

The Narrator in George Eliot's Fiction: Connections to Modernism

Abstract:

This article attempts to explore and identify literary connections between Victorian fiction as written and developed by George Eliot and Anglo-Saxon modernist literature of the first half of the twentieth century. It highlights the main similarities between Eliot's intentions as a novelist and what the modernists intended their fiction to achieve. The article discusses the intentional distinction between the author and the narrator, the characteristic of the latter known as unreliability, the interpretative tasks attributed to the reader, and the author's interest in both humanism and psychic life as common features between Eliotian and modernist fictions.

Key words: George Eliot, modernist writers, narrator, unreliable narrator, humanism, psychology.

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ملخص:

يهدف هذا المقال إلى الكشف و التعرف على الروابط الأدبية الموجودة بين الرواية الفيكتورية كما طورتها و أبدعت فيها الكاتبة البريطانية جورج إيليوث من جهة، و الأدب الأنجلو - ساكسوني الحديث من جهة أخرى ، حيث يسلم هذا المقال الضوء على أهم أوجه الشبه الموجودة بين نوايا إيليوث ككاتبة روائية و ما كان ينوي إنجازها كتاب الأدب الحديث. كما يناقش هذا المقال أيضا التمييز المتعمد بين الكاتب و الراوي الذي يمتاز بإنعدام الثقة، و مهمة القارئ في تفسير الأحداث، و أخيرا إهتمام الكاتب بالجانبين الإنساني و النفساني كقواسم مشتركة بين روايات جورج إيليوث و الأدب الحديث.
الكلمات الرئيسية: جورج إيليوث، الأدب الحديث، الراوي، الإنسانية، علم النفس.

Introduction:

Much has been written about Eliot so far, but criticism has constantly been fluctuating over time because critics have not been the same interpreters. When compared to their predecessors, twenty-first century readers of Eliot have more things to say about her thanks to both the abundance of material they benefit from and the evolution of mindsets.

Therefore, a re-reading of Eliot's novels such as *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner* (1861), *Felix Holt* (1866), *Middlemarch* (1871-72), and *Daniel Deronda* (1876) has led to new interpretations.

What if Eliot's narrator and fiction turn to show some similarities with modernism? The present article will try to identify the narrator in Eliot's fiction and attempt to examine any possible connections to the modernist one.

Alexander Main, a devoted admirer of Eliot, published in 1871 *Wise, Witty, and Tender Sayings in Prose and Verse*. The book is a collection of Main's favourite writer's narrative passages that he selected and classified according to their sources: "George Eliot (in propria persona)" and "various characters" (7-8). Even if she rated Main's book as homage to her art, Eliot did firmly react to this classification:

If it were true, I should be quite stultified as an artist. Unless my readers are more moved towards the ends I seek by my works as wholes than by an assemblage of extracts, my writings are a mistake. I have always exercised a severe watch against anything that could be called preaching, and if I have ever allowed myself in dissertation or in dialogue [anything] which is not part of the structure of my books, I have there sinned against my own laws. I am particularly susceptible at this point, because it touches deeply my conviction of what art should be, and because a great deal of foolish stuff has been written in this relation. Unless I am condemned by my own principles, my books are not properly separable into 'direct' and 'indirect' teaching. My chief doubt as to the desirability of the 'Sayings' has always turned on the possibility that the volume might encourage such a view of my writings (qtd. in Price 131).

The above quote clearly shows that Eliot had definitely not intended to create any kind of dissociation within her narrative. As Rignall put it, these very narrative comments are to be regarded as "a structural part of her novels and not as a vehicle for moralizing" (280). Moreover, Newton affirms that Eliot "intended the narrator's comments and 'intrusions' to be part of the overall artistic structure of her fiction" (47). It is striking how Newton identifies the comments present throughout Eliot's fiction with a narrator and not with the author herself. The nub of the matter is to assess whether Eliot did really intend to separate herself as an author from her novels' narrators.

