CHAPTER II

CHARACTER: APPROACH AND CLASSIFICATION
I don't think there can be any question but what characters, characters that seem to live, are the most important single element in the novel. No one remembers novels for their style, or for the skill with which their plots were constructed. What we remember is Princess Marya, Zuleika Dobson and Lewis Eliot's neurotic wife Sheila. Characters, characters that have a universal appeal, are, in fact, the life of a novel or a short story.¹

'Character' is, indeed, the most important single structural feature of the novel.² But this was not so clearly recognized or conceded until the beginning of the nineteenth century, as 'Plot' held the first place from the beginnings of the novel. Novelists of the eighteenth century tended to construct their plots around definite beginnings and endings. The temporal progression of their novels was a movement from a natural starting point to a definite ending, and the synthesis was provided by a single action which moved, usually by way of reversals and discoveries. This is the kind of plot which Aristotle analyses in the Poetics.

The action is brought to a stage in which the good characters, after a period of difficulties, achieve on a

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² The action that which is necessary to display the characters, not what is invented for the purpose of mystifying and surprising the reader.
permanent basis the conditions which insure their happiness, and the bad characters are placed in conditions which insure their suffering. It follows that plots of this type require a certain kind of characterization. Most important, the central agents must be clearly characterized as virtuous, and thus deserving of happiness, or evil, and thus deserving of suffering. Only when this is done, can the ending be constructed to provide that sense of justness which makes it definitive and final. Thus Fielding, Richardson, and Smollett, all take pains to construct characters who are either virtuous or evil and to make the distinctions clear to their readers.

Early in the nineteenth century, most clearly with the novels of Sir Walter Scott, the fashion began to change. Novelists now tried to subordinate the problem of beginnings and endings to the problem of constructing a logical sequence of events, a sequence in which no event occurred without a causal relationship. The requirements of characterization also changed. Central characters no longer had to be clearly virtuous or the reverse, but they tended to have clearly defined motives based on clearly defined passions and modes of behaviour. Characters such as Julian Sorel, Raskolnikov, Emma Bovary, Becky Sharp, Eustacia Vye and Strether, although

3 Some form of poetic justice was thus maintained.
4 The major distinction resulting between the Realistic novel and the Romance.
none are unambiguously virtuous or evil, are all constructed around passions and rules of action which bring them into conflict with the conditions surrounding them. 5

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, the novels had no very salient plots. Consider, for instance, Vanity Fair. It has no 'hero', no figure who exists to precipitate the action; no very clear plot; no definite action to which everything contributes; no end towards which all things move. The characters are not conceived as parts of the plot; on the contrary, they exist independently, and the action is subservient to them.

Trollope's great admiration was reserved, in his own time, 'for the work of Thackeray and George Eliot, who did not go in for the kind of sensationalism that depends on extraordinary and shocking incident, who hardly went in for plot at all, as it was understood by Dickens or Collins, but who put their trust in the delineation of character, and whose plots were hardly more than the unfolding and display of character'. 6

Among the mid-Victorian novelists, George Eliot was undoubtedly the most sensitive to the flux of speculative ideas. It was this sensitiveness to cultural cross-currents, coupled with a strong personal philosophy and an unusual facility in reducing the abstract to the concrete, that produced such a profound influence on both the subject-matter and the technique of English fiction.

George Eliot's intellectual approach to her subject-matter led her, indeed, to break with these fundamental conventions both of form and matter within which the English novel till then had been constructed. Nancy Hale says:

'George Eliot has the merit of having been the first novelist to lay much more stress on character than on plot and incident. She can be said to have inaugurated a fashion and a technique whose ultimate effects can be traced down to Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.'

After George Eliot, the story elements became less important in the novel, and writers applied themselves to the illustration of philosophical theory and the interpretation of a man's relation to the universe. The idea of the adjustment of man to the welter of conflicting forces within himself is of prime importance to her. In novel after novel she deals with this aspect of man.

