarch fits the criteria marked out for the political novel. It has been firmly established that the political activities serve to delineate the characters and to build their background; this function is in direct contrast to Holman's points. While the novel does deal with the significant aspects of the political life of the period, that is not its primary purpose; the book is not intended to be a showcase of the political situation. Nor is Bissell's incorruptible young man of the people found in Middlemarch. The person nearest to fitting this description is Will Ladislaw, who decides

toward the end of the book that he might do well in public life; but Will has drifted into this niche. He is not characterized at any point as being selfless, devoted, or pledged; party allegiance plays no part in his plans.

Bissell contends that the combination of diversity of social class with diversity of occupation and profession has allowed Eliot room enough to develop Middlemarch as a social analysis conducted from those various points of view. The political material, seen from the middle class, the Vincy, Bulstrode, and Lydgate families, the squirarchy and established families of Brooke and Casaubon, and the lower class families, Garth and Featherstone, operates as a central reference point for this multiple point of view (pp. 166-167). This idea can be considered support for Robert A. Colby's assertion in Fiction With A Purpose that Middlemarch is not concerned with issues as such, but with all realms of human interest.³ The multiple point of view, illustrated by comments from representative members of all levels of society, does fall on topics other than politics, most notably on medical reform and current scholarship. The tension of Middlemarch arises as two basic principles, diametrically opposite, struggle for dominance. The one, the present class structure with its prejudices and customs marked by materialism, can be labeled the rigid or the static. The other, called the flexible or the dynamic, consists of the social and intellectual movements that disregard class division and include the personal vision that sees more than the material things of the world.⁴

This tension between the static and the dynamic is not confined strictly to political and party events; it reaches into every aspect of life and effectively removes Middlemarch from the classification of pure political novel.

George Eliot's use of political events in a secondary rather than a primary position is motivated by her desire to deal with the human element as it surfaces in local interests, emphasizing it rather than its components.⁵ She seems to distrust both politicians and organized political programs, but in an effort to depict human problems completely, she includes historical change as it relates to personal growth and experience.⁶ The unobtrusive use of political issues as background gives more importance to the material when it is allowed to occupy the center position. For example, the discussion between Lydgate and Ladislaw about electoral reform, found in Chapter 46, comes forward to add color and excitement and to sharpen a conflict which has already been established. The scene emerges naturally from a private situation and serves to further define character and conduct.⁷ Eliot believed that theory provided politics with their real dignity; that they were more matters of belief than of practice is reconcilable with the evidence provided by Middlemarch.⁸

The conclusion that Middlemarch is not a true political novel stands firm when the book is compared with others by Eliot. Bissell sees Middlemarch aware, in a

wide-eyed and eagerly naive fashion, of the issues involved in reform, much more involved in political activities than *St. Oggs*, which in *Mill on the Floss* "groped" its way into political consciousness only on the issue of Catholic Emancipation.⁹ On the other hand, *Middlemarch* is a far less political novel than *Daniel Deronda*, in William Myers' opinion.¹⁰ In *Felix Holt the Radical*, Eliot's acknowledged political novel set in the Victorian period, the duty of the writer is seen as twofold: to record the failure of one parliamentary reform and to warn against the expectations of widespread improvement from more political actions unsuited to the national needs.¹¹ *Middlemarch* contains much less documentary detail than was necessary to accomplish the goals of *Felix Holt* and reveals that Eliot was more interested, at the time of writing *Middlemarch*, in the social and intellectual roots of reform politics.¹²

There seems to be little basis on which to rest a classification of *Middlemarch* as a political novel. None of the criteria of definition and convention set by Holman and Bissell are met by the novel. Scholarly studies indicate that Eliot's preference was to avoid party politics and that they are included only as they support the author's purpose in advancing the action developing the characters. In comparison with an acknowledged political novel of the period, the deficiencies of *Middlemarch* in political content are obvious. There is no case for *Middlemarch* as a political novel.

