

## ELEMENTS OF BOVARISM IN *MIDDLEMARCH*

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*Abstract: This paper attempts to examine the reading habits of George Eliot’s Dorothea Brooke, one of the main characters in Middlemarch (1871-72), who takes after Flaubert’s Emma Bovary as she inserts herself in the fictional realm of her readings and builds a gap between ideal and trivial versions of a suitor. Reading becomes the raison d’être of the two British and French female characters, setting them apart from their fictional siblings and delivering them to the public as heroines provided with an aesthetic penchant for literature. Throughout the novels, both Flaubert and Eliot address the issue of women’s troubling engagement with fiction and superficial chances at formal education and access to books. With their eyes feasting upon the written word, women readers begin to over-identify with the narrative constructs they devour with intellectual insatiability. They are at the mercy of day-dreams induced by poorly assimilated reading matter. Such anxieties governed not only the surface-realm of Middlemarch, but also the mindset of the Victorian society at large. Thus, this paper considers Dorothea Brooke and Emma Bovary’s reading or, rather, misreading. Both shape their lives according to what they read – the first is a pursuer of knowledge and desires to attain a classical education; the second is preoccupied with the lives of romantic heroines. Dorothea is interested in serious, “elite” literature; Emma is fond of “shlock” prose. The yawning gap between kitsch and its counterpart differentiates the two females’ acts of reading.*

### 1. Introduction

Nineteenth-century anti-fiction prejudices were often paired with the vehement opposition to female readers seeking refuge in flamboyant and scandalous print matter from the sordid reality in which they were trapped. The 21<sup>st</sup>-century reading public may find it difficult to imagine the anti-novel attitudes running through the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Literary historians wavered between deeming the novel purposeless or worthy of investigation before it secured its crucial position in literary studies and gained cultural acceptance and aesthetic value. Significantly, print production and distribution saw a revolutionary upheaval due to industrialization, new distribution networks, the decline in paper and ink costs and the unprecedented emergence of mass literacy.

Reading was not believed to be strictly a conceptual operation of the mind, but a poisonous habit of turning docile companions into querulous, discontented and passive human beings. Commentators repeatedly expressed their anxieties concerning women's use of their leisure time and desire to pursue education, a position persistently found in novels, medical journals, etiquette manuals, as well as domestic magazines, as such texts were available to larger audiences than ever before. Even in visual arts, representations of the woman reader as the inspiration of male action and the subject of male gaze cast a cloud over women's aesthetic exercise.

## 2. Female reading patterns in *Middlemarch* and *Madame Bovary*

Although one might not readily associate George Eliot with Gustave Flaubert – one author is British, the other is French; one female, one male – two of their 19<sup>th</sup>-century realist novels, *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and *Madame Bovary* (1856) share a thematic interest in female characters' uses of books and reading experience. The multi-plot of *Middlemarch* is hopscotched over by a Bovaryesque scenario: the temptation of fiction causes the idealist Dorothea Brooke, under twenty at the outset of the novel, to marry Reverend Edward Casaubon, a middle-aged misguided scholar who embarks on the completion of the great task of his life, "A Key to All Mythology", his intended masterpiece.

Both Emma Bovary and Dorothea Brooke succumb entirely to the reading experience undertaken prior to and after their marital life. Dorothea's high-minded appreciation of "great men" serves as a lead-in to her failed marriage; Emma's middlebrow infatuation with second-rate romantic literature determines her search for an ideal husband and her subsequent adulterous existence. Throughout the novels, both Flaubert and Eliot address the issue of women's troubling engagement with literature and superficial chances at a proper education. Dorothea's most pressing desire is not, as it would appeal to the common sense of the reader, romantic satisfaction. Her intellectual curiosity is an index of her personality, as she is possessed by a "passionate desire to know and to think" (p. 33). In Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie's relatives strip books of their textual value by mixing up the idea of a good book with its binding. In *Middlemarch*, however, Eliot provides her characters with books whose author is of primary importance, but denies the reader access to the content being read. The moment of the heroine's reading acts is not always revealed to the general reading public, as to report the experience would be to underrate its intensity.

Dorothea fantasizes about wedding a great thinker of the past, an author of her reading material. Her marital expectations are cultivated by her ingestion of 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>- century print material: "She felt sure that she would have accepted the judicious Hooker, if she had been born in time to save him from the wretched mistake he made in matrimony; or John Milton when his blindness had come on; or any of the other great men whose odd habits it would have been glorious piety to endure" (p. 8). Surprisingly, Dorothea is not even aware of the aftereffects of her presence on other characters, as she had "the charms of a nature entirely without hidden calculations either for immediate effects or for remoter ends. It was this which made Dorothea so child-like" (p. 44).

