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# *Middlemarch* and Female Oppression

## Redefining George Eliot's Feminist Opinion

B.A Essay

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## Abstract

A literary movement started in the mid-nineteenth century by feminists such as Virginia Woolf, which claimed authors' depiction of their heroine indicated their opinion on women's rights, brought contemporary critics' attention to George Eliot. Combined with her conservative lifestyle and her open relationship with George Henry Lewis critics argued that the main protagonist, as well as the society of *Middlemarch*, revealed the hypocrisy in Eliot's writing. However, this paper argues that *Middlemarch* is a testimony to how the English society of the Victorian Era forced young women into secluded and unhappy marriages. By providing information on women's place in society and the beginning of the feminist movement, *Middlemarch'*s setting is determined. While a dissection of Eliot's slow prose and narrative are displayed as shreds of evidence of the replication of the English country living. Throughout the plot, Dorothea Brooke is forced to rediscover her motivations and face the oppressive opinions of her uncle and husband. Moreover, by providing examples of Dr. Lydgate and Dorothea's storylines the paper aims to analyze how Eliot tried to display the sexual inequalities of the Victorian Era.

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## Introduction

Since its birth in the mid-nineteenth century, the feminist movement that start off with women's demand for proper education, work, and matrimonial rights has evolved. Because of their efforts women can graduate from universities, earn professions, and be protected by the law. The effort that started as a demand for equal rights and opportunities between sexes is more prevalent than ever before. With the development of feminist ideology, identifying the oppressive language that is used in literature became an important topic for discussion. The dissection of old literary works, although it was common at the beginning of the movement, and third-wave feminists, filled with a sense of duty, have examined literary works to find the issues. Such is the case for George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Once acknowledged as a feminist book, *Middlemarch* came under fire by the second and third-wave feminists because of Eliot's main protagonist's inability to find a vocation, while ignoring the metacommentary of the narrator displaying the oppression women faced in the society.

Virginia Woolf's criticism plays a significant role in the contemporary understanding of feminists' literary assessments. Woolf's call for breaking away from the stereotypical idea of femininity in Victorian literature and steering away from the angelic imagery of women was to ring the bells of female rebellion against the shackles of patriarchy. However, contemporary feminism still tries to use the same method of examination with their current autonomy to assess classic works. Hence, contemporary feminist critics expect *Middlemarch* to be up to par with the expectations of the twenty-first-century women. Although dissecting literature from the perspective of the contemporary reader is understandable, even expected, accusing an author of bigotry because their work does not hold up to today's standards is unreasonable. Understanding Eliot's writing requires examining her works, her life, and the culture she grew up in.

With the progression of technology and the pressure of the feminist movement, women gained stability, liberty, and education. The ideas of an author who experienced the beginning of such crucial cultural developments will be significantly different than those who were born into a pre-established system of rights. However, this does not stop the feminist literary critics of the twenty-first century from examining *Middlemarch* from today's standards of women's rights and

opportunities. Expecting the heroine of the book to find independence, while working in a profession and provide for herself was not a common concept in the Victorian Era. Therefore, the time in which a book is crafted must be taken into consideration while questioning the intent of the author.

Feminist literary critics, particularly the second and third wave, have been overly censorious of authors presenting any criticism or stories that goes against the feminist ideals. Stories involving characters who fail to achieve their ultimate freedom from patriarchy, regardless of the authors' intent, are deemed unworthy of success. However, this condescending approach to story drafting is detrimental to the core ideology of literature. Presenting tales involving diverse cultures, philosophies, and emotions while commenting on social issues is the writers' duty. Furthermore, the representation of such stories in no way implies the authors share the same opinion as their characters. In the case of *Middlemarch,* presenting the story of Dorothea Brooke is not an indication of Eliot's opinion on women's vocation. Critics assessing the novel solely by its ending discredit the entirety of *Middlemarch.*

## The Industrial Revolution and Women

Before steam-powered machinery and easier access to water became prevalent, families had an immense load of work on their hands. Women bearing children provided security for the family, a member who would grow up; eventually aiding with the elderly and provide money for the household. When bubonic plagues loomed over England, due to pesticides and unhygienic conditions, many fell ill, and many died. Hence, while women provided a clean and secure place for their children, the men of the house would earn their bread. Taking care of their home caused women to seclude themselves in their houses, and, as the societies became advanced, the gap between men's and women's worlds grew larger.

The 18th and 19th centuries are notorious for the injustice women faced before the law. Such ideology was even reflected in the literature of the 20$^{th}$ century. In his very controversial article, Blackstone argues about the place of women and their consequent existence in front of the law: "By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband…" (Blackstone 279). Blackstone's writings comment on

the 18th-century laws of the English society, his opinions were shared commonly while creating the oppressive laws of women were forced to fight against. Women were left to the mercy of their fathers, brothers, and husbands and their autonomy was taken away. Women were the possessions of their fathers until they were married. Once they found a suitable partner, women were passed down to their husbands. They were not allowed to decide on their property; their possessions would belong to their husband under the common law. If women were to have children, they belong to their husbands, "If women are not permitted to enjoy legitimate rights, they will seek illicit privileges in ways that make both men and themselves vicious." Wollstonecraft explains, speaking of the power, that "men are unjustly denying to share" (3). Divorce was impossibly intricate and unobtainable for many women. The women who did not accept having a miserable marriage would act so out of place that their husbands would have no chance but to divorce them. (Wollstonecraft 3)

Before feminism became a movement, women such as Mary Wollstonecraft were already demanding their rights, "If a woman is not fitted by education to become a man's companion, she will stop the progress of knowledge," she argues as she requests equal education opportunities (Wollstonecraft 3). Wollstonecraft's essay was published in the late 18th century, and the first woman graduate got her diploma a hundred years later. However, women continued their fight against the chains of patriarchy, and the rapid growth of technology brought women together under the same goal.

