

MINOR CHARACTERS IN THE NOVELS OF GEORGE ELIOT

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ABSTRACT: In George Eliot's novels some of the major characters fall into a moral classification, though perhaps slightly less obvious in the case of minor characters. If we consider some of the minor figures who appear to be playing 'character' parts for the purposes of filling in social background or providing comedy, it will often be found that they too are making their contribution to the moral theme. George Eliot like Jane Austen and Dickens, does not usually make the exaggerated feature of the 'character' the moral trait. Some of her minor characters shows the moral reflections of the main dilemma is much clearer. There is Bob Jakin, or Dolly Winthrop. Or little Henrietta Noble, all with some 'character' interest, in the theatrical sense, but all possessing a very strongly delineated moral feature of benevolence. The careful woven pattern extends even to minor characters, for 'Middlemarch' is a novel where, as far as possible, all the characters are carefully weighted with an implied full existence. It is impossible to separate vision and technical device. Her minor characters are drawn from various walks of life in the Midlands. We meet farmers, clergymen, gardeners, schoolmasters, carpenters, milkmaids, and inn-keepers. The whole gallery of minor characters add various and vivid colours to her novels.

KEYWORDS : Major characters, moral, contribution, existence, feature.

I. INTRODUCTION

George Eliot's character great merit as a portrayer of character lies in her power to depict the gradual evolution of character. Her characters are never static. They continue to change either for the worse or for the better. 'Character too,' she says is a process. In George Eliot's novels the characters develop gradually as we come to know them. They go from weakness to strength, or from strength to weakness, according to the works that they do and the thoughts that they cherish. Her characters are fully integrated with their social environment.

In George Eliot's novels some of the major characters fall into a moral classification, though perhaps slightly less obvious in the case of minor characters. If we consider some of the minor figures who appear to be playing 'character' parts for the purposes of filling in social background or providing comedy, it will often be found that they too are making their contribution to the moral theme. She like Jane Austen and Dickens. Does not usually make the exaggerated feature of the 'Character' the moral trait. Mrs Poyser, in Adam Bede, is placed on the side of warm human fellowship both in her relations with others and in her judgements, but the prominent features are her sharp tongue, her feminism and her common sense. She is constructed rather as a comic personality who is involved in the tragedy, than a conspicuous moral example. Mrs Poyser's satirical powers are often directed, it is true, towards the main theme of the novel 'For my part, I think he's welly like a crow as thinks the sun's rose o' purpose to hear him crow', she says of Craig the gardener. This is a comic chorus to George Eliot's analysis of Arthur and Hetty. Mrs Poyser is full of daring, she is outspoken shrewd and garrulous and so forth. The same disguised relevance is there in Bartle Massey, the schoolmaster in the same novel, or in Mrs Arrowpoint in Daniel Deronda, or in Cilia or Mrs Trumbull in Middlemarch. Such characters have a variety of functions, but mostly have a submerged commitment to the main theme.

There are many other minor characters in whom the moral reflections of the main dilemmas is much clearer. There is Bob Jakin, or Dolly Winthrop, or little Henrietta Noble, all with some 'Character' interest in the theatrical sense, but all possessing a very strongly delegated moral feature of benevolence. There is Caleb Garth, Very much more prominent both in the story and in the moral scheme, but possessing all kinds of attributes which bring him to life as a character yet have no obvious moral relevance- his simplicity, his slowness, his inadequate speech, his brusqueness, his tremendous enthusiasm, and his great respect for his wife- which on occasion surprise us by being transformed into unquestioned husbandly authority. It is not very helpful to throw the problem back on to the old eliche about the dullness of good characters since Caleb and Mary Garth, for instance, are both animated portraits and highly effective moral examples. But with Caleb and Mary we are conscious both of the emplariness and of a rich, varied, and mobile personal impression.

