

The Use of Humour in
George Eliot's *Middlemarch*

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Pia Helminen

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HELMINEN, PIA: The Use of Humour in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*

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Tämä pro gradu –tutkielma käsittelee huumorin käyttöä George Eliotin klassikkoromaanissa *Middlemarch*, jota yleensä pidetään yhteiskunnallisena tutkielmana, mutta jota hyvin harvoin luonnehditaan humoristiseksi. George Eliotin (oikealta nimeltään Mary Ann Evans) *Middlemarch* ilmestyi Englannissa jatkokertomuksena vuosina 1871-1872.

*Middlemarch*issa esiintyvän huumorin käyttöä on tutkittu hyvin vähän, joten taustakirjallisuutta ei juurikaan löytynyt. Kirja on kirjoitettu lähes 140 vuotta sitten, minkä jälkeen yhteiskunta on muuttunut merkittävästi. Tämä loi haasteita tekstissä piilevän huumorin tulkinnan suhteen.

Lähestyn romaania erinäisiä huumorin teorioita käyttäen. Päällimmäisinä teorioina käytän Simon Critchleyn ajatuksia kirjasta *On Humour: Thinking in Action*. Hän argumentoi koomisen maailman olevan sellainen, jossa tarkoituksenmukainen jatkumo katkeaa, sosiaaliset käytännöt kumotaan ja järjellinen rationaalisuus revitään riekaleiksi.

Tutkimus osoitti, että romaanissa esiintyy huumoria, vaikka se suurimmaksi osaksi onkin epäsuoraa. Huumorin avulla kirjailija on luonut tekstiin nyansseja, joiden avulla lukija lähes huomaamattaan pysähtyy pohtimaan kirjan kulkua syvällisemmin. Usein huumoria on käytetty nimenomaan vakavien asioiden yhteydessä, jolloin huumorin käyttö korostaa asiaa entisestään.

Lopputuloksena todettakoon, että *Middlemarch* ei ole koominen kirja, jota lukiessa voi olettaa purskahtavansa nauruun, mutta huumoria siinä on. Huumoria on käytetty säästäen ja hyvin harkiten.

Avainsanat: Eliot, Middlemarch, huumori

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1. Introduction

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is often considered one of the great classic novels in British literature. Virginia Woolf even called it a "magnificent book which with all its imperfections is one of the few English novels written for grown-up people". The *Penguin Popular Classics* version of the novel ends its summary on the back cover with the text: "While eagerly awaiting the next part of the *Middlemarch* serial in 1872, the *Spectator* critic declared that '*Middlemarch* bids more than fair to be one of the great books of the world'".

Critics such as Neil Hertz praise Eliot for being very particular with the way she introduces her images and characters, having a "humane moral consciousness elaborating patterns of action and imagery with great inventiveness and absolutely no horsing around" (Hertz 2003, 21). If there is no "horsing around", surely the humour also must have a meaning.

Seldom do we hear that *Middlemarch* is a humorous novel, although humour is very much present throughout it. (D.C. Muecke has noted that it has been "put forward at least twice on different grounds, that all art, or all literature, is essentially ironic" (1982, 3)). Whereas *Middlemarch* does not necessarily bring forth a roaring laughter in the reader, it can still make us laugh. As Edward L. Galligan puts it: "Laughter is a complicated physiological, psychological, intellectual, and social phenomenon. It takes a wide variety of forms, ranging from a barely discernible upward twitch at the corners of the lips to a full, racking convulsion of the face and body" (1984, 4). One may not experience the latter when reading *Middlemarch*, but certainly there are moments where the mouth twitches at the corners.

Ken Puckett has observed that "[r]eaders talk about the novel as 'the smartest person in the room'" (2007, 293), probably referring to the fact that the novel is so full of quotes,

information and general knowledge that the reader feels almost stupid for not knowing everything the novel is referring to. Keeping this quotation in mind, one should consider what makes the novel so *smart*. And do the *humour* and the *brain* have a link? In other words, is Eliot using humour in order to convey a message?

Even George Eliot herself hints that the events of the novel are full of irony. She writes early on in the novel a scene where Dorothea and Dr. Lydgate meet for the very first time:

Certainly nothing at present could seem much less important to Lydgate than the turn of Miss Brooke's mind, or to Miss Brooke than the qualities of the woman who had attracted this young surgeon. But any one watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots, sees a slow preparation of effects from one life on another, which tells like a calculated irony on the indifference or the frozen stare with which we look at our un-introduced neighbour. Destiny stands by sarcastic with our dramatis personae folded in her hand (94).

There is little or no interest in each other between Lydgate and Dorothea at their first meeting. Yet due to a calculated irony, (Lydgate's marriage, financial difficulties, monetary involvement with Bulstrode; Dorothea becoming a wealthy widow and learning the hard way what a loveless marriage is like) the destinies of these two characters become very much involved. It is however good to keep in mind that, as Debra Gettelman points out:

Over the course of her career, Eliot found that many of her readers were busily engaged in an imagining of their own direction—and one little like Jane Carlyle's "remembrances." Reading several of Eliot's novels in serial form, readers often guessed what the next installment would contain and guessed wrong. Over the many months during which *Romola* or *Middlemarch* first appeared, a complex relation developed between the author and her forecasting audience which became an increasing anxiety for the novelist.

As Blackwood recorded of her remark about her last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, "It was hard upon her that people should be angry with her for not doing what *they* expected with her characters" (qtd. in Martin 235). Eliot's recognition that she could not control the wayward imaginings of readers was compatible with the growing recognition in the period that the imagination was not easily controllable (Gettelman, 25).

Middlemarch was first published as a series and the audience had certain expectations about the way in which the story was to develop. Finding only very few studies of the use of

humour by George Eliot¹, it was a challenge to approach the novel from this point of view. Nancy Henry, in her study of Eliot and the British Empire, points out rather appropriately that “[t]here is truth in the humor” (Henry 2002, 63), where Eliot is describing Mr Brooke, Casaubon and Will Ladislaw. This is exactly one of the points worth exploring: is Eliot really using humour in order to reveal to the reader truths about society and the human condition?

Galligan writes that “[h]umour appears in literature almost always in short forms—the familiar essay, the short story, or the lyric poem. Longer works of humour usually turn out to be a series of loosely connected sketches, so loosely connected that they can be and often are printed as independent pieces” (1984, 17). This appears to be true for *Middlemarch* also. The aim of this thesis is to examine some of the humorous parts of *Middlemarch* separately and see what the purpose of the humour is.

Maybe it is true that George Eliot uses humour in order to make a point. Jerry Palmer certainly is of the opinion that humour is exactly the tool to use in order to make a point. Quoting Jonathan Miller, he claims that “[t]he more we laugh the more we see the point of things, the better we are, the cleverer we are at reconsidering what the world is like. We use the experience of humour as sabbatical leave from the binding categories that we use as rules of thumb to allow us to conduct our way around the world” (Palmer 1993, 58). This view seems to be shared by Avner Ziv, who has noted that “[i]n the theatre, the burden of social correction has traditionally been laid upon comedy. The renowned English playwright Ben Jonson described comedy as an educational instrument: Its goal is not to make us laugh, but

¹ See, for example, Jenkins, R.J. 2006. "Laughing with George Eliot". *George Eliot Review: Journal of the George Eliot Fellowship*: 37: 36-45

Laing, Robert Cutter, Jr. 1962. "Humor in George Eliot's Novels". *Dissertation Abstract*: 22:3666

Shaw, Patricia. 1973. "Humour in the Novels of George Eliot". *Filologia Moderna*: 13:305-35

The above works are not available in Finland.

to arouse us to moral improvement” (Ziv 1984, p.40). Similarly, did not Shakespeare himself use this very same method? The Fool in *King Lear*, for example, seems to be the only one who really sees what is going on. He uses humour to emphasize the wrongs in the play.

We must remember that we are reading the novel 136 years after it was first published. Simon Critchley writes that “in listening to a joke, I am presupposing a social world that is shared, the forms of which the practice of joke-telling is going to play with” (2002, 4). This is not the case here, as we do not share the same social world as that in the novel, but I will attempt to place myself 136 years back in time.

2. The Comic Use of Language: metaphors and “the unexpected”

As Simon Critchley writes, “[o]ne already finds Cicero writing in *De Oratore*, ‘The most common kind of joke is that in which we expect one thing and another is said’... The comic world is the world with its causal chains broken, its social practices turned inside out, and common sense rationality left in tatters” (Critchley 2002,1). This analysis can very well be used when studying George Eliot’s writing in *Middlemarch*. One is quite happily reading a sometimes very serious and certainly a very complex text when all of a sudden Eliot writes something quite unexpected, which leaves the reader somewhat surprised and often amused at the text. One such example can be seen in a scene where Will Ladislaw has gone to Lowick Church in the hope of seeing Dorothea and to tease his cousin Casaubon. Casaubon had prohibited Will’s visits to Lowick Manor, as he was jealous of the relationship his wife and cousin might have. In order to see Dorothea despite restrictions set upon him, he decides to go to church to see her. We can read that on the way to the church, “Will easily felt happy when nothing crossed his humour, and by this time the thought of vexing Mr. Casaubon had become rather amusing to him, making his face break into its merry smile” (450). Will is really looking forward to teasing Casaubon and the thought of seeing Dorothea seems to be secondary here. Will had planned to sit with his friends the Tuckers in their pew, which was located opposite that of the Casaubons’. To his surprise the curate’s family was nowhere to be seen and Will was left to sit alone opposite his cousin and Dorothea. Things have thus not turned out as Ladislaw had intended and he is feeling in a state of panic:

He could look nowhere except at the choir in the little gallery over the vestry-door: Dorothea was perhaps pained, and he had made a wretched blunder. It was no longer amusing to vex Mr. Casaubon, who had the advantage probably of watching him and seeing that he dared not turn his head. Why had he not imagined this beforehand? –but he could not expect that he should sit in that square pew alone, unrelieved by any Tuckers, who had apparently departed from

Lowick altogether, for a new clergyman was in the desk. Still he called himself stupid now for not foreseeing that it would be impossible for him to look towards Dorothea—nay, that she might feel his coming impertinence. There was no delivering himself from his cage, however; and Will found his places and looked at his book as if he had been a school-mistress, feeling that the morning service had never been so immeasurably long before, that he was utterly ridiculous, out of temper, and miserable. This was what a man got by worshipping the sight of a woman! The clerk observed with surprise that Mr. Ladislaw did not join in the tune of Hanover, and reflected that he might have a cold. (452)

Here, in the middle of Will Ladislaw's panic where our souls crumble with sympathy for him, Eliot brings us crashing down by trivially writing that the clerk thought Will had a cold for not singing. Here one is expecting to read a grand finale to Will's panic, and instead the reader is presented with a flat remark of Will's possible cold. This is an example of Cicero's idea of a joke, mentioned earlier, where we expect one thing but something else happens. In ending the description of Will in such an abrupt way, Eliot draws attention to people's (here Will's) behaviour. The scene raises the question of the validity of Will's panicking. Is he not perhaps exaggerating his panic? At least it shows how differently people interpret a situation.

Mrs. Cadwallader is from the very beginning depicted as a bold and quick-witted woman who may say anything that comes to mind. Her utterings do however occasionally cause humour in their strangeness and unpredictability. While watching Peter Featherstone's funeral from "an upper window of the manor" (312), Mrs. Cadwallader delivers one of her great metaphors: "That is how his family look so fair and sleek," said Mrs. Cadwallader. "Those dark, purple-faced people are an excellent foil. Dear me, they are like a set of jugs!" (314).

This comparison of people at a funeral to a set of (Toby) jugs does indeed come as something of a surprise and fulfils Critchley's definition of a joke. His mention of the comic world being one with its social practices turned inside out is also seen here. It is not a normal social practice to refer to people as jugs, let alone at a funeral. The choice of reference is also rather interesting. Mrs. Cadwallader has quite well defined Mr. Featherstone's relatives as

being empty on the inside (like jugs), only wanting their dead relative's money to fill them up. The mental image of a Toby jug gives the funeral-goers an extra morbid dimension. One could even go as far as paralleling the relatives to the source of the Toby jugs, to Sir Toby Belch from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and his thoughts that "I hate it [a false conclusion] as an unfill'd can" (Act 2, scene 3, line 6-7). As Sir Toby Belch, also Featherstone's relatives have hated *an unfilled can*, and are now all looking to fill theirs with Featherstone's money. The word *set* used by Mrs. Cadwallader, groups the relatives together as all being similar, as they are, deep down.

