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Towards the Modern Novel: a Study of the Female Protagonist in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*

Dissertação submetida à Pós-Graduação *Stricto Sensu* em Letras, área de concentração Mestrado em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa, da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, como requisito para obtenção do grau de Mestre em Letras.

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Esta dissertação foi julgada e aprovada, em sua forma final, pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação *Stricto Sensu* em Letras, área de concentração Mestrado em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa, para a obtenção do grau de Mestre em Letras, pela seguinte Banca Examinadora:

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Sinopse

Análise da construção da personagem feminina nos romances *Middlemarch*, de George Eliot (1871-72), e *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), de Henry James, observando como a exploração da subjetividade das protagonistas ao longo de suas trajetórias interfere no enredo e na concepção do romance como um todo. A finalidade última é verificar como esses autores contribuem para o nascimento do romance moderno.

Palavras-chave: George Eliot e Henry James, protagonista feminina, índices de modernidade

Synopsis

Analysis of the female character's design in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) regarding the exploration of the female protagonists' subjectivity along their trajectories interfere with plot and the conception of the novels. The final aim is to discuss how these novelists contribute to the beginning of the modern novel.

Key-words: George Eliot and Henry James, female protagonist, indexes of modernity

In the Age of Gold,
Free from winter's cold,
Youth and maiden bright
To the holy light,
Naked in the sunny beams delight.

Once a youthful pair,
Fill'd with softest care,
Met in garden bright
Where the holy light
Had just remov'd the curtains of the night.

There, in rising day,
On the grass they play;
Parents were afar,
Strangers came not near,
And the maiden soon forgot her fear.

Tired with kisses sweet,
They agree to meet
When the silent sleep
Waves o'er heaven's deep,
And the weary tired wanderers weep.

William Blake – "A Little Girl Lost"

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Introduction

The issue of human conflicts and dilemmas is one of the most interesting topics readers may find in prose fiction. As a matter of fact, we tend to value novelists whose masterpieces raise questions concerning the apparent stable condition of human life, and then make us reflect on our lives and social roles. In this light, good writers are the artists who underscore the problem of human disillusionment, and also enable us to associate the dilemma of certain fictional characters with our own. Therefore, we can acknowledge in their great novels much of the narrowness of our nature, which leads us to mistaken choices.

George Eliot (1819-80) and Henry James (1843-1916) are two major figures in Anglo-American literature whose realism came into maturity owing to their concerns with the matter of human dilemma. Indeed, Eliot's and James's female protagonists, for instance, illustrate in their delineations the existential crisis that overwhelms human beings whenever they are forced to examine the course of their lives. After being familiar with Eliot's and James's universes through many readings I was able to understand how these novelists explore the limitations and possibilities of human life in their narratives. That is why I decided to write about them in my dissertation.

George Eliot's and Henry James's masterpieces, entitled *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) respectively, display the fictive representation of female personality in prose fiction in a special way. Indeed, these works endeavour to look into certain issues of human experience such as the relations of desire and restraint, power and victimage, revolt and resignation, which are propitiously pictured in the main characters' delineation. The trajectories of the heroines Dorothea Brooke and Isabel Archer convey that a full image of human quandary personified in a fictional character can even change the procedures of the artist towards the work itself.

While analysing the ways Dorothea Brooke and Isabel Archer are characterized in a society of firmly established manners, some critics hold different viewpoints. Stuart Hutchinson, for instance, underscores that although *The Portrait of a Lady* retains a kinship

with the earlier novel *Middlemarch* in presenting the heroine's dilemma resulting from the choice of a husband, Isabel's characterization transgresses the traditional validities which enable the Victorian novel to confirm outcomes the reader expects.¹ To Hutchinson, unlike previous female protagonists, Isabel's possibilities of life are altogether elusive and her uncertain outline meddles in the formal composition of the novel.² In addition, critics like George Levine have claimed that Dorothea refuses to become the ideal Victorian heroine in *Middlemarch* inasmuch as the novel itself portrays the effort to keep this from taking place due to its brilliantly complex narrative, which shows George Eliot's recognition that no single perspective can encompass reality.³ From the very beginning of the novel, Eliot introduces Dorothea as a puzzle to be analyzed.

As we can notice, these approaches concerning the ways George Eliot and Henry James draw the heroines Dorothea Brooke and Isabel Archer not only convey their particular concerns with the emotional life of a certain character, but also show how this concern implies formal decisions. It is an agreed fact that both novelists anticipate the modernist experiences of many writers in English and North-American literature since their art transcends the boundaries of traditional realism, going far beyond an objective view of human beings and society. The aim of this dissertation is, thus, to discuss and examine how the fictive representation of Dorothea Brooke and Isabel Archer is in great part responsible for Eliot's and James's claims to modernity. My main assumption is that the focus on character's inwardness will distance the two novelists from realism *tout court*, enlarging the scope of prose fiction.

In order to achieve this aim and develop my main assumption, I shall divide my dissertation in two chapters showing the originality of Eliot's and James's inputs to the creation of protagonists and the consequences it entails to the novel design as a whole.

In the first chapter, I shall examine Eliot's and James's positions in relation to the literary tradition that precedes them. It is relevant to observe how far these novelists follow

¹ HUTCHINSON, Stuart. "The Portrait of a Lady: Affronting Destiny", p. 24

² Ibidem, p. 25

³ LEVINE, George. "Introduction: George Eliot and the art of realism", p. 9

and heighten the standards of their predecessors concerning the creation of characters. Thus, it will be possible to realize that the inner configurations of Dorothea and Isabel differ from the types conceived by the previous writers although Eliot and James owe much of their proficiency to them.

In the second chapter, I shall discuss what I am considering as the indexes of modernity in the novels. Before proceeding to the analysis of the two protagonists' design, I will present, in the first section of the chapter, some important characteristics of modern fiction, namely: exploration of characters' subjectivity, complexification of narrative voice and plot openness. In the second section, I will discuss how these characteristics are manifested in the two novels. As my main focus lies on the leading female characters, my strategy of analysis will consist of looking closely into their trajectories. Thus, the way they are presented in each novel, their entanglements with the issue of marriage and the solutions they find to cope with the dilemma brought by their choice of a husband will constitute the guideline of my discussion. Observing these three moments in *Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady* will enable me to check to what extent the aspects of modernity I have previously exposed are present in each novel.

Finally, I would like to stress that I do not intend to argue in favour of Eliot's or James's being modern writers, but I do intend to defend how they helped to build modernity.

Chapter I: George Eliot's and Henry James's literary influences within the traditions of the Anglo-American novel

The fictive representation of female personality in George Eliot's and Henry James's novels *Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady* is partly dependent on the Anglo-American literary tradition that precedes them.

Thus, I intend to map out former novelists to Eliot and James as figures who also enhanced prose fiction in its form through their artistic and psychological approaches to characters. It is in this way that I aim to analyze how Eliot and James owe much of their proficiency to some writers who belong to the pre-Victorian and Victorian periods. The novelists who represent the early nineteenth century still hold a bond with Romantic input whereas the Victorians display a strong social criticism.

First of all, as regards George Eliot, I shall examine the most influential figures in the Romantic period: Jane Austen and Walter Scott and their contributions to her. I will emphasize how their genres (novel of manners and historical novel) conditioned Eliot's views of fiction. Among the writers who provide a sense of the need of a firm realist background to Eliot's works of fiction, I shall include Charles Dickens, William M. Thackeray and Charlotte Brontë. In relation to Henry James, I shall mention the pre-Victorian novelists Laurence Sterne and Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose concerns with psychological features in characters are fundamental to his art. On the other hand, Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope and George Meredith introduce to the Jamesian novel the conflict between the individual and the social environment.

Among the issues to be discussed in this chapter, there are common subjects which were firmly underscored by the realist authors who influenced Eliot's and James's works such as: the search for a solid sociological grasp to criticize social manners and the effort to ascribe a psychological approach to characters.

I intend to examine how far Eliot and James preserve the sociological and psychological views of the previous generations. Nevertheless, it is also relevant to point out the novelists' innovations to the process of delineating characters once nineteenth-century prose fiction endeavours to refine the fictive representation of personality.

1.1 – George Eliot and the early nineteenth-century novel: Jane Austen (novel of manners) and Walter Scott (historical novel)

Despite the diffused and effective influences of Jane Austen (1775-1817) and Walter Scott (1771-1832) on the English novel – both authors are considered points of reference by which the achievements of others novelists are measured – they do not share the same view regarding the development of prose fiction. Such difference is due to the genres they select to follow: the novel of manners and the historical novel. The former genre, employed by Austen, explores the idea of human beings in society. That is why her characters are presented in a microcosm ruled by social values. But the genre improved by Scott, the historical novel, regards the novelist's sense of the past as the impulse of his art. According to Walter Allen, whereas Austen portrays the restricted life of provincial society, Scott conveys his concern with the history of Scottish, English and French civilization. In this way, Austen sets out to delight readers by depicting a tiny environment, the world of the parlour, the world of the ladies, where the relations between her characters are highly explored. Walter Scott, in his turn, seeks for the portrayal of man as conditioned by factors outside him, which means his place and function in society as well as his relation to the historic past.⁴ Certainly, the different worldviews which Austen and Scott grant to fiction reveal new directions in the process of delineating characters. Thus, it is important to state what Eliot draws from each author and her/his respective genre.

To examine Austen's and Scott's influences on Eliot, I shall firstly analyze how some themes discussed in Austen's fictional world such as marriage and female subjectivity are embraced by Eliot. I shall point out the way Eliot heightens Austen's art inasmuch as the misfortunes resulting from marriage are essential to the growth of Eliot's characters. In

⁴ ALLEN, Walter. The English Novel, p. 108-110

addition, the issue of female subjectivity is enlarged by Eliot's epistemological input. In relation to Scott, I shall emphasize his ability to depict the historical process of a certain people in a large contextualization. Indeed, his proficiency in relating character to historical past enables Eliot to create a convincing social landscape once she recalls the manners of her native community. Another aspect of Scott's fiction, which is present in Eliot's, lies in his conception of human life ruled by society and history. The delineations of their characters are somehow affected by this mechanistic viewpoint. However, I shall indicate that, differently from Scott, Eliot looks at history in a positivistic perspective that stresses the idea of fidelity to historical facts. Moreover, despite her mechanistic ideas, Eliot sees in the female representation an inner strength that counteracts the idea of a world overwhelmed by deterministic laws.

The scope of Jane Austen's fiction rests on a self-contained world whose reality is not intensified by references to the Napoleonic Wars or to the Industrial Revolution. As a matter of fact, it is a society with a subtle class-structure – aristocracy seems the rank she is more devoted to portraying – and a fairly rigid code of behaviour. Yet the context of such world is enlightened by her continuous awareness and scrutiny of the values that control it.⁵ Since the relation between female survival and patriarchal power is a relevant issue in her works, the idea of a young woman's finding a husband is the subject-matter of her fiction. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar infer that Austen is aware of male superiority in terms of economic, social and political status. For this reason, she dramatizes how and why a woman's life relies on having male approbation and protection. Therefore, Austen chooses to focus on the matter of women accepting a sensible man as a sign of success.⁶

In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), for instance, Elizabeth Bennet is a wise and witty girl, who can realize what is behind the appearances and articulate her opinions. Owing to her independent mind, she prides herself in being above the female obsession with man and marriage. It is important to add that Elizabeth inherited much of her father's wit, and so she can only envisage a man superior in reason and integrity. Despite her intellectual power

⁵ Ibidem, p. 111-112

⁶ GILBERT, Sandra, GUBAR, Susan. The Madwoman in the Attic, p. 154

and discernment, Elizabeth recognizes that she has been blind and prejudiced in judging William Darcy. After reading his letter, which reveals the cruelty behind Mr. Wickham's judgments in relation to Darcy, she realizes her naivety and immaturity.⁷ Thus, as Vivien Jones implies, Elizabeth needs to learn that she loves the gentleman whose social pride placed her against him. On the other hand, Darcy's lesson is to adjust his nature in order to deal with Elizabeth's family and connections. By this complementary process, their marriage turns into the model for the community.⁸

This idea of marriage, which conveys the disparity between male and female genders, is also very typical of George Eliot's stories. As Elaine Showalter infers in her study of the feminine tradition, from Austen to Eliot the woman's novel gradually emphasized an all-inclusive feminine realism, which accentuates a broad, socially informed focus on the daily lives and values of women within the family and the community.⁹ In *Middlemarch*, for example, Eliot raises the possibility for women to improve themselves through marriage. Like Elizabeth Bennet, Dorothea Brooke is a sensitive girl who looks for an experienced and sensible man. Yet the novelist underscores Dorothea's narrowness and puritanism since the heroine looks for a man who can replace her absent father. As a result, the heroine leaps into marriage with the ageing Mr. Casaubon whose arrogant and competitive attitudes lead her to disillusionment. The conflict Dorothea undergoes throughout her union to Casaubon reveals her complexity as a character. Indeed, Eliot shows an analytic presentation of Dorothea in all her mixed internal and external conditions.¹⁰ Her puzzled description indicates the confusion inside her personality. Unlike Jane Austen, Eliot shows the psychological growth of her protagonist *after* marriage. It is relevant to assert that the outcome Austen gives to the heroine's resolution – a successful union that embodies the contrasts between male and female personalities in a perfect symmetry – displays the Romantic aspect of her fiction. Since Eliot is a later Victorian, she sketches even the minor couples' marriages in a realistic way. Alexander Welsh ascertains that in *Middlemarch* the conflicts that occur in Garths' and

⁷ Ibidem, p. 160

⁸ JONES, Vivien. "Introduction to *Pride and Prejudice*", p. 29

⁹ SHOWALTER, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 29

¹⁰ ASHTON, Rosemary. *George Eliot*, p. 69-70

Bulstrodes' marriages convey that the divergent interests between husbands and wives can make their relations destructive.¹¹

The issue of female subjectivity, which corresponds to the heroine's ability to know herself and to achieve her own place in a patriarchal society, is another element we find in Jane Austen's fiction. Although the solution the novelist finds to settle the protagonist's quandary seems so trivial – the happy end when the girl relinquishes her 'inadequacies' and accommodates herself to the space a husband can provide – it is important to state that the female determination ensues from the heroine's courage to decide and act in accordance with her maturity. Female characters like Elizabeth Bennet, Fanny Price and Anne Elliot illustrate the writer's confidence in female subjectivity inasmuch as these women attentively watch, listen and judge the members of their society, but only exert themselves to speak out when they realize that they are being heard.¹² Her last completed novel, *Persuasion* (1818), focuses on a quiet heroine, Anne Elliot, who lives in a world symbolized by her vain and selfish aristocratic father, Walter Elliot. Other characters such as Mary Musgrove, Elizabeth Elliot and Lady Russell are somehow extensions of Mr. Elliot's male authority. Indeed, these women portray the several selves who reflect the same patriarchal prejudices mirrored by him. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have shown, Anne lives in a world of influences where people attempt to shape the female self through submission and renunciation. Since Anne is in process of personal development, she is haunted by the several selves a woman can become. In this sense, the other characters create images concerning her persona and endeavour to persuade her according to their standpoints:

Anne lives in a world of mirrors both because she could become most of the women in the novel and, as the title suggests, because all the characters present her with their personal preferences rationalized into principles by which they attempt to persuade her. (...) Only Anne has a sense of the different, if equally valid, perspectives of the various families and individuals among which she moves. Like Catherine Morland, she struggles against other people's fictional use and image of her; and finally she penetrates to the secret of patriarchy through absolutely no skill of detection on her own part.¹³

¹¹ WELSH, Alexander. "The Later Novels", p. 66

¹² GILBERT, Sandra, GUBAR, Susan. Op. Cit., p. 178

¹³ Ibidem, p. 177

Austen's concerns with female subjectivity are extended by Eliot. Suzy Anger asserts that Eliot's fiction points to the best means of acquiring adequate knowledge, its justification, and its boundaries. Therefore, the persistent problems of getting to know the world and other minds, which are important issues related to female subjectivity, instigate

Eliot to explore the subjective side of her characters.¹⁴ Alluding to Dorothea's progress in *Middlemarch*, Anger implies that such inner development is profoundly accurate since the heroine needs to adjust herself to the clearest perception of facts. However, the critic also infers that there is a strong appeal to feelings in this novel, which is seen as an essential source for the acquisition of knowledge.¹⁵ If the matter of female subjectivity attains an artistic importance in Austen's fictional world, Eliot goes far beyond it into her detailed presentation of the psychological progress of the heroine and its interaction with society. In fact, Dorothea's search for an effective expression of her personality requires an accurate understanding of the world, which raises questions concerning the nature of knowledge and its effects on the social environment. Obviously, epistemology is associated to moral standpoints in Eliot's realism. To illustrate her epistemological focus on Dorothea's mind, Suzy Anger asserts that knowledge, in Eliot's view, is something to be sought. The more the protagonist learns from experience, the more her knowledge is supported by adequate grounds. Eliot takes on a traditional concept of knowledge in which true beliefs are those that capture the facts as they really are.¹⁶ As W. J. Harvey elucidates, Dorothea's awareness of her place in the world ensues from her personal experience:

Provincial society seems to her a prison from which she longs to escape by doing great good or by espousing a noble cause; with this we can sympathize and we pity her when she adequates freedom with Casaubon's claustrophobic world. For the word *theoretic* suggests, Dorothea is innocent, ignorant of her self and the world; she is morally, as well as literally, myopic. It is in her marriage that her painful self-education must begin, and George Eliot makes explicit the lesson to be learnt.¹⁷

¹⁴ ANGER, Suzy. "George Eliot and philosophy", p. 82

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 83

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 83

¹⁷ HARVEY, W. J. "Introduction to *Middlemarch*", p. 198-199

Though George Eliot owes to Jane Austen much of her proficiency in portraying characters in a solidly constructed real situation without discarding their subjectivity, it is relevant to suggest that Eliot improves Austen's material because the intellectual evolution of the second half of the nineteenth century put forward a range of multiple interests concerning science, ethics and art, which the earlier literary generations could not have witnessed.

The historical contextualization the novel *Middlemarch* presents – the English Reform Bill in 1832 – conveys George Eliot's concerns with the problems of England in making further social progress due to its resistance to radical changes. Eliot's political enthusiasm, which discloses the prodigality of her material, is enhanced by the search for a solid historical grasp of diverse and slowly changing cultures. Such achievement is accomplished in Eliot's prose fiction owing to the portentous influence of Walter Scott. According to Walter Allen, Scott was the English novelist who best grasped the organic relationships between man and his time. The source of much of his excellence as a writer is his conception of human life as a finished thing, a completed process, which enabled him to draw his characters in a world shaped by the forces of history. In spite of sketching his characters from the outside owing to his emphasis on the social restrictions and limitations, Scott makes them idiosyncratic because we can deduce their inner lives.¹⁸

Scott's intuitive insight into historical forces and traditional social standards is important once it shows that men are affected by changes in the material reality they are all rooted in. Undoubtedly, the inner intensity that makes George Eliot's characters alive despite her mechanistic view of the world is partly due to Scott's interest in improving characters rather than composing a formal work. What also conveys the fact Scott contributes to the development of English fiction is his proficiency to describe the manners of a past generation in a larger context. Scott's historian hindsight, as Rosemary Ashton points out, allows Eliot to set her novel in the recent past. Then she can merge a remembered feeling for traditions with the ability to report the past of a certain community in a diffused setting. Thus she is able to create a fictional society that seems so real by evoking her juvenile Evangelicalism and her

¹⁸ ALLEN, Walter. Op. Cit., p. 120

acquaintance with the customs of Warwickshire, her native land. Ashton also asserts that Eliot's gift in conceiving a social environment in a larger outline accentuates the vivacity of her characters, even the minor figures, because they revivify her memories of the past.¹⁹

Despite Eliot's admiration for Scott's historical representation, it is relevant to mention her insistent faithfulness to historical authenticity. Considering nineteenth-century thought, the positivist assumptions stressed the importance of historical accuracy, which transmitted the sense of what should be like to 'write history'. In so doing, the description of the past is only possible through the accumulation of a primary stratum of historical facts which can be realized under an encyclopedic knowledge. Diane Elam ascertains that Eliot's respect for Scott led her into encyclopedic concerns since both writers believe that an accurate perception of history depends on the proper understanding of historical events. Nonetheless, whereas Scott's novels continually remind readers of the need of imagining themselves in a past situation, asserting the structural significance of anachronism, Eliot insists on reporting the past as utterly contemporary. In *Romola* (1863), in Elam's terms, the novelist tries to write a purely historical romance.²⁰ Eliot's commitment to accurate reconstruction springs out of a very traditional notion of historical realism which conceives history as the product of research and scholarship. Such positivist viewpoint accentuates her resistance to anachronism as well as any sort of metahistorical approach that raises questions about the meaning of history.²¹ It is in this way that Diane Elam sustains that Eliot's modern contribution does not lie primarily within the central narratives in her novels.

Scott's conception of human life as a finished process shows that his position as a writer becomes more realist. As Walter Allen has shown, Scott faces life squarely and without illusions, therefore his works are bound to portray the restrictions and limitations society imposes upon the individual. The historical circumstances that attempt to shape his national character are shown as forces no less impersonal than anything in the naturalist novel.²² The focus on this realist attitude from Walter Scott, which underscores the pressure of the outward

¹⁹ ASHTON, Rosemary. Op. Cit., p. 28

²⁰ ELAM, Diane. Romancing the Postmodern, p. 120

²¹ Ibidem, p. 121

²² ALLEN, Walter. Op. Cit., p. 122

laws (represented by history or society) on human beings, conveys a view of the world ruled by a static mechanism. Such realist side of his fiction, which presupposes a world that can be completely sketched, is deeply embedded in Eliot's thought. Like Scott, she believes that the world she describes is a finished one since it is governed by laws that depict its static mechanism. This assumption strengthens her delight in an ordered, hierarchical way of life in which people have their proper places and social roles.²³ Hence the solidity and comprehensiveness that enable Eliot to create her fictional world, according to Arnold Kettle, point to an absorbing sense of the power of society where the individual is scarcely able to change it:

There is no heroism in *Middlemarch* (leaving aside for the moment Dorothea and Ladislaw), no tragic conflict and there cannot be, for the dialectics of tragedy, the struggle in which the hero is destroyed through his own strength, is outside George Eliot's scheme of things. Because her outlook is mechanistic and not revolutionary no one can fight *Middlemarch* or change it. The most that they can do is to improve it a little by being a little 'better' than their neighbors. (...) And therefore even the 'sympathetic' characters must either be passive or else be brought to their knees through their own faults. For though George Eliot hates *Middlemarch* she believes in its inevitability; it is the world and our udder.²⁴

It is interesting to acknowledge Eliot's and Scott's concerns with the characters' actions within the mechanic laws that outline social order. But this mechanistic philosophy cannot merely be seen as the recognition of the natural stresses derived from the material environment. It is indeed something that transcends a materialist view of the world and reaches a moral perspective – the loyalty to one's own orderly society. As Alexander Welsh elucidates, Scott looks at prudence as a moral quality that increases the self-control of his characters against the rash desperations they are fated to endure in the most trying circumstances.²⁵ So it is not by chance Scott's protagonists are hero types inasmuch as masculinity means strength, control and firmness against the acts of cruelty. The hero's action is confined to his own ideal of moral righteousness upon which the rule of law and public opinion depends. Yet the way Scott exalts the rational virtues of self-restraint and common sense excludes the idea of 'calculating prudence' in the fictional creation of his

²³ Ibidem, p. 221

²⁴ KETTLE, Arnold. "Middlemarch", p. 164

²⁵ WELSH, Alexander. "The Hero of the Waverly Novels, p. 17

characters, which heightens their passiveness and quietness in relation to the forces that surround them:

The prudence celebrated by the *Waverly* novels would not be “calculating prudence”. Scott cautioned against calculating prudence at the end of his review of *Emma*. Expelling calculation from prudence destroyed its one attribute as an active virtue. A Prudent hero who cannot be deliberately prudent can have no active role. He can do no needs of violence; nor can survive by cunning. He is wholly at the mercy of the forces that surround him, and thus acted upon rather than acting.²⁶

Though the novel *Middlemarch* endeavours to picture a social environment in which human beings are essentially passive, recipients of impressions, modified by social forces, George Eliot finds a resolution out of her mechanistic philosophy. In this sense, Dorothea represents that element above the deterministic universe overwhelmed by materialist laws – the yearning of the individual to improve the world s/he belongs to.²⁷ Kettle’s observation is very relevant here once it not only acknowledges the fact that Dorothea’s characterization embraces the vital motive-force in human life that claims for ideals, but also points to the power of her fictional conception in charming readers’ imagination and enthusiasm. Despite the presence of determinism in Eliot’s beliefs, which she inherited from the findings of the positivist science, Dorothea illustrates the positive ideal that counteracts the tendency to depict society as an invincible force outside the characters.

