

The Subversion of the Marriage Plot Novel in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*

مراجعة أحداث روايات الزواج في رواية ميدلوارتش لي جورج

ألويت ورواية ذي بورتري اوف اليدي لي هنري جيمس

Saoudi Karima \*

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**Abstract:**

The present article seeks to study how the English author George Eliot and the American novelist Henry James subverted the domestic tradition in their respective novels *Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady*. To do so the research relies on Mikhael Bakhtin's dialogism, Julia Kristeva's intertextuality and a feminsit theory. The article reaches the conclusion that both authors thwarted the tradition of the marriage plot novel by creating unhappy endings paving the way to modernist fiction.

**Keywords:** : domestic tradition; intertextuality ; subversion; *Middlemarch* ; *The Portrait of a Lady*

ملخص:

يهدف البحث إلى دراسة كيفية مراجعة أحداث روايات الزواج في رواية ميدلوارتش

لي جورج ألويت ورواية ذي بورتري اوف اليدي لي هنري جيمس. من الجانب النظري

Corresponding author : Karima Saoudi , karima.saoudi@univ-alger2.dz

\* University of Algiers 2 .karima.saoudi@univ-alger2.dz

يعتمد البحث على نظريات ديالوجيزم لميخايل باختن ،انترتاكستواليتي لي جوليا كريستيفا و نظرية نسوية لجوديت لودر نيوتن .يستنتج البحث أن الكاتبين غيروا مواضيع و قالب رواية الزواج فاتحين المجال للتغيرات التي أحدثتها الرواية الحديثة. كلمات مفتاحية: روايات الزواج، انترتاكستواليتي ،مراجعة ،ميدلمارتش،ذي بورتري اوف اليدي.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The marriage plot novel, or the domestic tradition, is the genre that dominated the nineteenth century literary scene both in England and in the United States of America. The genre is so called because of the happy marriages that are celebrated by the end of such works which sustain the Victorian bourgeois ideology of separate male and female spheres. The pre-eminence of domestic literature reveals the extent to which bourgeois ideology controlled nineteenth century life and literature and how it limited the artistic creation for its opponents. However, by the second half of the nineteenth century, progressive movements started to challenge bourgeois hegemony and the marriage plot novel underwent some changes at the hands of some liberal authors. The present article aims at studying how the English writer George Eliot and the American novelist Henry James subverted the domestic tradition to liberate the English novel from its bourgeois constraints in their respective novels *Middlemarch* (1871) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). To do so, the article will first offer an overview about the marriage plot novel. Then, by relying on Mikhail Bakhtin's "dialogism", Julia Kristeva's "Intertextuality" and "a feminist theory", which is Judith Lowder Newton's "Power and the Ideology of the Woman's sphere, the article will establish the intertextual

relationship between the two works in order to discuss how they both subvert the traditional elements of the marriage plot novel. Finally, the article will study how Henry James takes over from George Eliot to work out a modernist ending to his work with which he thwarts the happy ending of the marriage plot novel and attacks bourgeois notions of family harmony.

## **2. The Marriage Plot Novel**

### **2.1 What is the Marriage Plot Novel?**

The typical plot in the domestic tradition features a young, not very pretty, sometimes orphaned girl who embarks on a voyage of self-discovery. Deprived of family protection, the heroine goes through difficult stages arising from the struggle between “instinctive impulse” and society, but her virtues lead her to triumph over problems and ends up rewarded with a happy marriage based on love. Hereby, if she is orphaned, the absent family protection provided by the husband or father is restored and more importantly, the heroine assumes the ideal role of wife and mother as dictated by bourgeois ideology (Benstock, 73).

In England, Jane Austen, Maria Edge Worth and many other female writers achieved considerable fame thanks to their marriage plot novels. According to Veneta Colby, the demands of literary realism helped the ascension of the middle class woman into the literary scene; confined to the “domestic sphere”, middle class women writers who undertook writing mostly to earn a living, multiplied and developed the genre of domestic realism. They did so by drawing material from what they knew best from their everyday life as daughters, wives, or mothers (24). Hence, the “bourgeois” women and domesticity became one of the prevailing themes in English fiction.