The use of an unexpected simile can be seen further on in the funeral scene. Eliot describes Dorothea's interest in Peter Featherstone's funeral: "I am fond of knowing something about the people I live among,' said Dorothea, who had been watching everything with the interest of a monk on his holiday tour" (313).

The reference to the *monk* gives the reader a reinforced sense of Dorothea's saint-like character. The monk being on a holiday tour again questions social practices: monks, who have given up everything material to devote themselves to God, certainly do not go on holiday tours. The unexpected simile does however alert the reader to study Dorothea's character the more. Is she really so saint-like as she would want to be, or is she as interested in the people at the funeral as the rest of them?

George Eliot also creates humour simply by using a word which is strange to the situation, as in describing Mr. Brooke in the following: "The weavers and tanners of Middlemarch, unlike Mr. Mawmsey, had never thought of Mr. Brooke as a neighbour, and were not more attached to him than if he had been sent in a box from London" (482). This of course is completely true, Mr. Brooke was indeed not considered a neighbour by the Middlemarchers, and the mere mental vision of poor Brooke in a box certainly challenges

Critchley's "causal chains". Moreover, Eliot's imagery of Brooke being sent in a box, like something that had been ordered from a catalogue, something superficial, like an ornament, describes well Brooke's usefulness in the eyes of the locals. He was nice to look at (well dressed), but not of much use in practise. *London* has also a slightly negative connotation throughout the novel among the Middlemarchers. One such example can be seen in connection with the building of a railway line through the village: "'Why, they're Lunnon chaps, I reckon,' said Hiram, who had a dim notion of London as a centre of hostility to the country" (529).

Mr. Brooke is again the target of humour when it is time for his election speech. Brooke has decided to run for Parliament and gives a public speech to convey his views. Eliot writes:

At one and the same moment there had risen above the shoulders of the crowd, nearly opposite Mr. Brooke, and within ten yards of him, the effigy of himself; buff-coloured waistcoat, eye-glass, and neutral physiognomy, painted on rag; and there had arisen apparently in the air, like the note of the cuckoo, a parrot-like, Punch-voiced echo of his words (484).

Someone in the crowd has made an effigy of Mr. Brooke and with the aid of a ventriloquist, the dummy repeats every word that Mr. Brooke says. Eliot continues:

The most innocent echo has an impish mockery in it when it follows a gravely persistent speaker, and this echo was not at all innocent; if it did not follow with the precision of a natural echo, it had a wicked choice of the words it overtook (484).

Simon Dentith has in his book *Parody* studied this very scene. He writes:

I take this as an exemplary instance of parody, albeit a fictional one. By the mere repetition of another's words, their intonation exaggerated but their substance remaining the same, one utterance, Brooke's, is transformed by another, held up to public gaze, and subjected to ridicule. George Eliot is doing no more here than illustrating an aspect of discourse which is so widespread as to be universal. The peculiarities of an election, especially the speeches delivered in the course of it, are certainly not typical of all speech situations, but many discursive interactions

are characterised by the imitation and repetition, derisive or otherwise, of another's words" (2000, 3).

3. The Use of Physical and Visual Humour

Let us return to Cicero's ideas of a joke (as seen above in a quotation from Critchley) and slightly elaborate on his definition. Where Cicero had noted that the most common kind of joke was that in which we expected one thing and another was said, we could elaborate this to include actions also. To better make the point, let us use as an example a quotation from Mr. Brooke's visit to one of his cottagers, Mr. Dagley. Mr. Brooke had gone to visit the Dagleys in order to tell the father that his son Jacob had been caught killing a leveret and was now temporarily locked up in a stable as a lesson for his wrong-doings. Mr. Brooke was hoping that Mr. Dagley would reprimand his son about this upon his return. The visit did not, however, turn out to be a very successful one: Mr. Dagley was upset with Brooke for not taking care of the cottages they lived in and was not at all prepared to take disciplinary advice from his landlord. Mr. Dagley was beginning to get rather hostile at the end of the visit: "That's what I'n got to say," concluded Mr. Dagley, striking his fork into the ground with a firmness which proved inconvenient as he tried to draw it up again" (381). Eliot shows here an example of a simple yet effective joke. Mr. Dagley is very upset and in his anger jams his fork into the ground. The intensity of the argument in the novel has made the reader nervous and afraid of what Mr. Dagley might do to Mr. Brooke. Eliot's subtle last comment of the fork getting stuck in the ground is an unexpected event and adds humour to the whole situation. We could analyse this scene using the Hobbesian humour theory, which claims that laughter is provoked by a sudden feeling of glory, of superiority, brought about by, for example, a success in battle. It is said that the "Hobbesian humour theory not only forces upon superiority (i.e. glory) but also suddenness...By [the] egocentric, competitive interpretation of superiority humour theory, the individual is amused only when he feels triumphant and/or another person

looks bad in comparison with himself" (La Fave et al. 1976, 64-5). It is certainly a (sudden) surprise that Mr. Dagley's fork is stuck in the ground. After his raging and threats he is made to look bad for not being able to pull out his fork from the ground. He is suddenly in the position of the weak one.

So why is this scene in the novel? Perhaps Eliot wants to draw attention to the poor conditions the people on Mr. Brooke's land live under. The scene emphasises that no matter how much the people protest against Mr. Brooke, they seem to lose in the end, just like Mr. Dagley did, getting his fork stuck in the ground. The humour in the scene simply helps us see the gravity of the situation. It is almost like J. Durant writes in *Laughing Matters*: "we laugh at something which is so intolerable, so horrible in our predicament that we simply have to laugh in order not to cry" (1988, 14). Here the horrible thing being the fork, stuck in the ground, a metaphor for Mr. Dagley's life: being stuck and rather helpless.

A similar event is seen after the reading of Mr. Peter Featherstone's will. After having first left a generous sum of money to Fred Vincy, Mr. Featherstone's second will had taken it all away from him. Angered by this, Fred's father goes home and Eliot writes:

Mr Vincy went home from the reading of the will with his point of view considerably changed in relation to many subjects. He was an open-minded man, but given to indirect modes of expressing himself: when he was disappointed in a market for his silk braids, he swore at the groom; when his brother-in-law Bulstrode had vexed him, he made cutting remarks on Methodism; and it was now apparent that he regarded Fred's idleness with a sudden increase of severity, by his throwing an embroidered cap out of the smoking-room on to the hall-floor (329).

Although Eliot tells us in the text that Mr. Vincy expresses his anger (and disappointment) in a very mild way, by taking his disappointment out on the oddest of targets, one would have expected him to be more sentimental after the great disappointment after the reading of the will. He does turn to physically expressing his anger, but takes it out on Fred's

embroidered cap. There is something oddly funny in this whole scene: an angry man throwing something to unload his anger, but it being a small and light object creates an amusing contradiction. The object does however represent Fred's high education and is probably a reminder of his idleness, which would explain Mr. Vincy taking his anger out on this particular object.

Although not very often, George Eliot is found using very direct humour to create a scene the reader can laugh openly at. One of these events is when she describes two of the long-established medical men of Middlemarch, Doctor Minchin and Doctor Sprague:

Mr. Minchin was soft-handed, pale-complexioned, and of rounded outline, not to be distinguished from a mild clergyman in appearance: whereas Dr. Sprague was superfluously tall; his trousers got creased at the knees, and showed an excess of boot at a time when straps seemed necessary to any dignity of bearing; you heard him go in and out, and up and down, as if he had come to see after the roofing. In short, he had weight, and might be expected to grapple with a disease and throw it; while Dr. Minchin might be better able to detect it lurking and to circumvent it (176).

The humour Eliot uses here is based on the visual, it is very physical. In its humorous description on how the doctors might deal with an illness, it raises a very serious question about the medical practices of the time. If one doctor can wrestle the disease away and the other can fool it away, is there not a serious problem with the standard of medical treatment? Perhaps Eliot here wants to draw attention to how critically important the medical reform was, being herself acutely aware of the need of proper medical training after the death of her "stepson" Thornton Lewes.

Another instance where Eliot uses visual humour is when describing Peter Featherstone's annoyance at his relatives who have come to wait for his death and visit his room, as their last attempt at getting him to include them in his will. Featherstone is not happy to see his greedy relatives and tells them to leave: "Their exit was hastened by their seeing

old Mr. Featherstone pull his wig on each side and shut his eyes with his mouth-widening grimace, as if he were determined to be deaf and blind" (299).

Mr. Featherstone has until this point been described as a cranky, unfriendly man of social importance. Seeing him pulling his wig and making grimaces turns Critchley's *social practices* inside out. This is not the way a man of his position should behave. Simultaneously as we wonder at his behaviour, we cannot ignore the behaviour of his relatives (and the greed of people in general).

4. Greed

Greed is a central theme in *Middlemarch*. The most famous concentration of this greed circles around Peter Featherstone, before, during and after his funeral. This is a topic that Eliot places much humour around.

Eliot is quite frank at laughing at greedy characters in the novel. Often her narrative has a very ironic tone. D.C. Muecke quotes Haakon Chevalier² on irony: “The basic feature of every Irony is a contrast between a reality and an appearance” (1982, 33). Eliot sounds innocent but the true intention of her narrative is not:

Sister Martha, otherwise Mrs. Cranch, living with some wheeziness in the Chalky Flats, could not undertake the journey; but her son, as being poor Peter’s own nephew, could represent her advantageously, and watch lest his uncle Jonah should make an unfair use of the improbable things which seemed likely to happen (295).

Having been sent by his mother to watch that no one take advantage of Mr. Featherstone’s inevitable upcoming death (especially not her brother Jonah), young Mr. Cranch watches his uncle closely. Eliot referring to Featherstone’s death as *improbable things* and later in the sentence saying it seemed *likely to happen*, is contradiction in itself. The reality is *certain death*, whereas it is made to appear as *improbable things...likely to happen*. Hence this being a clear example of Chevalier’s definition of irony. Similarly we should note Eliot’s use of *poor*: is Peter really poor? In monetary terms, no, but ironically for him, he is really a poor soul with no-one who cares for him. Eliot continues the description of young Mr. Cranch, who decides to stay in the kitchen to watch his uncle Jonah, where he “had a good corner to sit in and a supply of food.” Eliot writes:

² Haakon Chevalier, *The Ironic Temper*, New York, 1932, p.42

Seated in a famous arm-chair and in his best suit, constantly within sight of good cheer, he [Jonah] had a comfortable consciousness of being on the premises, mingled with fleeting suggestions of Sunday and the bar at the Green Man...there was young Cranch, who, having come all the way from the Chalky Flats to represent his mother and watch his uncle Jonah, also felt it his duty to stay and to sit chiefly in the kitchen to give his uncle company (296).

Young Mr. Cranch, being a dutiful son, follows his mother's instructions to the dot and stays in the kitchen (where there is a constant supply of food and beverages). Again the humour comes from Eliot's use of irony, referred to above. It *appears* that Mr. Cranch is a courteous man who keeps his uncle company, but in reality he stays in the kitchen to keep an eye on his uncle and enjoy the food and drink there.

While Eliot is here mocking the greedy relatives who come for free food and the chance to hopefully soon see their rich relative dead, she is also mocking the local relatives, who make the waiting for Mr. Featherstone's death seem like an on-going cocktail party where the hostess has to be well prepared (without wasting the best food!). Here Mrs. Vincy instructs poor Mary:

"Oh, my dear, you must do things handsomely where there's last illness and a property. God knows, I don't grudge them every ham in the house—only, save the best for the funeral. Have some stuffed veal always, and a fine cheese in cut. You must expect to keep open house in these last illnesses," said liberal Mrs. Vincy, once more of cheerful note and bright plumage" (295).

Mrs. Vincy instructs Mary on how to see to the needs of Mr. Featherstone's relatives. She stresses that there must at all times be food, but the best ham is to be saved for the funeral. Mrs. Vincy being cheerful and dressed in bright plumage, reinforces the idea of her treating the whole event as a cocktail party. In her defence let us note that at least she is not wearing her mourning yet, as are the other relatives. That seems of course a little premature, since Mr. Featherstone is not even dead yet and it is a clear indication of their shameless greed. The shameless greed is again mocked in a scene from Mr. Featherstone's funeral.