7 Hale: op.cit., p. 51.

In George Eliot's stories, the characters are all in all; the incidents are of secondary importance and grow out of the characters.
In initiating this innovation, she was very unlike the Victorian novelists. She was an 'intellectual' writer. Her mind was always active, and her experience set it immediately analysing and generalising, discovering why and how things happened. Her novels are inspired not by what she felt or fancied, but by what she thought, not by a wish to convey her impressions of life but her judgements on it.

Here are the first novels which set out to give a picture of life wholly unmodified by those formulas of a good plot which the novel had taken over from comedy and romance. Her story is conditioned solely by the logical demands of situations or character; it ends sadly or happily, includes heroes or omits them, deals with the married or the unmarried, according as reason and observation lead her to think so.

George Eliot seemed to a critic, writing in the National Review, the example of a novelist bringing out the intimate connection that should exist between plot and character. She rigorously eschewed 'all those artificial enhancements of interest which do not arise fairly out of the moral constitutions of the characters' and all the 'adventitious effects' of conventional romance, so that in her greatest works we find 'the simplest possible unfolding of tragedy'. 8

In form, the English novel in its first period consisted of a number of characters and incidents knit together by an intrigue centering round a young 'attractive' hero and heroine, and rounded off with their happy marriage. The plot did not arise from the characters; rather, it was imposed by the author on them. But since George Eliot began with an idea of character or situation; her plot was intended to follow not a standardized formula but what she conceived to be the logical development of that idea; and this entailed something quite different from the accepted Victorian notion of the plot.  

Thus, even in her earliest book, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, George Eliot ended her stories tragically, and in *Amos Barton*, she chose for her hero no gallant young man but a middle-aged, unattractive, married clergymen. Later, she departed still further from the old conventions. In *Silas Marner* the hero is an elderly bachelor. In *Middlemarch* there is no central figure of any kind; the main interest is divided between four separate groups of characters; and none of these except Dorothea Brooke approaches the conventional heroic type. Finally, since the action of her stories arises logically from the characters, those strokes of fortunes, coincidences, sudden

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9 This naturally did away with happy endings, wedding bells, and characters answering to the Victorian conception of hero and heroine.
inherences, long-lost wills, which are the stock-in-trade of the conventional Victorian plot, are inevitably omitted by her.

It is in the drawing of 'character' that her intellectual approach shows itself most clearly. She creates a lively image of man in society. And this image is realistic: it gives a full and precisely documented community, and an overflowing sense of humanity — both in psychological observation and in the Shakespearean sense of character.

Since the basic theme underlying all of George Eliot's novels is the moral theme, her serious characters are 'envisaged exclusively in their moral aspect'. 'They are portraits of the inner man', designed to show 'the principles of his conduct — his besetting sin, his presiding virtue'.

Such a portrait omits many of those aspects of a man — his manner, his mood, his face and his dress — 'which give a "living" quality to the great figures of fiction.

It is in her treatment of character that George Eliot's more active intelligence gives her most conspicuous advantage over the typical Victorians. She did not begin with the personality that appeared to the outside world, but with the

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psychological elements underlying the personality. This implies that her portrait is primarily concerned with these psychological elements. Early in her career, George Eliot wrote to her publisher:

'My stories always grow out of my psychological conception of the dramatics personaee.'

It is an important contribution of George Eliot's — to have initiated the use of a convincing, dynamic psychology in presenting characters. She was the first Victorian novelist to depict a character from the inside, and to portray realistically the spectacle of deterioration in people who are not intrinsically evil. Her most complex characters ring true, because the changes and apparent contradictions in them are always firmly related, as they are in life, to some central principle — the hub on which the wheel of personality turns. She knows why ambitions are frustrated, why idealists desert their ideals, why the bright promise of youth so often fades into insignificance. It is not due to social pressure, nor due to power exerted by Destiny, that her characters are impelled to go through each moral crisis, making necessary decisions in the way they do. Thus Lydgate need not have married Rosamond, though we understand well enough why he did. It is because the character's nature is betrayed by what is false within itself.