Unlike Scott’s heroes in the *Waverly* Novels, Dorothea has an active role because her delineation as a heroine constantly struggles with the pressures resulting from the environment where she is confined. It is relevant to remember that apart from the deterministic prejudices of nineteenth-century thought, Eliot was also influenced by the religious humanist outlooks (derived from Feuerbach, Comte, and Spinoza) that proposed secular metaphysical ideas in order to guide human aspirations. To all effects, Scott’s views of history and character are indispensable for the understanding of Eliot’s literary background. Indeed, the way Scott moulds his characters according to a historic living past as well as the forces of religion makes them full of natural feelings and consistent thoughts.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 18

²⁷ KETTLE, Arnold. Op. Cit., p. 166

1.2- George Eliot and the Victorian Novel: Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray and Charlotte Brontë

During the Victorian age the reading public witnesses the emergence of many writers in English literature. It is propitious to add that female novelists start to find their space in the English novel. What partly explains the immense literary activity of this age lies in the questions that so much concerned the Victorians. First, there were social and political problems that were affecting the English society such as: the outcomes of the English Reform Bill of 1832, the Catholic Emancipation, slavery, the extension of the British colonization in India, and poverty resulting from industrialization. A bigger problem for novelists than any of these was the challenge that the new science brought to the Christian faith owing to Darwin's Theory of Evolution. Moreover, the issue of materialism, which denied the existence of any metaphysical element, reached a considerable importance since Karl Marx, who wrote *Das Capital* in London, defended a new conception of society based on his materialist approach to history.

Once English writers always refer to questions concerning man and society, the novel of the Victorian period becomes more realistic. As a matter of fact, the progress of nineteenth-century science enabled the Victorians to portray a consistent social landscape in prose. The creation of sociology, for instance, heightened their social criticism inasmuch as the problems that overwhelmed the English society were analyzed and presented on adequate grounds. Furthermore, the representation of personality in fiction, which reveals how characters are drawn, was improved by the finding of modern psychology. Obviously, the particular responses of Victorian novelists to the questions of their time generate a set of different assumptions regarding human beings since the English novel is still seen as the expression of the individual's view of the world. Therefore, as David Cecil remarks, Victorian novels display a large variety of characters and incidents clustering round the figure of the protagonist. This also explains why their range of subject is as large as their range of mood.²⁸

Since Victorian novelists seem so fundamentally different and singular in their artistic views, it is relevant to underscore how George Eliot works with some subjects the novelists

²⁸ CECIL, David. Op. Cit., p. 5

Charles Dickens (1812-70), William M. Thackeray (1811-63), and Charlotte Brontë (1816-55) grant to the English novel. I particularly consider these writers as Eliot's predecessors because they represent personality in an innovative perspective. Indeed, they attempt to focus on the complexity of human behaviour although the idea of resignation is strong in the great Victorian novels due to the patriarchal power at that time. As Karen Chase points out, Dickens's, Brontë's and Eliot's conceptions of characters are mature and compelling insofar as they foresee the vagaries of mental life through their imaginative power. Though they cultivate the findings of contemporary psychology, it is their own analysis of man and situation that indicates how characters must be created.²⁹ Another issue which seems so common in Dickens, Thackeray, Brontë and Eliot is their critical look at society concerning its corruption and vices. In spite of describing social manners through different standpoints, the injustice and hypocrisy which are generally present in their fictional worlds point to the uncongenial circumstances human beings are fated to endure. Once the personal conflict often results from the stresses of environment, the social world provided by the Victorians also aids the psychological development of their hero types. Thus the psychological and sociological aspects improved by these authors cannot be seen as distinguished units.

Despite the importance of the multiple subjects introduced by the Victorians, which allow them to explore different genres in writing, I shall emphasize in this study of Eliot's literary influences, the topics I established at the beginning of the chapter: the sociological approach and the inner delineation of characters in the lineage of Dickens, Thackeray and Brontë. In this light, I would like to point out how Dickens's social criticism enables Eliot to denounce the degeneration behind social conventions. Adding to it, Dickens's analysis is enhanced by his satire. Such device allows him to create comic characters that illustrate either the author's sympathy or scorn in relation to man. Though Eliot points to the social flaws and satirizes the inconsistencies of human beings, I shall mention her advancement in relation to Dickens in exploring the psychological features in characters. Eliot's figures, differently from Dickens's, are not stereotypes of the outward world. In relation to Thackeray, I shall indicate his effort in illustrating the victory and fall of human beings in society. His greatest

²⁹ CHASE, Karen. Eros & Psyche, p. 4

achievement lies in the conception of man as virtuous and fragile, which conveys his resistance to picture characters as caricatures. Yet I shall mention that Thackeray does not regard the range of human experience in the outline of his characters. Eliot, in her turn, seeks for subtler problems that individuals are bound to face. As regards the matter of women's role in society, it seems to be an interesting aspect in Brontë's fiction. In this sense, I shall underscore how female characterization assumes a dominating role in her masterpiece *Jane Eyre*. Such establishment of a new narrative voice, which fosters the issue of female consciousness, is a relevant input to Eliot's art. However, I shall emphasize the superiority of Eliot's realist viewpoint in opposition to Brontë's romanticism since the former analyzes the heroine's quandary in an oppressive social system.

By placing himself in the role of a spokesman of his age, Charles Dickens creates a world of his own and peoples it. In so doing, he bestows on the novel a realist sense that reflects the changes in society and their consequent problems. Such eloquent power illustrated by his criticism makes him a prophet of his time and a shaper of several generations of English cultural life. Richard Church asserts that Dickens heightens his criticism of society through his assaults on the negative effects of the writhing industrialism which contorted the whole fabric of Europe, and particularly of England. Thus he exercised a strong influence as a reformer against certain abuses in public life. The nature of his genius was such that he identified himself with the public, which indicated one of the conditions necessary to his art.³⁰ Owing to his lower middle-class origin, he includes in his prose his acquaintance with poverty as well as his awareness of the violence against children and women.

Dickens's criticism of the English social system which points to the injustices of the poor law, corruption in the administration of justice, poverty enlarged by the results of industrialization and the cruelty of schoolmasters in relation to children discloses the realist side of his fiction. Like Dickens, George Eliot analyzes the problems that are in the core of an apparently ordered society. As Frederick R. Karl remarks, the novels *Bleak House* and *Middlemarch* denounce social institutions and systems as well as examine cultural patterns that become fragmented. In Dickens's masterpiece, *Bleak House* (1852-3), children

³⁰ CHURCH, Richard. The Growth of the English Novel, p. 149-150

are victims of neglectful parents who desert them. Furthermore, the attacks on the Chancery Court due to its lust for money, and the figure of Lady Deadlock, who represents a social stereotype, indicate the decadence of the prevailing order and the instability underneath Victorian life. Eliot's *Middlemarch* follows the same route as Dickens's social criticism. It satirically describes the clergy, the electoral system and conceives a scale of values that questions the concepts of authorship and order. Like Dickens, Eliot looks at money as a corruptive vehicle and status as a social hypocrisy. Hence her society is not in process of corruption, it is already ruined. That is why Dickens and Eliot were considered subversive novelists insofar as they revised the structure upon which the Victorians based their social and cultural beliefs.³¹

Once Dickens uses the novel quite deliberately as a vehicle for his criticism of society, it is propitious to examine how satire enables him to illustrate in the mirror of his world a fuller picture of man. Dickens's presentation of characters reveals his critical views of people. Walter Allen suggests that his comic characters fall into two groups. In this way, whenever Dickens outlines them without intervention of moral scruples, the outcome is pure humour. But when sympathy is withheld by his moral contempt, the consequence is a character not so much of humour. Despite the comedy the narrator pours upon him, he remains monstrous and savage. This sort of character is more evident when the novelist is criticizing social injustice or flaws in the social code.³² His method of drawing characters is aided by imagination. Indeed, they are figures startlingly caricatured since Dickens gives more importance to their external aspects than to their human insights. Nonetheless, according to David Cecil's comments, imagination is precisely the device that enables Dickens to fill his characters with individuality beyond the power of meticulous realists:

When Dickens is at his greatest he needs no such devices to make us believe in his personages. Imagination shows itself in their root conception. (...) His characters are all character parts. (...) If they analyze them little, Dickens analyzes them less. Indeed, as we have seen, he looked at them so little from the intellectual point of view, concentrated so much on their outwards characteristics, at the expense of their inner man, that now and again he lost sight of that inner man altogether, and transformed him, by an unconvincing

³¹ KARL, Frederick R. *George Eliot: A Voz de um Século*, p. 638-640

³² ALLEN, Walter. *Op. Cit.*, p. 167-168

miracle into something else. (...) It is here we come to the secret of Dickens' success. His was a fantastic genius. (...) Dickens' figures, for all that they are caricatures, derive their life from the fact that they do reveal, to an extraordinary degree, a certain aspect of real human nature – its individuality.³³

With a generous irony, George Eliot underscores how moral narrowness leads human beings to delusion. Like Dickens, she also supplies her works with a great variety of characters. In *Middlemarch*, for instance Eliot conceives minor figures that illustrate a crowded and wide social context in which the leading characters act. The proliferation of these minor characters enhances her concept of 'provincial life' inasmuch as they illustrate 'the chain of opinions' which attempts to shape the individual self. Yet it is propitious to notice how Eliot's ironic temper is also present when she indicates the self-delusion of main figures like Dorothea, Tertius Lydgate and Edward Casaubon. Quentin Anderson elucidates that each leading character has a serious disillusion: Dorothea's certainty that she can do good through knowledge; Lydgate's belief that science will improve people's lives in Middlemarch, and Casaubon's faith that his marital bond will provide him happiness and repose.³⁴ W. J. Harvey implies that Eliot's moral vision creates a corresponding response in readers. Therefore, she bestows upon them a wide variety of viewpoints that expand their understanding both of the fictional world and of the real world by the creation of characters and their respective actions in the concurrent stories:

In the process we constantly revise our judgments and alter the balance of our feelings; we are involved with the protagonists and yet – because of our wider view – we know more than they can, so that our sympathies are checked and controlled by our perception of their limitations and blind spots. Bulstrode and Casaubon are analysed with an almost surgical precision; yet at the same time they command our compassion. Any tendency to idealize Dorothea is checked by a cool flow of ironic and qualifying comment.³⁵

This suggests that Eliot envisages her characters differently from Dickens. Though both Dickens and Eliot employ satire as a means to represent the narrowness and inconsistency of human behaviour, the latter refuses to draw characters as mere stereotypes that incorporate the social flaws. As can be noticed, the psychological and spiritual development of Eliot's figures enables readers to see the painful struggle of the individual to

³³ CECIL, David. *Op. Cit.*, p. 167-168

³⁴ ANDERSON, Quentin. "George Eliot in *Middlemarch*", p. 283

³⁵ HARVEY, W. J. "Introduction to *Middlemarch*", p. 205

break free from the prison of stupidity in order to reach a wide worldview. That is why their delineation not only engages readers' interests but also makes them reflect judgments and sentiments. David Cecil states that, differently from Dickens, George Eliot does not construct her characters with the personality that appeared to the outward world, but with the psychological features underlying the persona. So they are all portraits of the inner man although they are not created by the imagination Dickens grants to his figures.³⁶ By all means, it is important to establish a parallel between Dickens and Eliot although many critics have underscored their contrasts since the former is considered the great entertainer, and the latter, the voice of higher culture. Certainly, both novelists illustrate a wide picture of human life in the narrative by employing devices such as satire and sociological analysis in order to enhance our critical views.

The concern for individuals affected by vices and deceived by society pervades English prose fiction after Dickens's emergence. In comparison, William Makepeace Thackeray is a figure whose works oscillate between a slight satire, concentrated on class distinctions, and a solid realist sense which displays his originality and makes him a prominent novelist in the course of the Victorian novel.

Following the realist line introduced by Henry Fielding, Thackeray accepts the conflicts and disturbances of social life as he observes them. Such attitude interferes with the development of his characters. Richard Church also remarks that Thackeray focuses on the efforts his characters make to conform to or avoid a certain ethical standard. He pictures them in all their resolutions and failings, but without the distortion of satire and the reduction of caricature.³⁷ Extending Richard Church's point of view, David Cecil proposes that some motives and qualities universally present in man stir Thackeray's intellectual power. It is insofar as it deals with vanity, egoism, passion and innocence steeped in human nature that his writing is creative. These opposite qualities Thackeray ascribes to his characters are certain aspects of human nature as a whole. In spite of considering people as well-intentioned, he

³⁶ CELCIL, David. *Op. Cit.*, p. 280

³⁷ CHURCH, Richard. *Op. Cit.*, p. 160

also acknowledges that they are all in some degree weak and vain, self-absorbed and self-deceived.³⁸

It can be inferred that Thackeray's characters are never so good as to become wholly immune to the novelist's irony because their actions arise from mixed motives. Once the range of human interests determine human deeds, it is impossible to classify men into two distinguished categories: the ones who are predominantly inclined to good and the others who are totally committed to evil. To assert this standpoint, David Cecil implies that Thackeray's insight is engendered out of the universal fragility of mankind. Thus, his disillusioned, ironical view of life, envisages man as a frail creature, whose best virtues are instinctive, while his worst vices are calculated. The weakness of the flesh reveals that these values and failings are inevitable characteristics of human nature.³⁹ Thackeray's masterpiece, *Vanity Fair* (1848), pictures individuals tormented by the worries of social life in Brussels during the weeks preceding the Waterloo battle. In this way, the virtues of these characters are always attached to a certain weakness. The female protagonists, Amelia and Becky, show how modesty and cleverness are intrinsically matched to foolishness and deceit.

Obviously, Thackeray's use of the narrative to express a conscious criticism of life fosters Eliot's concerns with human nature and its chaotic manifestations. Indeed, the assumption that ignorance, vanity, egoism are interwoven with knowledge, modesty and altruism in characters, is a precious contribution to the growth of the novel. Frederick R. Karl ascertains that Eliot's narrative is similar to Thackeray's insofar as his narrator creates a kind of muddle in searching for disorder, instability and unremarked chaos. In *Middlemarch*, Eliot questions her own conceptions related to social order and human harmony. She looks into the disorder that is inside an apparently ordered society.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, she extends Thackeray's moralism by displaying a richer picture of human experience. Indeed, Thackeray's morals, which reveal an essentialist conception of man, do not allow him to realize some facets of human experience – issues that make characters look at subtler problems:

³⁸ CECIL, David. Op. Cit., p. 82

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 93

⁴⁰ KARL, Frederick R. Op. Cit., p. 638

He can manipulate masses of material, but the masses are all masses of the same thing. (...) Even as a moral canon, Thackeray's is a limited one. As we have seen, it admits no heroic characters; it has no bearing on those larger, subtler problems that face the characters of George Eliot. Dorothea Brooke, thirsting to dedicate herself to a great cause, but unable to find such cause in the provincial story of Middlemarch; Lydgate, torn between his duty to scientific research which is his high vocation and the claims of his selfish wife; the order Thackeray imposed so lucidly on life gave no room for such problems.⁴¹

Thackeray's excessive interest in the common traces of human beings narrows the experimental and analytical approach every novelist needs to picture mankind in its variety. That is why he repeats his characters with the same situation and purpose since they are variations on the same theme. From the very beginning of her literary career, George Eliot's aim was to examine with microscopic exactitude the complex and intricate relationships between individuals and their social and historical milieu. This empirical approach to art enables her to see in human life a set of different experiences that probably condition the way she represents characters. To all effects, Thackeray's insight towards the vices and virtues coexisting in human nature – there is no such thing as complete innocence or wickedness according to his worldview – is important because it defies the Victorian conventions that tend to divide men into saints and sinners. Such assumption is indeed a starting point to understand the large range by which Eliot conceives her characters.

The greatness and originality of Thackeray also instigated the emergence of new novelists who launched their ideas of life into fiction. The prominent figure of Charlotte Brontë, who admired Thackeray in her lifetime and dedicated her masterpiece *Jane Eyre* to him, is perhaps the best outcome of the Thackerayan fictional world. However, Brontë shows her originality in this novel, which is a genuine love-story of great realism, full of sharp observation and wit. It is in this way she finds her own voice in the English novel and the heroine, whose name is the title itself, takes on a dominating position in the story. As Elaine Showalter points out, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) describes a remarkable range of women's physical and social experiences owing to the author's use of images, language and female symbolism in the narrative:

In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë attempts to depict a complete female identity, and she expresses her heroine's consciousness through an extraordinary range of narrative devices.

⁴¹ CECIL, David. Op. Cit., p. 86

Psychological development and the dramas of the inner life are represented in dreams, hallucinations, visions, surrealistic paintings, and masquerades; the sexual experiences of the female body are expressed spatially through elaborate and rhythmically recurring images of rooms and houses. Jane's growth is further structured through a pattern of literary, biblical, and mythological allusion.⁴²

Brontë's disposition to explore the idea of female consciousness allows her to locate a new dramatic center not in the predominantly powerful male, but in the initially powerless woman. As a subjective novelist, she is able to create the heroine that expresses directly her emotions and impressions. There are two common reasons, among different critical approaches, which explain the accomplishment of Brontë's goals in *Jane Eyre*. First of all, according to Derek Traversi's remarks, Brontë is able to recall her own experiences vividly, which involves her own intimate feelings, and her lifelong urge for emotional compensation. Hence she produces a powerful and acute picture of certain aspects of life.⁴³ By emphasizing narrative technique, Karen Chase compares the protagonist's delineation to the narrator's role. She asserts that at the same time the novel introduces the heroine as the main subject, it allows a dominant voice that upholds firm narrative control. As the story proceeds, the female protagonist and the narrator come into powerful conjunction.⁴⁴

The displacement of dramatic emphasis from men to women and the establishing of a dominant narrative voice, which illustrate the changes in Brontë's work, are important contributions to Eliot's fiction. They supply a fuller approach to the psychological complexity of the heroine, and propose a new sort of narrative enlightened by a feminine outlook. It is wise to mention that Eliot's heroines also assume the prevailing roles in her stories. Like Brontë, Eliot is prepared to analyze female conduct, and to show its flourishing through the conflict between personality and social stresses. Adding to it, as Brontë does, Eliot evokes her own experiences to create a vivid sketch of characters in her prose fiction. Through the conception of heroines like Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and Dorothea Brooke, the novelist recalls the most intriguing facts which took place in her life to describe a wide picture of female quandary. Thus it can be surmised that both Brontë's and Eliot's

⁴² SHOWALTER, Elaine. Op. Cit., p. 112-113

⁴³ TRAVERSI, Derek. "The Brontë Sisters and 'Wuthering Heights'", p. 257

⁴⁴ CHASE, Karen. "Jane Eyre's Interior Design", p. 49-50

fictional aims are devoted to the question of women's role in society illustrated by the heroine's revolt as well as her discovered sense of dignity.

Elaine Showalter elucidates how Brontë's *Jane Eyre* underscores the intense oppression women are fated to endure. As this is so, any attempt to revolt or self-assertiveness incurs severe punishment and ostracism in a society that worships submission and sexual discipline. The strains of patriarchy are so powerful that even women support these patterns and become agents for men. For this reason, the heroine grows up in a world without feminine understanding, where women police each other on behalf of patriarchal tyranny.⁴⁵ The different ways by which Brontë's female types react to sexual diminishment and repression depict her proficiency in drawing a great variety of characters. Indeed, she externalizes in Helen Burns and Bertha Mason the extreme components of mind and body. Whereas the former is inclined to kindness and indifference to material surrounding, the latter incarnates madness and animosity. Only Jane represents the integration of mind and body – the virility of female selfhood, which is achieved through a painful experience. Karen Chase proposes that Charlotte Brontë's imaginative strength lies in the attachment of different realms such as self and other, wish and threat, love and restraint.⁴⁶

Certainly, Eliot's works also analyze the unfulfilled longings of the young woman in a narrow and oppressive society. In *Middlemarch*, for instance, Dorothea is also overwhelmed by an environment that gives no direct expression to her wide charity and faith. Her dilemma is increased when she realizes that her husband lives in a claustrophobic world that accentuates the meanness of his character. Like Jane, she undergoes the uncongenial situations ensued from the repressive social pattern figured by the landscape of opinions that meddles in home circles. Therefore, Dorothea's self also oscillates between feelings of indignation and submission. What distinguishes Eliot's standpoints from Brontë's in fiction is precisely their different worldviews that affect the responses of their female protagonists. Brontë, the romantic and subjective novelist, describes the outward world as the picture of her own

⁴⁵ SHOWALTER, Elaine. Op. Cit., p. 116-117

⁴⁶ CHASE, Karen. Op. Cit., p. 63

impressions.⁴⁷ Jane Eyre, in this sense, can move from an oppressive environment and commence an independent life due to Brontë's imaginative world. But Eliot, the natural historian of society, underscores the problems of the passive, self-destructive heroine to live in a world without fantasy, where she must strive for survival. As Elaine Showalter has implied, this heroine seems much more persistent in British women's fiction than Brontë's rebellious types. Indeed, Eliot's method analyzes the protagonist in her moments of illumination, awakenings to an unendurable reality, which result in renunciation or self destruction.⁴⁸

1.3- Henry James and the novel before the Victorian Age: Laurence Sterne and Nathaniel Hawthorne

Despite the achievements that occurred in the novel during the later nineteenth-century – multiplicity of themes, character's psychological development, sociological criticism, among others – some novelists before this period had already looked for new sources to enlarge the artistic horizons in prose fiction. The originality and expressive genius of Laurence Sterne (1713-68) and Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-60) illustrate the wide scope writers attempt to grant to the novel.

Sterne's and Hawthorne's novels, which strengthened both British and American traditions, differently underscored character's subjectivity. Since Henry James was so close to these novelists, he inclined his concerns to the questions of subjective consciousness in characters as well as to the artistic power that turns theological issues into psychological ones. In this sense, I shall point out Sterne's originality in creating figures that portray the way the author senses life as a vivid moment throughout the narrative. As a matter of fact, James's concerns with the narrator's viewpoints and character's consciousness are tributary to Sterne's fictional ideas. However, despite Sterne's emphasis on the matter of point of view, I shall underscore James's capability in establishing a center of consciousness in characters once his narrator attempts to reflect a certain subject through their eyes. In relation to Hawthorne, I shall mention his concerns with the enigmas of evil and sin as psychological features that depict how the actions of his characters spring out of their ethical views. Hawthorne's focus

⁴⁷ CELCIL, David. Op. Cit., p. 104

⁴⁸ SHOWALTER, Elaine. Op. Cit., p. 130-131

on sin as a psychological issue conveys the development of his characters insofar as the novelist observes the process of their self-destruction. Although James considers Hawthorne's psychological approach to characters as an important achievement, he constantly explores the artistic issues. The problem that James notices in Hawthorne is the search for truth in prose fiction. As Robert E. Spiller elucidates, Hawthorne advocates that prose is always in contrast to poetry because the former seeks truth rather than beauty.⁴⁹ Hawthorne's truth is based on the consequences of human transgressions. It means that Hawthorne, despite his psychological approach to characters, does not place them above plot's arrangement once his narrator is confined to moral principles. This is a procedure that James's fiction aims at overcoming. Indeed, there is no perfect match between the moral and the artistic element in James's method inasmuch as his emphasis on the potentialities of a single character in the formal resolution of the novel goes beyond moral questions. Thus, James praises the method Hawthorne employs to create characters, but, as an artist, he evokes readers' artistry and criticism towards the vivid picture of a certain character.