Eliot uses the Ark as a metaphor for Featherstone's property and describes his relatives as vultures:

When the animals entered the Ark in pairs, one may imagine that allied species made much private remark on each other, and were tempted to think that so many forms feeding on the same store of fodder were eminently superfluous, as tending to diminish the rations. (I fear the part played by the vultures on that occasion would be too painful for the art to represent, those birds being disadvantageously naked about the gullet, and apparently without rites and ceremonies.)

The same sort of temptation befell the Christian Carnivora who formed Peter Featherstone's funeral procession; most of them having minds bent on a limited store which each would have liked to get the most of (318).

There is no longer subtle hinting here. In this allegory Eliot parallels the relatives to vultures among animals in Noah's Ark. She refers to them as *Christian Carnivores*, meat-eaters, who are after Peter Featherstone's flesh, who are at the funeral for the one simple reason that they have all been led to believe there will be something for them in Mr. Featherstone's will. According to Critchley, "what makes us laugh is the reduction of the human to the animal" (2002, 29). We can thus say that Eliot's description of Mr. Featherstone's relatives as vultures is a prime example of a joke.

Eliot continues the playful mocking of Mr. Featherstone's relatives at the reading of his will. The first will has been read, but it will be revoked by a second will. The suspense is unbearable:

Where then had Peter meant the rest of the money to go—and where the land? And what was revoked and what not revoked—and was the revocation for better or for worse? All emotion must be conditional, and might turn out to be the wrong thing. The men were strong enough to bear up and keep quiet under this confused suspense; some letting their lower lip fall, others pursing it up, according to the habit of their muscles (323).

Eliot is building up great suspense here. The questions set are on everyone's minds and she brilliantly adds humour to this scene by describing how strong the men are, bearing up

and keeping quiet, as if the situation was so grave that they would need to stand up and shout in protest. If we analyse this example, we can see that the humour comes from the physics and metaphysics in the scene. As Critchley puts it,

[h]umour functions by exploiting the gap between being a body and having a body, between – let us say – the physical and metaphysical aspects of being human. What makes us laugh...is the return of the physical into the metaphysical, where the pretended tragical sublimity of the human collapses into a comic ridiculousness which is perhaps even more tragic (2002, 43).

In the passage by Eliot above, the men try feverishly to control the fact that they are a body and try to alienate themselves from it in order not to react with it.

As noted, the previous passage is a build-up to a great suspense in the novel. Everyone is anxious to hear what the late Mr. Featherstone has left them. At this point Eliot reaches a climax in the novel:

There was still a residue of personal property as well as the land, but the whole was left to one person, and that person was—O possibilities! O expectations founded on the favour of “close” old gentlemen! O endless vocatives that would still leave expression slipping helpless from the measurement of mortal folly! (324).

The above quotation is in itself humorous in its exaggeration. But when examining the quotation more closely we can see that Eliot here perhaps alludes to Chaucer’s Pardoner’s Tale from *The Canterbury Tales*. The Pardoner preaches:

O glotonye, ful of cursednesse!
 O cause first of our confusioun!
 O original of oure dampnacioun,
 Til Crist hadde boght us with his blood agayn!
 (150, lines 498-501)

The Pardoner’s Tale simply mocks greed with the Pardoner being such a hypocrite that no one can take his tale seriously. By alluding to the Pardoner’s Tale, Eliot reminds the reader of the ridiculousness of greed seen in the Tale.

5. Society

Kent Puckett writes about 'brain' in *Middlemarch*. He argues that "the most important—if not the only—version of the brain-effect in *Middlemarch* is achieved through a comparative modeling of different orders of intelligence in different kind of form (form understood as a whole made up of a greater or lesser number of meaningfully related parts)" (2007, 293). (Puckett has defined his *brain-effect* as being one where "the novel thinks *before* us, thinks *at* us, as we try, however hopelessly, to think along with it" (2007, 293)).

Eliot has used brain to give the residents in and around Middlemarch more variety and character. Some of the more light-humoured examples come from characters considered of a lesser intellect. One such amusing comment can be read about Mr. Borthrop Trumbull: "He was an amateur of superior phrases, and never used poor language without immediately correcting himself—which was fortunate, as he was rather loud" (300). The reader is here told that Trumbull uses poor language [language of the poorer classes] and in a loud voice, but corrects himself immediately when he notices his mistake. Trumbull is trying to give an image of himself as being higher in society than he really is, but occasionally forgets his ways. By correcting himself, he draws attention to his slips, which makes him look foolish. This is perhaps one way that Eliot tries to draw our attention to the snobbery that goes on in society. It is divided in classes, which can be detected by speech among other things. Trying to appear as other than one is, is simply foolish.

Another character who is described with an element of humour, is Mr. John Raffles. Although Raffles is not a very amusing character, his description is a rather suitable one: "His name was John Raffles, and he sometimes wrote jocosely W.A.G. after his signature, observing when he did so, that he was once taught by Leonard Lamb, of Finsbury, who wrote

B.A. after his name, and that he, Raffles, originated the witticism of calling that celebrated principal Ba-Lamb” (397).

At first sight John Raffles simply seems unintelligent for jotting down random letters behind his name just because others do it. After closer inspection however the action seems to be well thought through and shows that he has no respect for the highly educated, mocking their habit of writing their title after their name. Also he being proud of giving his tutor the mocking pet name “Ba-Lamb” shows his total lack of respect.

At the same time, though, Raffles is shown to have quite a sense of humour. The letters after his name seem not to have been picked at random at all. A *wag* is according to *The Oxford Dictionary of English* “a person who makes jokes”. Raffles therefore considers himself a bit of a comic who lives his life just as he wants to. He may consider himself a wag, but in the novel he is nothing of the kind. His life has in fact rather a serious ending.

5.1. Morals

One aspect of Middlemarch society is morals. It is very important that people live and think according to certain standards. Let us look at a quotation from the novel to clarify the thought:

This was not one of the sales indicating the depression of trade; on the contrary, it was due to Mr Larcher's great success in the carrying business, which warranted his purchase of a mansion near Riverston already furnished in high style by an illustrious Spa physician -- furnished indeed with such large framefuls of expensive flesh-painting in the dining-room, that Mrs Larcher was nervous until reassured by finding the subjects to be Scriptural (574).

Mr. Larcher has bought a furnished mansion with paintings showing a lot of naked flesh in the dining room. The amusing part here is that Mrs. Larcher cannot like the paintings until she has been told the subjects for the paintings have been taken from the Bible. Thus, if a painting of a naked person depicts an event in the Bible, it can hang on the dining room wall.

If the very same picture had been painted for pure pleasure only, it would be condemned as sinful. This is the type of hypocrisy which Eliot is drawing attention to.

5.2. Gossip

Gossip has always been a uniting (and sometimes a dividing) force in society. What better way then is there to make a town come alive in a novel than to describe scenes of gossiping?

Many people believed that Lydgate's coming to the town at all was really due to Bulstrode; and Mrs. Taft, who was always counting stitches and gathered her information in misleading fragments caught between the rows of her knitting, had got it into her head that Mr. Lydgate was a natural son of Bulstode's, a fact which seemed to justify her suspicions of evangelical laymen. She one day communicated this piece of knowledge to Mrs. Farebrother, who did not fail to tell her son of it, observing—

“I should not be surprised at anything in Bulstode, but I should be sorry to think it of Mr. Lydgate.”

“Why, mother,” said Mr. Farebrother, after an explosive laugh, “you know very well that Lydgate is of a good family in the North. He never heard of Bulstrode before he came here.”

“That is satisfactory so far as Mr. Lydgate is concerned, Camden,” said the old lady, with an air of precision. “But as to Bulstrode—the report may be true of some other son (254).”

The gossip around the town that Dr. Lydgate is the son of Mr. Bulstrode is funny because of its total ridiculousness, as so often is the case with gossip. Someone has overheard parts of a conversation and deduced from that a truth, which is totally invented. This so-called truth is in turn told on to others. Here Critchley's *causal chains* have been broken and the result can be regarded as rather funny.

The quotation also allows an insight into the characters of Mrs. Taft and Mrs. Farebrother. Being told that Mrs. Taft picks up gossip haphazardly, not getting the whole story, but nevertheless re-telling her impressions as the truth, fairly well builds us the picture of her being the town gossip. Also amusing is Mrs. Farebrother's reaction as she hears the

truth about the rumour from her own son. She accepts that Dr. Lydgate is not a love-child of Bulstrode's, but cannot let go of the idea of him perhaps having a love-child elsewhere.

Gossiping among friends is something which probably happens everywhere, but organising dinner parties just for the sake of being able to gossip does sound a little extreme. This is nevertheless what happened after the scandal of Raffles dying at Mr. Bulstrode's house: "The business was felt to be so public and important that it required dinner to feed it, and many invitations were just then issued and accepted on the strength of this scandal concerning Bulstrode and Lydgate; wives, widows, and single ladies took their work and went out to tea oftener than usual" (686). Eliot writes about the dinner parties in a way that makes such behaviour quite normal and in doing that, she leaves *common sense rationality in tatters*, as Critchley would say.

6. Men vs. Women

Simon Critchley writes that:

...much humour seeks to confirm the status quo either by denigrating a certain sector of society, as in sexist humour, or by laughing at the alleged stupidity of a social outsider. Thus, the British laugh at the Irish, the Canadians laugh at the Newfies...and so forth. Such comic scapegoating corresponds to what Hobbes means in suggesting that laughter is a feeling of sudden glory where I find another person ridiculous and laugh at their expense. Such humour is not laughter at power, but the powerful laughing at the powerless. (Critchley, 2002, 12)

Critchley mentions here sexist humour – humour, where men laugh at women and women laugh at men. In this part I will concentrate on women laughing at men.

6.1. The Narrator's Comments

Today's world is filled with stereotypes of what men and women are like, what marriage is like, and so on. In the twenty-first century it is difficult to imagine what the standard stereotypes of 1872 could have been, but reading *Middlemarch* with the eyes of today, some small points need to be looked at. One such example can be found in a passage at the Lydgates':

"I wish you would fasten up my plaits, dear," said Rosamond, letting her arms fall with a little sigh, so as to make a husband ashamed of standing there like a brute. Lydgate had often fastened the plaits before, being among the deftest of men with his large finely formed fingers. He swept up the soft festoons of plaits and fastened in the tall comb (to such uses do men come!) (556).

Eliot is here describing a scene from the Lydgate house, where Rosamond is getting ready for the day. She silently tells her husband off for not helping her with fastening her plaits – a task Dr. Lydgate often performs. Eliot's little parenthesized comment of men being useful for this purpose exactly – especially Lydgate, who has fine fingers – not only emphasizes the

role reversal of the Lydgates' (with Rosamond being the one in charge) but also shows how little Rosamond values her husband's true talent. He may have fine fingers, wherefore he is a good surgeon, but Rosamond thinks they are meant for her plaits. With the use of parentheses, Eliot creates a little side comment, meant to look like a careless side thought of Rosamond's, but in emphasising it with a parenthesis (and some light humour), she makes the reader stop and think more deeply of the meaning of the paragraph.

In the twenty-first century, it is a commonly used stereotype in (slapstick) humour that men are afraid to tell their wives everything. Eliot hints at something similar when writing about Caleb Garth signing a bill of debt for Fred: "Either because his interest in his work thrust the incident of the signature from his memory, or for some reason of which Caleb was more conscious, Mrs. Garth remained ignorant of the affair" (224). We are given no clear message as to why Caleb has not told his wife about the bill, but Eliot certainly hints at the fact that he chose not to tell, hinting perhaps to the fact that Mrs. Garth is the one in power in the Garth residence. Looking at this through the perspective of a female writer, this could be a situation as described by Crichtley where the *powerful are laughing at the powerless*.

The feeling of powerlessness is something Mr. Brooke seems to experience when thinking of Dorothea and marriage: "Mr. Brooke wondered, and felt that women were an inexhaustible subject of study, since even he at his age was not in a perfect state of scientific prediction about them! Here was a fellow like Chettam with no chance at all" (41).

This is a typical example of women (here the powerful) laughing at the men (the powerless). Practically speaking it is the narrator George Eliot sympathetically mocking men and their inability to understand women.

