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The Concept of "Crisis" in *Middlemarch*

EUGENE HOLLAHAN

PARTICULARLY TRUE for *Middlemarch* is the traditional idea that an essential element in a plot is the crisis. George Eliot's attention to the importance of crisis in the plot is manifested in part by her use of the word "crisis" on fifteen occasions in this novel, all fifteen occurrences of the word coming after the halfway point of the story, being evenly distributed throughout the second half. An interesting variety of crucial junctures in the several subplots are made explicit by the use of the word itself. These verbal pointers concerning a character are supplied either by the narrator or else by the character himself; the characters involved in these minor crises are Dorothea, Casaubon, Lydgate, Bulstrode, Harriet Bulstrode, Ladislaw, and Rosamond. In addition to these references to individual crises, a few times the word refers to a group of characters involved in a collective crisis; and, finally, reference is made twice to the crisis situation in the local Parliamentary election.

Initially, when Dorothea discovers the hollowness of Casaubon and her marriage, the narrator says, "in such a crisis as this, some women begin to hate."[1] Of course Dorothea does yield to hatred for a brief while, but, as the heroine, she inevitably transcends it, if only after a difficult and believable struggle. Next, after Casaubon has decided to thwart by legal means what he wrongly imagines to be a romantic scheme between Will and Dorothea, his wife is aware from his changed work habits that "there had been some crisis in

[1] *Middlemarch,* ed. with introd. and notes by Gordon S. Haight (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Riverside ed., 1956), p. 313. Subsequent references in my text are to this edition.

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her husband's mind" (313–15). A major difference between Casaubon's response to his crisis and that of his wife to hers is that, unlike her, he yields to his own worst feelings, with serious consequences for himself, Dorothea, and Will. In another instance, and in a different sense, Mr. Brooke refers to his political difficulties in order to excuse himself from being involved in a domestic problem: "it's a crisis—a political crisis, you know" (358). As part of the author's historical setting for the human drama, which is her main concern, this political crisis is functional in setting up individual moral and psychological crises. Another kind of crisis is the one shown when Dorothea, some time after Casaubon's death, sits one day with Celia and her infant son, inwardly troubled over the discovery that her deceased husband had mistrusted her and also surprised by a "strange yearning towards Will Ladislaw." The narrator states that at "this crisis," Lydgate enters and observes that Dorothea looks ill (360). The political crisis is again referred to when Will becomes aware that he ought not to quit Middlemarch and leave Mr. Brooke in the lurch (365).

Occurrences of the word "crisis" become steadily more significant and in some instances are amplified and made more explicit. In chapter 55, later in the day after the morning parting of Will and Dorothea, the narrator, referring to Dorothea's troubled state of mind, offers the reader two characteristic views of crisis, those of youth and age.

> If youth is the season of hope, it is often so only in the sense that our elders are hopeful about us; for no age is so apt as youth to think its emotions, partings, and resolves are the last of their kind. Each crisis seems final, simply because it is new. We are told that the oldest inhabitants in Peru do not cease to be agitated by the earthquakes, but they probably see beyond each shock, and reflect that there are plenty more to come. (398–99)

Significantly, this narrator's view to the effect that crisis is inevitably part of life and that both experience and a realistic outlook ought to be factors in the formation of one's opinions on life's vicissitudes is an aspect of the authorial philosophy implied in the resolution of the main theme.

Other stages of the story are heightened by the explicit use of the word "crisis." Lydgate experiences a "crisis" when he thinks he ought for the sake of economy to return Rosamond's expensive

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amethysts to Mr. Dover, the goldsmith (431). Instead he allows her to keep them, and when he gets more deeply in debt and Rosamond is urged by her respectable parents to come and stay with them while things are in that miserable state, Lydgate gives in to her wish to go home, hopefully but wrongly telling her, "things are not coming to a crisis immediately. There is no hurry" (514). In Bulstrode's case, the narrator reveals that while attending the Town-Hall meeting on the question of a burial ground for cholera victims and upon becoming aware that scandal has spread concerning his putative connection with the death of Raffles, Bulstrode "had been going through a crisis of feeling almost too violent for his delicate frame to support" (533). Bulstrode's painful perplexity helps to create the ambiguous sympathy the reader feels for him. A minor crisis resulting in a clear revelation of unexpected moral courage is the instance when Harriet Bulstrode guesses from her brother's reactions that her husband is guilty of some hideous crime or sin. This is also the occasion for a singular authorial explanation of George Eliot's concept of the nature of crisis in general.

> That moment was perhaps worse than any which came after. It contained that concentrated experience which in great crises of emotion reveals the bias of a nature, and is prophetic of the ultimate act which will end an intermediate struggle. Without that memory of Raffles she might still have thought only of monetary ruin, but now along with her brother's look and words there darted into her mind the idea of some guilt in her husband—then, under the working of terror came the image of her husband exposed to disgrace—and then, after an instant of scorching shame in which she felt only the eyes of the world, with one leap of her heart she was at his side in mournful but unreproaching fellowship with shame and isolation. (549)

The narrator's definition of crisis will later be seen to be important for the entire novel, particularly with reference to the emphasis on the idea that one's reactions in a crisis will reveal one's inner nature as well as foreshadowing one's later crucial actions.

