

## George Eliot's Middlemarch

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is a novel embroidered by social relations, marriages, gender roles and a plain perspective on the Victorian society. Adopting a feminist perspective, Eliot aims at putting forth some matters of gender roles within the time and she successfully portrays the state of the society with her complex characters and marriages full of frustration and disappointment. At this stage it would be suitable to analyze the novel from a feminist point of view and to take a closer look at the characters and social relations revealed in the novel. Some of the major themes stated in the novel can be considered as disillusion, gender roles and frustrated love relations and marriages especially with the marriages of some major characters such as Dorothea, Casaubon, Lydgate and Rosamond. Through the details which Eliot uses to portray her characters it becomes possible to deeply analyze the themes mentioned above.

Taking a closer look at the novel, it would be suitable to take a closer look at some major characters such as Dorothea. She draws the character of a young lady who is idealist and who stands against the patriarchal law of the Victorian society. She is hungry for knowledge and believes that she can do more in the world other than being just a simple and ordinary woman which the Victorian society asks her to be. As stated in *Middlemarch*:

And how should Dorothy not marry? - a girl so handsome and with such prospects? Nothing could hinder it but her love of extremes, and her insistence on regulating life according to notions which might

cause a wary man to hesitate before he made her an offer, or even might lead her at last to reuse all offers. (7)

The portrait of Dorothea draws a contrary Picture of the classical Victorian woman who is limited in receiving a proper education and whose major goal is to marry a rich gentleman. As stated in the novel, “Women were expected to have weak opinions (7)”. T.R. Wright comments on Dorothea's character in his book titled *George Eliot's Middlemarch* saying:

Dorothea is portrayed as perpetually battling against limitations in her education, refusing to be satisfied with fashion, embroidery and a girlish instruction comparable to the nibbling and judgments of a discursive Mouse and insisting on a wider focus for her energies than village charities and the occasional Perusal of Female scripture Characters.(75)

Despite Dorothea's rebellious character there is also a feminine side of her which makes Eliot draw similarities between Saint Theresa and Dorothea in the Prelude. The similarity between Saint Theresa and Dorothy comes from Dorothea's learned Notion of self-sacrifice, which is imposed on her by the society which she lives in. Despite being a rebellious woman, Dorothea inevitably carries the traces of the society she lives in and adopts a Notion of self –sacrifice in her marriage. Dorothea, thinking that it is a virtue, sacrifices herself for her husband Casaubon, who is far from showing her any sort of affection. Dorothea, being an emotional woman and seeking fort his in her marriage, continually acts in accordance to please her husband and shows absolute loyalty to him,

despite her emotional needs are not fulfilled. At the beginning of the novel, Dorothea refers to Casaubon as “a scholar” and she admires his knowledge. She starts to learn Latin and Greek to be able to help her husband in his business. It appears to the reader that she does this under the virtuous act of “being able to help her husband”, which is again related to the theme of self-sacrifice. However, deep within herself, she is unaware that she names it as the desire to help her husband due to the society she lives in, while in reality she does it to gain more knowledge. Unaware of her own desire Dorothea feels glad for doing something that would lift the spirits of her marriage and that would be of great help to her husband. The act of self-sacrifice is present in Dorothea’s many actions throughout the novel, but it comes plainly to the surface when she begs Lydgate to tell her the reason of Casaubon’s disease. Dorothea blames herself for his illness for not being able to take care of her husband in proper terms. Drawing parallel lines between Saint Theresa and Dorothea’s self-sacrificing act, Masako Hirai, in his book titled, *Sisters in Literature-Female Sexuality in Antigone, Middlemarch, Howards End and Women in Love*, states:

By comparing Dorothea’s feelings and error, her faith and illusion with those of Saint Theresa, and by pointing to the gap between their ages, Eliot weaves the pattern of a continuous, emotive history against a social background which makes imperfections less heroic. This leads her to change the meaning of sacrifice itself. (75)

