

“Social novels have their purpose written clearly on them like a motto, and they hold to it perseveringly”. Discuss whether you think this is an adequate account of nineteenth-century novels you have studied

Dickens' *Bleak House* and Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871) are two Victorian novels very different in tone, in structure (noting in particular Dickens' introductory use of a double-narrative) and, ultimately, in purpose. Both these novels however, despite these differences, incorporate very prominent aspects of reality for a reader living in the nineteenth century, whether it addresses a particular historical event, as is the case of Eliot, writing in 1869 – 40 years after the First Reform Bill of 1832, or in the present day misery of the London slums and brutally powerful world of the Chancery system, themes that Dickens ardently explores and vividly encapsulates through his work. Each novelist makes a poignant comment on the socio-political order of living, and the realities for the individual and interdependent communities existing within the social infrastructure. Yet how far does each novelist go to maintaining their individual purposes, the personal goals they set out to achieve through the writing of two such successful novels? In order to answer this question it is necessary to first analyse the purposes that are perceivable from the novels themselves.

Middlemarch, then, mingles Eliot's two major ambitions, both universal and local. Not only does she want to analyse the historical development of man, the social system, its maturity and development, but Eliot also places much emphasis on the regional, more personal side of man's life, giving meticulous attention to the accidents and incidents of provincial life in nineteenth-century England. The first purpose, namely 'universal', concentrates on the theme of history and time. The novel preserves the synoptic ambition expressed in its opening sentence, the device to study, "the history of man" as it appears "under the varying experiments of time". All Eliot's characters are understood in terms of Reform. The Second Reform Bill of 1867 extended the suffrage to most of the working men in England, and looking back to the First Reform Bill in 1832, Eliot

can analyse just how much society has changed as a result, and predict further change following the increasing pressure amongst the working to reform.

This 'moving on' of society can be broken down into specific sub-headings. The first is Eliot's calling for religious reformation. Dorothea, in the first instance, echoes Eliot's young philosophy of Evangelistic denial. This can be noted in her giving up of her mother's precious jewels, and denying herself the pleasure of horse-riding. As Dorothea matures, however, we see Eliot's new edict (influenced in the main by Feuerbach) that religion must be transformed into humanitarian service, instead of Divine worship. This can be seen through Dorothea's experience of learning to love Will Ladislaw, and her eventual marriage with him, that she is enjoying the gifts that God has bestowed upon her, and is using these gifts for the greater good of the people, building cottages, donating money to the hospital, and is a better, happier, more serviceable person because of it. The Reverend Camden Farebrother is a prime example of a man who realises he is in the wrong profession for one can see "his devotion to the visible universe struggling against his obligation to serve an invisible God."¹ Through his love of his pipe, playing cards, and general taking pleasure in the world around, Eliot teaches us not to condemn, but to see his service to God as a more humanitarian means, speaking through his embracing of unharmed worldly pleasures.

Science, then, is also another major area in which Eliot seeks to promote advancement. Comte gave her an idea for a new fiction and a new pursuit of scientific truth, and this, as well as her readings of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) led her to create characters that embodied this pursuit. Casaubon and Lydgate are two very different scientific researchers, one of the science of mythology and the other the science of the body. She contrasts the dusty cleric Casaubon's futile search for an obsolete truth with Lydgate's fertile quest for a new truth, creating in him a new positive outlook and space for advancement. Lydgate's fellow physicians archaically deny his new approach, his zest for learning and his contemporary practice methods. Yet it must not be overlooked

¹ 'Middlemarch', *Landmarks of World Literature*, Karen Chase, Cambridge University Press, 1991, page 5

that Lydgate, for all his positive attributes and methods to embrace the future, inevitably fails just as much as Casaubon does. Perhaps it is because there is no money in this science. There is not enough faith, or funding. More than this, however, Eliot gently nudges one throughout the novel to her belief that without looking back and embracing the past, it is impossible to face the future. Lydgate denies both his personal and his familial history and aristocratic roots. This leads him to antagonise relations that might have helped him financially, and thus misunderstand the feelings and attraction that Rosamond has for him, and to deny his history with Laure, the actress in Paris. Eliot takes on a Marxist dictum which implies that those who ignore the past are condemned to repeat it, claiming, "Every past phrase of human development is part of that education of the race in which we are sharing; every mistake, every absurdity into which poor human nature has fallen, may be looked on as an experiment of which we may reap the benefit."²