The careful woven pattern extends even to minor characters, for 'Middlemarch' is a novel where, as far as possible all the characters are carefully weighted with an implied full existence. It is impossible to separate vision and technical device. The grotesque Rigg Featherstone, for instance, is not merely a character introduced as the unexpected heir, the joke upon the oldman's sleeve produced after death to frustrate the waiting mourners,

and the functional link between Raffles, his stepfather, and Bulstrode. As Coleridge said of the Fool in 'King Lear', this character is brought into the main interest of the story. So with a minor character like Rigg-'as an errand-boy in a seaport he had looked through the windows of the money-changers....'

This is a good example of George Eliot's methods of involving even her minor characters: Rigg's ambition is necessary to the plot because it removes him from Middlemarch, leaving Stone Court free, first for Bulstrode, then for Fred. He frustrates Featherstone's grasping dead hand, just as Dorothea frustrates Casaubon's, and Rigg is no mere figure of parody. But George Eliot puts as much imaginative sympathy into this brief glimpse at Rigg's ruling passion as she puts into the long and moving account of Lydgate's love for medicine. It is not merely the act of parallelism which is important, but the quality of attentiveness. She can use less sympathetic serious mirrors, of course. It is indeed the ability to express the energy of even a minor figure like Rigg which makes us believe that human beings are very much like each other. Human substance is placed before us, and we are not asked to make a quantitative accretion of similar cases but to feel that Rigg's excited vision is of a piece with Dorothea's and Lydgate's.

Her minor characters are drawn from various walks of life in the Midlands. We meet farmers, clergymen, gardeners, schoolmasters, carpenters, milk-maids and inn-keepers. After reading Adam Bede we feel as if we know Mrs. Poyser, Martin Poyser, the Reverend Irwin, Mrs. Irwin, his mother, Lisbeth Bede, the mother of Adam and Seth Bede, Bartie Massey, Mr. Cragg and Joshua Rann intimately. Of George Eliot's minor character's Mrs. Poyser stands out foremost. Somewhere Robert Evans second wife was very much like Mrs. Poyser. She was a successful dairy-woman, house-keeper and mother. She was a devoted wife with a sharp tongue which subdued her husband, children and servants. Mrs. Poyser is the wittiest of all George Eliot's character's. The novelist's minor rustic characters such as Mr. and Mrs. Hackit, Mrs. Patten, and Mrs. Poyser, Lisbeth Bede, Dolly, Mr. Winthrop, Macey. Mr. Craig, Bob Jakins, Bartle Massey and a host of others once met are difficult to forget. Through them George Eliot shows the upper class how the other half lives. Poyser with her homely wit and genuine kindness is masterly drawn. Her dialogues are scintillating with wisdom. To these minor characters of various professions she gives the realism.

In 'The Mill on the Floss' even the minor characters are sketched with the same firmness and strength as the major ones. The Tullivers, Gleggs, Pulletts and Bob Jakin are all individualised and distinct. Behind them stand a host of minor figures like Rev. Stelling, Lawyer Wakem, the gipsies and Mrs. and Mr. Moses. There are four Dodson sisters introduced in the novel, along with their husband. They are Mr. and Mrs. Glegg, Mr. and Mrs. Pullet, and Mr. and Mrs. Deane. They are the uncles and aunts of Maggie and Tom on her mother's side. These uncles and aunts are minor characters, but they play an important role in the novel. First, they are an important source of humour. The Dodson code has been exaggerated for comic effect. Some of the skirmishes between the two-Mrs. and Mr. Glegg- furnish hilarious comedy. Mr. and Mrs. are also very funny. In the Moses we find a clever blend of humour and pathos. Secondly, the uncle and aunt provide the chorus and they are closely integrated with the life of the central character, Maggie. The Dodsons are the most important minor characters in the novels, and their roles are of crucial importance.