The theme in disillusion is thus directly related to Dorothea’s Notion of self-sacrifice, since she fools herself in to thinking that she wants to marry and devote herself to a man who has knowledge and wisdom. Thinking that this would be the

quality that would make her happy in her marriage, she chooses Casaubon to marry. Her admiration for him is in fact her desire to reach knowledge which only men have Access to at those times and she disillusioned herself thinking that this desire to reach knowledge is in fact her admiration for Casaubon. Another striking point about Dorothea is that she chooses to marry Will at the very end of the novel despite her husband's will not to have any relation to him. Having longed for emotion and love, Dorothea finally gives up her inheritance from her husband and marries the man she loves and she bears a child thus becomes a mother. The final stage of the novel might be putting forth that despite a rebellious woman within the Victorian society, Dorothea still seeks love and affection and that she still can't come overcome her womanly instincts of being a wife and a mother. Karen Chase states in her book titled, *George Eliot, Middlemarch*, that:

It has been common for the readers to feel (and to say) that in the person of Dorothea the novel creates an image of the feminist protagonist, but then out of fear, doubt, weariness, or pessimism, George Eliot is unable to carry through the strength of her insight and she marries Dorothea to Will Ladislaw. (61)

Will, symbolizing emotions and love, manages to win Dorothea's heart at the end of the novel and Dorothea, contrary to the Victorian woman at the time who marries for Money and wealth, chooses to live with her love, who managed to touch her soul. Putting forth also the emotional side of such a feminist character, Eliot might want to draw attention to the fact that a woman is also in need of emotional fulfillment and love, besides knowledge and education.

Moving on the Casaubon, the husband of Dorothea, it becomes possible to say that he experiences a marriage full of disappointment through marrying Dorothea. Casaubon draws the Picture of a classical Victorian male character, who thinks that women should be mild and meek and that they should be a submissive helpmate, rather than educated and as rebellious as Dorothea. Casaubon isn't in search of a partner, in other words an equal character. As stated in the novel:

And when he had seen Dorothea he believed that he had found even more than he demanded: she might really be such a helpmate to him as would enable him to dispense with a hired secretary, an aid which Mr. Casaubon had never yet employed and had a suspicious dread of. Providence, in its kindness, had supplied him with the wife he needed. A wife, a modest young lady, with the purely appreciative, unambitious abilities of her sex, is sure to think her husband's mind powerful (231).

The appearance of Casaubon also hints his character and his contrast to Dorothy as he is described as old and ugly. As Dorothea and her sister talk about him, Celia states that he is ugly and sallow (16). On the contrary, Dorothea is described as young and lively (7). Casaubon and Dorothea are described by almost opposite metaphors and it seems like Eliot wants to foreshadow the frustrating marriage that they will have and that they are completely two opposite characters. While Dorothea longs for love and affection, Casaubon regards to his marriage as a responsibility and as an act which should be fulfilled in social terms. He believes that he fulfills his duties by providing Dorothea with a wealthy life and fine clothes, while Dorothy seeks love and emotions in

her marriage. While Dorothy self-sacrifices herself for him, Casaubon is so Patriarchal that he thinks it s her duty as a wife to act in this manner. R. Wright states:

Casaubon, of course, has no doubts about the role of women. 'the great charm of your sex', he tells Dorothea after she has accepted his proposal, 'is its capability of an ardent self-sacrificing affection, and herein we see its fitness to round and complete the existence of our own. He expects her to be 'all that an exquisite young lady can be' with the added advantage of being able to copy Greek characters (76).

As stated, Casaubon is extremely patriarchal, parallel to the society which he lives in, and believes that women are meant to be obedient to their husbands in every form. Based on the Victorian society of male roles, he also believes that a woman is totally dependent on her husband and that the success and wisdom of a woman's husband is also her wisdom in a way. He believes that women make their way through the social ladder through their husbands and that a woman alone has no chance to climb the ladder of social status on her own. Thus, it becomes possible to say that he also considers Dorothea to be a lucky woman to have married him. However things turn out to be just the opposite and Casaubon soon discovers his wife's real personality who is far from being an ignorant and woman of the typical Victorian society. Her rebellious attitude makes Casaubon feel himself threatened, especially during his illness, and he starts to suffer due to his unhappy marriage.

