

Relational Selfhood and Moral Consciousness in George Eliot's Fiction: A Philosophical Reappraisal of Human Nature

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Abstract

This article offers an extended philosophical reappraisal of George Eliot's conception of human nature, arguing that her fiction articulates a relational anthropology grounded in sympathy, moral accountability, and communal embeddedness. Engaging with the intellectual influences of Ludwig Feuerbach, John Stuart Mill, and G. W. F. Hegel, the study situates Eliot within Victorian debates concerning determinism, secularisation, gender reform, and moral psychology. Through sustained close readings of *Middlemarch*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *Silas Marner*, the article demonstrates that Eliot rejects both rigid determinism and radical individualism in favour of a morally situated selfhood shaped through sympathy and social interaction. Eliot's fiction emerges as an ethical project that reconceptualises human

nature as historically embedded, psychologically complex, and transformable through relational responsibility.

Keywords: Human nature; sympathy; Victorian realism; moral philosophy; relational identity.

Résumé

Cet article propose une réévaluation philosophique approfondie de la conception de la nature humaine par George Eliot, soutenant que sa fiction exprime une anthropologie relationnelle fondée sur la sympathie, la responsabilité morale et l'enracinement communautaire. En s'engageant avec les influences intellectuelles de Ludwig Feuerbach, John Stuart Mill et G. W. F. Hegel, l'étude situe Eliot dans les débats victoriens concernant le déterminisme, la sécularisation, la réforme des genres et la psychologie morale. À travers des lectures attentives et prolongées de *Middlemarch*, *The Mill on the Floss* et *Silas Marner*, l'article montre qu'Eliot rejette à la fois le déterminisme rigide et l'individualisme radical en faveur d'une identité moralement située, façonnée par la sympathie et l'interaction sociale. La fiction d'Eliot émerge comme un projet éthique qui reconceptualise la nature humaine comme historiquement enracinée, psychologiquement complexe et transformable par la responsabilité relationnelle.

Mots-clés

Nature humaine ; sympathie ; réalisme victorien ; philosophie morale.

Introduction

The nineteenth century witnessed profound transformations in religious belief, scientific theory, and social organisation. Industrialisation, biblical criticism, evolutionary thought, and democratic reform destabilised inherited certainties. Within this climate of intellectual turbulence, the question of human nature acquired renewed urgency: Are

individuals governed by divine providence, biological determinism, rational self-interest, or moral conscience?

George Eliot emerges as one of the most philosophically rigorous novelists of this transitional age. Unlike purely sentimental writers, she confronts moral ambiguity with analytical seriousness. As F. R. Leavis famously argued, Eliot belongs to “the great tradition” of English fiction precisely because of her ethical depth. Yet to reduce Eliot to moral didacticism is to underestimate her philosophical complexity.

This article advances three central claims:

Eliot articulates a relational theory of selfhood in which identity is socially constituted.

She constructs sympathy as the foundational ethical faculty.

She mediates between determinism and free will through a morally situated realism.

Through close textual analysis and philosophical Contextualisation, we argue that Eliot’s fiction constitutes a sustained inquiry into the conditions under which human beings become ethically mature.

1- Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative interpretative methodology grounded in close textual analysis and philosophical hermeneutics. Through sustained engagement with *Middlemarch*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *Silas Marner*, the research examines the narrative construction of moral consciousness, relational identity, and sympathy.

The theoretical framework combines ethical criticism and Victorian realism studies. Drawing on the ethical theories of Martha Nussbaum and Wayne C. Booth, the article treats Eliot’s fiction as a site of moral inquiry in which narrative form cultivates ethical perception. Additionally, insights from Victorian realism, as articulated by Ian Watt and George Levine, situate Eliot’s representation of human nature within broader nineteenth-century social and intellectual currents.

Feminist literary criticism further informs the analysis of gendered constraints on moral agency, particularly in the figures of Maggie Tulliver and Dorothea Brooke. Finally, the study engages philosophically with humanist thought, including Feuerbach's secular ethics and Mill's utilitarianism, to contextualise Eliot's relational conception of human nature. This interdisciplinary framework allows for a comprehensive understanding of Eliot's fiction as both literary art and philosophical intervention.

Critics such as F. R. Leavis have long praised Eliot's "moral seriousness," yet her work warrants renewed philosophical scrutiny. This article contends that Eliot's novels articulate a coherent ethical anthropology in which the self is formed through relational engagement, social responsibility, and sympathetic imagination.

2- Overview of Human Nature in Literature

The exploration of human nature has remained central to literary production across centuries. In the Victorian period especially, literature became a powerful instrument for investigating psychological motivation, moral consciousness, and social conditioning. Writers such as George Eliot, Charles Dickens, and Thomas Hardy treated fiction as a laboratory of moral inquiry, where the inner life of characters reflected the pressures of industrial modernity and social transformation.