Another heroic moral revelation occurs in a moment of crisis when Dorothea decides that she ought to think of the welfare of Lydgate, Will, and Rosamond rather than about her own bruised feelings after she had found Will and Rosamond in what seemed to be a compromising situation.

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> And what sort of crisis might not this be in three lives whose contact with hers laid an obligation on her as if they had been suppliants bearing the sacred branch? The objects of her rescue were not to be sought out by her fancy: they were chosen for her. She yearned towards the perfect Right, that it might make a throne within her, and rule her errant will. "What should I do—how should I act now, this very day, if I should clutch my own pain, and compel it to silence, and think of those three?" (577)

Her decision is to visit Rosamond and offer assistance and sympathy, a decision instrumental in setting up the culminating event of the main plot. On another occasion, even the childish Rosamond is capable of experiencing painful awareness of self and others, a necessary condition for moral crisis, undergoing, when Dorothea visits her, "a newer crisis" than anyone might expect when the real problematical world, an "unknown world" of adult conflict and mental suffering, breaks in upon her with the display of Dorothea's concern for Lydgate (583). This rare moment is later referred to as having been the "sharpest crisis" of Rosamond's life (610).

Concerning these various crises in the lives of the characters in *Middlemarch,* two conclusions seem clear. First, all of them contribute to the suspense and to the moral and psychological complexity of the book, and second, all of them are consistent with the author's view that in human life crisis is a concentrated emotional experience that "reveals the bias of a nature, and is prophetic of the ultimate act which will end an intermediate struggle." Obviously, equipped with such a firm understanding of the nature of crisis in terms of character, situation, conflict, and consequential action, in this one respect at least the author was well prepared to write an effectively structured novel, one deriving its unity from a coherent plot structure. Equally obvious, however, is the fact that none of the aforementioned crises in the subplots is indeed the crisis in the unifying plot of the entire novel. We must look elsewhere for the main plot, its crisis and resolution.

The plot of *Middlemarch,* with its clear representative event, defining event, functional halfway point, crisis, culminating event, and climax, is generated by the character, decisions, and actions of Will Ladislaw. This plot is initiated in chapter 22 when, during their private conversation in Rome, Will surprises Dorothea by announcing that he is freeing himself from Casaubon's generosity

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and will now set out to make his own way in life, the first step being to return to England, whither Dorothea herself, not surprisingly, is about to return with her husband at the end of their honeymoon in the Eternal City. Will tells Dorothea, "Mr Casaubon's generosity has been perhaps dangerous to me, and I mean to renounce the liberty it has given me. I mean to go back to England shortly and work my own way—depend on nobody else than myself" (165). In this representative event is shown the motif of realistic, independent aspiration, a motif of importance in the development and resolution of the main plot. In chapter 37, Will's bold self-assertiveness precipitates the defining event of the plot when, having tentatively decided to work as a political journalist for Mr. Brooke, he decides, after hearing Dorothea say that she should like him to remain in Middlemarch, that he will in fact remain there, rejecting his cousin Casaubon's injunction not to degrade the family by such low activities as Reform hack writing. Will replies to Casaubon's caustic letter with a letter of his own, insisting on "using the ordinary freedom of living where I choose, and maintaining myself by any lawful occupation I may choose" (276). Clearly, these two decisions by Ladislaw give a decided thrust to the story and more than any other events link up the disparate threads.

Necessarily, the major crisis will involve the same conflicts shown in these two preceding events, with Will's decisions and actions giving the panoramic novel its significant shape. At the halfway point of the story, the action is impelled toward the major crisis when Casaubon, growing steadily more embittered over his own scholarly failures and blaming Will and Dorothea for his troubles, decides to use his last testament to thwart any marriage plan Ladislaw might devise after Casaubon's death, saying, "That I will hinder!" (309). At this halfway point, two possibilities for the direction of the story are, first, that Lydgate and Dorothea, both of whom are present in chapter 42, might become romantically involved, or, second, that a romance might in fact materialize between Will and Dorothea. The latter of these two possibilities occurs.[2] The crisis itself occurs when Will is again urged by the established society to leave Middlemarch, this time by Mr. Brooke, who has withdrawn

[2] Lionel Stevenson in *The English Novel: A Panorama* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p. 381, very soundly remarks that a sentimental novel would have paired off Dorothea and Lydgate "after some opportune loss of their spouses."

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shamefacedly from the election contest and who wishes now that the previously useful Ladislaw would immediately remove his embarrassing presence from the neighborhood of the widowed and interdicted Dorothea. Will, now under even more intensely difficult pressures than before, again rejects this suggestion, deciding that "I shall stay as long as I like. I shall go of my own movement, and not because they are afraid of me" (373). This crucial decision and its consequences give shape to the rest of the story.