Middlemarch as an historical novel is a different matter. The historical novel, according to Holman, reconstructs a person, a series of events, a movement, or the spirit of a past age; particular attention is paid to the accuracy of the facts of the time being re-created. Holman credits Sir Walter Scott for the classic formula of the historical novel. That formula, as expressed in the prefaces to the Waverly novels, calls for an age when two cultures are opposed, the one gradually giving way as the other takes over; in this conflict fictional characters participate in actual historical events among actual historical figures. By their actions and reactions the fictional characters reflect the impressions of persons living in the period. Two departures from the formula have been noted. In the "costume romance" history serves as the background for a series of adventurous or sexual exploits, and in the "novel of character" the setting and the age are of secondary importance to the representation of a group of characters.¹³

This set of criteria finds many more points of correspondence in Middlemarch. The novel reconstructs a series of events and the spirit of an age that has passed, and the accuracy of the political events can be verified. John Prest warns in The Industrial Revolution in Coventry that, in regard to the actual epidemics which suggested those in Middlemarch, one should not rely absolutely upon their having happened between 1830 and 1832.¹⁴ The transitional nature of the period is particularly noted by

several critics. In his book George Eliot, Walter Allen calls the world that Eliot portrays one riven by great historical events brought on by new evolutionary factors in society, disruptive forces including the politics of the First Reform Bill, the coming of the railway, and new developments in medicine and public health.¹⁵ Robert Coles writing in Irony in the Mind's Life contends that the locale of Middlemarch, England's Midlands, and the period, "around 1831 and 1832, just before the Reform Bill was enacted," are facts obviously reflected in the values of every individual in the book.¹⁶ One of several movements in the novel is the historical movement of the world, the movement of social reform as it affected every hamlet in the nation from 1829 to 1832.¹⁷ As a panoramic novel Middlemarch's scope is vast; there seems to be no aspect of the time of its action that is omitted.¹⁸ Neil Roberts carries this idea even further in George Eliot: Her Beliefs and Her Art; in his opinion the novel conveys a feeling that the world of the story extends beyond its pages and that the fictional reality is embedded in a further reality. One means by which this feeling is created is the extensive and almost invariably casual historical reference.¹⁹

At this point Middlemarch departs from the classic formula of the historical novel to follow more the description of the novel of character. Under this classification the historical setting and age assume a secondary importance to the characters. The strong

historical background impinges upon each of the characters in the novel, either directly or analogously,²⁰ but these characters are still the primary focus of attention. In this subordination the Middlemarch reader experiences history as it is experienced by the obscure inhabitants of a provincial town. Even such a great event as the Reform Bill is seen mainly as the comedy of Mr. Brooke's candidacy and the almost accidental introduction to politics of Will Ladislaw.²¹ The history of Middlemarch is not the history of text books, but a broader kind shared by all human beings who must eventually give an account of themselves.²² The effect of the historical references is such that the reader is thoroughly persuaded that the characters belong to a particular time and place, an essential contribution to their reality.²³

Consideration of George Eliot as an historian is marked by varying opinions. Claude T. Bissell sees Eliot's role to be that of recorder and a reflective observer of man in society, and in his opinion few English novelists have been better qualified to fill the role.²⁴ An opposite viewpoint is held by John Prest, who labels Eliot's accuracy faulty enough that the historian cannot accept her evidence as the literal truth. Even though he admits that absolute truth is not what the reader is expecting from Middlemarch, his observation does serve to cast doubts on Eliot's qualification to write an historical novel.²⁵ The use of historical figures as the influence for Middlemarch characters is strong enough that the

figures are considered prototypes by some critics;²⁶ this practice is a standard one for historical novelists.

The importance of the novel as an element of political change cannot be underestimated. The popularity of the form grew steadily through the middle years of the century, and hardly a single writer of fiction or verse can be found who does not reflect some phase of the thought of the generation.²⁷ Much of the total impact of George Eliot's novels arises from the sense they create of historical change and how, slowly, indirectly, and in unexpected ways, that historical change touches the lives of the characters. Inconspicuous as this connection is, it does much to suggest an integrated social community in which personal relationships between characters play only one part.²⁸