Leslie Stephen writes:

'Her stories are preeminently studies of character in the sense that her main and conscious purpose is to set before us the living beings in what may be called...their statical relations — to show them, that is, in their quiet and normal state, not under the stress of exceptional events.'

When we once know Adam Bede or Dinah Morris, we care comparatively little of the development of the plot.

There are different ways of presenting a character in the novel. Sometimes, a character, as we see him in the beginning of a novel, is a shadowy and indeterminate being, but after his reactions to a chronological series of events have been presented we feel that he has grown into a living personality. In other novels we are given a descriptive portrait of the character first, so that we know what to expect; and the resulting actions and reactions of the character provide a filling-in and elaboration whose justness we can appreciate by comparison with the original portrait. Thackeray's novels conform to this latter type. In Thomas Hardy's The Mayor of Casterbridge, there is no set description of Michael Henchard's character at the beginning of the book or anywhere else. In the first chapter he is simply a young

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man, and we have just an account of Michael's physical appearance. There is no hint of his real nature or his personality. That emerges as the story proceeds — emerges from the story itself, from the account of what Michael does, and the way in which he reacts to the doings of others. His character is not fully presented until the story is concluded, and the way in which Hardy gives us a full view of his character is by taking him through a long and varied sequence of events. Any criterion of consistency applied would concern only the relation of one action or reaction of Michael to another; there can be no referring back to an original prose portrait, because the author has not given us one.

The second way of presenting character, a commoner one, is illustrated in the third chapter of Trollope's Barchester Towers. The chapter is entitled 'Dr. and Mrs. Proudie': it is a complete and formal account of the character of Dr. Proudie and the habits of his mind, then an account of his career, then a further expansion of his present nature and attitude. Next, Mrs. Proudie is taken up, and similarly treated. By the end of the chapter we know exactly who and what these two characters are: we know no more about their characters at the end of the book — we have only seen the application to particular events of the general principles already enunciated. The interest of the book lies in these events and in our noting and approving how the characters run true to form throughout.
The most effective of all, from the point of view of those whose chief interest in fiction lies in its psychological aspect, is the technique which combines the foregoing two methods. Jane Austen's novels provide the example. In *Emma*, in the first chapter we are given a fairly adequate sketch of her character and circumstances. Yet we do not know Emma completely. A full understanding of her nature comes only after we have watched her reactions to the events which constitute the story and have studied her own part in the shaping of these events.

These two methods, separately or in combination, have been the stock methods of presenting character in fiction from the beginnings of the novel until the modern times. You put a character into a story, or you arrange a story so that a character emerges — that makes the distinction, bluntly speaking, between them. 13

In recent times, partly as a result of increased speculation into the nature of consciousness, writers have become dissatisfied with these traditional methods. They have realized that a psychological accurate account of what a man is at any given moment can be given neither in terms of a static description of his character nor in terms of a group of chronologically arranged reactions to a series of

13 See David Daiches: *The Novel and the Modern World* (Chicago, 1938), Ch. II.
circumstances. The new method of describing states of mind becomes a new technique of story telling — 'the stream of consciousness' technique. 14

Besides the two methods of character-portrayal mentioned above, there is a third method which shows the character changing or developing so that, while the initial portrait is valid with reference to the situation presented at the beginning of the novel, it ceases to be valid by the time the novel is concluded. As a result of the circumstances in which the character finds himself throughout the course of the story, his nature is modified, and we are finally confronted with a different person from the one we met at the beginning. This method is essentially different from the one where villains, in quite a few popular novels, get reformed towards the end and become good men. It is, of course, possible to make a character suddenly change in the course of the action, but it is hardly convincing in terms of psychological probability. Development, as distinct from such a crude change, ought to be more regular in good fiction. This is, in essence, just an aspect of the second method, where the character incompletely presented at the beginning, does not emerge completely until the action has taken place. The final character is different in the sense that events have brought out elements in his nature which earlier were only potential.

14 Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway is a good example.
This is the method eminently suited for George Eliot's purpose, as she "was the first to trace the development of character, how it changed according to the personal act; 'character too is a process and an unfolding' — a great discovery in the realm of fiction".  