The quickest way to check the novelist's intent would certainly be to investigate her literary works. In *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857) and *Adam Bede* (1859), it is easy to understand that the narrator is meant to be male. Yet, this detail could still be discussed as a deliberate identity cover used by the author to hide her gender to the Victorian audience – including her publisher, William Blackwood. In truth, George Eliot had remained Mary Ann Evans' pen name until 1859 when she decided to reveal her identity after the publication of *Adam Bede* (1859). Her later novels including *Silas Marner* (1861), *Felix Holt* (1866), *Middlemarch* (1871-72), and *Daniel Deronda* (1876) do not include any clear references to the narrator's gender but they unequivocally reveal some other indications that shall be dealt with at a later stage. An explicit dissociation of the author from the narrator is to be found in *Romola* (1863) where Eliot introduced the latter as “the spirit of a [dead] Florentine citizen [who] could return from the shades” (2), and in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879) where the narrator is declared to be “a bachelor, without domestic distractions of any sort” (1).

Before going any further, it is necessary to highlight the two conclusions reached so far. The prior discussion claims that Eliot's narrator is not a vehicle for “preaching” and “moralizing”, but should rather be regarded as an integral part of the narrative structure. Readers should also not identify this narrator with the author. The next step would now be to verify whether these points could, in one way or another, be connected to modernism.

In *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*, Richardson asserts that for modern fiction “it has been crucial to differentiate carefully between the author and the narrator of a work ... The concept of the unreliable narrator, the foundational modernist type of narrator, presupposes such a clear division” (4-5). As for Mahaffey, she states that “the modernist writer – by making the narrator untrustworthy, fallible, or absent altogether – simultaneously erased himself from the text and scattered himself throughout it” (viii). In actual fact, modernist fiction insists on a clear separation between the author and the narrator, and regards the latter as an integral part of the narrative since he has to fuse in the text by “scatter[ing] himself throughout it”. No need to note that there is here a great similitude with what Eliot intended her narrator to be.

“Unreliable”, “untrustworthy”, and “fallible” are the qualifiers generally employed to characterize the modernist narrator who “lack[s] objectivity and view[s] things in a biased or partial way that the reader cannot trust” (Grellet 105). This type of narrator is opposed to the Victorian omniscient one who “like God, knows everything even what the characters are doing when no one is watching them ... and has knowledge of past and future events” (Grellet 104). According to Rignall, Eliot's novels “present the narrator as someone who

is writing a novel about events and characters that the narrator regards as real, with the narrator being generally referred to as a historian and the novel as a history" (281). Passages from Eliot's fiction do confirm the validity of this statement. The narrative voice in *Middlemarch* clearly declares: "We belated historians must not ..." (*MM* 1:251). Then, the narrator refers to a character as a real person: "(pardon these details for once — you would have learned to love them if you had known Caleb Garth)" (*MM* 2:11). In *Daniel Deronda*, the reader encounters this revealing extract: "But let it be observed, nothing is here narrated of human nature generally: the history in its present stage concerns only a few people in a corner of Wessex, — whose reputation, however, was unimpeached, and who, I am in the proud position of being able to state, were all on visiting terms with persons of rank." (*DD* 1:128) Both of *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss* do respectively help with the following key excerpts: "I gathered from Adam Bede, to whom I talked of these matters in his old age, that ..." (*AB* 184), and "Ah, my arms are really benumbed. I have been pressing my elbows on the arms of my chair, and dreaming that I was standing on the bridge in front of Dorlcote Mill, as it looked one February afternoon many years ago" (*The Mill* 3). In short, Eliot's narrator is not the God-like omniscient one opposed by modernist novelists, but rather a kind of "historian" or story teller who claims to reproduce reality.

Holding the narrative voice to be that of a historian means to regard it as "an interpreter of the world" (Newton 48) which, in turn, implies that Eliot, the author, is "making the reader aware that the narrator is constructing a particular picture of reality and interpreting it" (Newton 50). In other words, Eliot's narrator relates his own vision and personal interpretation of reality. He, thus, expresses a certain point of view or a subjective message. But, how could a subjective message avoid "preaching"?