Nicholas Rance in his book The Historical Novel and Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century England classifies Felix Holt the Radical and Romola as Eliot's historical novels. Critics are pretty well agreed with his statement that Romola is a failure as a representative of the genre, mainly because all of its value is located in an individual who is separated from a society which there is no serious attempt to portray. The emphasis is on the character, not the age. The only purpose served by the Florentine history in the novel is to expose the superficiality of historical change, to demonstrate that there is no historical uniqueness after which to strive. Middlemarch comes nearer to fulfilling the criteria for the historical novel than does

Romola; the total spirit of the age is more clearly depicted in the former novel, and the accuracy of the historical references is easily verified. The purpose of Felix Holt the Radical is George Eliot's attempt to confront the problems of industrialism, and her goal is better accomplished than in Romola, possibly because the author is writing about a time with which she is more familiar. The difference between Felix Holt and Middlemarch is a question of focus--Middlemarch places the emphasis on the characters, Felix Holt on the situation.²⁹

Erwin Hester compares the uses of historical references in Daniel Deronda with those of Middlemarch in his article "George Eliot's Use of Historical Events in Daniel Deronda." In Daniel Deronda the historical background contributes to the intensity of the novel to a greater extent than in Middlemarch, primarily because of the technique in which the national events parallel the personal ones. The chief historical events used in the novel are the American Civil War, the native uprising in Jamaica, and the Austro-Prussian War, all involving a struggle for independence which parallels Gwendolen's contentions with Grandcourt. These events also support one of the significant image patterns of the novel, that of rule and rebellion.³⁰

Middlemarch reconstructs the spirit of a past age, an age of cultural opposition; the accuracy of the political facts used in recreating this picture of the Victorian period can be verified. In the novel fictional

characters participate in actual historical events along with actual historical figures. Through their actions these fictional characters reflect the feelings of those living in the period. Up to this point Middlemarch follows the classic formula set up by Scott for judging an historical novel. Concentration on the characters of Middlemarch does not remove the book from the classification, but the treatment of setting and age in a position of secondary importance places Eliot's major work in a sub-classification called the novel of character. After a consideration of the criteria for historical novels and the qualities of Middlemarch, the novel's placement as a valid historical novel seems justifiable.

Comments by several scholars add further enlightenment to the use and purpose of political elements in Middlemarch. Morris Edmund Speare points out one danger an author runs in using long discussions of English history and party politics. These devices may impede action or clog the plot. Middlemarch, however, provides a clear illustration of the successful use of these discussions; rather than slowing the progress, the political debates and party strategies add a value and cogency to the work which it might not otherwise have.³¹ Eliot avoids the quality of a documentary by combining the scope of her knowledge with her actual experiences and associations. Rather than stating facts from a government report or quoting an eye-witness, she gives her version of a way of life that continues to exist powerfully in her

imagination.³²

The whole story of Middlemarch paints a social picture as well as a profound study of human character.³³ While the primary emphasis is on the individual, the provincial society portrayed by the novel serves as a synecdoche for larger social structures, for urban society, for all English society. The small stands for the large, and the simple represents the complex.³⁴ The importance of the individual to George Eliot is well known, but the individual and his relation to society can only be perceived by viewing that society. The meeting between the individual and his society involves several factors: the character, his knowledge of himself, his knowledge about the world around him, the world in relation to the individual, and society as a thing in itself.³⁵ In Middlemarch, for instance, the author's vision of society and her vision of the individual are never separated.³⁶ An individual can be only himself and can be real only in the particular social and historical circumstances that he inhabits.³⁷ No center of experience is altogether isolated; each is a node in a network of relations which ultimately includes all of society.³⁸

The purpose of Middlemarch, according to Michael York Mason, is to provide a starting point for the origins of the strong currents which modified the social, political, and cultural environment of the late 1860s.³⁹ True reform, Eliot says through the novel, begins at home in small charitable actions, not at a distance in abstractions

and generalities. This, a repeat of the message in Felix Holt the Radical, is the crux of the novelist's political position.⁴⁰ But the presentation of this political stance is not the terminal purpose of Middlemarch. The more general intention is to render to the reader a sense of the "primal tissue" of the community, that tissue from which all specially adapted tissues arise.⁴¹ For the community that tissue is composed of human relationships, all bound together, all parts of a whole.