Steam-powered machinery and faster production of goods made the English economy indomitable. The gap between rich and poor grew smaller with the rise of the middle class. Many women gained the privilege of hiring maids and household items that made chores easier. Housewives had more time to take care of their primary intellectual needs during the day. However, the education system did not provide the necessary tools to quelch women's thirst for knowledge. Many women found no marital life, as men chose their work over family. Men did not have to bring children to the world to secure their future, and hiring maids cost far less than owning a family. They often left the country for extended time for business trips and found partners outside of England, leaving English women with fewer options for suitors. Single women, who used to aid their families with taking care of children and cleaning, found that

maids and nannies took over their places. Industrial Revolution caused a significant identity crisis for women who were indoctrinated to live their lives as wives and mothers.

Women who had little to do at home were now forcing society into becoming more receptive to accepting them into the workforce. The Industrial Revolution brought opportunities for those who sought vocation; however, issues continued to arise as they tried to settle into the unfamiliar environment: “The immediate problem which stimulated the reformers was not the boredom of being a lady, but the pitiable condition of the “ladies” who were suddenly called upon to be useful” (Flynn Hess 15). Women who had an abundance of time on their hands had no professional education and no prior knowledge of how businesses worked, indicating that the Victorian women’s battle for freedom had just begun.

## Women Authors and Expectations

Before Christianity, the male-established imagery of women often revolved around the symbolism of angels and devils, which originated in the Middle Ages (Gilbert and Gubar 20). While purity, kindness, and submissiveness were seen as the epitome of angelic behavior, going against these notions was seen as the act of the devil. Male authors used this imagery to craft their ideal angelic women in literature. When Christianity started dominating England, these images blended with those in the Bible. Lisa Appignanesi argues that “Being gendered female at a time when religion still held near-universal sway, means that nineteenth-century women writers were working in a tradition in which Eve was responsible for the Fall and all human ills” (Gilbert and Gubar IV). In a world where women are to blame for every sin, certain groups of people were afraid to hear their ideologies, fearing that they would cause the fall of mankind once more. Hence when Victorian women authors started publicizing their works, there were already arbitrary standards determining what they could write about in their books.

Women authors had to establish their presence in a field dominated by men for centuries. Men had previously presented their ideology on women’s presence through the medium of literature. They had generations’ worth of models to be inspired by. On the other hand, women had to find their voice as well as breakthrough the bonds of patriarchal ideas of femininity and womanhood. Gilbert and Gubar point out that women authors had to “confront precursors who are almost exclusively male,” which already build the stereotypical ideologies that “drastically conflicted with her sense of self – that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity” (47).

tories told by men for ages that pre-determined feminine attributes mixed with the Christian view of Eve intimidated women authors in their search for finding their voices in literature. Women authors were filled with anxiety as they tried to prove their skills were worthy of being read. Many writers took male pennames to save themselves from society's scrutiny and their male-peers judging eyes. The Brontë sisters, Louisa May Alcott, and Mary Ann Evans were among many others who chose to use masculine names while publishing their books.

When the feminist view started spreading across the authors' community, creating stories that broke the illusion of what was feminine became a subject of interest for many. Virginia Woolf was one of the most outspoken critics of the era as she demanded the annihilation of subservient and angelic women in literature. Woolf's opinion on feminism has played a significant role in the development of feminist literary criticism. In her essay *Professions for Women*, she argues how the illusion of femininity affected the women authors' attempts of declaring their opinions: "Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure" says "the angel in the house" (Woolf 237). For women authors, trying to appeal the Victorian society while battling the expectations set by the opposite sex was disadvantageous. Gilbert and Gubar argue that the 'angel in the house' is the most pernicious image male authors have ever imposed upon literary women" (20). Women authors were to write on feminine subjects; their characters had to reflect those reserved, kind, religious, and sensitive features. Improper display of these angelic attributes meant the scrutiny of Victorian society. However, Woolf, among many others, chose to "kill the angel in the house" and battle the notion that was the submissive portrayal of women.

Unlike Virginia Woolf, George Eliot chose to stay away from openly declaring war against ideals set by male authors. Which obscures the opinions of contemporary feminists as to where she stood on the women's rights movements, in her way, Eliot did make contributions to the feminist movement through her commentary in her essays and books.

