

## Space Symbolism in George Eliot's Fiction: A Textual Analysis

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### Introduction:

This article aims at demonstrating that in George Eliot's novels, space is a hostile and tragic place for bad and wicked characters. It is a cemetery so to speak. In addition, this article wants to demonstrate that space is a physical entity endowed with demoniac qualities. That space is the opponent, indeed the killer of some of the characters of George Eliot's novels. Finally, we would like to show that in George Eliot's early novels and short stories, space has symbolic functions; one of them being to play the role of a dispenser of justice. To carry out our study, we have chosen a collection of short stories entitled *Scenes of Clerical Life*, a short story entitled "*The Lifted veil*," and four novels, namely *Middlemarch*, *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss* and *Silas Marner*.

In *Middlemarch*, we find two deaths in enclosed spaces. The first one takes place on page 482 and is related to Mr Casaubon. That death takes place in an 'interior'. The second death is announced on page 715 of the novel. It is about the death of Mr Raffles.

In "*The Lifted Veil*", Albert, the main character's brother, dies in the open space. The homodiegetic narrator says: "My brother was dead, had been pitched from his horse, and killed on the spot by a concussion of the brain" (p.784). He is punished by nature because he had bad intentions. He was ready to marry his brother's fiancée. In addition, he was haughty and contemptuous. Towards the end of that short story, the hero's housemaid dies in an enclosed space. The narrative reads: "The lips continued to murmur, but the sounds were no longer distinct. Soon there was no sound..."(p.797)

In *Adam Bede*, the hostility of space is first seen on page 96, when Adam's father is discovered dead in the forest: "This was the first thought that flashed through Adam's conscience, before he had time to seize the coat and drag out the tall heavy body on the bank" (p.96) Nature punishes him because he is a negative character. He was a drunkard. It is chiefly in chapters 36 and 37 of the novel that the reader sees the hostility of space faced with characters. These two chapters put on the stage Hetty Sorrel, one of the main characters of the novel. Hetty is undertaking a trip to find Arthur who is responsible for her pregnancy. On page 418, the reader meets Hetty. She is discouraged by the long way she has to cover. She finds it difficult to continue her walk. The narrator says at that precise moment: "It was beginning to rain..."(p.419). The reader starts to ascertain the hostility of space at that level. Hetty is discouraged because of the rain, the distance, and weariness. The narrative instance declares: "She sat down on the step of a stile and began to sob hysterically" (p.419). During her trip to find Arthur, Hetty thinks of finding refuge in that nature. She wants to hide herself, not to see those she knows. She also wishes to hide her pregnancy. But that space, far from being favourable to Hetty, is hostile to her. That antagonism is materialized by the presence of the rain, the cold and the colour of the weather. Indeed, the black colour dominates the passage. For instance, the story-teller states in the middle of chapter 37: "... the leaden sky was darkening" (p. 431). The image of darkness reappears when the narrator adds: "...feeling that darkness would soon come on..." (p.431). Some lines below, speaking about the pool, the narrator says: "There it was black under the darkening sky"(p.431). In that space, Hetty is tempted by invisible forces to drown herself in the pond. In the last but one line of page 431,

the black colour reappears: "She (Hetty) was frightened at this darkness..." Darkness manifests its presence on the following page when Hetty wonders: "O how long the time was in that darkness!" (p.432). In that open space, four elements or forces participate to Hetty's destruction: the horror, the cold, darkness, and solitude. Darkness is found once again in the middle of page 432: "...the darker line of the hedge". Finally the image and the presence of darkness are felt when the narrator states: "She no longer felt as if the darkness hedged in her"(p.432). Faced with that hostile space, Hetty is under the impression that her death is near. However, "... she did not dare to face death" (p.432). Nature will not kill Hetty but it will kill her baby.