In the United States, writers like Sarah Edgerton and Harriette Beecher Stowe made their best hit with historical novels dealing with slavery or the frontier ending with a happy marriage for the virtuous heroine. Ann Douglas states that domestic novels written by women for women dominated the literary market in America during the mid-1880's (8). In fact, domestic literature developed in America on the same grounds as it did in England, novel writing and reading were women's fields. Therefore, women's fiction proliferated and invaded the literary scene. Douglass adds that middle class women writers, well aware of young girls' addiction to reading, produced literature supporting middle class ideology to attract them (8).

The relationship between women readers and writers, nonetheless, had very satisfying results for both sides. In an age in which women were excluded from public life except being passively influential, novel writing on the one hand allowed women a public name and a field in which they could compete with men and subsequently triumph over them. On the other hand, novel reading allowed women "identification". Alfred Habbeger states that reading women's fiction allowed young girls to identify with the heroines in the novel and live with them the happiness of achieving the ideal gender role, it helped them to complete " the daydream of becoming the...the right kind of women " (11). Therefore, the satisfaction women writers and readers got out of domestic fiction explains the reasons behind the genre's popularity.

In the second part of the nineteenth century, various changes in different fields contested the conservative values and their defense in literature. In England, Evangelicalism that bred

middle class ethos first weakened following the catholic emancipation, then, questioned by Darwin's evolutionary theory. In the United States as well, Darwinism raised religious questions; its effects were more felt after the civil war that created a crisis in faith in the consciousness of most Americans. An important philosophical movement supporting the notion of "progress" also challenged Victorian social, political and cultural conservatism. Its proponents believed in the powerful reason of men that would lead to human perfectibility and a progressive amelioration of the common human life including women. Finally, different waves of feminist movements started to question the position of the middle class woman between the 1830's and the 1890's in both nations claiming for more civil rights and equality with men.

Under such a climate, cultural norms about marriage changed and the marriage plot novel was to take a new direction. The most famous late Victorian novelists who wrote domestic fiction are the English woman George Eliot and the American man Henry James. In their novels, the traditional patterns of the marriage plot novel are present but are given new shape according to their own assumptions. The beliefs of George Eliot stem out of her intellectual background. She was in fact one of the rare English women who was of so profound learning and was friend with intellectual men. Having lost faith, she adopts Feuerbach's free bond in her personal life with the prominent Victorian phycologist George Henry Lewes. Eliot was, in fact, a peculiar Victorian woman who moved in the male sphere. Henry James, in his turn, had a non-masculine education. His father scorned masculine norms and interests in

business, he, thus, excluded his children from the ordinary trainings of American boys that lead towards a career in business. Instead, James was rather “a mama’s boy” who was more attached to his family.

The relation between these two authors is however particular, many critics believe George Eliot to be the greatest influence on Henry James. M. Bradbury states that James wrote *The Portrait* in homage to her (16). His preface to the novel where he mentions Eliot serves as an “explicit marker” indicating indebtedness to her works (Plett, 12). James expressed his fascination with *Middlemarch* indeed by calling it “a treasure-house, but an indifferent whole”. This statement recalls Harold Bloom’s claim that “the largest truth of literary influence is that it is an irresistible anxiety” that the second author undergoes through an ambivalent reading of his precursor’s work. This ambivalence consists in “falling in love with” the work and denying or scorning it or its writer. In *The Portrait* James subverts the marriage plot novel in the same way George Eliot does in *Middlemarch*, however, dissatisfied with some of her artistic creations he offers what Harold Bloom calls “an act of creative correction” ( 30).

## **2.2 The Subversion of the Marriage Plot Novel**

The relation between Eliot’s *Middlemarch* and James’s *The Portrait* can be read in terms of precedence or intertextuality. According to Julia Kristeva “ any writing is a reading of the anterior literary corpus and the text as the absorption of and a reply to another text ”. Kristeva further maintains that “ in the space of a given text, several utterances taken from other texts,

intersect and neutralize one another”( 69). Indeed, through all James’s text several utterances, words, sentences and even long passages, recall Eliot’s text. Sometimes it seems that *The Portrait* is just, what Kristeva calls “ a mosaic of quotations ” most of which are taken from *Middlemarch*.

