

George Eliot: The Novels

MIKE EDWARDS

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General Editor's Preface

This series is dedicated to one clear belief: that we can all enjoy, understand and analyse literature for ourselves, provided we know how to do it. How can we build on close understanding of a short passage, and develop our insight into the whole work? What features do we expect to find in a text? Why do we study style in so much detail? In demystifying the study of literature, these are only some of the questions the *Analysing Texts* series addresses and answers.

The books in this series will not do all the work for you, but will provide you with the tools, and show you how to use them. Here, you will find samples of close, detailed analysis, with an explanation of the analytical techniques utilised. At the end of each chapter there are useful suggestions for further work you can do to practise, develop and hone the skills demonstrated and build confidence in your own analytical ability.

An author's individuality shows in the way they write: every work they produce bears the hallmark of that writer's personal 'style'. In the main part of each book we concentrate therefore on analysing the particular flavour and concerns of one author's work, and explain the features of their writing in connection with major themes. In Part 2 there are chapters about the author's life and work, assessing their contribution to developments in literature; and a sample of critics' views are summarised and discussed in comparison with each other. Some suggestions for further reading provide a bridge towards further critical research.

Analysing Texts is designed to stimulate and encourage your critical and analytic faculty, to develop your personal insight into the author's work and individual style, and to provide you with the skills and techniques to enjoy at first hand the excitement of discovering the richness of the text.

NICHOLAS MARSH

How to Use This Book

This book is designed to be used in close conjunction with the novels it discusses. Each chapter is based on detailed analysis of passages from four novels. The aim is to show how understanding of the writer's ideas and skill emerges from close study of selected passages. The approach and techniques used are clearly demonstrated so as to help you to embark confidently on independent study of other parts of the novels. You can use similar approaches to work on other writers too.

You will gain most benefit from this book if you have done some preliminary work of your own. Of course, you should have read the novels under discussion, and preferably more than once. If you are studying Eliot for examination purposes you should certainly make yourself thoroughly familiar with them. It will be useful, too, to reread each passage discussed and check on its context. You will need to have the relevant passage ready to hand as you read, so that you can refer back and forth easily between the analysis and the text.

There is much you can do beyond that. Study each passage in detail, first as a self-contained piece, then in the context of the novel. Think about its structure, its language, the balance of description, narrative and dialogue, and the links between these. You will probably find it useful to make a few informal notes. In this way you can develop a feel for the atmosphere, mood and tone of the passage, and about the treatment of character and theme. You will also develop insight into the author's ideas and the techniques he uses.

No doubt you have a method of study of your own that you have regularly used. By all means apply it to the passages discussed here. But remember that no programme of study is to be followed slavishly. Use all the means available to suggest approaches that may have slipped your attention, but keep an open mind and be ready to follow where your own imagination leads. Many things come to mind when you study novels. Don't be too ready to dismiss stray thoughts as trivial or foolish. Pursue them and work out their implications. Even if they turn out in the end to be misguided, you will have gained a

great deal in the process of developing them. The more you explore your ideas, the richer they will grow and the more thoroughly they will be your own.

Having done some preparatory study you will be in a better position to read the analysis in this book with understanding, and critically. In each chapter emphasis is placed on one specific feature of Eliot's work, but seen always in relation to others and not in isolation. Each extract is considered first as an independent piece of writing, then as part of the novel to which it belongs. The aim, in the end, is to see how the extract relates to its chapter and to its novel, and so deepen your ideas about the whole book.

There is a great deal of room for diversity of approach and interpretation in the process of analysis. You are unlikely to find your responses mirrored precisely in the discussions, though it would be strange if there were no resemblance at all. Certainly you will now be in a position to disagree or agree for good independent reasons with what is said in the analyses that follow, and you will be able to build on them and develop further ideas of your own. Remember finally that disagreement is an essential part of the process: criticism exists to be contested.