Obviously, the technique of fiction which served well the purposes of Scott and Dickens would not serve George Eliot. Her preoccupation with moral problems and consequent mental states necessitated a new kind of psychological character analysis. And in adopting this technique George Eliot broke with the old tradition, and began that of Meredith and Henry James, and in another way, that of Hardy. Batho and Dobree observe:

"Before her time the characters had not developed; they had performed to specification, and often acted quite inconsistently without any reason being suggested. Before her day, characters had not thought, they had only felt. Disraeli's characters; it is true, had uttered thoughts, but lives were not troubled by their thoughts as the lives of George Eliot's were."

George Eliot's intellectual understanding enables her to describe aspects of human nature, and describe successfully how a character develops. This is very rare among novelists.


16 Batho and Dobree: *op.cit.* , p. 89.
When they want to describe, for instance, a good man going bad, they generally cut him into two; we are shown a good man in the first part of the book, and a bad man in the second. But they do not seem to be the same man. We have seen nothing in the first which may lead us to understand how he becomes the second. In their efforts to show the change that overtook him, they forget to maintain those constant characteristics which keep him one person.

With George Eliot it is different, for her perception of these characteristics is the root of her whole conception. Lydgate, on his first appearance in *Middlemarch* is an enthusiastic and disinterested young doctor, intent only on extending the boundaries of knowledge and with a scorn for worldly prizes that his profession might enable him to gain. At the end, he is a fashionable physician with no interest in discovery, content only to maintain a prosperous practice. George Eliot portrays the evidences of this change with extraordinary acuteness of observation. We see how his spirits are lowered, how his scruples slackened, how his tongue embittered. And in spite of his being so altered, we recognize him as the same Lydgate as we saw him first; nor do we find the change in him inexplicable.

For, from his entry on the scene, we have been made aware of the weak spot in Lydgate's character, his dislike of doing something disagreeable to himself, and we can see
that in difficult circumstances this weakness will render his strongest ambitions impotent. Moreover, George Eliot knew how to bring about the change in the character. The situations in which she involved Lydgate are precisely those which are most likely to have happened, situations most likely to find out his weakness. And she can exhibit exactly the mode by which, step by step, he gives way to this weakness, readjusts his principles to suit his practice, till imperceptibly he is transformed into the man of the final phase. In a similar way, we see Silas Marner grow from an enthusiastic austere Methodist, careless of the world's good, first into a miser, dominated by a desire to increase his store of gold, and then, under the influence of the child Eppie, change a second time to a generous, affectionate old man with no thought but the good of others.17

George Eliot's grip on psychological essentials enables her to draw complex characters better than her predecessors. Novelists, like Trollope, who drew from the outside have no difficulty in making a simple character convincing; they have only to see its outside clearly to be able to deduce its elements for themselves. But when these novelists come to a complex character, they fail; for the outer manifestations of a character are so inconsistent, that unless the reader is

given some key to them, he simply does not feel that they are expressions of the same person.

George Eliot's peculiar power surmounts this difficulty. Drawing from inside out, starting with the central principle of the character, she is able to show how it reveals itself in its most variegated surface. Her characters always hang together; they are of a piece, their defects are the defects are the defects of their virtues. We are not surprised that a man so anxious for the good opinion of others as Arthur should selfishly seduce Hetty, because we realise that the controlling force in his character is the desire for immediate enjoyment; so that his wish to sun himself in the pleasant warmth of other people's liking goes along with his inability to resist the immediate pleasure of Hetty's embraces.

George Eliot thus explored and comprehended the motives of her characters. She was the first English novelist to analyse the secret thoughts of her characters, to probe their unavowed desires, to look within and reveal the operations of the human will. Her analysis of Arthur's reaction to his seduction of Hetty is, in fact, the beginning of a new technique, based on introspection.