CONCLUSION

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Investigation of George Eliot's use of contemporary political events in Middlemarch yields much more than just literary knowledge. From the first reading of the novel, a wider picture of an exciting period in history begins to emerge. Elements of social behavior and economic reaction take on a clearer delineation when seen with the matter-of-fact acceptance of Celia or the slightly alcoholic perception of Dagley. Lydgate illustrates the frustration of struggling against the established system, and Casaubon serves as an example of the narrow-minded futility present in much scholastic effort. Every character reveals some facet of human nature, clearly and definitely.

This depiction of character is the main goal toward which Eliot bends every element in Middlemarch. References to political activities are part of the support of the characters; their reactions to political situations add another reflection to the overall impression made by each character. Incident by political incident, Mr. Brooke emerges as a bumbling, inept product of the old tradition. By Mr. Casaubon's support of Peel in the political question of Catholic reform, his image as a man cut off from his neighbors in every way is

reinforced.

Recognition of the allusions to political activities would be hampered and any understanding of their meaning would be lacking without some investigation into the political history of the period. Study in that area reveals a time of change dominated by the Reform Bill of 1832. Society was in transition, letting go of traditional beliefs and practices and still in doubt about their replacements. No segment of the population was untouched by the push toward reform; Parliament was split on the question of Catholic relief, and laborers rebelled against poor working conditions. Wellington and Peel were forced out of office by their stand on the Catholic issue, and a small boy felt the injustices of the Game Laws. A realization of the total awareness of the reform question felt by all citizens is necessary if the references to political events and persons are to carry any impact for the reader.

The real purpose of the political references in Middlemarch begins to become clear when the references are studied in the context of the novel. Despite the large number of political references used by Eliot, the primary emphasis remains upon the characters. The political background functions to shed more illumination on those characters. Sir Robert Peel is important to Middlemarchers because of his connection to Mr. Casaubon. The dissolution of Parliament is important because it allows Mr. Brooke to stand for office in the general

elections. In every instance, the national events are given local application; the national interest is reflected in the provincial concern.

Middlemarch's failure to qualify as a clear-cut political novel or historical novel can in no way detract from its success. It depicts definite characters and traces their development through the period covered by the action; that classifies it firmly as a novel, and its thorough and sympathetic treatment of those characters within a readable and interesting structure qualifies the book as a success.

The primary purpose of Middlemarch is to relate the stories of Dorothea and Lydgate, to create the characters in the minds of the reader in such a way that they become almost real, and every element in the book is meant to support that creation. The use of contemporary political references contributes to that purpose by serving as one of the parts which make up the whole. As such, these references are an integral part of the novel, and without them, the picture of the Middlemarch world would be incomplete.

NOTES

CHAPTER I

¹ The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. I.

² Matthew Arnold, "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreouse," in Poetry of the Victorian Period, ed. Jerome Hamilton Buckley and George Benjamin Woods, 3rd ed. (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1965), p. 491.

³ Houghton, p. 3.

⁴ "History by Indirection," in Middlemarch, ed. Bert G. Hornback (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1977), p. 700.

⁵ George C. Brodrick and J. K. Fotheringham, The History of England From Addington's Administration to the Close of William IV's Reign (1801-1837) (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1928), pp. 289-290.

⁶ Frederick C. Dietz, A Political and Social History of England (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1937), pp. 494-495.

⁷ Dietz, p. 510.

⁸ William Law Mathieson, England in Transition 1789-1832 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1920), p. 276.

⁹ Broderick and Fotheringham, pp. 240-249.

¹⁰ Dietz, pp. 506-507.

¹¹ Broderick and Fotheringham, p. 237.

¹² Dietz, p. 509.

¹³ Broderick and Fotheringham, pp. 272-273.

¹⁴ Broderick and Fotheringham, p. 273, 309.

¹⁵ Mathieson, pp. 265-266.

16 Mathieson, pp. 266-267.

17 Mathieson, pp. 267-268.

CHAPTER II

¹ The Victorian Sage (London: Archon Books, 1962), pp. 123-124.

² "Social Analysis in the Novels of George Eliot," in Victorian Literature, ed. Austin Wright (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 160-161.