Laurence Sterne's narrative mode gives very careful attention to the matter of point of view. The epistemological question of how the narrator's eye perceives reality and its effects on the process of reconstructing it becomes one of his basic concerns. For Ian Watt, this question can be observed in *Tristram Shandy* (1760-67), a remarkable novel in which Sterne locates his reflections in the mind of his hero, and produces a very different fictional work from his predecessors':

Sterne, like Fielding, was a scholar and a wit, and he was equally anxious to have full freedom to comment on the action of his novel or indeed on anything else. But whereas Fielding had gained this freedom only by impairing the verisimilitude of his narrative, Sterne was able to achieve exactly the same ends without any such sacrifice by the simple but ingenious expedient of locating his reflection in the mind of the hero – the most recondite illusion could thus be laid at the door of the notorious inconsequence of the process of the association of ideas.⁵⁰

Once the hero's consciousness in *Tristram Shandy* becomes the locus of action, Sterne bestows a subjective and internal approach on character. Furthermore, Sterne's handling of the

⁴⁹ SPILLER, Robert E. *The Cycle of American Literature*, p. 59

⁵⁰ WATT, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 293

time-scheme of his novel – the protagonist Shandy recounts the story of his own life and opinions – prefigures the break with the chronological order of the narrative which was made by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Adding to it, Walter Allen asserts that Tristram Shandy endeavours to tell us about his life and opinions, but he seems to talk about things that have no logical connection. He remembers a story or fact that intends to illustrate something, and having brought it out realizes that is quite beside the point due to his wayward mind⁵¹. However, as Ian Watt points out, the behaviour of the main characters of the novel discloses their similarities with the social and psychological types conceived in Fielding's manner. As a matter of fact, Sterne's method suggests that there is no absolute dichotomy between the inward and outward approach to character. The author's exploration of the inner life of his characters does not exclude an emphasis on society. Sterne's criticism to the assumption that stresses a split between inwardness and outwardness in characters is his great legacy to the English fiction since it counteracts the tendency to root a huge split between 'characters of nature' and 'characters of manner' in nineteenth-century realism.⁵²

Henry James owes to Laurence Sterne much of his proficiency in equating the individual mind to external reality. Ian Watt asserts that James's technical triumphs are derived from his capacity in managing individual insight and the outward world. Therefore, the reader is absorbed into the consciousness of the characters and the awareness of external social facts, which constitutes the ultimate effects of subjective experience, is fully recognized by him/her⁵³. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, for example, while the narrator attempts to engage readers in the dilemma of Isabel, he also points to the senselessness of women in overestimating men, which conveys the narrowness of their social views.

Like Sterne, James also sustains that point of view is a strategy which the novelist must employ to present reality. Sergio Luiz Prado Bellei states that, in James's narrative, the narrator represents the eyes of the novelist inasmuch as he frames a picture that readers see through⁵⁴. What distinguishes James from Sterne and other novelists who deal with this same matter is his endeavour to define a structural center of consciousness in characters. For this

⁵¹ ALLEN, Walter. Op. Cit., p. 77

⁵² WATT, Ian. Op. Cit., p. 294

⁵³ Ibidem, p. 295-296

⁵⁴ BELLEI, Sérgio Luiz Prado. "James's Theory of the Novel", p. 90

purpose, the settlement Sterne proposes to combine reality and mind is somehow disrupted by James. In other words, although James manipulates these different elements as Sterne does, he also deals with them as an unresolved tension:

Whereas in the early criticism scant attention is devoted to the problem of point of view, in the prefaces the problem of defining a structural center of consciousness in each of the novels becomes paramount. What this evolution suggests is a shift never completely achieved between reality and the mind: these two polarities coexist as an unresolved tension in which the emphasis on the mind grows in importance but never achieves complete dominance.⁵⁵

Reading Bellei's comments, it is easier to understand that James's fictional figures do not entirely personify a center of consciousness. If we consider Woolf's or Joyce's works in particular, this is even clearer. The question lies in the fact that James, like the majority of nineteenth-century novelists, is also concerned with the matter of typical form, which means the way writers must coherently represent and develop a certain issue in writing. However, as his experience as a writer improves, James places a particular emphasis on the mind, which consequently prevails over the influence of objective reality. Such procedure allows James to make his characters also the reflectors in the novels. It means that James's narrator attempts to understand reality through character's subjectivity. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, for instance, James's narrator analyzes the problems concerning marriage through Isabel's dilemma in chapter 42. Unlike Sterne's types, James's cannot be classified as story tellers inasmuch as the narrator discloses their viewpoints in relation to a real situation. It is in this sense that the narrator reflects through their minds and we acknowledge their uniqueness in the novel. Therefore, although James still possesses the omniscient control of the narrative and develops his stories in a chronological order owing to the nineteenth-century artistic standards, he does not completely define characters by the outward world. By looking into the way James deals with the chosen subject of *The Portrait of a Lady*, Charles Feidelson indicates that the author is committed to making the most of Isabel's claim to intrinsic relevance, thereby making her a heroine above all external determinants. In other words, Isabel's characterization is not built up only by the social world around her.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Ibidem, p. 91

⁵⁶ FEIDELSON, Charles. "The Moment of *The Portrait of a Lady*", p. 713

As an American writer devoted to the problems of his native land, Nathaniel Hawthorne inclines his concerns to the understanding of the colonial history of New England. Inasmuch as his fiction looks into the gloomier aspects of Puritan New England, he is absorbed by the enigmas of evil and moral responsibility interwoven with man's destiny. As Robert E. Spiller precisely remarks, Hawthorne's material lies in the ethical view of life of his Calvinist New England ancestors, and his novels seem allegories with morals. But since Hawthorne's attitude towards his material is that of an artist, the idea of sin, which is the central theme of his plots, is not a theological matter, but rather a psychological effect of the belief of transgression on characters.⁵⁷ Consequently, he lets his characters follow their own convictions, exercising only an aesthetic control over their actions. This is what characterizes his ambiguous position as a novelist. As an artist he deals with characters according to the freedom of fiction, and as a moralist he underscores the bond of sin and its outcomes. The match between the artistic and moralist perspectives readers may acknowledge in his masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter* (1850):

The ambiguity of his position was completely revealed in this short and perfect work of art. He had fully accepted the terms of his material and had allowed his characters to state their own cases, exercising only an aesthetic control over their actions. His moral disinterestedness was much more nearly perfect than he imagined. In spite of himself, he imagined. In spite of himself, he had become in ethics the total skeptic who could view calmly the paradox of human will working its own destruction.⁵⁸

Hence it can be implied that his fiction speculates the projections of sin onto the observed lives of men and women once the weakness of the flesh binds them to common fate. Such standpoint can only be noticed through the actions of characters. In his analysis of the chief figures of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne examines what may actually happen when a secret sin starts to gnaw at one character in the love triangle and the feeling of fury at another. If the novelist enables Hester's husband, Roger Chillingworth, to illustrate the 'dark necessity' of Calvinist predestination, he is suggesting a determinism that works in accordance with the observable laws of human nature.⁵⁹ In this way, the actions of Hawthorne's characters also reveal that the novelist cares little for what may happen in afterlife once the ideas of "sin" and

⁵⁷ SPILLER, Robert. Op. Cit., p. 60

⁵⁸ Ibidem, p. 64

⁵⁹ BODE, Carol, HOWARD, Leon, WRIGHT, Louis B. American Literature, p. 111

“predestination” are materialized to explain the rewards and punishments resulted from human choices. The bond of sin, so central to Hawthorne’s thought, is also present in the consciousness of James’s characters whenever they foresee what is ahead. When Madame Merle realizes her ‘common crimes’ by deceiving Isabel, she feels her moral degradation. The inevitability of Isabel’s lot in accepting the tragic consequences of her marriage also recalls Hawthorne’s attitude in letting characters follow their own beliefs.⁶⁰ Yet differently from Madame Merle’s moral fall, Isabel’s acceptance of suffering depicts her humanity.

In spite of James’s admiration for Hawthorne as an explorer of the dark recesses of the human soul, who observes his characters revolve round the bond of sin as an admission to the brotherhood of man in a remarkable psychological intensity, the moral and social issues in James’s fiction become aesthetic. We can also assert that James recognizes Hawthorne’s concerns with the role of the “new woman” in society. Lyall H. Powers infers that the characterization of Isabel, like that of Hester Prynne, points to the emergence of women who aspire to a broader range of options than the roles of mother and housewife.⁶¹ Nevertheless, despite his social and moral interests, James does not give any suggestion that can precisely explain the misfortunes ensued from man’s action. His aesthetic outlook is so acute that he can present a moral situation without personal comment. He lets readers interpret the situations according to their own senses. In addition, his artistic concerns in characters’ creation such as the delineation, the course of action, the points of view, the content of dialogue among others, prevail over the questions of evil and human wretchedness as William H. Grass infers.⁶² This observation is very important because it shows that James’s position as a writer is above any sort of didacticism and moral complacency. That is why Isabel’s return to her husband cannot only be seen as an act of moral responsibility. On the contrary, I suggest that Isabel’s decision at the ending, which surprises the other characters’ expectations, shows how James undermines the idea of “heroine”.

⁶⁰ MATTHIESSEN, F.O. “The Painter’s Sponge and Varnish Bottle”, p. 596

⁶¹ POWERS, Lyall H. “The Place of *The Portrait of a Lady*”, p. 8

⁶² GRASS, William H. “The High Bruatality of Good Intentions”, p. 695

1.4. Henry James and the Victorian Novelists: Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope and George Meredith

Once the analysis of James's fiction in relation to the contributions of the Victorian novelists is indeed a very extensive subject, I shall compare James to certain figures of this age whose strategies concerning the construction of characters are adopted by him. Thus, I shall include Charles Dickens (1812-70), Anthony Trollope (1815-82) and George Meredith (1828-1909), whose artistic aims seem closer to James's.

It is important to observe Dickens's creation of eccentric types that describe the multiplicity of voices in society since James also creates minor characters that illustrate the contrasts of American civilization with its puritanical values. Yet I shall stress James's advancement in ascribing a psychological complexity to certain types (the villains) which are seen as mere stereotypes by Dickens. I shall mention that James owes to Trollope much of his ability to situate characters in a solid social environment. That is why the Jamesian novel looks into the disparity between the individual and the social stresses. Moreover, James also acknowledges Trollope's direct treatment of the subject once the latter envisages man without preconceived theories. Despite the relevance of Trollope's earnestness in drawing characters according to experience, he refuses to analyze the inherent conflicts in human nature. Such analysis is one of the contributions James grants to the novel. Finally, I shall underscore Meredith's proficiency in proposing a poetic craft for the fictional prose that lets the novelist develop the consciousness of his characters. Differently from Trollope, Meredith does not picture an organized society controlled by social conventions. For this reason, it is interesting to realize how different the goals of James's predecessors were. Meredith's concerns with the consciousness of characters is attached to female dilemma. Hence the figure of the heroine is much more expressive than the male type. Though Meredith and James are committed to emphasizing the quandaries of their heroines, I shall point to James's ability to illustrate Isabel's crisis in a more coherent way.

Whereas George Eliot inherited much of Charles Dickens's social criticism that attacks the corruption and hypocrisy behind the order, James appreciated the way Dickens conceived his characters as caricatures of comedy or puppets of melodrama in a cynic world. By

comparing James's *The Bostonians* to the earlier novels of Dickens, Charles R. Anderson acknowledges that the odd figures of Dickens inspire the conception of certain eccentric figures of American civilization – the publicists, charlatans, cranks, new-regionalists, feminists – in James's fiction.⁶³ In fact, what safeguards Dickens's memorable reputation as 'the great entertainer' is exactly his proficiency in conceiving figures that ironically portray a society steeped in corruption, class distinction and violence, among other degradations.

Nevertheless, by analyzing the characterization of Basil Ransom, the male protagonist in *The Bostonians*, Anderson little by little assumes that James creates his own model of hero owing to the psychological complexity of Basil Ramson as a man chivalric in his behaviour and conservative in his principles.⁶⁴ In *The Portrait of a Lady*, the remarkable impression Gilbert Osmond causes on Isabel as an uncommitted and free man illustrates Anderson's point. Indeed, despite the clutches of evil that lie behind Osmond's self, he is not a villain conceived through traditional devices. The way he enchants Isabel by conveying the image of a sensitive man who can contribute to the total fulfillment of her selfhood indicates his originality as a villainous type. In relation to Isabel, Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa Santos also points to her original creation compared with Dickens's female figures. By contrasting Esther Summerson, one of the chief characters in *Bleak House*, with Isabel, she asserts how Esther is defined by the social world throughout the narrative, whereas Isabel's consciousness is what seems to shape the world around her.⁶⁵

The determination of characters within a prescribed social world, a subject that motivated so much Jane Austen in her fiction, is enlarged by Anthony Trollope's novels. In this way, he uses the novel to create a world that embraces all aspects of English society such as: nobility, gentry lawyers, doctors, clergyman, civil servants, government officers of high rank, the world of the prosperous middle-class in property, and so forth. His novels *The Warden* (1855), *Framley Personage* (1861), *The Way We Live Now* (1875) among others, examine how the individual is overwhelmed by the conventions that surround him. Trollope's interest in social manners partly derives from his private experiences in life. Richard Church

⁶³ ANDERSON, Charles R. "Introduction to *The Bostonians*", p. 17

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 25

⁶⁵ SANTOS, Maria Irene Ramalho de Souza. "Isabel's Freedom: *The Portrait of a Lady*", p. 301

mentions that his knowledge of administrative affairs and the constant conflicts in his family, which harassed his childhood, heightened his understanding of human beings and their behaviour in society.⁶⁶ Consequently, Trollope's experience enables all questions that meddle in human relationships to emerge in his novels as Samuel Betsky remarks:

Rather, Trollope's sense of what makes for a gentleman, his religious and political convictions, his sense of what the relationships of men and women ought to be, his feelings about the orders within different classes, his confrontation of the claims of love as against property, his awareness of the threat to his squirearchy – all emerge in almost experimental form for each novel. He explores different kinds of landowners, members of the aristocracy, tenant farmers, young men and young women belonging to the different orders and seen in differing relationships, cleryman, lawyers, politicians, and the rest.⁶⁷

Another very curious aspect to consider in Anthony Trollope's narrative lies in the realist approach he ascribes to it, which conveys his original style. Walter Allen implies that Trollope is aware of what the novel can be according to the interest of the reading public: a picture of common life enlivened by humour and sweetened by facts. In this sense, his style is common place and the task of the writer must rely wholly on the truthful treatment of his subject-matter⁶⁸. Such theme is the world and its way, which is highlighted by the role of his characters. Hence, as Walter Allen accentuates, they are ordinary enough in mind, feelings, ambitions, fears, for the reader to be able to identify himself with them without difficulty. Nothing is outside the readers' experience, thereby the novelist awakens in them this feeling of recognition through the conception of lively characters.⁶⁹

Henry James appreciated Trollope's endeavour in shaping the novel according to the daily and immediate events he felt and saw in English life. For James, Trollope perceived them in so simple, direct, salubrious a way, encompassing all their measurable meanings, that his art depicts a 'complete appreciation of the usual'.⁷⁰ It is interesting to notice James's admiration for a novelist who, unlike most literary figures, relies wholly on the interest of his subject-matter. Instead of intensifying the material as many novelists do, Trollope does not care if his style becomes repetitive in his works. Such position is due to the fact he approached

⁶⁶ CHURCH, Richard. *Op. Cit.*, p. 169

⁶⁷ BETSKY, Seymour. "Society in Thackeray and Trollope", p. 160

⁶⁸ ALLEN, Walter. *Op. Cit.*, p. 199

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 200

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 201

life without theories or preconceptions once he relied on his wide personal experience. The rendering of his complete appreciation of the usual gives him authority to create characters thoroughly in range, diversity and number. This can be assured by his complex portrayal of his gentry. Seymour Betsky emphasizes that although Trollope illustrates as admirable the self-assurance of his gentry – the absence of self-doubt and self-questioning – he is also aware of its stubbornness, its hard conservatism, its unwillingness to reach an intellectual grasp. Moreover, Trollope's characteristic strength springs from the way his protagonists strive to maintain their virtues since they are disturbed by their inner limitations and vices, and threatened by the outward forces that paradoxically oppose and unite them.⁷¹

In this light, Trollope is able to draw characters overwhelmed by different forces that struggle realistically to preserve themselves in the world such as the strains of respectability, order, decency, cultivation, and so forth. Yet he conveys a great resistance to looking into moral quandaries in which his protagonists find themselves. He refuses to think through their problems and simply places on the reader the burden of finding answers to them. The psychological approach to characters, which lets George Eliot and Henry James penetrate Dorothea's and Isabel's dilemmas, is absent in Trollope's narrative, and this is what reveals his limitation as a writer:

Trollope's weakness, as we read him today, is his resolute lack of any psychological penetration as searching as we find in Henry James and George Eliot, whom he resembles. He refuses to deal with the irrevocable tragedies of protagonists whom we deeply respect; and he refuses to take up a position where he could say clearly – and in dramatic terms – that his Victorian world suffers from a deep malaise or a profound disturbance here, here, and here. His basic subject-matter is his gentry. Yet he never translates his understanding of that gentry into terms that take into consideration past strength, present uncertainties, and future possibilities. (...) The best he can do is set up the equation and ask us in gentlemanly fashion to solve it ourselves.⁷²

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, James pinpoints the disparity between American and English manners. Isabel represents an adventurous American girl who, differently from the English ladies, launches herself into the world according to her own theories of independence. Once her personality seems so 'affronting' to British patterns, she soon attracts the notice of her

⁷¹ BETSKY, Seymour. Op. Cit., p. 162-163

⁷² Ibidem, p. 167

cousin Ralph Touchett, who wants to watch the way she lives according to her imaginative mind. Certainly, this confrontation between American and English expectations in relation to women's social adaptation in James's masterpiece ensues from Trollope's portrayal of society. Nonetheless, James concentrates on Isabel's gloom when she realizes the narrowness and greed of her husband Osmond, whose chief goal in life rests on a suitable marriage for his daughter.

In the midst of a literary age when readers rejoice in the realist representations of the novel – they are delighted by the novelist's unerringness of his perceptions and discriminations, by the accuracy of his outline of character and society within the boundaries he has imposed to himself – the prominent figure of George Meredith illustrates the flash of revelation which they realize as something new. The originality of George Meredith, as Walter Allen elucidates, rests on his ability to build a poetic language, though it does not appear in the conventional form of poetry, which allows him to express moments of consciousness in his characters common to all but hitherto only expressed in poetry.⁷³ It is relevant to remember that a poetic language takes place by virtue of the writer's visual sense and concerns with words. Owing to the artist's especial use of language, the narrative turns into a flash of revelation insofar as we realize something new in the presentation of characters or events. In this light, there is not a barrier between Meredith's poetry and prose insofar as his novels depict an outcome that the form of his poetry takes on. Therefore, his poetic and novelistic abilities must be understood as a whole in the large context of his work. It is propitious to mention how his imaginative technique was rare during his time. F. N. Lees ascertains that it was through poetry that Meredith devoted his concerns to human nature. His poetic mind stressed the value of metaphor, and regarded the novel as an artistic expression which embodies values fostered by a subjective truth. That is why Meredith discarded all rationalist discourses presented by the naturalist tendencies of the later nineteenth century.⁷⁴

Meredith's non-realist position is evident in his refusal to draw a society ruled by rightful laws as realist fiction advocates. Hence there is no convincing society in his novels,

⁷³ ALLEN, Walter. *Op. Cit.*, p. 235

⁷⁴ LEES, F. N. "George Meredith: The Novelist", p. 327

and any search for accurate representation shall display the freakishness that lies behind his fictional world. The novelist and critic E. M. Forster infers that most of the social values are faked in Meredith's works. In this sense, his characters are set in a very odd social scene once nothing is exactly what it seems to be, including the functions of the characters. This is partly due to his fantastic mind and comic mode that make him the finest contriver that English fiction has ever produced.⁷⁵ What also places him ahead of the realist tradition is the painful evolution his characters undergo to achieve knowledge of the world and themselves in the clash between reality and illusion. As Walter Allen points out, Meredith's types are painted with a spiritual strength which enables them to reside in a sort of fairyland above commonplace:

They are, then, always not exactly larger than life but a fineness of perception, a potential greatness of spirit, that lifts them far above the ordinary. In a sense, they are spiritualized; men and women alike have Meredith's own cleverness and wit; and the men have a lofty conception of honour while the beauty of the women is matched only by their ardour and their pride in themselves. And Meredith's attitude towards his characters differs according to their sex: the men, even when the objects of his satire, are transfigured by his wit; the women, by his poetry.⁷⁶

F. N. Lees asserts that in Meredith's first novel *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859), there is an interest in the inner consciousness of characters, which appears later in *The Egoist* (1879) and *One of Our Conquerors* (1891). Despite Meredith's difficulty in attaining an unremitting control of the art of recounting thought and feeling, James owes to him much of his technique of presentation. In this light, James enhances his proficiency in introducing characters' inner consciousness in the narrative. Although he was able to improve Meredith's method, the latter's influence can be sensed even in the former's last works:

Matter of values though this is, in novels it appears most obviously as one of technique of presentation, and though Meredith never took a firm and unremitting grasp of the third-person mode of narrating thought and feeling which Flaubert seems to have been the first fully to excogitate, nonetheless he took it far. Though it was James who perfected this technique, Meredith has a fair claim to have been at least level with him in the advance, even the later James's brilliantly detached use of it *In the Cage* being preceded by *One of Our Conquerors*, where the 'stream of consciousness' handling of Victor goes far in the somewhat different direction of Virginia Woolf. (...) Imperfect as it is in result, *One of Our Conquerors* is a work of a remarkable originality, and the inventiveness is working for truth

⁷⁵ FORSTER, E. M. "The Plot", p. 190

⁷⁶ ALLEN, Walter. Op. Cit., p. 238

and suggestiveness of presentation, for the author's command of his characters, of his own feelings and impulses.⁷⁷

Inasmuch as the figure of the heroine has a relevant role in Meredith's fictional world, it is propitious to observe how the novelist delineates her since his attitude to young women is always poetic. Like the writers of his age, Meredith is also concerned with the problems of the nineteenth-century woman. In *Diana of the Crossways* (1885), for instance, he relates the oppression that upper-class women endure, and modifies the idea of marriage-plot in order to convey a positive view of divorce. Yet the characterization of Clara Middleton in *The Egoist* seems his greatest achievement. According to Walter Allen, Meredith's analysis of Clara is the one of an individual young woman in an intolerable position. Indeed, through her situation readers are moved by the sense of human destiny in a quandary since the heroine seems in an imprisonment managed by her egregious father and by her dreadful pretender Sir Willoughby. Meredith's specific analysis of Clara Middleton intensifies his perception of her character. Throughout the events of the novel, her mind is in a crisis of constant discovery about herself and the world around her. Owing to her nature, she is pledged to self-awareness and to action in accordance with what she realizes.⁷⁸

It is interesting to observe that Meredith's interest in the female dilemma is firmly attached to his effort to highlight the inner consciousness of characters. Certainly, James's heroines undergo Clara's conflict the same illuminating way. By analyzing Clara's resolution in refusing Willoughby as her future husband after a night of anxiety and indecision, F. N. Lees implies that there is a similar crisis in *The Portrait of a Lady*. In fact, James's interest in presenting Isabel's own drama through the evaluation of her mind and feeling resembles Meredith's distinct insight despite James's proficiency in handling it. According to Lees, Meredith's concern with the heroine's dilemma leads him to the exhaustive explorations of the human mind.⁷⁹ Therefore, what basically distinguishes James's procedure in exploring the consciousness of characters from Meredith's is the ability of narrating thought and emotion in a cohesive form.

⁷⁷ LEES, F. N. Op. Cit., p. 33

⁷⁸ ALLEN, Walter. Op. Cit., p. 242

⁷⁹ LEES, F. N. Op. Cit., p. 332

To sum up this analysis of George Eliot's and Henry James's literary influences, we can notice some points that indicate their originality concerning the fictive representation of female characters. First of all, though it is wise to mention that both Dorothea and Isabel are introduced in a solidly social landscape. The world that surrounds them is the realist one, and so it is ruled by conventions that attempt to shape the individual's self. In this sense, Eliot's and James's society is not merely a subjective world ensued from their imagination. Eliot's attentions to the findings of sociology allow her to picture a mechanistic society whose power is highlighted by the web of opinions and conventions that make human beings unaware of their inner strength. The cultural difference between American and English society is very present in James's fictional world. Isabel's search for independence and freedom astonishes the people who live around her. Her refusal of Lord Warburton's proposal, for example, depicts an opposition to the British system whose standards narrow a young woman's prospects.

However, Eliot's and James's realist perspectives of the world do not hinder them from ascribing a complex psychological design to their characters. As a matter of fact, we must firstly acknowledge that the protagonists Dorothea and Isabel are conceived according to Eliot's and James's own impressions of the social world. Such procedure is very different from the naturalistic conceptions that motivate writers to shape their characters according to the outward world in order to demonstrate a scientific belief related to man and society. Though Eliot and James recognize that the external reality affects the inwardness of human beings due to the nineteenth-century cultural environment, these authors also explore the way characters respond to the stresses of the social world. That is why Dorothea's and Isabel's designs are embedded with a subjectivity that enables them to endure the tragic consequences of their marital bonds without succumbing to madness or suicide.