The story of Dorothea Brooke features her “entrance into the world” as any previous heroine of the domestic tradition. However, Eliot draws her according to her notion of the socially dissatisfied character who seeks self-fulfillment through personally defined roles (Cox, 4). James seems to borrow from her this notion in creating Isabel Archer. Indeed, both are unconventional girls, they are different from other girls of their age, they have opinions about everything while Victorian women are supposed to have none, they also share a big interest for knowledge and reject conventional ways of women’s education.

To highlight the originality of their heroines Eliot and James give them sisters who represent “common sense and beauty”; while Dorothea and Isabel represent cleverness which is seen in the way they view life differently. Their vision takes the form of “theories” both work about themselves. It is interesting to notice that it is not only the word “theory” which James takes from *Middlemarch* and transposes into his text, but the whole theory Eliot concocts for Dorothea is transposed so that it prefigures as a quotation in James’s text. If we consider Dorothea’s view of life in “her mind was theoretic and yearned ...after some lofty conception of the world... she was enamored of intensity and greatness... ; likely to seek martyrdom and to make retractions” ( Eliot, 2) . Isabel’s view comes as follows: “she spent half her time in thinking of beauty, bravery and magnanimity; she had a

fixed determination to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion of irresistible action” ( James, 52) . Both dream of greatness, which they could achieve by doing some admirable action, and believe that the world offers them the opportunities to do so. The greatness each of them wants to accomplish stems from their frustration from gender roles. Dorothea, portrayed as “a Saint Theresa” figure, finds no relief for her religious zeal and eagerness for knowledge “in the bonds of a narrow teaching, hemmed in by a social life which seemed nothing but a labyrinth of petty courses” (Eliot, 33). Isabel, in her great desire for knowledge and curiosity about life, is dissatisfied with the sources of knowledge available to her, that is to say reading and “preferred almost any source of information to the printed page ” (James,28)

To achieve greatness Dorothea and Isabel have to look for male roles. Dorothea wants education and to be acquainted with male topics like Greek and Latin. Isabel wants to travel like her fellow citizens to improve her mind, James adds an American characteristic – she also wants to be free in an Emersonian way. Newton calls such capability for thought and transcendence of convention “power as ability” which authors adopt as “strategies to subvert gender roles in their novels”. Yet, it was difficult for Victorian women to wish to accomplish a man’s career as Newton states “No matter how much force the heroine is granted at the beginning of her story, ideology as it governed life and it governed literary form, required that she should marry” (888).

The occurrence of marriage in the beginning or the middle of the novel than being the reward at the end for the virtuous heroines is an unusual course in the marriage plot novel.



Furthermore, at the moment of inserting marriage possibilities for the heroines. *The Portrait* becomes, in Kristeva's words, "a reply to" *Middlemarch*. Thus; we witness a dialogue between the two novels. To achieve greatness, Dorothea wants to turn marriage into a vocational possibility and has to marry "a guide who would take her along the grandest path" (Eliot, 25), Isabel thinks she does not "need the aid of a clever man to teach her how to live, as she can find it out for herself" (James, 168). Isabel reads, in fact, "the prose of George Eliot", if we suppose she read *Middlemarch* and is deeply moved by Dorothea's disastrous marriage, this explains why she thinks marriage "a foolish period of history". Her conversation with her uncle Mr Touchett testifies to this conclusion as she says, "I don't believe [the English] are very nice to girls, they are not nice to them in the novels" (James, 59). Thus, we see her reply to Dorothea "I don't wish to be a mere sheep in the flock, I wish to choose my fate and know something of human affairs beyond what other people think it compatible with propriety to tell me" (James, 172).

According to Newton male writers felt less "the pressure of ideologies which requires marriage" as a necessary course in their novels as female writers did (883). Hence, it explains why James is not hasty to make Isabel marry. Moreover, this allows James to give her more freedom of will and action. In more specific terms, to draw her along Emersonian ideals of self-creation and self-reliance. Thus, James produces what Bakhtin calls a "creative evolution" of the other's discourse in a new context by transforming Dorothea's rejection of passivity required from middle class women in "what will she do, what

can she do ” into Isabel’s assertion of freedom “ what was she going to do with herself ? ... most women did with themselves nothing at all they waited.. for a man to come that way and furnish them with a destiny ”( James,66) .