As Ian Watt argues in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), the realist tradition foregrounds "individual experience as the ultimate arbiter of truth," situating moral struggle within ordinary life. Similarly, Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) contends that the novel is uniquely equipped to stage the "dialogic interaction" of competing moral voices, making it particularly suitable for representing the complexities of human nature.

Victorian literature reflects what Charles Taylor (1989) describes as the emergence of the "inward turn" — the growing emphasis on interiority and moral self-examination. In Eliot's fiction, characters do not merely act; they deliberate, hesitate, and suffer ethically.

Their moral crises mirror broader cultural anxieties about faith, industrialisation, gender roles, and social mobility.

Moreover, as Raymond Williams (1973) notes, the realist novel often reveals the “structures of feeling” that shape historical moments. Eliot’s representation of human nature is therefore inseparable from Victorian moral psychology. Her characters’ struggles illustrate that human identity is shaped not only by innate dispositions but also by social context, class structures, and communal expectation.

The psychological realism of Eliot aligns with insights later developed in moral philosophy and psychology. Martha Nussbaum (1990) argues that novels cultivate moral imagination by enabling readers to perceive “the particularity of lives different from their own.” In this sense, literature becomes an ethical practice — one that refines empathy and moral judgment.

Thus, human nature in literature is not presented as static essence but as a dynamic negotiation between selfhood and society.

3- . Human Nature as Relational Identity

Eliot rejects atomistic individualism. In *Middlemarch*, the famous meditation on “the growing good of the world” emerging from “unhistoric acts” encapsulates her moral worldview. Individual significance arises through contribution to communal well-being. This vision parallels the humanist philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach, whose critique of theological abstraction repositioned the divine within human relational life. Eliot’s translation of Feuerbach profoundly shaped her ethical orientation: morality is not obedience to supernatural decree but responsiveness to human need.

Similarly, Adam Smith’s concept of sympathy anticipates Eliot’s narrative method. Smith proposes that moral judgment originates in imaginative identification with others. Eliot operationalises this insight structurally: her omniscient narration moves fluidly across

consciousnesses, compelling readers to inhabit divergent perspectives. Sympathy becomes both thematic concern and formal strategy. Thus, human nature in Eliot is not defined by fixed essence but by capacity for relational awareness.

4- Meaning of the Concept of Human Nature in Silas Marner

In Silas Marner (1861), Eliot constructs human nature as relational rather than isolated. Philosophically, debates on human nature span from classical humanism to modern existentialism. Renaissance thinkers like Pico della Mirandola, in *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486), argued that humans possess the freedom to shape their moral destiny. This belief in moral plasticity deeply resonates in Eliot's fiction.

Silas's transformation exemplifies this humanist conviction. Betrayed by William Dane and expelled from Lantern Yard, Silas retreats into alienation. His condition corresponds to what Émile Durkheim later conceptualised as *anomie* the breakdown of social bonds leading to existential disorientation (1897). Silas's fifteen-year isolation reflects this psychological fragmentation.

Critic Barbara Hardy (1963) observes that Eliot's fiction repeatedly affirms that "moral life is rooted in sympathy." Sympathy, for Eliot, is not sentimentalism but ethical recognition. The arrival of Eppie functions as what Paul Ricoeur (1992) would describe as narrative reconfiguration — the restructuring of identity through relational engagement.

Silas's gold symbolises sterile materialism; Eppie represents living connection. His redemption through community affirms Eliot's belief that human flourishing requires interdependence. As F. R. Leavis argues in *The Great Tradition* (1948), Eliot's moral seriousness lies in her insistence that "the quality of human relationships" determines ethical worth.

Dolly Winthrop embodies practical Christianity — not doctrinal rigidity but lived compassion. Through her, Eliot illustrates that moral restoration is mediated through

community, not supernatural intervention. Even what appears miraculous Eppie's arrival operates symbolically rather than mystically. Eliot secularises redemption: love, not miracle, saves Silas.

Thus, human nature in *Silas Marner* emerges as: *Capable of moral degeneration through isolation Redeemable through sympathy Dependent upon social bonds Transformative through love.*

4.1- The Role of Nature in Eliot's Moral Vision

Nature in Eliot's novels is neither decorative nor passive. In *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), the River Floss symbolises both emotional intensity and destructive inevitability. As George Levine (1968) notes, Eliot's landscapes function as "moral environments," shaping consciousness.

Similarly, in *Middlemarch* (1871–72), provincial life acts as a social ecosystem where every action reverberates within the community. This ecological moral vision parallels what modern theorists call social embeddedness the idea that identity is inseparable from relational networks.

Eliot's rural settings contrast with the alienation produced by industrial modernity. Her critique aligns with concerns expressed by Victorian cultural critics like John Ruskin, who warned against industrial dehumanisation. Nature, in Eliot, symbolises moral grounding a reminder of organic interdependence.