George Eliot can follow the winding of motive through the most tortuous labyrinth, for she has the central clue in
her hand. Her power to describe mixed characters extends to mixed states of mind. Her eagle-eye can penetrate through all the shock and smoke of the struggle, to elucidate the position of the forces concerned, and to reveal the trend of their action. Indeed, the field of her most characteristic triumph is the moral battle-field. David Daiches says:

In all her fiction George Eliot was concerned with moral problems of characters, but she never abstracted her characters from their environment in order to illustrate their moral dilemmas. She was familiar with and responsive to the varied social contexts in which nineteenth-century men and women could live; she saw the relationship between town and country, metropolitan and provincial, agricultural, commercial, industrial, and professional, and she used her knowledge to make her characters move naturally in their daily occupations — something which Dickens was unable to do.

Further, these pictures of men at work are intimately bound up with her presentation of character. It is the relationships into which people are brought in the course of their daily activities that precipitate the changes and the crises out of which the ultimate moral meaning emerges. If Dr. Lydgate had been a medical man with specific views on medical research and progress, the effect in his character of his marrying a

18 For this she employs the 'stream of consciousness technique' in its immature form.

flighty girl with no comprehension of his professional aims could not have been what it was; and so on.

It is in this context of a working community that George Eliot dramatises the moral problems of her characters. These, as Joan Bennett has observed, are always concerned with the adjustment of the individual to the community, 'with the discovery of a mean point between complete self-repression and unchecked self-indulgence'. George Eliot sees society as a closely-woven web which, touched at any point, trembles in all its parts; hence the awful necessity of right action and the avoidance of wrong. Mr. Irwine, in Adam Bede, speaks for his creator when he says: "Consequences are unpitying. Our deeds carry their terrible consequences, quite apart from any fluctuations that went before — consequences that are hardly ever confined to ourselves." 20

The words, indeed, define the inner structure of George Eliot's novels as they do her moral view. The consequences of right-doing are necessarily less dramatic but just as important.

Her view of morality being as stern and intransigent as it is, George Eliot's constant insistence on the necessity and beauty of self-sacrifice cannot surprise us. For her, the

20 Adam Bede, Chap. XVI.
only guide to right behaviour is the good of others. Thus the characters in her novels divide themselves into two classes. To some the moral course is clear, and the characters are in a position to do what they think right, only they are tempted to do something wrong instead; and the conflict turns on the struggle between their principles and their weakness, while the other characters fail to recognise the higher law of rightful action.

Her stories are preeminently studies of character. She is more anxious to probe the condition of her protagonists’ souls, to give us an accurate diagnosis of their spiritual complaints, and an account of their moral evolution, than to show us the character in action.

Her power of drawing conclusions gave her a naturally sharp eye for symptoms of moral strength and weakness, taught her to discern them in all their varying modes of expression in well brought-up girls, in men of the world, a poor weaver, or a lusty young man. She could also distinguish between different varieties of the same characteristic; for instance, how Dorothea’s sense of duty differed from Mary Garth’s or Godfrey Cass’s self-indulgence from that of Arthur Donnithorne. She traced these expressions of virtue and weakness to their original source in the character, discovered the spark of nobility, the streak of weakness which are their origin. Finally, her disciplined generalizing intelligence taught her
to see the significance of her discoveries. 'Having analysed a character into its elements, she was able to distinguish their relative force and position. She could deduce its central principle so that, however, complex and inconsistent it might appear, she saw it as a unity.'

George Eliot's picture of human nature is far more homogeneous than that of a writer like Dickens. She was certain, she said in *The Mill on the Floss* that 'the mysterious complexity of life is not to be embraced by maxims,' because 'moral judgements must remain false and hollow, unless they are checked and enlightened by a perpetual reference to the special circumstances that mark the individual lot.' She, therefore, depicts no character as innately evil, but shows how harmful effects result from inadequate foresight and self-knowledge. Carroll's remark is significant in the context:

An examination of the delineation and development of her main characters reveals an archetypal pattern upon which all the novels are constructed. The main character, usually the heroine, through lack of self-knowledge embraces an illusory way of life; the illusions are stripped from the character by means of successive disenchantments which lead finally through a realistic knowledge of self to regeneration.