In *Middlemarch*, the narrator declares "thus while I tell the truth about loobies, my reader's imagination need not be entirely excluded from an occupation with lords" (*MM* 2:213-14). It is clear here that despite presenting a personal viewpoint on "loobies", i.e. foolish and silly fellows, the narrator invites the audience to seek information about "lords". The reader is therefore encouraged to individually interpret information whatever the narrator's opinions may be. Another particularly interesting passage from *Middlemarch* where the reader is suddenly surprised by the narrative voice goes: "One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea — but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage?" (*MM* 2:97). Dorothea Brooke is the young and beautiful protagonist in *Middlemarch* who accepts to marry the old and plain, yet erudite Mr. Casaubon. Eliot's audience is more likely to evaluate the Dorothea/Casaubon

relationship and wedding relying on the female protagonist's point of view because the narrator does so in the novel. But, the narrative voice reminds the reader of another possible perspective: a Casaubon/Dorothea relationship could also be taken into consideration. On the whole, Eliot's narrator invites the audience to form individual opinions, and aims at "mak[ing] the reader powerfully aware that points of view — and the narrator's should also be included — are relative and shaped by interests and often prejudices" (Rignall 282). Therefore, the above reference to the presence of biased narrative opinions in Eliot's fiction opens the mind to a conceivable perspective of connecting her narrator with the modernist concept of unreliability.

Therefore, the answer to the question raised earlier is that Eliot's subjective narrative succeeds to avoid "preaching" by encouraging the reader to be "active rather than passive" (Newton 53) in front of the text. This reveals the function of Eliot's narrator, but the question of the modernist narrator's *raison d'être* remains to be tackled. The modernist narrator is qualified as untrustworthy, which accentuates his deliberate dissociation from the author. This creates a sort of double distance *vis-à-vis* the reader. Indeed, not only does the narrator's unreliability cause an intentional gap between the author and the narrator, but it also automatically leads to a more functional distance between the narrator and the reader. So, does this intentionally created distance involve the reader in playing any role? Mahaffey declares: "such literature [modernist] forces readers to face and make interpretive choices that narrators used to make for them, and it also helps readers come to terms with the meaning of those choices. Modernist literature erodes the sharp distinction between writer and reader, and in so doing presents readers with interpretive ethical dilemmas" (7). On the other hand, Levitt claims that:

Modernists ... are vitally concerned with eliminating their presence as authors within their texts ... The reader in the Modernist novel has become a major actor in the elaboration of the novel's events and meaning ... The humanism inherent in Modernist fiction ... derives in very large part from the responsibilities entrusted to the reader ... They [Modernists] do not only avoid telling us what to believe, as their Victorian predecessors had done with their passive readers, they include the modern reader to become virtual co-creator of the text ... their intention was to turn us all into new, more self aware, more responsible readers (7-10).

These extracts shed light on both the reader's role in modern fiction and the modernist narrator's intentions. They also enhance and confirm some similitude with what has been discussed earlier about Eliot's narration, i.e. the distinction

between author and narrator, and the reader assumed to be rather active than passive in front of the text. Moreover, Levitt's statement highlights a new, significant reference to "humanism" that needs to be explored further.

In her *The Modern Novel: A Short Introduction*, Matz argues that modernist writers are "those who start off by thinking that human nature has changed: or if not human nature, then the relationship of the individual to the environment, forever being metamorphosized ... Cultural change demanded also changes in verbal arrangements, in basic styles of expression, and more" (8). Eliot is also a humanist writer who believed in and advocated universal values such as sympathy, compassion, tolerance, and altruism. In an 1877 letter to the English psychologist James Sully, Eliot called herself a "meliorist" affirming: "I don't know that I ever heard anybody use the word 'meliorist' except myself" (Letters 6:333-34). In his *Life and Letters*, Eliot's husband Cross, confirmed that she "was neither optimist nor pessimist. She held to the middle term, which she invented for herself, of 'meliorist'" (726). "Meliorism", according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, is a term "coined by George Eliot for ... the view that the world can be made better by human effort" (229). Indeed, for an individual to improve the world around him he needs to start by reforming and elevating himself first, and extend such positive attitude through better behaviour towards his human fellows. Eliot believed in the growing intellectual evolution of the nineteenth-century Victorian society and, therefore, promoted social progress in her fiction. She insisted on higher standards in her writings that she thought readers were prepared to accept. In 1856 — only one year before she started to publish fiction — Eliot had put forward the following opinion: "the external conditions which society has inherited from the past are but the manifestation of inherited conditions in the human beings who compose it; the internal conditions and the external are related to each other as the organism and its medium, and development can take place only by the gradual consentaneous development of both" ("Natural History" 208). The external conditions of Victorian society were indeed changing, following an impressive industrial revolution. As a result, the subsequent emergence of an important urban literate class was in need of a parallel development of the internal conditions: mentalities and mindsets. Eliot had therefore chosen to address this new England through a progressive literature which relies on an update of content and an upgrading of language in a way that would reflect the real complexity of life. Not only did modernist writers and Eliot share a mutual interest in the human, but they also had in common the same faith in the social, cultural, and intellectual change of their audiences that, in turn, had a metamorphosing impact on their fiction.

