

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

2011

'Pier glass imagery' in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and its fictional treatment of Spinoza's Ethics

Tapan Kumar Mukherjee

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English](#), [British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Mukherjee, Tapan Kumar, "'Pier glass imagery' in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and its fictional treatment of Spinoza's Ethics" (2011). *The George Eliot Review*. 587.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/587>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

‘Pier glass imagery’ in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* and its fictional treatment of Spinoza’s Ethics

By Tapan Kumar Mukherjee

In ‘George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* as a translation of Spinoza’s Ethics’ (*GER* 40), Miriam Henson refers to the author’s use of ‘pier glass’ imagery to illustrate her theory of morality and to show how an individual looks at the world from his self as the centre of moral vision and limitation. It is well known that Spinoza expounds his ethical theory in terms of geometrical concepts and physical theories of concentric and eccentric circles and lines etc. He was a lens grinder by profession and it is natural that he used to explore the mechanism of his trade in terms of binocular vision, reflection and refraction and other phenomena of optics and light. In the pier glass when a viewer looks at his own image as reflected in the mirror he is completely absorbed in the reflection of his own image, oblivious of the outside world at large. His vision is limited by the constraints of his exclusive concentration on his own self, cut off from the outside world. As Miriam Henson observes in her article, the failings of all the characters of the novel stem from their inability to see beyond the narrow horizon of the self, and their failure to transcend the barrier of the self and interact with the world beyond the self. But I think there is another angle and dimension to the use of pier glass imagery. A pier glass is usually placed in the wall between two large windows. It is used as a camouflage device and a decorative piece to cover the mass of masonry constituting the piers in the wall between two large windows. It would thus be possible by the simultaneous operation of concentric and eccentric vision to make contact with the outside world through the windows on either side of the pier glass, even when one is looking at one’s own image in the mirror. In Spinoza’s pantheistic philosophy Nature and God are of the same substance and co extensive with each other. Man is endowed by nature to play the dual role of physical extension and mental thought at the same time. In the same manner he is capable of concentrating on himself and interacting with others in the outside world simultaneously, if he is willing to do so. The pier glass image has a special symbolic significance for the novelist who uses it suitably to convey her moral vision imbibed through the study of Spinoza’s ethical theory.