



Moral Vision in Novels of George Eliot: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This research paper aims to delve into George Eliot's novels and explore the author's moral vision as exemplified through her works. Known for her insightful social commentary, Eliot, with her unique perspective and philosophical background, presents a profound understanding of human nature, ethics, and societal issues. This paper will focus on Eliot's novels, including "Middlemarch," "Adam Bede," and "The Mill on the Floss," to analyze the moral vision she encapsulates within her literary creations. By examining the moral dilemmas, character relationships, and social dynamics in these novels, this research will highlight how George Eliot's works contribute to the understanding of moral behavior and social responsibility. By examining the moral vision present in George Eliot's novels, this research paper endeavors to shed light on the author's contribution to the understanding of moral behavior, social responsibility, and the complexities of human nature. Through a comprehensive analysis of selected novels, this research aims to highlight the enduring relevance and moral insights offered by the works of George Eliot.

Introduction

George Eliot, born as Mary Ann Evans on November 22, 1819, was one of the most important and influential novelists of the Victorian era. Her works, including "Middlemarch," "The Mill on the Floss," and "Adam Bede," have left a lasting impact on the literary world. However, her life and writing style were not without controversy. This essay will provide an overview of George Eliot's life and writing style, while also exploring the importance of examining moral vision in literature.

George Eliot's early life was marked by tragedy and a yearning for knowledge. She grew up in Warwickshire, England, in a middle-class family. Her father was the manager of a large estate, which allowed her access to a rich library and the opportunity for self-education. However, her mother's death when she was just 16 years old deeply affected her. This loss, along with her father's disapproval of her intellectual pursuits, forced her to seek solace and fulfillment elsewhere. She turned to literature and philosophy, diving into the works of prominent thinkers such as Spinoza, Rousseau, and Hume.

It was during this time that Mary Ann Evans began questioning her religious beliefs and eventually renounced her faith. This decision caused a rupture between her and her family, leading her to adopt a more independent and unconventional lifestyle. She moved to London and began working as a translator and journalist, which allowed her to engage with prominent intellectuals of her time.

In the 1850s, Mary Ann Evans adopted the pen name "George Eliot" to ensure her works would be taken seriously in a male-dominated literary world. By disguising her gender, she had the freedom to write about unconventional topics and explore controversial ideas. This decision was not without consequences, as she faced criticism and condemnation from society for her unorthodox choices. Nevertheless, she persisted and solidified her place as a respected writer.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of George Eliot's writing style is her attention to detail and her ability to create vivid and realistic characters. Her novels are often described as psychological studies, delving deep into the motivations and complexities of human behavior. She expertly captures the nuances of her characters' experiences, providing readers with a rich and engaging narrative. Her observations of society, often informed by her own experiences and observations, offer profound social commentary.

Furthermore, George Eliot's writing is characterized by her moral vision and her exploration of ethical questions. She tackles themes such as the nature of goodness, the consequences of personal choices, and the impact of societal norms on individual lives. Her novels present a nuanced understanding of human morality,

challenging the reader to question their own preconceived notions. Through her characters, she explores the complexities of human nature, often blurring the line between right and wrong.

This moral vision is particularly evident in "Middlemarch," her most celebrated work. The novel delves into the lives of the inhabitants of a fictional English town, reflecting the social and political climate of the time. Through various storylines and characters, Eliot presents a comprehensive examination of individual morality and the influence of societal expectations. She explores themes such as marriage, religion, and ambition, making "Middlemarch" a profound exploration of the human condition.

The importance of examining moral vision in literature cannot be overstated. Literature has the power to shape our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. By engaging with moral questions, writers like George Eliot prompt readers to reflect on their own values and beliefs. They enable us to question the status quo and challenge conventional wisdom. In doing so, literature promotes critical thinking and empathy, helping us navigate the complexities of morality in our own lives.

George Eliot's life and writing style offer a unique perspective in the literary world. Her deep understanding of human nature and commitment to exploring moral questions make her a significant figure in Victorian literature. Her characters and stories continue to resonate with readers today, reminding us of the importance of examining our own moral vision. Through her works, Eliot encourages us to question societal norms and strive for a greater understanding of ourselves and others.