The climax, customarily the point where the reader experiences his most intense emotional response, is slightly more difficult to isolate and designate than these other crucial events, mainly because in the latter part of the story several scenes are sufficiently dramatic and emotionally heightened to qualify, as for example the scene in chapter 54 when Will and Dorothea painfully and yearningly confront each other at Lowick Manor at the time Will is about to leave Middlemarch: "like two creatures slowly turning to marble in each other's presence" (396). In chapter 61 another emotional scene occurs when Will rejects Bulstrode's attempt to restore part of the money he had wrongly gained by depriving Will's mother of her rightful share of Will's grandmother's estate, with Will defiantly concluding, "You shall keep your ill-gotten money" (457). Another scene that might be the climax is the second confrontation between Will and Dorothea at Tipton Grange in chapter 62, when it seems possible to both of them that they love each other, and Will declares sadly but truthfully this time that he is leaving Middlemarch in order to prove his abilities and hence his worthiness to win Dorothea (464). Several other scenes are potentially climactic in their emotional forcefulness: Lydgate asking Bulstrode for money, Bulstrode horrified by the reappearance of the spectral Raffles, the Town-Meeting where Bulstrode is censured, Dorothea's offering financial aid to Lydgate, or Dorothea and Rosamond in tearful reconciliation. Obviously, the second half of *Middlemarch* is packed with emotional scenes.

Nevertheless, in terms of the unifying structural pattern of decisions and events involving Will Ladislaw, the climax is unmistakably the vivid scene in chapter 83 that occurs when Will and Dorothea, under the pressure of their powerful mutual love and stimulated by the electrical storm outside the library at Lowick Manor, finally embrace, kiss, and vow to wed (593–94). Inevitably, this pain-

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fully delayed climax to their love affair is closely linked with and also prepared for by the culminating event of the plot; a few pages earlier, Ladislaw, embarrassed over the scene that occurred on the day of his arrival back in Middlemarch when Dorothea had surprised him and Rosamond in what seemed to be compromising circumstances at Lydgate's house, wishes to leave secretly for London without saying goodbye to the Lydgates. However, he musters the moral courage to visit the Lydgate home one final time, and, as if in reward, he is informed by means of a note smuggled from Rosamond saying that Dorothea has been convinced of Will's innocence of any misbehavior with Lydgate's wife (588–89). Obviously, had Will lacked the moral courage to face Lydgate this one last time, he probably would not have seen or won Dorothea, as he does in the climactic scene. Hence, the independent "bias" of his nature, previously revealed in the representative event, defining event, and crisis, is consistently illustrated in the culminating event in such a way as to produce the climax and finally to unify the plot. Moreover, this main plot structure of *Middlemarch* illustrates the author's view that the bias of an individual's nature will be revealed in the concentrated experience of great crises which is "prophetic of the ultimate act which will end an intermediate struggle" (549).

Thus, in being central to the unifying plot of *Middlemarch,* the enigmatic Will is central to the theme of this vast narrative structure. Put simply, the theme is that in a time of cultural change and fragmentation, a time when widely sanctioned guiding visions have disappeared, the individual's innate desire for wholeness forces him to devise his own vision of a complete life. Most people come to grief in such trying circumstances, but a few happy souls reach completeness by following certain virtues exemplified in George Eliot's novels. Ladislaw resolves the thematic conflict because, although he is prone to the excesses of the other characters who are ruined by narrow visions, he manages to avoid the consequences of such visionary excesses by embodying a medley of admirable traits such as are found only scattered in the other characters. He is a remarkable gathering up of the entire problem that primarily concerned George Eliot in this book. A mixture of human feelings, humor, and poetic insight, he is able to perceive that such a potentially narrowing activity as art exists under the aspects of both time and eternity, and he learns to mediate between the two planes of reality.

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Open to possibility and confronting it with intelligent, critical experimentation, he is sensitive to the importance of completion as a human aspiration, while also being aware of the seductiveness of excessive demands for personal completeness in a dynamic, evolving world. His combative nature helps him to survive in a world where he recognizes that conflict between visions is inevitable but where he thinks they can be reconciled. Sturdy and practical on the one hand, he is also aware of subtleties such as gradual change in other persons. Avoiding one-sidedness by combining a worldly smattering of various bits of knowledge with a constructive power for envisioning a primary unifying involvement in a single field of activity, he combines sympathy, piety, and joyfulness with disciplined thought in the formation of a unified sensibility that promises to grow to maturity. Both instinctively intuitive and deliberately empirical, at the end of the story he has a discriminating, evolving orientation toward outward, active life. He has learned to use abstract visions of completeness, not in a single-minded, literal sense as some other characters do, but in a unique double sense, not only as a stimulating imaginative diversion but also as a means of clarifying important problems in real life, illustrated, for example, by his ability to give up the idea of "an intended settlement on a new plan in the Far West" (587) when reality dictates that he should return to Middlemarch and claim Dorothea. Thus, despite the encomiastic flavor of his characterization that strikes many readers as distasteful, he nevertheless satisfactorily resolves this thematic problem by showing how one can combine visionary aspirations of completeness with practical human activity.

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