Yet, Victorian ideology required that a young girl should marry. In the novel we soon become aware that a woman is indeed hampered from doing what she wants, Isabel sets to traveling during a whole year, soon gets tired of her freedom. Furthermore, marriage as a necessary rule of conduct governed the English novel through all the nineteenth century, so James had to conform or to take risks of depreciating the opinion of the reading public. Pearson argues that by introducing intertextual references in his preface, James contextualizes his novel in the tradition of the authors mentioned and reduces his work’s own contextual freedom (145). Therefore, James has to make Isabel marry.

The idea each has about marriage is another attempt to escape Victorian norms of wifhood, Dorothea wants to get married to acquire knowledge. For this reason, she has to marry some religious and intellectual man who will help in her religious “mission”. Only such union will enable her “to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by” (Eliot, 25). Henry James gives less clear-cut explanations than does Eliot in his handling how Isabel reconciles her dreams with her desire to marry. If we consider this quotation from *Middlemarch* and try to apply it on Isabel “ she was looking forward to higher initiation in ideas as she was looking forward to marriage and blending her dim conception of both” ( James, 87) . In *The Portrait*, the desire for self-fulfillment and the desire to marry are perfectly

blended. For after two years of travel and ceaseless efforts of self-reliance, Isabel concludes: “one can’t do anything so general one must choose a corner and cultivate that” (James, 370) implying thus to marry is in itself an act of self-creation. Dorothea’s and Isabel’s expectation to invade male spheres through marriage is rather ground-breaking in the marriage plot novel. Newton states that “marriage meant relinquishment of power” for previous heroines in the English novel (885).

To achieve their dreams, Dorothea and Isabel have to marry the ideal husband in their eyes; Dorothea chooses Edward Casaubon, an intellectual man, and Isabel marries Gilbert Osmond, for his free ideas. However, their families find their marital choice as mistakes. The narrator dismisses Dorothea as “stupid”, “hasty in her trust” and above all “inconsistent”. Similarly, Isabel is accused of “inconsistency” and of being “precipitate and unduly fastidious”. These defects make both of them blind to the warnings the chosen husbands address to them before marriage. Dorothea fails to see the conformity Casaubon wants to drive her to in saying “ each position has its corresponding duties...[ hers] as the mistress of Lowick, will not leave any yearning unfulfilled ” (Eliot,78) . Isabel too misses Osmond’s conventional opinion about women when he tells her “A woman’s natural mission is to be where she’s most appreciated ... she often wastes a great deal of time in the enquiry. People ought to make it plain to her” (James, 285) Dorothea’s and Isabel’s defects can, however, be translated as an obligatory step as in any feminist work. Indeed, Newton states “to write of power, perhaps to perform some transforming action in one’s fiction upon traditional power division, was surely to

multiply defensive strategies”. (884). Therefore, Eliot and James may have introduced the defects principally as “defensive strategies” to make their much unconventional heroines excusable for their time. Nonetheless, these defects make Dorothea and Isabel preys to their conventional husbands.

*Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady* differ from previous novels of the domestic tradition in the fact they tell the story of unhappy marriages. After marriage, both realize that their husbands are very conventional and will not help them achieve their ambitions. Dorothea notices quickly that she was mistaken about Casaubon. Despite her meagre education, her fine intelligence and eagerness for greatness enable her to discriminate her husband’s shortcomings in knowledge: she “felt with a stifling depression, that the ... wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband’s mind were replaced by ...winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither” (Eliot,208) . Isabel arrives to the same conclusion that she was completely mistaken about Osmond in a similar quotation “ she had seen only half his nature , then, as one saw the disk of the moon when it was partly masked by the shadow of the earth , she saw the full moon now”(James, 463).