6.2. Marriage

Marriage is a central theme in *Middlemarch* and needs therefore to be looked at more closely. George Eliot herself was never married, but did live as if she was, with philosopher and critic George Henry Lewes, who was already married, but unable to divorce (Haight, 1968, 145). Her own relationship may well have contributed to the way in which she looks upon marriage.

In her introductory narrative about Dorothea, Eliot writes about her heroine in the light of being a bride:

Such a wife might awaken you some fine morning with a new scheme for the application of her income which would interfere with political economy and the keeping of saddle-horses: a man would naturally think twice before he risked himself in such fellowship (11).

Eliot is here considering Dorothea's love of charity and charitable work. She comments that a man should think twice before marrying such a woman, as she might upset his household economy. Similarly Eliot writes: "Certainly such elements in the character of a marriagable girl tended to interfere with her lot, and hinder it from being decided according to custom, by good looks, vanity, and merely canine affection" (10).

Choosing a husband on the basis of merely liking a man is perhaps not so bad, but when Eliot calls it "canine affection", she gives the feeling a strange, humoristic angle, paralleling marriage to taking a dog. According to Barbara Hardy, Eliot uses "animal images which have a dehumanizing effect... [and are] sometimes used with deadly seriousness, sometimes with unequivocal or deceptive humor" (2000, 226). In this case we could perhaps interpret it as humour, but with some seriousness to it. Simon Critchley ponders a lot on the subject of animals and humour. According to him, "what makes us laugh is the reduction of the human to the animal or the elevation of the animal to the human" (2002, 29). In Eliot's text

the human is reduced to an animal, a dog, and we can thus interpret the passage as being humorous.

There is also some room to explore what exactly Eliot means by canine affection. Does she mean that a husband should be chosen the way one chooses a dog or should one be as faithful to a husband as a dog is to his master? Be it whichever alternative, Eliot, with the help of humour, draws attention to the way in which marriages are entered into and in doing so forces the reader to question this habit. At this point it would also be good to keep in mind Clinton Machann's observation that "there is a long tradition of questioning Eliot's portrayal of mates and potential mates for her heroines" (2005, 344).

The most ironic comment on marriage in *Middlemarch* can be found towards the beginning of the novel where Dorothea visits her future home, Lowick manor: "A woman dictates before marriage in order that she may have an appetite for submission afterwards" (72). This certainly is true for Dorothea's marriage, she wishes to do nothing but be submissive. The great irony of this comment is that it is given as a general statement, a known truth. Alison Ross touches upon the same subject in her analysis of Jane Austen's *Emma*. Ross writes:

The humour of Jane Austen is created through irony...either in the author's voice or in one of the characters'. In the novel *Emma* Knightley's proposal of marriage to Emma is followed by this comment: 'What did she say?' 'Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does.' It is humour with a target. Austen's stance on the society of the time is detached and mocking. This, in turn, affects the reader's stance: (80)

Just as Austen mocks the society of her time with marriage related irony in *Emma* from 1815, Eliot does the same with marriage arrangements in the late 1800s. The excessive simplicity of the comment in Austen's novel draws attention. Similarly, Eliot's comment on submission is expressed in such an exaggerated way, as a general truth, that it draws

attention to itself. As it turns out, very few wives in *Middlemarch* do have an appetite for submission. Dorothea, being dutiful, submits, but not with an appetite, and Rosamond Lydgate has no intention of submitting, ever. (We shall return to Rosamond at a later stage).

7. The Use of Humour in Connection with Female Characters

Eliot has in *Middlemarch* a large number of general characters and a handful of central characters. I will analyse Eliot's use of humour with each of the main characters individually and have divided the sections according to the characters' gender. Firstly let us look at some aspects of humour used about women in general.

Mrs. Cadwallader is not featured in the novel in great depth, but she does appear over and over again in the novel, often being the voice of the 'reader between the lines'. She is depicted as rather a simple-minded, maybe even frivolous, woman who talks a lot but says very little. Let us look at example of her uncomplicated way of thinking. Mrs. Cadwallader is talking to Celia about accommodating to one's husband: "When I married Humphrey I made up my mind to like sermons, and I set out by liking the end very much. That soon spread to the middle and the beginning, because I couldn't have the end without them" (312).

Mrs. Cadwallader is explaining to Celia how one can learn to like something if one really wants. The example she is using is almost a childish one. First she decides to like sermons and likes the end the best (because then the dreaded sermon ends!). This way of thinking I would associate with children rather than the wife of a rector. A child could be talked into looking forward to the end of a sermon (as it would then finish) and gradually learn to anticipate the ending already in the middle, and so on. Mrs. Cadwallader's naive approach may have been put in the novel with great thought and intention. Perhaps the reader is meant to stop and think about the woman's position in a marriage. Is she treated like a child?

Dress, clothing and all "unnecessary fuss" that is related to it, is often seen as women's favourite pastime. Some would argue that it is enjoyed by men also, both in our time and in the settings of *Middlemarch*, but more typically it is associated with women. Although dress is

something I will be talking about in the section about Mrs. And Miss Vincy, I would like to mention it in the general part about women also, because it involves the usually so sensible

Mrs. Bulstrode:

"You are alone, I see, my dear," she said, as they entered the drawing-room together, looking round gravely. Rosamond felt sure that her aunt had something particular to say, and they sat down near each other. Nevertheless, the quilling inside Rosamond's bonnet was so charming that it was impossible not to desire the same kind of thing for Kate, and Mrs. Bulstrode's eyes, which were rather fine, rolled round that ample quilled circuit, while she spoke.

"I have just heard something about you that has surprised me very much, Rosamond."

"What is that, aunt?" Rosamond's eyes also were roaming over her aunt's large embroidered collar" (287).

Mrs. Bulstrode has come to see Rosamond about something she thinks is very grave and important, namely a rumour that Rosamond is in love with Dr. Lydgate. Despite this very important concern for her niece, Mrs. Bulstrode has the time to admire the quilling on Rosamond's bonnet. The overstatement of it being so charming that it would be impossible not to want something similar for one's own daughter makes the scene stand out. The faint glimpse of humour used by Eliot in describing Mrs. Bulstrode's wandering eyes upon the quilling of Rosamond's bonnet sets perhaps the scene for what is to come later on in the novel: Rosamond is so used to getting the most beautiful bonnets and quillings (even so beautiful that her aunt, who normally is very sensible, notices it), that it will be impossible for her to not have it. This, of course, proves to be a major issue in her marriage to Dr. Lydgate.

Someone who in the novel is depicted as not being interested in female vanity is Mrs. Garth. She is considered anything but simple:

She had sometimes taken pupils in a peripatetic fashion, making them follow her about in the kitchen with their book or slate. She thought it good for them to see that she could make an excellent lather while she corrected their blunders "without looking", —that a woman with her sleeves tucked up above the elbows might know all about the Subjunctive Mood or the Torrid Zone—that, in short, she might

possess “education” and other good things ending in “ion”, and worthy to be pronounced emphatically, without being a useless doll (234).

We are told how smart Mrs. Garth is, who has been educated enough that she can tutor children, but at the same time we are shown how hard working and efficient she is in the house. This image of her doing many things at the same time gives rather an amusing picture of an over-achiever. Eliot adds verbal humour to this passage by listing that Mrs. Garth possesses “education” and other good things ending in “ion”, but implying that the list is so long it would be silly to go through it. *That* is how smart Mrs. Garth is.

7.1. Dorothea

Dorothea is one of the main characters in the novel and receives accordingly a lot of attention. Eliot uses several types of humour on Dorothea. Firstly, let us look at the most “easily detected”, which is the physical type. Eliot describes Dorothea: “She walked briskly in the brisk air, the colour rose in her cheeks, and her straw-bonnet (which our contemporaries might look at with conjectural curiosity as at an obsolete form of basket) fell a little backward” (28). Eliot describes Dorothea as walking briskly – something a lady would seldom do – and pays special attention to her out-of-fashion bonnet, describing it as a basket. Although Eliot does describe Dorothea’s simple clothing on other occasions also, this is the first time she does it with a humorous touch. Perhaps we are meant to pay special attention to the extent of Dorothea’s simplicity regarding clothing that she does not care if she walks around with a basket on her head.

Sir James Chettam’s interest in Dorothea and new information about our heroine is presented to us in a rather unusual way:

"I have brought a little petitioner," he [Chettam] said, "or rather, I have brought him to see if he will be approved before his petition is offered." He showed the white object under his arm, which was a tiny

Maltese puppy, one of nature's most naive toys (31).

Sir James offers Dorothea a small dog, but she refuses the gift. Instead she encourages Sir James to give it to Celia: "I think she likes these small pets. She had a tiny terrier once, which she was very fond of. It made me unhappy, because I was afraid of treading on it. I am rather short-sighted" (31).

Eliot's choice to describe Dorothea as someone who refuses a gift in fear of treading on it draws attention to Dorothea's refusal of the dog. She can almost be called silly. In the bigger picture it seems indeed that Dorothea is being silly: she is. She is completely incapable of seeing that Sir James is hoping to find himself a wife in her. The following quotation reinforces this line of thinking:

The Maltese puppy was not offered to Celia; an omission which Dorothea afterwards thought of with surprise; but she blamed herself for it. She had been engrossing Sir James. After all, it was a relief that there was no puppy to tread upon (33).

Dorothea does not realise that Sir James is courting her and is surprised that he did not give the puppy to Celia. Eliot writes that Dorothea is relieved about having no puppy to tread upon and with these words of humour enforce upon us the fact that Dorothea indeed only thought about the dog, being completely incapable of understanding Sir James' feeling towards her.

As stated previously, Cicero understands humour as something that has an unexpected twist. In the middle of a highly emotional scene between Dorothea and Will Ladislav, the reader is quite surprised at reading a description of Will's thoughts:

Will never quite knew how it was that he saved himself from falling down at her feet, when the "long while" came forth with its gentle tremor. He used to say that the horrible hue and surface of her crape dress was most likely the sufficient controlling force (518).

He almost fell down at Dorothea's feet, but felt the controlling force that kept him on his feet was the horrible colour and surface of her dress. Why are we told that the colour and texture of Dorothea's dress stopped Will from telling her he loved her? At first glance this text seems very strange. To maybe lose the love of one's life over material and colour? I think not. At closer examination I believe we are to interpret the colour and material of the dress as what they represent. The black colour and simple mourning dress reminds Will too much of Dorothea's late husband. It shows strong irony that Casaubon, even when dead, has a separating force on Will and Dorothea.

The ironic humour used by Eliot has also been noted by Dwight H. Purdy, who pinpoints quite nicely the style of *Middlemarch*: "extremely minute details vibrate in tremolo for the attentive reader, especially when one keeps in mind that synthesis of sympathy and irony"(805). This synthesis of sympathy and irony can be seen in the following:

Dorothea said to herself that Mr. Casaubon was the most interesting man she had ever seen, not excepting even Monsieur Liret, the Vaudois clergyman who had given conferences in the history of the Waldenses. To reconstruct a past world, doubtless with a view to the highest purpose of truth – what a work to be in any way present at, to assist in, though only as a lamp-holder!" (20).

We sympathise with Dorothea for wanting to marry this old man whose faults are constantly being pointed out to us by other characters, but which Dorothea herself is totally ignoring in her youthful enthusiasm. The irony in this is that Dorothea wants to be even a lamp-holder, but when she gets to be more than that, when she finally gets to help Casaubon with his work, she realises (when it is too late) that the works are not very great at all.

Eliot seems to dwell on Dorothea's fascination of Casaubon. Dorothea is seen to praise him blindly: "And his feelings too, his whole experience – what a lake compared with my little pool!" (26). This exaggerated comparison draws attention to the words. Can Casaubon's feelings really be compared to a lake when mostly we have been able to read that he was a

dried-out old man without feelings? Similarly Dorothea describes her own feelings as a little pool, where she could rather describe them as an ocean. The irony here is very strong and serves as a warning for things to come. We are reminded of Dorothea's ignorance once again when we are told that:

In explaining this [his work] to Dorothea, Mr. Casaubon expressed himself nearly as he would have done to a fellow-student, for he had not two styles of talking at command: it is true that when he used a Greek or Latin phrase he always gave the English with scrupulous care, but he would probably have done this in any case. A learned provincial clergyman is accustomed to think of his acquaintances as of "lords, knyghtes, and other noble and worthi men, that conne Latyn but lytille."