Lydgate is another male major character in the novel who also suffers due to an unhappy marriage full of self illusions. Lydgate, the doctor of the Vincy family, is an idealist and he has long years to come to get married in the first chapters of the novel. He is also a part of the Victorian Patriarchal society and wants a stereotypical woman who stands for an ornament rather than a partner in his life. Despite his desire for an ordinary woman and his marriage to Rosamond who at first fulfills his desire, towards the end of the novel he finds out that he would prefer a woman who could in fact be a partner to him. This links him to Dorothea, who at first he despised for being so rebellious and different from the rest of the women in his society. Despite being a part of the patriarchal society which bases its values on mostly materialist things, he seeks freedom and dislikes the aristocracy. Being an orphan he symbolizes the modern man of the age who doesn't make a living out of his family inheritance or his social status, but portrays the Picture of a character who climbs up the social ladder by himself. It is also possible to say that Lydgate represents developing science of the age, which has witnessed the industrial revolution, since he is a doctor. At the beginning of the novel he thinks he only flirts with Rosamond and thinks that this wouldn't force him for marriage. However as the novel continues, the reader comes across the incident of him having to marry Rosamond due to social pressure. As a result of his flirting to her, he is expected to be a "gentleman" and to marry the woman who he has given hope for commitment. Lydgate is another character who disillusion himself, thinking that he is the romantic hero of Rosamond and marries her due to his belief, while in fact he wants to continue to his medical studies in a free manner and also wants to remain a single man. As their marriage continues, Lydgate discovers that he had made a fatal mistake in marrying Rosamond and that she isn't the woman he had hoped her to be. R Wright states in his book:

It does not take long for Lydgate to awaken from his dream land and discover that Rosamond is not an accomplished mermaid using her comb and looking-glass and singing her song for the relaxation of his adored wisdom alone. And when he discovers that she is less submissive than he had hoped, his coercion becomes more overt (80).

The theme of disillusionment once again comes to the surface when Lydgate's frustrated marriage and his relation to his wife Rosamond is taken at hand from a closer perspective. He too, alike Dorothy and Casaubon, fools himself in to believing that Rosamond is the wife he has always hoped and longed for and that the mild and meek appearance of the woman would last for a life time.

Rosamond, the wife of Lydgate, is one other major female character which appears in the novel. She represents the stereotypical Victorian woman who is educated to marry a rich man. She is sent to a finishing school and appears as a woman whose major goal is to marry a wealthy man. Throughout the novel it appears that Money is valued more than anything in the society and that women make their choices of husbands accordingly. Since a husband determines the social status of a woman, Rosamond too becomes interested in Lydgate, who is linked to an Aristocratic social circle and who would most probably provide her with a wealthy life. As Money is regarded as success and freedom within the society of Middlemarch, Rosamond tries to reach such a success through marrying a man. The feminist Picture which Eliot draws by putting forth such a clear perspective by portraying Rosamond, the writer once more reveals the fact that the only way to reach success for a woman is to marry a successful



and wealthy husband. As this is the case for Rosamond, she tries to manipulate Lydgate to marry her. Knowing that it is the only way she can make her way through the aristocratic circles, she treats Lydgate as an object which need to be manipulated, rather than treating him as a man. Thus, it becomes possible to say that Rosamond appears in the novel as a character to be disliked, since she is the outcome of the classical Victorian education for women. Chase states in her book that:

We are never to forget; after all that Rosamond's social bearings are not a gift of nature, that it is rather her art to appear natural. Rosamond may be as lovely as a flower but she is a flower of Mrs. Lemon's school, the chief school in the country, where the teaching included all that was demanded in the accompanied female (62).

Thus it also becomes possible to say the appearance of Rosamond and her character is directly related to the education for women in the period and being a representative of the stereotypical woman of the Victorian age, Rosamond goes through a sense of dissatisfaction in her novel as the true face of marriage hits her in the face. The desired Notion of a woman which means to suppress her feelings and to completely obey her husband overwhelms Rosamond and thus she develops a romantic approach towards Will. The novel states:

No Notion could have been falser than this, for Rosamond's discontent in her marriage was due to the conditions of marriage itself, to its demand for self-suppression and tolerance, and not to the nature of her husband; but the easy conception of an unreal Better

had a sentimental charm which diverted her ennui. She constructed a little romance which was to vary the flatness of her life (619).

