Title of Paper: **Forming Reality through Perception and Imagination in Middlemarch**  
Author: Marcus K. Jones  
Affiliation: St. Bonaventure University  
Section: Articles  
Date of Publication: January, 2015  
Issue: 3.1

Abstract:

This essay argues that George Eliot utilizes a Blakean theory of knowledge in constructing the social web of Middlemarch, and that this web was Eliot's attempt to address the Victorian anxiety over defining both the general and particular elements of the human condition, as well as understanding individual perceptions of “reality.” To support this claim, I will unpack what the Victorian anxiety was by introducing Matthew Arnold’s “The Buried Life” and Gerard Manley Hopkins “Pied Beauty” as representative pieces of what Victorians considered the general and particular aspects of the human condition to be. I will then briefly explain William Blake's theory of knowledge found within "The Clod and the Pebble;" examine Eliot’s authorial intention behind using that particular poem in an epigraph to chapter twenty-five of Middlemarch; and I will finish by showing how Eliot’s authorial intention is carried throughout her novel by all of the prominent characters, and that this intention closely resembles that of William Blake's.

Keywords: Middlemarch, George Eliot, William Blake

Author Bio: Marcus Jones received a dual Bachelor of Art’s degree in Philosophy and Theology from St. Bonaventure University. He is currently pursuing a Masters of Art’s degree in English Literature from the same institution, and working as a Minister in Residence and Editor of The Cord: A Franciscan Spiritual Review. His research interests are focused on Sixteenth Century French Reformation literature.

Author email: marcuskdjones@gmail.com
Critical attention to George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1874) over the past fifteen years has been centered on Eliot’s brilliant mapping of the psychological infrastructures of the human mind, and her illustrating how those varied infrastructures interact with one another in the social spotlight.¹ In this respect, Eliot’s novel can be viewed as a response to the Victorian concern of understanding both the general and particular elements of the human condition, and how those elements come together to form an individual’s perception of “reality.” This interpretation of *Middlemarch* is warranted by the fact that each character in Eliot’s novel has a unique perspective on reality, despite all of them living within or near, and consequently being influenced by, the town of Middlemarch. Eliot goes to great lengths to express the idea that each individual presents his or her self as a “cluster of signs” that requires interpretation, and that each interpretation will vary depending on the interpreter (Eliot 133). I believe that Eliot’s philosophy of interpretation closely resembles William Blake’s, whom she cites in an epigraph to one of her novel’s chapters. Blake, like Eliot, recognized the shared condition of humanity, and understood the basic principles of moral philosophy; however, he firmly believed that individuals must be able to freely exercise their imaginations in order to construct reality for themselves, and that no interpretation is inherently right or wrong. In this paper I will attempt to show that Eliot utilizes a Blakean theory of knowledge² in constructing the social web of Middlemarch, and that this web was Eliot’s attempt to


² See Northrop Frye’s *Fearful Symmetry* (1947) for a full examination of this theory.
The Victorian address the Victorian anxiety over defining both the general and particular elements of the human condition, as well as understanding individual perceptions of “reality.”

In order to understand the Victorian anxiety over defining the general and particular aspects of the human condition, and how this anxiety influenced Eliot’s writing of *Middlemarch*, I will briefly compare the attitudes expressed in Matthew Arnold’s “The Buried Life” (1852), and Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “Pied Beauty” (1877) to those found in *Middlemarch*.

Matthew Arnold’s “The Buried Life” displays the Victorian notion of a shared human condition that is common to all persons living within society:

I knew the mass of men concealed
Their thoughts, for fear that if revealed
They would by other men be met
With blank indifference, or with blame reproved;
I knew they lived and moved
Trick’d in disguises, alien to the rest
Of men, and alien to themselves – and yet

The same heart beats in every human breast! (ll. 15-22)

Arnold’s notion that men conceal their true selves out of fear of being exiled from their community (“The Buried Life” 15-8) is echoed in Eliot’s *Middlemarch* when Tertius Lydgate decides to vote for Rev. Tyke rather than Rev. Farebrother (175). Lydgate feels that Rev. Farebrother is better suited for the position, but he votes against his better judgment to please Mr. Bulstrode – the embodiment of corrupt social structures. This scene illustrates that everyone within society is under constant
pressure to conform to the pre-existing social order, and that adherence to the order may entail a rejection of one’s true self. Eliot’s choice to have Lydgate’s internal conflict known to the reader was her way of providing an example of this observation.

