



A Study of “Fidelity” in *Middlemarch* Book Covers

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Abstract

Book Covers play a major role in the identification and reception of literary works. However, not so many studies have been attributed to them. Genette and other critics’ concern about the significance of book covers lead the present study to investigate the factor of “fidelity” in *Middlemarch* book covers. To this end, six available covers from the Penguin Classics will be taken into consideration. The results would investigate how this publisher has been successful in demonstrating true images of the novel. It is concluded that while some covers do not give a true picture of the incidents of the novel, some like Midlands’ 1994 and 2003 versions have been relatively sincere in presenting the novel. It is hoped that the results will help the critics to pay more careful attention to book covers and their influence on the reception of literary works.

Key words: Book covers; *Middlemarch*; Fidelity; Penguin classics

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INTRODUCTION

Book Covers have always had a major role in the identification and reception of books. Nicole Mathews and Nickianne Moody (2007) state that the style of books and covers have affected books’ popularity since 19th

century (p.xii). Moreover, they believe that the 1930s’s “paperback revolution” has caused a great change in the books’ reception and publication and such a revolution was the result of “the launch of Penguin Books in the UK in 1935 and Pocket Books in the US in 1939” (p.xii). As they quote from Carlin and Jones, paperbacks had a significant influence in the reception of books as well as in their “price, portability [and] format” (p.xii). Furthermore, Angus Philips declares that a book cover influences not only the books’ sales, but also “the genre (identification and formation) ... the value of a given author ... and the positioning of a book” (qtd in Lau & Varughese, 2015). In the same way, Mathews believes that even changing a book cover, can change the type of the audience (Ibid.) because in Philips’s viewpoint, a book cover “conveys a message about the contents” of the whole book and nonetheless, it influences “both the retailer who stocks the book and the potential purchaser in the shop” (Ibid.). These indicate how book covers play an important role “in the initial appraisal of a book” (Kluwick, 2009, p.79).

Gerard Genette, a French theorist, takes a special attention to the items accompanying a text in a book. Genette believes that a literary work includes “verbal statements” which are adorned and accompanied with other things which he calls “paratext” (1997, p.1). He defines paratext as an “‘undefined zone’ between the inside and outside” of a book (p.2) and this includes different things like the book cover, the illustrations, the preface, the author’s name, details about the book, etc. (p.1). He believes that such items not only adorn a text, but they also give it an identity as a book (p.1). Book covers in Genette’s idea, would be under the category of the “publisher’s peritext” which includes all the things that a publisher directly or indirectly manages about a book like “the title page and their appendages” or the “selection of format, of paper, of typeface” (1997, p.16). While in Genette’s viewpoint a title gives the readers

the key interpretation of the whole book and its major contribution is "identification, description and seduction" (Wagner, 1996, p.284), he believes that a book cover "forms the zone of first contact between reader and book" (Kluwick, 2009, p.79) and therefore, its role is very significant.

The critics' concern about the significance of the book covers and especially Genette's attention to them as part of a publisher's "peritext", lead the present study to examine the factor of "fidelity" in *Middlemarch* book covers. The results would investigate how Penguin Classics has been successful in demonstrating a true image of the whole novel and how the covers' images suit the major themes of the novel. It is concluded that while some covers do not give a picture of the novel and its incidents, some like the Midlands' 1994 and 2003 versions have been relatively sincere in presenting the novel. The author hopes that the present study would help the critics to pay a more careful attention to book covers and their influence on the reception of literary works.

1. "FIDELITY" IN *MIDDLEMARCH* BOOK COVERS

George Eliot's *Middlemarch, A Study of Provincial Life* was first published in 1871 and 1872 in eight volumes. The novel consists of several plots which are distinct, but more or less related to each other. The novel refers to several historical events like "the 1832 Reform Act" and "the death of King George IV" (*Middlemarch*, 2017) and it focuses on various issues as his major themes like marriage, women's position, "idealism," "religion," "education," "political reform" and "self-interest" (*Ibid.*). Moreover, improvements in the "contemporary medical science" have been depicted (*Ibid.*). The novel has been published by various publishers including Oxford World's Classics, Signet Classics, Wordsworth Classics and Bantam Classics. The present study focuses on the versions of the novel that have been published by Penguin Classics. Penguin Classics, which is an "imprint published by Penguin Books" (Penguin Classics, 2017), publishes its various editions in many countries around the world. Since 1947, Penguin Books have paid a special attention to the design of their books by "recruiting German typographer Jan Tschichold" (*Ibid.*) and various editions of a single book with different book covers have been published by this publisher. Regarding the novel *Middlemarch*, we had access to six distinct book covers and we will examine them in details.