Editions

Penguin editions are used for page references to the novels discussed in this book. There are several different Penguin editions of Eliot's novels, and it will be easiest for you to use the specific editions listed below. Here are the original dates of publication of the novels discussed, followed by the editions from which page numbers are taken:

The Mill on the Floss: first published 1860; Penguin Classics 1979, revised 1985

Silas Marner: first published 1861; Penguin Classics 1996

Middlemarch: first published 1872; Penguin Classics 1994

Note that some, but not all, earlier Penguin editions of these novels have the same pagination, so it is important to check that your edition

matches those quoted. However, the major passages used for detailed analysis are identified by chapter and part of chapter as well as page number so that you can find them easily no matter which Penguin or other edition you use.

There are page references to the following other works by George Eliot:

Adam Bede: J. M. Dent, Everyman Edition, 1960

Daniel Deronda: J. M. Dent, Everyman Edition, 1964 (2 vols)

Where it is clear which book, or, in the chapter on critical approaches, which essay, is under discussion, reference is usually by page number alone. Otherwise books are fully identified at the time of reference, and reappear in the recommendations for further reading.

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PART 1

ANALYSING
GEORGE ELIOT'S
NOVELS

1

Beginnings

Three of the best-known of George Eliot's seven novels have been selected for this study: *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner* and *Middlemarch*. The first two of these novels illustrate contrasting aspects of her early work, and the third is the pinnacle of her later writing. *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot's second full novel, was published in 1860, the year after *Adam Bede*. It is distinctive in two fundamental respects. With some close parallels in the earlier pages between the protagonist and the author, it is her most autobiographical novel. Its emotive title singles it out not only from Eliot's other works, but also from the undemonstrative inclination of Victorian writers in general to name novels after a protagonist; it was, indeed, suggested by Eliot's publisher, John Blackwood. After *The Mill on the Floss*, next in order of publication was *Silas Marner* (1861); though it, too, took its origin from Eliot's childhood, it is a more consciously objective book than its predecessor, with rather more of the feeling of a parable. *Middlemarch* dates from much later, 1872, after Eliot had produced two further books. It is unique among her novels in taking the name of a town for its title and this reflects its broader scope. The complexity of *Middlemarch* shows a fully mature control of the elements of structure and theme. It evolved, however, from two stories originally conceived as separate.

These novels will be discussed in order of publication. In each chapter a topic or theme common to the novels will be studied by means of detailed analysis of extracts. At the end of Part 1 a chapter on the conclusions will review the outcome of the analysis and explore

the final effect of the novels. The business of this first chapter is to analyse the opening paragraphs and consider how they relate to the nature of the novels they introduce and how they reflect the concerns of Eliot's work in general.

(i) *The Mill on the Floss*

George Eliot considered several alternative titles for the novel, including 'Sister Maggie', 'The Tullivers', 'St Ogg's on the Floss', 'The House of Tulliver', 'The Tulliver Family' and 'Life on the Floss'. A stronger emphasis on location and setting is implied in the final title than in the others, and is confirmed in the first chapter, 'Outside Dorlcote Mill'. It opens with descriptions of the Floss and its associated town of St Ogg's, and moves on to describe Dorlcote Mill and the ordinary life – vegetable, human and animal – of the region. It is not quite devoid of characters: there are the anonymous waggons, who have a representative function; and there are the little girl and the dog, who, though yet unnamed, are to play an important part in the novel. Only in the last sentence of the chapter is there reference to the central family of the novel, the Tullivers. These are the opening two paragraphs:

A wide plain, where the broadening Floss hurries on between its green banks to the sea, and the loving tide, rushing to meet it, checks its passage with an impetuous embrace. On this mighty tide the black ships – laden with the fresh-scented fir-planks, with rounded sacks of oil-bearing seed, or with the dark glitter of coal – are borne along to the town of St Ogg's, which shows its aged, fluted red roofs and the broad gables of its wharves between the low wooded hill and the river brink, tingeing the water with a soft purple hue under the transient glance of this February sun. Far away on each hand stretch the rich pastures and the patches of dark earth, made ready for the seed of broad-leaved green crops, or touched already with the tint of the tender-bladed autumn-sown corn. There is a remnant still of the last year's golden clusters of bee-hive ricks rising at intervals beyond the hedgerows; and everywhere the hedgerows are studded with trees: the distant ships seem to be lifting their masts and stretching their red-

brown sails close among the branches of the spreading ash. Just by the red-roofed town the tributary Ripple flows with a lively current into the Floss. How lovely the little river is with its dark, changing wavelets! It seems to me like a living companion while I wander along the bank and listen to its low placid voice, as to the voice of one who is deaf and loving. I remember those large dipping willows . . . I remember the stone bridge . . .

