George Eliot and Intertextuality:
A Study of her Early Works

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Abstract: The article discusses intertextuality in the novels written by George Eliot (1819-1880). The author of the article strives to discover the sources of these intertexts and their functions. He defines intertextuality as a mode of perception. It is the field of literary analysis which studies the relations that a text has with other texts. The analysis of intertextuality in George Eliot's early novels allows the reader to distinguish three types of intertexts: the intertextual prolepses, the biblical intertexts and the bookish intertexts.

At the end of his article, the author makes the recapitulation of the most important intertexts that he discovered in his analysis of George Eliot's early novels.

INTRODUCTION

Our concern in this article is to study intertextuality in George Eliot's early novels, we mean *Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss, Silas Marner, and Scenes of Clerical Life*. Our target is to highlight the rationale of that intertextuality in the novels of George Eliot, a nineteenth century English woman novelist. In other words, we would like to discover why her novels are so full of passages borrowed from other writers' works. Why does she refer to other texts? Is it a naive attitude or have these intertexts a profound meaning?

Before dealing with intertextuality in George Eliot's novels, let us define that concept. Intertextuality can be defined as a mode of perception. It is the field of literary analysis which studies the relations that a given text has with other texts through words, phrases, sentences or full paragraphs which belong to those texts. Michael Riffaterre gives the reader a definition of intertextuality in his article entitled « La Syllepse Intertextuelle »:

> *Intertextuality is the very mechanism of literary reading. It is on/y intertextuality which produces significance, whereas linear reading, which is common to non literary texts, produces but sense*[1].

We can also define intertextuality as the total number of texts we find back in our memory at the reading of a given passage. We must consider two kinds of intertextuality: the general intertextuality and the limited one. General intertextuality is the intertextual relations among texts from different authors. Limited intertextuality is the intertextual relations among texts coming from the same author.

The Different Intertexts in George Eliot's Novels and their Functions

1. Intertextual Prolepses

Intertextual prolepses are intertexts which play the role of announcements of what is going to happen. They allow to vehicle an idea. Sometimes, these intertextual prolepses

[1] Michael Riffaterre, « La Syllepse Intertextuelle » in *Poétique* N^0 40. Paris: Seuil, 1979, p.496 The translation is ours.

summarize the novels. In other words, they tell the reader what kind of novel it is, or what the novel will be about. In *Adam Bede,* for example, we have an intertextual prolepsis at the beginning of the novel. That intertext is an excerpt from "The Churchyard among the Mountains" by William Wordsworth (1770 - 1850). This intertext is as follows:

> So that ye may have
> Clear images before your gladden'd eyes
> Of nature's unambitious underwood
> And flowers that prosper in the shade. And when
> I speak of such among the flock as swerved
> Or fell, those only shall be singled out
> Upon whose lapse, or error something more
> Than brotherly Forgiveness may attend.

This intertextual passage is a poem which is part of a set of poems gathered under the title "The Excursion" composed in 1795 and published in 1814. The function of this intertext is to disclose the main ideas of the novel. Indeed, the most important words of this intertext are 'clear images', 'nature', 'flowers', 'error', 'the flock as swerved', 'forgiveness'. These words illustrate what the novel is about, and what is going to happen. In the intertext, we find the word 'nature'. Indeed, the novel is a country story, as George Eliot used to define it, "full of the breath of cows and the scent of hay." The term 'flower' in the intertext symbolises Hetty Sorrel. In many pages of the novel, Hetty Sorrel is compared to a flower. In addition, we find, as a watermark, the reference to nature through the word 'flower' which is present in the intertext. The other words from the intertextual passage which draw our attention, are 'error' and 'the flock as swerved'. These words refer to Hetty Sorrel, one of the main characters of *Adam Bede.* Hetty has made the error of getting pregnant without being married. Through her misconduct, Hetty Sorrel has infringed upon the moral values of the Hayslope community in which she lives. In other words, she has not respected the moral principles of that religious community. Furthermore, she is interested in luxuries and materialism.

