

Articulating the ambiguous narrator



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In George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, the reader is confronted with a cast of enigmatic characters, though the "character" the reader receives the most exposure to is perhaps the least easily understood, and for the simple fact that it should not be a character. Despite the supposed objectivity possessed by a third-person omniscient narrator, Eliot does away with these conventions by ascribing her narrator a certain level of ambiguity – a degree of questionability – within the narrative. This leads to the narrator developing a subjectivity contrary to its role, sometimes exhibiting unique opinions and revelations as the plot unfolds. This becomes most evident when analyzing a passage where the narrator makes two distinct observations which require varying degrees of subjectivity, suddenly putting into question the extent of the narrator's role in the story. Eliot's narrator is no longer a simple broadcasting vehicle for the plot, but possesses an ability to, as James Wood puts it, "draw our attention toward the writer, to the artifices of the author's construction, and so the artist's own impress" (Wood 6). Eliot's mission of representation, of amplifying the insignificant, of trying to understand other people is best handled by something which deliberately ignores these overarching concepts, but is also rudely aware of them as well in ways the cast of characters inherently cannot be.

Throughout the book characters develop, rationalizing their decisions or reaching some revelation as a consequences of said decisions. Much like the characters themselves, the narrator also proclaims a revelation or an opinion, and does so from without the context of the plot. For instance, in the following passage when Casaubon introduces Dorothea to his property, the narrator makes two distinct observations: "A woman dictates before

marriage in order to have an appetite for submission afterwards. And certainly, the mistakes that we male and female mortals make when we have our own way might fairly raise some wonder that we are so fond of it.” (Eliot 73) The distinction lies in how the observations are relayed. Focusing on the first sentence, an observation is made that women are allowed a choice in furnishing so “ that she may have an appetite for submission afterwards” (73), a fact that Dorothea nor Casaubon consciously voice, or explicitly act on, but what the narrator posits as the basis for such actions anyways.

The beginning of the sentence, “ A women...” does not precede any character assignment, implying that the narrator is observing something seemingly beyond the plot. This first sentence maintains an aphoristic structure, with the only nouns and pronouns being “ women” and “ she”, neither of which are assigned to anyone particularly, while the lack of any subjective inflections give the sentence an impartial, authoritative tone. Suddenly, the reader is conscious of a societal condition regarding matrimonial norms, of appeasement for submission, despite the norm itself not being the focus of the plot. Yet, the reader is made aware of this anyways because the narrator’s conveyance, its very role, cannot be refuted. On one hand, the narrator fulfills the role of third-person omniscience, but it is not until this sentence is juxtaposed with the following one that the narrator’s ability to become characterized and formulate a unique subjectivity is realized.

The extensions of the narrator’s ability is achieved through its ambiguity. The ambiguity however, that degree of questionability and the reason the
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narrator's role begins to become something more, is thrown into relief with the following passage where the narrator notes somberly “ the mistakes that we...mortals make when we have our own way raise some wonder that we are so fond of it” (73). Suddenly the narrator's language changes in contrast to the previous one, leaving behind the impersonal language for one more engaging. A supposed inclusiveness begins to develop with the introduction of first-person plural language such as “ we...mortals” or “ when we have our way.” The narrator's ambiguity is further accentuated with the mention of “ we male and female mortals,” which makes one unclear of the narrator's gender, despite these very details being brought to the reader's attention.

Suddenly a new voice is introduced, one that exists separate from Dorothea or Casaubon, even the reader themselves. That new voice is the narrator, effortlessly transitioning from impartiality to a particular bias within a single sentence, but always remaining quiet elusive to both reader and characters alike. Now, not only is a theme – of humans being the cause of their own grief – being raised, but the very fact that it is being upheld within the story without a palpable character to attach it to makes it inherently relevant to the story now. Was Dorothea not already willing to submit, and was Casaubon not already expectant of her compliance? If their relationship is being questioned now, it must be because it will not be what was expected. Is the historical norm of female submission important, and if so, how does Eliot address it?

All these questions can now be asked because the narrator's seemingly unique subjectivity, its sudden development of ideas or opinions outside of the narrative itself, compromises the narrator's omniscience. This

compromise in role puts into question the narrator's role as just only a narrator. The narrator is no longer acting as an impartial reporter, but is close to becoming its own entity, and only because Eliot would not be able to make herself so self-evident in her own work without such an ambiguous contraption.