In this light, Dorothea Brooke represents one of the idealistic spirits whose aspirations lead her to a profound dissatisfaction with the Middlemarch world. It is in marriage that Eliot describes Dorothea's disillusionment in accordance with the narrator's philosophical viewpoints that point to the protagonist's limitations as a woman. However, Eliot also looks into Dorothea's inner outline according to the way her narrator perceives the growing

awareness of the protagonist. Eliot places herself in Dorothea's bewilderment, so she can examine closer the protagonist's quandary. Isabel Archer undergoes a quandary very similar to Dorothea's in marrying an oppressive man who only wants to manage her fortune. Like Eliot, James also intensifies Isabel's characterization by making her a victim of her own romantic expectation of reality. It is remarkable to examine how James fortifies Isabel against a commonplace and a foreseeable future that happens to the majority of heroines. By making Isabel the center of the novel, James not only underscores her inner consciousness, but also her uncertain selfhood reflects in the novel's formal irresolution.

Thus, the greatness and originality of Eliot and James concerning the art of creating female types result from their psychological and artistic approaches to characters. Despite the realist foundations of the novels *Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, the heroines Dorothea and Isabel are not merely delineated by the outward world, but also by the psychological elements that are rooted in their personalities. Moreover, the consistency of their artistic and psychological depths also interferes with the development of the stories since they are characters not conceived on the basis of the traditional literary validities. In this sense, the next chapter aims at focusing on the peculiar ways by which Eliot and James explore the complex characterization of Dorothea and Isabel along the course of their trajectories. We shall see in the way these characters are designed some aspects of modern fiction, of which Eliot and James are forerunners.

Chapter II: The Design of the Female Protagonist as a Sign of Modernity in *Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady*

Having outlined George Eliot's and Henry James's positions in relation to the fictive representation of characters in the Anglo-American tradition, I shall focus in this chapter on how the heroines Dorothea Brooke and Isabel Archer are characterized in the novels *Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady* respectively showing how this design is an index of Eliot's and James's closeness to modern fiction.

In order to examine Dorothea's and Isabel's delineation I will divide this chapter into two sections. In the first section, I will discuss the passage from nineteenth-century realism to modern prose fiction. In so doing, I will have more solid grounds to explain what I am considering as aspects of modernity in Eliot's and James's novels.

Having explained the features that describe modern fiction proper such as the exploration of character's consciousness, complexification of the narrating voice and plot openness, I will proceed to the analysis of the two protagonists in the second main section. It is relevant to mention that these elements do not achieve the same level in Eliot's and James's novels. Therefore, we must consider that despite the similarities readers may find in Dorothea's and Isabel's characterizations, there are differences which have to be underscored. This is what I aim at doing in this section by showing how Eliot's and James's singular achievements contribute to the beginning of the modern novel.

2.1 – The Passage from Realism *Tout Court* to Modernity

I shall now indicate some features that characterize the creation of the modern novel. To do so, I shall firstly point out the passage from the nineteenth-century realistic representations to new perspectives grounded on human subjectivity, from which the modern novel arises. Next, I shall discuss some aspects that characterize modern prose fiction such as the exploration of character's consciousness, the multiplicity the narrative voice, and plot openness. I will be resorting to theorian Erich Auerbach, who looks into the exploration of character's subjectivity as well as the different narrating voices as signs of modernity and to

Michael H. Levenson and Frank Kermode, who analyse the concept of plot. Finally, I shall include the standpoints that certain historians and other theorists convey to underscore the feature of Eliot's and James's modernity on which this dissertation focuses: the subjectivity of the heroine and its implication on novel design.

Nineteenth-century realistic assumptions claimed that the novel should accurately portray human life through scientific research on people and social environment. As a result, the so-called "realistic novel" is seen not only by writers but also by the reading public as a sort of art that deals with problems of humankind in a serious way. Erich Auerbach (1987) ascertains that the novel throughout the second half of the nineteenth century acquires the earnest function of an objective study. In this light, all social and psychological investigations that spring out of prose fiction must be based on a scientific methodology. Despite the right of fiction in claiming its own field and mingling different styles, subjects have to be explored according to scientific accounts since the activity of the novelist is compared to that of the scientist's. This reveals the strength of the positivist influence on the novel owing to the search for new effective patterns on which authors must rely.⁸⁰

Nevertheless, traditional justifications of value collapsed at the very ending of the nineteenth century as human subjectivity turned into the rightful support for knowledge. A close look at the history of philosophy conveys a strong assault on positivism (if we recall Henri Bergson's intuitive theory) as well as on religious and moral dogmas. By examining the philosophical works of Mathew Arnold, Walter Pater and T. H. Huxley in relation to mental processes, Michael H. Levenson (1992) asserts that subjectivity became the locus of experience. All assumptions that seemed objective and permanent were cut off. Thus, aesthetic value came to reside in the way of perceiving or conceiving subjects, which dismissed the "mere fact", the mechanical, the enclosed. This means a move in the direction of a "quicken multiple consciousness".⁸¹ In other words, art and human knowledge were taken to have a speculative basis since what we consider "value" came to reside within consciousness, and all

⁸⁰ AUERBACH, Eric. "Germinie Lacerteux", p. 446

⁸¹ LEVENSON, Michael H. "Consciousness", p. 18-19

other values were said to derive from it.⁸² Such position gave new perspectives to prose fiction although we still realize the remains of realistic representation in the novel until nowadays.

Among the chief aspects of the modern novel, we can highlight the exploration of character's consciousness, the presence of different narrating voices and the idea of an open plot, as was said above. Erich Auerbach's analysis of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* provides us with a good example. It conveys the shift from an objective narrator to a subjective one insofar as the events of the novel spring out of characters' consciousnesses. To Auerbach, whenever the narrator refers to the house or one of Mrs Ramsay's servants, readers do not attain an objective account of what the author knows about them, but of what the female protagonist thinks or feels about them at a certain moment. Moreover, the text does not display the narrator's knowledge about Mrs Ramsay's personality, but the impressions and effects of this personality on other people through several metaphors as well as the other characters' attempts to decipher the enigmas related to Mrs Ramsay's mysterious self.⁸³

The strategy employed by Woolf in order to expand character's consciousness, which requires a different attitude from the novelist, also results in the opposition to the idea of a "single" narrative point of view. In this sense, there is no longer a single narrator that has an entire control of the text, but "several narrators" that picture the thoughts of characters. Auerbach acknowledges that some European writers such as Charles Dickens, George Meredith, Honoré de Balzac and Gustave Flaubert before the rise of the modern novel had already pointed to the subjective side of their characters. However, these novelists among others displayed the way of thinking and feeling of their hero types through an accurate knowledge of the external reality. Hence all actions, thoughts and feelings that came from characters should be properly interpreted and described. In this sense, what distinguishes Virginia Woolf's narrative is the fact that the impressions of reality, which make the narrative complex, do not ensue from a single subject. Indeed, it is the multiplicity of subjects – illustrated in *To the Lighthouse* by Mrs. Ramsay, the family, the servants and so forth – that produces the several "consciousnesses" readers notice in the text.⁸⁴ All these characters who

⁸² Ibidem, p. 18-19

⁸³ AUERBACH, Erich. "A Meia Marrom", p. 481-482

⁸⁴ Ibidem, p. 482-483

become the real subjects of the novel are engaged in looking into the objective reality, which is depicted by the enigmatic Mrs. Ramsay.

Consequently, the concept of plot, which is faced as a static element by the realistic tradition, is deeply affected by the literary interest in subjectivity in the modern period. As Michael H. Levenson puts it, the plan of incident and plot in modern fiction is considered a static device, whereas deeper literary concern is ascribed to subjectivity. For this reason, the consequent enshrining of consciousness represents the overcoming of any artistic constraint and the awareness of new aesthetic possibilities.⁸⁵ Thus, subjectivity does not stand in a fixed correspondence to objectivity since it possesses a dynamism that challenges aesthetic boundaries, whereas objectivity remains immobile. Inasmuch as subjectivity turns into the repository of value for the novel, the idea of an “enclosed plot” is spurned by the subsequent writers of the modern age. As Frank Kermode (1968) remarks, novelists like James Joyce and Robert Musil struggle with the problems derived from the clash between a comfortable plot and the non-narrative contingencies of human life. Musil’s masterpiece *The Man Without Qualities*, for instance, consists of a multidimensional and fragmentary sort of work that discards the possibility of a narrative end.⁸⁶ Such reluctance to the formal resolution of the novel reveals a new position of the writer towards the reader: instead of providing a plot that fulfills the public’s expectations, the modern novelist leaves the story open, so readers can complete it according to their viewpoints.

Before moving to the discussion of Eliot’s and James’s delineation of their protagonists and its consequences for novel design, it is important to stress that these novelists and, obviously, their masterpieces *Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, are examples of the realistic novel despite the innovations their authors grant to prose fiction. In fact, issues concerning marriage, social environment and money, which characterize realism in fiction, are strongly present in both novels. In *Middlemarch*, for instance, Eliot’s narrator reveals a naturalistic standpoint when it declares that “For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that is not greatly determined by what lies outside it”.⁸⁷ In relation to *The Portrait of a*

⁸⁵ LEVENSON, Michael H. Op. Cit., p. 22

⁸⁶ KERMODE, Frank. “Literary Fiction and Reality”, p. 127-128

⁸⁷ ELIOT, George. *Middlemarch*, p. 785

Lady, Charles Feidelson claims that, for most part of the novel, James's narrator does not see directly through Isabel's eyes. Indeed, he sees many things that the heroine does not and that is why she does not completely embody a "center of consciousness".⁸⁸ We can also infer that neither *Middlemarch* nor *The Portrait of a Lady* introduce a multiplicity of voices in the narrative as we can note in later modern novels.

However, unlike the nineteenth-century realistic tradition, George Eliot and Henry James show their original procedures towards the creation of characters. As I have said, this achievement is profoundly attached to a new position of the novelist in relation to plot and narrative. Walter Allen's comments on the way Eliot matches character to action elucidate my statement. According to this literary historian, Eliot places the responsibility for human beings' fates firmly on their moral choices and attitudes. Since it is our choice of actions that shape our lives, then plot is no longer a device external to characters. In this way, character itself becomes plot once its capacity for growth and ability to endure the consequences of choices shape the events of the novel.⁸⁹ David Cecil heightens Allen's remarks when he ascertains that Eliot's fiction entails no idea of plot according to Victorian perspectives because her stories spring from a wide picture of characters and follow what she regards as the best development of her initial idea:

But since George Eliot began with an idea of character and situation, her plot was intended to follow not a standardized formula but what she conceived to be the logical development of that idea; and this might entail something quite different from the accepted Victorian notion of plot. It might entail no marriage, no happy ending, no character answering to the Victorian conception of hero or heroine. (...) Finally, since the action of George Eliot's stories arises logically from characters, those strokes of fortune, coincidences, sudden inheritances, long lost wills, which are the stock-in-trade of the ordinary Victorian plot, are inevitably omitted. (...) In fact, the laws conditioning the form of George Eliot's novels are the same laws that condition those of Henry James, Wells and Conrad and Arnold Bennet. Hers are the first examples in English of the novel in its mature form; in them it structurally comes of age.⁹⁰

Cecil's comments convey that Eliot develops her stories according to her sensibility towards the situation of a certain character. This certainly breaks the Victorian notion of plot insofar as the novelist's way of perceiving reality, which is something changeable according to

⁸⁸ FEIDELSON, Charles. *The Moment of The Portrait of a Lady*, p. 715

⁸⁹ ALLEN, Walter. *The English Novel*, p. 220-221

⁹⁰ CECIL, David. *Victorian Novelists*, p. 267-269

the moment, will affect her close relation with characters. In spite of being aware of the demands of the reading public, which are supported by prevailing artistic conventions, Eliot looks into the reasons that lead people to take on certain directions in life according to her own conception of the world. The tragic consequences which ensue from human choices are also carefully examined by the author's subjective view of individual and society. Though Eliot does not disregard the importance of realistic assumptions, she endeavours to explore the subjective aspects of human life such as individual choice and its consequences.

Insofar as the hero or heroine type attains a peculiar role in Eliot's works – she is also the author of *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner* (1861), *Romola* (1863), *Felix Holt* (1866) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876) – it is important to assert that the idea of narrator as an entity or a voice which analyses characters from a certain distance becomes irrelevant for Eliot's art. As Michael H. Levenson precisely points out, Eliot's narrator in *Middlemarch* is not another character that observes people through their outward features or actions, but an inward presence that approaches them in order to express their hidden thoughts and feelings. This shows that the way Eliot deals with her characters modifies the function of her narrator since it is no longer seen as the distant beholder we can notice in most realistic novels:

The narrator is not another character, but a disembodied presence, moving freely over the dramatic scene, and granted prerogatives not allowed to mere mortals. Without becoming implicated in the recorded scene, the narrator becomes an assimilating, amalgamating force who makes transparent the opacities between individuals, who lets moral evaluation mingle freely with description, who sees hidden thoughts quite as clearly as natural landscapes, who hears distinctly faintest whispers of introspection.⁹¹

In relation to Henry James, it is relevant to underscore that his interest in the wide exploration of life as well as in the form of prose fiction conveys the singularity of his art. Much of the modernity of James's works ensues from his concern with the technical problems presented to the novel. Walter Allen states that James's goal of exploring the aesthetic intensity of the novel without discarding ethical issues attests to his proficiency as a novelist:

⁹¹ LEVENSON, Michael H. Op. Cit., p. 8

The greatest figure among the generation of novelists who came to maturity during the eighties – Stevenson, Gissing, and Moore were among them – remains Henry James. (...) We read him today as a modern novelist in a sense that Stevenson, Gissing and Moore were not, and we do so because, for better and for worse, more than anyone else he made what seems to be the specifically modern novel. (...) We know James as a novelist better than any other apart from Flaubert, and in the history of the English novel James holds a position analogous to Flaubert's in the French: both strove to give the novel the aesthetic intensity of a great poem or a great painting. James was at any rate an Anglo-Saxon, and his fiction is as ethical in its intentions as it is aesthetic. These two aspects of his art cannot be separated.⁹²

In this light, it can be noticed that James's modernity ensues from the perception of the novel as a dynamic entity. Such awareness of the aesthetic intensity of prose fiction certainly interferes in the main elements of the novel such as creation of characters, narrative and plot. John Holloway's comments (1964) serve as an enlargement of Allen's. According to Holloway, James grasped the limitations of the world in which he moved and realized that the social world had little to offer the artist. Hence he endeavoured to seek for a more extensive picture of life in writing through his artistic sense:

James's distinction lies in the quick yet strong intelligence which unremittingly controls his work; in the clarity and nobility of his moral vision; and in his great sense of the richness and beauty of what at least is potential in human life. These qualities of intelligence, integrity, and idealism, this sense of what life can offer, are forcibly reminiscent of what was best in the culture of New England, Boston, Harvard, and New York in which James grew up. James's earlier work is largely set in America; and in it these qualities are in fact. His genuineness is completely and splendidly reassuring in the larger and more ambitious *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881).⁹³

Among the works Henry James wrote in his earlier phase, dealing with "the international period", besides *The Portrait of a Lady* we can include *Roderick Hudson* (1875), *The American* (1877), *The Europeans* (1878), *Daisy Miller* (1878), and *Washington Square* (1881). During this time James fostered a close association with the French novelists Gustave Faubert and Honoré de Balzac as well as the Russian Ivan Turgenev. As a matter of fact, James decided to study foreign literature deeply because he saw that successful novelists like George Eliot, despite her singularity in relation to realism *tout court*, achieved the massive richness of external and material facts of realist writers like Émile Zola.⁹⁴ As a result, he pointed to Gustave Flaubert and Honoré de Balzac as the artists who ascribed to the French

⁹² ALLEN, Walter. Op. Cit., p. 262-263

⁹³ HOLLOWAY, John. "The Literary Scene", p. 55-56

⁹⁴ Ibidem, p. 60

novel much of its form and complexity. According to Sérgio Luiz Prado Bellei, James considers Flaubert as a novelist who is supremely concerned with his medium and with craft in writing. In this sense, Flaubert's novels convey a perfect style that satisfies the reader's need for beauty and art. Balzac, in his turn, succeeds in making his fiction as vastly inclusive of the multiplicity of the real as readers may wish. Without losing artistic control, Balzac includes the large range of life in prose fiction.⁹⁵

Although James owes much of his proficiency to Flaubert and Balzac, it does not mean that he did not manifest his criticism of the French novel. Such criticism highlights James's interests in the development of characters. As Bellei infers, James sensed that Flaubert did not entirely embrace the variety and richness of life insofar as he sacrificed the multiplicity of voices of experience due to his excessive concern with style and form. Flaubert's obsession to the restrictions ensued from the craft of fiction did not allow him to see characters as endowed with intense psychological complexity.⁹⁶ In other words, unlike Flaubert, James looked at characters as human beings endowed with a capacity of consciousness. Thus, James sowed the seeds to the psychological novel once the psychological delineation of characters was placed above plot and incident. In relation to Balzac, James responds negatively to particular aspects of his fiction such as is the case of a certain artificiality in the delineation of his characters.⁹⁷ Millicent Bell implies that the growth of James's art gradually shows that the inner conflict and self-contradictions of heroines like Isabel Archer also point to the novelist's reflection in relation to his power over characters in the novel form.⁹⁸

In this sense, James's criticism points to the need of endowing characters with intense psychological complexity, which will generate the so-called "psychological novel" rather than the novel of plot and incident as Bellei claims.⁹⁹ The way Henry James attaches the representation of hero or heroine types to the content of the novel itself displays his endeavours to turn the social novel upside down by placing its subject in someone's consciousness. We can realize such achievement in *The Portrait of a Lady*.

⁹⁵ BELLEI, Sérgio Luiz Prado. "James's Theory of the Novel", p. 81

⁹⁶ Ibidem, p. 78

⁹⁷ Ibidem, p. 79

⁹⁸ BELL, Millicent. "Isabel Archer and The Affronting of Plot", p. 756

⁹⁹ BELLEI, Sérgio Luiz Prado. Op. Cit., p. 78

Instead of defining Isabel by the external impressions of social environment, James invests in her imaginative mind. As Charles Feidelson asserts, James's narrator conveys the whole process of Isabel's self-awareness once he relies on her conviction of inner possibilities. Therefore, her changes of behaviour and opinion figure the uniqueness of her perspectives in relation to her own fate as a woman.¹⁰⁰ This is what makes her delineation very different from the social types created by the realistic paradigm. Millicent Bell adds the possibility of conceiving Isabel as a female protagonist without a defined story since her failure to attain a prescribed role corresponds to the author's opposition to the traditional validities of prose fiction:

But the idea of a discrepancy between character and story – a technical problem on the one hand – is profoundly thematic also. It is related to the way James conceives the experience of his heroine, but also the way in which he finds himself forced to look at all human attempts to bring into the relation the claim of personal essence and a design of life which validates it to itself and to the world. From one point of view the result of the author's search for a story that will fully express such heroine is only in part successful, as her search for role is also frustrated, and even self-frustrated. At the same time, the negativity that marks her career, her profound distrust of offered roles, is both an acceptance of personal defeat and the writer's renunciation of story in its traditional sense.¹⁰¹

All these observations I chose to explain part of George Eliot's and Henry James's fictional range elucidate the tendency to what will constitute modern views towards the process of delineating heroines. It is important to notice that much of Eliot's and James's modernity rests on the exploration of female protagonists' subjectivities. This is what changes the prevailing patterns of plot and narrative and turns the novel into a sophisticated discursive art.

¹⁰⁰ FEIDELSON, Charles. *Op. Cit.*, p. 717

¹⁰¹ BELL, Millicent. *Op. Cit.*, p. 749

2.2 – George Eliot’s and Henry James’s Inputs to Dorothea’s and Isabel’s Subjectivity

It is important to emphasize from the very beginning of this section that my aim is to examine the singularity of Eliot’s and James’s approaches to the exploration of Dorothea’s and Isabel’s subjectivity in the novels *Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady*. In relation to the other modern features in Eliot’s and James’s novels – complex narrating voices and plot openness – it is relevant to state that these two elements turn into corollaries of the analysis of the protagonists’ consciousnesses. In other words, they ensue from the authors’ goals to look into characters’ inwardness. The strategy I will be employing to analyze Dorothea’s and Isabel’s subjectivities consists in the observation of their trajectories: presentation, marriage and reassessment.

The ways Dorothea and Isabel are introduced in *Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady* convey Eliot’s and James’s concerns with the social environment where the heroines’ actions will take place. In this sense, it is worth mentioning how the historical image of Saint Theresa of Avila locates Dorothea in a firm social and political context. Despite Eliot’s interest in history to illustrate women’s anonymity in society, it is important to acknowledge that the novelist also employs her historical approach to show her ambivalent position towards Dorothea. Thus, the symbolic picture of Saint Theresa points somehow to the complexity of Dorothea’s delineation. In relation to Isabel, the disparity between American and English social manners is a possible explanation to the heroine’s initial reluctance to marriage. We shall notice thus at first glance that these cultural demarcations are important once Isabel, who is completely fond of her independence in accordance with her American values, regards the British system as a narrow road for the fulfillment of her nature. However, since James’s fiction undermines the concept of a female character being formed by social conventions alone, the clash between American and British patterns does not entirely elucidate Isabel’s singularity.

The multiple feelings of Dorothea and Isabel, which reveal the intricacy of their characterizations, can be examined through the importance given to marriage in *Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady*. As a matter of fact, both novels underscore the issue of marriage insofar as the female universe of nineteenth-century prose fiction is centred in marital

problems. Nevertheless, we shall notice how Eliot's and James's analyses of Dorothea and Isabel not only display the inner complexity of these heroines, but also focus much of the subject of the chosen novels on their dilemmas. Therefore, it is essential to look at marriage from two perspectives: marriage as the possibility of an inner fulfillment and marriage as the endurance of their wrong choices.

The heroines' views of marriage as a means of improving their moral lives show that their expectations differ from the other ladies' who belong to their social environments. In this way, it is propitious to indicate the philosophical standpoints that lie behind Dorothea's and Isabel's worldviews insofar as these women consider Edward Casaubon and Gilbert Osmond as the men who can fulfill the demands of their female souls. Once Casaubon's and Osmond's cruel attitudes unmask their authoritarianism, marriage turns into a phase when Dorothea and Isabel face the upsetting results of their choices. That is the moment when Eliot and James convey much of their modernity and artistic proficiency by looking into the subjective side of these female protagonists. Indeed, Dorothea's and Isabel's conflicting thoughts and feelings, which figure their existential crises in the narrative, reveal how Eliot and James, unlike traditional realist writers, expand the inner potentialities of a single character.

As a result, the opportunity of a second marriage, which derives from Dorothea's and Isabel's courses of action, resembles a sort of "spiritual rebirth" for the settlement of their dilemmas. In this light, we shall observe how the plots of *Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady* do not reach the same conclusion owing to the different responses Dorothea and Isabel manifest towards the possibility of a second union. Yet the formal closing of both novels is affected by these heroines' resolutions no matter how peculiar they are. For this purpose, the assumption of the female protagonist meddling in the fictional structure of the plot illustrates Eliot's and James's contributions to the emergence of the modern novel.

The historical and political context in which the novel *Middlemarch* is set – the 1832 Reform Bill in England – points to George Eliot's concern with the social condition of her native country. According to Felicia Bonaparte, this particular Reform Bill – the first of three in the nineteenth century – brought the law into agreement with some significant questions at

that time such as the abolition of slavery in the British Empire.¹⁰² In this sense, Eliot is associated with the realist line developed by Dickens, Trollope, Brontë, Gaskell among others, by denouncing the flaws of the order and by situating the leading characters in this context. Bonaparte also states that *Middlemarch* can be classified as a condition-of-England novel inasmuch as the title indicates the backwardness of English society regarding “the march of civilization”. Whereas France advances in its laws and institutions, England finds itself no further along than the *middle* of the *march*.¹⁰³ Such insight is essential not only to our understanding of the title, but also to our awareness of the sort of environment where Eliot places her female protagonist.