In the introductory chapter of Book I, Eliot's habit of withholding the female character's reading choices in *Middlemarch* is paused to tempt the audience to dig through the external circumstances that echo the heroine's life. The reader is informed that Dorothea spends her nights reading old theological books, knows by heart many passages of the French scholar Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* (1657-58) and Jeremy Taylor work (probably his most popular writing among devout readers, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*, both containing suggestions of spiritual cures for vices and temptations). From Pascal's theological and philosophical unfinished work, she may have harvested ideas on "la condition de l'homme". Both Eliot and Flaubert dwell on Dorothea and Emma's early education. Dorothea and her sister Celia have been privately educated, with an English and a Swiss family. Emma, too, has been educated at a convent boarding school. Although the two novels are very different, a common thread which links the two heroines is the fact that they are readers. Both read religious texts – Dorothea with the ardent faith of a St. Teresa, Emma with the same interpretational instruments with which she decodes the romantic clichés of sensation fiction. The catalogue of texts that has framed Emma's education at the convent consists, in fact, of a tangled combination between religion and romanticism.

The heroines' education has textual roots. Dorothea is orphaned and has no real guide to administer her reading preferences and mold her behavior. Emma's mother, too, dies while Emma is still a young woman. Both can fall prey to grimy novels and become literally and literarily manipulated by printed material, as Dorothea's uncle and Emma's father are not able to look after them, although they intend to do so with the best of intentions. Unlike Eliot, Flaubert does not retain intertextual references. Flaubertian pastiche both hints to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century readership in France and fuels the overall "effet du reel" of the novel. Emma is an avid consumer of François-René Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788), Sir Walter Scott, Honoré de Balzac, George Sand and Eugène Sue. Her subjectivity is shaped by the mimetic feelings generated when reading and admiring pious vignettes, sermons, romantic tales, songs, ballads, keepsakes and illustrations.

As in Dorothea's case – who, contrary to Emma, desires through the actions and thoughts of famous philosophers and theologians of the past – Emma is forced to engage in a double-edged reading experience. The two female readers not only momentarily collapse into texts which fix their expectations, but are also confronted with new extratextual material. Emma has to derive meaning from her mother's death. Dorothea, too, has to 'read' Edward Casaubon and Will Ladislaw, Casaubon's cousin and the other characters she comes in contact with.

The heroines' feelings regarding love and marriage had been established by a recycled glossary of 'fine' emotions and sentiments. Both hope to reap the rewards of their husbands' intellectual success in the absence of career options for them. It comes as no surprise, then, that Dorothea misconceives Casaubon in her quest for a husband who is above her in judgement and knowledge. Dorothea longs to reach the macrocosm of masculine endeavour that lies beyond the Tipton Grange estate. Emma wants to replicate the "sensualités du luxe" which surround the romantic heroines of her readings in a sensuous process, as voiced by her lover, Leon:

“Your head empties by everything else (...) Whole hours go by. Without moving you wander through lands that you imagine you can actually see, and entwined with the story your mind gets involved with the detailed descriptions, or follows the twists and turns of adventures. It mingles with the characters; it seems as if it is your heart that beats beneath their clothes.” (p. 72)

Dorothea’s unattainable desires are different in scope. Her telos – her endgame – is to become Casaubon’s research apprentice and consecrate her whole life to a “great soul” (p. 17) who will ease her escape from female domesticity and divulge the crux of his ideas and values.

Mr. Brook gives Dorothea permission to marry Casaubon and supports his decision by envisioning him as bishop in the future. The pedant Casaubon describes himself as living “too much with the dead. [His] mind is something like the ghost of an ancient, wondering about the world and trying mentally to construct it as it would be”. He is in need of a wife as “a reader for [his] evenings” (p. 17), not as a potential creative artist with whom he can share his knowledge. A gap yawns between his false academic expectations and the real worth of his work. The misleading and dishonest view of Casaubon’s scattered work mediates Dorothea’s pointless wish to attain at least a minuscule part of her future husband’s intellectual and critical authority, to assist him only as a “lamp-holder” (p. 15) in exchange for the acquisition of knowledge denied to her. The act of reading in *Madame Bovary* and *Middlemarch* poses a problem ardently shared by both characters and modern readers. How does one order one’s mind through the guiding viewpoints of books? How does one derive meaning from one’s reading? The books to which the two heroines are exposed function as an early draft of their romantic and intellectual development. In many ways, Dorothea takes after Ramola in her marked preoccupation with knowledge acquisition. Like Bardo, a dry scholar driven by his unquenchable desire to preserve his classical library beyond the grave, Casaubon cannot ascertain the futility of his aspirations.