The first evidence of her astonishing gift for creating amusing minor characters, out-doing even Scott and Jane Austen is Mrs Poyser, the wife of a mild tenant farmer, turns the tables on the penny-pinching landlord, Squire Donnithorne. George Eliot is able not only to draw such characters for light comic relief or 'local colour', but also to use them to further the plot in important ways. In 'Silas Marner' the minor characters are the condescending parish clerk, the judicious landlord, the contradictory farrier and the assistant clerk.

The novel 'Silas Marner' is also full of minor character - Jem Rodney- the Raveloe pacher. Silas at first suspects him of stealing his gold. Sally Oates, the wife of the town cobbler is helped by Silas. He passes by her house and sees that Sally is suffering from heart-ache and dropsy. He gives her medicine made from herbs. Silas's knowledge of herbs lead to the villager's suspicion that he knows charms and curses. Bryce is another minor character to whom Dunsey sells Wildfife. Bryce tells Godfrey of the news that Dunsey killed the horse before he paid for it. Mrs Osgood is the sister of Mr Lammeter and aunt to Nancy and Priscilla's father. Mr Macey is a respected working-class man. He visits Silas soon after the gold is stolen and tells him that his money will turn up. Later, an elderly Mr Macey witnesses the bridal party and is glad to see that his words came true. Mr Macey also has a brother, Solomon, who is a fiddler and lives in another village. Mr Snell is the landlord of the Rainbow. He recalls that a peddler had come to Raveloe carrying a tinderbox like the one found outside Silas's cottage. The peddler is a suspect in the mystery of the stolen gold because of his tinderbox. Fowler is Squire Cass's tenant. He had paid his dues to Godfrey, who had given the money to Dunsey. Ben Winthrop is the town wheelwright. He is husband to Dolly, and father to Aaron. He is a jovial, happy man. The Gunn sisters who are unmarried. They find Nancy to be very pretty and charming despite her rough hands. They are offended by Priscilla's blunt words that they are ugly. Again; two of the minor characters'- Mr Crackenthorp is the town minister and doctor Kimble-the town apothecary, although who is not a real doctor is Godfrey's uncle. Apart from these minor character some few to added are the admirable sketches of the condescending parish clerk, the judicious landlord, the farrier etc.

The canvas of Middlemarch is a crowded one. There is a host of characters, so many that all of them can not even be named in the space at our disposal. Of the minor characters the more important ones are Mr and Mrs Cadwallader, Reverend Mr Camden Farebrother, his mother, Mrs Farebrother and his sister Winifred Farebrother. There is also Mr Toller, a well established doctor of Middlemarch and rival to Lydgate; the auctioneer, etc. The list is a long one, and it is by no means exhaustive or all-inclusive. The generalising can be seen in the quick pen portraits of the minor characters. Mrs Cadwallader, Mr Brooke, Sir James Chettam, Celia Brooke, Caleb Garth and Mrs Bulstrode can be taken as representing character traits that constitute the diverse forces in a society. They do not unfold an inner life in a complex and sustained way but are given dramatic moments that capture an essence of thought or feeling. Mrs Cadwallader is shrewd and talkative and is full of 'worldly' wisdom. Her pitiless remarks spare only a few. She is appropriately introduced through her dialogue with Mrs Fitchett, the lodge-keeper at Tipton. Mr Brooke is well-meaning in a sweeping sort of way but mostly ineffective. Celia Brooke is a conventional young woman seeking the time-honoured comforts of her husband and the domestic hearth. Caleb Garth is a land agent and builder with a strong sense of self-respect and an enthusiastic interest in his work. Caleb is merely a faint shadow of his predecessor, he is only a minor character, but all the same his role is of crucial importance, for he provides the moral centre, the norm, by reference to which the other characters and their actions are judged. Thus the minor characters help to reinforce the organicist dimension of the novel.

II. CONCLUSION

George Eliot's minor characters make a psychological journey from delusion to self-realisation and it is to her credit that she makes it a very realistic one for the readers. She tried to analyse the thoughts of her characters, to probe their deepest desires, and while doing so, displays a deep compassion and understanding of human nature.

III. REFERENCE

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