22 *The Mill on the Floss*, Bk VII, Chap. iii.
This movement from illusion, through disenchantedness, to regeneration approximates to what Aristotle calls anagnorisis.

And very truly all of George Eliot’s heroines — Maggie Tulliver, Esther Lyon, Dorothea Brooke, Gwendolen Harleth and Romola — go through the difficulties and the agonies and the struggles that had fallen to her own lot. As idealists they put their values against life, are disillusioned, and after the period of disillusionment is over win through resignation and serenity. Her novels reveal an exceptional sense of the pathos of human life, and a deep conviction that human nature can be tried and purified in the fire of suffering.

The secret of her power is to be found in the depth and range of her sympathies:

'She gets to the heart of her characters, and makes us feel with them, care for them, like to know about them. Even if they are stupid people who lead dull lives, she has the happy art of making us take an interest in their story and wish to hear it out.'

And this is George Eliot’s great gift that in delineating her characters, she makes us share in their hopes and fears, and taste their griefs and joys. She enlists our sympathies in the lives of her characters, good and bad, with a heartiness

24 As Dallas: The Times, 26 June 1866, p. 6, in Holmstrom and Lerner: op.cit., p. 71.
which few other writers can even rival; just as we are led eventually, as Dorothea is, to feel pity rather than contempt for Casaubon in *Middlemarch*.

Besides, George Eliot never falls into caricature. She could have easily fallen into the folly of drawing Casaubon into a tyrant like Grandcourt, but she is able to portray him successfully as a pedant only. Also Tito Melema, in *Romola*, degenerates from a pleasure-loving fellow into an unscrupulous and ruthless schemer, but she does not make him a vicious monster. Her characters are of interest to us, because we can easily identify ourselves with them. We can be Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*, or Dr. Lydgate in *Middlemarch*. But we can, perhaps, hardly be Micawber, or Becky Sharp, or Heathcliff.

The major difference lies in the methods of characterization. Characterization in Dickens does not involve George Eliot's psychological and moral analysis. George Eliot, especially in the later novels, brushes past externals to reach her characters' inner nature. Dickens's greatest psychological penetration is into the abnormal, while George Eliot, as we have noted, is far more concerned with normal experience, with the depths of suffering and possibilities of growth which may be hidden therein.

Her mode of character-portrayal is, nevertheless,
'predominantly temporal', because, above all, she presents character as deeply immersed in time:

This change is almost as common in George Eliot's character as it is rare in Dickens', whether it is the growth of Dorothea or the deterioration of Lydgate. It is impossible to imagine such characters, as we often do Dickens', in a kind of imaginative eternity, detached from a particular scene or even from the context of the novel in which they appear, because her major figures are always in process.25

For George Eliot, as Farebrother says, "character is not cut in marble — it is not something solid and unalterable. It is something living and changing".26

The principle that change results from the interaction of the laws of the agencies involved was basic to George Eliot's understanding of human thought and behaviour. What happens to the characters is never arbitrary, but the result of a combination of character and fortune. Their fates are more often determined by many minor, almost unconscious choices, definitely exemplified in the slow attrition of Lydgate's character. 'The fates of the men and women who people her novels are determined by the interaction of character and circumstance. The individual exists in a medium the nature of which largely determines his character and his fate. But

26 Middlemarch, Chap. LXXII.
the way in which his environment affects him is the consequence of his own nature." Irwine tells Arthur Donnithorne that "A man can never do anything at variance with his own nature. He carries within him the germ of his most exceptional action." Circumstances, however, are responsible for bringing the germs of character to their good or bad fruition. Arthur's flaws of character, for example, might never have disclosed themselves under a different set of conditions. George Eliot says:

Ships, certainly, are liable to casualties, which sometimes make terribly evident some flaw in their construction, that would never have been discovered in smooth water; and many a 'good fellow', through a disastrous combination of circumstances, has undergone a like betrayal.

Our fate, then, is both determined by us and determined for us. This is succinctly expressed in her epigraph to Chapter IV of Middlemarch:

Gent. Our deeds are fetters that we forge ourselves.

