Words That We Couldn’t Say – The Narrator’s Search for Meaning in *Middlemarch*

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“We couldn’t say them/So now we just pray them/Words that we couldn’t say.”
Steve Comte, Words That We Couldn’t Say

The narrator in Middlemarch is difficult to categorize cleanly because she occupies a special place in the novel. The traditional omniscient narrator is able to see everyone and everything, but unable to do more than simply and unbiasedly report what is happening with the characters. The traditional character narrator is literally a character in the novel, who is only able to report what he or she sees and is unable to ascend to a position to learn more. These two types of narration are referred to as the third person narrative and the first person narrative, respectively. While the second person narrative exists, it is generally difficult to implement, and out of these three perspectives, it is the most biased of them. The narrator in Middlemarch does not fall into any of these categories easily, and she is far too mercurial to remain in any one category permanently. However, it is only through this unique position that the Narrator is able to function to the novel’s needs.

Many questions arise from the existence of the Narrator. The first and foremost of these questions is who is the Narrator? Is the Narrator George Eliot, inserted directly into the novel in order to control the narrative in a more direct manner than most authors

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1 The song’s lyrics in their entirety can be found in Appendix A. This line from its refrain is placed here for two reasons. One, it follows Middlemarch’s epigraph custom. Two, the lyrics themselves follow the theme of the unspoken words that are an important part of the narratorial format of Middlemarch.

2 To save any possible confusion, the Narrator of Middlemarch will henceforth be denoted by a capital “N” and female pronouns. This is done not simply on a whim, but because the voice of the Narrator is unmistakably warm and forgiving, as the voice of an ideal mother figure would be.
would dare? Or is the Narrator another character in Eliot’s story? Critical theorists have been unable to reach consensus as to the nature of the Narrator; most cannot even agree what gender the Narrator is. But every one of these critics agrees that it is this special Narrator that brings life to the story. Although this life may be seen from time to time as being closely monitored and tightly regulated to ensure the desired response from the reader, the Narrator is still crucial to the comprehension of the characters, the novel and the aims of the novel. The Narrator is a character in her own right, not simply the vehicle for propelling the plot forward.

Without the Narrator, the reader would not have been privy to the full depth of the anguished hypocrisy of Bulstrode, or the appreciate full value of Dorothea’s unrecognized importance. And that is only the periphery; without the Narrator, the reader would not understand the true tragedy of being disconnected from the web of humanity, the goal of the novel’s subtitle, *A Study of Provincial Life*. More than merely setting the scene for the characters, the Narrator gives meaning to the actions of the town’s inhabitants. But when the Narrator is claimed to be a character, it can be seen immediately that the Narrator does not interact with the characters. She is present in every situation, and speaks to the reader, but not to the characters. The Narrator is a character for our benefit, and not meant to be simply another gossiping neighbor. The Narrator is the “voice, so often lacking in actual life, that speaks up for the failed or inadequate life and saves it, if only at the level of verbal recognition, from being failure merely.”

The Narrator is not simply the passive vehicle, but she has convictions, a voice, and, most importantly, a characterization of her own purpose. She is a “belated

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historian”, and must “unravel these human lots”4. The Narrator is a lens for the
examination of the Study. Humanity is largely unaware of its inherent connectivity, and
as such, no one person can look at the web from a distance and understand it. We need a
device, a construct to take a look at even the smallest fragment of this fractal presentation
of humanity. The Study cannot be focused on from solely a wide historical point of
view; we must get to the human level; as Lydgate says, the view must be “continually
expanding and shrinking between the whole human horizon and the horizon of an object-
glass” (Eliot, 640). This magnification of a small town being brought to the attention of
the reader, and the most important facet of that web is its connection to the larger web of
humanity. After all, the novel does not happen in a vacuum. It is set within a specific era
of English history, and the narrative constantly reaffirms the dates within the novel to
ensure that the reader is in chronological sync with it. Michael York Mason writes,
“Historical references in a novel are not to be justified on the grounds of their being
unnoticeable, but rather because they are meaningful”.5 The narrative must be viewed in
a historically aware fashion; after all, the characters are aware of the pressures of the
outside world (the first Reform Bill, the coming of the railroad system through their
lands), and thus, so should the reader.

Before we define the shape of her subject, we must take a closer look at the Narrator
herself. For the purposes of the Study, we are fortunate to have a Narrator who is
working towards the meaningful completion of the novel. And more importantly, we can
see what these aims are ahead of time. We know that the Narrator is a historian, and that

140. This work will be parenthetically cited for the remainder of my essay.
419.
she intends to give the history of this town the same meaning that we give to the history of the world at large. The Narrator is even kind enough to give us a hint as to the method of how we will receive this meaning. She mentions the historian Fielding and his manner of relating history: “he seems to bring his arm chair to the proscenium and chat with us in the lusty ease of his fine English” (Eliot, 141). This passage where the Narrator talks about historians serves as her own formal introduction to what she will be doing. As any good scientist delivering a treatise would, she drops names to show her knowledge of the field before presenting her own theory. And she does not take long to present this theory, only a paragraph into the chapter and she has already defined humanity as being a web that cannot be seen all at once. She states that “all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies known as the universe” (Eliot, 141). This is a coy way of downplaying her work, which in turn will only increase the effect of the universal ramifications that are actually present.

