

Title: Victorian Research Seminar Week 14 Outline

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Outline Week 14

Kurnick

Willa's summary

“Is the [novel-reader] a skeptic, of an unquestioning consumer, deeply identified with the text? Kurnick argues that both are true: “it is precisely this conflation of detachment and surrender, of inattention and over-attentiveness, that allows us to reconceive of novel-reading as a critical practice, a pursuit of insight into the structure of social reality” (587)” (Glickman 1)

As per Willa's suggestion: how does this tie into Bakhtin's understanding of novel as a social genre?

“The novels figures its heroine (and its reader) as a promiscuous pursuer of social knowledge, a kind of erotically impelled researcher” (587)

To what extent does Kurnick, in the process of discussing desire and the novelistic form, address the fact that the majority of Eliot's novel-readers would have been women / address contemporary associations between women, eroticism, and the “un-critical-ness” of the novelistic form?

What are Kurnick's shortcomings? Where does the argument fall apart?

Tristan's seminar paper

Tristan focuses on identifying the ways in which *Middlemarch* both resists – and fails to resist – being labelled as a misogynist text by presenting (often sexist) commentary regarding women in different ways.

“During the first half of the novel, pronouncements about gender and the proper role or place of women seem to cluster into one of two categories – qualified narratorial maxims and statements by male characters.” (Beiter 1)

“These forms carefully resist the alignment on perfect narratorial authority with misogyny, but also largely fail to challenge the sexist

ideas that are encoded within the statements of both the male characters and the narrator herself.” (Beiter 3)

Point one: “narratorial maxims” are general statements made by the narrator which then becomes specified to a singular character, making them personal failings instead of universalized commentary.

Point two: men, in *Middlemarch*, make commentary on women, through dialogue or free indirect discourse. This removes responsibility from the narrator (or does it?), since they are not directly making this commentary themselves.

In the case of Dorothea’s engagement to Mr Casaubon:

“He is thinking that Dorothea is lacking in some combination of knowledge of the world and submissiveness that would allow him to have no fear that she would oppose him and would prevent her from getting angry that he would think she might do so. The line is in narration and so given the authority afforded to the seemingly omniscient narrator, but it is clear that these are not the narrator’s own private thoughts, but Mr. Casaubon’s thoughts that are sneaking into the narrator’s words.” (Beiter 2)

Aly’s paper

A different focus on Kurnick:

“Kurnick observes that Eliot is “incapable of conceiving of characters who might be capable of conceiving of something like *Middlemarch*” (584)” (Ye 1)

Eliot’s characters cannot “outwit” her, to use Aly’s word. Women, especially, are thwarted in their pursuit of intellectualism, as they are presented (see Aly’s examples re: Casaubon as well as Lydgate) as “distractions from” men’s academic pursuits, and not as participants alongside them.

“However, their similarities may also question or complicate Kurnick’s argument in ‘The Erotics of Detachment’. Kurnick argues that *Middlemarch* figures both its heroine and its reader as “a promiscuous pursuer of social knowledge” (587). After positioning Dorothea and the novel-reader as “a kind of erotically impelled researcher,” Kurnick continues on to connect desire in the novel to desire *for* a novel, claiming that desire is an entry point from fiction to criticism (587, 588). However, Dorothea’s desire for knowledge seems erotic and promiscuous primarily because she is not allowed to fully possess it; she only desires to be like the novel-reader because she has no other options within the novel.” (Ye, 3)

Break

Price

Leila's summary

Eliot had an interest in maintaining “authorial voice in representations of her texts (138)” (Selchaif 1). Criticisms, therefore, became full of small slivers of the texts itself, which allowed Eliot's voice to come through even as other people discussed / criticized / reshaped her work through different interpretations.

What do we make of the perception of a novel as “gems of sentences padded by exposition” with authors writing “to be excerpted and summarized, and readers read[ing] to find these nuggets of finely crafted words” (Selchaif 1)?

- What about in context of Commonplace Books and the research practices we have studied?
- Is it an “ethical practice” (Selchaif 1)?

Break

Eliot's notes

Arthur's summary

Eliot's note-taking practices were thorough and meticulous. She noted down even tiny details so that they would prove to be factual. It isn't fully clear, however, what the context of them is / the larger process of note-taking in relationship to the story as a whole.

- What did people take away from the notes? Where any particular connections to the text visible?

Sarah Allison

Think back to Allison's argument about the “commentative clause” - can we remember her argument?

Return to Tristan's paper: ‘What Allison is pointing to in syntax, I am pointing to in content.’

Does anyone have any commentary from the talk to bring in?

Middlemarch

What are people's reactions to the book?

Potential discussion topics:

- Comparison to *Adam Bede*
- Eliot's narratological interruptions
- Themes of gender / romance

Ana's close reading

Ana does an analysis via search of instances in which Casaubon refers to Dorothea as "my love", finding that these moments often also explicitly are tied to feelings of annoyance, thus foreshadowing an unhappy end to the marriage.

"[...] Eliot tells us that Mr. Casaubon's extremely strict sense of propriety leads him to call his wife "my love" when he is the coldest to her [...]. It turns out that, though there are surprisingly few instances of his use of the word, Eliot's observation holds up." (Curtis 1)

- What other foreshadowing (if any) do we see?

"As we read the second half of the novel, it will be interesting to observe whether there is anything of note in the instances of the phrase that relate to Will." (Curtis 2)

Emma's close reading

Eliot continues to enforce / manage readers' expectations with a passage hinting that Will is the better, younger match for Dorothea, while also dismissing her own suggestion in a kind of apophasis.

"Eliot effaces the "prophecy" about Will Ladislav that she has just created (ie, that he is more fertile, will develop as a man and eventually become a better match for Dorothea). In fact, she claims to not have created this impression at all, seeming to cast doubt on the reader's expectations. When the inevitable does happen, then, it likely seems to surprise as well as fulfill expectations, perhaps even seeming inevitable or natural." (Pernudi-Moon 1)

Epigraphs

What's going on with them?

Mock written/oral exams

Info from Rachel re: end of year examinations.