The last word of the intertext which strikes the reader is 'forgiveness. This word refers to the Queen's forgiveness at the end of the novel. Indeed, after the murder of her baby, Hetty Sorrel will be condemned to death. Fortunately for her, Arthur Donnithorne will bring a

letter from the Queen ordering Hetty's release.

At the beginning and at the end of *The Mill on the Floss,* we have the following intertext: "In their death they were not divided."

This intertextual segment is extracted from *The Bible,* Samuel II, 1:23. In *The Bible,* that verset is part of David's laments for Saul and Jonathan. David was a shepherd who was designated by God to govern the people of Israel. Saul was the former king of the people of Israel. As for Jonathan, he was Saul's son. David was lamenting because Saul and Jonathan had been killed in their fight against the Philistines. In his laments, David is praising Saul and Jonathan. The beginning of the sentence from which the intertext is drawn is the following:

> Saul and Jonathan were lovely and
> Pleasant in their lives,
> And in their death they were not divided;
> They were swifter than eagles,
> They were stronger than lions. (II Samuel 1:23)

This intertext has a function. Its purpose is to make the peruser foresee what will happen at the closure of the novel. Indeed, that intertext contains the theme of unity that the reader finds again at the end of *The Mill on the Floss,* before the death of Tom and Maggie. At the end of the novel, and before Tom and Maggie die, Tom the brother and Maggie his sister clasp:

> 'It is coming, Maggie!' Tom said in a deep hoarse voice, loosing the oars, and clasping her....The boat reappeared - but brother and sister had gone in an embrace never to be parted. (P.655)

Again in *The Mill on the Floss,* we have another intertextual prolepsis on page 389. It is about the expression 'wheat and tares'. We find it in the fifth book of the novel. That intertext is also taken from *The Bible.* It has a precise function. It announces the two dramatic incidents which are going to take place in chapters five and seven of Book Five. The expression 'wheat and tares' is found in the parable of the good sower (Matthew, 13:23-30). The parable speaks of a man who had planted good seed in his field. But his enemy came in the night to sow tares; that is, bad grass; thus compromising the man's harvest. Through the

title drawn from *The Bible,* George Eliot wants to suggest the idea of an obstacle to overcome. Indeed, in Chapter Five of Book Five, Philip and Maggie are secretly continuing their love relations when Tom discovers them. He insults Philip in the presence of Maggie, thus putting an end to Philip's dream to marry Maggie.

That intertext drawn from *The Bible* is doubly symbolical. Indeed, in the same Book Five, Chapter seven, Mr. Tulliver has just bought back his mill. He thinks that he will now live a peaceful life. Unfortunately, he meets his enemy, Mr. Wakem, on his way. A fight breaks out, as a result of which Mr Tulliver dies.

Among the intertexts taken from *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan (1628-1688), the expression 'The Valley of Humiliation', deserves to be underlined because it has an implication in *The Mill on the Floss.* 'The Valley of Humiliation' is the place where Christian and Apollyon are fighting. Christian and Apollyon are two characters of *The Pilgrim's Progress.* One of them will be humiliated. That expression is a forerunner in *The Mill on the Floss* in the sense that it foretells what is going to occur in Book Five. Indeed, in the novel, Mr. Tulliver has just lost in suit against Mr. Wakem. He - Mr. Tulliver - has just lost the ownership and the management of his mill. He must now work under the orders of Mr. Wakem, his enemy. It is a very great humiliation for him. The narrator says, for instance, on page 369 of the novel: "Mr. Tulliver lingered nowhere away from home. He hurried away from market, he refused all invitations to stay and chat, as in old times." So, it is to pinpoint the humiliation and misery that Mr. Tulliver is enduring, that the novelist has chosen that title.

In *Silas Marner,* we find an intertext on the first page of the novel:

> A child, more than all other gifts
> That earth can offer to declining man,
> Brings hope with it, and forward-looking thoughts
>
> **Wordsworth**

That intertext is an excerpt from "Michael, a Pastoral Poem". It functions as a prolepsis because of the themes and images it contains. The most striking themes or words are 'child', 'gifts', 'declining man, 'hope' and 'forward-looking thoughts'. These themes and images sum up the whole novel, and even reflect its gradations or phases. In the novel, Mr. Marner, the main character, is an old hermit. It happens that all his money has been robbed.