Along with the setting, the prelude is an important introductory element. It announces the yearning to do good in the world through the image of Saint Theresa of Avila. Eliot implies that Theresa’s spiritual ecstasy is so intense that finds no expression in the world. Yet her ardour is still felt by women who envisage a better life in spite of the narrowness of social conventions:

That Spanish woman who lived three hundred years ago, was certainly not the last of her kind. Many Therasas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action; (...) With dim lights and tangled circumstance they tried to shape their thought and deed in noble agreement; but after all, to common eyes their struggles seemed mere inconsistency and formlessness; for these late-born Therasas were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul.¹⁰⁴

Despite the ironic hints in Eliot’s narrative, we can notice her criticism of social prejudices depicted by the “common eyes”, which do not allow us to recognize the noble souls who encompass the ardour to improve the world. Laurence Lerner looks into Eliot’s own attitude to Saint Theresa. To Lerner, Eliot clearly shows her ambivalence towards the Spanish saint as well as the women who have followed her model once we can realize the clumsiness and ineffectuality of passionate lives, but we can also note an unhesitating sympathy for the

¹⁰² BONAPARTE, Felicia. “Introduction to *Middlemarch*”, p. 32

¹⁰³ Ibidem, p. 31

¹⁰⁴ ELIOT, George. *Middlemarch*, p. 3 – chapter 1

yearning that makes them alive. Hence Eliot takes on this same ambivalent position towards Dorothea Brooke.¹⁰⁵

If we match Bonaparte's argument with Lerner's, we shall have the core of Dorothea's presentation in *Middlemarch*. A discriminating look at Lerner's standpoint already gives us a certain idea of the complexity of Dorothea's characterization. Inasmuch as he supports that Eliot's attitudes to Theresa and Dorothea are the same, we can perceive the writer's disapproval of female sacrifice. On the other hand, Eliot conveys a certain sympathy for the flame that nourishes women's inner strength. Bonaparte's political approach indicates the English conservatism, present in a provincial society. It is important to add that England had always prided itself in avoiding revolution by cultivating evolution. Thus, any attempt to change the social system radically would be considered subversive and Eliot had to create a figure that illustrated the need of moderate shifts. In this light, we deduce that Dorothea's zeal can "improve" her environment, not "alter" it. Nevertheless, once Saint Theresa, who advocated a new spirituality to hold the Catholic union, was persecuted by the Inquisition, we can presume that Dorothea could not have had a different fate. Like the Spanish saint, Dorothea is also a victim of the narrowness ensued from despotic systems. Her aspirations to assist people are undermined by the network of opinions and manners in a provincial society that attempts to shape the individual self.

Eliot provides us with a complex view of Dorothea at the very beginning of the first chapter. The shifts of emphasis we realize in the opening picture in which the female protagonist is presented display the proficiency of Eliot's narrator in evoking ambivalence, ambiguity, antithesis by means of the images which define Dorothea:

Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters; and her profile as well as her stature and bearing seemed to gain the more dignity from her plain garments, which by the side of provincial fashion gave her the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible, -or from one of our elder poets, in a paragraph of today's newspaper. She was usually spoken of as being remarkably clever, but with the addition that her sister Celia had more common-sense. (...) Young women of such birth, living in a quiet country-house, and attending a village church hardly larger than a parlour, naturally regarded frippery as the ambition of a huckster's daughter

¹⁰⁵ LERNER, Laurence. "Dorothea and the Theresa-Complex", p. 226

(...) such reasons would have been enough to account for plain dress, quite apart from religious feeling; but in Miss Brooke's case, religion alone would have determined it.¹⁰⁶

There is a mismatch inscribed in Dorothea's appearance, a disbalance between *form* and *content*: she dresses poorly but is beautiful. We sense her beauty overgrows her clothes as her profile illustrated by "the fine quotation from the Bible" is too singular to be described in "a paragraph of today's newspaper". Therefore, we realize that Dorothea from the first paragraph of the novel presents a *problem* for the narrator as well as for readers. How will this balance be solved?

Eliot's puzzling outline of Dorothea is worthy of our attention also because at the same time Eliot is being very critical, she is making very high complements to Dorothea. To illustrate this viewpoint, Laurence Lerner believes that the critical details of the passage are not wholly to Dorothea's discredit. Though the opening sentences give the impression of Miss Brooke's being out of place in a civilized provincial society, we can sense something deeper addressed to her owing to the ambiguity of the images of the fine quotation of the Bible as well as the elder poets in relation to the daily newspaper. Indeed, the former images, which refer to Dorothea's profile, are implicitly contrasted to the latter one. If readers attach the figure of the fine quotation of the Bible to the one of the elder poets, they will realize the triviality of today's newspaper whose goal is to inform provincial society. Thus, Eliot wants to show that whereas Dorothea with her oddity matters to us, provincial society with its daily manners does not.¹⁰⁷

Lerner's standpoints convey the doubleness which is deeply rooted in Eliot's narrative: it is true that her ironic tone indicates Dorothea's oddity in the social environment she is confined, but Eliot's sympathy for her lies behind this clear ironic portrait. Thus, we can infer that the first image of Dorothea suggests the complexity of Eliot's narrating voice insofar as it embraces two opposing elements: irony and sympathy. Karen Chase implies that the aim of the opening image is to subordinate description to explanation. In this way, the narrator poses some elements (beauty, dress) to inform us about Dorothea's temperament and the environment she is located in. But these features are not the main information. It is her

¹⁰⁶ ELIOT, George. Op. Cit., p. 7 – chapter 1

¹⁰⁷ LERNER, Larrence. Op. Cit., p. 227-228

religious sensibility we can note at the end of the paragraph that will definitely direct her life.¹⁰⁸ Thus, we can imply that the range of George Eliot's narrative in the first chapter, despite its multiplicity of details, not only displays a positive view of Dorothea, but also indicates the heroine's superiority in relation to ordinary women who do not cultivate a spiritual flame, as in:

Her mind was theoretic, and yarned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world which might frankly include the parish of Tipton and her own rule of conduct there; she was enamoured of intensity and greatness, and rash in embracing whatever seemed to her to have those aspects; likely to seek martyrdom, to make retractations, and then to incur martyrdom after all in a quarter where she had not sought it. Certainly such elements in the character of a marriageable girl tended to interfere with her lot, and hinder it from being decided according to custom, by good looks, vanity, and merely canine affection.¹⁰⁹

Such inner image of Dorothea, which highlights her zeal for self-sacrifice, her wish to achieve the highest where she sees it, foreshadows important events in the novel, for example: that Dorothea's expectations of marriage cannot be conventional once her ideals claim for human martyrdom and moral improvement. Indeed, Dorothea can fortify her altruistic feelings and learn to be a useful person through marriage. Also, we acknowledge that Eliot's admiration for Dorothea is heightened whenever the narrator attempts to see the protagonist from inside. That is why historians like Walter Allen insist that Dorothea stands at the heart of Eliot's conception.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, as the political aspect of the novel suggests, Dorothea is confined in a society that is reluctant to change.

Concluding the presentation of Dorothea, we can say that it prepares the reader for a trajectory which will involve a process of learning. Besides, it settles a double bind between the narrator and Dorothea – she is to be criticized as well as praised. All this shows us that the character we have before us promises some degree of complexity.

Unlike George Eliot, Henry James does not introduce his female protagonist in the opening scene of *The Portrait of a Lady*. Actually, he describes the English ceremony we know as afternoon tea. In so doing, his narrator reports the manners of the ladies and

¹⁰⁸ CHASE, Karen. "Mind and Body in *Middlemarch*", p. 140

¹⁰⁹ ELIOT, George. Op. Cit., p. 8 – chapter 1

¹¹⁰ ALLEN, Walter. Op. Cit., p. 230

gentlemen who reside in an old English country-house. We can realize that James's procedure is very realistic since James is describing the time and the place of the scene. The author also stresses the importance of the house for the successive English and American inhabitants due to its hospitality. As it follows, we are acquainted with the presence of an old gentleman who came from America and kept his American physiognomy in the best order.¹¹¹ James's accounts of the house and its inhabitants are important not only because this place carries family memories or other connotations such as privacy and antiquity, but mainly because his narrator hints at the disparity between English and American manners. The heroine Isabel Archer is presented under similar circumstances.

It is interesting to observe that Henry James lets his male figures (Mr. Touchett, Ralph Touchett and Lord Warburton) create an image of Isabel in their dialogue before focusing directly on her. Indeed, these men make Isabel the subject of their dialogue by discussing her origin and manners. It is not by chance that James firstly allows these male characters to display their views of Isabel once the novelist wishes to convey that the Touchetts' and Warburton's positions of beholders, which reduce Isabel into "something" to be argued about, will be undermined by his art according to the heroine's performance. As I have emphasized in this work, James's art places characters above the social world by endowing them with a voice of their own. Furthermore, we have to remember that the subject of these gentlemen's conversation is Lord Warburton's proposal of marriage, which means the appropriate solution to the nineteenth-century lady. Despite James's ironical touch, we can observe the strength of Isabel's intellectual power and moral determination when his narrator finally throws a closer look at her:

Isabel, however, gave us as little heed as possible to comic treacheries; she kept her eyes on her book and tried to fix her mind. It had lately occurred to her that her mind was a good deal of a vagabond, and she had spent much ingenuity in training it to a military step and teaching it to advance, to halt, to retreat, to perform even more complicated maneuvers, at the word of command. Just now she had given it marching orders and it had been trudging over the sandy plains of a history of German Thought.¹¹²

¹¹¹ JAMES, Henry. *The Portrait of a Lady*, p. 17-18 – chapter 1

¹¹² *Ibidem*, p. 33-34

This short passage elucidates Isabel's endeavours to enhance her own self through the act of reading. Like Dorothea, Isabel is also in search of a continuous self-improvement once she conveys a willingness to learn new issues. Such openness for knowledge and personal experience is exactly what gives Isabel confidence to face all consequences that ensue from a woman's choice no matter how harsh they can be. According to Auchincloss, Isabel knows that she has a vague destiny before her:

She is the loveliest and most appealing of all James's heroines. She is very fine, very straight, totally honest, and candid to a fault, and she has a charm which captivates every other character as well as the reader. Isabel has a high sense that she must be prepared for her destiny – whatever that destiny may be. She has no great opinion of her own capacities, but she appreciates that she is not made of common materials.¹¹³

The impressions of an enigmatic future as well as the feeling of being different are the internal qualities in Isabel's selfhood that lead her to discard a marital commitment to Lord Warburton. When Ralph Touchett inquires about the motives that led her to refuse Lord Warburton, Isabel replies that he is too perfect according to the English patterns, and such perfection intrigues her. Besides, Isabel does not wish to be a "superior being", or an object to be worshipped by the husband. She wants to be a "real woman" with her faults and qualities.¹¹⁴ This is completely understandable if we take into account the contrast between her search for challenges and his British way of life. A woman who considers herself unusual to common eyes and ready for an unforeseeable fate cannot accept a man who represents a successful model of the system. Sousa Santos ascertains that Isabel's zeal for an all-embracing consciousness equals her zeal for liberty. In this light, her higher ideals are related to individual freedom, whereas Lord Warburton seems to offer a routine that can hinder her prospects.¹¹⁵

Undoubtedly, much of Isabel's strength springs out of her urge for independence. Her independent-mindedness is one of the qualities which arouses the other characters' attention. As Lyall H. Powers ascertains, Isabel quickly proves to be charming and self-reliant. Isabel remains the focus of her relatives' concerns because they regard her as a "quite independent"

¹¹³ AUCHINCLOSS, Louis. "The International Situation: *The Portrait of a Lady*", p. 724

¹¹⁴ JAMES, Henry. Op. Cit., p. 132 – chapter 15

¹¹⁵ SANTOS, Maria Isabel Ramalho de Souza. "Isabel's Freedom: *The Portrait of a Lady*", p. 303

American girl. Inasmuch as her relatives had never experienced a close relationship with an independent American woman like Isabel, they are curious to observe her manners in their social circle. This also makes her characterization the center of the story once all eyes are focused upon her.¹¹⁶ As a matter of fact, Isabel's defense of her own freedom is what leads her to flinch from any kind of "protection" as we can observe when she declares that Mrs Touchett is not responsible for her life. Isabel's attitude astonishes both her cousin and Lord Warburton:

Lord Warburton, who appeared constantly desirous of a nearer view of Miss Archer, strolled toward the two cousins at the moment, and as he did so she rested her wide eyes on him. "Oh no; she has not adopted me. I'm not a candidate for adoption"

"I beg a thousand pardons", Ralph murmured. "I meant – I meant" – He hardly knew what he meant.

"You meant she has taken me up: Yes, she likes to take people up. She has been very kind to me; but", she added with a certain visible vagueness of desire to be explicit, "I'm very fond of liberty".¹¹⁷

However, we must remember that the disparity between American and British outlooks in *The Portrait of a Lady* does not seem so relevant as it is in James's previous works (*The Europeans* and *Daisy Miller*, for example). Once we have seen that the purpose of the novelist is to focus on the potentialities of the female character, the social world around Isabel and the other characters cannot be regarded as the only explanation for their attitudes, otherwise the representation of personality would be defined by the outward world.

We observed earlier how James's art avoids deterministic views concerning the conception of characters. As an illustration, let us see Louis Auchincloss's comment on the international theme in James in relation to *The Portrait of a Lady*. To Auchincloss, though the American novelist still contrasts the naivety of America with the experience of the Old World, Isabel does not have much difficulty in adapting to European standards because she knows that these conventions make little difference. To defy these rules is to make much of them against her own self.¹¹⁸ That is why the contrast of manners no longer attains the importance it did in James's earlier novels since the current focus is a fuller picture of the consciousness of a woman. At this point Isabel's presentation deeply differs from Dorothea's despite the

¹¹⁶ POWERS, Lyall H. "Miss Archer and Mrs. Osmond", p. 33

¹¹⁷ JAMES, Henry. *Op. Cit.*, p. 30 – chapter 3

¹¹⁸ AUCHINCLOSS, Louis. *Op. Cit.*, p. 726

singularity of their designs in the novels. Whereas Eliot is very concerned with emphasizing the contrast of Dorothea's personality with the society around her, James regards the struggle between American and European values as an issue that does not support the originality of Isabel's design. Hence we can observe that James, unlike Eliot, is not so concerned with making his protagonist a model that counteracts the social world.

Summing up, the way Isabel is presented in the novel, first as an *object* of conversation then as the *author* of important choices shows us one of the central themes in *The Portrait of a Lady*.

The belief in marriage as an opportunity to fulfill the spiritual life of a young woman is a common issue by means of which Eliot and James examine the psychological growth of their female protagonists. In *Middlemarch*, for instance, Eliot initially shows Dorothea's motives for embracing marital life as deriving from her claims for great ideals:

And how should Dorothea not marry? – A girl so handsome and with such prospects? Nothing could hinder it but her love of extremes, and her insistence on regulating life according to notions which might cause a wary man to hesitate before he made her an offer, or even might lead her at last to refuse all offers. A young lady of some birth and fortune, who knelt suddenly down on a brick floor by the side of a sick labourer and prayed fervidly as if she thought herself living in the time of the Apostles – who had strange whims of fasting like a Papist, and of sitting up at night to read old theological books.¹¹⁹

The charm of Eliot's satire can also be noticed in the following lines of the paragraph when the narrator compares Dorothea to a fervid prayer or to a wife who always appears in the morning with a new scheme for the application of her income, which can become a real nuisance for the poor husband. Yet Eliot's ironic remarks revert to Dorothea's defense when the narrator states the female condition – women were expected to have weak opinions – and the power of the environment over human beings: "Sane people did what their neighbors did".¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ ELIOT, George. *Op. Cit.*, p. 9 – chapter 1

¹²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 9

Since Eliot has underscored Dorothea's intellectual inclination – the quotations I have included above display the heroine's "theoretic mind" as well as her interest in "theological subjects" – it is relevant to indicate the philosophical assumptions that are embedded in Eliot's fictional world. Indeed, these ideas are underneath Dorothea's characterization and, consequently, strengthen her purposes to assume a matrimonial bond. George Eliot's views concerning human nature and religion spring from her intellectual attachment to the philosophers Ludwig Feuerbach, Auguste Comte, and Baruch Spinoza. It is important to add that Eliot translated Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* and Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* into English.

To Feuerbach, theological beliefs must be humanized insofar as Christianity projects the virtues of humanity in God. Scrutinizing the philosopher's project, which argues that Christianity worships human values behind the mask of theology, Frederick R. Karl ascertains that some aspects of Feuerbach's religious humanism such as Christian morality without transcendental faith, humanism without theological grounds, and the optimism towards man regarding his possible redemption without God's revelation, are points of reference in Eliot's fiction.¹²¹ In addition, as Barry Qualls points out, Feuerbach's religious humanism elevates women by considering them the spontaneous priestesses of the human community. Thus, the philosopher turns the patriarchal basis of theology upside down once he regards love as essentially feminine in its nature.¹²² It is not by chance that Dorothea is associated to religious images such as the "Blessed Virgin" and the "fine quotation of the Bible", which lose their transcendental meaning in Eliot's narrative, and also to theological learning as a sort of personal improvement. In fact, we shall observe that Dorothea's delineation attests to the power of female spirituality whenever she sees in human love a support to get over her quandaries without transcendental aids.

In Eliot's philosophy of humanity, Feuerbach's religious ideas are profoundly matched to Auguste Comte's ethical standpoints. Though the French philosopher is very drawn toward empiricist accounts in his work *Cours de philosophie positive*, in his later work entitled *System*

¹²¹ KARL, Frederick R. Op. Cit., p. 225

¹²² QUALLS, Barry. "George Eliot and philosophy", p. 123-124

of *Positive Polity*, which seems more interesting to Eliot, Comte displays an overt interest in moral questions. Unlike the earlier phase, his philosophy places the affective over the rational, allowing a larger place for feelings and emotions.¹²³ Whereas naturalist novelists such as Thomas Hardy inclined their concerns particularly to Comte's scientificism, George Eliot, the secular religious humanist, employed in the creation of her female protagonists much of the philosopher's interest in morality and religion freed from the theological codes of the past. According to Frederick R. Karl, Comte's positivism must be seen as one of the current philosophies of the nineteenth century which, similarly to utilitarian theories of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, attempts to replace Catholicism and Protestantism with new religious lights for humanity.¹²⁴ To Comte, moral sentiments are inherited via evolution, a process which moves human beings from egoistic instincts to altruistic ones. Since the sympathetic tendencies are stronger in the female sex, women have a special function in bringing about the positivist era.¹²⁵ In *Middlemarch*, what motivates Dorothea to accomplish an ideal life, which requires self-sacrifice and responsibility for others, is exactly the force of her altruistic nature. Much of her moral progress derives from her ability to place altruism above egoism.

We can acknowledge how the Feuerbachian and Comtean philosophical perspectives are important because they heighten Eliot's skills in outlining female characters like Dorothea not merely as conditioned individuals, despite the range of materialism we find in nineteenth-century philosophy. Following the rationalist line which shaped Eliot's mind, the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza exercised a great influence on her fictional world, especially in terms of the match between emotion and moral awareness pictured by characters' actions. As Rosemary Ashton hints, emotions are constantly struggling with reason in Spinoza's system. Whereas emotions are associated with the feelings that dominate human beings, reason is related to the discernment which points to the right attitudes. In this sense, in Spinoza's ethics, we are motivated to be driven by our emotions while at the same time urged to overcome them. To settle this contradiction, Spinoza asserts that although we cannot completely control

¹²³ ANGER, Suzy. Op. Cit., p. 85

¹²⁴ KARL, Frederick R. Op. Cit., p. 163

¹²⁵ ANGER, Suzy. Op. Cit., p. 80

our intimate emotions, we can exercise our limited power to bring about moral awareness.¹²⁶ Ashton also states that emotion carries a double effect in Spinoza's philosophy, so we can enter imaginatively into someone else's feelings. In this way, whenever someone we hate is in distress, we are satisfied since we hate him/her, but also sorry because s/he is like us, and has our fragilities.¹²⁷ In relation to Dorothea, we can assume that she is asked to educate her feelings by such imaginative sympathy when she particularly deals with pedantic and egoistic people like Casaubon. According to Ashton, the extension of sympathies, which illustrates the Spinozan education, is exactly what Dorothea will learn in her marriage. Indeed, Dorothea's growing awareness of life, which ensues from the conflict between Casaubon and her, enables the heroine to overcome her problems and to attain a greater perception of her relation to others – including her husband – in society.¹²⁸

Eliot's criticism of Dorothea becomes more acute when she indicates the heroine's inability to articulate her eagerness and disposition with life. Indeed, Dorothea searches for the enhancement of her knowledge so that she can accomplish her prospects. The problem is the fact she sees marriage only as an instrument for her self-learning, and so disregards the multiple aspects of this relationship: "Dorothea, with all her eagerness to know the truths of life, retained very childlike ideas about marriage. (...) the really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished".¹²⁹ Such narrowness and naivety from Dorothea's mind are the items that the majority of critics point to explain her great failure. Kate Flint, for example, asserts that Dorothea's sheltered existence causes simultaneous fervor and myopia. She fails to conceive a complete image of Edward Casaubon as a man owing to his scholarly attributes, which are figured by his knowledge of Latin and Greek¹³⁰. W. J. Harvey, in his turn, relies on the inevitability of a disastrous marriage for Dorothea's fate. Once she is morally innocent and ignorant of herself and the world, it is in marriage that her painful process of maturity must begin.¹³¹

¹²⁶ ASHTON, Rosemary. *George Eliot*, p. 15-16

¹²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 16

¹²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 74

¹²⁹ ELIOT, George. *Op. Cit.*, p. 10 – chapter 1

¹³⁰ FLINT, Kate. "George Eliot and gender", p. 162

¹³¹ HARVEY, W. J. "Introduction to *Middlemarch*", p. 162

Dorothea meets Edward Casaubon at a dinner party attended by important personalities of the town. She reveals her altruistic and humanitarian feelings by stating that farmers should make experiments for the good of all in spite of the possibility of losing money. We can sense the influence of Comte's positivism in Dorothea's viewpoint since it advocates the renunciation of the personal interest for the benefit of the entire social group. Yet Dorothea's opinions concerning farm affairs make her uncle Mr Brooke manifest his chauvinist criticism which regards women's understanding of political economy unsustainable. In this sense, Mr Brooke ignores his niece's opinion and confesses to Casaubon his efforts to follow the progress of human reason. When Casaubon declares that he has little leisure for literature due to his age, and thus needs a reader for his evenings because he lives "too much with the dead" and his mind "is something like the ghost of an ancient" since it tries to construct "the world as it used to be", Dorothea senses the profundity and neatness of his speech.¹³² From this moment on, her admiration for the ageing man is gradually strengthened and reaches its summit when Casaubon ascertains that she has motives for not considering herself a perfect horsewoman corresponding to Sir James's pattern of lady.¹³³ In fact, Casaubon causes a good impression on Dorothea when he declares that it is useless to inquire into the reasons why she considers horsemanship inappropriate for her:

Dorothea coloured with pleasure, and looked up gratefully to the speaker. Here was a man who could understand the higher inward life, and with whom there could be some spiritual communion; nay, who could illuminate principle with the highest knowledge: a man whose learning almost amounted to a proof of whatever he believed.¹³⁴

It is remarkable to notice that, like Isabel, Dorothea does not want a man who flatters her like Sir James. He was the person who insisted she was "a perfect horsewoman" at the dinner party. She looks for a different man who can show her the world with accurate knowledge as we notice in the passage above. Yet Dorothea's thought displays her immaturity to evaluate Casaubon as a future husband. Indeed, the way she admires him as a man who he is like "the portrait of Locke" due to his "deep eye-sockets"¹³⁵ displays her girlish nature once

¹³² ELIOT, George. *Op. Cit.*, p. 16-17 – chapter 2

¹³³ *Ibidem*, p. 21 – chapter 2

¹³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 21

¹³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 19 – chapter 2

she is completely enchanted by her first impressions of his appearance. It is interesting to observe how Dorothea concludes that Casaubon has a “great soul” by associating his profile with the “pamphlet on Biblical Cosmology”, which shows her inability to question the consequences of an engagement to a man like him:

‘Has Mr Casaubon a great soul?’ Celia was not without a touch of native malice.
 ‘Yes, I believe he has,’ said Dorothea, with the full voice of decision. ‘Everything I see in him corresponds to his pamphlet on Biblical Cosmology.’
 ‘He talks very little,” said Celia.
 ‘There is no one for him to talk to.’¹³⁶

The way Dorothea receives Casaubon’s proposal of marriage conveys all her expectations towards a new promising life that can set her free from ignorance and the overwhelming peremptoriness of the world:

Dorothea trembled while she read this letter; then she fell on her knees, buried her face, and sobbed. (...) Her whole soul was possessed by the fact that a fuller life was opening before her: she was a neophyte about to enter on a higher grade of initiation. She was going to have room for the energies which stirred uneasily under the dimness and pressure of her own ignorance and the petty peremptoriness of the world’s habits. Now she would be able to devote herself to large yet definite duties; now she would be allowed to live continually in the lights of a mind she could reverence. (...) All Dorothea’s passion was transfused through a mind struggling towards an ideal life; the radiance of her transfigured girlhood fell on the first object that came with its level.¹³⁷

The way the narrator describes Dorothea’s intimate emotion through the reading of the letter is another instance that reveals how the heroine’s psychological complexity is carefully delineated since Eliot underscores the effects of the mind and feeling operating in the young lady. Furthermore, Eliot indicates her ambivalent position towards Dorothea. On the one hand, the narrator points to her immaturity by stating that she is a “neophyte about to enter on a higher grade of initiation”. Such statement hints at the assumption that her hopes can be pathetic. On the other hand, we realize that Eliot gives a certain credit to her protagonist inasmuch as she strives for an ideal life despite her confinement. The Feuerbachian idea of love as the highest value to be reached plays an important role here, and this subjective ideal enhances her female condition. Indeed, Dorothea wishes to accomplish something she considers valuable for her no matter what the others think. Laurence Lerner sustains that there

¹³⁶ Ibidem, p. 19 – chapter 2

¹³⁷ Ibidem, p. 40-41 – chapter 5

is no motive that withdraws our sympathy from the emotion that seizes Dorothea in this description. As a matter of fact, the intensity with which she welcomes a certain perspective is something that catches our attention. Yet, Dorothea's immaturity does allow her to see the consequences of such perspective.¹³⁸

By emphasizing Eliot's attitude to Dorothea, Alexander Welsh implies that the heroine is a close copy of her creator. Therefore, we have the impression that her affinity with the novelist grows in accordance with the favoring of the latter.¹³⁹ To all effects, it is important to perceive that the critics' positions suggest that the representation of Dorothea's personality ensues from Eliot's insights. Differently from traditional realism, it is not something external to the novelist's eyes. That is why Eliot's philosophical background is so relevant to our understanding of Dorothea's interior design. As I have pointed out, what lies behind Dorothea's reasons for marrying an older gentleman is her intent to accomplish a life of self-renunciation and personal improvement. Such disposition is illustrated by Feuerbach's optimism towards human skills, Comte's emphasis on altruistic inclinations and Spinoza's concerns with imagination and duty.