Gent. Ay, truly: but I think it is the world

That brings the iron.

27 Paris: op.cit., p. 49.
28 Adam Bede, Chap. XVI.
29 Ibid., Chap. XII.
Thus character, for George Eliot, is neither immutable nor imposed; it is evolved. Her characters are not simply passive, nor do they stand still: 'They are shown making their own history, continually changing and developing or degenerating as their motives issue into acts, and the acts become part of the circumstances that condition motive and purify or demoralize the will.' 30

Thus the fate which reappears in each of her novels is not the external malicious Fate of Greek Poetry; it is simply the logical result of moral causation. Each individual is the master or the victim of the fate which he bears within him.

Paris observes:

'Her is a more modern and true' conception. The destiny which surrounds her characters...is the compounded description of natural laws, character, and accident which we call life. It leaves nothing out of view, neither the material nor the moral forces; neither immutable fixity of physical succession, nor the will. Man is, in these novels; neither a creature who controls...nor who is controlled by nature, he is himself part of nature.' 31

Both Maggie Tulliver and Dorothea Brooke are eager, passionate creatures whose natures are oppressed by the indifference, and sometimes the hostility, of external reality. Their

31 Paris: op.cit.
plight typifies George Eliot's conception of human destiny, as all her novels show men and women grappling with the circumstances of their lives, seeking ways to escape frustration and despair, searching for a home for themselves in the world. Though many of her characters do not face the central problem of human existence in the same way as Maggie and Dorothea, but it is there, built into the nature of things, for all.

Earliest among English novelists she introduced the idea of retribution; for her each individual act has its consequences, every evil action carries its nemesis with it. No one has so fully seized the great truth that we can none escape the consequences of our conduct; that each action has not only a character of its own, but also an influence on the character of the actor from which there is no escape.

George Eliot believed that the wages of sin is untold misery; and she did not shrink from showing it requiting the transgressor. Such moral determination gave to her novels a certain rigidity, but it also gave them power and significance. Sorrow was strictly determined, not by external factors, but by character. Her characters are caught in some unbreakable chain of causation: 'Our deeds determine us as much as we determine our deeds' is an assertion fully justified by her novels.

No one would deny that George Eliot takes a dominantly moral interest in her characters; she is more than anything
interested in the sequence of motive, act and consequence — above all, in the consequence. Harvey observes:

No one has been a finer analyst of what an existentialist would call 'bad faith', the twists and turns of the corrupted self as it seeks to evade truth and responsibility. In particular, she is concerned with bad faith as it stems from various kinds of egoism. Yet egoism, bad faith, moral analysis — all these imply for her a central stable core of character.32

A critic in The Westminster Review opines:

'The moral progress of mankind is a far higher thing to her than the finest poetry, which is but an instrument in that progress. This bias leads her to treat the events by which she develops the characters of her stories with too great an arbitrariness, and to disregard their natural sequence in a manner which strongly contrasts with the inexorable constructiveness of every step in the development of the characters themselves.'33

The central characters in the novels of George Eliot are deeply rooted in the social environment which determines their lives as much as their individual entities. George Eliot was aware of the ethical, religious, and social conventions of the world she paints as a product of history, evolved in time and changing with time. She was consciously interested in the pressure they exert on individual lives and in the existence of a problem concerned with resisting or succumbing to that pressure. She shows the modern consciousness of man in a changing and developing society.

