Gender, Class & Social Evolution in George Eliot's Middlemarch

Tim Mount
Seton Hall University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations
Part of the Classics Commons, and the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Mount, Tim, "Gender, Class & Social Evolution in George Eliot's Middlemarch" (2002). Seton Hall University Dissertations and Theses (ETDs). 1233.
https://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations/1233
Gender, Class & Social Evolution in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*

Tim Mount

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of English.
Seton Hall University
May 2002
Contents

1 Introduction 1

2 Chapter 1 – Gender Issues in *Middlemarch* 4

3 Chapter 2 – Class and Economic Inequality in *Middlemarch* 26

4 Chapter 3 – George Eliot’s Solution to Social Inequalities 46

5 Conclusion 53

6 Works Cited 55
Introduction

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is widely hailed not only as one of the greatest novels of the Victorian Era but as one of the greatest novels ever written. George Eliot (or Mary Ann Evans) herself is largely considered to posses a rare genius. She displayed a keen insight into the workings of the human mind and human society, and fused this together with a moralistic vision. Harold Bloom places her more in the company of the great philosophers rather than in the company of the great artists, and he writes that "the novel compels aesthetic awe in me, if only because it alone, among novels, raises moral reflection to the level of high art" (6). But despite all of the admiration, which often borders on reverence (and indeed often crosses over that border), *Middlemarch* has been viewed by many as a flawed masterpiece. Contemporary reviews of the novel were mixed, ranging from adulation to severe detraction, although the novel itself was wildly popular (Harvey 125-147). Henry James said that "*Middlemarch* is at once one of the strongest and one of the weakest of English novels" (Swinden 60). His criticism of the novel centered around his view that it is "a treasure-house of detail, but it is an indifferent whole" (Swinden 61). Others have looked on the novel the same way that much Victorian literature is viewed: as too didactic. But more recently *Middlemarch* has been criticized as a work that promulgates the tradition of female subjugation in the patriarchal system. This seems rather strange considering the fact that it is a novel written by a woman and very much revolving around gender issues. The novel begins and ends with Dorothea. And so much of the novel is about Dorothea and her role as a woman that there can be no mistake that the gender issue is one of the major concerns of the novel.
Despite this, the novel has received much criticism from feminist writers. This criticism mainly arises from the fact that although Dorothea has an intelligent mind and a noble, arduous soul, she fails to break free completely from the societal pressures that bind her to her prescribed gender role. The feminist critics wish for her to live an epic life to set an example for women of the possibility of overthrowing those bonds. They view her marriage to Will Ladislaw as a subjugation of the feminine spirit and a reinforcement of the patriarchal order. But George Eliot has been much defended against this feminist critique, as it is clear the novel sympathizes with the inequality of women. The novel is a realistic portrait of the plight of female subjugation, and it shows the process, slow as it may be, of social evolution that is wearing down the gender gap.

But George Eliot was not really a feminist – she was a humanist. That is, she was more concerned with the plight of humanity in general, inclusive of gender issues, than merely with the inequality of women in particular. Dorothea’s own pity for the sufferings of the lower classes is a quiet reminder on Eliot’s part, and perhaps even a mild admonition aimed at the feminist movement, that class differences are harsher than gender differences. This theme of artificial class distinctions, like the theme of artificial gender distinctions, is infused throughout the novel. Mr. Casaubon is the personification of both of these inequalities; and Dr. Lydgate, who is almost as central to the novel as Dorothea herself, is led down the path to failure because he has internalized both of these artificial constructs. The character of Will Ladislaw also resonates with both of these issues, but he is more symbolic of the injustice inherent in class distinctions, as well as of the move away from those distinctions. The contrast between the Vincy family and the Garth family further extends these ideas of gender and class, but also centers more
around the class issue. The Vincys represent the falseness of aristocratic pretensions, whereas the Garths represent a sort of simple morality that is free from class distinctions. The Garths, like Ladislaw, thus represent social evolution away from the traditional class structure.

However, the novel centers around two failures – the failure of Dorothea and Dr. Lydgate to live up to their full potential. Both of these characters are continuously described as ardent, and each is involved in the struggle to make the world a better place. But they both fail to achieve their high ideals and their lives become steeped in mediocrity. Thus the main theme of the novel is the search for good and meaningful work and the societal pressures that hamper this. But in Dorothea and Lydgate, indeed in almost all of the characters, this idea becomes inextricably linked with the sub-themes of gender and class inequality – as it is these very social problems that are the main reason that these two ardent souls become incapable of achieving greatness. And as central as Dorothea and Lydgate are to the novel, *Middlemarch* is about more than just these two; it is about just that – the entirety of Middlemarch, which is representative of humanity in general. And the conclusion the novel comes to is that there are many inequalities in society – gender, class and even racial – but that society is slowly evolving. It is through individual efforts, by finding that proper vocation and living a moral life, that society is changing. Henry James was right. *Middlemarch* is a treasure-house of detail. But he was also wrong. It is a very complete whole. It is easy to get lost in the minutia, to look through Eliot’s microscope and focus on the details. But Eliot’s narrative also pulls back and looks with a telescope at the totality of society. And with her metaphor of the web she ties together all the various elements of the novel into a unified picture.
Chapter 1

Gender Issues in Middlemarch

*Middlemarch* begins with the portrait of a young, innocent, and very naive Dorothea Brooke. She has completely internalized the sexism of her society and is looking for a husband who will be a father figure — a John Milton who will be her moral superior and teacher. These ideas lead her to marry Mr. Casaubon. This marriage, with the older Casaubon standing dominant and unsympathetic over Dorothea, is illustrative of the subjugation of women. But it is Dorothea’s second marriage to Will Ladislaw and the Finale of the novel that has inspired many feminists to criticize the work. Critics such as Abba Goold Woolson in the 1880s and Lee Edwards and Patricia Beer in the 1970s mourn Dorothea’s marriage (Blake 68). These critics would have had Eliot depict a Dorothea who rejects marriage and leads an epic life in order to present an example for the female reader that they too can overthrow the artificial gender constructs of society. Jeanie Thomas writes:

Clearly, for many feminists, this is not only, or even primarily, a literary matter. The stakes are deeply personal. Hungry for models of achievement, looking to literature, as Carolyn Heilbrun does, “for the proclamation of the possibilities of life,” these disgruntled critics are the temperamental heirs of Dorothea Brooke herself, for Dorothea also sought what her immediate world did not offer and longed for a guide who would light her spiritual and intellectual way. (47-48)
But the sense of melancholy and emptiness, the ache and the longing for more, are exactly the feelings that Eliot intended to instill with this ending. Thomas explains further: "My own experience of the novel does not culminate in anger on Dorothea's behalf; instead, I feel regret, intensely so, followed by difficult acceptance. And it is this complex feeling that I believe George Eliot intends us to tolerate and value, in place of total satisfaction of our desires or anger at their frustration" (54-55). And what the ending does do is illustrate just how detrimental the subjugation of women in society is. That the reader senses how much the world has lost because Dorothea is not allowed by a patriarchal society to achieve her full potential is a powerful statement on the impact of gender inequality.

Furthermore, the novel is intended to be realistic. It is a study of provincial life. George Eliot reveals how difficult and rare epic lives are in the novel's Prelude. She writes:

Many Theresas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action; perhaps only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity; perhaps a tragic failure which found no sacred poet and sank unwept into oblivion. With dim lights and tangled circumstance they tried to shape their thought and deed in noble agreement; but after all, to common eyes their struggles seemed mere inconsistency and formlessness; for these later-born Theresas were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul. Their ardour alternated between a vague ideal
and the common yearning of womanhood, so that the one was disapproved
as extravagance and the other condemned as a lapse. (8-9)

This is the problem ardent souls face—“this meanness of opportunity” and “tangled
circumstances” that sinks their dreams into oblivion. It is even more problematic for
women, as they earn disapproval rather than admiration for their ardour, and are held
back by that “common yearning of womanhood” that has been infused in them by a
patriarchal society. This not only reveals that central to the novel is the idea that social
pressures prevent women from achieving greatness, but it also foreshadows the ending by
revealing how very difficult it is to achieve epic grandeur: Dorothea’s lack of great
achievement should not only therefore come as no surprise, but should be seen as an
indication of the social constrictions placed on women.

Many of these feminist critics also feel that Dorothea’s marriage to Will is a betrayal
of the feminist movement because it functions to support the dominant patriarchal order
by reinforcing the woman’s role as wife and mother (Barrett 177, Chase 61). But
Dorothea’s marriage to Ladislaw is not a reaffirmation of the patriarchal order. First of
all, it is a rebellion on her part against the legacy of Casaubon and goes against the
expectations of her family and her society. Jeanie Thomas explains: “She, unlike Mary,
breaks with family and tradition when she marries Will Ladislaw. The choice to marry,
however conventional, is the protest that it is within her power to make against the
existing structure of things” (62). But also, the simple fact that she marries cannot be
read as a justification for the subjugation of women. It is an unfortunate fact that
marriage often serves as a form of enslavement for women, but that Eliot is aware of this
and derides it is proven by the example of Dorothea’s marriage to Casaubon. And the
novel illustrates the movement toward greater equality in marriage through Dorothea’s movement from Casaubon to Ladislaw – which is not to say the problem of gender inequality has been solved, but that it has improved.

