

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

1989

George Eliot: From Middlemarch to Manhattan

Catherine Civello

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Civello, Catherine, "George Eliot: From Middlemarch to Manhattan" (1989). *The George Eliot Review*. 104. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/104>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

GEORGE ELIOT: FROM MIDDLEMARCH TO MANHATTAN

by Catherine Civello

Female novelists in this century from de Beauvoir to Drabble have acknowledged the contribution of the Victorian George Eliot. In Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter, for instance, Simone de Beauvoir reports that, during her schooldays, she tried to conceal her reading of Adam Bede from her mother because of the novel's character Hetty Sorrel, pregnant out of wedlock (11). The Mill on the Floss held the future French feminist in its spell for many reasons:

I read a novel which seemed to me to translate my spiritual exile into words: George Eliot's The Mill on the Floss made an even deeper impression on me than Little Women. . . Maggie Tulliver, like myself, was torn between others and herself: I recognized myself in her. She too was dark, loved nature, and books and life, was too headstrong to be able to observe the conventions of her respectable surroundings, and yet was very sensitive to the criticism of a brother she adored. . . . The others condemned her because she was superior to them; I resembled her, and henceforward I saw my isolation not as a proof of infamy but as a sign of my uniqueness. . . . Through her heroine, I identified myself with the author; one day other adolescents would bathe with their tears a novel in which I would tell my own sad story. (Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter, p.140)

Not only de Beauvoir but also the English novelist Elizabeth Bowen became so enamored of Eliot that she dressed up as her for an Oxford pageant in the 1930's (Glendinning, p63). And Virginia Woolf, preparing to write an article for the Times Literary Supplement's observation of the centennial of Eliot's birth, wrote in a letter that she was "reading through the whole of George Eliot":

So far, I have only made way with her life, which is a book of the greatest fascination, and I can see already that no one else has ever known her as I know her. . . . I only wish she had lived nowadays, and so been saved all that nonsense. . . . It was an unfortunate thing to be the first woman of the age. (Letters, 26 January 1919)

In our own time, novelist Margaret Drabble has admitted that "George Eliot is the woman writer that she most admires" (Rose, 125). In addition to gaining the respect of female writers, George Eliot has been hailed by male literary critics from F.R. Leavis to Harry Levin and Raymond Williams. Moreover, the French novelist Marcel Proust admitted weeping more than once over The Mill on the Floss (Levin, 390).

But what I would like to consider surpasses such adulation as de Beauvoir's and Woolf's and transcends even the praise of Proust. It is a pattern that occurs in the work of at least three contemporary female novelists; it is a phenomenon of intertextuality. Not content to quote the novels of George Eliot or to allude to her life, these writers have made either Eliot or her work an integral part of their own fiction. Such intertextuality indicates that these authors, whose fiction embodies that of George Eliot, are both writers and readers. The reader-oriented perspective of Wolfgang Iser supplies a theoretical key to the situation.

Iser has described a literary work "not as a documentary record of something that exists or has existed, but as a reformulation of an already formulated reality, which brings into the world something that did not exist before" (x). As I examine Gail Godwin's The Odd Woman (1974), Susan Cheever's Looking for Work (1979), and Antonia Byatt's Still Life (1985), I will demonstrate that

they are at once “reformulations” as well as originals. For, as Iser delineates it, the reading process itself is janus-faced; it oscillates between reader and text, creating a “network of responses” that can take many forms (34, 27). I suggest that each of these three novels constitutes a response to George Eliot’s works; that, at the same time that Godwin, Cheever, and Byatt forge a link with Eliot through their texts, they simultaneously break from that tradition with the creation of original material; that, moreover, as these contemporary novelists build on traditional readings of George Eliot, they likewise alter subsequent readings of her works. Jane Clifford, the protagonist of The Odd Woman, is an English professor whose journey to her grandmother’s funeral triggers something that causes her to end her relationship with a married man. Jane’s longtime obsession with George Eliot—her dissertation topic was “The Theme of Guilt in the Novels of George Eliot” (213)—influences every stage of that decision. After one of her secret trysts with Gabriel, she wonders if fidelity until death were possible: “George Eliot and George Henry Lewes did it” (8), she remembers immediately. During the trip home for the funeral, the same question arises in conversation, and she tells her mother:

Look at George Eliot and Lewes. They completed each other. They were passionate, but neither of them exploited the other. They met in the middle of their lives when both were on their way to being disappointed people, and they gave each other back the birthrights of their best selves. The love she had for him made him do the best work of his life, and she became George Eliot because he gave her the confidence to. She was afraid to write fiction before he told her she could. They were outrageously happy, and they were all in all to each other for twenty-five years. . . . She wrote a friend, ‘We are leading no life of self-indulgence, except that, being happy in each other, we find everything easy.’ Don’t you love that? Being happy in each other, we find everything easy. As if love contained some kind of energy which freed you for your best creative work. I want that kind of love which bring such energies. (167-68)

Jane has convinced herself more easily than she persuades her mother of the appropriateness of her analogy, but Jane has had more practice. Years before, in the course of a trip to Europe, her college graduation present, Jane had searched in vain for George Eliot’s grave in Westminster Abbey. Finding where Eliot was buried and why (374) marked the beginning of at least Jane’s scholarly interest in Eliot. On the same trip, she studied the novelist’s manuscripts in the British Museum and developed an image of herself patterned on her perceptions of Eliot:

She saw herself pursuing George Eliot’s dramatic overcoming of her insecurities in the undramatic security of her own adopted English life, studying this braver woman’s passage through the cold world while she herself sat in front of cozy fires . . . and marveled at Eliot’s intelligence and stamina. (376)

And when she was a graduate student, she frequently considered that if she could be a character in any novel, she would want to be portrayed by George Eliot. Ruling out Jane Austen as too provincial, Jane Clifford believed that Eliot would do her justice:

No, Jane would have a better chance in an Eliot novel. She might even marry a nice man at the end and lead a useful life helping him. There would be no ecstasy, however. Though Marian Evans had found success in her profession and ecstasy with her married lover, she had forbade her characters to do so. No ecstasy for Jane, then. And no crashing denouement. (22)

Jane begins to parallel her life with Eliot's. When Gabriel (an art historian) suggests that, if he were to receive a Guggenheim fellowship, she might accompany him to England, Jane mentally compares her situation with Eliot's:

Marian Evans went off to Germany in 1854 with a married man, but Jane did not think she had a tenth of that woman's courage, even given the relaxed moral structure of a world a hundred years older. And Lewes had given Marian his heart openly, wanted to live with her, did live with her openly for twenty-five years; whereas Gabriel only suggested nine months of secrecy in London. (245)

Later, when Gabriel reveals a gap in his knowledge of art history, Jane again falls into her pattern of paralleling:

She had a moment of horror, remembering George Eliot's Mr. Casaubon and his worthless lifetime project, *The Key to All Mythologies*, and how Will Ladislaw had told Dorothea that her husband would have done better to have learned German; most of the work he was slaving over had already been surpassed by the Germans. (261-62)

Toward the end of her affair with Gabriel, Jane draws a final parallel. When an old friend observes that "childless couples remain true to each other longer, because they are more things to each other" (393), Jane cannot help recall that—like the childless Marian Evans and George Henry Lewes—her lover Gabriel and his wife Ann had no offspring. Her friend's cutting remarks, about childlessness and about Jane's escapism into the world of Eliot, catalyze her to act. Jane returns to her university town, having decided not to see Gabriel again.

Like Jane Clifford, Salley Gardens in *Looking for Work* has a tie with academe; her father is a university professor. Unlike Jane, Salley is a married woman and unemployed. Toward the beginning of this first-person confessional, Salley and her husband Jason move back to New York from California where they had recently relocated from New York—all to accommodate Jason's career, Salley's own journalism career having been sacrificed for the sake of her husband's. As she settles into their shabby apartment, she makes a significant discovery:

In the kitchen cupboard, next to a moldy jar of brown rice, I found a dog-eared student's copy of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. All day long I read it, huddled in the bathroom, my ears stopped with pink plastic plugs against the noise from the vacant lot. All day long I dreamed its romantic dreams. Was Ladislaw coming to save me? (69)

Instead of Will Ladislaw, however, at the end of the day "Jason/Casaubon"—as Salley thinks of him—returns to the tiny apartment and to his depressed wife.