The Radical, then, is the one who plans for the future by studying the past. This image is embodied in the character of Caleb Garth, one whom the reader is taught to respect and admire. In the incident of the introduction of the railway, it is Caleb Garth, the conservative farmer, who settles the rebels and accepts the inevitable. He claims to them, "It will be made whether you like it or not. It may do a bit of harm here and there...so does the sun in Heaven. But the railroad's a good thing" (VI, 56). Eliot here does two things. Firstly she shows that we can link man's progress with the unstoppable changing of nature. The world changes and develops under the sun, and humans adapt to the surroundings (again her reading of Darwin is apparent here). Secondly, Eliot shows that it is precisely Caleb Garth's archaism that allows him to see beyond the blinded present: "The fact that he belongs to the social past liberates him from the fallen present and binds him to the emerging future."³ This is only to be put into place by education, Eliot further enforces. Mrs Garth's strict home schooling of her own children is a prominent example of this. Thus her universal ideas concerning the state of human advancement are continually alluded to throughout *Middlemarch*, clearly

² *The Progress of the Intellect*, George Eliot, 1851, sighted in Ibid, page 8

³ Ibid, page 53

expressing her purpose and fulfilling, through her characters, the fates of those who do or do not adhere to it.

Second to this primary purpose of Eliot's is her preoccupation to show life as it really is. Her obsession with describing the local, the real and the ordinary originates from her scorn of female novelists that simply dish up the fantastical, the wishful. In her essay, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' (1856) Eliot deals harshly with the self-indulgent fantasies of popular fiction, in which the heroine is idealised, the plot falls neatly, conveniently into place, and all involved end up contented. Whilst Casaubon does die at an opportune moment, freeing Dorothea from the suffocating bonds of her dead marriage, she is not completely free. Casaubon traps her in his will, controlling her movements even there. Henry James asserts that Eliot displays a total, 'panoramic' picture of society which at a glance demonstrates the sheer breadth of characters and communal areas⁴. Whilst this idea may also be true of Dickens, who used his artistic talent to draw and connect together members from the full scope of the social hierarchy, there is a subtle difference between the two even here. Dickens was intent on showing the 'romantic side of familiar things', believing that "the way to reach the real was to surpass the merely familiar, to heighten, to exaggerate, to deform, to caricature, all in order to illuminate the reality veiled by everyday experience."⁵ Contrary to the way that Dickens saw scientific objectivity as an obstacle to a perception of inner truth, Eliot saw science as not depletitive but nourishing of the moral insight, nestling securely within, not transcending, the ordinary. Eliot then projected the familiar side of romantic things, leading the reader to see that "part of the earnest teaching in *Middlemarch* is that what we call romance is merely the gradual unfolding of common realities."⁶

Common realities are nowhere more greatly to be seen than in the realm of sociological gender constructions and assumptions, and its role in male-female relations. Of the "Three Love Problems" that pervade the novel, it is the urban middle-class romance that fails, and most strikingly. The lack of communication, and the previous assumptions and expectations of marriage, lead Lydgate and

⁴ Henry James, sighted in *ibid*, page 35

⁵ *Ibid*, page 26

⁶ *Ibid*, page 27

Rosamond to lead a life of misery entirely separate from each other. Lydgate has a “spot of commonness” that enables society to dictate his ideas concerning femininity, and his judgement against Dorothea as not looking “at things from the proper feminine angle” leads him to label her as an oddity, defying usual sexual conventions. The nineteenth-century ideal of ‘femininity’ is embodied in Rosamond, a “rare compound of beauty, cleverness and amiability” (III, 27). She is a social achievement dedicated to aesthetics and useless cultural ‘accomplishments’. It is evident even before the two are married that she has few familial ties, given her readiness to leave home, and her eternal dislike of “brothers”. Lydgate, for his part, assumes she is perfect, being taught in “all that was demanded of the accomplished female – even given to extras, such as getting in and out of a carriage” (I, 11). She appears docile, pliable and submissive; in short, “an accomplished creature who venerated his high musings and momentous labours and would never interfere with them” (IV, 36).

