

# [Pier-glass and world order in george eliot’s middlemarch](https://assignbuster.com/pier-glass-and-world-order-in-george-eliots-middlemarch/)

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## Eliot and the Pier-Glass

George Eliot introduces a fascinating metaphor in Middlemarch in order to make the claim that the world does not have any inherent order; individual perspectives create different illusions of the world. The compelling central image of the pier-glass allows for different layers of Eliot’s metaphor to permeate throughout the section of text. At first read, the pier-glass seems to simply describe Eliot’s thoughts about Rosamond’s vanity and while valid, the metaphor goes beyond a single character on a page. Eliot transcends the need for the concept to work solely within the confines of the plot and instead makes a claim encompassing all of society. Furthermore, the phrasing of the passage permits the reader to truly think about the illusion Eliot’s perspective creates in the novel; is the novel a cohesive piece of literature by its own merit or merely a series of random scratches that happen to come together by the candlelight of her point of view?

Eliot opens up the passage by citing the pier-glass concept came from the mind of a philosopher. This statement immediately tells the readers that the metaphor will stem from a complex thought process and work within multiple dimensions. Eliot’s word choice further cements the notion of the complex metaphor by calling it a “ pregnant little fact”: each word heavy with significance (Eliot 248). The word “ pregnant” provokes a visceral, and most likely unconscious, reaction from the reader due to the inherent implications of the word. When the reader sees a concept described as “ pregnant”, the pier-glass having a multi-faceted meaning becomes the natural conclusion. The word choice gives emphasis to the rest of the passage, gives the readers a hint for what to expect, and gives Eliot the foundation on which to delicately balance the layer of the pier-glass imagery.

Eliot’s choice to utilize the word “ little” presents a stark contrast to her use of “ pregnant”. Where “ pregnant” implicated the intricacy of Eliot’s metaphor, the use of “ little” forces the reader to shrink their expectations, and not get caught up in the grandiosity of Eliot’s words. Eliot’s phrasing suggests an undertone of mystery: the concept large but the audience small. In other words, the facets of the pier-glass do not garner the attention of the masses and so the masses remain oblivious to the magnitude of the pier-glass.

Still integral to Eliot’s argument, the last word she chooses to describe the pier-glass metaphor, “ fact”, becomes a simpler word to grapple with. After using more ambiguous and symbolically weighted words, the use of such a simple ending word solidifies Eliot’s claim. If the reader had any doubt before finishing Eliot’s opening sentence, they do not after her assertion of her claim as fact. After tackling the symbolism behind “ pregnant” and “ little”, Eliot uses “ fact” as a way to assure her audience that she has confidence in her claim and to not doubt the truth of the assertion.

The first section of Eliot’s assertion begins with the literal interaction of the reader with the pier-glass. The reader’s introduction to the glass sets up the premise of the individual perspective with the phrase “ Your pier-glass”; Eliot’s use of the second tense forces the reader to claim the pier-glass as their own without any way to create distance (248). The ownership given to the reader makes an easy transition to the glass that “ will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions” as an imperfect object they are now responsible for (248). Eliot’s wording goes back to the allusion made earlier on in the paper. The phrase is written with a strong undercurrent of double meaning. On the surface, Eliot simply states that a polished pier-glass will inevitably end up marked in some way but those same words take up a new meaning when put together with the statement she made about the entire metaphor having multiple layers. Once the reader digs underneath the literal words Eliot puts on the page, her objective becomes clear¬. The scratches on the glass represent the events that take place in the reader’s life––numerous, inconsequential, random.

Eliot takes the idea of a random series of life events one step further with the rest of the passage. If she left the metaphor with just the concept of life as a series of random events, her entire assertion would not come across as believable. The reader, no matter how learned, does not see his or her own life as random and inconsequential; Eliot must expand upon her claim in order to keep the reader invested. Eliot’s justification comes in the form of beautiful imagery as she states, “ place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun” (248). Where the scratches on the glass represented the events of an individual’s life, the candle (or more accurately the flame) represents the individual. Eliot expresses her belief that only the individual can provide incite into the makings of his or her own life. Without someone to give perspective on his or her own life events, the rest of the world has no context as to what the events mean. For example, if the reader sees a photograph of two little girls picking flowers, all that can be said with certainty lies within the above description (two little girls picking flowers). The reader has no way of knowing if the girls are siblings or best friends. The reader has no way of knowing if the girls pick flowers to give to a loved one or to press them in between book pages. Eliot says that person’s life remains only as important as the memories the person has to go along with it.