Karen Chase argues that the masculine and feminine are merging in the characters of Dorothea and Ladislaw. Will is described in feminine terms. His mannerisms are effeminate, and as he stretches himself out on the floor to listen to Rosamond’s music he divests himself of masculine aloofness. “He is not shut up in his own masculinity,” and “he is kin to women, not polarized against them. Ladislaw’s position, outside money inheritance, sharing the awkward financial dependency more often associated with women, does have the effect of reinforcing his feminisation” (Beer, “Woman Question” 159). Dorothea is constantly compared with the masculine. She is described as comporting herself “very much with the air of a handsome boy” (Eliot 24). This androgyny is furthered in Dr. Lydgate. Chase explains how “the novel is rethinking sexual identity” through these characters:

Indeed, Dorothea and Lydgate are the two characters in whom the term “ardour” takes deep root, and in both cases it suggests a form of psychological energy that sublimates sexual energy and that can carry personality beyond the usual restrictions of gender. Dorothea’s ardour takes her beyond the region of feminine domesticity, much as Lydgate’s ardour lets him escape the commonness of preoccupation with blood, furniture and women. (66)

Thus the marriage of Dorothea to Ladislaw represents the continuation of gender inequality, but also the lessening of that inequality; and Dorothea and Lydgate symbolize
the evolution of the feminine and masculine beyond traditional roles. Dorothea Barrett further explains how the androgyny of the novel extends the idea of gender equality:

> The androgynous imagery – the description of women by comparing them to men or to the masculine – contributes to monumentality by suggesting physical largeness and strength but also by suggesting that this heroine is not limited by her gender. Here George Eliot moves out of the realm of physical metaphor and suggests greater scope in qualities of mind, such as intellectuality, strength of will, or bravery, in which greatness is traditionally supposed to be restricted to men. But most importantly, androgynous imagery helps in the representation of heroines as fully human agents, in the evaluation of whom gender is not nearly as central as humanity. (26)

This idea of the androgyny in *Middlemarch* can be further extended to encompass the figure of the narrator. The voice of the narrator is so strong, with its parenthetical wisdorns and little philosophies suffusing the text, that the narrator has often been recognized as a palpable character within the novel. Quentin Anderson sees the figure of the narrator as the dominant character in the novel. He writes:

> George Eliot is present as the only fully realized individual in her book. This sounds like a harsh saying, but it may not be quite so harsh as it sounds. When one is reading *Middlemarch* there are many moments when one looks up and says, “How intelligent, how penetrating this woman is!” And, of course, one is speaking of George Eliot. (154)

But he makes two mistakes here. The first is in not recognizing the fullness of the novel’s characters. All of the major characters, with the lone exception of Will Ladislaw,
are richly developed. One of the most amazing passages of the work comes in Chapter 29 when the narrator moves the perspective from Dorothea to Casaubon. Here Casaubon develops a richness of character that fully rounds him out, makes us understand him, sympathize with him to an extent, and pity him. Even Bulstrode is not presented simply as some thieving, murderous villain. He is a character so real that he echoes into the twentieth century and we see his likeness in Jim Baker and Jerry Falwell. This hypocritical evangelist of the nineteenth century is mirrored by these televangelists of the twentieth century. What Bulstrode does is make these real-life figures understandable -- for Eliot’s narrative draws us in to the inner workings of his tortured mind and we see how he justifies his actions to himself. We do not approve, but we understand. These characters are amazing accomplishments, and alone are enough to make the novel great, but it is in the exquisite portrayal of the novel’s two main characters, Lydgate and Dorothea, that Eliot’s narratorial skills truly shine. In Lydgate we see a passionate young doctor striving for change, and we feel his passion in the detailed account of its blossoming. And as the events of the novel unfold, and his ardour is weakened as he is cowed by worldly concerns, we are given an insightful portrait into how youthful idealism is transformed into sad pragmatism. There is a similar transformation in Dorothea. And she is such a richly developed character, as she moves from the naïve, energetic, ardent young woman, to the mentally beaten down wife of Casaubon, to the widow searching for vocation, to the lover who defies society to marry the outsider Ladislaw, to the portrait we get in the Finale of a woman who did not live up to her full potential, that it is ridiculous not to recognize her as one of the most palpable and fully rounded characters in all literature. It is that she is so well developed a character that the
reader is so saddened by the end. She is not an Anna Karenina or a Lily Bart, and the reader is given the sense that she actually led a rather happy life, but nonetheless her fate is often seen as tragic. This is because she seems so “real.” The narrator, in comparison, does not grow and change as these characters do.

The second mistake Anderson makes is in viewing the narrator as a she. J. Hillis Miller explains that “the fiction of the male narrator is still maintained in Middlemarch. To speak of the narrator as a ‘he’ allows the reader to keep firmly in mind the distinction between the author of the novel, Marian Evans, and the created role of the storyteller, George Eliot” (13). It is difficult not to refer of George Eliot as she, but it is important to remember that Eliot is not just a pen name. George Eliot is also a fictionalized character, and when speaking of Eliot the narrator it is necessary to remember that it is a male figure. But while the narrator is not the author, Mary Ann Evans was such a strong moralist that there is the distinct imprint of her own self in Middlemarch. Many critics have seen Evans in Dorothea and in Mary Garth, the author herself admitted to having much of Casaubon in her, but it is the narrator, George Eliot, who is closest to the real Mary Ann Evans (Mintz 97-120). It is a mistake to equate Evans entirely with Eliot, a mistake which led Quentin Anderson to view the narrator in Middlemarch as a fully realized character, but it is unmistakable that there is much of Evans in Eliot.

Thus the figure of George Eliot can be viewed as an amalgamation of male and female: an androgyne. Mary Ann Evans was, in fact, often viewed this way during the Victorian Era — but that was due to the extreme sexism of the time. She was seen “as a pathological monster created by the unnatural conjunction of a masculine mind with a
feminine body” (Brady 2). Kristin Brady explains the Victorian ideas that led to this viewpoint:

The icon of Eliot as that ‘repulsive phenomenon, the “man-woman”’, emerged from a nineteenth-century equation of woman with her reproductive organs that was based on a scientific model of incommensurable sexual difference. Such a definition, which admitted no commonality between genders, naturalized – and thus justified – the already existing social and cultural differences between the sexes. If woman was the heart (that is to say, uterus) in relation to the man’s head (that is to say, brain), then the separate spheres of the man’s public world and the woman’s domestic world were merely social manifestations of essential, natural differences. To unsettle these binary oppositions was to tamper with nature itself.

(2)

But further than this, the same sort of pseudo-science that can be identified with Nazi theories on racial superiority taught that the uterus drained the energies of the body away from the brain and thus made women naturally less intelligent than men. Also associated with the female body was the notion of hysteria. According to this theory the uterus creates an excess of nervous energy which causes psychological problems. Marriage and child-birth was seen as one cure for this excess in nervous energy, but more bizarre and extreme treatments included systematic douching, clitoridectomy and institutionalization. These extreme views the Victorians held of the difference between men and women highlight how radical a departure the androgyne of the novel is. And the real reason George Eliot is an androgynous figure is not that she had the brain of a man in the body of a woman, but rather is that she wrote from a genderless perspective. George Eliot is
the androgyny, not Mary Ann Evans. And through the figure of George Eliot, Evans was able to break free from gendered writing. The feminist detractors would have Eliot write as a woman about women’s issues. But *Middlemarch* depicts the gender issue from both male and female perspectives. The androgyny of the novel and the androgyny of the narrator break down the artificial constructs of gender difference and get to the heart of the matter: that there is no real difference between men and women; the physical differences exist, but are physical and not mental. The only difference in terms of intellect are social creations created by the limitations placed on women by an unequal society, justified and furthered through false social theories. But, true to her genderless perspective, Eliot depicts how these limitations are destructive to both the female and the male characters in *Middlemarch*. The androgyny is a sign of evolution away from these destructive limitations.

And, indeed, *Middlemarch* is in many ways an optimistic novel that illustrates the evolution of society away from damaging social structures. The ending of the novel, as melancholy as it may be, is not simply tragic. It is also hopeful. Eliot writes of Dorothea in the Finale:

> Her finely touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive, for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts, and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs. (811)
This fills one with sadness that Dorothea did not achieve more, but it also illustrates Eliot’s philosophy of social evolution. It also gives the example that you need not achieve greatness to have a positive effect on the world. This idea of souls echoing throughout time is a philosophy that is very empowering for the individual. An example of a woman achieving greatness could even be very intimidating for the average woman – whereas the idea that anybody can have an effect for the greater good of society simply by living a good life and striving toward ideals does not have this paralyzing effect and makes one realize that even fairly ordinary lives count.

In fact one of the things that makes ardent young souls give in and stop struggling for the betterment of society is the slow realization that she or he is not going, in all probability, to see sweeping changes occur because of their actions. In short, societal pressures are so strong that they can drive people to give up knowing they are not going to achieve greatness. Eliot illustrates this through Will Ladislaw’s and Dr. Lydgate’s struggles:

We are on a perilous margin when we begin to look passively at our future selves and see our own figures led with dull consent into insipid misdoing and shabby achievement. Poor Lydgate was inwardly groaning on that margin, and Will was arriving at it. It seemed to him this evening as if the cruelty of his outburst to Rosamond had made an obligation for him, and he dreaded the obligation; he dreaded Lydgate’s unsuspecting goodwill; he dreaded his own distaste for his spoiled life, which would leave him in motiveless levity. (760)

Will and Lydgate, and indeed, Dorothea herself, do not give in to these societal pressures and stop striving toward their goals; but they are hindered, and none of them
achieve greatness. But the fact that Eliot's ending reveals that one can still have a positive effect on the world without achieving greatness can be read as a more emphatic example of the power of individual action – which could strengthen individual resolve in the face of the various pressures of life that steer one's course away from one's goals. And this combination of poignant realism and individual empowerment should be viewed as evidence of Eliot's understanding of the suffering caused by societal inequalities, and her effort to develop a philosophy to solve as well as explain that suffering, rather than as an indication of her failure to live up to the ideals of the feminist movement.