A cruel shock, then, was in store for Lydgate. Eliot suggests through the use of these two characters that the myth of female submission is exactly that – a myth. Rosamond proves herself to be, “a worthy antagonist with unsuspected powers of her own”⁷. Lydgate quickly realises that “his will was not a whit stronger than hers” and “as to saying he was master, that was not the fact” (VII, 64). Accomplishments teach females to appear in a certain way, whilst all the while they are something completely different underneath. This hatred of the myth of submission led Eliot to believe there was no ‘fixed essence’ for a female (again, influenced by *The Origin of the Species*). Lydgate later thinks of Rosamond as, “an animal of another and feebler race”. In this, he pays for his mistake in generalising and determining the feminine character. It would be easy to blame Lydgate for this mistake, as he so readily accepts the female ‘norm’ set out by society, and dispels the abnormal in the form of Dorothea. He also excludes her from the beginning from concerns which are vital to their life together. Rosamond, similarly, may be free from blame, since her education has taught her only of the areas she should be concerned with, and has instilled vanity into her. Her egoism is not unique, but is built into the structure of most

⁷ Ibid, page 13

girls' lives, originating from, "that inward repetition of looks, words, and phrases" (II, 16). The narrator does, however, blame Rosamond for the failure of the marriage. She is a product of sociological and gender expectation. In this she is guilty, not having enough of the notion of individuality in her to free herself from these ideals.

Just as Eliot, through her use of familiarising and casting reality on the marriage system, promotes her idea that there is no fixed essence of femininity, she continues to broaden this edict by declaring that there is no fixed essence of mankind. There is no distinct place for her characters in society, thus it is impossible to type-cast them. Fred Vincy and Will Ladislaw cannot settle into a vocation, there is no 'chosen path' for them. Even when there is a seemingly set route a character must take, it is not always inevitable, and once reached, the character is not necessarily going to find fulfilment within it. An example of this would be Farebrother, unhappily caught in a vocation he does not enjoy. Choosing to leave, as in the case of Mr Hale in Gaskell's *North and South*, would result in social disgrace and the difficulty in finding another occupation. Public opinion, the major social evil that both Dickens and Eliot attempt to dispel, has a major effect on a character's position. Reputation, it is noted, is the biggest threat to many of the characters in *Middlemarch*, not least Bulstrode and Lydgate. Lydgate notes that as the rumours spread about him, he is treated "as if [he] were a leper" (VIII, 73). The philosophy is undoubtedly that "sane people did what their neighbours did, so that if any lunatics were at large, one might know and avoid them" (I, 1). Bulstrode, Eliot is clear to discern, was entirely free from the law at the time his past was uncovered, yet he was cast out by society, causing his occupation, health, friendship ties and social standing to suffer. Fear of public opinion becomes the cause of secrets, lies, and deception, shown prominently through both novels.

Finally, then, Eliot attempts to show the ordinary lives of her characters, by showing their fallacies, the surprising, unpredictable, and not always agreeable course their lives may take, and to conclude that this reality saturates our very society. Public opinion and gossip provide a threat to this 'reality' and thus force people to hide behind socially constructed ideals, promoting lies, mischief, and a

façade or masquerade to be required whenever one comes into contact with another. Eliot desperately sought to break down this façade, by encouraging others to be virtuous and to develop sympathy, not simply benignity with one another. Dorothea tellingly keeps her story a secret even from Celia, claiming, “No dear, you would have to feel with me, else you would never know” (VIII, 84). Eliot ultimately aspires to bring isolated individuals into a common perspective, and as the narrator can delve into the inner consciousness of other people, “Poor Lydgate! Or shall I say, Poor Rosamond! Each lived in a world of which the other knew nothing” (II, 16). Eliot is free to embrace many points of view and, in doing so, places herself firmly within its large society. It is evident that, “The panoramic eye of the narrator is what these characters tellingly lack”⁸. Even Bulstrode, the narrator urges, is one of us. He is not wholly bad, rather he “was simply a man whose desires had been stronger than his theoretic beliefs, and who had gradually explained the gratification of his desires into satisfactory agreement with those beliefs” (VI, 61). Eliot aims to discover an active sympathetic relationship with even the most unattractive of characters, something that Dickens does not attempt, merely labelling people as “good” (like Esther) or “bad” (such as Tulkinghorn and the chancery world).