Dorothea was altogether captivated by the wide embrace of this conception. Here was something beyond the shallows of ladies' –school literature: here was a living Bossuet, whose work would reconcile complete knowledge with devoted piety; here was a modern Augustine who united the glories of doctors and saint (26).

Casaubon explains his work to Dorothea and when doing so, speaks to her as if to a fellow scholar, as he cannot speak in any other way. Eliot has even written the narrator's comments in old, Chaucerian English to emphasize how outdated he and his studies are. Only because Casaubon is incapable of speaking plainly (hence only interested in his own world and not of the people around him), does not make him interesting. On the contrary, he seems rather a bore. But this poor Dorothea does not see. And here the irony lies again. We are almost in a situation here where we could interpret the situation as being the *powerful laughing at the powerless*, as described by Critchley. The readers (powerful) know so much more about the truth about Casaubon than Dorothea (powerless) that we feel we can laugh at her naivety.

When writing about Dorothea, the word *poor* seems to be used quite frequently. Eliot uses the word *poor* a lot –so much so that Dwight H. Purdy has written an article on its use. He writes:

Indeed, the word [poor] achieves the force of dramatic irony when...Dorothea sanctimoniously declares that "Marriage is a state of higher duties. I never thought of it as mere personal ease," to which the narrator enjoins the epithet to her protagonist, "said poor Dorothea" (p.41). The modifier emphasizes Dorothea's ignorance of men and marriage and asks us to forgive it and to forgive the religiosity that prevents her from seeing so much (2004, 808).

Again we come back to the subject around Dorothea we have been discussing earlier. She is so ignorant of the marriage she is about to embark on that one should almost feel sorry for her. At the same time there is some heavy irony in her enormous naïveté.

J. Durant writes in *Laughing Matters* that "we laugh at something which is so intolerable, so horrible in our predicament that we simply have to laugh in order not to cry" (1988, 14). An example to match these criteria can also be found in *Middlemarch*, although the definition could be softened to mean *smile confusedly* instead of *laugh*. The passage in question is taken from nothing less than Dorothea's honeymoon in Rome. Already at that stage of the marriage has she been left alone while Casaubon is researching for his *A Key to All Mythologies*. Eliot writes:

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 (189).

Amid all the beauty of Rome, Dorothea sits alone and is upset. The mood of the text is melancholy, but does not in any way prepare for the grotesque shock of the last words. The use of the word disease gives a picture of the marriage of Dorothea and Casaubon as being diseased (if it was not already clear at this point). The red drapery, which is hung for Christmas, which is considered a time of joy and peace (as is a honeymoon?), is associated with a horrendous image of sickness. Should the choice of illness be of importance here? Probably yes. A disease of the retina affects the eyesight of a patient, and in a similar way

Dorothea has been blind about her relationship to Casaubon. Eliot uses a very dramatic technique to draw attention to Dorothea's problems, but in doing so ensures that her comment is noticed. Just like J. Durant wrote above, this is so horrible a passage that it would simply be better to laugh at it in order not to cry.

7.2. The Vincy Women

There is a big difference, both physical and mental, between our heroine Dorothea and Rosamond Vincy. The two women are connected in the novel only towards the end, when Dorothea tries to help Rosamond's husband. Dwight H. Purdy writes in his article: "Having vainly sought her soul's companionship with Casaubon and, thus far, vainly with Will, what biting irony there is in Dorothea's expressing 'pitying fellowship' with the almost soulless Rosamond, who seems small selfishness incarnate"(810).

Whereas Dorothea is seen as being almost too kind and naïve, it is interesting to see how we are to conceive Rosamond, who quite unflatteringly is described as "small selfishness incarnate" (Purdy 2004, 810).

7.2.1. Mrs. Vincy

Let us first begin by looking at Rosamond's mother Mrs. Vincy, to find possible explanations for Rosamond's character. Mrs Vincy is often presented as being cheerful and light in manner. She is also often seen as quite emotional. When Fred is taken ill, she is quite upset: "'Save my boy.' Once she pleaded, 'He has always been good to me, Mr. Lydgate: he never had a hard word for his mother,'—as if poor Fred's suffering were an accusation against him" (256). The narrator's comment here about Fred's suffering being an accusation against him steers the reader to consider that Mrs. Vincy is simply a silly woman. A strong reaction like

this one is perhaps not very uncommon in mothers who are worried about their children, but later we are told that:

Mr. Wrench was again sent for, but was gone on his rounds...[Mrs. Vincy] thought it "very ill usage on the part of Mr. Wrench, who had attended their house so many years in preference to Mr. Peacock, though Mr. Peacock was equally a friend. Why Mr. Wrench should neglect her children more than others, she could not for the life of her understand. He had not neglected Mrs. Larcher's when they had the measles, nor indeed would Mrs. Vincy have wished that he should. And if anything should happen..." (251).

Mrs. Vincy is angry at Mr. Wrench for attending to other patients at the very same time that she would have needed him. She is particularly angry because Mr. Wrench had been chosen to be the Vincys' doctor over Mr. Peacock, who would have been equally good. For this preference Mrs. Vincy would have expected Mr. Wrench to be available at all times. Mrs. Vincy's behaviour is rather immature and not what would be expected of a lady. Indeed, we can here see a clear case of what Critchley would call *social practices turned inside out*. Her way of thinking that the doctor has neglected her children, but not the children of others, seems both self centred and naïve.

Mrs. Vincy's excessive maternal instincts are described in a scene where she is seeing to a still sick Fred by his bed:

"If I can only see my boy strong again," she said, in her loving folly; "and who knows?—perhaps master of Stone Court! And he can marry anybody he likes then."

"Not if they won't have me, mother," said Fred. The illness had made him childish, and tears came as he spoke.

"Oh, take a bit of jelly, my dear," said Mrs. Vincy, secretly incredulous of any such refusal (257).

Mrs. Vincy is talking to her adult son, although sick, as if he was a small boy. Her tender words are perhaps not exaggerated in a grave situation as this one is, but when she encourages Fred to have some jelly, Critchley's definition of a joke as something unexpected

come to mind. The mention of food (and in particular jelly, which in itself is considered as childish and even a little funny in all its wobbliness) is very unexpected in the midst of tender words between mother and son. Vanity and pride in her children is also something that seems to be associated with Mrs. Vincy. She is very proud of her daughter and is not afraid to say so: "And Rosamond—where is there a girl like her? She might stand beside any lady in the land, and only look the better for it. You see—Mr. Lydgate has kept the highest company and been everywhere, and he fell in love with her at once" (330).

Mrs. Vincy is praising Rosamond as being just as good as any Lady, in not better and uses Lydgate as proof of this. According to Mrs. Vincy, Lydgate has been associating with the best and finest people in the country and yet he fell for Rosamond the minute he saw her. Not only has this passage a humorous tone to it for its over-the-top praising of Rosamond, but more importantly we should note that the company Lydgate has kept previously, that Mrs. Vincy speaks so highly of, is perhaps not so good after all. He may indeed be from a good family (who want nothing to do with him due to his medical career), but did he not fall in love with a married woman in Paris? A woman who killed her husband because she was tired of him?

Michael Mulkey refers to Arthur Koestler's theories when he writes that "humour is created when two incompatible frameworks are brought suddenly together" (1988 ,39). Baring this in mind, Mrs. Vincy's exaggerated praise of both Rosamond and Lydgate can be seen in a humorous light. The two incompatible frameworks here being Mrs. Vincy's *perception* of who Lydgate is and who he *really* is.

7.2.2. Rosamond Vincy Lydgate

The object of much (physical) praise, Rosamond is truly a woman of both beauty and poise.

She was after all

the flower of Mrs. Lemon's school, the chief school in the county, where the teaching included all that was demanded in the accomplished female—even to extras, such as the getting in and out of a carriage. Mrs. Lemon herself had always held up Miss Vincy as an example: no pupil, she said, exceeded that young lady for mental acquisition and propriety of speech, while her musical execution was quite exceptional (95).

Rosamond is being praised as the best pupil at Mrs. Lemon's school – a school that teaches etiquette to young ladies and very highly thought of in the county. The praise goes as far as referring to Rosamond as the *flower* of the school and according to Mrs. Lemon, one of the best pupils ever. Perhaps we can parallel this description of Rosamond to Freud's theory of humour. Referring to Freud³, Michael Neve writes that “someone...becomes laughable because they often seem to be overdoing something” (Durant 1988, 40). In the above quotation not only is Rosamond described as overdoing her studies, but the quotation is overdoing the praise in such a manner that the exaggeration makes the description of Rosamond laughable.

We are given a picture of a beautiful exterior with no insides. We could also look at the quotation from the perspective that the joke is in the realisation that Rosamond is so well trained that we all know it goes wasted in a place like Middlemarch.

Lynda Mugglestone has also made a note of the humour in the passage and writes:

Eliot's irony here reveals female education as a litany of the trivial, in which accomplishments replace the acquisition of knowledge, and in which the superficial is elevated into a symbol of superiority. It is, in effect, an education in etiquette, both social and linguistic, and Rosamond's success within this sphere is marked by her command of the spurious 'correctness' which defines it (1995, 21).

³ Freud. 1986. *Jokes and their Relationship to the Unconscious*. London: Penguin Books.

According to Mugglestone, Eliot is using irony in order to emphasise the triviality of female education. She is in other words using humour to bring to the surface a serious point: female education. Rosamond Vincy's perfect manners are often described in *Middlemarch*. Whenever she is described, her manners are mentioned. This again creates an image of her being just an empty shell that behaves well, and unavoidably should we be thinking of the Freudian theory mentioned above. When Fred is taken ill, we see this again:

Mrs Vincy sprang to the window and opened it in an instant, thinking only of Fred and not of medical etiquette. Lydgate was only two yards off on the other side of some iron palisading, and turned round at the sudden sound of the sash, before she called to him. In two minutes he was in the room, and Rosamond went out, after waiting just long enough to show a pretty anxiety conflicting with her sense of what was becoming (251).

Whereas Mrs. Vincy is beside herself with worry over Fred's illness, Rosamond is merely interested in showing her good manners. This also shows a very egotistic side to her and makes her less sympathetic in the readers' eyes. Some critics even go as far as calling her "a horror" (Austen 1976, 559). The unsympathetic description of Rosamond can easily lead to unsympathetic (and thus humorous?) interpretations of her.

We are told at the beginning of the novel that Rosamond "herself thought unfavourably of [her] dimples and smiled little in general society" (97). Yet every time she does smile, we are told that she dimples: "I suppose it would be unprofessional,' said Rosamond dimpling" (284). Why is it? Is it to make fun of Rosamond? Perhaps to remind us that she is not perfect? As already mentioned above, this could be seen as an unfavourable description of Rosamond and ultimately be an example of Critchley's theory of the *powerful laughing at the powerless*.

As discussed earlier, women are often accused of being too much interested in (if not obsessed with) clothes. Rosamond's name is often seen mentioned in connection with

garments. So much so that she is even described through what she is wearing: “One evening in March, Rosamond in her cherry-coloured dress with swansdown trimming about the throat sat at the tea-table...” (444). This information is not relevant to the plot of the novel, but clearly it has been added to feed the reader more information on Rosamond. This information only reinforces our impression of her as being a shallow empty shell whose vain efforts to be better than others is easy to look upon with humour.

Other characters in the novel are seen to laugh (quite openly) at Rosamond. It is one of the more “serious” characters, Mary Garth, who mocks Rosamond, as follows in a scene from Mary’s home:

“I must get this sewing done. It is for Rosamond Vincy: she is to be married next week, and she can’t be married without this handkerchief.’ Mary ended merrily, amused with the last notion.

‘Why can’t she, Mary?’ said Letty, seriously interested in this mystery, and pushing her head so close to her sister that Mary now turned the threatening needle towards Letty’s nose.

‘Because this is one of a dozen, and without it there would only be eleven,’ said Mary, with a grave air of explanation, so that Letty sank back with a sense of knowledge” (384).

The narrator clearly tells us here that Mary finds the whole notion of a dozen handkerchiefs quite funny and is giving us an opportunity to yet again laugh at Rosamond’s vanity. The fact that it is Mary who is in this scene, makes the whole situation even more ironic. It is after all Mary who had to give away all her savings to save Rosamond’s brother from his gambling debts. Also having Mary answering her sister with a grave face shows extreme sarcasm about the whole situation.