What is perhaps more interesting about this scene, however, is the fact that Lydgate’s vote is predicted by Mr. Wrench, and willingly accepted by Rev. Farebrother. Both characters understood that it was Lydgate’s social duty to choose Rev. Tyke as the chaplain of the new hospital, and this common understanding provides us with the general condition in which all of the characters in Middlemarch find themselves. Hans Geppert’s article “‘A Cluster of Signs’ Semiotic Micrologies in Nineteenth-Century Realism: Madame Bovary, Middlemarch, Effi Briest” (2001) provides us with a better understanding of this observation:

We find it [topos aporos – the underlying semiotics of life] drastically expressed when Dorothea is living in a ‘virtual tomb’ (466) or when Lydgate is ‘feeling […] as if he had opened a door out of a suffocating place and had found it walled up’ (644). Frequently it is a web that keeps the characters imprisoned: the threadlike pressure of ‘small social conditions’ (176), ‘the gossamer web,’ the ‘mutual web’ of self-deception (337-338), the ‘close network’ of egoism (571), ‘masses of spiderweb, padding the moral sensibility’ (603). (Geppert 247)

Geppert further supports his observations on the web-like societal construction of Middlemarch by quoting the novel’s narrator:

Have not these structures some common basis from which they have all started, as your sarsnet, gauze, net, satin, and velvet from the raw
The Victorian

cocoon? Here would be another light […] showing the very grain of things. (Eliot qtd. in Geppert 248)

Geppert’s analysis of Middlemarch society illustrates that all of Middlemarch’s characters are constrained by a pre-existing social structure like flies in a spider’s web. The web is transparent enough not to be noticeable at first glance, but becomes vividly clear as more characters become entrapped. Luckily for us, however, Eliot does not end her novel with this dark message of hopelessness; rather, through the varied perceptions of her characters she inspires us to break free from social convention, and to interpret reality in our own unique way. Eliot’s message is evident throughout the novel in that each character retains his or her own opinion of how reality should be interpreted, despite all of them being subjected to the social web that surrounds them.

Eliot’s determination to have each character’s opinion clearly expressed and valued follows a larger Victorian theme of respecting individual worth. An example of this theme can be found in Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “Pied Beauty:”

Glory be to God for dappled things –

For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;

For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;

Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;

Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;

3 For other examples of this Victorian theme see Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” (1846) and “The Cry of the Children” (1843); Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “Jenny” (1848); Augusta Webster’s “A Castaway” (1870); and Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “As kingfishers catch fire” (written 1882, published in 1918).
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original spare, strange;

Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)

With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;

He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:

Praise him. (1-10)

Hopkins’ poem illustrates the Victorian concern for respecting things in life that common opinion says are strange, ugly, or different. Eliot’s characters within Middlemarch represent a similar idea by holding counter-popular ideas about how to perceive reality. Mr. Casaubon believes that the goal of life is to discover the key to all mythologies; Mr. Bulstrode believes that life is meant to be an opportunity to gain as much money as humanly possible, and to climb the ladder of social success while looking like a Christian; Mr. Lydgate views his life in terms of improving the medical system, so that he can help to ease the suffering of the human condition; Will Ladislaw believes that life is beautiful, and that everyone should attempt to experience as much beauty in their lifetime as possible; and Dorothea views her life as a mission to help others in need, and she strives to gain knowledge from her society to help her achieve that goal. Each character’s unique perception of him, or herself colors each one’s view of the world, and each other. James Harrison’s “Eliot’s Middlemarch” (1999) further expatiates this analysis:

There may be a sad irony in the admission, but George Eliot is here [in Middlemarch] acknowledging the necessarily selective nature of all perception. Were we not all in some measure ‘wadded’ with
The Victorian

insensitivity, we would die of not being able to concentrate on essentials and exclude inessentials. Selective perception, moreover, is also subjective perception; seeing and hearing only what we need to see and hear shade into seeing and hearing only what we want to see and hear. (79)

This idea of selective/subjective perception in Middlemarch’s characters is precisely what William Blake promulgated in his poetry, and I believe that this is where we can most clearly see the close resemblance between Blake’s and George Eliot’s respective philosophies of interpretation.

In an epigraph to chapter twenty-five of Middlemarch Eliot quotes “The Clod and the Pebble,” found in Blake’s Songs of Experience (1789):

‘Love seeketh not itself to please,
Nor for itself hat any care,
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a heaven in hell’s despair.

………………………………………

Love seeketh only self to please,
To bind another to its delight,
Joys in another’s loss of ease,
And builds a hell in heaven’s despite. (Blake qtd. in Eliot 237)

Eliot’s choice in selecting these lines from Blake’s poetry provides us with a profound insight into the mind of Middlemarch’s author, and supports my paper’s thesis that Eliot’s philosophy of interpretation resembles Blake’s theory of
knowledge. This section highlights Blake’s notion that an individual is capable of “build[ing] a heaven in hell’s despair” through an imagination rooted in selfless love. More to the point, if one views the world through a compassionate lens, life’s worst conditions can become imaginatively transformed into the greatest. Blakean scholars Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant tell us that “[t]he Clod’s song recalls Saint Paul’s praise of selfless love in 1 Corinthians 13; the Pebble’s recalls Satan’s defiant assertion in *Paradise Lost* 1.254-255: ‘The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven’” (31). Blake’s notion that one’s perspective can transform an individual’s world is known as Blake’s theory of knowledge, and I believe that we can see this theory take form in chapter twenty-five of *Middlemarch* where this epigraph appears.