Ultimately, what Dorothea achieved in her night of agony on believing Ladislaw loved Rosamond, surpassing her anger and bitterness and developing sympathy (“all her vivid sympathetic experience returned to her now as a power”) for the married Rosamond (“I must see her, and save her” (VIII, 80)) – this is precisely the element that Eliot wants the reader to develop during, or as a result of, their reading of *Middlemarch*. The move from egoism to altruism and the acceptance of seemingly repulsive figures such as Raffles, Bulstrode and Featherstone, are all products of this training of emotion that will bring these characters into our universe of feeling. These themes Eliot purposely sets out to promote and a judgement of its effectiveness will be addressed shortly.

Bleak House is a very topical novel. Dickens appears to have had five aims in writing the book, and each of these he develops very well. Firstly, Dickens makes a comment about what he terms ‘Telescopic Philanthropy’. This

⁸ Ibid, page 37

is a term given to those groups of people that ignore the crying social needs at home in favour of the spurious excitement of sending out missionaries abroad. Nowhere in the novel is this more apparent than in the darkly comic characters of Mrs Jellyby and Mrs Pardiggle. They have both ceased to engage in reality, although in themselves they are very different characters. Mrs Jellyby's handsome eyes "had a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off. As if...they could see nothing nearer than Africa!" She can see nothing immediately about her, and this is reflected on the state of her house and family activities. There are dirty children tumbling down the stairs, a silent husband who turns his face to the wall. There are letters in amongst her home, contributing to this comic, slovenly image. Her plans for, "cultivating coffee and educating the natives of Borrioboola-Gha, on the left bank of the Niger" (chapter 4) have obliterated husband, children and home. "Such lunatic idealism, however irresponsible, has a kind of comic pathos."⁹

Mrs Pardiggle, however, is not pathetic, or essentially comic. Her mission, as she blunders about and knocks items over, is one of "pouncing upon the poor, and applying benevolence to them like a strait jacket". Her reaction in the brick-makers homes was not one of charitable kindness, but of charity promotion. She is clearly a Puseyite (taken from The Oxford Movement, who's new leader was E. B. Pusey, that was the party within the Anglican Church, which aimed to restore it to its primitive 'Catholic' roots), and Dickens was not a follower, nor a fan, of the Pusey's. Other clues that she is of this denomination are the names of her boys, each after a Saint or heroes of the primitive church, and they are taken to Matins at 6.30am year round. At the brick-makers, she most likely gives the families a tract ("It's a book fit for a babby, and I'm not a babby," says one of them). Dickens detested interference masquerading as charity, "Mrs Jellyby evades domestic reality and others have to bear the consequences. Mrs Pardiggle tramples on human respect and human privacy, all in the name of charity"¹⁰.

This is obviously cause enough for dislike and mistrust of these 'charitable' individuals, only when it is put into a tangible action, such as their treatment of Jo

⁹ 'Bleak House', *Landmarks of World Literature*, Graham Storey, Cambridge University Press, 1981, page 61

¹⁰ *Ibid*, page 61

the crossing-sweeper boy, it is placed in context for further negativity. The narrator states, “[Jo] is not one of Mrs Pardiggles Tockahopo Indians, he is not one of Mrs Jellyby’s lambs; being wholly unconnected with Boorioboola-Gha”. Their charity is most definitely not for him, and as such he does not gain any assistance from them in his time of need. Dickens reinstates that charity, most desperately needed, must begin at home.

Of course, a main theme throughout this novel is the depiction of the chancery world, and Dickens’ prominent and permanent belief that it is corrupt, and in turn corrupts others. The narrator’s description of the fog that settles over London at the beginning (especially in contrast to the rural retreat at the end) is striking, clearly painting a portrait of this filthy, evil, all-pervading and encompassing world. The dust that covers Tulkinghorn’s office, the excessive heat at the Inns of Court and the close ‘steaming’ night that begins the chapter entitled, “The Appointed Time” are all reminders of this fact. The behaviour and description of the solicitors is vivid and detestable. Tulkinghorn in particular is from the offset described as epitomising the secret world that is the essence of *Bleak House*. “He is surrounded by a mysterious halo of family confidences; of which he is known to be the silent depositor”, “Mute, close, irresponsive to any glancing light, his dress is like himself”. Secrecy obviously gives power then, the power to play with people’s lives for one’s own benefit or amusement.