³ "Middlemarch, George Eliot's Masterpiece," in From Jane Austin to Joseph Conrad, ed. Robert C. Rathburn and Martin Steinmann, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), p. 194.

⁴ Middlemarch: Notes on English Literature (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1966), p. 3.

⁵ "George Eliot's Use of Historical Events in Daniel Deronda," English Language Notes, IV (1966-67), 118.

⁶ Irony in the Mind's Life (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974), p. 186.

⁷ Cockshut, p. 15.

⁸ Michael York Mason, "Middlemarch and History," Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 25 (1970-71), 420.

⁹ Robert A. Colby, Fiction with a Purpose (Bloomington, Indiana: University Press, 1967), p. 37.

¹⁰ "The Method of Middlemarch," Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 21 (1966-67), 38.

¹¹ Lyons, p. 39.

¹² George Eliot, Middlemarch, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1956). Further references to this work in this chapter will appear in parentheses in the text.

¹³ Lyons, p. 38.

¹⁴ "George Eliot in Middlemarch," in George Eliot, ed. George R. Creeger (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), p. 153.

15 "George Eliot: Politics and Personality," in Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century, ed. John Lucas (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1971), p. 108.

16 Mason, p. 420.

17 Lyons, pp. 39-40.

18 William Law Mathieson, England in Transition 1789-1832 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1920), p. 214.

19 Mathieson, pp. 273-274.

20 Cockshut, p. 3.

CHAPTER III

1 A Handbook to Literature (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1972), p. 409.

2 "Social Analysis in the Novels of George Eliot," in Victorian Literature, ed. Austin Wright (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 154.

3 Fiction With a Purpose (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), p. 262.

4 Bissell, pp. 167-168.

5 A. O. J. Cockshut, Middlemarch (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1966), p. 2.

6 William Myers, "George Eliot: Politics and Personality," in Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century, ed. John Lucas (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1971), p. 107.

7 Bissell, pp. 168-169.

8 Myers, p. 110.

9 Bissell, p. 167.

10 Myers, p. 121.

11 Morris Edmund Speare, The Political Novel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1924), p. 225.

12 Michael York Mason, "Middlemarch and History," Nineteenth-Century Fiction 25 (1970-71), 424.

- 13 Holman, p. 254.
- 14 The Industrial Revolution in Coventry (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 143.
- 15 George Eliot (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1964), p. 91.
- 16 Irony in the Mind's Life (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974), p. 158.
- 17 Reva Stump, Movement and Vision in George Eliot's Novels (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1959), pp. 137-138.
- 18 Allen, p. 161.
- 19 George Eliot: Her Beliefs and Her Art (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975), p. 147.
- 20 William H. Marshall, The World of the Victorian Novel (New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1967), pp. 299-300.
- 21 Roberts, p. 148.
- 22 Coles, p. 181.
- 23 Roberts, P. 145.
- 24 Bissell, p. 155.
- 25 Prest, p. 145.
- 26 K. M. Newton, "Historical Prototypes in Middlemarch," English Studies 56 (1975), 403-408.
- 27 D. C. Somervell, English Thought in the Nineteenth Century (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1947), p. 167.
- 28 John Holloway, The Victorian Sage (London: Archon Books, 1962), p. 117.
- 29 The Historical Novel and Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century England (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1975), pp. 103-107.
- 30 Erwin Hester, "George Eliot's Use of Historical Events in Daniel Deronda," English Language Notes IV (1966-67), 115-116.
- 31 Speare, p. 71.

- 32 Bissell, p. 156.
- 33 Sir A. W. Ward, "The Political and Social Novel," in The Cambridge History of English Literature, ed. Sir A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller (Cambridge: The University Press, 1922), p. 399.
- 34 J. Hillis Miller, The Form of Victorian Fiction (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 120.
- 35 Jerome Thale, The Novels of George Eliot (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 118.
- 36 Bissell, p. 169.
- 37 Roberts, p. 145.
- 38 Miller, p. 118.
- 39 Mason, p. 418.
- 40 Stump, p. 164.
- 41 Quentin Anderson, "George Eliot in Middlemarch," in George Eliot, ed. George R. Creeger (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), p. 143.

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