Furthermore, to react against the idealization of marriage in domestic fiction, Eliot and James make them deprived of the blessing marriage is supposed to bring in these novels. Dorothea feels that she would have overlooked for a while, the loss of her ideals, if she received some signs of affection and intimacy from Casaubon. She would have been happier “ if she had been encouraged to pour forth her girlish and womanly feelings- if he would have held her hands in his and listened with the delight of

tenderness... to all the little histories .”( Eliot, 211) . Similarly, Isabel “would have been willing, however, to renounce all her curiosities and sympathies for the sake of a personal life, if the person concerned had only been able to make her believe it was a gain!” (James, 46). The heroines are also deprived from other marital blessings like motherhood, harmony between husband and wife and more importantly, the ideal of “home” which is supposed to be a peaceful place for Victorian women but which has become a “stone prison” for Dorothea and the “house of suffocation” for Isabel.

Yet Eliot and James have not drawn revolutionary women to make them finally yield to their husbands’ wishes .Newton states that in novels where women are endowed with power as ability “tension, disguise and disjunction of form” prevail as a result of the pressure of the dominant ideology which is being rebelled against(888). In *Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady* “ defiance”, “ rebellion” and “ revolt” are recurrent terms and scenes where the heroines seem to defy are numerous. Dorothea’s’ reaction to Casaubon’s “your society has happily prevented me from that too continuous prosecution of thought beyond the hours of study which has been the snare of my solitary life” (Eliot, 213) is more potentially defiant than merely revealing disappointment. Thus, she not only answers ironically that she is happy her “presence has made any difference to” him, but is all the more in the best mood to reproach him for never starting his research. What seems to irritate Casaubon most is hardly that his failure has been found out but that the finder should be his young wife.

In *The Portrait*, Isabel’s defiance of her husband is more

open. Osmond accuses her of “working against” him, of desiring to “quarrel” with him and is “afraid [he] should encounter [Isabel’s] opposition” in the “business” of his daughter’s marriage. Isabel herself seems determined to be defiant to her husband, regarding his daughter’s marriage she says “I’ve determined, this time, to try and act as you’d like. I’ve so often failed of that” (James, 445). Her defiance is nowhere more deliberate than in her argument with him; far from being “timid” and submissive” Isabel enters in hot contests with Osmond. The best example is when she tells her husband “I might say to you that I judge you’ve nothing to say to me that is worth hearing” (James, 525). This suggests not simply defiance but also an assertion of her superiority. The ostensibly daring manners in which both heroines defy their husbands do simply prepare the ground for further rebellion. It certainly is to this effect that both writers give their protagonists their opportunity for revenge.

### **3. The Unhappy Ending**

#### **3.1 George Eliot’s Ambiguous Ending**

In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea rebels against her husband and society; she not only refuses to accept Casaubon’s will, but she also marries Will Ladislaw as he did not wish her to. Describing her second marriage as a revolt is however debatable because Casaubon dies and Dorothea is free to choose. Yet, what seems to make this second marriage possible is the thought of revolt itself. First, it is said in the novel that Dorothea did not see Ladislaw in the light of a lover before the content of her husband’s codicil to his will was broken to her. Furthermore, the will reveals her husband’s “hidden thought” against her,

probably inferring his jealousy and a perverse desire to prevent her from performing an “act of justice” by giving back to Ladislav his money. Then, it becomes undeniable that the strong-willed girl of the first chapters is determined to take her revenge. Nonetheless, Dorothea comes to think of her relation with Ladislav and reaction to Casaubon in terms of “defy” and “revolt”, “any act that seemed to a triumphant eluding of [her husband’s] purpose revolted her” (Eliot, 529).

Casaubon’s death just before the moment Dorothea was to promise loyalty to his wishes is often described as an “offstage” authorial control to allow her a happier fate (Hadley, 27). The question we might ask is whether Eliot would have allowed Dorothea to carry on revolt if her husband had not died. The answer is negative because Eliot makes it clear that Dorothea is predisposed to faithfulness. At the same time, revolt during Casaubon’s life is unthinkable for Dorothea, for Eliot and for the Victorian reader. His death is perhaps a “disguise” in Eliot’s defensive strategies, as Newton puts it “the very omission of overt references...are social strategies for managing...the most compelling rebellion”. So far Newton’s conclusion that “what might be seen [in these novels] is a growth of consciousness that is potentially revolutionary... [Which] does not find satisfactory expression” (892) applies well on *Middlemarch*.