*Scenes of Clerical Life* abounds in deaths taking place in open or enclosed spaces. In the short story entitled "The Sad Fortunes of Rev. Amos Barton", Mrs Milly Barton dies in her chamber. The narrator says: "They watched her breathing become more and more difficult, until evening deepened into night..." (p.108) Her death is manifest when Mrs Hackit tells Mr Amos Barton: "She feels no more pain now. Come, my dear Sir, come with me." (p.109)

In the short story entitled "Mr Gilfil's Love Story", Captain Wybrow is found dead on the path, synonymous of an open space, we mean nature. Here, space plays the role of a dispenser of justice. Captain Wybrow was a negative character who used to play with Caterina's love feelings. He promised her marriage while he was engaged to another young lady. Space punishes him because of his dishonesty and his wickedness. He dies in the open space while he was going to a venue with a woman. About his death, the narrator says, reporting Caterina's astonishment: "But what is that lying among the dank leaves on the path three yards before her? Good God! It is he-lying motionless – his hat fallen off... he is dead!" (p.212)

In "Janet's Repentance", Old Mrs Dempster dies in her arm-chair. The storyteller states: "For then little 'mamsey' died –died suddenly. The housemaid found her seated motionless in her arm-chair, her knitting fallen down..." (p.337) As for Mr Dempster, he dies in an enclosed space: "'Robert, do you know me'? He kept his eyes fixed on her... as she was bending to kiss him, the thick veil of death fell between them, and her lips touched a corpse." (p.388) It is important to underline that enclosed spaces are sometimes places of death. Those places symbolise mourning, and arouse pity and compassion in the reader.

In that collection of short stories, space is sometimes seen as a cemetery. That characteristic appears clearly in chapter 19, in which the reader follows the burial of Mr Amos Barton's wife. The storyteller says: "They laid her in the grave". We notice the presence of the snow which participates to the moroseness of the whole setting through the following sentence: "...while the Christmas snow lay thick upon the graves and the day was cold and dreary" (p.109). There are some colours such as the black colour, which are very suggestive. Some striking images are present such as "the open grave" (p. 109), "the coffin went down" (p. 110).

Space is seen as a corpse dumping in "Janet's Repentance", the last short story of *Scenes of Clerical Life*. The illustration is given on page 411 with Mr Tryan's burial: "...and in the second week of March they carried him to the grave. He was buried as he had desired..."

In that short story, space is also seen as a conflictual element. Space is opposed to man in chapters 14 and 15 of "Janet's Repentance". That antagonism starts on page 342 when Janet is put out of doors by her drunken husband. The narrator shows the first signs of the conflict between man and nature when he says: "The harsh north-east wind, that blew through her thin night-dress, and sent her long heavy black hair streaming..."(p.342). We notice that the atmosphere is calm as if something were going to happen: "There would have been dead silence in Orchard Street but for the whistling of the wind and the swirling of the March dust on the pavement" (p.343). Nature is dead-like and morose: "Thick clouds covered the sky; every door was closed every window was dark. No ray of light fell on the tall figure that stood

in lonely misery on the door-step "(p.343) Janet Dempster is facing the coldness and the moroseness of space: "...she sank down on the cold stone, and looked into the dismal night" (p.343). The hostility of space faced with the human being is well seen in chapter 15 through Janet's sufferings in the open space. The narrator comments: "The stony street, the bitter north-east wind and darkness and in the midst of them a tender woman thrust out from her husband's home in her thin night-dress." The antagonism is patent when the story teller avers: "...the harsh wind cutting her naked feet" (p.343). On page 345, the conflict is as a watermark when the narrator says: "She was getting benumbed with cold. With that strong instinctive dread of pain and death..." (p.345). The conflict goes on some lines below. Janet is frightened: "The wind was beginning to make rents in the clouds, and there came every now and then a dim light of stars that frightened her more than the darkness"(p.345) The personification of space is perceived when the narrator says: "... it was like a cruel finger pointing her..." (p.345) Janet is so frightened that "she must seek some shelter, somewhere to hide herself" (p. 345) Janet Dempster's fright reappears when the story-teller affirms: "She was frightened at the thought of spending long hours in the cold" (p. 345). The attacks of nature on Janet's body are seen through some suggestive phrases: " ... her naked feet on the rough pavement... " (p.345); "... the gusts of wind drove right against her" (p.345). The wind is one of Janet's opponents: "The very wind was cruel." That wind wants to prevent Janet from finding a shelter. It desires to throw her back to nature, to darkness. The narrative instance says à propos: "...it tried to push her back from the door where she wanted to go" (p.346)

In *The Mill on the Floss*, the hostility of nature is witnessed when Mr Tulliver is found lying inanimate on the road. He had received a letter from his creditor telling him that his property had been transferred to his enemy Mr Wakem. The narrator reports: "In half an hour after this, Mr Tulliver's own waggoner found him lying by the roadside insensible, with an open letter near him, and his grey horse snuffing uneasily about him." (p.277)