## Eliot and Feminism

George Eliot and the feminist movement have a convoluted relationship, often hidden beneath witty narrations and intricate character interactions. Her reserved personality, scandalous life, and awareness of the influence she possessed over her readers kept Eliot away from publicly

speaking of her about important matters. Nonetheless, her life before moving to London, her religious opinions, and overall dark sense of humor bled into her work. Although her opinions on such matters changed over time, Eliot wrote using her experiences to create relatable characters that explored the ideas of feminism.

There is not much known about Eliot's life before moving to the big city. She had a humble beginning in the provincial town of Warwickshire, where her father worked as an estate manager. In her younger years, she became devoted to Christianity and even worked on the translation of some studies on the Bible. When George Eliot moved to London in the mid-19th century, she aspired to become a professional writer and editor.

At the beginning of 1951 till the 1954, Eliot worked in the *Westminster Review* as an editor and journalist. Thomas Pinney argues that this part of Eliot's life was the time in which she "…had outgrown the self-conscious awkwardness of her provincial days and before she took on the new self-consciousness of her fame" (1). During these years of Eliot's career as a writer she chose to publicize her reviews without excruciating filtering, and in which she wrote with freedom. In 1856, she wrote the overly critical *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*, expressing her frustration with women writers insistent on writing female characters that were out of touch with the reality of life. It was during her years at the *Westminster Review* that Eliot's exceptional editorial skills as well as her commentary flourished to their full potential.

In the coming years, George Eliot became a famous writer. Her books were loved by many, and Eliot took her place as one of the best authors of Victorian literature. However, Eliot's self-consciousness caught up to her fame, which pushes her to restrain herself from society. She refused to be called by her real name, Mary Ann Evans. Eliot became more conservative, often avoiding stating her opinions on divisive topics and staying away from social groups. Many believe this was because of her controversial relationship with her partner George Henry Lewes. Although she never openly commented on feminism, in 1856 Eliot signed Barbara Leigh Smith's petition in support of a Married Women's Property Bill, which would allow women to own their property independent from their husbands (Flynn Hess 7). The bill never passed, yet her signature on the petition is an indicator of her wish for women's freedom under the law. Moreover, Eliot was sympathetic toward the philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft; in 1855 she drafted a sympathetic essay on Margaret Fuller and Wollstonecraft. The paper anticipated the

concerns she presented in *Middlemarch* such as women's nature, their need for work, men's presumption of superiority, and its destructive consequences (Blake 287). Nonetheless, her book *Middlemarch* and her essay *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* are some of the more notorious pieces of work she left behind that caused many feminist authors to take an offensive stance against Eliot and her conservative approach to feminism.

*Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* is, for contemporary feminists, harsh criticism of women authors. When critics speak of Eliot's idea on women's vocation, her essay is often taken as an insult to women's cause. However, feminists overlook the historical context of the article when her work is dissected. George Eliot was very passionate about writing; during a time when men tended not to take women seriously, many lady authors would often write fiction that disregarded the reality of life. Their characters were unrealistic portrayals of women, with their shiny hair, unfathomable knowledge, and attitudes that would cause Greek goddesses' jealousy. This type of prose is called 'Mary Sue' in contemporary literature and managed to gain the disdain of many readers. When ladies were redefining femininity, these incredible characters were neither helping the feminist cause nor ensuring women authors the respect they deserved.

Eliot demands to be taken seriously as an author, seen as equal to her male counterparts. This passion for respect was not only for herself but also for her peers. She says, "We had imagined that destitute women turned novelists, as they turned governesses because they had no other "ladylike" means of getting their bread" (460). Victorian society often pitied working women; they thought hoping to find a vocation that fulfilled a particular desire of being independent was not a feminine notion; hence, if a woman was to work, she had to be in dire need of money. Although this thought was undoubtedly false, authors of the opposite sex grew to pity women authors. Eliot further refuses to look at women in such a derogatory manner:

> Under these impressions, we shrank from criticizing a lady's novel: her English might be faulty, but we said to ourselves her motives are irreproachable; her imagination may be uninventive, but her patience is untiring. Empty writing was excused by an empty stomach, and twaddle was consecrated by tears. But no! This theory of ours, like many other pretty theories, has had to give way before observation. (460)

Eliot was demanding that societies look on women authors to change, yet she also expected the same creators to put effort into their writing. Instead of hiding behind the excuse of their

femininity, Eliot was challenging women into working on their crafts: “A cluster of great names, both living and dead, rush to our memories in evidence that women can produce novels not only fine but among the very finest—novels, too, that have a precious specialty, lying quite apart from masculine aptitudes and experience”. The essay voices Eliot’s passion for writing and supports women writers presenting their femininity in their novels. Though feminist ideology and interests have changed over the decades, women criticizing women due to their values have not. Therefore, the critics who were conditioned to condemn a women author because they are concerned about her prejudice must be willing to understand the same concerns displayed by Eliot.

## *Middlemarch* and Feminist Criticism

*Middlemarch* was published in eight installments in 1871. The story revolves around multiple characters voicing Eliot’s opinions on the momentous events and ideas of the Victorian Era, such as feminism, religion, and the Reform Bill. Although the book became extraordinarily successful, the criticism around *Middlemarch,* often accused of being overly sentimental, never ceased existing. The feminist criticism of *Middlemarch* does not revolve around the exaggeration of certain characters, emotions, or events instead, it merely focuses on the ending of the book. Women’s, particularly Dorothea’s, inability to find success, their mediocre marriages, and the overall emotional ending of the book are seen as the embodiment of Eliot’s opinion on women’s rights.