The passage that begins Chapter 15 serves as her own introduction:

“A great historian, as he insisted on calling himself, who had the happiness to be dead a hundred and twenty years ago, and so to take his place among the colossi whose huge legs our living pettiness is observed to walk under, glories in his copious remarks and digressions as the least imitable part of his work . . .” (Eliot, 141)

This passage defines the Narrator as a very learned person, for only an academic would be interested in the work of a much earlier historian. But she places herself, and her contemporaries, beneath Fielding, casting him and his contemporaries as being giants in the field. Their time of history must have been filled with events of earth-moving
importance, and how lucky they were to have been able to live in a time so great that even its mere chroniclers became legendary.

This glorification of prominent history fits with the tone of the passage. The Narrator is exuding a humble image of herself, which will then in turn lead to a more humble image for her Study, all of which goes towards creating an almost hyperbolic irony. She creates the image of a humble historian detailing the mere happenings of a small town in a peaceful time, and all in a personable tone. The irony is compounded by her assertion that “we belated historians must not linger after his example; and if we did so, it is probable that our chat would be thin and eager, as if delivered from a camp-stool in a parrot-house” (Eliot, 141). This cannot be a true chiding, however, for the very same conversational tone that she warns against is the style she uses to impart her most crucial statements. The very nature of the material she is reporting on keeps itself from becoming “thin and eager”. Its importance drives it from the esoteric to the universal. This same importance is highlighted by the Narrator.

There are three types of scenes concerning the Narrator that will be examined in my essay, and these three types of scenes are all handled in a different style. First, there are the scenes that contain the normally insignificant actions of the town. In these instances, the Narrator speaks in terms of her being a historian, and utilizes the classical academic lexicon of that field to both introduce and narrate those scenes. The second type of scene is much more personable. They focus on Dorothea’s reactions to various events, using her as a ready example of human relations. The Narrator speaks in the most sweeping and universalizing terms when she is adding voice to Dorothea’s trials. The pain of Dorothea’s disconnection is made to be a universal one; after all, “the quickest of us walk
about well wadded with stupidity” (Eliot, 194). The Narrator’s presence is an attempt to demonstrate this universality through Dorothea’s emotional pain. The final form will be exemplified by the discussion of the Garths; that is, the type of scene in which the Narrator is very quiet. The meaning of a novel is usually delivered through its characters, and not by its narrator. Thus, in the scenes where the Narrator is quiet, one would typically expect to find the most meaning, but this expectation is not necessarily true for Middlemarch. Some of the most important passages are those when the Narrator soliloquizes. The passages in which the Narrator is silent are not without meaning; rather, they are examples of those few individuals who at times demonstrate an innate grasp of the truth of the Study.

Therefore, it is prudent to find the Narrator to be “an integral part of her novels’ structure and [to recognize] that a fuller understanding of her fiction depends on this being taken into account”.

The personality of the Narrator has several mirrors in the narrative, one of those occurring in the text itself and the other being in the character of Lydgate. The Narrator’s scientific nature is reflected in the text by the many allusions to the greatly increasing amount of scientific discovery of the age. Lydgate and the Narrator have often been critically compared because of the similarity of their roles. Both the Narrator and Lydgate are scientists of a sort; Lydgate being a medical scientist while the Narrator is a societal scientist. In both of their cases, they are in-depth examiners of a “special experiment”. This similarity can explain the special depth at which the Narrator operates. Neither the scientist Lydgate nor the scientist Narrator can truly be a part of their experiment; but at the same time, they stand at a much closer proximity.

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distance than anyone else could. Lydgate cannot physically enter his terrariums any more than the Narrator can physically enter Middlemarch. But the assistance of the fastidious eye of both of these examiners is necessary to understand their work, but we can learn more about the Study of Provincial Life. As fascinating as the nature of Lydgate’s electrically-driven small game experiments may be, their full nature is not disclosed by Lydgate. The Narrator even alludes to her own purpose as she speaks of Lydgate; she asks, “does it seem incongruous for a Middlemarch surgeon to want to be a discoverer” (Eliot, 147)? It is not, for it also does not seem incongruous for a narrator to want not only to become the historian of a small burg, but also more importantly, to imbue that otherwise unnoteworthy history with the same dignity and sense of consequence as that of an entire nation.

This essay looks to show that the Narrator’s purpose in the text is to explain an emotional subtext to the reader and give meaning to scenes of emotional duress. The addition of this meaning elevates the mundane happenings of this sleepy rural town, placing it on par with the capital of any nation. The Narrator’s goal in this endeavor is to show that these events are worthy of our attention because these events not only comprise the day-to-day narrative of humanity’s history, but also because we are connected to those people. The events that affect them will also affect us, and the recognition of this property is to everyone’s benefit. The instances of the Narrator interjecting a sense of philosophical meaning into the scene have to occur because “some discouragement, some faintness of the heart at the new real future which replaces the imaginary, is not unusual, and we do expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual” (Eliot, 194). She is making it clear that she expects emotion out of us because she will be placing these
events into the category of unusual, because when they are in the category of the common, they are put there only because they are unexamined. In order to understand that imperative, the scenes in which the Narrator explains herself must be examined. These scenes are telling in more than the direct definition of the word. The Narrator is giving breath to the unutterable words that fill “the other side of silence” (Eliot, 194). This requires her to exist in the state that she does. She has to perform as the Narrator, but at the same time, she has to have a personality and be character that cannot be approached by the other characters in the novel.