The justiciable character of space is seen when Mr Tulliver dies following his fight against Mr Wakem. Indeed, after he beat Mr Wakem on the road, he felt very ill at ease and was led to his room. Nature had already punished him for his wickedness and bad behaviour towards Mr Wakem. The bad consequence for him is that his fight against Mr Wakem will lead him to die in an enclosed space, his bedroom. The narrator reports on his painful death: "For an hour or more the chest heaved, the loud hard breathing continued, getting gradually slower [...] At last there was total stillness, and poor Tulliver's dimly lighted soul had for ever ceased to be vexed..." (p.464)

In that novel, the hostility of nature is also felt through the relations between Maggie and nature. The open space is not favourable to the heroine. In chapter 10 of Book I, Maggie is scolded by Tom because she pushed Lucy into the mud. In chapters 13 and 14 of Book VI, she is the object of many disappointments on the banks of the river Floss. But the hostility of nature towards Maggie Tulliver is even more manifest in chapter 5 of the last Book. The open space i.e nature, is going to destroy Maggie. And it is the flood which will be in charge of her death. That flood is perceived when Maggie exclaims: "... The flood is come!" (p.649). The heroine senses her death. That is why she says: "I have received the Cross..."(P.648). And she adds: "I will bear it, and bear it till death" (p.648). Maggie knows that she is condemned. She is aware that she is going to be killed by that demoniac space. That is why she repeats on the following page: "I will bear it, and bear it till death..."(p.649) Maggie does not know when she dies. That is why she wonders: "How long it will be before death comes!"(p.649). It is in that instant that the flood starts to come into her bedroom to chase Maggie from the securing enclosed space where she is. The first image of struggle between the heroine and nature is present on page 650 when the narrator says: "And without a moment's shudder of fear, she plunged through the water" (p.650). In that struggle, the boat plays a double function. On the one hand, it helps Maggie to leave her house and to go to her mother and Tom. On the other

hand, the boat concurs to the death of the heroine because at the closure of the novel, it will carry her till the middle of the river Floss and will capsize there.

In *The Mill on the Floss*, like in *Adam Bede*, space is helped by darkness and the black colour, to commit murder. The first allusion to the black colour intervenes when the narrator refers to Maggie's hair: "...Black hair streaming" (p.650) Here the black colour on Maggie's hair is extremely symbolical. It means that from her childhood Maggie was already a doomed character. Furthermore, the reference to darkness is manifest on page 651 where that colour is related to death: "It was the transition of death and she was alone in the darkness with God". Six lines below, darkness is linked with the rain which also concurs to the destruction of the main character: "...the rain and a perception that the darkness was divided by the faintest light ..." (p.651). In the passage, darkness symbolises Maggie's passage from agony to death. She is in an unstable state. It is as if she were in agony. She has difficulty in seeing "the long-loved faces looking for help into the darkness..." (p.651)

It is worth mentioning the ambivalent character of Maggie's drift on the Floss. That drift is a physical and symbolic travel. Physically, Maggie is travelling on the river Floss. Indeed the narrator is literally describing the different scenes and the environment Maggie is meeting while she is on the boat and pushed by the current. But Maggie is also symbolically travelling towards her death. Here the river Floss is metaphorically the road leading to the cemetery and the grave; whereas the boat Maggie is on represents the vehicle of death, the hearse which carries her to her tomb. Maggie is just wondering: "O God, where am I?" (p.651). Maggie's agony is increasing. That new phase leading towards her oncoming death is symbolised by the mixture of darkness and the black colour. The instance is patent at the bottom of page 651: "... the slowly defining blackness of objects above the glassy dark!... she saw the lines of black trees..." On page 652 the narrator refers twice to "the dark mass," while Maggie is drifting on the river. Symbolically, "the dark mass" represents the cemetery Maggie is vaguely perceiving away. In that instant, Maggie begins to be aware of her destination because the narrator asserts: "For the first time, distinct ideas of danger began to press upon her..." (p.652) Maggie feels vanquished because the narrator says: "But there was no choice of course..." (p.652). Maggie's awareness of her trip to death is clear when the narrative instance adds: "For the first time Maggie's heart began to beat in an agony of dread" (p.653). The last phase leading to Maggie's death is reached when "huge masses" come towards her and her brother Tom. The narrator mentions them many times: "...huge fragments were being floated along," "the threatening masses"; "the huge mass was hurrying on in hideous triumph" (p.655). Finally, Maggie sees "Death rushing on them." The black colour appears alone to confirm the death of Maggie Tulliver: "The next instant the boat was no longer seen upon the water"; "But soon the keel of the boat reappeared, a black speck on the golden water" (p.655). Obviously, the black colour symbolises the victory of space over Maggie the main character of *The Mill on the Floss*. Towards the end of the chapter, a captivating image emerges. It is the association which is made between the river, and its personification. The river and death become the same thing. In addition they embody human forms. Let us mention in this respect that the words "inundation" and "death" are written with capital letters respectively on pages 649 and 655. The personification of death and the river is seen through the following description: "Huge fragments clinging together in fatal fellowship, made one wide mass across the stream" (p.655). And further, "... and the huge mass was hurrying on in hideous triumph" (p.655).