Furthermore, the importance of Dorothea's marriage to Mr. Casaubon should not be overlooked in answering Eliot's feminist detractors. In the opening chapters of Middlemarch Dorothea is being courted by Sir James Chettam. But she does not see him as a suitable husband. She is a serious young woman and is striving to find something important to do with her life. Her struggle to find that vocation is, however, made difficult by the fact that she is a woman. She cannot see beyond the gender constraints of her time, and therefore sees being a helpmate to a husband as her only option. She thus comes to the conclusion that her husband should be an older, scholarly figure whom she can aid, and who can be her teacher. When she meets Mr. Casaubon she thinks she has found the ideal husband. She is, of course, mistaken, both in her view of what a husband should be and in thinking Casaubon meets up to her expectations. Lee Edwards recognizes Dorothea's mistake, but also makes a mistake herself in thinking George Eliot condones the marriage between the young woman and the much older Casaubon. Edwards writes:
Unable to find her “ideal of life” in the “walled-in maze” which constitutes the usual occupations open to a woman of the leisured class, Dorothea sees knowledge as offering the only way out of the labyrinth. But the radical implications of this vision are tempered since both Dorothea and her creator see this knowledge in terms of a “union which . . . would . . . give her the freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest path.” This union is not a transcendent linking of the mind with abstract principles systematically combining wisdom and morality, but is instead mediated by physical reality and institutionalized. (688)

It does not take a very close reading of the text to realize that Eliot is not advocating or even condoning Dorothea’s “voluntary submission.” The entire courtship is treated with irony, and the marriage agreement is described as “funereal” (Eliot 50). Their marriage should more correctly be read as emblematic of the insidiousness of sexism in society in that it enters the subconscious’s of even the noblest and most ardent souls, and also as a detailed depiction of the soul-crushing power of male domination. For after this marriage Eliot depicts a very changed Dorothea. One of the more poignant moments of the novel is the depiction of the formerly vibrant young Dorothea in a state of depression on their honeymoon. In the midst of her sorrow she slowly begins to realize her mistake, and there can be no doubt that Eliot saw this marriage as a mistake. Dorothea is described as “in the midst of her confused thought and passion, the mental act that was struggling forth into clearness was a self-accusing cry that her feeling of desolation was the fault of her own spiritual poverty. She had married the man of her choice” (190). The marriage is very obviously portrayed as a mistake. And as their marriage
continues Dorothea moves even further away from being an ardent young woman full of hopes and aspirations into a state of deep depression and frustration.

Casaubon can also be read as symbolic of the history of the patriarchal order. Neil Hertz focuses J. Hillis Miller's idea about the characters in *Middlemarch* being a cluster of signs on Casaubon:

In the pages that follow I propose to take up that question by dwelling on the figure of Casaubon, and by asking what it might mean, if all the characters in *Middlemarch* may be thought of as texts or clusters of signs, for the signs of textuality to cluster so thickly around one particular name. Or, to put it another way, why is Mr. Casaubon made to seem not merely an especially sterile and egotistical person, but at moments like a quasi-allegorical figure, the personification of the dead letter, the written word? (73)

But Casaubon embodies more than Hertz's idea of the personification of the written word and the narcissistic imagination. His figure is more important to the grander ideas of the novel concerning gender and class than this. Casaubon's supposed embodiment of the qualities of the ideal husband (husband as father figure, lord, master, and teacher) prove not only to be false in him, but false in general. But it is his life's work, his struggle to write the *Key to All Mythologies*, that really sets him up as this symbol of male oppression. He himself comes up with no organizing theory that links and defines all mythology, but he himself embodies the qualities that link all mythologies and the societies that produced them. His mind is a useless warehouse filled with muddled ideas of the whole history of human myth. And what is that history, the key to all mythology,
other than the long, seemingly endless tradition of gender, class and racial discrimination, and the stuttering, failed attempts at progress?

The wedding trip to Rome sets this idea up against the perfect backdrop. Eliot describes Dorothea’s feelings during this honeymoon:

She had been led through the best galleries, had been taken to the chief points of view, had been shown the grandest ruins and the most glorious churches, and she had ended by oftenest choosing to drive out to the Campagna where she could feel alone with the earth and sky, away from the oppressive masquerade of ages, in which her own life seemed to become a masque with enigmatical costumes. (190)

This trip further solidifies Casaubon’s personification of the history of male domination with all of Rome’s historical significance and the feelings of oppression that this engenders within Dorothea. That “oppressive masquerade of ages” is represented both by Rome and also by Casaubon himself. Casaubon himself is a masquerade, he is a charade both in his being and in his work. And finally Casaubon’s failure and his death are symbolic of the misguidedness of all this history, as well as symbolic of its passing. Eliot sets the novel at the time just before the Reform Act. This sets it up as a novel about social growth. Casaubon’s death is symbolic of this growth and representative of Eliot’s theory of social evolution. But it is not a swift and easy transition into some pardisiacal world of equality. The masquerade goes on. The codicil to Casaubon’s will, the dead hand, is powerfully symbolic of the continuation, albeit in a weakened form, of male oppression. In this light, Dorothea’s marriage to Will Ladislaw is an even more forceful act of rebellion.
The gender issue is further illustrated through the marriage of Dr. Lydgate to Rosamond Vincy. Lydgate, in fact, is nearly as central a figure in *Middlemarch* as Dorothea. Like Dorothea, Lydgate is continuously described by Eliot as arduous. Through his role as a doctor attempting to improve the medical practice in England Eliot illustrates the impediments ardent young souls face in trying to achieve their goals. Lydgate is faced with the obstinacy of his peers, the distrust of the public of new and different methods, and corruption and political problems as he becomes aligned with the much-opposed Bulstrode. These problems, however, could very well have been surmounted. It is Lydgate’s own nature that is his greatest obstacle. His arrogance and lack of tact turns off both his peers and his potential clients. This threatens his financial well being and leads to the validity of his methods being increasingly questioned and doubted.

But Lydgate’s chauvinism is a bigger failing than this, and helps to lead him to the brink of ruin. Lydgate, although keenly aware of the flaws of society in terms of its backward medical practices, is completely unaware of its backwardness in terms of its social inequalities. Just as the young Dorothea internalized artificial and false social constructs regarding gender relations, Dr. Lydgate has unthinkingly adopted the idea that a wife should merely be a pretty ornament—a pretty ornament with no vocation other than the care for husband and children. He finds this object in Rosamond. She is the product of a family with aristocratic pretensions and prejudices, but more importantly of Miss Lemon’s School. It is this school that indoctrinates her so forcefully into the role of the idle gentlewoman, and as such a frivolous creature Rosamond is completely unsuited to be Lydgate’s wife. She does not understand his
ardour and passion for his work and mostly admires him for his aristocratic family
collections. It is the expenses of the wedding and Rosamond's own frivolous spending
and unwillingness to live within their means that pushes Lydgate to the brink of
financial ruin. But one cannot merely blame Rosamond. Lydgate's lack of wisdom in
choosing an inappropriate bride, fueled by his false perception of a woman's place in
society, makes him equally at fault. Also, his own aristocratic pretensions (such as
feeling the need to keep two horses) fuel his downfall as well. Thus Lydgate's
adherence to false social constructs regarding gender and class lead him to the brink of
ruin, dampen his ardour, and ultimately cause his life to be very similar to Dorothea's in
that, while they both still have a positive effect on the greater good of the world, their
achievements are not what they should have been.

This marriage, like Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon, fails because of a rift created
by false gender ideas. Both marriages, in fact, were bad matches from the beginning, as
they were fostered by flawed ideas concerning the relative roles of men and women in
society. Both marriages are examples of the damaging effects, on both individuals and
society, of the traditional gender roles. But interestingly, the breakdown in these
marriages is caused by the corresponding breakdown of the patriarchal order. Lloyd
Fernando explains:

The crisis in each marriage consists essentially of the downfall of the man from
his self-assumed position of lord, contributor to the world's knowledge, and
guardian - in a way that goes near the bone... In other words, in both marriages
the force of 'intellect', the traditional preserve of the man, is baffled by grinding
female skepticism, aroused partly by undervalued potential. The critical gap in
the relations between Dorothea and Lydgate, then, does not present a simple unrelated contrast but is the locus of a creatively balanced interplay of character and of an organic extension of theme. (698–699)

Fernando does have trouble reconciling Dorothea’s marriage to Will Ladislaw with this view of the novel. He sees it as perhaps bowing to the “demands of popular publishing,” as an ironic comment on romantic love, and finally “as a failure of art, rather than sensibility” (699). But in viewing Ladislaw as an embodiment of social evolution as well as an example of the continuation of gender inequality, and this marriage as a further example of how difficult it was at this time for women to fully break free from the traditional patriarchal order, allows this union to be reconciled with the novel’s portrayal of social inequalities. The fact that these marriages illustrate the breakdown of the assumptions inherent in a patriarchal society is a continuation of Eliot’s idea of social evolution away from the traditions of that sexist culture.