Although the position taken in this discussion is that the Narrator is not Eliot thrust into the novel, the arguments that place Eliot directly into the text as Narrator deserve some notice. If the Narrator is in fact Eliot, then here is a problem. A “‘George Eliot’ [who] intrudes too often in her own person and so interferes with the reader’s response” would be detrimental to the Study. George Eliot cast directly as Narrator would convey a lack of confidence in her creation, and given what biographical information we have about her, this could be the case with a different work. However, this nervous version of George Eliot is unlikely as it pertains to Middlemarch; her confidence, while waxing and waning from critical reactions to her earlier works, was buttressed by the relatively low-risk method of delivery chosen for the narrative, formatted as a serial story published by way of Blackwood. The same Eliot who would be self-consciously concerned with the reader’s reaction to some of the choices the characters make in the novel would be the same as the intrusive Narrator, who constantly rushes in to save characters from harsher judgements by the reader, if only because the character and the reader share the same humanity. Despite its differences, the logic behind declaring Eliot to be the Narrator has

\[\text{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{7}}\] Newton, 97.
the same effect that the “non-character character” theory has: the Narrator is still designed to deliver a closer look at the Study. However, the theory that Eliot is the Narrator casts a doubt on the validity and necessity of the experiment. If George Eliot needed to come in every few chapters to tell us that the story is important, and that the end of the story will satisfy the question of the average man, it cheapens the story. That George Eliot who would do that is not the George Eliot who could write this story; it is a George Eliot who would sell us the story primarily for profit. If tribute to the innumerable masses was as important as the author would have us believe, then why would that author take the role of barker, and repeatedly call for us to stay tuned for the next installment, so that we can continue to work our way closer and closer to the “truth” of the novel, while reminding us to continue to pay the admission?

The existence of so many contradictory classifications of the Narrator represents merely some of the problems that result from the structure and implementation of the Narrator. With all of the free range that the Narrator has, it is important to note when the Narrator is actually serving Eliot’s purposes, and when she is providing a bit of her own personality for the reader’s benefit. Even the author can be called in question here because, as Ginsburg says, “George Eliot did not create Scenes of Clerical Life; he did not exist before having written fiction.”8 There are many layers set up between us the reader and the truth of the narrative. They are set purposefully to hinder us and to make readers with wildly varying thought processes arrive to a set of truths that are at least within a certain range of deviation. It is an attempt to write a “minimum acceptable

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measure of narrativity”⁹ into the story. The Narrator must enable her own necessity; if every fact and result were espoused in the beginning of the novel in a straightforward fashion, there would be no further need for the Narrator. So, while the Narrator has more power than most other narrators, she still must perform according to certain conventions, not because of what the reader expects, but simply to validate her own existence.

However, in her attempt to validate her existence, and to prevent the reader from comprehending the truth right away, she fills the narrative with multiple images that are intended to stand for the entire Study. These images all have in common that they involve visual examination and a repeatedly varying focus for that examination. Vision is always subjective, even if it is a character in a novel whose vision is being debated. As Miller succinctly phrases it, “It is the creative projection of light from an egotistic center motivated by desire and need.”¹⁰ We are not allowed to question the vision (the light) of the Narrator. While these words are primarily intended for the other characters in the novel, with the amount of free will and varying tastes as the Narrator appears to have, she must work carefully to not become like her subjects and use “the act of seeing [as] the spontaneous will to power over what is seen”¹¹. And perhaps that is what is troubling about this Narrator. With a purely omniscient narrator, it is understood that he will have no personal stake in the narrative, and that he is not trying to point the reader to specific goal. The omniscient narrator is simply reporting the facts as they are revealed. The other side of this pure objectivity is an absence of personality, a lack of life. But,  

Middlemarch’s Narrator has personality, and thus will unconsciously (if a character can

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¹¹ Miller, 138.
have a conscious to match its personality) color the text. What makes this a concern is what Ginsburg notes: “The intrusions of the [N]arrator are very often indistinguishable from the words of the characters”\textsuperscript{12}. But the personality of this Narrator is to see the potential for good in each person, to see the interdependence of her subjects. All of these factors can hinder the text, if they are focused on for too long. They must be noted, and taken into account. It can be taken into account that from “the moment the author [or Narrator] intervenes, he himself is fictionalized and from then on exists as a fictional character” and “rather than creating his fiction, he is created by it”\textsuperscript{13}. The Narrator’s unconscious desires are the aims of the novel, and thus, they can be trusted. If not for the whole novel, then at the very least, for the short while that they take center stage in the form of her soliloquies.