And this is Dorlcote Mill. I must stand a minute or two here on the bridge and look at it, though the clouds are threatening, and it is far on in the afternoon. Even in this leafless time of departing February it is pleasant to look at – perhaps the chill damp season adds a charm to the trimly-kept, comfortable dwelling-house, as old as the elms and chestnuts that shelter it from the northern blast. The stream is brim full now, and lies high in this little withy plantation, and half drowns the grassy fringe of the croft in front of the house. As I look at the full stream, the vivid grass, the delicate bright-green powder softening the outline of the great trunks and branches that gleam from under the bare purple boughs, I am in love with moistness, and envy the white ducks that are dipping their heads far into the water here among the withes – unmindful of the awkward appearance they make in the drier world above.

(pp. 53–4)

The first purpose of these introductory paragraphs is to set the scene for the narrative which is to follow. They are primarily descriptive, introducing the Floss and the town of St Ogg's in paragraph one and Dorlcote Mill in paragraph two as significant elements in a rich environment mingling human activity and natural phenomena. These two features, the river and the mill, one natural, the other man-made, will dominate the whole of the novel and determine its conclusion.

Discussion of a passage like this will naturally tend to focus on the mood that emerges from the description – on the keynote established here, which will influence the mood of the rest of the novel. There is another element, too, that demands attention: the nature of the observing eye, the narrator, who intrudes and participates both explicitly and implicitly in the description.

First impressions of this passage are likely to be strongly influenced by its unhurried pace – a feature it shares with many another nineteenth-century novel. There is space to consider the mental

picture at length, from the obvious bridge to the less obvious fir-planks. The senses are engaged by rich colours, green, soft purple, red-brown, golden and red alongside more subtle shades, by the movement of the river and the scent of fir. There is considerable particularity of detail. Notice, for example, that Eliot is not satisfied with general descriptions, but uses compounds to try to convey the particularity of what she describes in her references to 'fresh-scented fir-planks', 'tender-bladed autumn-sown corn'. Trees are referred to by species: ash, willow (also here called 'withy', 'withe'), elm and chestnut. It is easy to believe that this scene is drawn from life. (As it was, of course: Eliot travelled far to find an actual geographical model for the Floss and its mill.)

But there is more behind the leisureliness than convention only. Spaciousness in both mood and rhythm dominates the first paragraph from the first phrase to the end in a sequence of cumulative adjectives ('wide . . . broadening . . . mighty . . . broad . . . spreading . . . large'). At the same time there is a sense of richness in the 'dark glitter of coal' and of fertility in 'rounded sacks' of seed, seemingly somewhat at odds with the season: the mood of this damp February seems poised between the plenitude of a Keatsian autumn and the incipience of spring: both seasons are caught in the reference to the tint and tenderness of the newly sprouting corn sown in the autumn. The promise of new growth stands side by side with the recollection of 'last year's golden cluster'. There is a powerful awareness here of the changing seasons and their meaning for the lives of people bound into them. Equally there is a powerful sense of the richness, variety and complexity of the life of the countryside.