Rosamond herself is also a target of feminist criticism. Many critics have seen her portrayal as harsh and unsympathetic. Perhaps there is some truth to this charge. Eliot certainly does blame women a bit for their position of subjugation. Blame is placed on Dorothea for her initial unthinking acceptance of the patriarchal order. Her views on marriage make her complicit in her own subjugation. But Rosamond is neither as intelligent, compassionate, nor as ardent as Dorothea. She has completely embraced her role as the ornamental, idle and frivolous gentlewoman. She is not without redeeming qualities, but they are few. It is this portrayal of women that prompts much of the feminist criticism. Dorothea Barrett explains: “And it is this — the fact that she criticizes women as well as men — one suspects, that is at the root of feminist anger with
George Eliot” (183). But this blame is not without warrant. If one considers women to be as intelligent as men, as they obviously are (or at least equally stupid), then they are just as responsible for embracing and passing on their prescribed social roles as men are. And Rosamond is certainly not presented as a stupid character, a bit vapid and shallow perhaps, but not stupid. Thus her unthinking acceptance of her role as pretty object, and her moral stupidity in not at all thinking of contributing to the greater good of the world, is reason to place blame. Gillian Beer sees her portrayal as a satirical comment on the Victorian views of what a woman should be: “Rosamond, with her equivocal name – the mystical rose of the world and the worldly rose – is a tragic satire on the ideal woman as described in much Victorian writing; in particular on what constitutes ‘women’s work’ and ‘women’s influence’” (George Eliot 153). But she is judged, and, indeed, condemned by the narrative. Eliot comments on creatures like Rosamond through Dorothea: “I used to despise women a little for not shaping their lives more and doing better things” (527). However, the use of “used to” indicates a softening of tone. There is blame to be placed, but, as Kathleen Blake indicates, no harsh judgment: “In view of the doubtful pains it costs a woman to mark out anything more original, and in view of the odds against learning a taste for originality, or pains, at Miss Lemon’s school, we are not invited to blame Rosamond with as much cold dislike as most critics permit themselves” (62).

Indeed, perhaps the thing that most characterizes Eliot’s narrative is sympathy. She even portrays Casaubon and Bulstrode with sympathy. She draws the reader in to the inner workings of their minds to elicit understanding and sympathy and to lessen the harshness of judgment. Rosamond is not ignored – she too is portrayed with sympathy.
She may be the product of a cultural indoctrination that teaches women that they are supposed to be nothing more than pretty ornaments, but she does manage to escape this vision a bit. She proves she is not a mindless creature and even displays quasi-feminist views with her complaint, petulant as it may be, that she “cannot see why brothers are to make themselves disagreeable any more than sisters” (Eliot 100). And in her troubled marriage to Dr. Lydgate, Eliot’s narrative draws the reader into her mind and shows things from her perspective rather than just Lydgate’s. The fact that Lydgate himself sympathizes with her is further indication that the reader should not judge her too harshly.

And if it true that this blaming of women for their role in their own subjugation is the cause of feminist criticism then concomitantly the sympathetic portrayal of chauvinistic characters like Casaubon and Lydgate must also be seen as a cause of feminist outrage. For if women are not to blame at all for the false construct of gender roles in society then men must be wholly to blame; and if men are wholly to blame then a sympathetic portrayal of chauvinistic characters is a betrayal of the feminist ideals. However, it is this sympathy that is the key to understanding. Without that extraordinary passage in which Eliot gives the reader a glimpse into Casaubon’s mind, we would not get such a clear picture of the causes of social inequalities. It is Casaubon’s lack of sympathy, the same lack of sympathy displayed by these feminist critics, that is the cause of his sexism and classism. And without understanding the root or the cause of a problem no real solution can be applied. To use a medical analogy, one could then only treat the symptoms of the problem rather than find a cure that would prevent the disease. And it is this sympathy that is the key to Eliot’s solution to social problems. The solution she
presents is to be sympathetic and to find good work and then through the echoing of our actions and our lives the world will slowly evolve.

However, despite all of this, George Eliot’s relationship with the gender issue is still problematic. But this has more to do with Mary Ann Evan’s life than the actual text of Middlemarch. The Victorian Era was a period filled with debates over social, political and philosophical ideas; one of the foremost issues of the time was the woman question. Victorian society was very sexist, but it was also a time when many had begun to question those beliefs about the inferiority of the female gender. The feminist movement was expanding rapidly throughout the Victorian Era, and by the time Middlemarch was written Mary Ann Evans was surrounded by people involved in the struggle for gender equality. She herself lived a life far outside the norm. Not only did she invade the male world of intellectuality with her writing, but she flouted the social standards of her time by openly living with a married man. This relationship with George Henry Lewes set her outside of society. But she embraced her position as outcast in a quiet form of rebellion. Gillian Beer explains:

She sustained relationships and acted out a life as little as possible bounded by society’s curtailing demands. Yet her method was not one of zealous confrontation but of persistence. The style of her rebellion, such as it was, is represented in her decision to claim the name of Mrs Lewes, to insist on recognition in the terms understood by her society, of a relationship which transgressed its assumptions. She did not seek to conceal that ‘transgression’. She challenged the name given to relationships – and challenged, too, the
insistence on secrecy and the private which burdens love relationships outside marriage. The cost of such obduracy was high. (George Eliot 8-9)

She did not, however, actively participate in the burgeoning feminist movement. Although she was a subscriber to the feminist *English Woman’s Journal*, she never wrote for the magazine. Even her contemporary, friend, and prominent feminist, Bessie Rayner Parker, begrudged this refusal to write for the journal. Beer feels that Evans may have abstained from a more active support of feminist causes out of fear that “her ‘irregular’ life might jeopardize more than it gained for the movement if she were an open and active supporter” (George Eliot 183). This, however, as Beer herself admits, is not an entirely satisfying answer. It becomes even less satisfying given that Mary Ann Evans did not even support the women’s suffrage movement (Brady 58). One would expect that such an intelligent person, such a great writer, and a woman who so completely lived outside of what was expected of her by her society as a woman, to have been at the forefront of the feminist movement. This is what so puzzles many feminists. Perhaps the best answer lies, as Beer puts it, in the fact that Eliot’s “skepticism made it difficult, perhaps increasingly so, for her to feel much confidence in the power of specific social measures to rectify women’s lot” (George Eliot 185). And in looking to the text of *Middlemarch* we can find a solution that does not rely on any specific social or political measures. The power is in the hands of the individual: to find good work, to live a good and meaningful life. This is how real change is effected. Political measures do not truly solve social problems. Would giving Dorothea the right to vote have changed things so that she could have lived that epic life? Society is comprised of
individuals, and it is only through individual efforts that true social changes can be accomplished.

This is not, however, to underestimate the level of Eliot's mistake – as her failure to support the move towards women's suffrage must be viewed as a mistake. But this mistake must be viewed in the context of a woman who was struggling to find a way to truly free society from its inequalities, who was trying to view things wholly, and who was trying to solve the root of the problem rather than simply attack the symptoms and enact stop-gap measures. Eliot's vision was philosophical, her solution social, others would have her be more political. Eliot was more akin to Dorothea the moralist than to Ladislaw the politician. Ironically, her detractors would have her be more like that figure who causes them so much consternation: Will Ladislaw. To have turned her philosophical mind to politics would, however, have been too much like that second marriage of Dorothea's. It would have muted her greatness.
Chapter 2

Class and Economic Inequality in *Middlemarch*

As central as this gender issue is in *Middlemarch*, it is not the main focal point of the novel. This is actually the main cause of so much feminist criticism – the rather simplistic wish that Eliot had been more of a feminist in her life and in her art as well. But class differences and economic inequality are presented as the major problem in society. Dorothea Barrett explains Eliot’s humanistic outlook in answering Eliot’s feminist critics:

It is partly because of this disturbing similarity between sexist and feminist uses of difference that socialist feminist theorists like Monique Wittig and Cora Kaplan have rejected the stressing of sexual difference at the expense of wider political considerations: through this preoccupation with woman’s sexual identity feminists have continued to put off the realization of our human identity – the identity which sees, as George Eliot saw, the problems of humanity as primary and those of gender as secondary. (188)

It is the issue of class differences, of economic inequality, that is presented as the more pressing of humanity’s problems. For some reason this issue has received little critical attention. Class is generally a footnote used in discussing Ladislaw as a man who transcends class distinction. Perhaps this is because the novel begins and ends with the gender issue, that Eliot’s relationship to feminism is so problematic, and that the gender issue holds a more prominent place in recent critical history. Or it may simply be that
the class issue is more subtle in the novel. Whatever the reason, it has received too little attention. It holds a prominent place in the novel and needs to be looked at.

The issue of economic inequality is introduced early in the novel. It is through the young Dorothea’s efforts to improve the lot of the poor by building better cottages that we first see this issue of class. It is introduced almost anecdotally, and could be written off as a gloss on Dorothea’s ardent nature, but it stems from her looking at the luxury in which she is living and comparing it with the relative squalor in which the lower classes on her uncle’s land are living. It is this effort to improve the lives of the poorer classes that is the essence of Dorothea’s struggle to find her vocation. But the gender roles of her time prevent her from setting out and fulfilling this vocation. Eliot illustrates how the fire of passion for the medical profession was awakened in the young Tertius Lydgate, and how easily he then pursued that vocation. We see that same passion in the young Dorothea’s efforts to aid the poor. Unfortunately, however, the social constrictions of her time do not allow her to freely pursue this as her life’s work. Instead we see an ardent young woman grown confused by false ideas and watch with outrage and dismay as she chains herself to the dusty old wreck, Casaubon.