Any discussion of the novel’s unique narrator inevitably leads to an examination of the passage in which the narrator compares life to a pier-glass, whose surface is “minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions”. The Narrator then says, “Place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination and lo! The scratches seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles around that little sun.” (Eliot, 264) This is a summation of several important themes in the novel. First, it is a summary of how a small town such as Middlemarch actually functions. Every facet of local living is intricately intertwined; the town’s isolation from larger population center necessitates that certain families fulfill certain roles, thereby creating varying webs of interactions, alliances and rivalries as the town continues to exist. The pier-glass passage describes the inner workings of the town, and illustrates how the Narrator will be

\textsuperscript{12} Ginsburg, 549.
\textsuperscript{13} Ginsburg, 551.
conducting the Study. She will demonstrate this provincial phenomenon through a sampling of these intersections in a highly scientific fashion, and present the findings to the reader. The Narrator herself will become “that little sun”. Such a grandiose statement should not alter the reader’s core perception of the Narrator, however. The Narrator is still a character in the novel, under the control of Eliot. Even though it is the Narrator’s duty to present the findings of this Study, as a separate character-entity, she would not lose her own personality to do so. For the most important parts of the story, of course, the Narrator delivers the events in a more business-like fashion. But, the beginning of each chapter belongs to the Narrator, and from those beginnings, the next scene’s focal point is announced and ushered onstage. Why is the pier-glass scene so often referenced? What attracts critics to it time after time? The pier-glass is a viable analogy for the proposed Study. While it is not alone (there are several others), the imagery of the web-like scratches on the pier-glass surface is the most potent. This is even taking into account the underlying image of the web in and of itself. Unlike the bare web by itself, the pier-glass scratches require both polishing and direct focused light before a discernible pattern will appear. These two actions are representative of the Narrator’s functions. The Narrator polishes the town and the characters by filling in the background information with comfortable familiarity of both subject and audience. Then, she directs her light on a specific character, omnisciently trailing that character and thus temporarily structuring the narrative around that character.

The purpose of the Narrator is poetically stated in the passage that discusses the nature of being able to feel “all ordinary human life” (Eliot, 194). She is telling us that she will bring us “that roar that lies on the other side” in small portions so that we will be able to
withstand it. We will first look at the scene detailing the circumstances that provoke this response from the Narrator: Dorothea experiencing extreme sorrow during her husband’s absence. This scene is being examined first because it is a restatement of what the Narrator hopes to accomplish and a demonstration of how she will perform it. Then, we will move to the character of Bulstrode, because his scenes of inner conflict are an additional look at what the Narrator does for a character. He is also placed here because he is a solitary peripheral character, and should be disposed of before we spend the bulk of our time with the Narrator at Dorothea’s side. We will rejoin Dorothea spending time alone as Casaubon attends to his academic business. During this private moment, she begins to subconsciously doubt her marriage, but then projects that doubt onto Ladislaw’s grandmother. We would not know this if not for the presence of the Narrator. The next scene of the Narrator investigating Dorothea’s feelings takes places in the garden, after Lydgate informs Casaubon that his illness is imminently terminable. Here, where her dying husband rebuffs her, we appreciate her sorrow more richly because of the Narrator’s presence. Because of that presence, we understand the ramifications of her rejection. This scene is not merely the rejection of an idealistic wife by a cold husband. It is every kind act being rejected by that miserly spirit which we all manifest from time to time. These are the main scenes. There will also be a secondary scene that will be examined that also proves the same point. The more supplementary scene that will be examined is the elder Garths and Farebrother discussing the impact of Featherstone’s will on several other characters. The difference between the supplementary scene and the main scenes is the amount of the Narrator’s presence. Supplementary scenes such as this have more dialogue in them, but that does not discount them from this essay. The
Narrator is responsible for continuity up to these scenes and the continuity after these scenes. The Narrator is not on a break during these scenes; she has already formed the scene, thereby allowing the characters to perform. She does not need to immediately transmit the subtext when the characters are willing to do it themselves. These reasons are why the Narrator, as she is, is a critical part of *Middlemarch*’s structure and execution. The successful reception of this Study of Provincial Life hinges on how the Narrator is received.

There are two assumptions that comprise the Narrator’s hypothesis of human relations. The first is that the type of tragedy that she will be presenting to us is oft-occurring. The second is that we are unaware of these sorrows. As she relates in more elegant terms in the passage about that “roar which lies on the other side of silence”, she is telling the reader that she is going to draw out the emotion and meaning from these everyday occurrences. As it is done in this passage, most of this excavation will be accomplished by examining Dorothea’s life and actions; “But why always Dorothea?” indeed (Eliot, 278). There are several reasons why the Narrator should single out Dorothea more often than any other character. First, unlike Bulstrode, Casaubon, or even Lydgate, she is young and fresh to society; against these other candidates, she has the advantage of potential. But unlike her sister Celia, of whom it could also be argued as having this same potential, Dorothea has an additional advantage: the “fervent conviction that life should be heroic.”\(^\text{14}\); a trait she shares with the Narrator. Her last advantage is a corollary to that conviction: an ardent belief that humanity would be better off if more people would realize the validity of honestly working for the good of others, particularly

\(^{14}\) George Eliot, *Middlemarch, or A Study of Provincial Life*, Penguin Classics Edition (London, 1994), Back Cover. This statement was written by Rosemary Ashton, the editor of this edition of *Middlemarch.*
if they happen to be the “average person”. But, aside from this, Dorothea is representative of women in her class in her time period; she is in the middle of the marching mass of humanity.

With this in mind, we join Dorothea crying during her honeymoon in her husband’s absence. The first thing the Narrator does is strip her favored subject of her special qualities. This makes it easier for the Narrator to create her universal comparisons. However, it is precisely that uniqueness which invites these moments to Dorothea in such a high quantity. If Dorothea was not as sensitive to the webbed nature of humanity as she is, then, like other people already have done, she would have lost her grander notions after her first setback. But the Narrator knows that Dorothea will not be thwarted easily, and thus returns to her time after time to touch base with the very soul of her study. In accordance with this stripping of Dorothea’s uniqueness, the Narrator makes seem as if she isn’t saying anything the reader doesn’t already know. “Many souls in their young nudity are tumbled out among incongruities . . . nor can I suppose that when Mrs. Casaubon is discovered in a fit of weeping six weeks after her wedding, the situation will be regarded as tragic” (Eliot, 194). In order for the reader to receive the point, the Study and its antithesis must be placed in a useful tension. This antithesis is, of course, that such events are ordinary and that there is no meaning in ordinariness.