In *Silas Marner*, space is a cemetery so to speak. It is also a demoniac place. That peculiarity is clearly seen in chapter 12. That chapter puts on the stage Molly Farren who is Godfrey's former wife. Molly is crossing the forest to go to "The Red House" to disclose her secret marriage with Godfrey Cass. Molly crosses the forest on a special day; it is the New Year's Eve; a Christian day. If it is literally a simple journey, symbolically it is a travel towards the cemetery and towards Molly's grave. Metaphorically, the forest Molly is walking in is in

fact a cemetery. The forewarning about Molly's death is perceived through the presence of figurative words and phrases such as "...her journey's end" (p; 164).

We said that the space Molly was crossing was symbolically a cemetery. It is a cemetery inhabited and kept by a demon. That demon is possessing Molly as the narrator states: "Molly knew that the cause of her dingy rags was not her husband's neglect, but the demon" (p.164). The demon the narrator is alluding to is physically the opium "to whom she was enslaved, body and soul" (p.164). The demon does not want only to kill Molly. He also wishes to kill her baby. Molly knows that she is going to die. However she wants to prevent her baby from being killed by the demon. Her refusal is manifest when the narrator says: "The mother's tenderness that refused to give him her hungry child". Molly Farren is a negative character that is why the storyteller compares her body to a "poisoned chamber" (p.164). The hour at which Molly is in the open space is highly symbolic. She sets out "at an early hour." It is a moment when nature is just waking up; the colours are still blurred. The distinction between day and night is not yet defined. Molly Farren is hopeful. It is the demon who lives in that space who makes her think that "if she waited under a warm shed the snow would cease to fall" (p.164). Here, the snow symbolises the white colour and the cold. The snow we said represents whiteness. But whiteness signifies absence. It is sometimes situated at the start of life, sometimes at its end. The whiteness of the snow will challenge Molly Farren. It will play a great role in her death. The snow will act as a transformer. We will see that Molly will be covered with whiteness. The white colour is the colour which symbolises the passage from life to death. It acts as a transition tool. The whiteness of the snow is the sign and the colour of death and mourning which absorbs the being and leads to the lunar world. It leads to emptiness, to the absence, to nothingness. In the passage, the road Molly Farren is taking is covered with the whiteness of the snow. It is therefore the road of the shroud. In the novel, we ascertain that the snow begins to attack the character of Molly when the narrator says: "She found herself belated in the snow hidden ruggedness..." We note that the snow has certain strength. In addition, let us say that in the passage, the phrase, "her journey's end" is symbolic. In other words, her journey will end in death. During her symbolic crossing of the cemetery, Molly Farren is possessed by the demon. The narrator states for example: "the familiar demon in her bosom" (p. 164). Molly's sinking in hell is literally symbolised by the black colour. The first appearance of that colour is made when the narrator says: "... but she hesitated a moment, after drawing out the black remnant" (p. 164). That "black remnant" is symbolically the devil. The expression "black remnant" is repeated on page 164. The following page contains elements which confirm that Molly Farren is a doomed character. For example, we have suggestive phrases such as "the breaking cloud," "a quickly-veiled star." The presence of the breaking cloud is there to signify Molly's symbolic bursting. The star represents the messenger who will soon bring the piece of news concerning Molly Farren's death. On page 165, we learn that the snow, one of the elements of nature in charge of Molly's destruction, has ceased. But it is at once replaced by the wind. This element works towards Molly's destruction. Indeed, Molly Farren is weary. She begins to totter. The demon who was so far hidden and who appeared under some allusions, now manifests himself explicitly. And the narrator says by the way: "Slowly the demon was working his will, and cold and weariness were his helpers" (p; 165), Molly Farren begins to lose strength. She also starts to realise that there is no open door for her: "Soon she felt nothing but a supreme immediate longing that curtained off all futurity." In the text, the narrator tells us that Molly Farren has arrived at a spot. Symbolically, that spot is her grave. Indeed, she will literally die there. At that level, the white colour comes again to grasp her, to compress her, so to speak. Whiteness is everywhere: "She had wandered vaguely unable to distinguish any objects, notwithstanding the wide whiteness around her..."(p.165). From that instant, the images present in the text have highly symbolic meanings. They are emblems. The narrator affirms for example "She sank down against a straggling furze bush, an easy pillow enough" (p. 165).