The feminist movement of the 19th century brought a distinct view to the representation of female protagonists. Katherine Devendorf argues the importance of the heroine: “to (Virginia) Woolf and the feminist critics of the ’60s and ’70s lies in the connection between a female author and how she chooses to represent women” (8). This idea meant authors who were willing to explore the darker side of reality, and present a story in which their heroine failed, were accused of opposing feminist ideology. The new movement brought some unexpected attention to *Middlemarch* and Eliot’s ideas on feminism. Because Dorothea is unsuccessful and unable to fulfill her desires, critics following the footsteps of Woolf assumed Eliot was opposed to the feminist movement.

*Middlemarch*, combined with the Eliot's conservative lifestyle, got critical feedback from contemporary feminists. Due to Dorothea's marriage to Will Ladislaw and her failure to find purpose in her society, Elin Ringler claims that "…she (Eliot) was at best indifferent, at worst hostile, to the cause of women's suffrage" (55). While Eliot indeed lived a preserved lifestyle, choosing not to comment on the feminist movement publicly, *Middlemarch* is filled with intentions to show why a typical Victorian woman fails to succeed in life. The characters represent the stereotypical ideas, the narration is filled with pinning commentaries, and the slow movement of the story provides the nuanced yet necessary changes in the plot. Yet Eliot's analysis of women's issues was not enough to satisfy the readers of *Middlemarch*. Richard S. Lyons discusses that: "there is a great discrepancy between critical analysis and the direct experience of the work itself" (35). Contemporary feminist criticism of *Middlemarch* often revolves around the said experience left on the reader; the sour taste of a virtually unhappy ending brings out resentment buried in the minds of women who were treated unequally for centuries. Critics then turn to Eliot, questioning her authority upon the book in search of an answer as to why she chose to doom her protagonist to a life of misery. Although acknowledging the ending of a despairing story is exasperating, comparing an imaginative character's life to the author's indicates a faulty understanding of the literature on critics' part.

Eliot enjoyed realism in her writing, *Silly Novels by Lady Novelist* is her commentary on why women authors' impractical situations and unrealistic standards for their heroine are problematic. Therefore, expecting Eliot to draft a story in which her character succeeds after being subjected to disparagement is futile. Furthermore, an author does not need to agree with or support the idea they write about; their role is to bring up a subject matter, present their social commentary, and give the readers an idea to contemplate. If Eliot have written Dorothea as a successful woman who achieved everything she desired, the issues Victorian women faced would not have changed for the better or worse. Instead, by dimming Dorothea's potential. Eliot focuses the reader's attention on the reasons behind her failure and of everyday women in the Victorian Era. It is easy to presume her intentions were successful since *Middlemarch* has been a topic of discussion for feminists ever since its release.

## The Prologue, Foreshadowing, and Saint Theresa Syndrome

*Middlemarch* starts with Eliot's mention of the story of Saint Theresa of Avila. Eliot speaks of Theresa's search for an "epic life" as she became an important figure for Christianity. Dorothea's issue, often referred to by critics as the "Saint Theresa Syndrome," is the desire for an epic life but finding no outlet for achievement apart from the socially limiting role of "common womanhood" (Ringler 57). For feminists, Dorothea's failure to find her passion in the story is the novel's central theme. However, *Middlemarch* is filled with Eliot's nuanced commentary and detailed plots; beneath the thick layer of obvious foreshadowing, there lies a deeper story.

Ellen Moers voices her disappointment by saying, "Eliot seems to have had in mind the heroine as leader and reformer… instead she was indeed to be, as Eliot said herself, a tragic failure" (124). Moers overlooks Dorothea's change throughout the story; though she never accomplishes any concrete reforms, she goes through an inner change. Dorothea begins the story as a naïve girl; in the end, she grows to understand herself and takes lessons from her mistakes. The revolution of self is the only option given to Dorothea as the society of *Middlemarch* restricts her options. Virginia Woolf comments on the general sentiment carried over in Eliot's characters as she argues;

> They cannot live without religion, and they start out on the search for one when they are little girls. Each has the deep feminine passion for goodness, which makes the place where she stands in aspiration and agony the heart of the book—still and cloistered like a place of worship, but that she no longer knows to whom to pray. In learning, they seek their goal; in the ordinary tasks of womanhood; in the wider service of their kind. They do not find what they seek, and we cannot wonder. (5)

Ellin Ringler argues, "Why, when Eliot herself could defy social tradition and achieve her own epic life, did she relentlessly consign Dorothea to the unmitigated mediocrity of a conventional marriage to Will Ladislaw?" (57). Ringler's question brings the analogy of Saint Theresa, which Eliot presents at the beginning of *Middlemarch*. This so-called Theresa Syndrome and Dorothea's inability to find her voice in *Middlemarch* is a testament to women's issues in Victorian society. Many feminist critics agree with Eliot's depiction of society's pressure to subdue women's fervent attempts to find their voice. In the third paragraph of her "Prelude,"

Eliot insists that society blames women's failure in life on their "womanhood" when men's failure is seen as an inconvenience. Blake points out:

> She (Eliot) is not with those who judge that an 'inconvenient indefiniteness' is part of the fashioning of feminine nature by supreme power, for this psychic slackness resists the scientific measurements that should be possible if it were naturally given. Rather it is the result of social conditions, those which favored Saint Theresa but do not favor Dorothea (288).

