

# A Life That's Good:

Metaphor and Greatness in Eliot and Ishiguro

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At first glance, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* seem wholly dissimilar. Eliot's novel offers a panoramic view of English society just before the passage of the 1832 Reform Bill; the complex interactions of its large cast of characters are mediated for us by a wise, acerbic, philosophical narrator. Ishiguro's, in contrast, immerses us in the perspective of Mr. Stevens, the unnervingly self-contained and, as we eventually learn, willfully self-deceived butler to a Nazi sympathizer during the appeasement era. As Emma Peters's insightful essay shows, however, both novels are fundamentally concerned with how to live a moral life, perhaps even a great life, as a small person in a big world -- and both novels show us that the metaphors we rely on in our stories about the world are critical to our chances of making sure that, in Eliot's words, "things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been."

— Dr. Rohan Maitzen

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**A**ctivist Desmond Tutu said "do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world" (Snodgrass 97). Desmond Tutu is one of many examples of people who have lived a great life, and their work will be memorialized in their honour. But how can regular people live a great life, without being Mother Teresa or Desmond Tutu? In their novels *Middlemarch* and *Remains of the Day*, George Eliot and Kazuo Ishiguro explore this question. The two novels use metaphors of the wheel and the web, respectively, to

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demonstrate that their protagonists could achieve great lives by doing the small amount of good they are capable of. *Middlemarch*'s Dorothea realizes that she is part of a web of storylines and that her actions affect those around her. Ishiguro's Stevens, however, believes that only those at the hub of the wheel matter, and his actions are insignificant. Both Eliot and Ishiguro support their metaphors with other literary choices, like narration and setting. These novels demonstrate, through their main metaphors, that living a great life is only possible if you realize your small bit of good matters.

In the town of *Middlemarch*, "there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it" (1054). *Middlemarch* residents "are not associations of organs which can be understood by studying them first apart [...] but must be regarded as consisting of certain primary webs [...] out of which the various organs are compacted" (301-302). Eliot repeatedly uses the web metaphor to describe how all her characters are connected. The web demonstrates links between characters and their impacts on one another. Not all characters realize that they are a part of this web, and some, like Dorothea, do not realize it until they have life experience. Dorothea fully comes to understand her part in the web when she is dealing with the Lydgates, their debt, and Rosamond's potential affair with Will, Dorothea's love interest. During a visit with Rosamond, the narrator describes Dorothea's thoughts:

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She tried to master herself with the thought that this might be a turning-point in three lives—not in her own; no, there the irrevocable had happened, but in those three lives which were touching hers with the solemn neighbourhood of danger and distress. The fragile creature who was crying close to her—there might still be time to rescue her from the misery of false incompatible bonds; and this moment was unlike any other: she and Rosamond could never be together again with the same thrilling consciousness of yesterday within them both. She felt the relation between them to be peculiar enough to give her a peculiar influence, though she had no conception that the way in which her own feelings were involved was fully known to Mrs. Lydgate. (1002)

Eliot's web metaphor is especially suited to her medium of a multi-plot novel, and this passage illustrates the crossing of the story strands in the web. Dorothea, having grown into self-awareness, now sees that this is “a turning-point in three lives” in the web of Middlemarch (1002). The omniscient narrator in this novel moves around between the characters so that the reader can see all of the different plots, and also see the connections between them. Allowing the reader to hear each of the character's thoughts, as we hear Dorothea's thoughts in this passage, allows for a deeper understanding of their situations and the effect that other plots have on them. This passage demonstrates the instance when Dorothea becomes aware of the impact her

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actions have on others. At this point in the novel, Dorothea has the choice to treat the Lydgates poorly, due to her resentment of Will and Rosamond's relationship. But Dorothea registers the larger affect her actions could have on the Lydgates and others involved, so she decides to do the right thing and be kind to Rosamond and her family. Dorothea realizes that she is not the only person implicated by her actions, and is actually only one part of the bigger web.

*The Remains of The Day* uses a different metaphor, that of the wheel, to represent the same concept as Eliot's web. Ishiguro writes that to Stevens, "the world was a wheel, revolving with these great houses at the hub... rich and poor [...] revolved around them [...] [and] serve[d] the great gentlemen [...] in whose hands civilization had been entrusted" (115-116). Stevens returns to the wheel metaphor throughout his journal. Stevens, being only a butler, is one of these peripheral parts of the wheel, serving his hub, Lord Darlington, with undying faith. Consequently, Stevens' sense of duty has caused him to do immoral things, due to Lord Darlington's Nazism. Stevens grapples with Lord Darlington's decision to fire his Jewish employees:

Indeed, the maids had been perfectly satisfactory employees and - I may as well say this since the Jewish issue has become so sensitive of late - my every instinct opposed the idea of their dismissal. Nevertheless, my duty in this instance was quite clear, and as I saw it, there was nothing to be gained at all in irresponsibly displaying such

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personal doubts. It was a difficult task, but as such, one that demanded to be carried out with dignity. (147-148)

Ishiguro's use of first person narration allows the reader to follow Stevens' thought process as he justifies his actions to himself through the claim that "there [is] nothing to be gained at all" by him doing anything, but his duty (148). To the reader, this passage is an instance of Stevens' unreliable narration. There is a clear gap between Stevens' ideas that his actions will not make a difference and the fact that he is firing "perfectly satisfactory employees" because of anti-Semitic reasons (148). Unreliable narration causes the reader to doubt the narrator's ideas, and thus creates skepticism of Stevens' understanding of his role in the world. Ishiguro's extremely formal diction in this section and throughout the novel opposes the journal narrative form of the novel, but reflects Stevens' obsessive need to act with dignity and duty while serving the hub. It is this compulsive need for duty that leads Stevens to fire the Jewish maids, despite his moral obligations. Stevens could have done the right thing and refused to fire the employees, but instead he stays a mere spoke in the wheel and does as the hub commands.

The protagonists in these stories live their lives based on the metaphors the authors use to describe their relation to others, with varying results. The web metaphor in *Middlemarch* demonstrates that every action each of the characters takes has effects that resonate with other characters, and that all of the plots are connected. By being

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aware of others in the story, Dorothea learns to be a better community members and more empathetic towards those around her. When deciding on her first marriage to Mr. Casaubon, she thinks in terms of how he can fulfill a need in her life. This is seemingly similar to Stevens' wheel-hub idea: Dorothea sees herself as the hub of Middlemarch's wheel and other character's lives as peripheral parts of the wheel that have no effect on her life. She sees Mr. Casaubon as "a guide who [will] take her along the grandest path [...] [to] learn everything" (40). Upon finding out that Mr. Casaubon's scientific work has been for nothing, Dorothea begins to realize that the people around her have things going on in their lives that she has not been taking into consideration. This is the first step in her education. Eliot uses an intrusive, omniscient, first person narrator to make sure that even though Dorothea may not have realized she is part of the web yet, the reader is aware of other opinions and connections between characters. For instance, though Dorothea is initially in the dark about her husband's struggles, the narrator is "very sorry for him" (357-358). And then, as Dorothea becomes more aware of other people, the narration moves further into her thoughts, which now become closer to that of the narrator's. By the time she reaches her epiphany with Rosamond, as described, she has realized that she is just part of the web in the bustling town of Middlemarch. Middlemarch provides a perfect setting for Dorothea's growth because it provides multiple story lines, characters, and places for each of the stories to take place and intersect, like the strands of a web.

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Dorothea had once had plans to “lead a grand life,” but when she realizes is that her marriage to Mr. Casaubon did not turn out the way she had planned, the only thing she is capable of doing is what little good she can, like helping the Lydgates (41). Her actions, however small they may seem in the grand scheme of things, change her life and the lives of others, making her life “great” even if it is not “grand” in the way she had originally planned. As Eliot writes, “the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts” (1055).

Stevens has lead a very dutiful life, waiting on those at the hub of his wheel, but not a great life. Stevens does not see the connections between his life and others’ because he has never left the hub of Darlington Hall. It is only once the setting has changed that Stevens begins to realize there is life outside Darlington Hall. Unfortunately for Stevens, he has realized quite late in his life that he may “have not turned out quite as [he] may have wished” (244). He was all-consumed by Darlington Hall and his duties there and did not see what was all around him outside the house. He did not, for instance, show kindness to the Jewish maids he fired, but left his “fate, ultimately, in the hands of those great gentlemen at the hub of this world,” in this case, Lord Darlington (244). Unlike Dorothea, he does not realize the web that everyone in this world is tangled in. Ishiguro’s use of first person narration also reflects this, because Stevens, and the reader, cannot see other people’s perspectives. Stevens is not self-aware enough to see how his actions can impact those around him. Ishiguro’s use of the journal

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allows the reader to follow Stevens' emotions closely during his journey to self-discovery as he realizes he "gave [his] best to Lord Darlington [...] and now [...] [does] not have a great deal more left to give" (242). This realization, unfortunately, does not seem to lead to any significant change. Stevens simply returns to Darlington Hall with plans to continue the way he has always done, ignoring anything he could do to help the greater good.

Eliot and Ishiguro use the metaphors of the web and the wheel, respectively, to demonstrate their ideas on what makes a great life. Though, comparatively, Stevens has had a much more exciting ("grander") life than Dorothea, he ultimately has the lesser of the two lives in terms of his impact on others. Stevens has served many of England's elite and has been part of a powerful aristocrat's inner circle for much of his life, but at the end of their stories, it is Dorothea who is able to affect others in a positive way. Both Dorothea and Stevens, as Eliot writes, are "born in moral stupidity," and over the course of their respective novels grow to realize their places in the world (272). Dorothea does her best to do her little bit of good in the web, whereas Stevens only does the bidding of his wheel's hub. It appears that a great life may be fulfilled by doing the little bit of good you can.

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