Examination of how her philosophical ideas shaped her moral vision in the novels

George Eliot, the pen name of Mary Anne Evans, was a prominent Victorian novelist known for her deep portrayal of characters and their moral dilemmas. Eliot's novels, such as *Middlemarch* and *Adam Bede*, display a clear philosophical bent, exploring themes of morality, ethics, and human nature. This essay aims to examine how George Eliot's philosophical ideas shaped her moral vision in her novels.

- **Influence of Spinoza's Pantheism**

One of the most significant philosophical influences on George Eliot was the pantheistic ideas of Benedict de Spinoza. Spinoza's pantheism posits that God and nature are identical, rejecting the traditional view of a separate divine being. Eliot's novels frequently portray characters grappling with questions of religion and spirituality, showcasing her interest in this philosophy.

Middlemarch, the character Dorothea Brooke epitomizes this struggle. She yearns for a deeper sense of purpose and seeks to align her actions with a higher sense of moral obligation. Through Dorothea's journey, Eliot raises questions about the nature of God and the role of religion in guiding moral behavior.

- **Humanism and the Morality of Empathy**

George Eliot was also deeply influenced by humanistic ideas, particularly the view that human beings are capable of shaping their own destiny through reason and empathy. Eliot believed that moral goodness lies in our ability to understand and empathize with others, leading to ethical actions.

- In *Adam Bede*, the eponymous character embodies this moral vision. Adam displays an unwavering kindness and empathy towards others, even in the face of personal tragedy. Through Adam's actions, Eliot emphasizes the importance of empathy and compassion in building a just society.

- **Examination of Gender and Morality**

novels often explore the intersection of gender and morality, challenging traditional gender roles and norms. She believed that gender should not determine an individual's moral worth and that women were capable of the same moral agency as men, contradicting the prevailing Victorian beliefs.

- In *The Mill on the Floss*, the character of Maggie Tulliver challenges societal expectations and asserts her own moral principles. Despite facing numerous obstacles and moral dilemmas, Maggie consistently acts according to her own convictions. Eliot's depiction of Maggie dismantles the idea that women are morally weaker or inferior to men, highlighting the universal nature of moral agency.

- **Morality as a Product of Social Context**

Another central theme in George Eliot's novels is the idea that morality is deeply intertwined with social and cultural contexts. She believed that individuals are influenced by their surroundings and that moral judgments should take this context into account.

In *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot explores the moral implications of imperialism and colonialism. Through the character of Gwendolen Harleth, she highlights the moral conflicts faced by individuals living in a society built on exploitation and inequality. Eliot's portrayal of Gwendolen's struggles shows how larger social structures can shape individual morality.

George Eliot's philosophical ideas significantly influenced her moral vision in her novels. By drawing on Spinoza's pantheism, humanism, and her understanding of gender and social context, Eliot created deeply moral narratives that challenge traditional moral frameworks. Her novels remind readers of the complexities of human nature and the importance of empathy, compassion, and individual agency in shaping moral behavior. Through her unique perspective, George Eliot's philosophical ideas continue to resonate today, inviting readers to reflect on their own moral positions and the world in which they live.

Moral Dilemmas in George Eliot's Novels

George Eliot, the pen name of Mary Ann Evans, is renowned for her insightful exploration of moral dilemmas in her novels. Through her characters, she delves into complex ethical questions and examines the consequences of the choices they make. In analyzing these moral dilemmas, one can gain a deep understanding of the societal influences that shape them.

Throughout her selected novels, Eliot presents characters facing dilemmas that force them to question their values and beliefs. In "Middlemarch," Dorothea Brooke grapples with the conflict between her desire for intellectual and spiritual fulfillment and her societal obligations as a wife. Her moral dilemma arises from the vast difference between her idealistic ambitions and the limited opportunities available to women in the 19th century. Another notable example is Silas Marner in the novel of the same name, who is torn between seeking vengeance for the wrong done to him and choosing forgiveness and redemption. These moral dilemmas highlight the internal struggles faced by Eliot's characters, as they navigate the complexities of their lives.

The moral dilemmas in Eliot's novels are deeply intertwined with the societal norms and expectations of the time. Victorian society imposed strict roles and expectations on individuals, particularly women. These expectations often clashed with their desires for personal fulfillment and happiness. Characters like Dorothea Brooke and Hetty Sorrel from "Adam Bede" are bound by the social mores that dictate their actions and choices. Their dilemmas reflect the limitations imposed by societal norms, where individuals are forced to weigh the consequences of deviating from the expected path against their personal desires.