Seasonal cycles further reinforce psychological development. Spring symbolises renewal; winter evokes stagnation. Through this symbolism, Eliot subtly affirms a philosophy of moral evolution.

4.2- Philosophical Reflections on Human Nature in George Eliot's Novels

George Eliot's philosophical engagement with human nature moves beyond simple moral didacticism and enters the realm of ethical anthropology. Her fiction does not merely

describe behaviour; it interrogates the foundations of moral consciousness itself. Through psychologically complex characters, Eliot constructs what may be termed a relational theory of the self, in which identity is shaped, constrained, and ultimately transformed by social embeddedness.

In *Middlemarch*, Eliot famously writes that “what do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult to each other?” This statement encapsulates her ethical vision: human existence finds meaning through mutuality. This relational understanding resonates with Ludwig Feuerbach’s humanism, which relocated divinity from transcendence into human interdependence. Eliot’s translation of Feuerbach profoundly influenced her conviction that moral life is grounded not in divine command but in sympathy.

Similarly, Adam Smith’s theory of sympathy in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) provides a philosophical parallel. Smith argues that moral judgment arises from the capacity to imaginatively enter into another’s situation. Eliot transforms this philosophical idea into narrative practice: her omniscient narration repeatedly invites readers to inhabit multiple consciousnesses, thereby performing sympathy structurally. Thus, human nature in Eliot is not defined by isolated rationality but by affective responsiveness.

4.3-. Moral Conflict and the Dialectic of Selfhood

In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie Tulliver embodies internal division between personal desire and familial duty. Her struggle reflects a dialectical movement reminiscent of G. W. F. Hegel’s model of ethical development, in which self-consciousness evolves through contradiction.

Maggie’s aspirations are repeatedly curtailed by social convention. Yet Eliot does not frame her as morally deviant; rather, she exposes the rigidity of Victorian codes that constrict female agency. Through Maggie, Eliot interrogates whether moral systems truly serve human flourishing.

The tension between individuality and conformity anticipates later psychological theory, yet Eliot resists reductionism. Human motivation in her fiction is never singular; it is layered, ambivalent, and historically situated.

4.4- Determinism and Moral Responsibility

Eliot's realism confronts the tension between social conditioning and free will. In *Silas Marner*, Silas's alienation is socially produced betrayal, exile, and economic isolation erode his faith in human connection. His transformation through Eppie suggests, however, that moral regeneration remains possible.

This balanced portrayal resists strict determinism. While characters are shaped by environment and class, they retain ethical accountability. Such a view anticipates modern discussions of the "situated self," articulated by philosophers like Charles Taylor, who emphasises that identity is historically embedded yet reflexively aware.

Eliot thus proposes a moderated moral realism: circumstance influences but does not absolve responsibility.

5- Gender and the Ethics of Aspiration

Eliot's philosophical engagement extends to gender. Dorothea Brooke's intellectual ambitions in *Middlemarch* collide with patriarchal constraint. Her marriage to Casaubon dramatizes the tragedy of misdirected idealism within restrictive institutions. Feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter have argued that Eliot reconstructs female virtue as moral intelligence rather than passive obedience. Dorothea's growth occurs not through rebellion alone but through expanded sympathy and ethical discernment. Eliot therefore situates gender inequality within a broader philosophical problem: when social systems confine human potential, they distort the very development of moral character.

6- . Sympathy as Ethical Foundation and the issue of Moral Redemption

The central pillar of Eliot's conception of human nature is sympathy. For Eliot, sympathy is not sentimentality but disciplined moral perception. It requires intellectual humility and imaginative effort. As Martha Nussbaum argues, realist fiction trains moral vision by enlarging the reader's capacity to perceive complexity. Eliot's narrative refusal to caricature even flawed characters — such as Lydgate or Rosamond exemplifies this ethical commitment. Her fiction insists that understanding precedes judgment. Human nature, though fallible, remains redeemable through recognition of shared vulnerability.

Though raised within evangelical Christianity, Eliot ultimately secularises moral transformation. In *Silas Marner*, Eppie's arrival carries symbolic resonance but is grounded in human causality rather than divine miracle. Eliot's moral universe does not depend upon supernatural intervention; it depends upon restored human connection. Ethical meaning arises through love, labour, and community. This secular humanism distinguishes Eliot from many contemporaries and situates her within a broader Victorian transition from theological to ethical frameworks.

Conclusion

George Eliot's novels articulate a philosophy of human nature grounded in relational identity, moral growth, and sympathetic imagination. Against both rigid determinism and radical individualism, she proposes a vision of ethical interdependence. Her fiction proposes that ethical growth depends upon sympathy — the imaginative capacity to recognise the full humanity of others. In an era marked by fragmentation, Eliot's relational ethics retain striking relevance. She reminds us that the moral health of society depends upon the depth of our recognition of one another.

Her fiction suggests that:

Identity is socially constituted.

Moral maturity requires imaginative sympathy.

Gender constraints deform ethical potential.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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