Then Ringler's previous question sets the basis for comparison in *Middlemarch*'s prologue, forcing Eliot to take the role of Saint Theresa. Although Eliot does not accomplish any religious reforms, she is one of the most successful English literature authors. Eliot was fortunate to know her desires; she was knowledgeable and had the opportunity to surround herself with people who supported her. Eliot had the right social conditions to succeed, while Dorothea and the rest of the female characters in *Middlemarch* suffer from the pressure of society. If the criticism focuses on the accomplishments of Eliot as an author puts her onto a pedestal higher than women like Dorothea could reach, not because they are incapable of such accomplishments, but because society would prevent their attempts in finding success. The prologue focuses on how Saint Theresa became an essential figure of Christianity and deliberately stays away from acknowledging the specifics of her accomplishments. What Saint Theresa accomplished in her religious conquest is not important for Eliot's narrative; it is on the idea that Dorothea would never earn the freedom or the support of her society should he wish to become a reformer.

From the beginning, Eliot never shies away from telling the fate she chose for her heroine; "many Theresa's have been born who found for themselves no epic life…" writes as she points at Dorothea "…perhaps only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity," commenting on her marriage to Mr. Casaubon (ii). The narration highlights the crucial yet minute details of her story; "… until domestic reality met them in the shape of uncles, and turned them back from their great resolve." (Eliot i). The narrator's mention of Mr. Brooke is nuanced, yet his effect on Dorothea's life is crucial to the plot.

Eliot is intentionally failing her heroine and expecting the readers to join Dorothea as she stumbles in life. While the readers know the protagonist of the book will be unsuccessful, their

focus is meant to shift from “if she would succeed” to “why she has failed” as a character. The failure of finding the same epic life as Saint Theresa’s is not meant as a shock factor; it is meant to be Dorothea’s reality.

The foreshadowing in the prologue marks the beginning of Dorothea’s solemn ending. Feminist critics who are disappointed with her story turn to question if Dorothea was the right protagonist for *Middlemarch.* Critics are often dissatisfied with her submissive nature, her choice of clothes, her femininity, and her marriage to Will Ladislaw.Yet some, if not all, of those virtues of Dorothea, belong to many women in nineteenth-century England, all struggling under the same grip of patriarchy and scrutiny that was scarred into their society, making her a relatable character for the readers of the Victorian era. Moreover, Eliot plays with Dorothea’s angelical nature to demonstrate that the nature of women is far more complex than the imagination of male authors.

## Dorothea as Protagonist

Dorothea Brooke is angelic and intelligent, yet she suffers from a lack of purpose and ignorance. She aspires to have an “epic life” and, in search of it, finds herself admiring Mr. Casaubon. As her marriage to the old man causes misery, Dorothea finds herself falling deeply in love with Will Ladislaw. While the feminist critics recognize Dorothea Brooke as a failed heroine. Dorothea’s passive nature, her marriage to Will, and her inability to find a vocation bring the real issues women faced in the Victorian Era.

Dorothea is the angelic imagery of women portrayed in male authors’ books. *Middlemarch* starts with a description of her: pure beautiful face, her rich background, and her religious sensibilities. However, her simple yet fashionable clothes and her devotion to religion are only a façade to the inner turmoil she faces throughout the story. By using Dorothea, Eliot explores what it is like to be a woman in the Victorian Era. She is naturally inclined to gain knowledge, her desire to build cottages comes from her fervent attempts to discover a potential profession. Dorothea represents those who wish to find a profession, only to face a lack of opportunity and scrutiny in their social circle.

Mr. Brooke, Dorothea’s uncle, carries a patriarchal superiority complex against women’s ideals. He takes care of the Brooke girls after the death of their parents and certainly plays a part

in Dorothea's way of thinking. Mr. Brooke never shies from making discriminatory, derogatory, and outrageous commentary about women. He comments, "there is a lightness about the feminine mind – a touch and go – music, the fine arts, that kind of thing – they should study those up to a certain point, women should; but in a light way, you know" (Eliot 69). Mr. Brooke's public discourse on women's inferiority causes Dorothea to be self-conscious. Moreover, when her lack of education and opportunity is combined with the offensive speech of her uncle, Dorothea is forced into believing she is incapable of achievement. Mr. Brooke is "the domestic reality" Dorothea "meets in the shape of her uncle, turning her away from her great resolve" (Eliot i). Mr. Brooke's idea of femininity molds her ideals as Dorothea becomes more interested in being under the shadow of a man who aims to achieve success, instead of becoming a successful woman. Growing under the indoctrination of male domination, Dorothea never questions her options and submits herself to the hands of patriarchy.