From what precedes, we see that Molly Farren is in front of her deathbed. In addition, to reinforce the metaphor of deadly death, the narrative instance argues: "... and the bed of snow, too was soft." The deceitful devil gives Molly Farren the impression that the "straggling furze bush" is an "easy pillow enough" (p.165), and that the snow is a "soft bed" (p.165). If Molly Farren has lain on the snow, it was because she relied on its whiteness, its spotless colour. She has been deceived. She ignored that she was lying on the bed of her death, on her shroud, so to speak. Molly Farren did not know that the white colour was the symbol of condemnation, of death. Molly Farren did not know that it was finally the colour of the shroud. Finally in the text, Molly Farren is not able to face the demoniac space. That is why she dies. The phases of her death are perceived when the narrator says: "... the fingers lost their tension, the arms unbent..." (p. 165). In that cemetery Molly's baby is spared because it is saintly. It has not yet sinned. That is one of the reasons why it is saved. Molly Farren's baby is also saved by the conflicts of colours, especially the triumph of the red colour symbolised by the fire over the white colour symbolised by the snow. Indeed, on page 165, the narrator tells us that the baby is covered with snow. The snow wants to kill the baby. But its eyes are attracted by the light which is in fact the fire warming Silas's cottage. The opposition between the red and the white is seen through the following suggestive sentence: "...a bright glancing light on the white ground." The attraction by the fire is manifest when the story-teller affirms: "That bright living must be caught; and in an instant the child had slipped on all fours and held out one little hand to catch the gleam" (p.165) Finally, the child enters Silas's cottage as the narrator states: "...and the little one toddled on to the open door of Silas Marner's cottage, and right up to the warm hearth, where there was a bright fire " (p.165). The function of space as a cemetery is seen in chapter 14 about Molly Farren's burial.

In that novel, the deacon dies in an interior. On page 59, the narrator says: "Silas observed that his usual audible breathing had ceased. Examination convinced him that the deacon was dead – had been dead for some time, for the limbs were rigid." Further down in the novel, we learn that Dunstan Cass died in an open space, especially in a pit. To inform the reader, the author makes use of an intradiegetic narrator. The second narrative instance is his brother Godfrey who states: "Dunstan was the man that robbed Silas Marner...there was the money, and they're taking the skeleton to the Rainbow." (p.223) The author decides to make Dunstan die in a pit to reinforce the dramatic aspect of the passage.

In her treatment of space, George Eliot shows us the conflict which exists between nature and dishonest and wicked characters. Chapters 36 and 37 of *Adam Bede*, and chapter 5 of *The Mill on the Floss*, are some examples. For the artist, space must do justice. It must punish wrong characters. That is why Dunstan Cass who robbed Silas, dies in a pit. That is also why Molly Farren who had bad intentions towards her former husband, dies in crossing the forest. We noticed that sometimes, George Eliot made her enclosed spaces places of death and mourning, and her characters pitiable or tragic dramatis persona. In doing so, her aim was to arouse the reader's pity and sympathy. That desire perfectly matched her philosophy that some critics such as Thomas A. Noble<sup>6</sup> called "the doctrine of sympathy".

#### Notes:

- 1- Roland Bourneuf, "L'Organisation de l'espace dans le roman" in *Etudes littéraires*, Volume 3, N°1 avril 1970. Quebec : Université Laval. 1970, p.77.
- 2- Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles*. Paris : Robert Laffont/Jupiter, 1982, p.414
- 3- Jess Stein, P.Y. Su, *The Random House Dictionary*. New York: Random House. 1978, p.897.
- 4- A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. 1979. p.671.

- 5- Edward A. Bloom, *The Order of Fiction: an Introduction*. New York: The Odyssey Press, 1964, p.211.
- 6- Thomas A. Noble, *George Eliot's Scenes of Clerical Life*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965, p.55

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