Eliot’s belief cements by her use of the word “ sun” to round out the assertion she makes. While the word may seem innocuous, as simply a different way to describe the light coming from the candle, the history behind the sun makes it impossible to allow the word to exist in the sentence without attempting to dissect further meaning. It is a universally known fact that the Earth revolves around the sun and not the other way around. The events of a person’s life make sense because of the person they center themselves around. A person does not make sense because of the events of the world.

The sun also has the added benefit, at least to Eliot, of having a connotation that leans toward self-centeredness. Eliot would not have chosen a word so heavy with implication if it did not have exactly the correct amount of implication that she wanted. Eliot takes great care when crafting the entirety of Middlemarch when it comes to word choice, imagery presented, metaphors explained, etc. and it seems doubtful that she would so easily ignore the variety of meanings and undertones that come into existence over a world like “ sun”. By using the sun as the descriptor for the candle flame, Eliot compares individuals to the sun of which their own life events circle around––a person’s events revolve around them and only make sense because of them.

The undertone of egoism that presents itself becomes a fully fleshed-out reality when Eliot continues with “ the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection”; Eliot uses firm and persuasive language to drive home the point that a person’s own self-involvement crafts the illusion of the world that they live in (248). Eliot once again speaks to the reader directly during the phrase but this time, instead of just forcing the reader to take ownership, she utilizes the word “ only” as a way of telling the reader that no argument can be broached on the subject matter. Eliot allows no questions with the use of “ only”: she stands firm in her decision that no other person could make sense of the reader’s world the way that the reader could. After taking her stance, Eliot begins to poke at the egoism of the individual when she describes a person’s life as a “ flattering illusion” as if to say that no matter how good everything in the individual’s life may seem, it is only a product of the individual’s self-involvement. If individuals had the capability to look outside the bubble of their own lives, they would realize the inconsequentiality of their existences, a mere speck in the timeline of all of history. Most people, Eliot claims, do not have the ability to look outside themselves into the greater, less structured world but instead allow themselves to exist within the confines of their comfort zones where everything makes sense because it comes together from their own inherent ideas and biases but will undoubtedly not encompass a complete picture of the world.

Eliot’s claim becomes the infrastructure for a closer look into the novel as a whole. By asking the reader to grapple with such a broad and fascinating claim about society, she asks the reader to also grapple with the perplexing idea that perhaps her novel falls under the same constraints that the rest of the world does. After the opening paragraph of chapter twenty-seven in the novel, the reader faces an endless cycle of questions. If Eliot does not want the reader to think of her assertion as anything but true, then the novel also becomes a world in and of itself that Eliot created through her own perspective and inherent biases. Only the best writers have the ability to call into question the entirety of their own work based on a passage within the work itself. Eliot wants the reader suspicious of everything he or she encounters and while she paints a well-imagined and vivid atmosphere within Middlemarch, she wants the reader remain cognizant of the fact that the world she created cannot become the be-all and end-all definition of the world during that period of time, but instead a world that she saw and experienced through the eyes of a female during the 1800s.

Eliot remains one of the most influential and talented writers of her time. The ability to take the single image of a scratched mirror and turn it into a commentary on the pervasive egoism of society takes an immense amount of delicate crafting. She has the ability to carefully choose words that she knows will hold the most influence over the readers and put them together to create a beautiful, multi-layered metaphor over the course of a few sentences. The pier-glass, while seemingly innocuous, shapes the reader’s perspective of the content they read for the rest of the novel and shifts their own perspective about life in an egocentric society. The metaphor she uses takes the reader out of the novel entirely and has them questioning what about the novel stems from reality and what stems from Eliot’s own imagination, despite its genre classification as realistic fiction. While the content of the novel remains obviously important, Eliot’s main goal was to inspire the readers to think about, to interact with, and to analyze the inner workings of a society focused on its own individual interests both in and outside the context of a novel.