George Eliot's Complex Characters in *Middlemarch*

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The mature reader's ability to understand the extensive range of emotions felt by characters in fiction stems from the reader's own life experiences, as George Eliot was well aware when writing *Middlemarch*. According to Virginia Wolfe, Eliot's novel is "one of the few English novels for grown-up people." *Middlemarch* has characters disillusioned by the self-deception and deception of others that they see around them. *Middlemarch* is about the process of understanding the experiences and perceptions of others, and of suffering through self-deception and disillusionment, social positioning, class consciousness, and the ambition for self-improvement with its concomitants: education and money.

Several scholars praise Eliot's novel because of the realistic characters that allow her readers sympathetic identification and participation. Huge Witemeyer says, for example, "The variety of meanings it [*Middlemarch*] can encompass, from the moral and psychological to the historical and sociological, makes Eliot's literary portraiture richer than that of any earlier novelist in English" (1). Although characters within her novel may engage in deceit or suffer disillusionment, Eliot's focusing on their human condition allows readers to connect with each character's situation. This attachment, this connection between the reader and the character, enables Eliot to present a convincingly real world and enables her novel to convey the essential truths about human nature. For example, the women in Eliot's novel, though fictional, are faced with the same life decisions and responsibilities as the women in Victorian society.

Upper-middle and upper-class Victorian women, for example, were expected to "marry money," stay home to raise the family, and be responsible for the management of domestic affairs. As a result, women, who lacked the opportunity for the kind of education men had, were praised chiefly for their ability to act properly towards their husbands. Dorothea Brooke is an intelligent and independent young woman, who differs from the conventional woman of the Victorian Age. While other Victorian ladies worried about fashion and marriage, Dorothea concerns herself with issues of philosophy, spirituality, and service. Eliot points out Dorothea's genuine beauty in describing her physical appearance:

Miss Brooke had the kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters; and her profile as well as her stature and bearing seemed to gain the more dignity from her plain garments, which by the side of provincial fashion gave her the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible, — or from one of our elder poets, — in a paragraph of to-day's newspaper. [7]

Eliot, who emphasizes the plainness of Dorothea's clothing, alludes to paintings of the Virgin Mary to describe her, thereby accentuating Dorothea's dignity and purity (Chen 1). Because Dorothea does not concern herself with fashion, most people in *Middlemarch* perceive her to be
odd, and "sane people did what their neighbors did, so that if any lunatics were at large, one might know and avoid them" (9). Eliot mocks the social norm by praising the purity of the young and "inexperienced" Miss Brooke.

I think Dorothea is almost too perfect, but she evolves from her immaculate persona after she goes astray and marries Edward Casaubon. Dorothea's feelings for him are influenced by his supposed wisdom and her hopes that it will allow her to "become educated, to have her curiosity nurtured, and to be of constant usefulness to a man of sixty who really needed her nineteen year old eyes for reading" (Thompson 1). Bernard J. Paris sees Dorothea as a mimetic character whose desire for intensity, greatness, an epic life are not manifestations of spiritual grandeur but of a compulsive search for glory. Her craving for "illimitable satisfaction" is an expression of insatiable compensatory needs, and her "self-despair" results from hopelessness about actualizing her idealized image of herself as a person of world-historical importance. She misperceives Casaubon because "her need for glory leads her to idealize him" (31-32). Dorothea realizes "the fault of her own spiritual poverty" (192), and is "sobbing bitterly" when she is left alone by Mr. Casaubon, who goes to work alone at the Vatican on their honeymoon.