Speaking from a feminist perspective about the novel, at this stage it becomes possible to say that feminist figures are present all over the novel. Due to Eliot's deep insight in to the characters in the novel, the gender roles of the time become plain to see. While women are considered to be inferior to men, they are also considered as only wives in the patriarchal world. Women lack a proper education to become able to support themselves without a husband. As it is the case for Farebrother, his mother is a widow and his aunt and sister are unmarried. So Farebrother is responsible of looking after his unmarried female relatives. Since the education provided for women is very limited and since women are only trained to become perfect wives at the time, many women, who don't have a male relative to look after herself, bare hard financial situations. A similar case is also present for Rosamond as she becomes totally dependent on her husband as Featherstone dies and she doesn't receive any inheritance upon the appearance of an illegitimate son. Rosamond, having studies at a finishing school, never received any education to enable her with the skill to become able to look after herself.

Eliot manages to draw the Picture of the Victorian women in a realist manner through her characters in the novel. The scene when Mr. Brooke and Casaubon speak about Dorothea, the comment of Mr. Brook makes on women, makes it plain to see how women were perceived those times. Mr. Brook states, "Well, but now, Casaubon, such deep studies, classics, mathematics, that kind of thing, are too taxing for a woman- too

taxing you know (53)". Upon Casaubon stating that Dorothea is learning Greek, Mr. Brooks continues saying:

Ah well, without understanding, you know-that may not be so bad.  
But 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  
(53).

As stated above, the perception of women was as light and limited beings, since the patriarchal society believed that even the intelligence of women was limited those times and that women should be interested in arts, to a limited level and that they shouldn't be involved in a deeper education which was considered to be a task for men.

All through the novel, Eliot seems to question gender roles and which Notion stands for the better when men and women are concerned. She seems to seek a proper identity for both the male and female characters throughout the novel. John Peck states in his book titled, *Middlemarch- George Eliot* that, "One way to look ahead to the activity of Middlemarch which brings into question again the idea of what is natural in function and in attitude for women (171)". By drawing the picture of Dorothy, who stands for a different character within the Victorian society and by the character of Rosamond who stands for a stereotypical character, Eliot manages to put forth two types of women. It is, however, important to notice that both these women end in similar places when their marriages are concerned despite they take different paths. Both the marriages of these characters end in frustration and they both seem to be having made a big mistake when they first thought of their ideal mates and made their choices

accordingly. At this stage it might be possible to say that Eliot tries to point out that humans, both male and female require both reason and emotion in their lives to reach happiness. Kathleen Blake, in her book titled, *Approaches to teaching Eliot's Middlemarch*, she states that:

The very conception of Dorothea- a woman with an ardent mind- explodes the old dualistic chestnut about emotion and intelligence. So does the portrait of Lydgate. His worst failures occur when he tries to separate analysis from emotion, mind and body, as he does in dichotomizing life into public and private, masculine and feminine spheres. His greatest moments occur when his thoughts and feelings, judgment and sympathy are united (69).

At this stage it becomes possible to say that Eliot regards balance as a matter of great importance in human life and in relations. Pointing out that the unbalanced way of life is also related to the Victorian education for women at the time and the imposed notion about gender roles on them, Eliot concludes her novel by marrying Dorothea to Will. Speaking in feminist terms, it can be possible to say that Eliot chooses such an ending not only to point out the emotional needs of a woman which Dorothy finally fulfills in the end through marrying Will, but she also wants to point out another resistance by Dorothy. Despite the character tries to stop herself from breaking the law of loyalty to her husband even after his death, she finally gives up even the inheritance and chooses to marry Will. Her action can surely be considered as a resistance to the whole Victorian society which she lives in, as she breaks the law of her deceased husband. Jeanie Thomas, in her book titled *Reading Middlemarch: Reclaiming the*

*Middle Distance*, states that, “Dorothea, 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)”. As the resistance of Dorothy continues all through the novel, Eliot manages to draw the Picture of a different kind of woman within the age of the Victorian society.

Speaking in general terms, the novel *Middlemarch* can be considered as a criticism of the Victorian society from a feminist perspective and that it clearly and realistically puts forth the state of gender roles within the time. Eliot manages to draw the Picture of both perspectives when approaching to both men and women and concludes herself in indirectly saying that balance is one of the most crucial things in human life. In this sense *Middlemarch* can be considered as one of the most efficient sources to gain information about the Victorian society and about the state of women at the time.

## Bibliography

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