Dorothea's disbelief in her sex is one of the causes of her matrimony with Mr. Casaubon. She wishes to be a "lamp holder" for Casaubon's divine accomplishments; "…when I was a little girl; it always seemed to me that the use I should like to make of my life would be to help someone who did great works so that his burthen might be light." (Eliot 359). Although Dorothea's sincerity in these lines as she confesses her desires to Will Ladislaw molds their relationship in the finale, it is the desperation of being useful that sets her up for the failure of marriage with Casaubon. *Middlemarch*'s social conditions provide the necessary conditions for Mr. Casaubon to oppress Dorothea as he too carries the same disdain and superiority complex perceived in Mr. Brooke. However, his attempts to oppress Dorothea causes distrust in their relationship. Eliot's affection for Wollstonecraft shows in Dorothea's relationship with Mr. Casaubon. Wollstonecraft argues, "If the woman isn't filled by education to become man's companion, she will stop the progress of knowledge" (2). Because of Mr. Casaubon's persistent attempts to hold Dorothea down, he brings agony to their relationship, and their fights fasten his heart issues causing his early demise. His death causes the stop of "the progress of knowledge" as he never finishes the book he so desperately desired to write.

After the death of her husband, Dorothea is left with a hefty inheritance and the freedom of a dowager. In the end, she chooses love over the inheritance Mr. Casaubon leaves behind and marries Will Ladislaw. This act on Dorothea's part is disliked by feminist critics. However, as

discussed earlier, Dorothea is unsure of her sex, she is uneducated, and her self-consciousness combined with the pressure of society leaves her with no other option than to marry Will Ladislaw. Yet, Dorothea is aware of the potential she was forced to submit as the narrator points out: "…there was always something better which she might have done if she had only been better and known better." (Eliot 811) The mediocrity of Dorothea's life comes from her desperation; she is sure of her love for Will Ladislaw, yet should she wish to walk her path alone she is unsure as to what kind of achievements await her.

Eliot's argument against the arbitrary rules preventing women's liberty does not only apply to Dorothea or Mr. Brooke. The rest of the characters in *Middlemarch* struggle under the grip of patriarchy as well.

## *Middlemarch* and Women

Feminist critics often critique *Middlemarch* by solely focusing on Dorothea's plotline while overlooking the rest of the characters. Considering the number of individuals existing in Eliot's book, their complex relationships, and their decisions that often result in the change of the story overall, evaluating the ideology of the author by a single character, regardless of their role, is unreasonable. *Middlemarch* is a replica of English society; with characters' intertwining plots and exaggerated personalities, they all represent an ideology.

While the Brooke family is from the upper class, the Garth family represents the lower-class families. Despite never interacting with each other their decisions within the book affect the overall outcome of the story. In his article "The Method of *Middlemarch*" Richard S. Lyons articulates how Eliot uses her lengthy chapters to progress characters to their final destinations:

> The action of the chapter is also significant according to a more general conception of plot, one in which individual lives illustrative of the "subtle movement" in society by which "municipal town and rural parish gradually made fresh threads of connection" and the slow process of historical and social change was affected. (37)

These small stirs of conflict are presented in every part of *Middlemarch*, creating a cause-and-effect relationship between characters. Dorothea and Mr. Brooke's relationship, which was discussed in the previous section, is one of the reasons why she marries Mr. Casaubon. Even

though this matter occurs specifically in the overarching plot for Dorothea, women's vocation is an issue present in every subplot.

In the nineteenth century, the idea of women having professions was a controversial topic. Even amongst women, there were reservations as to the appropriateness of such a notion. Mrs. Vincy, the mother of Rosamond, admits to feeling uneasy around Mrs. Garth, not due to their economic and hierarchal differences, but because Mrs. Garth had to "work for her bread" and "no woman who was better off needed that sort of thing" (Eliot 232). Mrs. Vincy reflects the ideology of the middle-class in the nineteenth century, hoping for Fred and Rosamond to have successful marriages. Hence Rosamond gets the best education to learn the feminine traits: "Rosamond had been educated to a ridiculous pitch, for what was the use of accomplishments which would be all laid aside as soon as she was married?" asks Eliot (168). Although Rosamond could find a way to use her skills, she chooses to find a husband who would raise her in the ranks of *Middlemarch.* And like Dorothea, Rosamond finds her future husband as an opportunity to reach her goals.

> …the piquant fact about Lydgate was his good birth, which distinguished him from all *Middlemarch* admirers, and presented marriage as a prospect of rising in rank and getting a little nearer to that celestial condition on earth in which she would have nothing to do with vulgar people, and perhaps at last associate with relatives quite equal to the country people who looked down on Middlemarchers. Eliot 167)

Mrs. Vincy's idea of a perfect woman aids Rosamond in finding the right husband. However, Rosamond never imagines a life in which she can rise in the ranks of society by herself. Instead, she must rely on her beauty and attitude to find a husband who will deliver her the ideal life she wishes to have. The indoctrination of young women plays a key role in the society of *Middlemarch*, shaping their goals and ideals. Eliot's craftily crafted characters act according to the ideologies their families represent. Even more sensible characters such as Mary Garth struggle in *Middlemarch*.