But instead of his money, he finds a baby in his hut. The child is the gift the intertext is alluding to. That child gives Mr. Marner some hope; the hope to spend a good life with the little girl he has found. Towards the end of the novel, Mr. Marner is thinking of organizing his future. He has lots of projects. This is symbolized in the intertext by the expression 'forward-looking thoughts'.

After the analysis of intertextual prolepses, let us now consider the biblical intertexts.

2. Biblical Intertexts

Biblical intertexts are intertexts George Eliot drew from *The Bible.* These intertexts are numerous. And it is not a surprise since George Eliot had been deeply influenced by religion. Indeed, after her last years in school (1832 - 1835), her religions ardour increased. She dressed severely and engaged earnestly in good deeds and socially committed works. It is obvious that there has been a considerable influence of religious education and environment on George Eliot's career as a writer. Her novels deal with religion, morality, human vices, and redemption. George Eliot has always regarded religion as a means of leading people towards the 'right' way.

Biblical intertexts have many functions in her novels. Some of them are present to give a puritan colour to her fiction. Her novels were written during the Victorian period; a period characterized by religion and Puritanism. In *Adam Bede,* we find seventeen biblical intertexts. [2] In *Scenes of Clerical Life*, we encounter ten biblical intertexts.[3] In *The Mill on the Floss,* we discover five biblical intertexts.[4] In *Adam Bede,* on page 52, we come across a biblical intertext when Ben Wiry answers Seth who was asking him to go and listen to Dinah's sermon:

> What come ye out for to see? A prophetess?
> Yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophetess.

This intertext belongs to *The Bible.* It is found in the *Gospel*, according to St. Matthew (Matthew 11:9) in which Jesus, addressing the crowd, and alluding to the prophet

[2] Biblical intertexts are found on pages *52,* 64, 68 three times, 79, 80, 90, 104, 113, 118, 136, 137, 158, 161, 204, *528.*
[3] These biblical intertexts are manifest on pages 47, *53,* 60 two times, 127, 153, *259,* 302, 317, 373.
[4] They are discovered on pages 361, 365, 389, 411, *657.*

John the Baptist, exclaims:

> But what went ye out for to see?
> A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet
> Matthew 11:9)

In the second chapter of the novel, during her sermon on the hill, Dinah Morris quotes *The Bible* six times. On page 68, she begins her prayer by addressing the Christ: "Saviour of sinners! When a poor woman, laden with sins, went out to the well to draw water, she found Thee sitting at the well." Dinah alludes to Chapter Four of the *Gospel* according to St John (The woman of Samaria), in which "Jesus.... sat thus on the well.... There cometh a woman of Samaria to draw water." (John 4:7). In her sermon, Dinah asks God to guide people, and to grant forgiveness of their sins. On page 68, Dinah quotes what Jesus said; "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34) The scene we find in Chapter two of *Adam Bede* comes from two sources. George Eliot paraphrases *The Bible* in the scene dealing with the prayer. She refers to the sermon on the mountain. (Matthew 5:1-12). George Eliot also draws that scene from *Life of Wesley* by Robert Southey. Indeed, in *Adam Bede,* Note 8, Chapter 2 (edited by Stephen Gill), the peruser reads:

> In preparation for Adam Bede, she (George Eliot) annotated Robert Southey's Life of Wesley and, as Cunningham shows, op.Cit. pp. 148 - 149, used it in setting the scene for the preaching (*Adam Bede,* p. 594)

A similar sermon is preached by John Wesley himself on April 2, 1739. In *Le Methodisme,* C.J.Bertrand affirms:

> However, the second of April, the particular Reverend John Wesley, accepts to degrade himself...., addressing 3000 people, from a little height outside the town. He chooses as a theme Isaie's quotation (LXI.1-2) from Jesus of Nazareth (Luc IV: 18-19) (p. 49)

