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"What do I think of glory?"

On *Middlemarch* by George Eliot

Beverley Park Rilett

What do I think of *Middlemarch*? What do I think of glory?"[1] This is the famous reply Emily Dickinson wrote to her bookish cousins in 1873 after her first reading of George Eliot's novel. Dickinson's sentiments were also my own when I completed my first reading of *Middlemarch* (1871–1872), about thirty-five years ago. *Middlemarch* is the book that made me realize literature could be more than a source of entertainment, that it could be Art with a capital A. Here was a text with fascinating and seemingly limitless possibilities for interpretation that would continue to reward scrutiny. Of course, I didn't come up with that assessment entirely on my own. Since its publication, *Middlemarch* has ranked among the world's most popular and highly acclaimed literary works. It was one of the staples of Victorian literature courses and was essential reading for English majors at Queen's University in Canada, where I completed two undergraduate degrees. Even before I learned that "George Eliot" was the pseudonym of a female writer, Mary Ann Evans, I'd been conditioned to recognize her name as part of the canon of Great Authors, a list dominated by male writers such as Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Conrad, and Joyce. I still meet people all the time who have heard of *Middlemarch* as one of the world's best-loved novels and know George Eliot is the author

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but don't know she was a woman, let alone the most successful woman writer of the Victorian era. Knowing a book is on the "should read" list and actually reading it are two entirely different things, and I must confess I never did make it all the way through Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Reading *Middlemarch*, however, turned out to be life-changing, igniting my passion for Victorian literature and for George Eliot in particular. What I hope to convey here is how and why this Victorian novel and its author continue to inspire me.

The virtues of *Middlemarch* aren't easy to summarize. The novel is so comprehensive that it contains something for everyone: layers of narrative wit and wisdom about history, sociology, science, mythology, religion, philosophy, economics, and art have kept critics excavating and theorizing for nearly 150 years. *Middlemarch* is also rhetorically rich, full of striking metaphors and allusions, and delivered in a characteristically precise diction tuned to intentionally complicated connotations, all of which encourages readers to attend to the novel's subtle nuances of language. There is always something fresh to notice, a new thread one can follow through the labyrinth of potential meanings. Eliot's long, meticulously careful sentences, which I will be quoting liberally, make her writing endlessly rewarding to decode over successive readings.

As suggested by the novel's subtitle, *A Study of Provincial Life*, Eliot demonstrates a sociologist's understanding of how communities of people function. Her *Middlemarch* characters are concerned about their little community in provincial England in the 1830s, yet their personalities and problems are recognizably timeless. This acuity for the nuances of human motivation distinguishes Eliot as a gifted psychologist as well. She is able to depict not only how her characters behave but why they behave the way they do, exposing the pressures and constraints that motivate secrets, misunderstandings, and disastrous choices. She often explores how difficult it is for any of us to really know another person, how many of our decisions are made on too little information in relation to too much hope. For example, *Middlemarch*'s narrator comments that without our illusions and "liberal allowance of conclusions" about other people, marriage could never take place: "Has any one ever pinched into its pilulous smallness the cobweb of pre-matrimonial acquaintanceship?" she asks, as

she dramatizes the monumental consequences to individual characters who make the commonest of mistakes.[2] Eliot's novels remain relevant precisely because the human foibles she writes about *are* common—any one of us could fall into tragedy despite our best intentions. Her novels open our hearts and minds to ways other people experience the world and show us that their problems aren't so different from our own. In short, Eliot's novels teach us to become more sympathetic human beings.

Middlemarch came to mean more to me than any other book, but in my early readings of it I was only partially attuned to several intersections between the novel and my own life that seem more obvious in retrospect. I was an idealistic if naive young woman about the same age as Miss Dorothea Brooke the first time I read *Middlemarch*. We were both eldest daughters determined to do something important in life. I sympathized with Dorothea's lack of reliable parental guidance, especially the way she had to figure out how to reach her goals primarily on her own. I was a good student, proud to have been accepted into my college's honors program in a challenging track toward concurrent bachelor's degrees in arts and education, in addition to earning a position on the varsity synchronized swimming team. I'd moved over four hundred miles from home, escaping parents whose marriage after twenty-five years had begun to implode. My parents' divorce had been a long time in the making before they finally accepted the inevitable, taking so long probably because no one on either side of our extended families had ever officially split up. Being so far away from home when it finally happened made their breakup seem somehow unreal to me; throwing myself into the physical labor of swim practice and the intellectual labor of coursework deferred the grief and conflicted emotions I couldn't immediately process. In hindsight, preoccupation with my parents' dysfunctional marriage prepared me to recognize in *Middlemarch* what I still consider the novel's paramount concern: the disaster of incompatible marriage caused by incomplete knowledge of self and other. As I confront my twenty-year-old self, I'm amazed at my eagerness to start my own career and family—to try to have it all and do it all successfully. Like Dorothea, I was short-sighted and in a tremendous hurry to grow up. Though I can't recall with certainty, I may even have imagined that Dorothea's headlong rush to the altar was perfectly reasonable.