Mary Garth is perhaps the most rational and kind character in the story. Although she is not exceptionally beautiful as Rosamond or resolute as Dorothea, Mary Garth is rational, gentle, and smart. She represents the lower-middle class of *Middlemarch* and falls deeply in love with Fred, Rosamond's brother. She struggles because of her lover's misfortunes, and throughout the

book, Mary demands Fred become a proper responsible man. Although every person in the twenty-first century would wish to have a stable partner, Mary must rely on her husband's income to survive. In the end, Mary's strong will and patience grant her a happy marriage. Yet she faces the scrutiny of Mrs. Garth for having to work for her bread. Regardless, even Mary's intelligence is challenged in the finale, as the book she writes for her children is attributed to her husband.

The feminist critics then turn to criticize Eliot for wedding her female characters and binding them into a life of mediocrity. Dorothea's marriage, as discussed in the previous section, was foreshadowed in the prelude; on the other hand, the courtships of Mary Garth and Rosamond was not. Both Mary and Rosamond are living in the same conditions of nineteenth-century England. Their families, specifically the Vincys encourage the idea of marriage. And although there is nothing inherently wrong with matrimony, it is discouraging for feminists to see characters submit to the influence of patriarchy. However, knowing Eliot's passion for realism, it is crucial to understand that women in the nineteenth century did not have much chance outside of marriage.

Virginia Woolf sees how Eliot used her writing to explore the characteristics of femininity and her intent to depict the cruelty everyday women had to face. She presents her thoughts on Eliot in an essay she had attributed to her:

> The ancient consciousness of woman, charged with suffering and sensibility, and for so many ages dumb, seems in them to have brimmed and overflowed and uttered a demand for something - they scarcely know what - for something that is perhaps incompatible with the facts of human existence. George Eliot had far too strong an intelligence to tamper with those facts, and too broad a humour to mitigate the truth because it was a stern one. Save for the supreme courage of their endeavour, the struggle ends, for her heroines, in tragedy, or in a compromise that is even more melancholy. (Woolf 5)

Being a Victorian woman meant to crush under the weight of personal expectations; Eliot understood these struggles as she wrote her heroines to aid carry those burdens. Whether it is Dorothea, Mary, Rosamond, or any other female character of Eliot's they all have a tale to tell.

## Dorothea and Lydgate

Even though Dorothea is the book's main character, Dr. Lydgate's storyline takes up a significant part of *Middlemarch*. Although at first, Lydgate appears as another character coloring the nature of the municipal town, the distinct similarities between him and Dorothea's plots raise questions. While these resemblances appear unintentional, compiled in over 800 pages. When the book's prologue starts by explaining that women cannot succeed due to the pressure of society, chapters emphasizing Lydgate's life urge the readers to examine the reasoning behind the presence of two similar plotlines. Lydgate carries the potential and freedom Dorothea never gets to experience, which intensifies the inequality of the sexes seen in *Middlemarch*.

The image both Dorothea and Lydgate project on their lovers causes them to fall into a life of misery. Although they hope for different outcomes from their partners, they both see a reflection of their desires. At first, while Dr. Lydgate takes a liking to the beautiful Rosamond, his eventual decision to marry comes from the scenery displayed by the Vincy family as the narrator notes:

> … and her (Mrs. Vincy) cheery manners to husband and children, was certainly among the great attractions of the Vincy house - attractions which made it all easier to fall in love with the daughter. The tinge of unpretentious, inoffensive vulgarity in Mrs. Vincy gave effect to Rosamond's refinement, which was beyond what Lydgate had expected. (Eliot 159)

Lydgate's idea of an exemplary family and his notion of an ideal wife makes Rosamond appealing. On the other hand, Dorothea falls in love with Mr. Casaubon because of his intellectual capabilities. She hopes to get educated under the shadow of Mr. Casaubon and become his assistant. Dorothea imagines the old man as a "winged messenger," and in a world in which "the indefiniteness had oppressed her," he would be her guide and "make her life greatly effective" (Eliot 33). Both characters fall for a reflection of their ideal partners. In her narration of *Middlemarch* Eliot comments: "signs are small measurable things, but interpretations are illimitable…" as she points out both Lydgate and Dorothea's inability to see the problematic aspects of their partners. (30) Both characters make the same mistake in the end. When Mr. Casaubon becomes aware of Dorothea's admiration, he asks for her hand.

The existence of Dr. Lydgate enhances the story of Dorothea. By using Dr. Lydgate's story, Eliot reinforces the plight of Dorothea. At the same time, by using Rosamond's venomousness, Eliot reveals the "vicious women" Wollstonecraft speaks of.

Another fascinating connection between Dorothea and Lydgate lies in their wish to become reformers. Dorothea finds herself interested in religion and education, hoping to find a medium to perform a duty. However, she is filled with unwanted ignorance, her mind clouded by her inability to get trained. She is constantly reminded by those who call her family that her sex is lesser and incapable of learning. On the other hand, Lydgate has everything Dorothea hopes for. His scientific interest in medicine and biology pushes him into becoming a doctor. Providing him an outlet to spend his vigor as the narrator explains: "there was another attraction in his profession: it wanted to reform and gave a man an opportunity for some indignant resolve to reject its venal decorations and other humbug and be the professor of genuine though undemanded qualifications" (Eliot 147). The difference between Lydgate and Dorothea's options to have a profession reminds the readers of the unequal treatment of sexes, diminishing their sympathy for the doctor.