Eliot's fiction depicts human psychology and portrays human inner struggles, moral conflicts, and social dilemmas that are all parts of human

experience. She also relies on her own experiences to sustain the psychological dimension of her fiction, as she herself acknowledged: "my writing is simply a set of experiments in life ... I refuse to adopt any formula which does not get itself clothed for me in some human figure and individual experience" (*Letters* 6:216-17). As a realist author, Eliot focuses on the complexities and hazards of life, and highlights the potential dangerous psychological and emotional impacts of the social code on individuals. Contrary to conventional wisdom, none of physical perfection, good birth, self-accomplishment, or good manners spared any woman from bearing the serious consequences of the wrong choices fuelled by idealism and social conventions. The responsibilities of women towards society and the restrictions imposed on them are the same reasons for their errors, misfortunes, and psychological confinement. A real depiction of the imperfect social state of women, rather than any delusion, would better serve the woman question. Bleak reality alone may stir up feelings of sympathy, and raise the awareness of the masses to eventually trigger progressive evolution of mentalities. Levine asserts that "although [Eliot] did not portray successful women who resisted the conventions of their culture, she brilliantly and sympathetically traced their defeats" (2). In the introduction to *Felix Holt*, one can read: "there is much pain that is quite noiseless; ... There are glances of hatred that stab and raise no cry of murder; ... yet kept secret by the sufferer — ... seen in no writing ... many an inherited sorrow that has marred a life has been breathed into no human ear" (11). Eliot's fiction strongly cries out these silent pains so that every reader around may not only hear them, but most of all feel them. In *Daniel Deronda*, for instance, the reader encounters the very pretty and graceful Gwendolen Harleth for whom "a man might risk hanging" (*DD* 1:9). Gwendolen "is really worth some expense ... [and] ought to make a first-rate marriage" (*DD* 1:46). She is an orphan who agreed to marry the wealthy baron Henleigh Grandcourt out of economic interests to save herself and her family from poverty. She believes her physical beauty and her strong character to be persuading enough assets that would permit her to manipulate her husband and get whatever she wants: "she was thinking of him, whatever he might be, as a man over whom she was going to have indefinite power; and her loving him having never been a question with her, any agreeableness he had was so much gain" (*DD* 2:51). Ironically, Grandcourt was, on his part, animated by his thirst for authority and has chosen Gwendolen as a wife in order to master her. Rather than being a complementary union between two lovers, this marriage turns to be an infernal power relationship between a master and a slave. Gwendolen becomes a daily victim of matrimonial cruelty. The novel denounces the psychological brutality and torture she is forced to experience, and a poignant illustration would be the following narrative description: Gwendolen "had been

brought to accept him in spite of everything”, says the narrator, “brought to kneel down like a horse under training for the arena, though she might have an objection to it all the while” (*DD* 2:58). As for Grandcourt, he was:

perfectly satisfied that he held his wife with bit and bridle. By the time they had been married a year she would cease to be restive. He continued standing with his air of indifference, till she felt her habitual stifling consciousness of having an immovable obstruction in her life, like the nightmare of beholding a single form that serves to arrest all passage though the wide country lies open... ‘What orders shall I give?’... His words had the power of thumb-screws and the cold touch of the rack. To resist was to act like a stupid animal unable to measure results. (*DD* 3:186-87)