By juxtaposing Rosamond’s with Dorothea’s characters in the plot we are given the possibility to enhance one character’s characteristics over the other’s. For example, Rosamond is eager to compare herself to the other lady:

moreover, Rosamond was not without satisfaction that Mrs. Casaubon should have an opportunity of studying *her*. What is the use of being exquisite if you are not seen by the best judges? And since Rosamond had received the highest compliments at Sir Godwin Lydgate's, she felt quite confident of the impression she must make on people on good birth (413).

Here again the sarcasm simply shines through the text. The narrator tells us of Rosamond's thoughts in a manner that leaves no other ways of thinking about the situation. Except between the lines. And between the lines both the narrator and the reader is laughing hard.

As if we are not yet laughing enough at Rosamond's incredible vanity and egotism, we are simply told to laugh more. The narrator tells us to "Think no unfair evil of her, pray: she had no wicked plots, nothing sordid or mercenary; in fact, she never thought of money except as something necessary which other people would always provide" (259). I am almost on the border of deciding whether to cry or to laugh at Rosamond's opinion of money, it being something which others always provide her. To be fair to her, she cannot entirely be blamed for this opinion, having been raised the way she was.

In the above quotation I am not as interested in Rosamond's views on money as I am in the narrative. The way the narrator tells us not to think badly of her, that she in fact is not a horrible person, reminds me very much of William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, where Queen Gertrude's famous quotations "The lady doth protest too much, methinks" (Act 3, scene 2, line 230) seems to say it all. I think the narrator tell us so firmly not to judge Rosamond that I start to believe I should.

If in the above section the narrator tells us indirectly to laugh at Rosamond's selfishness, I think the narrator's intentions are quite clear here:

she was in such entire disgust with her husband that she wished she had never seen him. Sir Godwin's rudeness towards her and utter want of feeling ranged him

with Dover and all other creditors—disagreeable people who only thought of themselves, and did not mind how annoying they were to her. Even her father was unkind, and might have done more for them. In fact there was but one person in Rosamond's world whom she did not regard as blameworthy, and that was the graceful creature with blond plaits and with little hands crossed before her, who had never expressed herself unbecomingly, and had always acted for the best—the best naturally being what she best liked (634).

At this point we are perhaps beginning to not only laugh at Rosamond's obscure and egotistical thoughts, but we also become angry with her. The calm way in which we are described her thoughts are full of sarcasm. The cunning way in which the narrator expresses Rosamond's feelings depict our feelings for her exactly. *We* think *she* is disagreeable and only thinks of herself. *We* think that *she* does not mind how annoying she has been to her husband. And we laugh at her naïve little world where she still thinks she is “the graceful creature... who had never expressed herself unbecomingly, and had always acted for the best” (634).

To finish off the topic of poor Rosamond, I think it is appropriate that we look at an extract of just that: “Poor Rosamond for months had begun to associate her husband with feelings of disappointment, and the terribly inflexible relation of marriage had lost its charm of encouraging delightful dreams” (629).

Here we can see strong irony in the word *poor*. Yes indeed, Rosamond is poor. She is poor for money, and is it not ironic that after all, one could feel sorry for her.

8. The Use of Humour in Connection with Male Characters

8.1. Tertius Lydgate

If women are stereotypically thought of as running after pretty clothes and other (un)necessities, men are perhaps mostly considered as running after women. Our hero Dr. Lydgate is described with the following sentence: “He cared not only for ‘cases’, but for John and Elizabeth, especially Elizabeth” (141). Lydgate is described here as truly caring for his patients: it is not important to him what the illness or case is, he is more concerned with the people that are ill. The little additional comment that Lydgate cares more for “Elizabeth” than “John”, is perhaps a rather surprising comment and could be interpreted as humorous using Critchley’s theory of the unexpected.

Being a doctor, it is perhaps not so unusual that Lydgate is described using medical metaphors. This is also true about his interest in his (extended) family. Whereas Lydgate’s bedside manner was praised above, he himself describes his interest in his cousin by saying: “My dear Rosy, you don’t expect me to talk much to such a conceited ass as that, I hope,” said Lydgate, brusquely. ‘If he got his head broken, I might look at it with interest, not before’ (554).

Although the image of Lydgate examining his cousin’s crushed skull is a horrendous image, the idea comes across as quite a humorous one. Here we see that Lydgate is more interested in medicine than keeping in touch with his relatives and are told so in a strong, yet humorous way. The humour here is again a clear example of Critchley’s theory on the unexpected. A world where Lydgate is interested in his cousin only when his head is broken is surely one “with its causal chains broken, its social practices turned inside out, and common sense rationality left in tatters” (Critchley 2002,1).

A more light-hearted description of Lydgate also sheds light on his priorities: "...while Rosamond sat at the piano, and played one tune after another, of which her husband only knew (like the emotional elephant he was) that they fell in with his mood as if they had been melodious sea-breezes" (436).

Humour has been used very subtly here. Lydgate is described to us as an emotional elephant (these thoughts being not only the narrator's but I believe also Rosamond's), who does not care about the songs his wife plays, just as long as they sound good to his ear. Critchley points out that it is this very process of animalisation which produces the humour. He writes: "what makes us laugh is the inversion of the animal-human coupling, whether it is Horatian urbanity of Juvenalian disgust" (2002, 34). Rosamond on the other hand always plans meticulously her every move (and the tunes which are appropriate to be played). This seemingly simple, light-hearted comment may hold in it much more than at first is read out of it, but one is made to stop and think about its meaning because it makes a stir and the humour interrupts the process of reading. Peter J. Capuano puts it quite nicely in his article, writing that

It is one of the great ironies of the novel, and certainly one of George Eliot's most deft artistic achievements, that *Middlemarch's* most musical characters are not "musical" in the technical sense of the term. Instead, they are the characters for whom music inspires deep Schopenhauerian feelings of egoless sympathy. Will Ladislaw, Tertius Lydgate, Caleb Garth and Dorothea Brooke lack formal musical training, but George Eliot instills in them a distinctly Schopenhauerian appreciation for musical reality (2007, 931).

This comment certainly coincides with the quotation from *Middlemarch* above, Lydgate being described as an emotional elephant, when he is far from it. Similarly Rosamond is presented as someone very musical when she, in fact, is the true emotional elephant. Again, with the use of subtle humour, Eliot is able to highlight certain facts and characteristics.

8.2 Fred Vincy

The way in which we look at Fred Vincy differs somewhat from the way we look at Dr. Lydgate. Fred is throughout the novel presented to us in a more light manner (with this I mean less serious) than the doctor. Maybe it is because of this (seeming) light-heartedness of his character that we find several occasions where he is described with the use of humour.

Most of Fred's humorous moments involve the buying of horses, a hobby Fred holds very dear and always costs him dearly. We are told about his fascination:

Considering that Fred was not at all coarse, that he rather looked down on the manners and speech of young men who had not been to the university, and that he had written stanzas as pastoral and unvoluptuous as his flute-playing, his attraction towards Bambridge and Horrock was an interesting fact which even the love of horse-flesh would not wholly account for without that mysterious influence of Naming which determinates so much of mortal choice. Under any other name than "pleasure" the society of Messieurs Bambridge and Horrock must certainly have been regarded as monotonous" (227).

Fred is described as being someone who looks down on people who have no university education, yet one is encouraged to wonder why he seems to enjoy the company of Bambridge and Horrock so much. It cannot be the love of horses alone – there must be some excitement in the fact that others call horse trading *pleasure*.

A slightly mocking tone can be detected in the narrator's voice here, describing the love of horses as the love of horse-flesh. We are also made to think about Fred's addiction to horses by being told of his dislike to associate himself with people with a lower education than him. Still such low-lives as Bambridge and Horrock he considers his friends. This they are clearly not and a situation has arisen where Plato's theory of humour can be applied. As defined by Plato, here one "laugh[s] from feelings of superiority over other people" (Critchley 2002, 2). It is clear that poor Fred is being fooled by these men and does not realise it. The

feeling of superiority is given to the reader in the lines that follow: “Bambridge let it out in the course of the evening, when the farmer was absent, that he had seen worse horses go for eighty pounds. Of course he contradicted himself twenty times over, but when you know what is likely to be true you can test a man’s admissions” (230). The reader is given information that Fred is being fooled when Bambridge changes his story over and over, but Fred still only hears what he wants to hear.

The apparent mockery of Fred continues and again the reader is given an opportunity to feel superior. “The friend’s stable had to be reached through a back street where you might as easily have been poisoned without expense of drugs as in any grim street of that unsanitary period” (229).

Fred is led to see the horse he wants to buy through back streets so dirty that one might catch one’s death there. Still he seems quite confident about his purchase whereas the reader is again given an opportunity to *laugh from feelings of superiority*.

How is it possible that Fred does not see he is being led to the stables from the back? And how does he not notice that the street he is walking through is so unsanitary there is not much chance of the horse being in very good shape either. The irony in this quotation comes from the narrator mentioning poisoning. The place is so filthy one could get poisoned there. Fred’s trust is poisoned in this very place. We go on to read about Fred’s purchase: “Fred believed in the excellence of his bargain, and even before the fair had well set in, had got possession of the dappled grey, at the price of his old horse and thirty pounds in addition – only five pounds more than he had expected to give” (231). There is clearly some sarcasm to be read in the narrator’s comments about the “good buy”. Again we have a situation where the reader can feel superior to Fred. The narrator emphasises Fred’s belief in the sheer excellence of his bargain by pointing out that he had to pay an additional five pounds to what

he had planned. By making this sound like something positive in pointing out that it was *only* five pounds extra, we clearly see that it is sarcasm.

Leaving behind Fred's ill fortune with horses we see him trying to sort out his life and win the heart of the woman he loves. In this section we come across some physical humour, which is perhaps not so much ridiculing Fred as it is the upper classes. Fred is nevertheless embodied in this:

At that time the opinion existed that it was beneath a gentleman to write legibly, or with a hand in the least suitable to a clerk. Fred wrote the lines demanded in a hand as gentlemanly as that of any viscount or bishop of the day: the vowels were all alike and the consonants only distinguishable as turning up or down, the strokes had a blotted solidity and the letters disdained to keep the line—in short, it was a manuscript of that venerable kind easy to interpret when you know beforehand what the writer means (540).

Fred is described as being a typical gentleman of the times – one, whose handwriting is impossible to read. He even tries hard to achieve the illegibility to his script a gentleman is supposed to have.

This passage points out to the reader the enormous gap between where Fred is at present and where he has to go before he can do his job. It is hard to say if we could go one step further and interpret the text as hinting that the 'gentlemen' in question who write so illegibly that no one can read their handwriting, are considered to be of less use to society than the ones who can write in a legible hand. Caleb Garth puts it quite appropriately when he says: "Is there so little business in the world that you must be sending puzzles over the country?" (540). Also this indicates that he (Caleb) has a business to run and things to do and cannot be sending papers that people are unable to read. (In contrast to vicars, who merely write sermons for themselves to read?).

8.3 Mr. Vincy

Moving on from son to father, I would like to examine the few points where Mr. Vincy is associated with the use of humour. Mr. Vincy has rather a small part in the novel, but is an essential character in setting the scene for the past of his children.

We have seen how manipulative Rosamond can be and perhaps the following can shed some light on how she has come to be that way: “Mrs. Vincy’s belief that Rosamond could manage her papa was well founded. Apart from his dinners and his coursing, Mr. Vincy, blustering as he was, had as little of his own way as if he had been a prime minister” (332).

We can here read that both Mrs. and Miss Vincy are firm believers that they can control the father of the house. Despite his attempts at getting control, it is put to us plainly that he has no chance at all. This could be a case of *social practices being turned inside out*, as usually it would be the man of the house in charge. This situation can be seen as humorous as we now have a situation which is turned upside down from the so called “normal”.

The mention of Mr. Vincy having as much power as a prime minister parallels the Vincy household to the country, where the Prime Minister (Mr. Vincy) may be in a leading position, but having no real power at all.

Mr. Vincy is at times presented as rather a simple minded man viewed by other characters in the novel. Dr. Lydgate is for example a little annoyed at Mr. Vincy’s requests at times:

Lydgate did not mention to the Vicar another reason he had for wishing to shorten the period of courtship. It was rather irritating to him, even with the wine of love in his veins, to be obliged to mingle so often with the family party at the Vincys', and to enter so much into Middlemarch gossip, protracted good cheer, whist-playing, and general futility. He had to be deferential when Mr. Vincy decided questions with trenchant ignorance, especially as to those liquors which were the best inward pickle, preserving you from the effects of bad air. (336).