Isabel's first meeting with Gilbert Osmond took place at his home. In fact, it is part of a cunning plan created by him and his lover Madame Merle to possess Isabel's fortune. For this reason, Osmond behaves in a sensitive way in order to cause a good impression. Isabel ends up being thrilled by his cultural background and modesty. Despite his simulation, Osmond somehow reveals his conservative thought when he says, for instance, that "a woman's natural mission is to be where she's most appreciated". Isabel, with her sense of humor, replies that the question is to find this place. What really strikes her is Osmond's independence and disengagement from the advantages of the world. He declares that his goal in life is to resign himself, to be content with little instead of struggling for other ambitions.¹⁴⁰ After knowing that Osmond has spent many years on his philosophy of life without losing his joy and faith, Isabel is enchanted by the way he preserves his authentic lifestyle.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ LERNER, Laurence. *Op. Cit.*, p. 229

¹³⁹ WELSH, Alexander. "The latter novels", p. 65

¹⁴⁰ JAMES, Henry. *Op. Cit.*, p. 226-227 – chapter 24

¹⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 228 – chapter 24

Osmond's presenting himself as a man seemingly without a system, who experiences life without material interests and concerns, displays his superiority in relation to other fellows. It is in this way that Isabel sees in his personality qualities that her suitors Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood do not apparently have. Isabel's admiration for Osmond's modest life in contrast to Lord Warburton's wealth in her discussion with Ralph elucidates it:

Your mother has never forgiven me for not having come to a better understanding with Lord Warburton, and she's horrified at my contenting myself with a person who has none of his great advantages – no property, no title, no honours, no houses, nor lands, nor position, nor reputation, nor brilliant belongings of any sort. It's the total absence of all these things that pleases me. Mr. Osmond's simply a very lonely, a very cultivated and a very honest man – he's not a prodigious proprietor.¹⁴²

To Souza Santos, since Osmond seems the most uncommitted and independent man Isabel has ever seen in her entire life, the heroine believes that her marriage to him will open for her a broad road towards the complete fulfillment of her personality. This is the only way Isabel can truly be herself in her marriage.¹⁴³ Although Isabel envisages a promising future through a commitment to Osmond, her resolution causes great distress to her friendly cousin Ralph Touchett. Indeed, Ralph is responsible for her being in the possession of a fortune once he persuaded his father to bequeath her seventy thousand pounds so she could accomplish the requirements of her imagination. Ralph decided to make Isabel a wealthy woman due to her determination in rejecting Warburton's proposal in order to seize the other opportunities life might offer. Inasmuch as Ralph considers Osmond a selfish and narrow-minded fellow, he senses that his plan to watch Isabel's progress towards the fulfillment of her personality is actually contributing to her fatal destiny:

(...) He pulled off his hat and laid it on the ground; then he sat looking at her. He leaned under the protection of Bernini, his head against his marble pedestal, his arms dropped on either side of him, his hands laid upon the rests of his wide chair. He looked awkward, uncomfortable; he hesitated long. Isabel said nothing; when people were embarrassed she was usually sorry for them, but she was determined not to help Ralph to utter a word that should not be to the honour of her high decision. "I think I've hardly got over my surprise", he went on at last. "You were the last person I expected to see caught."¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Ibidem, p. 293 – capítulo 34

¹⁴³ SANTOS, Maria Irene Ramalho de Souza. Op. Cit., p. 303

¹⁴⁴ JAMES, Henry. Op. Cit., p. 228 – capítulo 24

Ralph's reaction shows his inability to change Isabel's situation for which he considers himself responsible. According to S. Gorley Putt, Ralph's impotence, which only enables him to observe Isabel using her independence to march into a prison, indicates that he is one of James's sensitive invalids. Yet his shortcomings as a male figure make him very likeable.¹⁴⁵ Thus, by recognizing in Isabel a potentially active personality, Ralph realizes his limitation in relation to her determined mind. When Ralph states that "You were the last person I expected to see caught" he is sure that Isabel has already made her choice. In vain he tries to convince his cousin of Osmond's conventional behaviour and little singularity. It is important to examine some reasons Isabel brings up in Osmond's favor, which also illustrate her courage to follow her own viewpoints:

It's very good of you to try to warn me, if you're really alarmed; but I won't promise to think of what you've said: I shall forget it as soon as possible. (...) I can't enter into your idea of Mr. Osmond; I can't do it justice, because I see him in quite different way. He's not important – no, he's not important; he's a man to whom importance is supremely indifferent. If that's what you mean when you call him 'small', then he's as small as you please. I call that large – it's the largest thing I know. (...) Pray, would you wish me to make a mercenary marriage – what they call a marriage of ambition? I've only one ambition – to be free to follow out a good feeling.¹⁴⁶

Owing to the issue of personal freedom, which is deeply rooted in Isabel's characterization, I think it is the right opportunity to analyse the philosophical lights that support James in the building of his heroine's faith in her independence. Like Dorothea, Isabel also mirrors the author's philosophical perspectives in her trajectory. However, unlike Eliot's philosophical background, James's is much more confined to the values of his native country. It is the American philosophers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who examined the matter of human intuition and independence, that exercise a considerable influence on James's fictional world.

The emergence of Ralph Waldo Emerson as a Romantic figure both in literature and philosophy is due to his spirit of revolt, opposed to tradition and respectability, relying on a transcendental law through which man discovers that the nature of life is energetic and fluid, as Robert E. Spiller suggests.¹⁴⁷ Once nature is conceived as a living strength, his philosophy is a way of experiencing life, not a dogmatic system of thought. Emerson also displays a

¹⁴⁵ PUTT, S. Gorley. "Organizing an Ado: *The Portrait of a Lady*", p. 120

¹⁴⁶ JAMES, Henry. Op. Cit., p. 292-293- chapter 34

¹⁴⁷ SPILLER, Robert E. "The Affirmation: Emerson, Thoreau", p. 37

passionate desire for complete integrity inasmuch as the main goal of human beings is to observe the true nature of life through intuition.¹⁴⁸ These aspects of the Emersonian vision highlight Isabel's exaltation of the singular self with its scorn for the opportunities of promising unions. In fact, the quest of the heroine for her ideals of integrity and independence in the first half of the novel stimulates readers' attention. Millicent Bell infers that we admire Isabel owing to her Emersonian conceptions of the human, from which her callow expectations derive. Hence we acknowledge that her errors are the consequences of noble aspirations.

The only flaw of Emersonian idealism lies in its inability to take account of the presence of evil¹⁴⁹. Such fault can be seen in Isabel when she tells her cousin Ralph Touchett of her wish to see the world but not "touch the cup of experience". This is what makes the female protagonist vulnerable to the plot Osmond and Merle plan to satisfy their ambitions since she refuses to look into the real nature of their characters:

"You want to see life – you'll be hanged if you don't, as the young men say".
 "I don't think I want to see it as the young men want to see it. But I do want to look about me".
 "You want to drain the cup of experience".
 "No, I don't wish to touch the cup of experience. It's a poisoned drink! I only want to see for myself".
 "You want to see but not to feel", Ralph remarked.¹⁵⁰

Emerson's compatriot, Henry David Thoreau, also conveys in his philosophy a strong resistance to social order and the prevailing concepts of civilization. E . B. White ascertains that Thoreau's accounts of human life in the woods as well as his complaints about society enable him to examine deeply man's quandary in society and his ability to elevate his spirituality through nature. Such insights turned into a sort of spiritual nourishment for Americans insofar as they are always in search for moral supports such as self-justification and solitude, which modern life does not provide¹⁵¹. Another aspect that indicates much of Thoreau's wildness rests on his lust for originality. According to White, Thoreau's

¹⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 39-40

¹⁴⁹ BELL, Millicent. *Op. Cit.*, p. 763

¹⁵⁰ JAMES, Henry. *Op. Cit.*, p. 133-134 – capítulo 15

¹⁵¹ WHITE, E. B. "Commentary", p. 790-791

masterpiece, *Walden*, reports a man torn by two opposing drives – the desire to enjoy the world and the urge to set it straight. What gave Thoreau strength to explore this conflict, depicted by his wish to join two different goals, was his tormented spirit which made him assume positions differently from most men.¹⁵²

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, readers can sense the input of Thoreau's wildness in Isabel's thought. In this light, despite Isabel's refusal to "touch the cup of experience", the female protagonist finds that Madame Merle's only fault lies in her lack of "tonic wildness" since the latter is too perfect according to social customs. It means that Merle's behaviour does not disclose the frenzied attitudes one needs to be found natural:

If for Isabel she had a fault it was that she was not natural; by which the girl meant, not that she was either affected or pretentious, since from these vulgar vices no woman could have been more exempt, but that her nature had been too much overlaid by custom and her angles too much rubbed away. (...) She was in a word too perfectly the social animal that man and woman are supposed to have been intended to be; and she had rid herself of every remnant of that tonic wildness we may assume to have belonged even to the most amiable persons in the ages before country-house life was the fashion.¹⁵³

Another issue that elucidates Isabel's decision to marry Osmond rests on the subjectivity which is embedded in her delineation. Certainly, to her, her own perception of Osmond's self is the only evidence that matters. Such positive intuition encourages Isabel to follow her plan no matter how reproachful people's opinions can be. Moreover, as Nina Baym has shown, since Osmond is less obviously a product of environment than Warburton and Goodwood, Isabel thinks that there is no model of wife in his mind. Therefore, she imagines that she can shape her own persona despite marital routine.¹⁵⁴

Dorothy Van Ghent, in her turn, stresses the importance of the theme of seeing in *The Portrait of a Lady*. To Ghent, James's fictional world is endowed with the finest selective opportunities for the act of seeing. In this light, Isabel's perception of reality is what defines the quality of something external to her. It means that all assumptions Isabel conceives in

¹⁵² Ibidem, p. 794-795

¹⁵³ JAMES, Henry. Op. Cit., p. 167 – chapter 19

¹⁵⁴ BAYM, Nina. "Revision and Thematic Change in *The Portrait of a Lady*", p. 633

relation to people in general ensue from the way she perceives someone.¹⁵⁵ That is why her response to Osmond's proposal is dependent on her own "sight". Such argument is relevant because it elucidates that neither the other characters nor readers can judge Isabel's decision once it results from a subjective choice. It is deeply attached to the Emersonian view regarding the power of human intuition over the course of actions.

To end up this section, it is important to point out the differences that lie behind Dorothea's and Isabel's views on marriage. Whereas Dorothea is very immature to understand not only Casaubon but also the idea of marriage itself, Isabel seems much more experienced to embrace a marital life. It is Eliot's narrator that refers to Dorothea as a "neophyte to enter on a higher grade of initiation", which means that marriage will be a painful education necessary to the protagonist's growing maturity. Moreover, let us remember Lerner's comments on the dimness that does not enable Dorothea to see all aspects of a future plan. Isabel, in her turn, is able to evaluate the consequences of a marital bond as she does by confessing that "perfect" gentlemen like Lord Warburton can provide a very conventional life for a woman. The same happens when Isabel considers how her future with a man "without properties" like Osmond can be. However, it is interesting to notice that, despite Dorothea's naivety, she looks at marriage as the possibility of a strong commitment. This is something that Isabel does not give too much importance to not only because Osmond's independent lifestyle enchants her, but also because of the feeling that her destiny is wide and vague. Thus, she is constantly motivated to launch into it.

The disillusionment ensuing from Dorothea's and Isabel's choices in *Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady* is perhaps the most propitious moment for Eliot and James to concentrate on the subjectivity of female selfhood. It is in this sense that the heroine's quandary turns into the most relevant point of female representation insofar as both novelists underscore in Dorothea's and Isabel's emotional situations the inner conflict that springs out of the states of bewilderment and confusion. Such approach to the heroine's dilemma also points out to the inconsistency of female personality in choosing a husband without an

¹⁵⁵ GHENT, Dorothy Van. "On The Portrait of a Lady", p. 682

accurate examination. As a matter of fact, if the novelist only explores the rebellious response that derives from personality, and so lets characters follow the strength of their anger, s/he will merely make them stereotypes in opposition to the social environment.

It is important to underscore that Eliot's and James's power to describe the conflict that takes possession of Dorothea's and Isabel's minds after their disenchantment exemplifies the exploration of consciousness I am taking here as one of the indexes of modernity. As a matter of fact, we shall observe how Eliot's and James's narrators pause the novels only to examine the inner conflict of these female protagonists and its possible implication on their actions. The course of events which springs from the other characters' actions as well as from the development of plot is interrupted by the analysis of a particular situation: the heroine's disillusionment. But their different narrating voices show that they do not expand the issue of female subjectivity in the same way. In this sense, the descriptions of Dorothea's and Isabel's quandaries, featuring in *Middlemarch* (chapters 20 and 21) and in *the Portrait of a Lady* (chapters 38, 41, 42 in particular, and 47), disclose the careful approach Eliot and James grant to their subjectivity. Let us see now some extracts from these chapters.

Dorothea's bewilderment starts at the moment she is spending her honeymoon in a handsome apartment of the Via Sistina in Rome. It is interesting to notice that Eliot does not mention the cause of the heroine's gloom, since this cause is unknown to Dorothea herself. Eliot follows the girl's puzzled disappointment:

Dorothea had no distinctly shapen grievance that she could state even to herself; and in the midst of her confused thought and passion, the mental act that was struggling forth into clearness was a self-accusing cry that her feeling of desolation was the fault of her own spiritual poverty. (...) Permanent rebellion, the disorder of a life without some loving reverent resolve, was not possible to her; but she was in an interval when the very force of her nature heightened its confusion. (...) But was not Mr Casaubon just as learned as before? Had his forms changed, or his sentiments become less laudable? O waywardness of womanhood! (...) How was it that in the weeks since her marriage, Dorothea had not distinctly observed but felt a stifling depression, that the large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband's mind were replaced by the anterooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither? I suppose it was that in courtship everything is regarded as provisional and preliminary, and the smallest sample of virtue or accomplishment is taken to guarantee delightful stores which the broad leisure of marriage will reveal.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ ELIOT, George. *Opt. Cit.*, p. 180-183 – chapter 20

By examining Dorothea's disillusionment in relation to Casaubon, who she thought could enlarge her worldview, Eliot acknowledges the reproof women firstly point to themselves once they generally consider the failure of their relationship as the outcome of their personal flaws. On the other hand, the narrator raises the inner struggle that is commencing to flourish in Dorothea. This indicates the beginning of female dilemma in Dorothea's self. As Gilbert and Gubar elucidate, Dorothea is locked in a moral imprisonment because the large prospects she dreamt of finding in Casaubon's mind are now replaced by the narrowness of his male personality. As a result, Dorothea experiences a living burial when she becomes a wife.¹⁵⁷

The fact of Eliot's narrator being unable to point out the cause of Dorothea's confusion once the protagonist does not visualize her own feelings can be understood if we remember her presentation in the novel. Indeed, Dorothea appears from the very beginning as a *problem to be solved due to the mismatches in her very constitution*. This disbalance implies that Dorothea does not know how to express herself. The same can be said about her inability to analyze Casaubon behind his fine portrait and gentle manners. In this light, we can realize that the bewilderment Dorothea undergoes at present is not only a result from her limitations, but also part of a scheme that Eliot creates to look into the protagonist's subjectivity. According to Dorothea's trajectory up to this point, we can observe that her puzzled appearance, immaturity and confusion are features which are intrinsically linked in her design. That is why Eliot's narrator will place itself in Dorothea's bewilderment to explore her consciousness.

Eliot's exploration of the heroine's consciousness is deeply attached to her style. Indeed, Eliot's narrator at this moment of the text is sided with Dorothea and is as ignorant as her about her feelings. The strategy Eliot uses to portray this ignorance is the elaboration of an external physical space in correspondence to the construction of an internal psychological space. Michael H. Levenson hints that both physical and psychological spaces in Eliot's fiction, which are respectfully known as "physis" and "psyche", submit to her narrating eye. Hence Eliot's narrator moves from externality to internality, from behaviour to consciousness,

¹⁵⁷ GILBERT, Sandra, GUBAR, Susan. The Madwoman in the Attic, p. 504

and from a public to a private realm.¹⁵⁸ We can notice Eliot's proficiency in suggesting Dorothea's mental state by an apparently impersonal description that is also part of the moment when the heroine is found weeping in her apartment in Rome:

To those who have looked at Rome with the quickening power of a knowledge which breathes a growing soul into all historic shapes, and traces out the suppressed transitions which unite all contrasts, Rome may still be the spiritual centre and interpreter of the world. But let them conceive one more historical contrast: the gigantic broken revelations of that Imperial and Papal city thrust abruptly on the notions of a girl who had been brought up in English and Swiss Puritanism, fed on meagre Protestant histories and on art chiefly of the handscreen sort; a girl whose ardent nature turned all her small allowance of knowledge into principles, fusing her actions into their mould, and whose quick emotions gave the most abstract things the quality of a pleasure or a pain; a girl who had lately become a wife, and from the enthusiastic acceptance of untried duty found herself plunged in tumultuous preoccupation with her personal lot. The weight of unintelligible Rome might lie easily on bright nymphs to whom it formed a background for the brilliant picnic of Anglo-foreign society; but Dorothea had no such defense against deep impressions. (...) Our moods are apt to bring with them images which succeed each other like the magic-lantern pictures of a doze; and in certain states of dull forlornness Dorothea all her life continued to see the vastness of St Peter's, the huge bronze canopy, the excited intention in the attitudes and garments of the prophets and evangelists in the mosaics above, and the red drapery which was being hung for Christmas spreading itself everywhere like a disease of the retina.

Not that this inward amazement of Dorothea's was anything very exceptional: many souls in their young nudity are tumbled out among incongruities and left to 'find their feet' among them, while their elders go about their business. 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. (...) If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.¹⁵⁹

This long passage remarkably elucidates that Dorothea's feelings are still so unknown to her that cannot be told even by the narrator. Eliot's narrator firstly sees Rome as "the spiritual centre and interpreter of the world" for people who can look at the city with the "quickenning power of knowledge". It means that Rome is the place where people can settle their problems. At first glance this seems a clue to the understanding of Dorothea's quandary. However, as Eliot's narrator endeavours to focus on Dorothea's bewilderment by stating the contrast between the "gigantic broken revelations" of the city and the notions of a girl brought up in "English and Swiss Puritanism" whose personality tends to turn "all small allowance into principles", we realize that the protagonist is unable to understand the Roman setting. It is not by chance that Rome is illustrated as a burden for her cultural background. Despite

¹⁵⁸ LEVENSON, Michael. H. "Consciousness", p. 7

¹⁵⁹ ELIOT, George. *Opt. Cit.*, p. 181-182 – chapter 20

Dorothea's limitations, the narrator ascertains that she feels the impressions of "unintelligible Rome" due to her sensibility. In this way, though Dorothea finds herself "plunged in tumultuous preoccupation with her personal lot", she is able to sense the "inward amazement" that the Papal city provides. Nevertheless, the narrator is not able to explain Dorothea's bewilderment since it conveys its doubts concerning the protagonist's awareness of her tragic situation in the last paragraph. The only idea that we can have from the whole quotation by which Eliot attempts to compare Dorothea's impressions to the situation of her marital life is the protagonist's inability to realize what is happening to the relationship between Casaubon and herself. She can feel that a certain conflict is overwhelming her, but she cannot describe it.

According to Arnold Kettle, once there is a difficult access to Dorothea's actual feelings, Eliot's narrator endeavours to examine the protagonist's state of mind in an apparent objective description in order to make us understand a little of her situation:

Only very occasionally are we brought into contact with Dorothea's actual feelings. We do not feel closer to her as we read on, but we understand her better and the understanding is not a purely objective one. George Eliot has here the power to give 'the most abstract things the quality of a pleasure or a pain' because under her contemplation of the particular, concrete situation (Dorothea's state of mind at this moment) the generalised experience and abstract thought cease to be abstract and become symbolic – the squirrel's heart-beat and the roar lies in the other side of silence.¹⁶⁰

The aim of Eliot's narrator is to focus on Dorothea's process of attaining a clearer perception of her own life. Let us remember the comments of some critics that enable us to understand the importance that Eliot grants to Dorothea's growing awareness as a means to explore her subjectivity. W. J. Harvey asserts that marriage is the propitious period for Dorothea to go through her self-education. It is indeed a painful moment because she knows nothing about the world and herself. Yet it is exactly her personal experience that allows her to see her life.¹⁶¹ Eliot's narrator conveys that the idea of Casaubon as a man with an "equivalent centre of self" is one of the lessons Dorothea starts to learn:

We are all of us born in moral stupidity taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves: Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but it had been easier to her

¹⁶⁰ KETTLE, Arnold. "Middlemarch", p. 152-153

¹⁶¹ HARVEY, W. J. Op. Cit., p. 198-199

to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr. Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling – an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects – that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference.¹⁶²

Eliot's narrator makes it explicit that knowledge is something to be searched for. Once we are "born in moral stupidity" and thus see the world according to the narrowness of our thoughts, it is evident that, in Eliot's views, we only acquire wisdom through the consequences of our acts. As Suzy Anger elucidates, the quotation above shows the struggle that Dorothea undergoes to understand Casaubon's personality. Much of the novel depicts Dorothea's endeavour to understand her husband.¹⁶³ Anger also ascertains that Dorothea's quandary is centrally about the persistent problem of knowing her mind as well the world around her.¹⁶⁴ As a matter of fact, Anger's standpoints are deeply attached to Harvey's insofar as both critics state that Dorothea's maturity is entirely dependent on experience. Nonetheless, Anger asserts that the progress of Dorothea's awareness cannot be understood only by a knowledge founded upon observation and experiment. To Anger, feeling also supports Dorothea's understanding of her personality as well as her interaction with other people since Eliot aims at examining the protagonist's subjectivity as a whole.¹⁶⁵ It is important to observe that although Eliot's narrator is still unaware of the real cause of Dorothea's gloom, we realize how her feelings gradually enlarge her view of Casaubon. As a result, Dorothea starts to perceive that her "wifely relation" is changing once she is no longer able to support her impression of Casaubon which has been kept since her "maiden dream":

However, Dorothea was crying, and if she had been required to state the cause, she could only have done so in some such general words as I have already used: to have been driven to be more particular would have been trying to give a history of the lights and shadows; for that new real future which was replacing the imaginary drew its material from the endless minutiae by which her view of Mr Casaubon and her wifely relation, now that she was married to him, was gradually changing with the secret motion of a watch-hand from what it had been in her maiden dream.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² ELIOT, George. *Op. Cit.*, p. 198 – chapter 21

¹⁶³ ANGER, Suzy. *Op. Cit.*, p. 81

¹⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 82

¹⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 82-83

¹⁶⁶ ELIOT, George. *Op. Cit.*, p. 182 – chapter 20

Summing up this analysis of Dorothea's dilemma, it can be said that Eliot establishes a method in order to look into the protagonist's subjectivity. Therefore, Eliot creates a narrator that pretends to lessen its omniscient power over Dorothea, so that she can approach to the protagonist's puzzle. In this way, Eliot's narrator follows Dorothea's process from her ignorance up to her gradual awareness.