Calvin Bedient gets to the Crux of the idea:

... the chief burden of her novels is that human beings are not social, not 'Victorian' enough — society having as yet failed to redeem them from what Freud called 'the crude life of the instincts'. George Eliot's characteristic subject is the necessary submission of individuals to their own society, ... and this submission is to be made not so much in the interest of this or that society as in the interest of this or that society as in the general interest of the socialization of the self. For her, any society is preferable to the explosive egoism of the individual.34

The Victorians divided the characters into virtuous and vicious ones. George Eliot's perception of them, however, is more complex than that of her predecessors. She never suggests a simple division of characters into good and bad. The individual, like the environment, has evolved and is evolving; his or her behaviour at any given moment is the inevitable result of all that has gone before. Her vision of human nature, the human condition, and human values was largely shaped by the cosmology, sociology, and psychology of science. She employed her novels as a means of 'envisioning the implications for human existence of the order of things and the subjective and objective approaches to reality'.35

The characters unable or unwilling to recognise the mandates of this order are 'invariably punished by the deterministic sequences they engender: Amos Barton, Lawyer Dempster, Hetty Sorrel, Godfrey Cass, Tito Melema, Mrs. Transome, Nicholas Bulstrode, Tertius Lydgate, and Gwendolen Harleth must pay for disregarding both the guidelines of the past and the impending consequences of the future.  

The vitality of George Eliot's art is a matter of a preoccupation with moral problems — and her dealing with the agonised conscience. This involvement in moral and psychological themes leads her characters to be biased morally. In this context Barbara Hardy remarks:

She is always interested in individual man, sometimes energetic and powerful, often dwarfed, frustrated, and alone. He is placed in history and in society, given his local colour... but emerges primarily as a moral being.

There is instance after instance in her novels of worldly failure and of moral error and frustration resulting from thoughts that do not agree with the nature of things. If collisions arise between the individuals and the general, the fault must be entirely with the individuals and their impious egoism, their selfish appetites — as is indeed the case with Arthur Donnithorne and Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede*, with Tito

Macleay in *Romola*, with Bulstrode in *Middlemarch*, with Mrs. Transome in *Felix Holt*, and with Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda*.

All her characters may then be classified and understood, in terms of their tendency towards egoism or objectivity. As George Eliot herself writes in *Middlemarch*:

> We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves; Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it had been easier to her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr. Casaubon, ... that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference.\(^38\)

These terms generate the novel's organizing categories; they classify, in this case, characters into those who, like Dorothea, emerge from the moral stupidity of egoism, and those who, like Casaubon, never do, or like Rosamond who emerge briefly once and then relapse forever; they organize the characters into those of emergence or of failure to emerge from egoism.

A careful study of George Eliot's novels shows that almost all her characters are shown as morally committed, and committed as egoists or altruists. As Barbara Hardy puts it:

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38 *Middlemarch*, Chap. XXI.
Her homoduplex is pulled in two directions by the urge of self-interest and the urge of social impulse. The prominent characters are either proceeding outward, towards Daniel Deronda's 'transmutation of self', or inward, in a slowly hardening egoism which blinds the imagination and moves logically towards the exclusions of betrayal and murder. 39

It is obvious, therefore, that George Eliot's major characters fall into a moral classification, though perhaps slightly less obvious in the case of minor characters. Her realism, of course, creates a tension between these general categories and the individual characters. In a novel like Middlemarch, the complex system of parallels and contrasts between the characters derives its general outlines from the basic moral categories but is 'also capable of qualifying them by unexpected juxtapositions' 40. A character so limited as Harriet Bulstrode, who hardly appears before Chapter 74, achieves her own moment of moral growth in forgiving and accepting her unlovable husband in a more complete abnegation of self than Dorothea ever achieves in her marriage with Casaubon. In fact, realistic fidelity to human complexity prevents oversimplification. Nevertheless, the pattern remains, and the general moral categories remain valid.


The characters are, roughly speaking, either egoists or altruists. The failing of potential altruism or nobility, defeated by the inherent human weakness of egoism helps to define the various categories of egoists into:

a) Absolute egoists,
b) Repentant egoists,
c) Redeemed egoists.

The human progress is seen as a movement towards the loneliness and aggressiveness of self-regard, or towards the humane and warm acceptance of one's private case as part of the human lot. The human process at its most hopeful is seen in terms of the tragic education of the egoist. This last category of 'Redeemed egoist' includes the borderline cases as well, since the characters tend to emerge from the shell of egoism through suffering and disillusionment, and attain some degree of altruism.

We shall examine each one of these categories in greater depth and detail in the following three chapters.