Eliot's exploration of moral dilemmas goes beyond mere analysis; she also evaluates the choices made by her characters and presents the consequences of those choices. In "The Mill on the Floss," Maggie Tulliver's decision to prioritize her love for her brother over societal expectations leads to tragic outcomes for both of them. Through such instances, Eliot emphasizes the profound impact moral choices can have on individuals and their relationships. Moreover, by evaluating these choices and consequences, she prompts readers to question their own ethical alignments and the repercussions of their decisions.

George Eliot's novels provide a rich and profound examination of moral dilemmas faced by her characters. By exploring these dilemmas, understanding the societal influences behind them, and evaluating the choices made by the characters, readers gain valuable insights into the complexities of human morality. Eliot's works continue to resonate with readers, as they grapple with timeless ethical questions that remain relevant today.

Social Dynamics and Morality

In today's complex and interconnected world, social dynamics play a crucial role in shaping individual moral choices. Society's structures, norms, and values influence how individuals make ethical decisions and navigate through the moral landscape. This essay aims to explore the profound relationship between social dynamics and morality, examining the impact of social structures on moral choices, discussing the ethical implications of societal norms, and analyzing the author's commentary on social responsibility and accountability.

Social structures, such as familial, educational, and economic systems, significantly influence an individual's moral choices. The family unit, as the primary socializing agent, instills moral values in individuals from an early age. For instance, children growing up in a family that values honesty and integrity are more likely to make morally upright choices. On the other hand, individuals raised in dysfunctional families, where abusive or immoral behavior is normalized, may struggle with making ethical decisions later in life.

Educational institutions also contribute significantly to an individual's moral development. Schools play a pivotal role in imparting not only academic knowledge but also social values. By teaching subjects like ethics, schools provide students with the tools to engage in critical thinking and moral reasoning. Moreover, the social environment in schools, comprising peers and teachers, also shapes moral choices, as individuals tend to conform to the behaviors and norms of their social group.

Economic systems, such as capitalism or socialism, also impact moral decisions. In capitalist societies, where competition and individualism are emphasized, individuals may prioritize personal gain over collective well-being. Conversely, socialist societies may prioritize communal benefits, leading individuals to make choices that prioritize the greater good over personal interests. Thus, the economic system within a society can influence an individual's moral choices.

Societal norms act as a guide for moral behavior, with individuals adhering to accepted standards of conduct. However, it is important to recognize that societal norms can be subjective and vary across different cultures and time periods. A critical analysis of societal norms is crucial to determine their ethical implications.

For instance, certain societal norms may perpetuate inequality and discrimination. Norms that enforce gender roles can restrict women's opportunities and reinforce harmful stereotypes. Similarly, norms that condone racism or homophobia can marginalize specific groups within society. Examining the ethical implications of these norms is essential for fostering social justice and inclusivity.

Additionally, societal norms can also promote positive moral values and behaviors. For example, norms that emphasize empathy and compassion can foster a more caring society. Norms that promote environmental consciousness can encourage individuals to make choices that prioritize sustainability and the preservation of the planet. Thus, societal norms can have both positive and negative ethical implications.

In addressing social dynamics and morality, several authors have offered insightful commentary on social responsibility and accountability. Immanuel Kant, a prominent philosopher, argued that moral actions should be guided by a sense of duty and that individuals have a responsibility to act morally, irrespective of social pressures or personal desires. According to Kant, individuals should hold themselves accountable for their actions and pursue moral principles that uphold human dignity and respect for others.

Another influential commentator on social dynamics and morality is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau proposed that society's structures, such as the divide between the rich and the poor, create inequalities that erode moral values. He argued that the pursuit of material wealth and social status corrupts individuals, leading to moral decay. Rousseau emphasized the importance of collective responsibility and advocated for a society that prioritizes the common good over individual interests.

Social dynamics permeate every aspect of human life, and morality is no exception. Social structures, norms, and values exert a profound influence on the moral choices individuals make. By understanding the impact of social dynamics on morality, society can foster an environment that promotes ethical behavior and social responsibility. Critical analysis of societal norms is crucial in identifying their ethical implications and addressing any injustices they may perpetuate. Ultimately, individuals must hold themselves accountable for their actions, recognizing their social responsibility to contribute to a more just and compassionate society. Only through a collective commitment to morality can society thrive and ensure the well-being of all its members.