In this chapter, we find Fred Vincy confessing to Mary Garth the outrageous debt that he owes her father, and the unlikelihood of him ever being able to repay that sum back. Mary is hurt by Fred’s words, but due to her love and compassion for him, she is able to make a “Heaven out of Hell:”

> ‘However, I’re going,’ Fred ended languidly. ‘I shall never speak to you about anything again. I’m very sorry for all the trouble I’ve caused – that’s all.’

Mary had dropped her work out of her hand and looked up. There is often something material even in a girlish love, and Mary’s hard experience had wrought her nature to an impressibility very different from that hard slight thing which we call girlishness. At Fred’s last words she felt an instantaneous pang, something like what a
mother feels at the imagined sobs or cries of her naughty truant child, which may lose itself and get harm. And when, looking up, her eyes met his dull despairing glance, her pity for him surmounted her anger and all her other anxieties. (Eliot 177)

In this passage, Mary Garth’s anger towards Fred is transformed into pity, and her perception of him is transformed from negative to positive. Mary’s compassion towards Fred not only impacts her perception of him, but impacts her father’s as well when she defends Fred’s character against his accusations: “Fred has always been very good to me; he is kind-hearted and affectionate, and not false, I think, with all his self-indulgence” (Eliot 178). This statement shows that Mary acknowledges Fred as a self-indulgent individual, but that she also sees the good in him, which makes her view him in a positive, rather than negative light. Mary’s compassionate choice to make a Heaven out of the Hell known as Fred Vincy is precisely what Blake’s epigraph denotes, and is what I believe to be at the heart of George Eliot’s Middlemarch. Eliot wanted her audience to feel as though their individual choices had a real impact on the world, and that they were more than just cogs in the machine of life. Mary Garth’s decision to speak out against her father on Fred Vincy’s behalf directly conveys Eliot’s Blakean-like philosophy of interpretation by illustrating that Mary was able to see something in Fred that no one else could or wanted to see, and that through her vocalization of her beliefs, she was able to directly impact her father’s perception of Fred, and make her vision become a reality.

To further understand how Eliot utilizes a Blakean-like theory of knowledge in Middlemarch to address the Victorian anxiety of defining the general/particular of
the human condition, I believe that it is necessary to revisit Dorothea’s interactions with Mr. Casaubon and Will Ladislaw. Both of these individuals were labeled by society as different and strange; however, Dorothea was able to look past her society’s preconceived notions about these two characters and make a positive judgment concerning the two. Dorothea’s compassion for the other and her genuine desire to help the marginalized victims of society caused her to imaginatively reevaluate both characters – “make a heaven of hell” (Johnson and Grant 31) - which eventually resulted in her marrying both: thus, becoming one in identity (Mrs. Casaubon and Mrs. Ladislaw) and social status with her society’s victims.

Dorothea’s impact on her society through her unwavering counter-popular perception is noted in the final paragraph of Eliot’s novel when the narrator states:

Her finely-touched spirit had still its fine tissues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and 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. (785)

This final section of *Middlemarch* displays George Eliot’s position on the general/particular aspects of human nature, and the individual’s perception of reality. In this paragraph we see the impact that Dorothea has had on her society by “liv[ing] faithfully a hidden life” (Eliot 785). The life that Dorothea lived was counter-popular
(the particular), and considered strange by her peers; however, she remained constant in her faithfulness to compassion, and due to that faith was able to alter the web (the general) in which she was caught. It is clear that Eliot intended *Middlemarch* to be an inspirational message to her society on the necessity of being true to oneself.

Dorothea, as well as Mary Garth, showed Eliot’s Victorian audience that it is acceptable to have a unique perspective on reality, and that all individual perspectives should be sympathetically embraced by society in order to create a better future. After the reader considers Blake’s poetry, and understands Blake’s position on human perception, it is plausible to draw connections between Eliot’s philosophy of interpretation imbedded with *Middlemarch*, and Blake’s theory of knowledge expounded throughout his poetry. This connection aids the reader in better understanding how Eliot’s work addressed the Victorian anxiety of defining the general and particular aspects of the human condition by offering multiple perspectives of reality through her novel’s characters, and illustrating the shaping of reality that each perspective creates.

Works Cited


Blackwell Annotated Anthologies.

Fontana, Ernest. "Gentleman as Signifier in Middlemarch." George Eliot-George