Eliot takes time to engage us in the natural world, to make us feel its evolution. Nature itself is brought to life. Personification is the cold name for the device used but how vividly poetic is the effect! The Floss 'hurries' against a tide 'rushing' to meet it and seems to the narrator 'a living companion', its sound a 'placid voice'; the February sun casts a 'transient glance' at the earth; the Ripple flows with a 'lively' current; even the distant ships, 'lifting their masts and stretching their red-brown sails' seem to share in the animation of nature. The imagery deepens into sexual or emotional significance with the 'loving' tide that meets the Floss in 'an impetuous embrace' and has

the voice of a 'loving' companion. Eliot, like the characters she is to write of, is used to close contact with the natural world and has an intimate knowledge of its ways and changing moods. The environment is like that to which she formed a powerful emotional attachment in her own childhood, and it is one to which Maggie will be seen to be indissolubly tied.

The theme of change develops in the second paragraph. Here the emphasis rests more evenly between promise and menace. There is still colour in the 'delicate bright-green' powdering the tree-trunks that 'gleam' from under purple boughs, but the boughs are bare. The clouds threaten rain or storm in this 'chill damp season', this 'leafless time'. At the same time, the stream is brim full, the grass vivid, and trees shelter the dwelling-house from the cold north wind. Thus inspired with the fruitfulness that grows out of the chill and damp of winter, the narrator may speak of being 'in love with moistness'. The mood changes too. Though there remain hints of the leisureliness of the opening paragraph (the full stream, the great trunks, the age of house and trees), there is a stronger focus on the near and small. Dorlcote Mill is homely: pleasant, trim, comfortable, its withy plantation little. The season adds 'charm' rather than power or greatness to the house. The atmosphere of the paragraph lightens with the concluding picture of the rather comical white ducks. With this second paragraph we have moved from the sublime to the homely – with just a hint of the ridiculous.

As a whole, this passage clearly has a complex mood, embracing grandeur, threat, richness, restlessness, a mild touch of comedy; there is sensuality as well as sensuousness. The narrator is conscious of the changing seasons and the broader movement of time; intensely conscious of the personality of the natural phenomena she describes, and in an intimacy bordering on sexual with them. Always she is conscious of impermanence, movement and variety: of the transient sunshine, of the rushing and checking of waters and their 'changing wavelets'; at one moment she is aware of the promise of the young shoots of corn, at another of the 'remnants' of last year's ricks; everything is in flux, February 'departing', and in this damp season, suggestive of the seasonal cycle as a whole, the brimming stream looks forward to a time when its level will have sunk in a dry warm summer.

The description is detailed, vivid and thus persuasive; more than that, it is striking because it is so intensely felt by an eye that understands the countryside.

The features that emerge from these paragraphs are to do chiefly with the natural world. A locality and its life are described with a sense of nostalgia at a time of year redolent of the transience of nature; the mood is complex, divided between consciousness of the decaying remnants of a dead season and delight in the promise of spring. There are also thematic points here. There is something ominous about the rushing river and in the sense of change itself, which always promises death as well as renewal. And the language of love that runs through the passage points to a major theme of the novel. Love and death are encapsulated here as keynotes for what is to follow. It is clear from the nature of the passage that, though the eye of the narrator recalls in St Ogg's aspects of her own past, her memories are fully disciplined by her artistic intentions and thematic interests.

The perspective of the narrator is far from easy to identify. The past recalled in this novel is Eliot's own, and it is unprofitable to attempt to distinguish between narrator and author: for all practical purposes the narrator is Eliot. However, the nature of her recall is not at all straightforward. Her influence is felt long before the blatant 'it seems to me' and repeated 'I remember' at the end of the first paragraph. Her voice is present earlier in the ecstatic exclamation drawn from her by the spectacle of the plain of the Floss, 'How lovely the little river is . . . !' It is felt from the beginning in the present tense of the paragraph, and in the opening phrases: without a finite verb, they suggest a limitless present containing the world of change and movement about to be described. Although the scene purports to be remembered and the presence of the narrator grows more insistent in the second paragraph ('I must stand', 'As I look', 'I am in love'), a different impression emerges later in the chapter when the narrator is described dozing in a chair, recalling the whole scene. This opening, then, is not an actuality being described, but an episode in the infinite present of the imagination. That 'I remember' repeated at the end of the first paragraph is ambiguous: the narrator is remembering visiting a place she remembers: thus the remembering embraces and contains the scene as well as being contained within it.