Lydgate considers the Vincys' social life a burden to himself and seems to be particularly annoyed at Mr. Vincy for giving out ignorant, un-informed medical advice (advice, which Lydgate has to agree with in order not to offend his future father-in-law) to his guests. The comment is not an expected one in this situation and brings humour to the passage in its unexpectedness, as was defined by Cicero.

8.4 Mr. Brooke

One of my personal favourite characters in Middlemarch is Mr. Brooke. I cannot specifically pin point why it is so, but I do like his always being so jolly. He is a jolly fellow. This jolly fellow is the object (and cause) of many humorous situations in the novel.

One characteristic that immediately stands out about Mr. Brooke is his way of speaking. He never says anything simply, but instead goes on and on, no matter what the subject. The same pattern of speech is repeated constantly:

“‘Sir Humphry Davy?’ said Mr. Brooke, over the soup, in his easy smiling way, taking up Sir James Chettam's remark that he was studying Davy's Agricultural Chemistry. ‘Well, now, Sir Humphry Davy; I dined with him years ago at Cartwright's, and Wordsworth was there too—the poet Wordsworth, you know. Now there was something singular. I was at Cambridge when Wordsworth was there, and I never met him—and I dined with him twenty years afterwards at Cartwright's. There's an oddity in things, now. But Davy was there: he was a poet too. Or, as I may say, Wordsworth was poet one, and Davy was poet two. That was true in every sense, you know’” (18).

Mr. Brooke uses eighty-eight words to express the fact that he has dined with Sir Humphry Davy several years previously. His speech is full of syntactic expletives and he often loses the direction of what he is talking about. This rambling gives us an image of Brooke as being rather an ‘airhead’ with no serious thoughts on anything in particular.

Mr. Brooke has another distinctive attribute to his speech, which is the repetition of words. This repetition of words has a very important role in the novel, as can be seen in a

quotation from Dwight H. Purdy, where he discusses the use of the word *poor* and links the use of it to some sheep stealers, who are to be hanged at the beginning of the novel. Purdy writes:

Advertently or not, two early uses of the commiserating adjective establish the theme of its incremental repetitions...these early uses of the epithet...foretell a marriage that becomes for Dorothea, as well as Casaubon, a suicidal hanging. Mr. Brooke innocently corroborates that reading when...he confesses that he never married because "I never loved any one well enough to put myself into a noose for them. It *is* a noose, you know" (41). George Eliot achieves varied effects through Brooke's comic habit of repeating himself. Here she gives the modifier finer subtleties than one expects" (2004, 808).

As Purdy states, Brooke's habit of repeating words really is quite comic and are probably in the novel not only to amuse us the readers, but to draw attention to the subject at hand. In the example above, his seemingly innocent comments hold in them much more than is first observed. Brooke's "original" way of communicating, by rambling and repeating words, draw the reader's attention to the hidden irony in the text.

Brooke's comments affect the way things and people are perceived in *Middlemarch* in other ways as well. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth has noticed that

Sometimes a casual conversation carries an implicit commentary, as with this self-revealing commentary by people at a party on French influence and English tradition:

"Lydgate has lots of ideas, quite new, about ventilation and diet, that sort of thing,' resumed Mr. Brooke, after he had handed out Lady Chettam, and had returned to be civil to a group of Middlemarchers.

'Hang it, do you think that is quite sound?—upsetting the old treatment, which has made Englishmen what they are?' said Mr. Standish" (ch. 10, 85). The fun here lies in the way perspectives multiply and balance. Lydgate's ideas receive a certain transfiguration in Mr. Brooke's way of putting things. Thus transfigured, these ideas receive decided opposition from Mr. Standish, whose own reliance on tradition itself requires some deconstruction (2006, 111).

We can again see that Brooke influences the way in which Middlemarchers perceive information. Mr. Brooke, who is not so specific with his comments, often causes confusion and a misinterpretation of things.

Staying on the subject of not being able to say things simply, I would like to continue to look at Brooke's incapability to be brief. Eliot writes about it in a commentary: "No one more ready than Mr. Brooke to write a letter: his only difficulty was to write a short one, and his ideas in this case expanded over the three large pages and the inward foldings" (282).

We can read that Mr. Brooke is more than willing to write a letter (to Will Ladislaw, letting him know of his uncle's illness and the fact that he would not be able to come for a visit to Lowick Manor.) Mr Brooke's only difficulty is to keep the letter brief and has in the end covered three pages and their foldings with text.

The humour in this quotation can be found in Mr. Brooke being different from other characters in *Middlemarch*. As Critchley states, we laugh "at people who are not like us" (2002, 69). Mr Brooke is more than ready help, as ever, but quite openly we can here see even the narrator mocking his difficulty to express himself briefly. However funny this passage is, the consequences of Brooke's ramblings are quite serious in the novel and I am again tempted to point out that it is with the use of humour that our attention is drawn to this event.

Following again along the same lines as above, we could look at Brooke's studies. Just as he has a comment to everything in his conversations, he seems also to have studied a bit of everything. Paralleling Mr. Brooke's studies to those of Casaubon, we get an impression of two sets of studies being of totally different calibre. Even Eliot writes about Brooke's documents in a sarcastic way:

Will, the moment before, had been low in the depths of boredom, and, obliged to help Mr. Brooke in arranging "documents" about hanging sheep-stealers, was exemplifying the power our minds have of riding several horses at once by inwardly arranging measures towards getting a lodging for himself in Middlemarch and cutting short his constant residence at the Grange; while there flitted through all these steadier images a tickling vision of a sheep-stealing epic written with Homeric particularity (372).

The way in which Eliot mentions Brooke's *documents* in quotation marks immediately draws our attention to them. Referring to them in quotation marks diminishes their meaning and we are led, or rather told, to view them as inferior to some other scholar's studies. We could view this passage through the lens of Hobbesian theory of humour, where we "find another person ridiculous and laugh at their expense" (Critchley 2002, 12).

We may think of Brooke as being bad at allocating his time and effort when we laugh at his topic of study in the above. Now we are also invited to take a look at his total blindness and ignorance of people. By greeting Dorothea, who has returned from her honeymoon, with the words "I need not ask how you are, my dear, Rome has agreed with you, I see—happiness, frescoes, the antique—that sort of thing" (267), we cannot but wonder at the total ignorance of the man. His listing everything that Dorothea's honeymoon was not –happy, educating about antiques, and so on. We are experiencing a situation where we have humour from feeling superior to him, as we know what Dorothea's honeymoon has really been like. With this humour, Eliot is able to emphasise the misery of Dorothea's marriage. What Mr. Brooke is assuming Dorothea has done on her honeymoon is probably what she herself expected to be doing. She never said it out loud – on the contrary – she wanted to help her husband, but how else could we explain her great sadness while in Rome?

Mr. Arthur Brooke is the object of some of the physical humour *Middlemarch*. We can read about his misfortune when he is trying to run for Parliament and is to hold a speech for the people of Middlemarch. A large crowd has turned up to (ridicule) Mr. Brooke, who seems to be surprisingly nervous. He asks Will to give him a second glass of sherry to calm his nerves. This proves to be mistake and Mr. Brooke finds himself unable to concentrate. Eliot writes:

"I'll take another glass of sherry, Ladislaw," he said, with an easy air, to Will, who was close behind him, and presently handed him the supposed fortifier. It was ill-chosen; for Mr. Brooke was an abstemious man, and to drink a second glass of sherry quickly at no great interval from the first was a surprise to his system which tended to scatter his energies instead of collecting them (482).

For Mr. Brooke to be so nervous, comes as a surprise, as he has always been depicted as a confident man. Mr Brooke's bad tolerance to alcohol is also a surprise. As James Russell Lowell wrote in 1870, "Humour is produced by the experience of a felt incongruity between what we know or expect to be the case, and what actually takes place..." (Critchley 2002, 3). In the above example one could expect Mr. Brooke to be as confident a speaker as he has been throughout the novel, but instead we are shown a very nervous and insecure man.

One subtle point of Eliot's writing caught my attention: we are told that Mr. Brooke is an abstemious man, but one thing he cannot be moderate about, is his use of words. There always seems to be a superfluity of them, be it in speech or in writing.

8.5. Edward Casaubon

Reverend Edward Casaubon is the source of much humour in *Middlemarch*. He is from the very beginning depicted as someone uninteresting and dull (except to Dorothea). People's prejudices toward Casaubon are so strong that they even pre-judge his staff, as we can see from Celia's thoughts: "... Mr. Tucker, who was just as old and musty-looking as she would have expected Mr. Casaubon's curate to be; doubtless an excellent man who would go to heaven (for Celia wished not to be unprincipled), but the corners of his mouth were so unpleasant" (76).

It is with slight disgust that the character of Casaubon (here through his curate Mr. Tucker) is presented to us, and the narrator's comments in parenthesis excuses the negative

thoughts of Celia's. It is as if we were told to forgive her for thinking ill of Mr. Tucker (but what is a girl to do, when the corners of his mouth are so unpleasant!). This addition is clearly ironic, but we accept it, as it is very possible that we are building the same kind of image of Casaubon ourselves.

Mrs Cadwallader, as we have seen previously, is not one to keep anything to herself. She is quite forward with her opinions and is not afraid to express them. She offers the reader opinions served with humour without forcing us to read between the lines. Mrs. Cadwallader has just learned about Dorothea's engagement to Casaubon. She is eager to tell the news to Sir James Chettam, who had had hopes of marrying Dorothea himself. Below is a conversation between Mrs. Cadwallader and Sir James:

"She is engaged to be married." Mrs. Cadwallader paused a few moments, observing the deeply hurt expression in her friend's face, which he was trying to conceal by a nervous smile, while he whipped his boot; but she soon added, "Engaged to Casaubon."

Sir James let his whip fall and stooped to pick it up. Perhaps his face had never before gathered so much concentrated disgust as when he turned to Mrs. Cadwallader and repeated, "Casaubon?"

"Even so. You know my errand now."

"Good God! It is horrible! He is no better than a mummy!" (The point of view has to be allowed for, as that of a blooming and disappointed rival.)

"She says his is a great soul. —A great bladder for dried peas to rattle in!" said Mrs. Cadwallader.

"What business has an old bachelor like that to marry?" said Sir James. "He has one foot in the grave."

"He means to draw it out again, I suppose" (58).

Calling someone a *great bladder for dried peas to rattle in* or a *mummy* must certainly be a prime example of *social practices turned inside out*, as explained by Critchley. It is not a common social practice to call anyone a great bladder for dried peas, however true a comparison that is. Mrs. Cadwallader also dehumanises Casaubon in calling him a dried

bladder. Henri Bergson was of the opinion that “we laugh when a human being or another living being...begins to appear somehow thingly or machine-like” (Critchley 2002, 56).

Referring to Mr. Casaubon as *dry* is partly due to his studies, the topic of which almost everyone in Middlemarch seem to find boring and dry. Mrs. Cadwallader does not leave her “dry” opinions of Casaubon there, but is seen once more calling him dry—this time in an even more nasty way:

Mrs. Renfrew, the colonel's widow, was not only unexceptionable in point of breeding, but also interesting on the ground of her complaint, which puzzled the doctors, and seemed clearly a case wherein the fulness of professional knowledge might need the supplement of quackery...

"Where can all the strength of those medicines go, my dear?" said the mild but stately dowager, turning to Mrs. Cadwallader reflectively, when Mrs. Renfrew's attention was called away.

"It strengthens the disease," said the Rector's wife, much too well-born not to be an amateur in medicine. "Everything depends on the constitution: some people make fat, some blood, and some bile—that's my view of the matter; and whatever they take is a sort of grist to the mill."

"Then she ought to take medicines that would reduce—reduce the disease, you know, if you are right, my dear. And I think what you say is reasonable."

"Certainly it is reasonable. You have two sorts of potatoes, fed on the same soil. One of them grows more and more watery—"

"Ah! like this poor Mrs. Renfrew—that is what I think. Dropsy! There is no swelling yet—it is inward. I should say she ought to take drying medicines, shouldn't you?—or a dry hot-air bath. Many things might be tried, of a drying nature."