And Casaubon is not just a symbol of patriarchal oppression. He is also representative of the problem of artificial class distinctions. The first inkling notion Dorothea gets that Casaubon is not the great man she thinks of him as is in his disinterest toward her plan for the cottages. She tries to overlook this by justifying his lack of concern for the poor by the fact that he is so busy with his intellectual work, and the fact that the workers on his land are really not so poorly treated. But his cold dismissal of her concerns disturbs her and she is not fully able to overlook his lack of
sympathy. And this is not the only time that the class issue surfaces and causes problems between the two. The second time it arises is in reference to Will Ladislaw. Dorothea first sees Ladislaw as Casaubon’s idle young relative who is taking advantage of Casaubon’s kindness and generosity in offering him an allowance. As she gets to know Will better he grows in her estimation, and as the circumstances of his background unfold it is revealed that his grandmother was disinherited simply because she married a man beneath her in class. And typical of Dorothea’s ardent nature, she sees an injustice and tries to rectify it. She feels herself to be undeserving of Casaubon’s inheritance and, unbeknownst to Ladislaw, attempts to persuade her husband to alter his will and leave his wealth and estate to Will. This is ultimately what causes the irreparable rift between Dorothea and Casaubon, as Casaubon sees Dorothea’s selfless act as evidence of something improper going on between she and Ladislaw. At this point Dorothea has already been disillusioned with her husband by the way he has treated her and because of her realization that his scholarly work is really very insignificant and unlikely ever to be completed, but it is his failure to see the injustice done to Ladislaw’s family that finally makes her fully realize Casaubon’s moral stupidity.

This theme of classism and economic inequality is highlighted by Dorothea’s passionate efforts to improve the lot of the poor, but it is even more powerfully underscored by her lament in the midst of all of her own suffering. Eliot describes Dorothea’s thoughts:

She opened her curtains and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view, with fields beyond, outside the entrance-gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see
figures moving, perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky
was the pearly light, and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold
wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary,
palpitating life and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a
mere spectator nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining. (765)

This comes after the death of Casaubon, at a time when Dorothea is faced with the
oppressiveness of the codicil to his will, and immediately after she has seen Ladislaw
with Rosamond and thinks that there is an illicit relationship between the two. The fact
that she feels this awareness of the suffering of the laboring class at the height of her
own suffering is a clear indication that Eliot felt economic inequality to be a more
pressing problem than gender inequality. Dorothea, who so immediately felt the pain of
oppressive gender constrictions, with her morality that stands so strongly outward in the
novel that she seems at time almost angelic in her goodness, realizes that her situation is
incomparable to that of the lower classes -- for as oppressed as she is by the gender roles
of her time, she still lives a life of luxurious ease. It is the fact that she is aware of this
and longs to help those less fortunate that makes her the great soul she is.

The light of Dorothea's conscience clearly illuminates the injustice of class
distinctions. Her recognition of the difficulty of life for the laboring classes, and her
recognition of the wrongs suffered by Will's mother and grandmother because of
society's class structure, coupled with her efforts to rectify both of these situations
highlight class inequality as one of the major themes of the novel. Will Ladislaw is a
figure of central importance in the novel's discussion of class issues. His very name,
Will Ladislaw, resonates with the history of the legal tradition of inheritance. He is
associated three times in the novel with this issue of inheritance. The first is in the disinheritance of his grandmother, the second is in the codicil to Casaubon’s will that will disinherit Dorothea if she ever marries him, and the third is the revelation of his relation to Mr. Bulstrode – who has in essence stolen a second inheritance from him. The original disinheritance allows for his evolution out of the traditional class structure because it creates a break between him and that aristocratic tradition. But he also willingly rejects that tradition when he cuts himself off from Casaubon’s allowance, and when he recoils from Bulstrode’s offer of money. Eliot detested the idleness of the aristocracy. Ladislaw is symbolic of the evolution away from that old system that allowed for such idleness. He himself moves from idleness to action when he ends his dependence on Casaubon. He is not born a nobleman, he fashions himself into a noble man through work when he moves from idleness to the ardent efforts at political reform.

Not only is Ladislaw thus thoroughly immersed in the issue of class through the legal tradition of inheritance, but Eliot also depicts of him as a “a sort of gypsy, rather enjoying the sense of belonging to no class” (447). This further sets him up as a model for evolution away from artificial class distinctions. At this time class was not just a matter of economics. It was a matter of blood. The members of the aristocracy were superior to the commoners because of a natural, inbred nobility (pun intended). Ladislaw is distrusted and looked down upon because he contains the taint of foreign blood. His Jewish or Italian or Polish heritage causes rumor and speculation to swirl around him. Ladislaw’s intelligence and goodness highlight the ridiculousness of these racist and classist views. Dorothea’s acceptance of Will represents the rejection of this
false social construct of class. Ian Milner illuminates how powerful a rejection of long-standing traditions this is:

When Dorothea, in the name of love, cries out: “I don’t mind about poverty – I hate my wealth” (ch.1xxxiii), she repudiates more than her dead husband’s last will and testament. She confirms, by her decision to marry Ladislaw, that process of “convulsive change” that brings her to distance from and then by her own acts to oppose the norms of conduct in her society. Casaubon, the very image of scholarly and spiritual respectability, wisely devotion to whom had seemed a hallowed duty, now inspires in Dorothea only “a violent shock of repulsion” so strong that it “terrified her as if it had been a sin” (ch. 1). Ladislaw, descendant of a Polish “rebel”, a Radical in politics, with neither family connections nor fortune, is chosen, in face of the gentry’s scorn and animus, as her husband. (74–75)

This choice of marriage represents the slow movement of society away from these class constructs. Just as Casaubon is symbolic of gender and class inequality, Ladislaw is symbolic of the slow dissolution of these inequalities. The death of Casaubon and the emergence of Ladislaw is symbolic of social evolution away from those flawed social constructs of class and gender. It is not the sudden emergence of freedom, but it is a radical departure and a step forward in the struggle for equality.

Reading Ladislaw symbolically allows for him to be reconciled into the novels thematic structure. It is not just Eliot’s disgruntled feminist detractors who have been so dissatisfied with Ladislaw’s character. From the novel’s early reviewers to modern day critics Ladislaw is seen as an inadequate character and a poor match for Dorothea. (Milner 72) Ladislaw has his fine points, and perhaps in another novel he would be seen
as an exceptionally rich and full character, but next to Eliot's portrait of Dorothea he stands wan and pale. But we are supposed to be dissatisfied with him. The entire novel hinges on us being dissatisfied with him. If we are not, then the ending is happy. Dorothea has found her match and all is well. But this is not the case. The Finale of the novel is sad, achingly so, to the point where Dorothea's fate is seen as tragic. To view Ladislaw as a mistake on the author's part is to completely misunderstand the novel — to completely miss the point. He embodies all of the novel's major themes — gender and class inequality, the search for vocation, and social evolution. He is flawed, but he is a vast improvement over Casaubon. And that is the point. He is an evolutionary step. And at the same time he is a “real” person. He is not flat. He has grown and changed. He has sloughed off his old self, severed all ties with the aristocratic tradition, struck out on his own and found a vocation in which he attempts to make the world a better place. He is not Dorothea's match. But who would be?

Dr. Lydgate's story is also heavily infused with class issues. He comes from an aristocratic family; he is one of the lesser relations, but nonetheless is tied into the aristocracy. But he has rejected that aristocracy. By choosing to be a doctor he has turned his back on the traditions of his class, as the medical profession was not viewed as one fit for a gentleman. In doing so he earned the derision of his relatives. This functions as a comment on the values of the aristocratic system. Dr. Lydgate's profession is obviously a noble one — but more than that he pursues it with such a passion and ardour that its nobility is heightened even further. It is Lydgate's ardent nature, it is his passion to reform the medical profession so that he may help others and
save lives, that makes him noble: it is not that his uncle is a duke. But in the class
system of the time, the uncle is the more noble of the two.

Lydgate, however, is not able to fully free himself from the bonds of the aristocratic
tradition. As admirable a character as Lydgate is, he is also flawed. His main character
flaw lies in his arrogance surrounding the nobility of his blood. In Chapter 15 Eliot
introduces us to what makes Lydgate such an admirable figure. Eliot invites us to
admire his ardent nature. She (should I say he?) invites us to admire his plan “to do
good small work for Middlemarch and great work for the world” (Eliot 147). But she
also illustrates his flaws:

Lydgate’s conceit was of the arrogant sort, never simpering, never impertinent,
but massive in its claims and benevolently contemptuous. [...] All his faults were
marked by kindred traits and were those of a man who had a fine baritone, whose
clothes hung well upon him, and who even in his ordinary gestures had an air of
inbred distinction. (148)

These false notions of class superiority are so ingrained in him that his very being is
infused them. In the same way that the young Dorothea unthinkingly embraces her
prescribed gender role, Lydgate has subconsciously assumed the notion that a man born
of noble blood is naturally superior to those of more common lineage. Eliot at length
illustrates how infused Lydgate is with these aristocratic notions:

Lydgate’s spots of commonness lay in the complexion of his prejudices, which, in
spite of noble intention and sympathy, were half of them such as are found in
ordinary men of the world: that distinction of mind which belonged to his
intellectual ardour did not penetrate his feeling and judgment about furniture or
women or the desirability of its being known (without his telling) that he was better born than other country surgeons. He did not mean to think of furniture at present; but whenever he did so, it was to be feared that neither biology nor schemes of reform would lift him above the vulgarity of feeling that there would be an incompatibility in his furniture not being of the best. (148-149)

The irony is clear: it is his aristocratic notions that make him common. His nobility is in his “intention and sympathy”, his “intellectual ardour”, his passion “to do great work for the world.” Unfortunately his ardour to reform the medical practice does not allow him to escape the “vulgarity” of his class pretensions.