Eliot’s gritty realism in the above passage is relative to the cruelty of this social infamy. The blatant deterioration of human relations when they are wrongly and dangerously gender-based may reach the most degrading level of servitude. By comparing Gwendolen to a horse, an animal that is held with “bit and bridle”, Eliot strongly condemns the inhuman humiliation of women caused by some men’s greed for power and authority. The climax of horror lies in relating such a vicious situation to an act of torture with barbarous instruments like “thumb-screws” and “racks”. Eventually, Gwendolen acts like an intelligent “animal” and submits to her oppressor in order to reduce the violence of the consequences. Gwendolen remains silent out of love for her family because she sees her terrible situation as a sort of tacit agreement through which she “had sold herself, and had been paid ... more than she had dared to ask in the handsome maintenance of her mother, — the husband to whom she had sold her truthfulness and sense of justice, so that he held them throttled into silence” (*DD* 3:171).

In *Middlemarch*, the tapestry in Dorothea’s boudoir looks like “a ghost in his ghostly blue-green world; the volumes of polite literature in the bookcase looked more like immovable imitations of books” (*MD* 2:88). The reader is propelled into a parallel dimension, i.e. the “ghostly” and bleak world Dorothea was compelled to live in after her marriage to Casaubon. Indeed, “ghostly blue-green” is nothing but a dim reflection of the real blue-green aged by monotony and the lack of care. Even “the volumes of polite literature” have been affected by this suffocating lifeless atmosphere and were reduced to indistinct “imitations of books”. This passage is a visual representation that allows Eliot to introduce the reader to Dorothea’s environment so that he may have access to her feelings. The indifference shown by Casaubon, the coldness of the house, and the heavy boredom all around had rubbed off on Dorothea’s mental state. Her innate motivation and joie de vivre had been dulled by sorrow and disappointment.

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In *Adam Bede*, the narrator reveals the mental state of Hetty Sorrel, the major character in the novel. All of her agitation, fear, and despair are successively expressed by an up-and-down movement, shudder, and then total sinking:

She roamed up and down, thinking there was perhaps a pool in every hollow ... and she sat down to rest. The afternoon was far advanced, and the leaden sky was darkening, as if the sun were setting behind it. After a little while Hetty started up again, ... and make her way to some shelter for the night. She had quite lost her way in the fields, and might as well go in one direction as another, for aught she knew. She walked through field after field, and no village, no house was in sight; but *there*, at the corner of the pasture, there was a break in the hedges; the land seemed to dip down a little, and two trees leaned towards each other across the opening.... There it was, black under the darkening sky: no motion, no sound near. She set down her basket, and then sank down herself on the grass, trembling. The pool had its wintry depth now: ... and presently her head sank down on her knees. [emphasis in the original] (*AB* 389-90)

Eliot's narrator equally describes several scenes where the heroines remain lost in their thoughts in front of windows. The female protagonists sink into deep reflections on their imperfect social conditions, their sufferings, and their inner struggles. Maggie Tulliver, for instance, is used to sit at the window and "her eyes *would* fix themselves blankly on the outdoor sunshine; then they would fill with tears, and sometimes, if her mother was not in the room, the studies would all end in sobbing [emphasis in the original]" (*The Mill* 308). Dinah Morris has a chair below her room's window where she would sit and think of "the struggles and the weariness that might lie before them in the rest of their life's journey ... and the pressure of this thought soon became too strong for her to enjoy the unresponding stillness of the moonlit fields" (*AB* 160). In *Daniel Deronda* Gwendolen Harleth, too, would sit in front of an open window "gazing fixedly on the sea, resting her cheek on her hand ... with a deep melancholy in her expression ... she looked towards the window silently, and again turned with the same expression ... there was some fear hindering her" (3:212). As for Dorothea Brooke, she looked out and "felt nothing but the dreary oppression; then came a keen remembrance, and turning away from the window she walked round the room ... all existence seemed to beat with a lower pulse ... the struggle out of a nightmare in which every object was withering and shrinking away from her" (*MD* 2:90-91).