"Let her try a certain person's pamphlets," said Mrs. Cadwallader in an undertone, seeing the gentlemen enter. "He does not want drying" (88-89).

Mrs. Cadwallader is discussing Mrs. Renfrew's disease with a friend. They both agree that Mrs. Renfrew would need medicines that would make her drier. Mrs. Cadwallader suggests she should read Casaubon's pamphlets, as they seem to have dried him completely.

Mrs. Cadwallader's comment about Casaubon's pamphlets being so dry they could cure Mrs. Renfrew from her illness of storing too much water is very rude indeed, but still there is a humorous aspect to the words. As in the example above, Mrs. Cadwallader's words show a

world where *social practices are turned inside out*. Mrs. Cadwallader is so bold with her comments that they do not even seem to have an undertone.

It is interesting to note that the two negative adjectives associated with Mr. Casaubon are each others' opposites, *dry* and *damp*. Whereas Mrs. Cadwallader calls Casaubon dry, the narrator compares his being as damp. "Only I was afraid you would be getting so learned,' said Celia, regarding Mr. Casaubon's learning as a kind of damp which might in due time saturate a neighbouring body" (268). Regarding Mr. Casaubon's learning as something *damp* gives the word *learning* a very negative connotation. Whereas Mrs. Cadwallader had called Casaubon and his studies very dry (in other words boring), Celia's view of the man seems to be more like *mouldy*. Mould grows in damp and it is found on something old. The use of the word *saturate* instead of for example *rub off on*, is also of interest here. Celia not only fears that some of Casaubon's (damp) learning should be picked up by Dorothea, but she fears that Casaubon may saturate her sister with his studies. Although this quotation is not as boldly mean as the ones we saw uttered by Mrs. Cadwallader, I believe this is in its subtlety all the more stinging. And again Casaubon is here turned into a "thing" (damp mould) that we can laugh at, according to Henri Bergson.

Mrs. Cadwallader does not let Mr. Casaubon off easily in her comments about him. One of the more sophisticated things she says about him concerns her opinion of what his family crest should be like:

"Well,' said Mrs. Cadwallader, putting on her shawl, and rising, as if in haste, 'I must go straight to Sir James and break this to him. He will have brought his mother back by this time, and I must call. Your uncle will never tell him. We are all disappointed, my dear. Young people should think of their families in marrying. I set a bad example—married a poor clergyman, and made myself a pitiable object among the De Bracys—obliged to get my coals by stratagem, and pray to heaven for my salad oil. However, Casaubon has money enough; I must do him that justice.

As to his blood, I suppose the family quarterings are three cuttle-fish sable, and a commentator rampant" (56).

Mrs. Cadwallader is imagining Casaubon's family crest to be one with three (ink spitting) cuttlefish and an expert who (uncontrollably) spreads his knowledge. All this of course, very clearly referring to Mr. Casaubon's (in her opinion useless) studies.

Many of the theories of humour could be applied here: Casaubon is in a sense being depicted as an animal and Mrs. Cadwallader doing so to him turns social practices inside out. Behind all this humour is again a serious issue of who Casaubon is and what he is like. Is he really a great serious scholar or is he merely a cuttlefish squirting ink about him and rambling on without control? This again brings forth questions about the wisdom of Dorothea marrying him.

As we saw earlier, the reader is invited to laugh at Dorothea for being so naïve about Mr. Casaubon. Dorothea's viewpoint can also be used to shed light on our view of Casaubon as well. As we know that Dorothea is wrong in her evaluation of the excellence of Casaubon's work, it is sad to read that "As for Dorothea, nothing could have pleased her more, unless it had been a miraculous voice pronouncing Mr. Casaubon the wisest and worthiest among the sons of men" (209).

Dorothea's total misjudgement of Casaubon can be seen as a perception of the incongruous, as written by Critchley. The humour of the situation comes from Dorothea's naivety and trust in Casaubon's excellence paralleled with the reader's knowledge that Casaubon is not that great. Also Casaubon's own beliefs in himself give cause for humour. The fact that he may *look* like St. Thomas Aquinas, does not mean that Casaubon can parallel himself with the saint. Mere looks does not a saint make. Casaubon's thoughts can

also be seen in the following quotation, where we are told of Dorothea's and Casaubon's time of courtship:

Mr. Casaubon, as might be expected, spent a great deal of his time at the Grange in these weeks, and the hindrance which courtship occasioned to the progress of his great work—the Key to all Mythologies—naturally made him look forward the more eagerly to the happy termination of courtship (63).

During his courtship with Dorothea, Mr. Casaubon spent a great deal of time with her at her home, but was very much looking forward to the end of this, as he would be able to return to his studies.

It is such great irony that Casaubon wishes for the courtship to end! This is supposed to be the best time of any couple's life and Casaubon thinks of it as merely a chore he cannot wait to finish. The narrator describing his studies as being his *great work* and it being *natural* that he would wish the courtship (which is a *hindrance* to him) to end as soon as possible, is again heavily ironic in the use of such exaggerated narration. The opinions about the work are those of Casaubon himself and one cannot but wonder at his pompousness and self-centeredness.

The narrator invites us to laugh more at Casaubon's bad success with his studies. He seems to think of them very highly himself, but as we can see, no one else seems to take much interest in them: "Times had altered since then, and no sonneteer had insisted on Mr. Casaubon's leaving a copy of himself; moreover, he had not yet succeeded in issuing copies of his mythological key (269). No Shakespeare has written any sonnets⁴ for Casaubon to leave a copy of himself. He has not even been able to publish the great work which he has been working on all his life. It sounds like the narrator is mocking Casaubon, we can see

⁴ Shakespeare, William. 1974. "Sonnets". In *The Riverside Shakespeare*, sonnets 1-7, p.1749-1750. Boston : Houghton Mifflin

examples of the *powerful laughing at the powerless*. When he finally does get some recognition for his work, we see another side to him:

“I have had the gratification of meeting my former acquaintance, Dr. Spanning, today, and of being praised by one who is himself a worthy recipient of praise. He spoke very handsomely of my late tractate on the Egyptian Mysteries, —using, in fact, terms which it would not become me to repeat.” In uttering the last clause, Mr. Casaubon leaned over the elbow of his chair, and swayed his head up and down, apparently as a muscular outlet instead of that recapitulation which would not have been becoming (355).

At last having been praised for his work, Casaubon is quite proud, but still so aware of what is *becoming*, that he does not boast even to his wife, what praise he has received. The physical description of Casaubon swaying his head up and down and it being excused as being a muscular outlet does however create an amusing image of a nodding Casaubon, quite pleased with himself. To take this one step further, we could even compare the nodding Casaubon to an animal – parrots often nod their heads in a similar fashion. With this animal – like reference we can again read the passage as humorous as defined by Critchley.

A very memorable part in the novel is without doubt the one where Casaubon is being painted by Ladislaw’s friend Naumann. We are introduced to the situation with subtle irony:

“My friend Ladislaw thinks you will pardon me, sir, if I say that a sketch of your head would be invaluable to me for the St. Thomas Aquinas in my picture there. It is too much to ask; but I so seldom see just what I want—the idealistic in the real.’
 ‘You astonish me greatly, sir,’ said Mr. Casaubon, his looks improved with a glow of delight; ‘but if my poor physiognomy, which I have been accustomed to regard as the commonest order, can be of any use to you in furnishing some traits for the angelical doctor, I shall feel honoured’ (209).

As Jakob Lothe writes, “The variant of irony...is supplemented by Naumann’s ironic description of a sketch of Casaubon’s head as ‘invaluable.’ Verging on sarcasm, this irony is so obvious that we are mildly surprised Casaubon does not seem to detect it” (2006, 186).

Eliot goes on by writing:

The adroit artist was asking Mr. Casaubon questions about English politics, which brought long answers, and, Will meanwhile had perched himself on some steps in the background overlooking all.

Presently Naumann said—"Now if I could lay this by for half an hour and take it up again—come and look, Ladislaw—I think it is perfect so far."

Will vented those adjuring interjections which imply that admiration is too strong for syntax; and Naumann said in a tone of piteous regret—" Ah—now—if I could but have had more—but you have other engagements—I could not ask it—or even to come again to-morrow."...

"You are unspeakably good—now I am happy!" said Naumann, and then went on in German to Will, pointing here and there to the sketch as if he were considering that. Putting it aside for a moment, he looked round vaguely, as if seeking some occupation for his visitors, and afterwards turning to Mr. Casaubon, said—"Perhaps the beautiful bride, the gracious lady, would not be unwilling to let me fill up the time by trying to make a slight sketch of her—not, of course, as you see, for that picture—only as a single study" (209).

Casaubon is being fooled by the artists, and Will's false interjections of delight only intensifies the situation. Casaubon's immense vanity is seen here very clearly. This is not something that would be expected of Casaubon, who has thus far been described as a very reserved person. With the *causal chains* of his behaviour *broken*, we can laugh at it.

Even physical humour is included in this passage, where "Mr. Casaubon blinked furtively at Will. He had a suspicion that he was being laughed at" (208). At this point Casaubon's behaviour is beginning to resemble that of an animal with his heavy blinking. It is interesting to read that despite some suspicion of being laughed at, Casaubon still wanted to go along with posing, as his vanity was so strong. Once more we can see Casaubon's vanity:

So Mr. Casaubon's patience held out further, and when after all it turned out that the head of Saint Thomas Aquinas would be more perfect if another sitting could be had, it was granted for the morrow. On the morrow Santa Clara too was retouched more than once. The result of all was so far from displeasing to Mr. Casaubon, that he arranged for the purchase of the picture in which Saint Thomas Aquinas sat among the doctors of the Church in a disputation too abstract to be represented, but listened to with more or less attention by an audience above (210-211).

Casaubon is too taken by someone wanting to paint him that he does not mind losing one day of work to sit for the artist. Casaubon's utter narcissism is all the more clear when he

wants to purchase the painting he is in. Again this is not expected of him and we can see the *common sense rationality left in tatters*. We get to laugh at not only his vanity, but also his blindness to all that is going on around him. We know that he was not even supposed to be painted in the first place, and now he has gone as far as paying for the painting. We could even say that here the reader is invited to laugh from *feelings of superiority* over Casaubon.

9. Conclusion

In the introductory section of this thesis, I set out to explore whether there was any humour in a novel which is usually regarded as great literature, even a classic, but never a humorous work. The almost total lack of previous studies on the topic hinted that there may be some challenges ahead. Simultaneously this very challenge was the driving force that kept me going: I could almost consider myself a pioneer on the study of humour in *Middlemarch* (at least in Finland).

It was certainly a challenge to prove that there was humour in the novel. It was easy to find passages where *I* laughed, but *proving* them humorous using various theories was indeed more complicated.

Simon Critchley's theories on humour have played an important role in this thesis. His statement, which I have also quoted in the introduction that "in listening to a joke, I am presupposing a social world that is shared" (2002, 4), is not appropriate here, which added to the challenges of analysing the humour in the novel.

We can nevertheless conclude from all the examples studied in the above thesis, that there *is* humour in *Middlemarch*. Eliot uses humour sparingly (after all, the novel is not a comedy as such), but she *does* use it. Usually the utilisation of humour can be seen in rather grave circumstances, where one would not expect it. Examples of such circumstances are for example the funeral of Mr. Featherstone and Dorothea's miserable honeymoon, where she slowly begins to realise that her marriage is not what she had expected.

Eliot's use of humour in these situations draws attention to the grave matters at hand: at close range to the fact that Mr. Featherstone's relatives are only after his money and that Dorothea has made a big mistake in marrying Casaubon. There is also a wider range of

matters that Eliot draws attention to with humour. She can effectively criticize society and even human nature through her comments and humour. Of course we need to accept that the *whole novel* is a study (and criticism) of society and human nature and that it is not merely the humorous parts that are important. Nevertheless, they are useful in highlighting certain points.

Eliot does not leave any of the main characters untouched by humour. Each and every main character in turn serves as an interpreter of society to the reader.

Answering the question from the introduction, we could probably conclude that the *brain* in the novel does have something in common with the humour used. The brain in question being that of George Eliot – a brain that has thought of numerous clever ways of telling a story and drawing attention to important issues. Together they guide the readers to explore certain (social) issues. And the highlighting is often done by the use of – humour.

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