The Narrator takes this opportunity to state that we “do not expect people to be moved by what is not tragic. That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of humanity” (Eliot, 194). By telling us that we mistake frequency for insignificance, the Narrator is telling us again what she will be doing, in different words this time. But so that we would not miss the point, she
restates it again in a more direct manner: “If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrels heartbeat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence” (Eliot, 194).

While the Study primarily focuses on the effects of one person being unable to join the web of humanity, there are also two cases in which it looks at the effects of what happens when characters attempt to put themselves at the center of everyone’s perception of the web. The first and most egregious of these is Rosamond. Her private feelings are explicitly state her as being the center of the town’s web, and that she is that “one person in Rosamond’s world whom she did not regard as blameworthy, and that was the graceful creature with blond plaits and with little hands crossed before her, who had never expressed herself unbecomingly, and had always acted for the best – the best being naturally what she best liked” (Eliot, 665). Her refusal to allow for any other possible interpretation puts her at odds with her husband, and because of Lydgate’s personality, she succeeds in making herself also the center of his perception of the web. The other character who suffers from a misperception of the web is Bulstrode.

The sanctimonious Bulstrode had a problem, which could be broken down into several smaller problems. The overarching problem begins with his need to appear unapproachably virtuous in his town of Middlemarch. Raffles’s unexpected presence puts this appearance at risk. A bribe silences this problem temporarily, but Raffles’s return and convalescence complicates matters again. Bulstrode’s decision to ignore Lydgate’s orders solves this problem with Raffles’s death, but leaves him with the overall unfavorable result of the destruction of his reputation. In typical Middlemarch fashion, this event does not only affect Bulstrode, but the repercussions spread to Lydgate and
thus Rosamond as well. But the communal effects will be pushed to the side for the time being. Focusing on Bulstrode, the Narrator’s presence is crucial to feeling the full emotional depth of this event. Without the Narrator, the reader would not see all of the shades of gray involved. It is the Narrator who is solely responsible for the look into Bulstrode’s soul that explains his anxiety and his behavior. Bulstrode himself might not have been sufficient to tell his innermost conflict; for as the Narrator says, “speech is representative: who can represent himself just as he is, even in his own reflections” (Eliot, 710)? Even as she validates the necessity of her role, she does not place herself in the role of judge; she leaves that to the other characters and to the reader. As she usually does, the Narrator is attempting to create an intimate understanding of Bulstrode that should lead to sympathy for him. Without the Narrator, the reader would only be able to infer that Bulstrode wanted Raffles to die. With the Narrator, there is an additional period before the death of Raffles where his desire to be rid of Raffles is at war with his more noble impulses.

The Narrator places the reader directly on this battlefield: “Should Providence in this case award death, there was no sin in contemplating death as the desirable issue – if he kept his hands from hastening it – if he scrupulously did what was prescribed” (Eliot, 704). The Narrator has moved from the familiar, conversational tone into an Evangelical one, one that suits Bulstrode. With a different narrator, this shift in diction wouldn’t have happened. It is not simply the actions, but the very character of Bulstrode that the narrative is now a part of. The lens of the study is now solely upon Bulstrode. The Study will soon dissect him and place him in a specific role within the community, this role having been made clear earlier in the novel. However, now that he is what is being
magnified, the Study will change to examine the effects of the town upon him; that is, the effect of the whole upon one of its parts. As she does elsewhere with other characters, the Narrator lays Bulstrode’s soul bare. This act of full disclosure aids the Narrator’s trademark style, and is a significant part of the effectiveness of the examination. If the reader was flatly told of Bulstrode’s past, then the reader would more than likely be swayed immediately against Bulstrode. And since this is the scene by which the reader is to definitively judge Bulstrode, the Narrator must be careful to present him with the same “concentrated conflict” that she has presented all other characters with. Bulstrode’s moral intelligence at this point is first presented by his own musings, and, then a page later by “the judgements of the Narrator expressed as generalizations.” The reader alone would not be able to know that “Bulstrode had not yet unravelled in his thought the confused promptings of the last four-and-twenty hours” (Eliot, 710). An omniscient narrator simply could not structure the scene as the Narrator does, and that deficiency necessitates Eliot’s particular brand of Narrator.

The Narrator uses this inner conflict as an opportunity to instruct the reader once again on the importance of the webbed structure of humanity. However, as opposed to the majority of the other times this is done, the character in question understands, or at least seems to understand, the nature of the web. But his lust for being the most important of any center of illumination is facilitates his downfall. Bulstrode’s understanding is incomplete because it is based on his ego. Bulstrode has a higher awareness of the web than most citizens do, and as a result, he places a higher value on the web than most citizens do. However, it is as self-serving as Rosamond’s perception. He believes that

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his public image is of paramount importance and thus, he fears Raffles not because he feared any material punishment.