In Middlemarch education and money "greatly determine" the characters' lives and opportunities, and Eliot takes as her central topic the unfit preparation of women for life. This theme is as crucial for understanding Rosamond Vincy as it is for understanding Dorothea (Beer 159). Rosamond comes from a family familiar with the comfortable lifestyle of middle-class society. Her egocentric character does not adapt to the sacrifices or adjustments in one's style of living necessary when money is scarce. In contrast to Dorothea's, Rosy's marital vocation does not include "the inward life of a hero, or his serious business in the world"; rather, she just wants to climb the social ladder and find a seat among the aristocracy (Thompson 3). Eliot reveals Rosamond's egotistical nature when she describes how the young girl wishes her father would invite Lydgate to a dinner party:

She was tired of the faces and figures she had always been use to -- the various irregular profiles and gaits and turns of phrase distinguishing those Middlemarch young men whom she had always known as boys. She had been at school [Mrs. Lemon's establishment] with other girls of higher position, whose brothers, she felt sure, it would have been possible for her to be more interested in, than in these inevitable Middlemarch companions. [97]

Rosamond wants to meet Lydgate, "the new aspiring doctor," because she is utterly disappointed with the eligible bachelors in her immediate community. Eliot utilizes Rosamond's character to reveal her attitude towards provincial middle-class society by describing Rosamond's social circle as "inevitable Middlemarch companions." Rosamond knows what she wants out of life: to become a member of the aristocracy, but her marriage to Lydgate is not what she expects. Her upbringing and education do not prepare her for the hardships all married couples experience. Eliot uses her — as a foil to Dorothea — as an example of the misfortunes of shallow women. Or, she may be highlighting the importance of seeing reality instead of appearance.

Lydgate exemplifies the desires of an epic life, as Dorothea does, but unlike her he finds his vocation in the study of medicine, who works hard for success in his medical practice. Eliot's introduction of Lydgate, however, hints at his coming failure:
For surely all must admit that a man may be puffed and belauded, envied, ridiculed, counted upon as a tool and fallen in love with, or at least selected as a future husband, and yet remain virtually unknown--known merely as a cluster of signs for his neighbours' false suppositions. There was a general impression, however, that Lydgate was not altogether a common country doctor, and in Middlemarch at that time such an impression was significant of great things being expected from him. [142]

Lydgate has the drive and ambition to make a difference in the world by advancing studies in the medical field. He is aware of the risk that such an unknown field of study poses because the common people would have no proof that newly discovered cures would work. On the other hand, Lydgate's belief that there is a vast field for discovery and improvement in medicine makes him persevere. Lydgate's plan for his future is "to do good work for Middlemarch, and great work for the world" (149). But he remains "virtually unknown" in his because of his passion for women. He becomes enamored of Laure when he sees her on stage while he is a student in Paris, but he is in love with her "as a man is in love with a woman whom he never expects to speak to" (152). He does speak to her, though, but only after she murders on stage her husband who plays the part of her lover. Lydgate is convinced of her innocence until she confesses to him that she "meant to do it" because her husband had wearied her by being "too fond" (153). Lydgate realizes that his passion will lead to his own destruction, so he returns to his studies, convinced that he will not make such a mistake again (Paris 65). Inevitably Lydgate's passion resurfaces when he meets Rosamond, and his emotional neediness leads to an impulsive proposal.

Lydgate's descent into debt makes Rosamond very unhappy, and his busy career makes her and other characters believe she is neglected. After dinner Mrs. Vincy sympathetically tells the other ladies around them: "It is dreadfully dull for her when there is no company" (642). Rosamond is used to having company in a "cheerful house" which is "very different from a husband out at odd hours, and never knowing when he will come home" (642). Her unhappiness is encouraged by those around her. Perhaps Lydgate's willingness to sacrifice his own interests to ensure her happiness could have been appreciated by another wife. Instead, he sacrifices himself without any real hope of reciprocated affection. Although Lydgate accepts his own doom, he still has the ambition to make something in the world better, and that is his marriage. These are only a few examples of the wide range of characters in Middlemarch with whom readers can either identify with or understand. While representing an entire community, George Eliot invites her readers to become a part of Middlemarch, allowing them to enter into her characters' lives because she gives readers access to the characters' thoughts throughout the novel.

Works Cited