Tulkinghorn is shown at work playing with bits of ink and seal as if they were people’s lives, “Now the inkstand top is in the middle: now; the red bit of sealing-wax, now the black bit”. This chilling description of his outlook is a premonition to his actions throughout the rest of the novel. Throughout, Tulkinghorn’s language is, “absolute in its blindness to all human feeling and totally reductive”. With regards to Lady Dedlock, he makes no concession to her feeling either, taking on her secret as his own, “It is no longer your secret. Excuse me. That is just the mistake. It is my secret in trust for Sir Leicester and the family”. Tulkinghorn, like many of the other players in this chancery game, treats other people’s business, news, secrets and information as pieces of family property, manipulating his players and forcing them to bend to his will. To Sir Leicester he is, “mechanically faithful without attachment”, using two forms of

language – that of suppressed power, in which he entreats Lady Dedlock to listen, and threatens Mlle Hortense for example, and another non-language. “It is part of Mr Tulkinghorn’s policy and mastery to have no political opinions; indeed, no opinions”. He refuses to commit to a viewpoint, and this leaves his character to be considered even more dubious by the reader. What is more, Dickens does not show that this lack of feeling originates from a desire for money – no, more than that, Tulkinghorn is numb to the plight of others simply for the buzz of power he gains over them, and because information is more important than anything else in the world.

It is comic, then, that Mrs Snagsby parodies his character, suspicions and quest for ultimate knowledge. The mistrust between her and Mr Snagsby, to the extent that she makes the absurd conclusion that Jo is an illegitimate son of Mr Snagsby is a reminder of the mistrust in the world over, and furthermore, of charitable help from a man to a boy being so questioned, for it does not appear normal, usual, or expected.

Then there is chancellor Krook, owner of the Rag and Bottle Warehouse of Chancery Lane. He symbolizes the court’s evil, blackly comic, grotesque force. His sensual touching of Ada’s hair, the containment of the last testament and will for Jarndyce and Jarndyce, and his method of regarding John Jarndyce “with eyes turned up and grey eyebrows lowered, until his eyes appeared to be shut” (chapter 14) all add to the sinister image and lifestyle of Krook. It enters almost into the realm of the vampire, a gothic creating, as we read of Nemo’s death in chapter 11. Krook’s lean hands, spread out above the just dead body are “like a vampire’s wings”. Vholes in this way, Richards attorney, has an effect on Richard that is described by Esther as being, “so slow, so eager, so bloodless and gaunt, I felt as if Richard were wasting away beneath the eyes of this advisor, and there were something of the Vampire in him” (chapter 60). All the solicitors are reductive in their ways, then: Tulkinghorn of his language and feelings, Vholes of the human life around him, sucking life, money and energy out of his subjects, such as Richard, or reductive of closure, like Krook, who harbours information that others need to extricate themselves for this tangled, soul-sucking chancery web.

Richard's ruin is predicted throughout the novel, both by his own actions by being unable to settle in a vocation and not heeding the words of advice from his guardian, instead squandering his money and time on the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case, yet also from the words of others. Miss Flite and Gridley suggests Richard's psychological and physical deterioration, Gridley by being a voice for all the suffering he has endured until his unfortunate death, and Miss Flite by showing what the court does to people, being half-crazed. Miss Flite also predicts his downfall to Esther, "I know the signs, my dear. I saw them begin in Gridley...let someone hold him back or he'll be drawn to ruin" (Chapter 35). A poignant point is made that suggests not even love of a woman, or Ada in Richard's case, is enough to prevent the disarming powers of the chancery world from taking hold.

The Chancery world even has an effect on those living in the slums of London, in Tom-All-Alones and in the hovels at St Albans. The brick-makers' homes are no better, with death appearing round every corner. Indeed, there is anger at Jo's death; the narrator does not leave any doubt about who he blames for it. The reader is forced to look at their own treatment of people living in the slums and attempt to rectify it. The anger in chapter 42 is just one of the strong emotions present as Jo dies. The saying of the Lord's Prayer, and his subsequent death, embody more than just the death of the character Jo. He was one of the innocents who "don't know nothin'" and became tangled up in the aristocratic and chancery world, through no fault of his own. Even through his helping others, none helped him, especially at his time of need when ill, and it is only on his death can we see so clearly the intricate network of all those that have been connected with Jo in some form. The narrator even implicates the reader in this, by turning his anger to irony after Jo's death, exclaiming, "Dead, Your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen". The final sentence falls into blank verse, "And dying thus around us everyday". The slums are a major factor for this constant death, and they are described throughout the novel as the other sort of Hell (evil in form of neglect), aside from the chancery (evil in form of maliciousness).