“It was not that he was in danger of legal punishment or of beggary: he was in danger only of seeing disclosed to the judgment of his neighbours and the mournful perception of his wife certain facts of his past life which would render him an object of scorn and an opprobrium of the religion with which he had diligently associated himself.” (Eliot, 615)

The Narrator is in control of this passage, although it is not Dorothea who is being examined. The universal lesson this time is that “the terror of being judged sharpens the memory: it sends an inevitable glare over that long-unvisited past which has been habitually recalled only in general phrases” (Eliot, 615). As it is in the other cases of the Narrator providing this subtextual meaning to a scene, there is no chronological reference for her comment in relation to the narrative itself. That is, her comments are a-chronological; they are timeless, to use a phrase. This goes along with her not being an actual character in the novel, but a character construct placed into the narrative as a part of the Study for the reader’s benefit.

Although she focuses heavily on Dorothea, the Narrator would be hypocritical to neglect the other inhabitants of the town. We will go with the Narrator to one of these scenes with other Middlemarch citizens. But this scene is a slight departure from the scenes that have been previously examined, in more than just the fact that Dorothea is not the focus of this scene. This is a scene in which the Narrator allows the characters to discuss and create their own subtext in the scene. The interconnectedness of Middlemarch cannot be measured solely by viewing the town all at once through the bird’s-eye view. It must be seen at a different level, a closer perspective, and sometimes straight from a character’s mouth without it being translated by the Narrator. The center
of light must be changed every so often to maintain the sense of how greatly interconnected the town is. The effect of person A’s actions concerning person B must be looked at through person C’s eyes. A sharp demonstration of this connectivity occurs just before the story shifts to the discussion between Joshua Featherstone and Rigg. The elder Garths and Mr. Farebrother are discussing the effects of Caleb Featherstone’s last minute attempt to alter his will:

‘Now Mary’s gone, I must tell you a thing – It’s known only to Susan and me, and you’ll not tell it again. That old scoundrel wanted Mary to burn one of the wills the very night he died, when she was sitting up with him by herself, and he offered her a sum of money that he had in the box by him if she would do it. But Mary, you understand, could do no such thing – would not be handling his iron chest and so on. Now, you see, the will he wanted burnt was this last, so that if Mary had done what he wanted, Fred Vincy would have had ten thousand pounds. The old man did turn to him at last. That touches poor Mary close; she couldn’t help it – she was in the right to do what she did, but she feels, as she says, much as if she had knocked down somebody’s property and broken it against her will, when she was rightfully defending herself . . . Susan doesn’t agree with me. She says – tell what you say, Susan.’

‘Mary could not have acted otherwise, even if she had known what would be the effect on Fred,’ said Mrs. Garth, pausing from her work. ‘And she was quite ignorant of it. It seems to me, a loss which falls on another because we have done right is not to lie upon our conscience.’ (Eliot, 407)

An action that, at face value should affect only one person, Mary maintaining her own moral convictions in a secluded scene, instead not only affects Fred Vincy, but also affects everyone else who was waiting for the results of Featherstone’s will. These consequences in turn affect her again, and they also affect other characters’s levels of pity for Fred. And, due to the setup of the scene itself, we learn more about the inner workings of Farebrother and the Garths. This domino effect is a recurring structural ploy
of the Narrator, as it fits not only with her multiple allusions to webs and other interconnected imagery, but also because with a novel with a cast this large, this is the most effective way to spread the narrative light around, in order to get more characters adequately involved with the story. It would only be destructively ironic for a narrative that wishes to celebrate the importance of the previously uncelebrated to become the very force that silences these voices in order to focus on the story of three separate romances.

The Narrator spends a good deal of time on the subject of romances and marriages. She does so not on the surface effects such as changes they bring in personal economy or social standing, but rather on the often unheralded swirl and surge of egos, desires, and needs which lay beneath the surface. As marriages are fundamental in the history of the world, the Narrator goes beyond what other historians might present, and gets to the matter of whether or not the married couple is able to truly connect with each other as she believes they should. Near the beginning of Chapter 28, there is a scene involving Dorothea that is apparently devoid of the Narrator’s blunt theorizing on the disconnectivity of most of humanity. At first glance, the passage could easily be dismissed as the simple narration that the Narrator sometimes slips into out of necessity in order to keep the story moving. The sentence, “Marriage, which was to bring guidance into worthy and imperative occupation had not yet freed her from the gentlewoman’s oppressive liberty” (Eliot, 274) slips quietly into the narrative. This line betrays several things, not only about Dorothea, but also of the Narrator’s understanding of marriage. This scene results in another generalization, although one not as wide in scope as most of her generalizations. In this case, she is using Dorothea to theorize about state of marriage in polite London society. In the scene, Dorothea is stewing in her own boredom. As it
happens in these Dorothea moments, the Narrator removes the majority of speech from the scene. Happiness is not a part of the scene; not even a sense of worthy companionship to her husband is present in Dorothea’s feelings. In its place, the word “oppressive” twice and the quiet beginnings of Dorothea’s unfortunate disconnection from her husband. This moment of disillusionment, while common throughout humanity, is not the most important psychological factor being examined in this scene. The oppression of being in an unloving marriage, or any other type of relationship, is the point of universal sympathy this time.