However, Eliot does not invite us to condemn Lydgate because of this flaw, even though it is a serious one. Lydgate’s classism is inextricably linked with his sexism. It is his aristocratic pretensions that mislead him into thinking he needs a gentlewoman for a wife. His marriage to Rosamond, that ultimately dooms him to mediocrity, is the result. And the expenses of that wedding are just as much Lydgate’s fault as Rosamond’s. It is his picture of himself as the aristocrat that makes him feel the need to buy the finest of furnishings for his home; and it is that which begins his descent into debt. And while he viewed Rosamond as Boccaccio’s basil plant “which had flourished wonderfully on a murdered man’s brains”, he is ultimately responsible for his own fate. Rosamond herself reminds him of this with her “placid but strong answer”: “why then had he chosen her?” (Eliot 808). The result is tragic. A man who could have made such a difference in the betterment of humanity, with such a promising career, made insignificant. His ending is sad like Dorothea’s, but it is not as tragic as hers. This is
because his fault was deeper, his fate more of his own accord. Ian Milner elucidates how Lydgate is set off by his faults:

Lydgate is shown as the intellectual whose enlightened purpose is at odds with his "prejudices", themselves derived from his nonchalant acceptance of the privileges belonging as of right to the gentry and to himself as a member of it. Lydgate's "commonness" marks him off from Dorothea Brooke, who, while of the gentry, was innocent of all sense of social elevation. He is sharply differentiated, too, from Ladislaw, of rebel Polish stock, without "any caste". Lydgate's summation of Ladislaw to Rosamond indicates his sense of the distance between them:

"Ladislaw is a sort of gypsy; he thinks nothing of leather and prunella... I think he is a good fellow: rather miscellaneous and bric-a-brac, but likable" (ch. xliii).

(76)

Lydgate is certainly a figure to admire, but his faults are deeper than either Dorothea's or Ladislaw's. Dorothea and Ladislaw are steps forward in the evolutionary process of society. Lydgate is too much rooted in the past. It is his classism that ultimately murders his brains.

As powerful an example of the destructive force of these false perceptions of class as Lydgate is, and as symbolic as the death of Casaubon and the emergence of Ladislaw is of this move away from strict class distinctions toward greater equality, the falseness of the tradition of the class structure is perhaps even more powerfully displayed in the contrast between the Vincys and the Garths. Rosamond Vincy is presented as a frivolous young woman. As the worldly rose she is truly an ornament. Her education, both by her family and Miss Lemon's School, has indoctrinated her into this role. But
the flaw in her character is not just that she has so openly accepted her prescribed gender role. Rosamond's biggest failing lies in her aristocratic pretensions. What attracts her in the first place to Dr. Lydgate is that he is an outsider. She does not see the fineness of his mind or admire his passion for the medical profession. Indeed, she never understands this passion and it becomes one of the points of contention between the couple. What she sees is the alluring stranger who is not of the common world of Middlemarch. And what she falls in love with is the doctor who's uncle just happens to be a member of the aristocracy. After their marriage Rosamond becomes obsessed with this side of Lydgate's family. And in her affection towards Lydgate's cousin we see the bankruptcy of her value system. This cousin is nowhere near as noble as Dr. Lydgate; but since he wears the mask of nobility Rosamond adores him and wishes her husband to be more like him. Ultimately it is her inability to give up her aristocratic pretensions that dooms Lydgate. Lydgate see his mistakes and attempts to rectify them, but it is too late. Rosamond is unchangeable.

It is her role as the idle gentlewoman that is more damaging than her role as a mere object of beauty. The latter is personally damaging in that it robs her of an existence as a fully developed human being; it is also socially damaging as an example and a continuation of female oppression. But the former is more socially damaging. As an idle gentlewoman she can be seen as a sort of social leech. She exists in frivolous idleness without contributing anything to the greater good. Through Dorothea Eliot presents a further critique of this social role:

Marriage, which was to bring guidance into worthy and imperative occupation had not yet freed her from the gentlewoman's oppressive liberty; it had not even filled
her leisure with the ruminant joy of unchecked tenderness. Her blooming, full-pulsed youth stood there in a moral imprisonment which made itself one with the chill, colourless, narrowed landscape, with the shrunken furniture, the never-read books, and the ghostly stag in a pale, fantastic world that seemed to be vanishing from the daylight. (268)

Dorothea sees the life of a gentlewoman as a prison to be escaped. She longs for action: to do something good and meaningful. And this criticism of the idle gentlewoman is made even more vivid given Dorothea’s guilt at her position of luxury juxtaposed against the hardships of the working class. It never occurs to Rosamond to be anything other than what she is. Her failing is twofold — she has unthinkingly accepted both the gender and class roles prescribed to her. Both leave her a frivolous and idle person, waddled in moral stupidity.

But if it is an example of moral stupidity to be an idle gentlewoman, then it is at least equally so to be an idle gentleman. Rosamond’s brother Fred is depicted as a lazy, idle young man with aristocratic pretensions. His expectation of inheritance and his ideas of what a gentleman should be give him a sort of purposeless existence. Just as Rosamond nearly ruins Lydgate, Fred nearly ruins the Garth family. Fred’s gambling debt, which Caleb Garth takes on himself after Fred’s assurances of being able to pay it off, is a nearly crushing blow to the Garths’ financial status as well as an illustration of the selfishness inherent in Fred’s idle ways. But the death of Mr. Featherstone does not lead to Fred’s hoped-for inheritance. Just as Casaubon’s death can be read as a weakening of the traditional gender/class system, Featherstone’s death is similarly symbolic of the dying out of the aristocratic tradition. For rather than passing on his land and wealth to
the idle young aristocrat, he passes it on to Joshua Rigg. Rigg represents the burgeoning middle class, and he promptly sells off the land to become a moneylender. This, however, is not exactly positive, as Rigg is certainly not set up as a prototype for the middle-class – but as Eliot teaches us, society grows in fits and stutters, not in great leaps forward (perhaps Chairman Mao could have learned something from this novel).

Even with his aristocratic hopes shattered, however, Fred still does not give up his aristocratic pretensions. The only thing Fred has prepared himself for in the event of his inheritance falling through is to enter the clergy – that woeful refuge of lesser aristocrats. It is only Mary’s conscience and love, and Caleb’s intervention that turn him away from this path. That is not to say that Eliot indicts the clergy all together. It is only a poor occupation for Fred, as it is for Mr. Farebrother, because he is not suited to it.

Against these failings of the Vincys is juxtaposed the strong morality of Mary Garth and her father Caleb. There are three figures in the novel who stand out for their nearly impeccable morality. One is the novel’s heroine, Dorothea. The other two are Garths: Mary and Caleb. In comparing Mary to Rosamond the difference between a serious, compassionate and moral figure and a frivolous, superficial and selfish figure is highlighted. Mary is not the idle gentlewoman. She is not the pretty ornament. Her family, while not exactly poor, is in a precarious financial situation. Mary is thus working to support herself. She comports herself with a quiet morality, and her love for her life-long friend, Fred Vincy, is only dampened by her inability to accept his laziness and aristocratic pretensions. She functions as a moral voice to condemn Fred and to condemn the aristocracy in general. Mary’s voice is given a largeness of importance
when she responds to Fred’s question, “did you mean anything particular—just now?”,
with “no, I mean something general—always” (Eliot 136). One can hear Eliot’s voice
echoing through this statement; and one can see Evans echoing throughout Mary Garth’s
character. Some have seen Dorothea as an idealized self-portrait; but while there are
certainly elements of Evans’ morality within Dorothea there are too many differences to
ignore. It is likewise with Mary Garth. She represents the ironic tone of Eliot, as she
takes “life very much as a comedy in which she had a proud, nay, a generous resolution
not to act the mean or treacherous part” (Eliot 307). We can also recognize the author’s
intelligence and perception within Mary as she recognizes people as “so ridiculous with
their illusions, carrying fool’s caps unawares, thinking their own lies opaque while
everybody else’s were transparent, making themselves exceptions to everything” (Eliot,
307). And at the end of the novel we learn she has become a writer – a writer of
children’s books, but this is perhaps a bit of wry self-deprecation upon Eliot’s part. But
it is important to recognize Eliot within Mary Garth. It lends more weight to the
morality behind her judgments of the idleness of Fred and of the aristocratic tradition.

Caleb further extends the example of morality set by the Garth family. He is an
example of what Fred should be – a man who works hard and is filled with morality and
compassion. He, like Lydgate, has found his proper vocation. He is a builder who takes
great pride in his work. He is so compassionate and generous that the Garths are in a
precarious financial situation because he so often works for free. The epigram to Chapter
40 perfectly sums up Caleb’s importance:

Wise in his daily work was he:

To fruits of diligence,
And not to faiths or polity,

He plied his utmost sense.

These perfect in their little parts,

Whose work is all their prize—

Without them how could laws, or arts,

Or towered cities rise? (387).

Caleb is the builder who sets the foundation from which civilization can arise. His name further underscores his symbolic importance. It is taken from the Old Testament and the story of Caleb who helps to discover the land of milk and honey. He and Joshua, alone amongst the Israelites, are allowed to enter that promised land because of their faith.

Caleb Garth is an example. It is the values that he embodies that will allow society to slowly evolve and make the world a better place. But it is not through religion or politics ("faiths or polity"), it is through morality and work.