“The filth, hideous overcrowding and lack of sanitation of the slums are a major part of the bleakness of *Bleak House*”¹¹. Tom-All-Alones is such a prominent theme throughout the novel that Dickens even considered titling the book just that. The Brick-makers’ hovels are full of wretched drunks that provide no better habitat than that of Tom-All-Alones. Finally there is the rat-infested Paupers’ graveyard where Captain Horden and Jo are buried, and where Lady Dedlock dies. All these three places are brought together in the chapter culminating in Krook’s death (chapter 32). The pollutants from these places would have been very strong, with death, infection and disease inhabiting every crevice. In 1851 cholera epidemics were very topical, and Dickens was highly aware that without sanitation, the class that grows the fastest may sow the seeds for the ruin of the whole community.

Jo, in infecting Esther Summerson, shows how the high and low are connected inextricably and that “disease is no respecter of class”¹². The novel in this way brings seemingly unconnected characters and shows that one cannot escape this interconnection. “What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together!”(Chapter 16) It is noted that “*Bleak House* is unsurpassed in its social range, from the highest baronet of ancient family, Sir Leicester Dedlock, to the destitute crossing-sweeper of literally no family at all, Jo”¹³. What connects the characters however is not a positive attribute or deed, rather it is greed, disease, unreality, suspicion, guilt and blindness that are the connecting communal senses. The narrator expects his reader to feel this constantly throughout, as there is rarely any good that comes of one another meeting, rather, the characters seem to cause one another more pain and discomfort, such is the case of Esther’s scarred face from the small-pox she acquired from Jo, and Lady Dedlock’s death as she learns Mr Bucket has told Sir Leicester of her secret past love life with Captain Horden.

Another of Dickens’ aims throughout the novel is to attack England’s widely held view that if those Party leaders previously chosen to fulfil the position

¹¹ Ibid, page 7

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid page 49

of responsibility back out, then there is nobody else to take their place. This is enforced by chapter 40 of *Bleak House*, named “National and Domestic”, and begins with the opening lines; “England has been in a dreadful state for some weeks. Lord Coodle would go out, Sir Thomas Doodle wouldn’t come in, and there being nobody in Great Britain (to speak of) except Coodle and Doodle, there has been no Government... [If] Coodle and Doodle had killed each other, it is to be presumed that England must have waited to be governed until young Coodle and young Doodle, now in frocks and long stockings, were grown up...there is hope for the old ship yet”. This chapter goes on to show that the ruling classes are of an old aristocracy, and that they are chosen by birth and family ties to partake in the governmental system as an occupation. It refers to another major theme throughout the novel, that of Reform. Dickens predicts that soon there will be a revolution, in that those living in an unrealistic world, those in high positions that feed off of the low (such as Skimpole) will suffer. This is echoed in Miss Flite’s assurance that all will be put right on the Day of Judgement.

Skimpole and Turveydrop are two such examples of Dickens’ plight to suggest that England harbours many social traditions, ideas and attitudes that are archaic, and unproductive. They are costly to keep up and do not enable cultural or scientific advancement. This idea is naturally seen in the work of Eliot. Skimpole is the “Quintessential aesthete: he has mastered the art of living with no responsibilities towards life”¹⁴, masking his exploitations with fanciful ‘logic’. After his death even Dorothea does not want to read his memorials, as they cannot be of benefit to anyone.