While this type of sweeping generalization is not limited only to scenes involving Dorothea, her scenes do command the lion’s share of the Narrator’s calls for universal sympathy. This does not make Dorothea’s character pathetic, as might be expected since every time she suffers a setback, the Narrator stretches the occasion’s ramifications to the point that it becomes applicable to the whole of humanity. This universalizing of Dorothea’s suffering makes her more of a figure for humanity, since all of her suffering comes from the same root: disconnection from her fellow human. This disconnection is not often solely the cause of one side in the exchange, but is usually a combination from both sides. But as the novel and these scenes of Dorothea being exemplified continue, the Narrator makes it clear that the problem is more firmly rooted with the rest of the population. Unlike most of them, Dorothea tries to break the barriers between herself and the people she lives with, and despite the damage she receives every time these attempts are rebutted, she tries to maintain that “sense of connection with a manifold pregnant existence [which] had to be kept up painfully as an inward vision, instead of coming from without” (Eliot, 274). Instead of connecting with her, these people instead push her to the
side, and wonder why, if she has everything that their society says she needs, she is curiously concerned with helping others. They are unable, and unwilling, to understand the “stifling oppression of that gentlewoman’s world” (Eliot, 274). The placement of the Narrator’s voice in this scene emphasizes the absurdity of Dorothea’s situation. If there is a place where a connection is supposed to have been made, it is in the marriage. This connection is not necessarily the joining to the entire human race that the Narrator is trying to work us all towards, but it is supposed to be at the very least the creation of a connection with another person. Marriage is supposed to carry with it this minimum gain, but as with the countless other variations of human relationships, they do not function as they are supposed to. And while this may already be in the reader’s subconscious, the Narrator has to come out and give a fleshed out voice to this, in order for it be considered in the Study. For to whom could Dorothea voice these doubts? Not to her sister, who had advised against the marriage; nor to any other inhabitants of the town for that same reason. And certainly not to her husband, if only for the fact that he was not in any proximity to his wife at all. She cannot even admit these doubts to herself, because as the unhappiness surrounds her, she projects her trepidation onto a similar occurrence in another family, who lived in another time and another place. The whole passage is all of the words she cannot say, and therefore the Narrator must say them for her. And this action is not at all because these words are insignificant; on the contrary, these words are among the most life-changing that Dorothea could possibly express.

In few places is the rejection of an offer to join the web of humanity as harsh as Casaubon’s, who remains frigid against the last waves of his wife’s warmth and tenderness. This shocks Dorothea into silence and inactivity, until they separate from
each other in embittered silence. Because of the nature of this reaction, the Narrator is left to provide the words and the meaning for this scene. As per her usual style, she does not pass judgement on Casaubon personally, and again she uses Dorothea’s pain as an example of the consequences of humanity’s failure to connect. Speaking to these events specifically, she once again extols the virtue of Dorothea’s heartfelt attempts to gather up Casaubon, as she narrates that Dorothea “might have represented a heaven-sent angel coming with the promise that the short hours remaining might yet be filled with that faithful love which clings the closer to a comprehended grief” (Eliot, 425). Casaubon’s reaction is a lack of reaction: “Mr. Casaubon kept his hands behind him and allowed her pliant arm to cling with difficulty against his rigid arm” (Eliot, 425). Despite Casaubon “inflicting” this pain on her, the Narrator does not condemn him. The closest she gets to it is “That [inflicted] is a strong word, but not too strong” (Eliot, 425).

Telling someone that they have a terminal illness is a serious matter, but the fallout of that seriousness is usually limited in its range. This is doubly true when this is viewed from outside of the point of impact of the news. A spectator is able to see that the news is devastating to the people hearing it, but the exact emotional result is beyond normal perception. However imperceptible it is, it can lead into other pains that are just visible, without a viewable cause and effect relationship. It would require someone with the ability to hear the minds of others, taste the feelings directly, and most importantly, to communicate that inner turmoil to others. The Narrator is such a person, and such activities are well within the scope of the Study. This is present in the garden as Dorothea tries to comfort Casaubon in the face of his mortality. The reader is called to understand the feelings of both characters, with the hopes of this understanding becoming
sympathy for them. The one most in need of this sympathy is Casaubon, and not simply because he is dying. But because there are others like him, others who have resisted kindness, and are bound by their own suspicions:

“His was a mind which shrank from pity: have you ever watched in such a mind the effect of a suspicion that what is pressing it as a grief may really be a source of contentment, either actual or future, to the being who already offends by pitying?” (Eliot, 425)

This voice is not Dorothea, as the reader could expect. The matronly voice of the Narrator is the only one in this passage. Who else would be able to analyze a character in such a fashion? The scene is about Dorothea; it began with her, and will end relative to her, in the fact that Casaubon is no longer with her.