2. THE 1965 VERSION

Penguin Classic's 1965 version of *Middlemarch* was published in America. The cover depicts a vertical image which reduces the narrative nature of the story presented

in it. In the cover, we find a girl whose face is back to the audience as a result of which the identity of the female character is not clear. This, in fact, enhances the curiosity in the audience. The lady is alone in nature and no man accompanies her. She wears a white skirt that gets the attention of the audience among the dark colors of the jungle that she stands in. In symbolic terms, white usually stands for innocence. However, this lady's dress is both brown and white which is suggestive of her complex life which is filled with both dark and bright stages. She is deeply thinking in nature, a characteristic of a romantic figure, as if nature serves as a shelter for her. Besides, we might suppose that she is waiting for somebody to come, perhaps to rescue her, or that people have left and she is following them. But what is important at this stage is that she is alone and no traces of a social life can be detected in this picture. Thus, loneliness is the major theme of this cover. This does not seem in harmony with the themes of the novel. Furthermore, that the picture is filled with tress and no space is free, it does not allow for the multiple narratives that exist in the text. While *Middlemarch* is famous for its various parallel stories and its manifestation of different aspects of a social life, the cover does not indicate any of those issues. This book cover focuses on the life of only one individual. Thus, it is valuing one of those stories in the novel and does not create true perceptions in the audience to find their needed book.

3. THE 1967 VERSION

This version demonstrates two rings locked together. The golden color of the rings suggest royalty and wealth of their owners. It is clear that the theme of marriage has been connoted by this photo. However, no images of the city and no traces of the characters are recognized. It is as if the story is all about marriage. Although marriage is considered one of the major themes of the novel and it plays a major role in the stories, it is not what the novel is all about. However, this is a more sincere cover than the previous case since it has paid attention to one of the major themes of the novel. Moreover, unlike the previous cover that destroyed the parallelism of the stories and valued one single case, this cover pays attention to a shared issue in all the stories of the novel.

4. THE 1994 VERSIONS

Two distinct book covers have been published in 1994 by Penguin Classics. The first one which was published in New York, demonstrates a room with two ladies. One sits on a chair and seems to be older as she has a stick in her hands. Her face is toward the other young woman and is clear to the audience whereas the younger woman's face is back to the audience and therefore, not clear. The young

lady is taking and offering something to the old woman as if she is helping her. The picture reminds the audience of “The Dead Hand” chapter in which Dorothea who is rich, goes to the Middlemarch city and helps the charity: “... but she did occasionally drive into Middlemarch alone, on little errands of shopping or charity” (Eliot, 2005, p.660). While the novel *Middlemarch* recounts several stories, it is clear that what this picture presents does not have anything to do with those major plots. The house is old. Warm colors attract the attention of the audience: everything seems red and brown which is in line with the kind and friendly relationship between the young lady and the old woman she is helping. The flowers on the ground, the window which gives a view towards nature and also traces of light that cover the lady suggest the good atmosphere in the room and the good task she is accomplishing. However, the audience who does not know anything about the novel, might suppose that it is a story about two women, or about helping, or anything except the story that we know. The picture does not present a good image of the novel and it is not in line with the major plot and the themes. Rather, it values minor incidents.

The second book cover was published in Midlands. It demonstrates a scene in the city and groups of people are interacting. The focus is not on any group or any story. The picture has made it clear that the novel is about people in a city and their stories. This version’s strength is in the sense that it suits the title and it demonstrates a city and the social interactions in it. Also, it is an objective view towards the lives in the city which is in line with the text that is narrated from the third-person point of view. Besides, marriage and women’s status are manifested in the cover by depictions of female figures and also couples. Therefore, the present study suggests that this is a more sincere book cover and a better version than the previous cases.