Eliot's interest in the human psychological dimension echoes the modernists' interest in analysing human nature by means of human experience. As Virginia Woolf herself put it, modernist novelists tried to come closer to life by showing that "everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss" (qtd. in Goldman 106). By introducing this psychological concept into fiction, modernists "have opened up for it a new area of life. They have added mental functioning and psychic existence to the already established domain of motive and action. They have created a fiction centred on the core of human experience" (Humphrey 22). Humphrey goes on explaining that "in short, the stream of consciousness novelists were, like the naturalists, trying to depict life accurately; but unlike the naturalists, the life they were concerned with was the individual's psychic life" (9). Furthermore, Dolin admits that "the modernistic self-awareness of *Daniel Deronda* and [Eliot's] emphasis on psychological analysis set the pattern for modern stream of consciousness fiction" (218). As a matter of fact, both Daniel Deronda and Gwendolen Harleth, the two central characters of the novel, came to self-awareness through psychological struggling. This very concept of self-awareness is also linked to another issue: unconsciousness. While the unconscious mind would wait until "the end of the 1880s", when Eliot had died, to "become the most celebrated of all psychological concepts" (Tallis 34), she was already using this modern vocabulary in her fiction: "the silent consciousness" (*AB* 495), "deep fold of his consciousness" (*DD* 1:123), "dark seed- growths of consciousness" (*DD* 2:22), "an under-consciousness" (*DD* 2:111), "a suppressed consciousness" (*DD* 2:151), "unconsciousness" (*DD* 2:248), and "beyond his consciousness" (*DD* 3:107). Eliot's works show an advanced interest in consciousness and psychological life. Her interest in human nature and psyche is clearly reflected by her novels' description of human inner struggles and social conflicts relying on human experiences. Together with the modernists, she shares the same attempt to come closer to life by showing, as Woolf put it, that "every feeling, every thought" is "the proper stuff of fiction" (qtd. in Goldman 106). Both Eliot and modernist writers made efforts to "depict life accurately" (Humphrey 9) using the psychic dimension. As acknowledged by D.H. Lawrence, "it was she [George Eliot] who started putting all the action inside; she made visible the invisible world inside the heads of her characters" (qtd. in Harris 160).

To sum up, Eliot's novels could certainly not be categorized as stream of consciousness fiction, but there exist some similarities between Eliot's intentions as a novelist and what the modernists intended their fiction to achieve. On a technical level, both Eliot and modernists insisted on a clear separation between themselves as authors and their narrators, who are to be considered as

integral parts of their fiction. Readers of modernist writings are supposed to accomplish certain interpretative tasks. Indeed, the narrator in modern fiction is weakened by his unreliability to secure a greater role to the reader, granting him more responsibilities and more self-awareness. For her part, Eliot intended her audience to be rather active than passive in front of the text. Narrators in Eliot's works of fiction encourage the readers to interpret the narrative facts and, thus, form personal viewpoints. This connotes subjectivity and biased opinions in Eliot's narration, which could possibly connect her narrator to the modernist concept of fallibility. Eliot's writings showed an advanced modern interest in human consciousness and self-awareness. As a matter of fact, both modernist writers and Eliot tried to come closer to life throughout their fiction. Modernist novelists aimed at reproducing psychic life relying on human experience. Their fiction, therefore, mirrors streams of human thoughts, memories, emotions and perceptions. Eliot, too, attempted to reproduce reality through human inner struggles, personal dilemmas, and social conflicts. Her writings do also repose on human experiences. Consequently, humanism is inherent in both modernist and Eliotian fictions. As authors, Eliot and modernists believed in the intellectual, social, and cultural changes of their audiences caused mainly by the scientific revolution during the Victorian era, and by the two World Wars during the Modern one. These transitions had, in turn, remodelling impacts on their writings. Eliot's fiction is not only a "pure" literature, but also a vast arena in which various disciplines co-exist and, at the same time, interact: philosophy, mythology, science, politics, arts, social progress, and most of all human psychology.

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