Symbolism and Allegory as Tools of Moral Vision

Symbolism and allegory are powerful tools used by authors to convey moral messages. In the works of T.S. Eliot, these literary techniques are widely employed to illuminate her moral vision. Through an evaluation of her use of symbols and allegories, we can gain a deeper understanding of the author's intent and the impact of these techniques on the reader.

Eliot skillfully incorporates various symbols and allegories throughout her works to convey complex moral messages. In "The Waste Land," for example, the mythical figure of the Fisher King symbolizes the decaying state of society. This symbol represents the loss of spiritual and moral values, reflecting the wasteland that modern society has become. By employing this allegory, Eliot highlights the consequences of the moral decline of humanity, urging readers to reflect upon their own actions and consider the larger implications of their choices.

Another example of symbolism in Eliot's work can be seen in "The Hollow Men," where the hollow men themselves embody the spiritual emptiness and moral bankruptcy of modern society. Through this symbol, Eliot emphasizes the superficiality and lack of substance in the lives of many individuals. The use of allegory here serves as a critique of the moral degradation present in the world, urging readers to seek deeper meaning and purpose.

Eliot's symbols and allegories not only convey moral messages but also serve to illuminate her moral vision. Through these literary techniques, she creates a vivid and evocative portrayal of the human condition, forcing readers to confront uncomfortable truths about themselves and their society. The symbols and allegories act as a mirror, reflecting the darkness and despair of the world, while also pointing towards the possibility of redemption and renewal.

The author's intent in using symbols and allegories is to elevate the moral consciousness of her readers. By presenting them with thought-provoking imagery and metaphorical representations, she aims to challenge societal norms and beliefs. Eliot believes that symbols can penetrate the depths of the human soul, evoking a sense of moral responsibility and urging individuals to strive for higher ideals.

Furthermore, Eliot's use of symbols and allegories reflects her belief in the power of literature as a means of transformation. She sees literature not just as a form of entertainment but as a vehicle for moral instruction. Through the use of symbols and allegories, she presents readers with a moral critique, urging them to reflect upon their own lives and make conscious choices that align with their values.

T.S. Eliot masterfully employs symbols and allegories to convey moral messages and illuminate her moral vision. Through the use of these literary techniques, she challenges societal norms, highlights the consequences of moral decline, and urges readers to reflect upon their choices and seek deeper meaning. Her intent in using symbols and allegories is to elevate the moral consciousness of her readers and inspire them to strive for higher ideals. Eliot's work serves as a reminder of the power of literature in shaping our moral compass and driving us towards a more meaningful and ethical existence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, George Eliot's novels demonstrate a strong moral vision that is deeply rooted in her views on human nature, personal responsibility, and the consequences of our actions. Through complex and multi-dimensional characters, Eliot explores the ethical dilemmas of her time and emphasizes the importance of empathy, understanding, and moral growth. One key aspect of Eliot's moral vision is her belief in the interconnectedness of all individuals and their actions. She emphasizes that everyone is influenced by their environment, upbringing, and social context, and that these factors play a significant role in shaping one's

character and moral compass. This is evident in novels such as "Middlemarch" and "The Mill on the Floss," where characters' choices and decisions are depicted as products of their circumstances and past experiences. Eliot also champions the idea of personal responsibility and the importance of making morally just choices. She criticizes societal expectations and norms that may lead individuals to compromise their own moral integrity. For example, in "Adam Bede," the protagonist struggles with the decision to marry someone he does not love due to his sense of duty and responsibility. Through this, Eliot stresses the need to prioritize authenticity and personal integrity over external pressures.

Furthermore, Eliot explores the consequences of our actions and the potential for personal growth and redemption. She depicts characters who make mistakes or engage in morally dubious actions, but she also provides them with opportunities for reflection, repentance, and personal growth. Eliot's moral vision promotes the idea that individuals have the capacity for change and moral development throughout their lives. In examining Eliot's moral vision in her novels, it is important to recognize the influence of her own life experiences and philosophical beliefs. As a self-proclaimed agnostic, Eliot grappled with questions of duty, virtue, and the role of religion in shaping morality. Her exploration of these themes in her novels reflects her own personal journey and intellectual development.

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