5. THE 2003 VERSION

The 2003 version of *Middlemarch* was published in Midlands and it demonstrates the same girl with the same dress that was presented in New York’s 1994 version. However, she is sitting with a man in black on the top of hills and she has a book in her hands (perhaps referring to Dorothea’s interest in learning). The faces are back to the audience and therefore, cannot be recognized. The man points to the city and it seems that he is explaining about the incidents in the city. This cover focuses on one of the major plots of the novel (the relationship between Dorothea and Casaubon) and includes two major characters of *Middlemarch*. Moreover, by pointing to the city, it addresses the incidents of the city and it is implied that there are stories about the city that must be recounted. While the present study assumes that this

picture is a relatively faithful cover for the novel, weak points can also be detected. The only focus of the picture is of Dorothea and Casaubon’s story and no traces of Lydgate and Rosamond who are also major characters of *Middlemarch* and who build a major plot in the novel can be found. It is as if Dorothea’s story acts as the major plot and the others are considered secondary. This, in fact, highlights the subjectivity of the designer towards the novel. All in all, this study assumes that despite its minor weaknesses, this cover is relatively successful in presenting the novel.

6. THE 2011 VERSION

A more modern version of the covers, this version does not present a city. Rather, it depicts portrayals of two distinct female figures and of two distinct male figures which remind us of the two major couples in the novel – Casaubon and Dorothea and Lydgate and Rosamond. This is true that *Middlemarch* circles around their stories, but the novel includes other stories and incidents as well which are ignored in this picture. The theme of marriage is manifested in this cover: women accompany men and there is a crown-like item on the top of women’s head. Moreover, the background of the picture is pink which connotes femininity. Nevertheless, the cover is weak in the sense that it depicts the novel as if it is all about marriage which is not true. Also, while the city life plays a major role in the construction of the atmosphere of the novel, it is ignored in this picture. All in all, the cover is sincere in presenting two plots, four characters and the theme of marriage. However, it has not been successful in manifesting the complete picture of the novel.

CONCLUSION

In the present study, we analyzed the factor of ‘fidelity’ in *Middlemarch* book covers. Six distinct book covers by Penguin Classics were examined in comparison with the major incidents and characters of the novel. Regarding the sincerity of book covers towards the text, an improvement was felt along the passage of time and it is clear that the publisher has tried to pay attention to the faithfulness of book covers towards the text along with the creativity that is added to the covers and which is not in contrast to their sincerity. However, the covers have not yet been successful enough in presenting true pictures of the novel. Some like the 1965 and New York’s 1994 versions account a single moment in the novel that does not have any significant roles in the construction of the plot. They, in fact, not only construct a false image of the novel, but they also destroy the audience’s expectations when reading the text which might lead to the point that they will not trust the publisher again.

While Midlands' 1994 and 2003 versions depicted city life, in the other cases, no traces of a thorough picture of Middlemarch as a city is presented. Besides, the other versions like the ones produced in 1965 and the 2011 have tried to prioritize the status of certain characters over the setting. Ignoring the setting creates a false image of the stories and destroys the picture of the whole novel. Moreover, some book covers like the *Middlemarch*'s 2003 version published by Penguin Classics focused on one single plot of Dorothea and Casaubon's relationship and ignored the others which is very subjective and not acceptable. By this, the audience would expect only one story and the significant art of the novel's author in gathering multiple plots together in a single novel would be ignored. Also, the theme of marriage was highlighted in the version of 2011, 2003 and 1967 and the other themes have totally been ignored. This mars the parallelism in the various plots presented in the novel and it is as if the illustrator and the publisher have prioritized one theme over the others. This, again, destroys the audience's positive view towards the publisher. Finally, no one of Penguin Classics' book covers on *Middlemarch* highlighted the historical and scientific aspects of the novel. While the present study considered some of the book like Midlands' 1994 and 2003 versions as more successful than the others in terms of their sincerity to the text, none of the versions have been completely successful in presenting a true image of the novel. It is hoped that the results of this study will attract the attention of critics as well as publishers to pay a more careful attention to the book covers.

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