Together Mary and Caleb redeem Fred. They turn him away from his idle, purposeless existence and save him from the "fatal step of choosing the wrong profession" (Eliot 394). Mary's love inspires him to change because she will not accept him if he becomes the idle and apathetic gentleman wearing the clergyman's mantle. It is Caleb who takes Fred under his tutelage and gives him a job. This job forces Fred to begin to shuffle off those aristocratic pretensions. It is not at all gentlemanly work. It is actual labor -- physical work that requires him to use his hands and get dirty and sweaty. He also performs clerical work for Caleb, but it is that work which exposes the utter uselessness of his gentlemanly education. Eliot describes Fred's attempt to perform that clerical work:
At that time the opinion existed that it was beneath a gentleman to write legibly or with a hand in the least suitable to a clerk. Fred wrote the lines demanded in a hand as gentlemanly as that of any viscount or bishop of the day: the vowels were all alike, and the consonants only distinguishable as turning up or down; the strokes had a blotted solidity, and the letters disdained to keep the line—in short, it was a manuscript of that venerable kind easy to interpret when you know beforehand what the writer means. (548)

The ironic tone perfectly illuminates the preposterousness of this habit – the only way to understand what is written is if you already know what is said before you read it. Further judgment is passed on this by the usually mild-mannered Caleb “snarlingly” exclaiming “the deuce!” when seeing that handwriting (548). Caleb, however, does not give up on Fred; and Fred abandons that gentlemanly habit and learns to write legibly. Fred is thus reformed. He abandons his aristocratic pretensions, mostly at least, and becomes a contributing member of society. Catherine Neale illustrates how Fred, by linking his life to the Garths takes a step down in class: “Fred’s rejection of his milieu is interesting for the way that, after initially aiming at visions of a higher-class life, he opts to be seen to ‘go down in the world’ in occupation and in marriage” (82). By rejecting that milieu of the aristocracy, he thus further symbolizes Eliot’s theme of social evolution.

The contrast between the Garths and the Vincys also encompasses the idea of proper versus false education. Indeed, this idea is central to the novel as Gillian Beer explains: “Middlemarch is about false education, both of women and of men” (George Eliot 162). Fred’s education is frivolous. He did not take it seriously, and that example of Fred’s
handwriting being purposely sloppy and illegible is a perfect microcosm of the uselessness of the gentlemanly education. This is in contrast with the serious intellectual ardour of Mary’s older brother Christy “who held it the most desirable thing in the world to be a tutor, to study all literatures and be a regenerate Porson, and who was an incorporate criticism on poor Fred, a sort of object-lesson” (Eliot 552). Christy’s exceptionally brief appearance in the novel, as he makes an entrance for a few pages and then disappears and is forgotten about, seems actually to serve the sole purpose of a contrast to highlight how deeply flawed Fred’s education is. Rosamond’s education is, however, even more frivolous and useless than Fred’s — serving the purpose of molding her into the idle, ornamental gentlewoman. Contrastingly, the Garth children are all given a very practical education. Every scene in the Garth household has the children being tutored by the mother. The Vincys represent the faulty values of the aristocratic system, an idle snobbery that views people like Mary and Caleb with disdain, but the Garths are clearly superior. It is not just that Mary and Caleb are superior to Rosamond and Fred, but also that the Garth family is a prototype for what the rising middle class should be, while the Vincys represent the fading archetype of aristocratic pretension.

Fred Vincy, and his marriage to Mary Garth, is not, however, unproblematic. Fred has not met with nearly as much critical disdain as Will Ladislaw, but many critics have felt a similar sense of dissatisfaction with his character. Most critics, however, have reconciled him within the context of the novel’s thematic structure (Martin 1, 11). Bruce Martin, however, sees Fred as a serious flaw in the novel — so much so that he feels “George Eliot’s treatment of Fred Vincy unravels both the moral and aesthetic design of Middlemarch.” He feels that Eliot’s sympathetic portrayal has gone too far in
regards to Fred, which "thus compromises the moral fairness and realism to which she was committed" (1). In essence, Martin feels that Fred does not fully realize nor fully atone for his transgression against the Garths.

Interestingly enough, his criticism of Fred echoes the criticism of Will Ladislaw. He sees Mary's marriage to Fred as making her "a person and an intellect limited by the part to which society and the novel consign her," which gives her story "an ironically sad dimension" (7). It is fitting that these two characters be criticized in the same fashion. They are, after all very similar. Both are presented as a sort of leisurely, idle gentleman. Ladislaw is figured more positively as he dabbles in the arts in search of his vocation, whereas Fred Vincy engages in vices such as gambling. Fred is portrayed as a more selfish and socially damaging figure than Ladislaw, but they are both idly playing out the part of the listless gentleman. Through the love of Dorothea and Mary Garth they are spurred to action, they throw off their listlessness and move on to purposeful action. This turns out to be an act of self-sacrifice on Dorothea's part, and perhaps on Mary's part as well -- but then there is no real sense that Mary could have achieved more than writing children's stories and living a quietly happy life had she not married Fred, as she does not have that ardour to effect social change that Dorothea and Lydgate are so suffused with. Any sense of sadness one feels for Mary's fate can be answered with the same explanations given for that sense of sadness over Dorothea's fate. The novel consigns Mary to that part, as it does Dorothea, because society consigns her to it. A reflection of reality cannot be equated with an endorsement of that reality. Furthermore, Fred, like Will, is symbolic. Both represent a move away from artificial class distinctions.
Martin, however, feels that Eliot's treatment of Fred glosses too easily over the problem of class inequality. He argues that the pastoral feel to the lives of Fred and Mary ignores too much the historical forces occurring. He writes:

When Fred agrees to work with Caleb, Mr. Vincy has more to regret than he could imagine, for in the process his son converts to the mindset of one "[whose] prince of darkness was a slack workman" (174) yet who would not think to question the leisure of the aristocracy or how their wealth had been created and maintained. Perhaps even more striking than moving Fred into such a world is Eliot's extending that world into the 1870s. [. . . In the Finale] Fred and Mary, we are assured, may yet be seen "in white-haired placidity at the open window from which Mary Garth, in the days of old Peter Featherstone, had often been ordered to look out for Mr. Lydgate" (575). This after the Chartist uprisings, after the upheavals of 1848, after the Second Reform Bill—and into the otherwise indefinite future beyond the writing of *Middlemarch*. Through this single brief lapse into the present tense, the narrative signals support for more than the myth of easy marriage. It asks us to believe in an economic order unaffected by shifts in the social formation or by related shifts in technology and communication—shifts of which George Eliot was aware and of which she gives considerable evidence elsewhere in *Middlemarch*. (7)

But while Fred may not be aware that there is something wrong in the aristocratic system, he does still abandon those aristocratic pretensions to a large extent; and Mary and Caleb, as well as George Eliot, are certainly aware that there is something wrong with that class system. Regardless of the fact that Fred himself does not even think to
question the leisure of the aristocracy, the novel does. It is interesting that in the midst of all the social upheaval of the times Fred and Mary seem to remain unscathed — but there is no reason to question the plausibility of that. Even with all those social changes that occurred, there were undoubtedly still people living throughout Britain in virtually the same way as they had for centuries. Even in today’s industrialized information-age societies there are people like Fred and Mary. They have televisions and microwaves (perhaps even cell phones and internet access) but they still live in fairly remote areas and work the land and are rather unfazed by anything that happens in the greater world. But Martin’s objection lies more on thematic grounds than issues of plausibility and historical accuracy. He seems to long for the novel to be more of a cry for the “wholesale disruption of [society’s] sexist-capitalist center.” He describes Eliot as backing away “from the novel’s radical implications” and succumbing to the “powerful tug of reactionary attitudes” (9). But the novel does proffer a solution to these problems. It is not radical. But it is realistic.
Chapter 3

George Eliot’s Solution to Social Inequalities

*Middlemarch* is concerned with social problems that create inequality and unhappiness. The two major problems presented are economic and gender inequality. The novel is not, however, just a social critique highlighting these problems. Neither is the point of the novel merely to illuminate the evolution of society away from these artificial constructs. The setting at the time just before the first Great Reform Act infuses in it the idea of social and political change. This Reform Act extended voting rights and made the parliament more democratic (Hornback 87). This underscores the theme of class inequality, as this act removed political rules that helped to protect the traditional class structure of Britain. But Eliot did not set the novel forty years in the past to make it an historical piece. It is set at this time to make the idea of reform part of the organic whole. Quentin Anderson explains how the novel’s specific setting actually masks the author’s intention of making a generalized statement about the nature of society:

This novel is subtitled “A Study of Provincial Life,” and the climax in the national life which it partly chronicles, the period in which the Reform Bill of 1832 was moving towards adoption, was selected with the apparent intention of giving the novel the representative quality which we associate with Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education* and Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. But one of the first things we must note about the novel is that this particular intention masks a more general one. (143)
This setting both reflects and illuminates the theme of social reform. Harold Bloom was correct in noting that George Eliot is more related to the great philosophers than to the great novelists. This is a philosophical work in which Eliot explores the ways in which these problems of social inequality can be overcome.

However, it is not a novel about political reform. The flaws inherent in political reform are highlighted through Mr. Brooke. Dorothea’s uncle is presented as a good-natured, but bumbling man. His attempt to be elected to Parliament illustrates the hypocrisy inherent in the reform movement. He talks of reform, but he is really stuck in the old world of the aristocracy. Mr. Brooke is the idle gentleman who reaps the benefits off being a land-owner without doing any actual work. The hypocrisy is that his tenants suffer from the worst living conditions in Middlemarch. It is seeing their living conditions that inspires in Dorothea the plan to build the cottages. Will Ladislaw, too, works for political reform; but he does so ardently, with a true passion to right wrongs. Eliot describes how “Will became an ardent public man, working well in those times when reforms were begun with a young hopefulness of immediate good.” However, she continues by noting that his “hopefulness of immediate good [. . .] has been much checked in our days” (809). Bert Homback notes that the novel’s “theme is at least in part that political reform matters far less than personal reform” (88). Dorothea’s life proves this. After all, it was she who inspired Ladislaw to become that serious and ardent reformer. And she had a more powerful effect on the world. Her goodness became “incalculably diffusive” in promoting “the growing good of the world” (Eliot 811). Her impact is thus immense, spreading out and encompassing the largeness of the world. Ladislaw’s efforts, ardent as they were, were checked and did not result in
immediate good, and are not given that rippling, diffusive effect that the narrator endows Dorothea’s goodness with.