Differently from Dorothea's conflict, Isabel's springs from motives clearly reported by James's narrator. It means that she senses that her relationship with Osmond is changing. By accepting the task of finding a suitable husband for Pansy (Osmond's daughter), Isabel firstly realizes the stinginess and narrowness of Osmond's character when he asserts his wish to marry Pansy in terms of wealth and social position. We can notice Isabel's inner imprisonment when Edward Rosier, the young gentleman who wishes to marry Pansy, shows his real love once he had many opportunities to embrace a marital life but preferred to wait for the girl. In reply, Isabel confesses that she would like to help him, but she cannot do it due to Osmond's concern for money.¹⁶⁷ To make matters worse, Isabel's disappointment is heightened when Osmond affirms that his daughter wants to be a great lady only to please him. Though Isabel considers Lord Warburton an excellent man for every single woman, she is haunted by her husband's treacherous plan. Indeed, he proposes his wife to use her influence in order to persuade Warburton. It is relevant to add that Isabel acknowledges that she is simply an instrument for Osmond's strategy. When he states that Lord Warburton is not the timid English type because he made love to her, he actually sees his wife as a whore who "can bring men to the point" whenever she wants.¹⁶⁸ Since Isabel feels the oddity of Osmond's behaviour, she sits in a drawing-room to meditate about her relationship. James's narrator remarkably looks into the reasons of her disillusionment in relation to the husband:

Isabel's cheek burned when she asked herself if she had really married on a factitious theory, in order to do something finely appreciable with her money. But she was able to answer quickly enough that this was only half of the story. It was because a certain ardour took possession of her - a sense of the earnestness of his affection and a delight in his personal qualities. He was better than any one else. This supreme conviction had filled her life for months, and enough of it still remained to prove to her that she could not have done otherwise. He said to her one day that she

¹⁶⁷ JAMES, Henry. *Op. Cit.*, p. 316-317 – chapter 38

¹⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 353-354 – chapter 41

had too many ideas and that she must get rid of them. (...) She had a certain way of looking at life which he took as a personal offense. Heaven knew that now at least it was a very humble, accommodating way! The strange thing was that she should not have suspected from the first that his own had been so different. She had thought it was so large, so enlightened, so perfectly that of an honest man and a gentleman. (...) He had told her he loved the conventional, but there was a sense in which this seemed a noble declaration. In that sense, that of the love of harmony and order and decency and of all the stately offices of life, she went with him freely, and his warning had contained nothing ominous. But when, as the months had elapsed, she had followed him further and he had led her into the mansion of his own habitation, then, *then*, she had seen where she really was.¹⁶⁹

We can observe in this passage how James's proficiency in exploring female subjectivity differs from Eliot's. Unlike Dorothea, Isabel is not completely lost. She is *aware* of the feeling that Osmond is not the gentleman she idealized in the past. Obviously, this feeling is affecting Isabel's life from this moment because her conviction concerning Osmond's singularity which has "filled her life for months" is now fading away. As a result, Isabel becomes more aware of Osmond as she "follows him further" to the point of entering "into the mansion of his habitation". It is in this way that Isabel's growing perception of Osmond clearly displays her marital situation. Once Isabel is aware of the change that is happening to her marriage, James's narrator directly explores the thoughts that are surrounding the protagonist's mind.

However, like Eliot, James implies that Isabel is also a victim of feminine waywardness once Osmond indicated some glimmers of his conservatism when he affirmed that she had "many ideas", and confessed his appreciation for conventions. Obviously, James also points to the deceitful effect of Isabel's first impressions, so we can excuse her naivety. That is why his narrator mentions that she chose Osmond because a "certain ardour took possession of her" owing to her impressions of "his personal qualities". Moreover, since the nineteenth-century woman could not envisage all the facets of patriarchy, I find it interesting when James's narrator says that Isabel in knowing her husband further, in visiting "the mansion of his own habitation", realizes his real personality. It clearly conveys James's sensibility in relation to the problems and limitations of the nineteenth-century woman in spite of being a male author.

¹⁶⁹ Ibidem, p. 358-360 – chapter 42

By analyzing Isabel's meditation in this chapter – the most relevant element in the book according to Henry James¹⁷⁰ – Charles Feidelson asserts that the attitude Isabel takes up in this circumstance rescues her from Osmond's enclosed system:

What saves Isabel from him, and will presumably sustain her after she returns to him at the end, is the posture she adopts in the dim world of her midnight meditation, "the best thing in the book". It is the posture of a mind whose every moment brings the very grounds of its movement into question, but which nevertheless moves, exploring the desert of its own uncertainty.¹⁷¹

Such "posture of mind" which Feidelson points out can be illustrated by the arguments which will be absorbed in Isabel's consciousness. In this way, the reasons exposed by the narrator that counteract her motives for discontentment are fortifying her inner strength because she will recognize in the near future that, despite her limitation, she was free in choosing Osmond as the man of her life. Thus she will no longer be afraid of him. It is important to notice that James's narrator states that Isabel "had a more wondrous vision of him, fed through charmed senses and oh such a stirred fancy!" However, her imaginative mind "had seen only half his nature".¹⁷²

Once Isabel's growing awareness is the most relevant issue in chapter 42, it is propitious to state that the heroine's disillusionment indicates James's subjective input to her characterization. Indeed, we can realize that Isabel's response to Osmond's selfishness is not *action*, but *reflection*. Instead of fortifying Isabel's role through actions and incidents that overtly show the reaction of the female protagonist to a distressing situation (the recognition of Osmond's evil character), James concentrates on her consciousness. As Millicent Bell elucidates, Isabel's dilemma conveys that James's narrative in *The Portrait of a Lady* focuses on the heroine's mode of perceiving rather than on external actions:

Her immediate "act" is reflection, the long, elaborated rumination in chapter 42, which reviews her present problem and serves to repair the text's ellipsis of her married years. It is a silent dramatization of thought which discloses a history curiously bare of recollected incident, a history of attitudes and inner responses. Her real offense to Osmond, she finally perceives, has

¹⁷⁰ JAMES, Henry. "Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*", p. 8

¹⁷¹ FEIDELSON, Charles. Op. Cit., p. 719

¹⁷² JAMES, Henry. Op. Cit., p. 357 – chapter 42

been nothing she has done; it has been simply her unreacted selfhood – “having a mind of her own at all”.¹⁷³

James’s narrator stresses the activity of Isabel’s consciousness when he asserts that her suffering is an “active condition”. Indeed, his narrative encompasses some incidents, attitudes and responses that took place throughout Isabel’s relationship with Osmond in her “silent dramatization of thought”. In this way, Isabel’s reflection depicts a “passion of thought, of speculation, of response to every pressure”.¹⁷⁴ As a result, Isabel begins her thoughtful self-criticism in order to find out the wrong deeds she could have done in her matrimonial life. In so doing, she attempts to understand Osmond’s mind in order to find out the reason for his hate. According to Souza Santos, chapter 42 displays the moment when *The Portrait of a Lady* turns into a novel-of-consciousness inasmuch as Isabel learns how to make connections between people and their plans and relate the events that took place in her life. Hence the heroine reassesses what has happened to her consciousness and to her freedom.¹⁷⁵ After concluding that she has done no harm to her husband, Isabel senses that much of her quandary ensues from the certainty of being hated by him. It is relevant to observe how James, in his analysis of Isabel’s mind, instigates the actions of the heroine but immediately prevents them from happening to stress her inner conflict:

She was morally certain now that this feeling of hatred, which at first had been a refuge and a refreshment, had become the occupation and comfort of his life. The feeling was deep, because it was sincere; he had had the revelation that she could after all dispense with him. If to herself the idea was startling, if it presented itself at first as a kind of infidelity, a capacity for pollution, what infinitive effect might it not be expected to have had upon *him*? It was simple; he despised her; she had no traditions and the moral horizon of a Unitarian minister. Poor Isabel, who had never been able to understand Unitarianism! This was the certitude she had been living with now for a time that she had ceased to measure. What was coming – what was before them? That was her constant question. What would he do – what ought *she* to do? When a man hated his wife what did it lead to? She didn’t hate him, that she was sure of, for every little while she felt a passionate wish to give him a pleasant surprise. Very often, however, she felt afraid, and it used to come over her, as I have intimated, that she had deceived him at the very first.¹⁷⁶

As we can notice in this passage, James’s narrator describes Isabel’s state of mind so vividly to the point of involving us in her personal dilemma. In this sense, we acknowledge

¹⁷³ BELL, Millicent. Op. Cit., p. 781

¹⁷⁴ JAMES, Henry. Op. Cit., p. 356 – chapter 42

¹⁷⁵ SANTOS, Maria Irene Ramalho de Souza. Op. Cit., p. 304

¹⁷⁶ JAMES, Henry. Op. Cit., p. 362-363 – chapter 42

that Isabel is fully overwhelmed by the perception that Osmond despises her insofar as she is unable to carry out his plans. The fact of not possessing the “traditions and moral horizon of a Unitarian minister” figures a mismatch between Osmond and herself. This means that Isabel is not the lady Osmond has imagined. It is interesting to observe that Osmond is also deceived by his impressions of Isabel since he idealizes a submissive woman that corresponds to his moral patterns. But once Isabel “has many ideas” which are very difficult “to be sacrificed”¹⁷⁷, Osmond despises his wife because he cannot mould her as he wants. Philip Rahv implies that Isabel recognizes that Osmond has little respect for her personality in her enlightening review of her marriage. Indeed, Isabel is considering the fact that she has unintentionally misled Osmond about herself and the accomplishments he has expected from her such as her power to persuade Warburton to marry Pansy.¹⁷⁸

To enhance Isabel’s resistance to Osmond’s authority, Lyall H. Powers ascertains that one of the outcomes of Isabel’s soul-searching, portrayed in this chapter, rests on the reawakening of her independent-mindedness. Therefore, she starts to prepare herself to act in defiance of her husband’s wishes. Since she wants to avoid a direct confrontation, her caution lies in the articulation of her responses.¹⁷⁹ In other words, Isabel must learn how to free herself from the position of complete submission to Osmond’s aims. However, as we can perceive in the narrative, James offers no solution to Isabel’s questions. Instead of defining her future action as the settlement of her quandary, the novelist probes her feelings and invests in her inner struggle. Though Isabel does not hate Osmond, she feels guilty of using him as a means to fulfill her prospects.

James’s resistance to providing possible resolutions to the queries in Isabel’s consciousness discloses his modernity as a writer for some reasons. First of all, as Michael H. Levenson precisely remarks, James’s art insists on the primacy of consciousness over the muteness of the mere event. It does not mean that James ignores the significance of the outward world. Indeed, what the novelist underscores is the idea that characters in any tragedy

¹⁷⁷ Ibidem, p. 244 – chapter 27

¹⁷⁸ RAHV, Philip. “The Heiress of all Ages”, p. 124

¹⁷⁹ POWERS, Lyall H. Revelation, Action, Recovery, p. 53

are interesting only to the extent which they feel their respective situations.¹⁸⁰ Feidelson's analysis of Isabel's consciousness matches Levenson's viewpoints. To Feidelson, James outlines a tragedy of consciousness through Isabel's trajectory. In this light, the novelist portrays a lady who is more than ever a world unto herself. Everything Isabel conceives or rejects springs out of her inner world. Yet she is a woman confronted with the strangeness of her nature in a tragic landscape where all settlements are suspect. Since her mind turns into the sole measure of reality, all values that can arise in the world of the novel are questioned.¹⁸¹ Thus, we can hint that the questions which are opened in Isabel's consciousness depict the singularity of her conception as a fictional character. What Isabel must do to solve her marital problem is a solution that exclusively depends on her sense. Moreover, as I have pointed out, James emphasizes Isabel's dilemma by evoking her feeling of being doomed by hate throughout the passage quoted above. By analysing Feidelson's comments, I personally suggest that Isabel's conflict foregrounds the assumption concerning the impossibility of a suitable plot to settle her trajectory as a character. Isabel's working mind, which inquires not only the social world around her but also her own feelings, will always defy the realistic representations.

Another point that explains Isabel's self-probing consciousness is exactly James's criticism of the nineteenth-century values which enlighten the realistic conceptions. Souza Santos argues that Isabel's discovery of her lack of freedom due to her moral imprisonment (as we can notice at the end of the quotation above) can be read as the "bankruptcy of liberal thought", whose principles such as individual freedom, integrity and coherence of mind are undermined by the crisis in Western thinking. Hence Isabel's inquiries related to the attitudes she should take as well as the fact of having no idea of what can possibly happen to her marriage highlight the shifts which humanity goes through at the end of the nineteenth century. To Souza Santos, her only hope rests on the preservation of a lost ideal of independence as the basis for her personality.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ LEVENSON, Michael H. Op. Cit., p. 21

¹⁸¹ FEIDELSON, Charles. Op. Cit., p. 718-719

¹⁸² SANTOS, Maria Irene Ramalho de Souza. Op. Cit., p. 305

The conflict between Isabel and her husband becomes more intense as his cruelty is revealed. Consequently, Isabel acts in her own defense as we can observe in the scene when Osmond aggressively accuses her of being responsible for the end of Pansy's engagement:

Isabel slowly got up; standing there in her white cloak, which covered her to her feet, she might have represented the angel of disdain, first cousin to that of pity. "Oh, Gilbert, for a man who was so fine-!" she exclaimed in a long murmur.

"I was never so fine as you. You've done everything you wanted. You've got him out of the way without appearing to do so, and you've placed me in the position in which you wished to see me – that of a man who has tried to marry his daughter to a lord, but has grotesquely failed".

"Pansy doesn't care for him. She's very glad he's gone", Isabel said.

"That has nothing to do with the matter".

"And he doesn't care for Pansy". (...)

He looked at her a moment; then he turned away. "I thought you were very fond of my daughter".

"I've never been more than to-day".¹⁸³

The passage clearly shows Osmond's use of Pansy as a means to achieve his goals. As it has been said, Isabel's indignation ensues from the way he reduces people to instruments, which displays the evil behind his cultivated manners. In this light, the image of the "angel of disdain" depicts that she no longer cultivates illusions about him once the man "who was so fine" does not exist. From this moment on, Isabel needs to strive for her dignity, otherwise she can become a work of art created by her husband. According to Dorothy Van Ghent, because Osmond is morally dead, incapable of reverence to the human value in others, he makes people his own objects, exterminating their volition. For this purpose, Pansy's innocence and gentleness are the modeling materials which he attempts to reduce into an echo of his own. Isabel resists turning into another of Osmond's utility figures, and so nourishes the volition that remains in her.¹⁸⁴ That is why she needs to express her own feelings, especially when she declares that she has never been "more fond of Pansy than to-day" owing to the girl's unwillingness to marry Lord Warburton. I particularly believe that Isabel's reaction in the scene illustrates her reluctance in being a "portrait" for Osmond. Thus she can escape from his manipulation.

¹⁸³ JAMES, Henry. *Op. Cit.*, p. 402-403 – chapter 47

¹⁸⁴ GHENT, Dorothy Van. *Op. Cit.*, p. 686

Concluding these comments on Dorothea's and Isabel's dilemmas, we can better visualize the differences between Eliot and James in the exploration of the female protagonist's consciousness. The bewilderment Dorothea senses in her honeymoon is deeply attached to her puzzling presentation and ignorance towards life. This explains why Dorothea's limitations interfere in the approach of Eliot's narrator to her consciousness. Indeed, Eliot's narrator needs to side itself with Dorothea and the route it follows to analyze the protagonist's subjectivity lies in disclosing her growing awareness of the social world and herself. James's narrator, in its turn, does not need to follow the progress of Isabel's maturity because she is already aware of her situation. We have noticed since her presentation that she does not have problems to adapt herself in the world. That is why James's narrator focuses closely on the thoughts that are dominating Isabel's mind. Once James's narrator does not move from an external space to an internal one to understand Isabel's mental state as Eliot's does in her analysis of Dorothea, it attempts to establish a center of consciousness in the protagonist by enabling her to review all her life with Osmond. However, it is important to mention that James's narrating voice does not achieve the same complexity of Eliot's. Whereas James's narrator is straightforward in reporting Isabel's feelings, Eliot's employs remarkable passages such as the Roman scenery to locate Dorothea as well as to convey a little of her bewilderment. But in this process, Eliot's narrator not only enhances our knowledge by evoking myths and other symbols, but also plays with us by making us believe in its "inability" to state the cause of Dorothea's conflict.

Inasmuch as George Eliot and Henry James do not delineate characters in accordance with the demands of a certain plot, it is relevant to examine how the settlement of Dorothea's and Isabel's quandaries interferes with the formal resolution of the novels *Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady*. In this way, the different responses these protagonists manifest towards the suggestion of a second marriage as a possible fulfillment for their personalities also illustrate the singularity of their conceptions as feminine types.

According to the unfolding of Dorothea's story in *Middlemarch*, the death of Edward Casaubon represents a new stage to her. It is relevant to assert that, despite Casaubon's death, Dorothea still finds herself subjugated by his occult presence when her uncle, Mr Brooke, announces the poisoned codicil Casaubon made in his will. It states that if Dorothea marries his cousin Will Ladislaw, she will lose all the properties left by him. As a result, Dorothea realizes that Casaubon's jealousy and hate were stronger than she had imagined because he considered the possibility of her being Will Ladislaw's lover. It is interesting to observe how Dorothea senses that her life is taking a new direction since her views of Casaubon start to undermine:

Dorothea by this time turned cold again, and now threw herself back helplessly in her chair. She might have compared her experience at that moment to the vague, alarmed consciousness that her life was taking a new form, that she was undergoing a metamorphosis in which memory would not adjust itself to the stirring of new organs. Everything was changing its aspect: her husband's conduct, her own duteous feeling towards him, every struggle between them – and yet more, her whole relation to Will Ladislaw. (...) Then again she was conscious of another change which also made her tremulous; it was a sudden change yearning of heart towards Will Ladislaw. It had never before entered her mind that he could, under any circumstances, be her lover: conceive the effect of the sudden revelation that another had thought of him in that light – that perhaps he himself had been conscious of such a possibility, - and this with the hurrying, crowding vision of unfitting conditions, and questions not soon to be solved.¹⁸⁵

As we can notice, Dorothea's reaction to the cruel imposition of her dead husband definitely points to a new beginning for her life. This scene displays Dorothea's reassessment because all the illusory hopes she nourished for after Casaubon's death – especially the mutual confidence – can no longer be cultivated. From this moment, Dorothea as a mature woman must decide the course of her fate, including how she will cope with the affection she starts to feel for Ladislaw.

It is propitious to mention that Will Ladislaw's masculinity is quite relevant to Dorothea's personal growth. Whereas Casaubon is associated with authority, dryness and sterility, Ladislaw is closely identified with intellectuality, tenderness and potency. Quentin Anderson ascertains that Dorothea considers Ladislaw a representative of the world outside Middlemarch to which she has mistakenly aspired when she chose Casaubon. Because Ladislaw speaks authoritatively about the world outside the town's awareness, he is exactly

¹⁸⁵ ELIOT, George. *Op. Cit.*, p. 460-461- chapter 50

the man who fosters artistic and political aspirations and tells Dorothea about the limitations of Casaubon's intellectuality.¹⁸⁶ A further understanding of Ladislav's fictional creation explains how his bohemian behaviour attracts the heroine. Once George Eliot was so fond of the German language, it is not by chance that one of the aspects that distinguishes Ladislav's singularity from Casaubon's narrowness lies in the mastery of German. I think that it is very important to mention how Eliot criticized English society for its disdain for foreign cultures. Moreover, the name "Will Ladislav" suggests something very interesting. The "will" that illustrates the trap Casaubon left for Dorothea is what accentuates her dilemma after his death insofar as she is obliged to choose between her inherited fortune and her love for Ladislav.

When Dorothea finally decides to marry Will Ladislav, she starts her life anew. During their last conversation, Ladislav declares that he did not accept the income Bulstrode offered as a compensation for an old injury. In reply, Dorothea confesses that she is very surprised by the integrity of his character. Although Dorothea recognizes her foolishness in suspecting of an intimate relation between him and Rosamond, Ladislav insistently affirms that his poverty will be a serious obstacle to their attachment. When Dorothea realizes that he is very incisive in his arguments to the point of depreciating himself, she breaks her silence and expresses all her passion in declaring that she does not mind poverty once they can live quite well on her own fortune. The love she feels for him is what really matters.¹⁸⁷ As I have underscored, Will Ladislav is the man who can supply a deserving position for Dorothea as a woman because he has the sensibility and respect that Casaubon lacks. As Kate Flint says, there are no power relations between them. As a matter of fact, Dorothea's noble ideals lead Ladislav into a purposeful life. By way of complementarity, it is Ladislav whose manhood instigates her sexual desire, and through a respectful relationship, provides her with a social role in which her female zeal can find channels in a provincial environment.¹⁸⁸

Therefore, it is important to elucidate the real meaning of Dorothea's and Ladislav's union. To Dorothea, it means the awareness of accomplishing something for the first time in her life. As a matter of fact, Dorothea confesses to her sister that she has "never carried out

¹⁸⁶ ANDERSON, Quentin. "George Eliot in *Middlemarch*", p. 187

¹⁸⁷ ELIOT, George. *Op. Cit.*, p. 759-762 – chapter 83

¹⁸⁸ FLINT, Kate. *Op. Cit.*, p. 164-165

any plan yet”.¹⁸⁹ This is very interesting specially if we consider her process of growth. In relation to Ladislav, their union represents the recognition that he is unable to provide a comfortable life for Dorothea. Despite Ladislav’s bohemian nature, he is still confined to the idea of man as the “good provider”, which is very strong in the nineteenth century. Ladislav overcomes this prejudice when he realizes that there are no power relations in marriage as Kate Flint has shown.

The heroine’s resolution to embrace a second marriage as a sort of moral progress deeply influences the ending of the novel *Middlemarch*. One of our first impressions is the way some characters are struck by Dorothea’s decision. In fact, we can notice that Dorothea turns into the most important object of Mr Brooke’s, Sir James’s and Celia’s concerns. In other words, these minor figures unconsciously make the heroine the center of the town’s attention. It is wise to acknowledge the power of Dorothea’s determination when she replies to her sister’s objections:

“But it would be better if you would not be married”, said Celia, drying her eyes, and returning to her argument; “then there would be nothing uncomfortable. And you would not do what nobody thought you could do. James always said you ought to be a queen; but this is not at all being like a queen. You know what mistakes you have been making, Dodo, and this is another. Nobody thinks Mr Ladislav a proper husband for you. And you *said* you would never be married again”.

“It is quite true that I might be a wiser person, Celia” said Dorothea, “and that I might have done something better, if I had been better. But this is what I am going to do. I have promised to marry Mr Ladislav; and I am going to marry him”.¹⁹⁰

As we can notice, Dorothea states that she is determined to marry Ladislav so she can accomplish something better in her life. Indeed, much of her inner strength springs from her altruistic zeal, which enables her to search for new perspectives. We can sense in this dialogue how Feuerbach’s humanism exercises a strong influence on Dorothea’s interior design. Her individual consciousness is profoundly grounded on a love figured by the idea of a goodness entirely human, which she needs to achieve in order to enhance her female condition. It is important to add that Dorothea is no longer so unexperienced in relation to marriage inasmuch as she acquired, according to the Spinozan education, a clearer perception of her relation to

¹⁸⁹ ELIOT, George. *Op. Cit.*, p. 770 – chapter 84

¹⁹⁰ ELIOT, George. *Op. Cit.*, p. 770-771 – chapter 84

others as we realize when she declares that “I might have done something better, if I had been better”. In Feuerbach’s terms, Eliot’s narrator attests that Will Ladislaw was the man who contributed to Dorothea’s self-improvement insofar as the love they felt for each other was stronger than any other kind of impulse. Thus, Dorothea never repented renouncing her fortune once no life would be possible for her without emotion. With Ladislaw, she was experiencing a sexual and concrete relationship according to the demands of her passionate soul.¹⁹¹

Another point that must be emphasized is the fact that Dorothea’s determination in accepting Ladislaw as her promising husband does not properly portray the happy ending of the story. Once the protagonist’s resolution indicates a rupture with the patriarchal system of the province because she disobeyed a rule established by her husband, whose reputation was unquestionable, Eliot cannot conclude the plot according to the prevailing artistic convention of her time as we can observe in the following passage:

Sir James never ceased to regard Dorothea’s second marriage as a mistake; and indeed this remained the tradition concerning it in Middlemarch, where she was spoken of to a younger generation as a fine girl who married a sickly clergyman, old enough to be her father, and in little more than a year after his death gave her state to marry his cousin – young enough to have been his son, with no property, and not well-born. Those who had not seen anything of Dorothea usually observed that she could not have been ‘a nice woman’, else she would not have married either the one or the other.