Since this is a scene focusing on Dorothea, its purpose is for the Narrator to take her pain, and to use that pain to teach the reader a lesson about the whole of humanity. The lesson to be learned in this passage is that people may reject the pity that their fellow man should have for them “until [these] men and women look round with haggard faces at the devastation of their own waste has made, and say, the earth bears no sweet harvest – calling their denial knowledge” (Eliot, 425). The simple loving act of Dorothea approaching him and putting her arm around his is one of those “seeds of joy [that] are for ever wasted” (Eliot, 425) on people such as these. While this passage may seem to be tailor-made to fit the marriage of this promising young woman and this husk of an academic, the Narrator makes it be a universal situation. Casaubon is not the only person to feel distant from his fellow man for any variety of reasons, many of them in his own imagining, nor will he be the last. Dorothea is not the first person to have her sympathy judged as deceitful, and tossed aside, and once again, nor will she be the last. All of humanity suffers from relationships like these. Not only marriages, but friendships and
familial relationships as well. Is this a large dose of philosophy? Yes, but these are the scenes where the Narrator delivers this philosophy with very little subtlety. When Dorothea feels the searing pain from having Casaubon’s “unresponsive hardness inflicted on her” (Eliot, 425), she is not the only one who feels it. The reader feels it, and then not just from Dorothea, but also from the countless other humans whose very nature is wounded by having sympathy rejected. And that is the Narrator’s *raison d’être*. The Narrator could have simply said, “Dorothea placed her arm around Casaubon, who made no response with his own, nor even turned to face his wife. Feeling rejected after a moment, she unfastened from him, letting him retire to his pitiless books.” But this does not accomplish the goal of the Study. Not only does it not let the reader into Dorothea’s soul, it does not reflect and magnify that pain in the rest of humanity.

The Narrator, as she is, is a necessary construct of *Middlemarch*. The omniscient characterless narrator would not deliver the results of the Study in the same way that a character who has a position to defend would. And that is what the Narrator ultimately becomes; a character in the novel who has an interest in the outcome of the Study, and how that study is received by the reader. The Narrator contains traces of Eliot, but such comparisons are inevitably made between characters in any novel and their authors. Defining the Narrator as being a direct projection of Eliot herself is very presumptuous move on the critic’s part. The Narrator brings to us the literally unspeakable that exists in the undercurrent of every day life, because humanity needs that knowledge. Humanity has convinced itself otherwise, and leaves the unspoken in its silence, limiting the connections that people can make. But also in doing so, much of the meaning that the every day acts could have is taken away. All of the most important scenes are silent on
the characters’s side. These scenes are for the Narrator to speak in. She is still implicated even in the scenes where her presence is less pronounced. We hear the Garths speaking the truth that the Narrator would be imparting to us, that “a loss which falls on another because we have done right is not to lie upon our conscience” (Eliot, 407). These words are coming from Mrs. Garth as a sign of wisdom, and not simply as a matter of convenience.

The wisdom that the Narrator is championing in her duty is twofold in its most basic elements. The knowledge that humanity is connected in a web-like fashion, and the strands of that web entangles us all, whether we want them to or not. But simply acknowledging this trait is not enough. The Study reveals that the second half of the wisdom is understanding that this web does not ever permanently focus around one single person, nor are the other webs designed to serve and add to the glory of one of these “centers of being”. It is only from the self-centered point of view that this is true. The best place to demonstrate the truth of these statements from is from the middle of the road, in terms of society. For these are the people who are often overlooked, for they are neither threatened or threatening. The only people who would be interested in this mostly contented middle class are historians, and therefore, Eliot sends us one to examine this town, and to draw out the meaning that lurks within the mundane. For truly, “even at its most powerless, man’s life is never without meaning.”

Dorothea shares in these ideals, and starts with the inklings of a comprehension of the nature of humanity. And thus the Narrator spends much of her time with her. But since Dorothea’s moral intelligence is at a premature stage when the story begins, it is necessary for the Narrator to fill in the words that are left unsaid. As the narrative

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progresses, it becomes clear that Dorothea is improving her understanding of the nature of humanity, and the Narrator’s words are being aimed more and more directly towards the reader. And whenever the Narrator does this, the true meaning of the scene is revealed and these every day actions prove they have the importance that the Study proposes they have. Because the reader is just as susceptible to the same faults that the characters are, the Narrator gives a “sympathetic presentation of unsympathetic characters.”

The characters are not the only ones being examined in *Middlemarch*. Tomlinson also notes “Eliot seems always willing to subject both narratorial voice and the reader to any judgement made.”

We are not merely looking through a microscope, but a mirrored subject, in which our own modes of being are reflected back to us in slightly different shapes. But in each case, both in the initial look and the reflection, the Narrator translates our vision and thus soothes the reader’s desire for painful punishment towards these characters. This recalls the Narrator’s earlier observation in the Finale that “we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas, some of which may present a far sadder sacrifice than that of the Dorothea whose story we know” (Eliot, 838).

So why exactly does the Narrator constitute such an important part of the structure of *Middlemarch*? More than merely moving the plot along, she is put in the story to be the historian of the smallest details of life. The importance of the Study is to show empirically that “the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts”. (Eliot, 838), Events that were once viewed as not particularly important to the continuation of the world – an idealist young person hitting the hard wall of reality, a

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18 Tomlinson, 288.
sudden change in an inheritance, and the silent despair of a terminally ill man – have now become the most meaningful tales possible, because they affect humanity at large, by virtue of their frequency. The Narrator shows this through Dorothea’s “incalculably diffusive” (Eliot, 838) life in the novel, and the events that comprise her life are just the same in reality. In real life, as it is in Middlemarch, there are times and situations when words will not come from our mouths. There are words waiting in the ether, but the average person is not able, or as it is sometimes, is not willing, to tap into them. This does not mean these instances lose their importance simply because there is no pithy saying that is born out of them. In Middlemarch, Eliot is able to rectify this problem through the character of the Narrator. She gives these normally ignored moments meaning not only to the characters that are in them, but also to the people who are reading them by universalizing the deeper issues at stake in those scenes; so that we may understand that the fact “that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs” (Eliot, 838).