The solution Eliot presents is a personal one. It stems from the idea that society is comprised of individuals and that all of our lives are interconnected (this is illustrated throughout the novel with the metaphor of the web). According to Eliot’s philosophy, what each one of us does effects all of society, and each one of us is capable of having an effect on the growing good of the world. The most important aspect of Eliot’s philosophy of social evolution is the idea of proper vocation. Alan Mintz writes:

“Everyone in the novel is somewhere along in the process of making a decision about vocation or living with the ‘fatal’ consequences of his choice” (59 – 60). And Gillian Beer explains that “the crucial topic of the whole is finding satisfying work to do” (George Eliot 197). The real tragedy Dorothea represents is that women were not able to take a more active role in the world. It is not really a personal tragedy, as there is no evidence that she was unhappy in her life. The dampening effect of gender constrictions on her life is presented more as a loss for the world. Eliot’s philosophy is that while everyone is better off because of people like Dorothea, all of us are worse off because people like her are prevented from accomplishing more. The tragedy lies in the fact that Dorothea was obstructed in finding a vocation.

Dr. Lydgate, on the other hand, is a character who was able to find his proper vocation – work that he enjoys and that is for the greater good of society. But societal pressures, both internal and external, and mainly regarding class and gender, prevent him from fulfilling his full potential. Caleb Garth, in comparison, is a figure who was not only able to find his proper vocation, but is also able to achieve his full potential.
Caleb is instilled with a deep sense of morality and works without concern for money. He does not strive for the same sort of grand achievement as Lydgate, but nonetheless performs good and important work – it is he who carries out Dorothea’s plan for the cottages. There are two reasons why Caleb does not fail in the way that Lydgate does. The first is that he does not suffer from the same class and gender prejudices that infect Lydgate’s mind. The second is simply that his work is simpler and his goals are more down to earth. Where Lydgate seeks to effect great change Caleb only wishes to perform his work well and help those around him. This is symbolic of Eliot’s philosophy of slow social evolution through sympathy, morality, and good work. Caleb underscores the example set by Dorothea that greatness need not be achieved in order to have a positive influence on the world.

This theme of proper vocation is further illustrated through the characters of Will Ladislaw and Fred Vincy. It is by finding their vocation that they find redemption. They cease to be useless and help to contribute something positive to the world. For Eliot that is all any of us can do – just find our niche in the world, find our vocation, and strive to make the world a better place. That is what each of these characters do. The characters of Dorothea, Dr. Lydgate and Will Ladislaw represent the higher ideals of souls yearning for great action. The characters of Mary Garth, Caleb Garth and Fred Vincy represent the simpler, commoner souls who do not strive toward great change. But while they may lead quiet lives, they are moral and purposeful. Taken as a whole it is illustrative of Eliot’s philosophy – each individual must be instilled with morality and sympathy and struggle to find his or her proper vocation. With this society will evolve and shirk off the dead skin of social inequality.
Eliot offers a realistic and practical solution to the world’s problems. It seems, however, almost immeasurably slow. This seems to be at the heart of Martin’s criticism of Fred Vincy, and his belief that Eliot’s treatment of him unravels the thematic structure of the novel. Martin longs for a more radical solution to society’s problems, he longs for “a wholesale disruption of its sexist-capitalist center.” He criticizes the novel as “regressive” and being too influenced by a “powerful tug of reactionary attitudes” (9). He concludes his essay with:

The unsettlement which led George Eliot to turn to Fred has been compounded in the twentieth century. The cracks in society have grown wider, or at least more visible, but for most of us radical action seems no less difficult and uncertain than for George Eliot. Perhaps the more history has taught us that there is no going back to a “settled” existence – pre-industrial, pre-capitalist, pre-revolutionary or whatever the more we wish, at least momentarily, that we might. Perhaps, too, the more science, literary theory, and personal experience suggest the folly of attributing an integrated personality to ourselves or to others, the more attractive, even if impossible, someone like Fred becomes. (10-11)

However, this pre-supposes that Fred is the prototype for the ideal. Eliot is not espousing some kind of regression into an Elysium of agrarian, pastoral bliss. We need only look to the reformers of the novel (Dorothea, Ladislaw and Lydgate) to see this. There is the idea that all sectors of society need to be reformed – from professions, like the medical practice, to politics and society in general (and not just in terms of class and gender, but also in terms of the general selfishness and lack of sympathy in people).

What Caleb and Fred represent is the foundation for society, and even in the twenty-first
century we still need laborers, we still need builders and farmers. We might all wish for a more radical solution, some sort of quick-fix to wipe away the inequalities and injustices of the world, but if history has taught us anything it is that radical political solutions, even when beginning in idealism, lead at best to disappointment and at worst to tyranny and unspeakable horror.

Radical political solutions do not work, and political solutions in general do not work. They do not attack the root of the problem. Social problems and inequalities arise from deficiencies in individual thought and action which form, and are formed by, culture. Eliot offers a solution for this. It is a solution that is very empowering for the individual. It means that you and I can have a very real effect on the growing good of the world. That effect will not be immediate, it will probably not be something that is even remotely tangible within our lifetimes, but it will further the evolution of society away from inequality and injustice. All that it requires of us is that we remain sympathetic toward our fellow human beings, that we find good work to do, and that we strive to make the world a better place.

Jeanie Thomas eloquently sums up Eliot’s vision:

Neither revolutionary nor reactionary, George Eliot’s long social vision steers a difficult middle way. It encompasses an understanding of why that enriched condition is not yet possible, to the sad detriment of men and women living now and wanting more; it simultaneously embraces a sense of how that desirable goal may yet slowly be realized, albeit in a form unknown and unforeseeable. There is hope in this vision, but not such as fuels revolutionary action. Instead, by investing our lives with complex knowledge, George Eliot’s feminism helps us to
come to terms with the present, enabling us to live in it with courage, perhaps
even with a measure of grace. (65)

This is an important elucidation of the novel. *Middlemarch* presents the tragedy of
social inequalities — the tragedy of those ardently willing souls whose energies are so
thwarted and whose passion is slowly squeezed out of them by the weight of societal
pressures. But it presents a hopeful vision of a way to break free from the shackles of
inequality. It is tragic, but hopeful. It is sadly optimistic. Most of all, it is empowering.
The means for social growth and change is within us as individuals. What we do in this
world *does* matter. This certainly is not a reactionary philosophy. It is not revolutionary
in the traditional sense, but it is empowering. Eliot’s philosophy gives us the power to
overcome nihilism and apathy, to avoid sinking into sad pragmatism, and to live with
courage and grace.
Conclusion

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* weaves a tapestry that illustrates the workings of the human mind and human society. It is a work centering around issues of morality that examines the problems and inequalities of the world. A key element of the novel is the examination of gender inequality. Through Dorothea and Rosamond, through Casaubon and Lydgate and Ladislaw, through most of the characters in fact, we are given a fairly complete picture of the gender issue. Some feminists have criticized the novel for not being more of a feminist work. But these critics have failed to understand the full scope of the novel and suffer from the same sort of narrow and unsympathetic thinking as Mr. Casaubon. The longing they feel for Dorothea to have achieved more is the stifled sob and low ache of sorrow that Eliot intended to evoke. The novel is about the suffering of women, and is a lament about the inequality of social roles. To extricate the gender issue from the novel, to look only at that, is to fail to understand the totality of *Middlemarch*. It is to fail to see and to learn from the vastly complex portrait of that vastly complex organism: human society. What Dorothea teaches us so poignantly, in the midst of all her suffering, is that others suffer too. We should not need for Eliot to give us some Dickensque portrait of the suffering of the lower classes to realize how much worse economic inequality was (and indeed still is) than gender inequality. This juxtaposition of gender versus class inequality that Eliot gives through Dorothea's lament over the suffering of others is not to say that the suffering of women should be ignored. The gender issue clearly takes a prominent role, but what the novel illustrates is how intertwined these issues are. Both of these inequalities arise from the same sort
of faulty thinking and false education. They are both revealed to be false social
constructs arising from selfish and unsympathetic feelings and outmoded ways of
thinking. And they are both linked in the solution that Eliot’s philosophy provides –
through sympathy, morality and proper vocation society will slowly evolve. Indeed, it is
slowly evolving, thanks to people like Dorothea. And it is this idea that leaves the novel
ending on a sad but hopeful note. The sadness is that Dorothea did not achieve more.
The hopefulness is that her life was not in vain – that things “are not so ill with you and
me as they might have been” (Eliot 811). Eliot’s philosophy is not only a beautiful idea,
but is also a very empowering one. For while it shows an awareness of all the things
that prevent individuals from living a good and moral life, and all the things that prevent
ardent young souls from achieving their goals, ultimately the novel reveals that no life,
lived morally, is lived in vain. Each person can affect the world positively and move
society closer to the ideal of equality simply by being a good person. There is much to
be learned from this book. George Eliot was not only a great writer, but a great moralist
and a great philosopher as well. That things are not so ill with you and me is in large
measure owing to the grandness of ardent souls like Mary Ann Evans.
Works Cited


Harvey, W.J. “Criticism of the Novel: Contemporary Reception.” Middlemarch:


