



## MORAL RESPONSIBILITY AND ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING IN MIDDLEMARCH AND OLIVER TWIST

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### Abstract

This article examines the representation of moral responsibility and ethical decision-making in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. Although both novels explore human morality, they differ significantly in narrative strategy and philosophical depth. *Middlemarch* portrays morality as complex, gradual, and psychologically driven, emphasizing internal conflicts, moral reflection, and personal growth. In contrast, *Oliver Twist* presents morality in clearer terms, sharply distinguishing between good and evil while highlighting the effects of social injustice and poverty. Through comparative textual analysis and sociological criticism, this study demonstrates how moral values are shaped by both individual conscience and societal influence. The findings reveal that Victorian literature plays a vital role in developing ethical awareness by illustrating the consequences of moral choices within social structures.

**Keywords:** moral responsibility, ethical decision-making, Victorian literature, moral values, social influence, character development, literary analysis

### Introduction

Literature has long functioned as a reflection of society's moral and ethical values. In the Victorian era, rapid industrialization, class division, and social inequality raised serious ethical questions, which writers sought to address through fiction. George Eliot and Charles Dickens are among the most influential Victorian authors who explored moral responsibility and ethical decision-making through realistic characters and social critique.

*Middlemarch* and *Oliver Twist* offer contrasting yet complementary views of morality. Eliot focuses on the psychological depth of moral decision-making, portraying ethical choices as gradual processes shaped by self-awareness and experience. Dickens, on the other hand, presents morality through clear contrasts between virtue and corruption, emphasizing the moral consequences of social injustice. This article aims to analyze how both novels depict ethical responsibility, how society influences moral choices, and how characters develop moral understanding within their environments.

## Methods of Analysis

This study employs a qualitative and comparative research approach to examine moral responsibility and ethical decision-making in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. The analysis is based on close textual reading, supported by concepts from moral philosophy and sociological criticism. These methods allow for an in-depth understanding of how moral values are shaped by both individual psychology and social conditions.

Key characters and significant narrative events are selected to illustrate ethical dilemmas and moral choices. In *Middlemarch*, special attention is given to Dorothea Brooke and Tertius Lydgate, as both characters struggle to reconcile their idealistic goals with the realities of social expectations and personal limitations. Their experiences reveal how moral responsibility develops over time through reflection, failure, and self-awareness.

In *Oliver Twist*, the analysis focuses on Oliver Twist, Fagin, and Bill Sikes in order to highlight moral contrast and the influence of environment on ethical behavior. By comparing character development, narrative techniques, and ethical conflicts in both novels, this study demonstrates how Eliot and Dickens present moral responsibility and the consequences of ethical decision-making within different social contexts.

### Moral Responsibility in *Middlemarch*

In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot presents morality as **complex, evolving, and deeply connected to psychological development**. Ethical responsibility is not defined by fixed moral rules or simple distinctions between right and wrong. Instead, Eliot portrays morality as a continuous process of learning, self-reflection, and increased awareness of others.

**Dorothea Brooke** represents this moral complexity. Her strong idealism and desire to lead a meaningful life initially lead her into an unhappy marriage with Casaubon. Dorothea believes that self-sacrifice and duty will allow her to achieve moral fulfillment. However, her expectations conflict with reality, and her disappointment becomes a source of moral growth. Through suffering and reflection, Dorothea develops greater empathy and emotional maturity. Eliot suggests that true moral responsibility requires not only good intentions but also understanding human limitations.

Similarly, **Tertius Lydgate** embodies the tension between professional ambition and ethical responsibility. As a doctor, Lydgate hopes to reform medical practice and serve the public good. However, financial pressure, social ambition, and his marriage to Rosamond gradually weaken his moral independence. Eliot uses Lydgate's experience to show that ethical failure often results from social constraint and self-deception rather than deliberate wrongdoing. His story emphasizes that moral responsibility involves recognizing one's weaknesses and accepting accountability for one's choices.

### Moral Values and Social Influence in *Oliver Twist*

Unlike Eliot's psychological realism, Charles Dickens presents morality in *Oliver Twist* through **clear contrasts between good and evil**. **Oliver Twist** symbolizes innocence, honesty, and compassion, while characters such as **Fagin** and **Bill Sikes**

represent corruption, greed, and moral decay. Despite growing up in an environment filled with poverty and crime, Oliver maintains his moral integrity. This suggests Dickens's belief that moral goodness is an innate human quality.

Through sociological criticism, this study shows that Dickens closely links moral behavior to **social conditions**. Poverty, neglect, and lack of education contribute to the criminal behavior of characters like Fagin and Sikes. At the same time, social institutions such as workhouses and legal systems fail to protect vulnerable individuals. Dickens exposes these failures to argue that society shares responsibility for moral corruption.

According to **Baguswaluyo (2007)**, moral values are standards of behavior shaped by social agreement and collective norms. Dickens illustrates this idea by showing how unjust environments influence moral outcomes. Although Oliver resists corruption, many other characters are shaped negatively by their surroundings. This contrast highlights Dickens's belief that society has an ethical obligation to create conditions that encourage moral behavior rather than crime and exploitation.

## DISCUSSION

This study reveals that *Middlemarch* and *Oliver Twist* present moral responsibility and ethical decision-making through distinct literary strategies that reflect the authors' philosophical and social concerns. Although both novels were written in the Victorian period, they address morality from different perspectives: George Eliot emphasizes psychological realism and internal moral struggle, while Charles Dickens focuses on social injustice and institutional failure. The discussion below examines these differences in depth and explains their broader significance.

### Moral Responsibility: Internal Development vs. External Conditions

One of the most significant findings of this study is the contrast between **internal moral responsibility** in *Middlemarch* and **external social responsibility** in *Oliver Twist*. Eliot presents morality as something that develops gradually within the individual. Characters are not born morally complete; instead, they grow through experience, disappointment, and reflection. Dorothea Brooke's moral journey illustrates this idea clearly. Her early idealism lacks practical understanding, and her mistakes are not caused by selfishness but by limited knowledge. Through suffering, she gains emotional depth and ethical maturity.

In contrast, Dickens places moral responsibility largely on society and its institutions. In *Oliver Twist*, individuals often become immoral because they are shaped by harsh social conditions such as poverty, neglect, and crime. Characters like Fagin and Bill Sikes are products of an unjust environment that encourages exploitation and violence. While Dickens does not excuse their actions, he suggests that society plays a major role in their moral corruption. This approach highlights Dickens's belief that ethical reform must begin at the social level.

### Ethical Decision-Making and Human Limitation

Another important aspect of the discussion concerns how ethical decisions are made in each novel. In *Middlemarch*, ethical decision-making is presented as uncertain and difficult. Eliot emphasizes human limitation—people often act without fully understanding the consequences of their choices. Lydgate's moral decline demonstrates how ethical ideals can be compromised by pride, financial pressure, and

social ambition. His failure is not sudden or intentional; rather, it develops through a series of small compromises. Eliot's message is that moral responsibility requires constant self-examination and awareness of one's weaknesses.

In *Oliver Twist*, ethical decision-making is more clearly defined. Dickens uses strong moral contrasts to guide the reader's judgment. Oliver consistently chooses goodness, while criminals repeatedly choose evil. This clarity serves a social purpose: Dickens wants readers to recognize injustice quickly and respond emotionally. However, this simplicity also suggests a belief in innate morality—Oliver's goodness remains untouched despite his environment, implying that ethical behavior can exist independently of social corruption.

#### Sympathy as a Moral Force

Both Eliot and Dickens consider **sympathy** essential to moral responsibility, but they define it differently. Dickens appeals to emotional sympathy. By portraying Oliver as innocent and defenseless, Dickens encourages readers to feel anger toward social injustice and compassion for the poor. This emotional response is meant to inspire moral action and social reform.

Eliot, on the other hand, promotes a deeper and more reflective form of sympathy. Her concept of "fellow-feeling" requires understanding others' motives, fears, and limitations. In *Middlemarch*, moral growth occurs when characters learn to see beyond their own desires and judgments. Eliot challenges readers to practice moral patience and empathy, suggesting that ethical responsibility begins with understanding rather than condemnation.

#### Narrative Technique and Moral Meaning

The narrative techniques used in both novels play a crucial role in shaping their moral messages. Dickens employs melodrama, clear characterization, and dramatic events to highlight moral contrasts. His narrative voice often directly criticizes injustice, leaving little ambiguity about ethical judgment. This approach strengthens the novel's reformist aim and makes moral issues accessible to a wide audience.