Several passages from *Middlemarch* could have engrossed Salley that day, but two in particular underline the significance of her find. In the first, Eliot describes a frustrated Dorothea after her marriage to Casaubon:

This afternoon her helplessness was more wretchedly benumbing than ever: she longed for objects who could be dear to her, and to whom she could be dear. She longed for work which would be directly beneficent like the sunshine and the rain, and now it appeared that she was to live more and more in a virtual tomb, where there was the apparatus of a ghastly labour producing what would never see the light. (516)

Salley, "looking for work" (as the title indicates), must have responded to Dorothea, who "longed for work," according to Eliot. Released from her torturous marriage by her husband's death as Salley will eventually be freed from hers through a divorce, Dorothea confesses:

Two years ago I had no notion of that—I mean of the unexpected way in which trouble comes, and ties our hands, and makes us silent when we long to speak. I used to despise women a little for not shaping their lives more, and doing better things. (589)

After Middlemarch, Salley reads another but, for her, less satisfying Eliot novel:

After lunch I usually lie in bed and read, and one after noon just as Daniel Deronda is losing my sympathy by falling for the prim goody-goody Miriam [sic] instead of the regal Gwendolyn [sic], the telephone rings. (130)

Salley's preference for the "regal and troublesome" character over the "prim goody-goody" one reveals less about her self-image than about her generation of American women, who attended college with the hope of acquiring a husband as well as a diploma.

Married to a rural clergyman, Stephanie Orton awaits the birth of her first child as Still Life opens. Stephanie's brother, recovering from a nervous breakdown, and her mother-in-law, recuperating from a broken hip, have come to live with them indefinitely. It is the Christmas season. During midnight mass, the fatigue of holiday preparations combines with traces of her youthful agnosticism to produce in Stephanie the following reaction:

She thought instead of The Mill on the Floss, that cruel social history of English religion, locating its true centre in the Lares and Penates, a dense structure of things that defined who you were and what your relation to others was, spotted damask, sprigged china, the graduated expense and display of bonnets kept to be worshiped rather than worn. This had, and George Eliot knew it, little or even nothing to do with Christ's injunction to his followers, and certainly nothing at all to do with the Incarnation, which was now being celebrated as the congregation sang "Unto us a Boy is Born" as Daniel at the white-draped altar, with its lovingly embroidered white cloth, watched with Mr. Ellenby over the bread and wine. George Eliot, Stephanie thought, was a good hater. She looked long and intelligently at what she hated, with curiosity to see exactly what it was, and the necessary detachment to imagine it from within and from without, these two breeding a kind of knowledge that was love. George Eliot had loved the bonnets and sprigged china—because she knew them, or because writing them down gave her power over them, made her gentle and generous to their meaning? She tried to relate this sudden vision of the things of the pieties of the sisters to Daniel's mum's instructions about how to cook Christmas pudding, and largely failed. (45-46)

Jane Clifford drew parallels between her life and George Eliot's; Stephanie Orton, however, more closely resembles Salley Gardens, who lapsed into observations based on Eliot's writing rather than on her biography. Just as thinking about Dorothea's marriage in Middlemarch made Salley's marriage in Manhattan bearable, so did reflecting on the pettiness of nineteenth-century villagers in St. Ogg's somewhat reduce Stephanie's twentieth-century yuletide irritations.

What is the nature of the comfort derived from retreating into the nineteenth century? Certainly the knowledge that, whatever the tribulation, it has happened to and been weathered by previous generations. But, without taking away from history's consoling power, I suspect that something more specific nourishes the tendency in these female characters to seek parallels with the past—if only with its fictional rendering. It has to do with reading, with responding to a text, better yet, when the text is a familiar one. And, in Godwin, Cheever, and Byatt, the response to the texts of Eliot has become embodied in texts of their own. The simultaneity of response/reformulation has not only generated The Odd Woman, Looking for Work, and Still Life, but has rejuvenated our reading of The Mill on the Floss, Middlemarch, and Daniel Deronda.

WORKS CITED

- Byatt, Antonia. Still Life. NY: Scribner's, 1985.
- Cheever, Susan. Looking for Work. NY: Simon & Schuster, 1979.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter. Trans. James Kirkup. NY: The World Pub. Co., 1959.
- Eliot, George. Middlemarch. NY: Penguin Books, 1965.
- Glendinning, Victoria. Elizabeth Bowen. NY: Knopf, 1978.
- Godwin, Gail. The Odd Woman. NY: Viking Penguin, 1974.
- Iser, Wolfgang. The Act of Reading. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1978.
- Levin, Harry. The Gates of Horn. NY: Oxford Univ., 1966.
- Rose, Ellen Cronan. The Novels of Margaret Drabble. Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1980.
- Woolf, Virginia. Letters. London: The Hogarth Press, 1976.