*Middlemarch*'s conclusion is somber; although the readers sympathize with Lydgate, their emotions are swept away by Dorothea's sorrow. Eliot strips away Lydgate's happiness by having him fail in his attempts to further his career, affecting his marriage to Rosamond. He dies shackled to an unhappy marriage with Rosamond and is left weary after his unsuccessful attempts to reform the profession. Nevertheless, compared to Dorothea's, the ending of Lydgate's storyline does not compel the readers. Dr. Lydgate's freedom to work, make decisions based on his selfish needs, and look on women separates her from Dorothea. The similarities between their plotlines indicate the separation of men and women in the Victorian era.

Although they share equally unfortunate courtships, Dorothea's only chance to be happy in life is bound to the person she marries. Dorothea, who lived within the rules of patriarchy all her life, does not know how to use her passion. Furthermore, in a world where her husband must provide her with everything she can possess, Dorothea's life energy disappears, leaving the readers unsatisfied. Although, unlike Lydgate, she finds her true love, her hopelessness and the untapped potential for success reinforce the sense of grief in the finale.

Lydgate's life is filled with a series of failed attempts, bad decisions, and an unfortunate series of events.

## Conclusion

By analyzing the content of *Middlemarch*, it becomes evident that Eliot's perception on feminist movement have been misinterpreted. While carefully underlining Eliot's use of realism, subtlety, and slow-paced chapters, her look at English society and everyday women were determined. *Middlemarch* is a small replica of English country living; its characters are exaggerated stereotypes of historical and social ideals. Dorothea and Rosamond represent the young women of society who, instead of focusing on their desires in life, are forced to marry to be granted their wishes.

While dissecting George Eliot's *Middlemarch* from the feminist perspective, acknowledging the era the book was written is crucial. The first-wave feminism of nineteenth-century England was concerned with what contemporary feminists define as "the basic human rights." Women were trying to get recognized under the common law and hoping that one day they would get the respect they deserved. The Industrial Revolution hastened the women's search for their rights, yet in Eliot's time, they were still trying to earn their place in the workforce.

George Eliot chose to have a conservative lifestyle, never publicly commenting on the feminist movement. She did some contributions to the women's cause, yet she is notoriously known for her criticism in her essay *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists.* Despite her intentions in drafting her essay, *Middlemarch* is filled with Eliot's opinions on women's potential and the issues they faced in English society.

Saint Theresa is an important figure in the prologue of *Middlemarch*. Dorothea's fervent attempts to find an outlet to explore her ideas are compared to those of Saint Theresa. The focus here is not on the achievements of this significant figure of Christianity; it is about the society that aided her success. While foreshadowing the finale, Eliot intends to pull the attention of the readers to the actual plotline: because how the story proceeds determine how Dorothea's story ends.

*Middlemarch* is written with slow-paced chapters to enhance the sense of country living. The book is built entirely around a complex structure of hierarchy, interconnecting character plots, and subtle commentary that constantly shifts the story. Mr. Brooke's prejudice and misogyny against women cause Dorothea to distrust her ability to find a vocation. With her inexperience she finds herself drawn to more knowledgeable and experienced Mr. Casaubon. However, Dorothea is not the only character in the book who finds herself trapped in a marriage because of her family. Mrs. Vincy's opinions on women's vocation are just as problematic as Mr. Brooke's. She represents the conservative women of Victorian society and admits to feeling uneasy around working women. Her ideology forces Rosamond into a marriage with Dr. Tertius Lydgate.

The main love story of Dorothea and Dr. Lydgate significantly resembles one another. Eliot uses her hero to enhance Dorothea's lack of means to succeed. Dorothea and Lydgate fall in love with an idea; while the heroine is in search of a teacher, the hero finds himself falling for the image of a happy matrimonial life. Whilst they are infatuated with an imaginary partner, they marry prematurely. Though these similarities continue throughout the story, Lydgate's sex and his opportunities for professional reformation separate him from Dorothea. Although Lydgate never finds his true love and dies at a young age, the readers never connect with him as they do with Dorothea. This is due to Lydgate's inability use his freedom properly, causing him to make unfortunate decisions. Dorothea's desperateness for an outlet to spend her resolve and her untapped potential leaves the readers with more dissatisfaction than Lydgate's plot.

It is natural for a reader to criticize the ideals of an author through the characters they choose to write. However, while doing so, the story in question must be examined thoroughly, without the reflections of gender prejudices.Yet the same critics who are dissatisfied with the author's decisions on her heroine's end do not pay heed to her male characters. While dissecting the book, Eliot's writing style and the time in which she drafted the book must be taken into consideration. Moreover, the ending of a story does not need to articulate the author's opinions on a subject. Instead, focusing on the overall story, how the author chose to articulate their thoughts on the subject matter must be prioritized. *Middlemarch* is an interesting manifesto of first-wave feminism, with its quirky characters, complicated plots, and social commentary that still resonates with contemporary readers.

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