Eliot's narrative style is more complex and analytical. She frequently enters the minds of her characters, revealing their thoughts and emotional conflicts. This psychological depth allows readers to understand how moral decisions are formed and how self-deception operates. Eliot's use of an omniscient narrator encourages ethical reflection rather than immediate judgment, making morality a subject for contemplation rather than simple evaluation.

#### Individual and Collective Moral Responsibility

The discussion also shows that both novels address the tension between **individual** and **collective** moral responsibility. *Middlemarch* suggests that individuals must take responsibility for their actions within a social network. Moral responsibility is shared but never avoided. Eliot implies that ethical improvement occurs through small, everyday acts of kindness and awareness.

*Oliver Twist*, however, emphasizes collective responsibility more strongly. Dickens argues that when institutions fail, individuals suffer. The novel suggests that moral responsibility lies not only with criminals but also with lawmakers, administrators, and society as a whole. This perspective reflects Dickens's broader concern with social reform and justice.

## Scholarly Perspectives in Discussion

Scholars support these interpretations of moral responsibility. **George Levine** argues that Eliot's moral vision is grounded in realism and sympathy, emphasizing ethical complexity rather than moral certainty. According to Levine, *Middlemarch* teaches readers to accept moral uncertainty as part of human life.

Similarly, **Barbara Hardy** highlights Eliot's belief that moral understanding emerges through relationships and emotional experience. Hardy notes that Eliot rejects rigid moral rules in favor of ethical awareness developed through empathy.

In contrast, **Raymond Williams** describes Dickens as a moral critic of industrial society. Williams argues that Dickens uses emotional intensity and moral clarity to expose injustice and demand reform. *Oliver Twist*, therefore, functions as both a literary work and a moral protest.

## Broader Implications

The expanded discussion demonstrates that *Middlemarch* and *Oliver Twist* offer complementary insights into moral responsibility. Eliot focuses on internal ethical development and psychological depth, while Dickens emphasizes external social injustice and collective responsibility. Together, these novels show that ethical decision-making is influenced by both personal conscience and social environment.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, *Middlemarch* and *Oliver Twist* provide significant and complementary insights into moral responsibility and ethical decision-making within Victorian society. Through different narrative techniques and moral frameworks, George Eliot and Charles Dickens explore how ethical values are shaped by both personal choice and social conditions. Their novels reveal that morality is not only an individual matter but also a reflection of broader social structures and cultural expectations.

George Eliot, in *Middlemarch*, presents morality as a complex, evolving process rooted in psychological depth and self-awareness. Ethical responsibility emerges through experience, reflection, and empathy rather than through fixed moral rules. Characters such as Dorothea Brooke and Tertius Lydgate demonstrate that good intentions alone are insufficient; moral growth requires an understanding of human limitations and the acceptance of responsibility for one's actions. Eliot's realistic portrayal of ethical struggle encourages readers to engage in thoughtful moral reflection rather than simple judgment.

In contrast, Charles Dickens, in *Oliver Twist*, emphasizes moral clarity and social injustice. By portraying strong contrasts between innocence and corruption, Dickens highlights the ethical failure of social institutions that neglect the poor and vulnerable. Oliver's moral purity, despite his harsh upbringing, reflects Dickens's belief in innate goodness while also underscoring society's responsibility to protect moral development. The novel criticizes systems that create conditions for crime and moral decay, calling for social reform and collective ethical accountability.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that moral responsibility in Victorian literature is shaped by the interaction between individual conscience and societal influence. While Eliot focuses on internal moral development and psychological realism, Dickens foregrounds external social forces and institutional failure. Together,

their works show that ethical decision-making is influenced by both personal character and social environment.

Ultimately, these novels encourage readers to reflect on ethical responsibility, social justice, and the long-term consequences of moral decisions. The continued relevance of *Middlemarch* and *Oliver Twist* lies in their ability to address universal moral questions that remain important today. Victorian literature, therefore, serves not only as a historical reflection of nineteenth-century values but also as a lasting guide for understanding ethics, character development, and the moral responsibilities of individuals and society.

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