Groups that don’t epitomise muddle, greed or blindness are those characters who, however comic, vulnerable or unsuccessful, keep a firm hold on reality, such as the Bagnets, Boythorn, the Rouncewells, and the Bayham Badgers. Dickens makes these characters comic, but in a playful, affectionate way, as if attempting to preserve their primary quality of innocence. Through Mr Rouncewell there is the added element of industry, and his need for an educated youth. His work defines his character, and even if Dickens were ambivalent to

¹⁴ Ibid, page 38

progress, there is still an excitement in the newness and unavoidable reality of the factory; “distant furnaces of it glowing and bubbling in its youth, bright fireworks of it showering about, under the blows of the steam-hammer” (chapter 62). It is also shown in Mr Rouncewell asking Rosa to leave Chesney Wold to continue her education, in order to be fit for her son to marry. Of course the archaic Sir Leicester is confounded with Mr Rouncewell’s new perspective of seeing the world as a factory, on the move, by asking, “Do you draw a parallel between Chesney Wold, and a” – here he resists a disposition to choke – “a factory?” (Chapter 28) The family is proactive, dedicated to service (even if it is service for the past, as in Mrs Rouncewell) and a model of what families should be like in Dickens eyes.

It is most interesting to examine just how far these social novels consistently – and obviously – project their purpose. To show in the case of Dickens, that the chancery was corrupt, and that the slums caused disease, and that the classes are inextricably linked, is all very well and good. Yet if Dickens through *Bleak House* were to suggest that these social groups and aspects of society exist and that the reader should do something about them, like Esther tries to throughout, the ending of the novel would convince a reader that perhaps it is not necessary. Esther idyllically marries Mr Woodcourt, and moves to a rural area quite apart from London and all its urban, political misdemeanours. This rural haven provides a sort of escape, a retreat, and the pastoral ending is altogether unreal. For whilst there appears to be a wish-fulfilment for one person, one cannot escape that fact that although Tulkinghorn, Krook and Gridley are dead, the manipulative chancery still goes on, and although the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case has melted away, there will be further law suits that become the ruin of others. Similarly, there are more Jo’s darkened by ignorance and dying in the slums from disease. Yet as our hero and heroine are safely united and placed far out of danger’s reach, it renders the novel’s message almost ineffectual, as though when one identifies with the characters’ ending, the beginning, and the endurance of how it was achieved, is forgotten.

Similarly with Eliot, there are problems throughout the novel that cause some confusion. For example, the events or people in the novel that are intended

to represent historical events are blurry. An example of this is Raffles, who comes twice times to haunt Bulstrode and to threaten to reveal his past. He embodies the spirit of reform, and his appearances coincide with the reform bills (or so it says in her notes¹⁵). His first appearance was in parallel with the First Reform Bill (1827) where the middle classes presided over the landed gentry. The Second Reform Bill happened at the time of writing, where (1869-72) there was an increasing conflict between the middle and working classes. Thus as the whole novel is meant to reflect past events, there is a highly ambiguous relationship within the time period – the period that seemed to be a window of the past is also a mirror of the present. In fictional time, science bowed before religion, as opposed to the time of writing, and in Lydgate for example, he is a figure of 1869 who fails in his life by not looking back at this all-too-important past¹⁶. In the late 1860's the Victorian middle class dreaded the power of working class, as Bulstrode dreads the power of Raffles.

There are also problems in Eliot's novel concerning the consistency of capturing the real and the ordinary. Dorothea's goodness is a key area for discrepancy, as it exists in tension with realism. However Eliot attempts to justify this by claiming, "She was blind, you see, to many things obvious to others – likely to tread in the wrong places, as Celia had warned her; yet her blindness to whatever did not lie in her own pure purpose carried her safely by the side of precipices where vision would have been perilous with fear" (IV, 37). In this Esther Summerson is also brought to one's attention in her inability to recognise Woodcourt's love for her. Dorothea's blindness also takes her a peg down from being perfect, yet she is still held as an ideal throughout the book, and as Graver pointed out, "there is tension between the idealism of conception and the realism of presentation [in Dorothea]"¹⁷.

Yet for all these slight criticisms, it is certainly fair to say both Dickens' and Eliot's novels are powerful social media in which a writer could address the public. Both authors knew this, and exploited it to their advantage, clearly

¹⁵ 'Middlemarch', *Landmarks of World Literature*, Karen Chase, Cambridge University Press, 1991, page 20

¹⁶ See: *ibid*, page 20

¹⁷ *Ibid*, page 30

interjecting their beliefs and ideas about their surrounding society and communities that make up that society in a sharp, poignant message which, whilst it may not be unwavering in its aims (simply to portray an image, or to propose and promote action in lieu of it), is unflinching in engaging with a reader's attention and enabling critics the world over to announce with further vigour their belief that these two classic authors are two of the best social writers of the nineteenth century.