The end of Chapter 3 of *Adam Bede* contains intertexts borrowed from *Life of Wesley*

by Robert Southey. On page 82 of the novel, the narrator speaks of Methodists:

> They believed in present miracles.... in revelations by dreams and visions .They drew lots, and sought for Divine guidance by opening the Bible at hazard

That passage is borrowed from *Life of Wesley* from which George Eliot took notes. Gordon Haight says in this respect: "Now she (George Eliot) got out Southey's Life of Wesley and made careful notes on such matters as women's preaching. (pp.249-250)

Finally, when we read *Life of Wesley*, we realize that George Eliot had borrowed the Christian name 'Hetty' from John Wesley's sister who was called Hetty Mehetabel. Robert Southey lengthily disserts on the unhappy love of the latter. Some characters of *Adam Bede* use biblical intertexts to achieve their goals. That is the case of Seth, on page 78, who quotes *The Bible* when he declares: "St. Paul says, 'She that's married careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband.' In fact, .Seth is quoting I Corinthians 7:34: "But she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband. Seth goes on and says: I will that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house, give none occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully." (p.78) In this passage, Seth Bede is quoting I Timothy, 5:14: "I will therefore that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house, give none occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully." Seth Bede wants to marry Dinah Morris. That is why he quotes paragraphs and versets from *The Bible*, to persuade Dinah to get married.

After the study of biblical intertexts, the next part will concern bookish intertexts.

3. Bookish Intertexts

Bookish intertexts attest to George Eliot's wide knowledge. She had a mastery of Greek, Latin, French, English and Italian authors. In *Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss, Silas Marner* and *Scenes of Clerical Life*, we find, as a whole, fifty-seven bookish intertexts. For example, in *Adam Bede,* page 49, we have the following intertext:

> Awake, my soul, and with the sun
> Thy daily stage of duty run
> Shake off sloth.

That intertext is the morning hymn of Bishop Thomas Ken (1637-1711). Another intertext appears on page 58. it is 'Spotty globe', as Milton has irreverently called the moon. That expression is borrowed from *The Paradise Lost* by John Milton. The function of these intertexts is to prove George Eliot's erudition. In *The Mill on the Floss*, there is another intertext taken from *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan (1628-1688): 'The river over which there is no bridge" (p. 94). The sentence is about Christian crossing the river of death. That sentence is found on page 238 of *The Pilgrim's Progress:* "Now I further saw that betwixt them and the gate was a river, but there was no bridge to go over and the river was very deep." We come across another bookish intertext on page 122 of *The Mill on the Floss:* "As Ajax among the slaughtered sleep." That intertext is borrowed from Ajax II, 307 by Sophocles (496-406 B.C.):

> And as he scanned the havoc all round
> He smote his head and wailed and sank to earth
> A wreck among the wreck of slaughtered sheep
> Digging into his hair his clenched nails.

In that tragedy by Sophocles, in a moment of madness, Ajax mistook a flock of sheep for enemy soldiers. That intertext has a function. It unveils one of Maggie's idiosyncrasies, namely her incapacity to discern good from evil. In *Silas Marner*, the reader sees a bookish intertext on page 225: "Beauty born of murmuring sound." This intertext is taken from "The Excursion" (1814), a long poem in nine books written by William Wordsworth (1770-1850). In *Scenes of Clerical Life*, page 47, there is a bookish intertext when Mr. Hackit, one of the characters, says: "The cups that cheer but do not inebriate." That intertext is borrowed from "The Task" (1784), a poem written by William Cowper (1731-1800). On page 143 of Gluck's "Orfeo", we have the following intertext: "Che faro senza Eurydice?" That work is a metrical romance of the early l4th century, of about 600 lines.

Like in *Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss,* and *Silas Marner,* these two intertexts, among others, found in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, have no particular function. They decorate the narrative and especially highlight George Eliot's scholarship.

CONCLUSION

We can say that George Eliot was a writer of genius. She used to build her novels from extant things whence her allusions to books, sentences or passages taken from the books of her contemporaries.

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