Certainly those determining acts of her life were not ideally beautiful. They were the mixed result of young and noble impulse struggling amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state, in which great feelings will often take the aspect of error, and great faith the aspect of illusion. (...) But 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.

Her finely-touched spirit had still its final issues, though they were not widely visible. (...) But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffuse: 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.¹⁹²

It is quite clear in these last paragraphs of the novel that Eliot refuses the Romantic idea of a successful marriage as the model for the community. As David Cecil remarks, Eliot’s plot arises from the characters. That is why her story is not intended to follow a standardized

¹⁹¹ Ibidem, p. 782 – finale

¹⁹² Ibidem, p. 784-785 - finale

formula but what she conceives to be the suitable development of a certain character.¹⁹³ In this novel, Dorothea's decision could only have resulted in the disapproval of the community because her independence of mind is a gift that neither the men who are extensions of Casaubon's authority nor the women who submit to these fellows have.

Furthermore, we have no clue to what really happened to Dorothea in her second union. We only know that, according to the social prejudices related by the novel, she should avoid marriage and become a spinster. It is interesting to observe how Eliot's narrator by stating that Dorothea's story is told by those people "who had not seen anything of her" deconstructs our traditional concepts of history. In addition, her narrator states that Dorothea's attitudes sprang from "the young and noble impulse struggling amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state". If the individual self is affected by the outward world, how can we affirm that Dorothea's characterization differs from the realist conceptions of the nineteenth-century novel?

Arnold Kettle asserts that Dorothea stands at the heart of George Eliot's conception of humanity insofar as the heroine's aspiration for a life nobler than the provincial manners counteracts the tendency to present society as an invincible force that shapes human beings. In this light, Dorothea is the character that most captures our sympathy because she represents a positive force in the world.¹⁹⁴ Kettle's argument points to Dorothea's singularity in relation to the other characters. He is implying that, unlike the other figures, she represents one's need to change the world one inherits. The only problem that I see in Kettle's comments is when the critic affirms that Dorothea fails to convince us because she has no place in Eliot's worldview.¹⁹⁵ In other words, when Kettle defends Dorothea's singularity he ends up implying that Dorothea is something outside Eliot's realism. I personally disagree with Kettle's conclusion. The historical image of Saint Theresa of Avila in the Prelude foreshadows the coming burden Dorothea undergoes throughout the novel. Since Dorothea is compared to many unknown martyrs whose fervour finds no expression in the social system, we can realize that her characterization is built on a real basis. Moreover, the last paragraphs show

¹⁹³ CECIL, David. *Op. Cit.*, p. 267

¹⁹⁴ KETTLE, Arnold. *Op. Cit.*, p. 165

¹⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 166

that she had shortcomings and her noble acts were not recognized by Middlemarch society because the power of female will must be avoided in a patriarchal system. Therefore, Dorothea's reputation as a woman is damaged because her ardour for an ideal life represents a menace to the "insignificant people" who wish to keep the social relations as they are. Once the town has its purposes to erase the diffuse effects of Dorothea's acts, she cannot merely be considered as an element apart from real world.

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel's tragedy is enhanced when she finds out Osmond's intentions before their marriage. In fact, her encounter with Madame Merle discloses devious secrets she had never suspected. What initially strikes Isabel in the conversation is the fact that Madame Merle was the first person who Osmond sought to discuss the end of Pansy's engagement. It shows that their concerns for the girl are more intimate than she had fancied. Afterwards, Isabel is impressed by the directness of Madame Merle's suppositions. The American compatriot firstly inquires whether Lord Warburton changed his mind or Isabel urged him to do it. When she raises the second possibility and then implicitly advises Isabel to use him on future occasions, the heroine recognizes the wickedness behind Merle's character.¹⁹⁶ It is wise to analyze Isabel's reaction when she finally discovers that Madame Merle arranged her marriage once the latter confesses she has everything to do with it:

Isabel took a drive alone that afternoon, she wished to be far away, under the sky, where she could descend from her carriage and tread upon the daisies. She had long before this taken old Rome into her confidence, for in a world of ruins the ruin of her happiness seemed a less unnatural catastrophe. She rested her weariness upon things that had crumbled for centuries and yet still were upright; she dropped her secret sadness into the silence of lonely places, where its very modern quality detached itself and grew objective, so that as she sat in a sun-warmed angle on a winter's day, or stood in a mouldy church to which no one came, she could almost smile at it and think of its smallness.¹⁹⁷

We can observe how Isabel more than ever invests in her self-reflection. If we remember Bell's comments on Isabel's reflection as an *act*¹⁹⁸, we acknowledge that such disposition heightens when her relationship with Osmond becomes worse. The passage shows clearly that Isabel leaves "her secret sadness into the silence of lonely places". Indeed, the idea

¹⁹⁶ JAMES, Henry. *Op. Cit.*, p. 428-430 – chapter 49

¹⁹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 430

¹⁹⁸ BELL, Millicent. *Op. Cit.*, p., 781

of “silence” is very important because it both denotes her spiritual misery as well as the Emersonian notion of self-reliance. It is relevant to establish here a comparison between Isabel’s and Dorothea’s conflicts. Although their disillusionment ensues from different sources, both women are overwhelmed by the feeling that they have no freedom to guide their own lives. If Casaubon’s codicil portrays the obstacle Dorothea needs to overcome so she can embrace a truthful bond with Ladislaw, Osmond’s machinations not only stop Isabel from accomplishing her ideal of freedom but also indicate that she has been a puppet in his hands. Therefore, as Nina Baym infers, the dreadful revelations of the story push Isabel to the inevitable point of leaving Osmond. But this eventuality is much on her mind. In this sense, as the novel approaches its end, her dilemma makes her more singular and less universal, which lessens the novel’s social realism.¹⁹⁹ Sousa Santos, in her terms, states that there is one option for Isabel to recover her dignity: to invest in freedom. In other words, the heroine must value her initially determined choice. Thus, in staying with Osmond and in turning this decision into a free act, Isabel definitely creates her real freedom.²⁰⁰

Isabel conveys signs of her determination when she decides to visit her cousin Ralph Touchett due to the gravity of his illness. Osmond is very cruel by affirming that Ralph means nothing to him. In addition, he does not approve of Isabel’s intention to leave Rome once it seems an affront to him. It is wise to observe the arguments Osmond employs to persuade her. He asserts that he takes their marriage seriously and so Isabel is nearer him than any human creature because their union results from a deliberate decision. Therefore, they must accept the consequences of their actions.²⁰¹ Isabel’s state of mind towards Osmond’s words reveals that her urge for integrity and a decent life is confronted by the way he endeavours to manipulate her through gestures that conceal his egoistic nature:

He spoke gravely and almost gently; the accent of sarcasm had dropped out of his tone. It had a gravity which checked his wife’s quick emotion; the resolution with which she had entered the room found itself caught in a mesh of fine threads. His last words were not a command, they constituted a kind of appeal; and though she felt that any expression of respect on his part could only be a refinement to egoism, they represented something transcendent and absolute, like the sign of the cross or the flag of one’s country. (...) Isabel had not changed; her old passion for justice still abode within her; and now, in the very thick of her sense of her

¹⁹⁹ BAYM, Nina. *Op. Cit.*, p. 632

²⁰⁰ SANTOS, Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa. *Op. Cit.*, p. 309

²⁰¹ JAMES, Henry. *Op. Cit.*, p. 445-446 – chapter 51

husband's blasphemous sophistry, it began to throb to a tune which for a moment promised him the victory. It came over her that in his wish to preserve appearances he was after all sincere, and that as this, as far as it went, was a merit.²⁰²

It can be noted that Isabel is more than ever tempted to take on a false relationship with Osmond insofar as it seems easier to acquiesce to a conventional union in which all roles are hypocritically established than to strive for a union by which mutual respect and independence are its main basis. Nevertheless, though Osmond's words "represented something transcendent and absolute", Isabel was still determined to assist the sickly cousin without caring if the husband considered her attitude "a piece of the most calculated opposition".²⁰³ Indeed, her consciousness is not seduced by the dryness and conservatism Osmond attempted to impose. Such resolution from the heroine's part discloses how her introspective mind, which is gradually enlightened by the events of the novel, enables her to confront her husband.

The final encounter with Ralph Touchett can be seen as Isabel's new beginning. As the scene follows, she expresses the shame for not recognizing all the good he did to her. Since Isabel realizes that Ralph's love is her only possession, she declares that her life was never what it should be. Furthermore, she implies that Osmond would never have married her if she had been poor. In reply, Ralph states that Osmond was greatly in love with her, and the failure of her choice cannot completely hurt her soul. Adding to it, he ascertains that she will always have him in her heart and, above all, if she has been hated in life, she has also been loved.²⁰⁴ As we can notice, Ralph's words remarkably fortify Isabel's selfhood inasmuch as her certainty of "being adored" is the most sincere affection she senses at a very difficult moment of her life. It can even be inferred that she is about to reconsider Osmond's affections towards her. Perhaps Isabel's consciousness is raising the possibility of a sincere love from her husband in spite of his evil nature.

To all effects, Isabel's resolution to refuse Caspar Goodwood's proposal displays her determination to reconsider her marriage at the end of *The Portrait of a Lady*. It is relevant to mention that Goodwood's stubbornness in convincing Isabel depicts his strong personality as a

²⁰² Ibidem, p. 446

²⁰³ Ibidem, p. 444

²⁰⁴ Ibidem, p. 477-479 – chapter 54

male type. Much of his inner force derives not only from insistence, but also from his patience. As a matter of fact, Goodwood had waited two years for Isabel before her marriage and, because of the probability of divorce, still nourished his hopes. That is why he resembles James's chauvinist figure, Basil Ransom, whose strong masculinity conquers the feminist Verena Tarrant in the novel *The Bostonians*. In this light, Goodwood employs all motives he finds in order to persuade Isabel. He firstly states that she can no longer mask her gloom since she is attached to "the deadliest of fiends". Afterwards, Goodwood tries to be more incisive and then declares that "the world is all before them". Therefore, under his guidance, Isabel must launch herself into a new life once they were not born to rot in misery.²⁰⁵ Yet Isabel disregards all his arguments and asks him to leave her in peace as the proof of his love. Through the narrator's accounts we can perceive her emotional condition when she flees from Goodwood after his kiss:

His kiss was like white lightning, a flash that spread, and spread again, and stayed; and it was extraordinarily as if, while she took it, she felt each thing in his hard manhood that had pleased her, each aggressive fact of his face, his figure, his presence, justified of its intense identity and made one with this act of possession. So had she heard of those wrecked and under water following a train of images before the sink. But when darkness returned she was free. She never looked about her; she only darted from the spot. There were lights in the windows of the house; they shone far across the lawn. In an extraordinary short time – for the distance was considerable – she had moved through the darkness (for she saw nothing) and reached the door. Here only she paused. She looked all about her; she listened a little; then she put her hand on the latch. She had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There was a very straight path.

²⁰⁶

This passage illustrates that only Isabel knows the "path" she must follow to reconstruct her life. It is interesting to observe that the phrases James uses such as "she had moved through the darkness and reached the door" and "she had not known where to turn; but she knew know", illustrate how the author relies on the protagonist's potentiality in following the perspectives that ensue from her consciousness. It can also be inferred that the last events strengthened Isabel's awareness of her life. Thus, the position that James takes on after exploring Isabel's subjectivity is to leave the protagonist in search of her own future. As the narrator points out, Isabel finally knows how "to turn the latch". Nonetheless, it is her decision to cross the "very straight path".

²⁰⁵ Ibidem, p. 488-489 – chapter 55

²⁰⁶ Ibidem, p. 489-490

Despite Isabel's resolution to deny a second union as an opportunity to start a new life, which displays her peculiarity in relation to other women concerning the settlement of female dilemma, many critics agree that such decision is profoundly compatible with James's artistic concerns. In this sense, our attempts to conclude the story by means of a single interpretation are undermined by the open plot ensued from the logic of Isabel's characterization. It is true that Henry James in dealing with the representation of female personality includes issues we can see in the majority of the realist novels such as marriage, money, feminine confinement, patriarchal authority and so forth. Nevertheless, if we only consider Isabel's return to Rome in terms of female self-righteousness we shall find numberless reasons justifying her decision. For example, we can fancy that Isabel returned to Osmond because she thinks that a woman must assume her choice or that she came back home to require divorce. We can imagine that she still expects a sincere affection from Osmond or, on the other hand, the loving experience she had with Ralph will be enough for her survival if her husband feels nothing for her. We can even claim that her return is a sign of her Emersonian mind which relies on personal intuition and self-reliance. Since interpretations may vary, I shall include some viewpoints that elucidate the writer's reluctance to a closed plot in its traditional sense.

Stuart Hutchinson, for instance, hints that James's problem in composing the novel is analogous to Isabel's problem in composing herself. That is why her affronting self as a woman is also an aesthetic enterprise. By venturing in the world of uncertainty, Isabel is exiled from traditional sureties.²⁰⁷ Millicent Bell, in her turn, expands Hutchinson's standpoints. To Bell, Isabel is a character in search of its plot. From the beginning of the novel, we observe that her gestures are more renunciatory than anything else, and her failure in fulfilling the other characters' expectations points to her unwillingness to terminate her own story with any of them.²⁰⁸ Moreover, Isabel's renunciatory actions depict her refusal to become "a portrait" for their eyes once they are all engaged either in defining her or in making her a means for their goals.²⁰⁹ Since Isabel's actions do not correspond to our expectations and, for this reason, we do not attain a clear conclusion of her *portrait* as a woman, it can be

²⁰⁷ HUTCHINSON, Stuart. "The Portrait of a Lady: Affronting Destiny", p. 38

²⁰⁸ BELL, Millicent. *Opt. Cit.*, p. 783

²⁰⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 784

implied that James is undermining the idea of “truth” especially if we consider this concept as the accurate presentation of something as it appears in the outward world.

To end up this section, it is necessary to elucidate why Eliot and James have so different positions concerning the settlement of the female protagonist’s dilemma which meddles in the plot’s conclusion. After following the exploration of Dorothea’s subjectivity, we realize that the protagonist undergoes a process that moves from bewilderment to awareness. In this sense, it is implicit that the possible resolution for Dorothea’s quandary lies in her gradual awakening to herself as well as to the world. Therefore, the conflict that Dorothea endures, which is carefully analyzed by Eliot’s narrator, is a *transition*. Indeed, the ending of *Middlemarch* shows that Dorothea overcomes her conflict by marrying Ladislaw. It is wise to add that Eliot lived in the period when philosophical systems such as idealism and positivism influenced the literary setting. If we remember Comte’s law of the three stages as well as Hegel’s dialectics, we acknowledge how the idea of “settlement” is strong in the nineteenth century. According to Frederick R. Karl, once Eliot is concerned with making human beings find moral stability, she sees in Comte’s positivism a philosophy that settles her uncertainties concerning people and society.²¹⁰ In this light, the idea of plot openness in her fiction is not complete, is only partial. Though Eliot makes us question the idea of truth, she is still confined to nineteenth-century thought.

In relation to James, we can observe that the issue of human beings acquiring knowledge and finding their places in society is also present in his fiction. However, such process of awareness overcomes the idea of settlement. Obviously, Isabel’s journey throughout the novel shows that she becomes wiser because of her experience. Yet we realize from the beginning of the novel that, unlike Dorothea, Isabel is aware of the importance of a marital life once she rejects two proposals. The fact of being deceived by Osmond does not lower her intelligence because she is not passive to him. As we have seen, Isabel astonishes Osmond by conveying her ideas about life instead of merely appreciating his wisdom. Inasmuch as Isabel is aware of what she does, James’s goal is not to underscore the result of her self-learning. Indeed, James aims at exploring Isabel’s ability to follow the power of her

²¹⁰ KARL, Frederick R. Op. Cit., p. 373

own consciousness. That is why Isabel's quandary *is not a transition* because James sees that the best way to explore her subjectivity is to let herself search for what she considers promising for her future life. This explains that James is not interested in exploring a certain character in order to criticize the social world or to display a moral lesson.

Concluding the chapter, I hope to have demonstrated why the exploration of the protagonist's subjectivity deserves most attention in *Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady*. We can observe through Dorothea's and Isabel's trajectories that Eliot and James explore their consciousness as a means of making these protagonists the dramatic center of the novels. The ways Dorothea's and Isabel's existential conflicts are demonstrated elucidate that these protagonists attain a powerful voice. The complexification of the narrative voice as well as plot's completeness become corollaries of the examination of the protagonist's subjectivity because they ensue from the way the authors conceive their female characters. Since Dorothea has difficulties to understand herself, Eliot's narrator mimetizes this difficulty to be sided with her. Due to Isabel's awareness of being despised by her husband, James's narrator directly examines the diffusion of thoughts that makes the protagonist review her life. The same happens to plot conclusion. Dorothea's process of learning also includes readers' gradual awareness of life. That is why the resolution Eliot takes to conclude *Middlemarch* as the outcome of Dorothea's lesson is something that educates us because it displays the fragility of our assumptions. In relation to Isabel, it can be suggested that James's sympathy with her self-awareness prevents him from pointing to the right solution to her dilemma. Thus, Isabel's freedom in choosing the course of her destiny is associated with our freedom in concluding the story according to our viewpoints.

Conclusion:

After following the journeys of Dorothea and Isabel, we may conclude that the characterization of female protagonists in the novels *Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady* indicates George Eliot's and Henry James's contributions to modern fiction. By looking into Dorothea's and Isabel's delineations we have been able to assess to what extent the exploration of character's consciousness involves a complexification of the narrating voice and plot openness.

Let us remember the contributions of the Anglo-American literary tradition that precedes Eliot and James. As we have seen, both novelists were influenced by two subjects which were stressed by their predecessors: the creation of a social world and the psychological approach to characters. In this way, Jane Austen, Walter Scott and Charles Dickens influenced Eliot's sociological views. Austen analyzes the issue of women in society by indicating how they improve themselves by marriage. Scott is more realistic by underscoring a mechanistic world where human beings are affected by the historical forces and social standards. Dickens's social criticism points to the injustices behind social conventions and satirizes human limitations. In relation to William Makepeace Thackeray and Charlotte Brontë, we realize that they aided Eliot to ascribe a psychological approach to characters. Thackeray focuses on the flaws and virtues that are in someone's self whereas Brontë starts to explore the idea of female consciousness by giving voice to the powerless woman.

In relation to James, I have shown that Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope influenced his social views. Dickens creates eccentric characters that portray the degradations of society whereas Trollope emphasizes a complex social world that overwhelms human beings due to its conventions. Among the novelists who motivated James to ascribe a subjective approach to characters, we can mention Laurence Sterne, Nathaniel Hawthorne and George Meredith. In this sense, James owes to Sterne much of his ability to explore the individual mind and external reality once Sterne's narrative stresses the matter of point of view. Hawthorne looks into the psychological side of characters by observing how their

actions are affected by ethical views. Meredith enhances the issue of character's consciousness by examining the female dilemma.

Despite the importance of the Anglo-American tradition, Eliot and James witness the collapse of the traditional assumptions of value and truth in the second half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the realistic principles that claim for the accuracy of prose fiction are questioned owing to the importance that is granted to subjectivity. As a result, novelists are concerned with the way human beings perceive and internalize the impressions of the external world. That is why Eliot and James are so interested in expanding the issue of subjectivity, they want to examine the process of characters' improving consciousness. Despite Eliot's and James's differences since the former is closer to nineteenth-century values, both authors endeavour to look into the matter of subjectivity in characters' designs.

Eliot's and James's concerns with the exploration of the female protagonists' consciousness can be verified through the issue of marriage, which is so important in *Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady*. The motivations behind Dorothea's and Isabel's decisions in assuming a marital bond disclose Eliot's and James's philosophical beliefs and the fact that these novelists show the female protagonists' reasons to accomplish something under philosophical lights indicates a peculiar attention to character design, which is not easily identified in the realist tradition. Also, the disillusionment which Dorothea and Isabel undergo owing to the wrong choice of a husband enhances Eliot's and James's interest in characters' consciousness. As I have underscored, there are long pauses in both novels when the narrator endeavours to penetrate into Dorothea's and Isabel's minds, investigating their bewilderment, their feelings and their immaturity. Since Dorothea and Isabel reconsider their roles as women in a way they have never done in their lives, their future actions will be affected by these moments of reflection.

The use of a complex narrating voice in the descriptions of Dorothea and Isabel is another achievement that indicates Eliot's and James's contributions to the modern novel. Even though we do not have in either novel a multiplicity of perspectives, we do have a use of point of view which masterfully accounts for the protagonists' doubts, ignorance, puzzlement and so on. The narrators are extremely faithful, whenever necessary, to Dorothea's and

Isabel's "not-knowing" condition. Eliot's narrator, for instance, proceeds from the general to the particular. When the narrator analyses Dorothea's quandary it starts from an intellectualised assumption – the clash between Catholics and Protestants, for instance – to contemplate the environment where Dorothea is located. Thus, Eliot's narrator gradually associates Dorothea with the setting whose outward figures enlighten her and finally focuses on her mind. James's narrator, in its turn, overtly emphasizes the conflicting ideas that are puzzling Isabel's consciousness. In this sense, we observe that James's narrator develops in Isabel's mind a sort of recollection of her thoughts and attitudes towards Osmond, so the heroine can examine her behaviour. Yet both Eliot's and James's narrators take on ambivalent positions towards their female protagonists. Hence when Eliot's and James's narrators analyse Dorothea's and Isabel's dilemmas, we realize how they criticize these heroines from a certain distance by pointing out their immaturity, but, at the same time, sympathize with them by making us sense their distressing situations.

Consequently, Dorothea's and Isabel's different responses to the possibility of a second union meddle in the plot's closure of *Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady*. Dorothea's decision to embrace a second union to the prohibited man haunts the Middlemarch community's social standards. But Dorothea needs to pursue the requirements of her "ardent zeal" as a woman. In this light, the consequent opposition of the town to Dorothea conveys that Eliot's fiction does not entail the idea of happy ending according to our expectations. We not only perceive Eliot's reluctance to relate what happened to Dorothea in her second marriage – "Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending" – ²¹¹, but also observe how the novelist's last comments on the protagonist questions our concepts of society and history. In this way, Eliot's art extends from the external world to the world of individual awareness. In relation to Isabel, we can observe that her attitude in placing herself above the external elements that define her outline as well as her self-reliant soul cause a great distress to the other characters who want to frame her and make her a means to achieve their interests. Her courage to experience a challenging marriage with a man she considers "uncommitted" to the social world discloses her strength. The same can be inferred of her unexpected responses to the people who belong to her environment. Indeed, Isabel fails to use her money

²¹¹ ELIOT, George. *Opt. Cit.*, p. 779

as Ralph expected or to provide a suitable husband to Pansy according to Osmond's plan, and so forth, because her conflicting self was not bound to being domesticated by someone else's wishes. In this light, Isabel's search for the complete fulfillment of her personality intensifies her renunciatory actions not only for the other characters but also for the readers. As a result, our attempts to envisage her future steps and to define her feminine self will never be completely accomplished. That is why we are still trying to draw her portrait.

For sure, *Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady* cannot be properly named "modern novels". We still have in the two works the use of a chronological order in their plots and a range of matters typical of bourgeois environment such as marriage, money, and so forth. Anyway, it is clear that these works exemplify the transition from realistic procedures to the complexification of representation in prose fiction giving up the idea of truth in favour of multiplicity, ambivalence, indeterminacy. Eliot has the look of the "philosopher": she seizes much of the representation of Dorothea's personality to raise questions concerning our positions and attitudes concerning life. James, in his turn, conveys the look of the "artist". He explores the potentialities of a certain character in opening the plot for the reader's constant examination as he does in the delineation of Isabel. To all effects, we must keep in mind that with Eliot and James characters achieve in prose fiction a relevance they did not have in traditional realism once the exploration of their potentialities place them above plot, granting them the power to create their own stories, in a path which is lonelier but freer, like that of the modern individual.

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