### **3.2 Henry James’s Open Ending**

Being a male feminist who is less exposed to ideological pressure facilitates the pattern “absorption and transformation” for James in such a way that he can “make use of [Eliot’s] discourse for his own purpose, by inserting a new intention into a discourse which has an intention of its own” (Pam, 105). James

has facilities to take over Eliot's rebellious intentions in Dorothea and transform the latter's "revolutionary potential" into something actual by making Isabel revolt openly against her husband while he is still alive, as she goes to see her cousin even if Osmond did not want her to. Dorothea's and Isabel's revolt against their husbands is a direct criticism of the Victorian ideology of womanhood. More importantly, their revolt against their husbands signals a complete change in the domestic tradition. The revolutionary potential for women's liberation in both novels is a mere reflection of women's frustration with gender roles.

However, the two novels end differently. The end of *Middlemarch* is ambiguous; the marriage of Dorothea with Will Ladislaw is the happy reward George Eliot reserves for her moral growth. It is surprising that an author who writes "against her age" should finish her masterpiece in the conventional manner of her literary predecessors. According to Newton nineteenth century, ideological pressure left women novelists, who wrote stories about "growth" with no other solution but to lead their heroines towards an eventual "loss of power". Thus, women writers had either to introduce marriage as a "happy ending" as the only solution or resist "the marriage plot novel" but to contrive a similar result of loss of power by making the heroine die for example (884). The pathetic tone at the end of the novel may at once reveal Dorothea's tragedy of being meant for great things but forced to a conventional role as well as George Eliot's capacity to provide better solutions but forced to conventional endings.

When Henry James states that *Middlemarch* "has sets limits



to the development of the old fashioned English novel”, he probably relates the thematic issues she arrives at to the conventional endings of Victorian literature and concludes that the English novel requires another kind of ending. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, there is no reward, no second marriage and no happy ending for Isabel. Facing less ideological pressure, James could lead his heroine to the isolation and retreat from society which he believes to be the final destiny for free spirited individuals. Furthermore, appalled by the marriage plot novel, which in his opinion, enforced a dream of social order that does not reflect reality, he works out an open ending to attack that tradition. Indeed, by the end of the novel, readers do not know whether Isabel would return or not to her husband after her cousin's death. The end of *The Portrait* is, therefore, a modernist one in which the individual is condemned to social isolation rather than fitting into Victorian bourgeois harmony that is familiar in the marriage plot novel. In this way, James's novel is what Bakhtin calls a “stylization” of Eliot's tradition; “the author's thought, once having penetrated someone else's discourse...does no collide with [it], but rather follows after it in the same direction merely making that direction conventional” (Pam, 106) . Dissatisfied with the ways she ends her novels, he employs the open-ending technique and produces a “thwarting of the linearity” of the domestic tradition (Clayton,56).

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The article is a humble attempt to study how the Victorian novelists George Eliot and Henry James attacked bourgeois notions of separate spheres and subverted the dominant literary tradition during the nineteenth century. By using Bakhtin's

“dialogism”, Kristeva’s “intertextuality” and feminism, the article establishes the intertextual relation between *Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady* and reaches the conclusion that both authors created revolutionary heroines who challenged Victorian notions of womanhood. The novels also question the sanctity of marriage as the only possible career for women by telling the stories of unhappy marriages as opposed to the familiar plot of the domestic tradition. Furthermore, by writing unconventional marriage stories, Eliot and James disestablish an entire literary tradition that dominated the English novel during a whole century.

The article comes to the point that *Middlemarch* and *The Portrait of a Lady* occupy an intermediary position in the domestic tradition of the English language novel. The elements constituting the marriage plot novel are kept only to subvert patriarchal attitudes and to reinforce feminist issues and finally to work out, especially for Henry James , new artistic endings that paved the way to modernist works dealing with domestic issues. While the article makes it clear that it is a woman moving in a circle of men and a man who escaped the male sphere who broke loose from the “Austen tradition”, a further study may consider the confusion both authors went through with gender roles during their own lives

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