Akin to Emma, who must struggle with the trivial mindset of Tostes and Yonville society, Dorothea is faced with the worldview of the other inhabitants of the provincial world of *Middlemarch*. Emma gains ‘free membership’ to the library of the pharmacist Homais. Likewise, Dorothea spots Casaubon’s library and her heart trembles at the mere thought of reading from it. The scholarly background and bookish atmosphere of Lowick exacerbate Dorothea’s desire to wed Casaubon. She harbors a delusional marital dream in which the cold and unbending clergyman with research aspirations would “deliver her from her girlish subjection to her own ignorance, and give her the freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest path” (p. 24). The fundamental dilemma of Dorothea’s existence, as in Emma’s case, is the incongruence between infantile expectations derived from texts and the actual life unfolding in front of her credulous eyes. Similarly, Emma’s emotional vitality has been generated by the printed word, which has occasioned the counterfeit assumption upon which she has decided to marry Charles Bovary. Michael Wheeler, in *The Art of Allusion in Victorian Fiction* (1979), concedes that Dorothea must have seen Casaubon through the “spectacles of books” (p. 78). To her, the scholarly cleric is “something beyond the shallows of ladies’-school literature: here was a living Bossuet, whose work would

reconcile complete knowledge with devoted piety; here was a modern Augustine who united the glories of doctor and saint” (p. 21). Such comparisons leave no doubt that Dorothea wrapped Casaubon up in aesthetic rolls of paper and added a bow and the wrong tag at the end, for the final touch.

Emma and Dorothea are both uncritical women readers in their quest for either sappy romances or classical studies. Intertexts become cyphertexts as the two fictional women exhilarate over fantasies of romantic literature or reveries about great thinkers of the past. Although the two resemble each other in their faulty search for an ideal husband, they are situated at opposite ends of the reading spectrum. Their reading tastes sets them apart. One yearns for serious, highbrow literature; the other for popular, post-industrial fiction soaked in cliché-ridden themes and motifs. Emma has been associated by critics to the female version of Quixote. The jumbled mixture of her reading texts with her own memories and sensations is as powerful as the compulsive untruths told by pathological liars who play with reality and begin to fall prey to their own fantasies. In a way, both Dorothea and Emma are susceptible victims of a kind of *pseudologia fantastica* and make no palpable distinction between the print they consume and real life. Both become dissatisfied with their life eventually. However, their disgruntlement is, towards the end of the novels, awakening.

After becoming Casaubon’s research apprentice, copying interminable quotes in Sisyphean manner for him and reading for him to protect his failing eyesight, Dorothea no longer regards him as she did initially. She revolts like the daughters of her beloved Milton. Casaubon, on the other hand, has not grounded his research on an authentic paradigm through the methodical gathering of qualitative data. Sunk in minutiae, he still believes in assembling a cutting-edge work. Thus, Dorothea’s marriage does not collide due to her constant crucifixion and self-sacrificing endeavors or her penchant her books, but rather because her version of Casaubon has proved to be nothing more than a chimera. At the other end of the continuum, Emma remains an outside observer of the products of “le bas romantisme” which she has projected onto her marriage and adulterous relationships.

Dorothea and Emma’s flaw lies in their literal reading process, in their inability to move from linguistic details to concrete, factual information. Emma, unlike Dorothea, romanticizes and takes as literal pictures that display passive and languorous women in a state of unproductive inactivity. Such images cause her own fall into carelessness or, as the Greek name it, into *akedia*, the precursor of today’s laziness, with many more subtleties involved. Thus, it is difficult to turn from a passive to an active reading state. From this perspective, Emma’s suicide comes as a surprise – she has finally asserted and chosen her own will over the desire of her fictional ideals. Although Dorothea’s last decision, after Casaubon’s death, to relinquish her intellectual ambitions in return for her union with Will Ladislav has attracted many acolytes and detractors, the heroine is, in fact, given a second active reading chance to prove her critical versatility. She starts life anew next to a man with artistic and aesthetic sensibility, who views her as “a poem” (p. 195). The reader is relieved – Dorothea is no longer a mere lamp-holder to a great man, but her own incandescent light source from within.

### 3. Conclusions

The moral, sexual and medical dangers of furtive reading and female self-absorption contributed largely to fears about socio-cultural and political dissolution. The previous sections have presented evidence consistent with the idea that the intertexts scattered across the two novels' storylines are no decorative frill. They generate the fictionally-tailored versions of the female characters. These women's vicarious lives contradict the societal suspicions of the sanctity of the written word. Their 'tragic flaw', however, lies in their inability to extract a unimodal and unisemiotic self-contained system for self-improvement out of the polysemiotic cocktails cultivated by fiction. The reading practices undertaken by Dorothea Brooke and Emma Bovary, in turn, shape the bibliophiles' personal identity and establish the premises of their spiritual and cultural memory. Most Victorian girls focused mainly on reading the Bible as an ethical model to which to compare the other available texts. It is no wonder, then, that young and poorly instructed female readers fell prey to the 'evils' of reading. Their infatuation with fictional characters or geniuses of the past stems from their inability to discriminate between denotative and figurative meaning at key junctures in their development. They lack the critical dexterity to filter the information that comes to them via reading. The female characters' education is almost completely textual, as their mother, considered the chief source of a child's instruction, is unavailable – she is either deceased or inefficient.

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