Now, as an older and potentially wiser woman, I've become more like *Middlemarch*'s narrator, looking back on Dorothea with sympathetic head-shaking, knowing what difficulties lie ahead of her and wishing she didn't have to actually live through those life lessons. I also have grown to respect Dorothea's more practical sister, Celia, who unabashedly wants and seeks pleasure in her life and doubts that female self-sacrifice is necessarily a virtue. I judge Dorothea's choices differently now. As the old saying goes, one cannot step into the same river twice; similarly, with every reading, I am a new person with a slightly different perspective on the issues and problems that affect the Middlemarch residents and community. Eliot's presentation of her major characters' thought processes is nuanced; she offers readers multiple ways of understanding their behavior not only in relation to their individual temperaments but also in relation to the social web that connects and affects them all. We care about what happens to them; as the narrator recognizes, "the fragment of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web: promises may not be kept, and an ardent outset may be followed by declension; latent powers may find their long-waited opportunity; a past error may urge a grand retrieval" (3.Finale:455). While many of the characters in *Middlemarch* continue to fascinate me, it's Dorothea's story with its mixed elements of tragedy and triumph that remains the most compelling.

Middlemarch opens by introducing its heroine, Dorothea Brooke, an earnest, sincere, ambitious, and stubborn nineteen-year- old on the cusp of life. With a yearning for social justice and a genuine desire to help the less fortunate, Dorothea has not yet worked out any specific vocational path. She has dedicated a great deal of time to designing new, more practical cottages she believes will make life easier for the tenant farmers residing on her Uncle Brooke's property, but without proper training as an architect, she can't be sure whether she has designed "incompatible stairs and fireplaces" (1.1:19). The narrator of *Middlemarch* conveys Dorothea's yearning to be a force for good in life larger than what was allotted to women:

> For a long while she had been oppressed by the indefiniteness which hung in her mind, like a thick summer haze, over all her desire to make her life greatly effective. What could she do, what ought she to do?—she, hardly more than a budding woman, but yet with an active conscience and a great mental need, not to be

> satisfied by a girlish instruction comparable to the nibblings and judgments of a discursive mouse. (1.3:39)

In 1830s England, social obstacles are most obviously in Dorothea's way. Women were not yet admitted to colleges, and professional careers were still the exclusive purview of men. Restricted from producing a great work of her own, Dorothea covets "masculine knowledge" and begins to imagine that she can achieve a meaningful life through a particular kind of marriage, wherein she could "learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by" (1.3:40). She fantasizes about marrying a fatherly mentor figure whose manuscript she can help produce, a promising scholar whose "odd habits it would be glorious piety to endure" (1.3:12). Though Dorothea's hopes and dreams didn't seem so preposterous to me a generation ago, my students see through her deluded foolishness. They're able to recognize the irony of Dorothea's grandiose idea of enduring miserable years for the sake of "glorious piety," and they protest against the unjust social conditions that prevented women like Dorothea from achieving success independently, which are at least partly responsible for her disastrous choice to marry Edward Casaubon.

How did the patriarchal pre-feminist setting of Dorothea's story relate to my own Canadian middle-class university experience of the 1980s? While Dorothea was prevented from pouring her intellect and creativity into a self-actualizing vocation, I was embarking on an independent life, discovering the ever-expanding world of history, philosophy, and literature and learning about the great writers and thinkers of the Western literary canon. *Middlemarch* helped open my eyes to both the persistence of gender inequality and the hard-won advances women had already achieved since Dorothea's day. The English department at Queen's University in the 1980s was dominated by male professors who assigned mostly male-authored texts; I was elated that my required class in Victorian literature was not only taught by a woman but included more than 50 percent women writers on the syllabus. Dr. Cathy Harland started each class with a pithy quotation and then lectured for a full hour, though it felt too brief to me. Dr. Harland inspired my lifelong devotion to the works she loved, including *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Aurora Leigh*, and *Middlemarch*. As destiny would have it, at least two women in that

class—myself and Lisa Surridge—went on to become professors of Victorian literature. An observation by the narrator of *Middlemarch* explains such serendipity beautifully:

> But any one watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots, sees a slow preparation of effects from one life on another, which tells like a calculated irony on the indifference or the frozen stare with which we look at our unintroduced neighbour. Destiny stands by sarcastic with our dramatis personae folded in her hand. (1.11:142)

We never know when the stranger sitting next to us will end up playing a significant role in the rest of our lives.

My appreciation for *Middlemarch* was instilled, in part, by the passion of Dr. Harland, but I also remember being captivated by the wisdom, wit, and generous nature of the story's narrator, who self-consciously considers how to make her art meaningful. In the following passage, for example, she specifically calls attention to her intent and process using the first-person pronoun: "I at least have so much to do in unraveling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe" (1.15:214). The narrator positions herself usually as a knowing watcher or transcriber who is interested in conveying the experiences of a "particular web" of characters. This is what makes the novel endlessly readable, in my opinion, because the generous narrator is able to reveal minute details and psychological insights in a measured, understanding tone that seems to me, after having read all nine volumes of the author's letters, to be the voice of the gentle genius who called herself George Eliot. Her philosophy, which she states repeatedly throughout her writing, is that art should generate a sense of sympathy with our fellow erring humans. In *Middlemarch*, she writes, "What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult to each other?" (3.72:308).

Eliot contended that tragedy not only happens to the great and powerful but occurs every day in the ordinary, private lives of common people. It is a concept represented in her description of *Middlemarch* as a "home epic." In one of the novel's most famous passages, the narrator refers to the secret pain of failure taking place all around us, but

specifically to Dorothea, who after only six weeks of marriage realizes she has gravely misjudged her husband's character:

> That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity. However, Dorothea was crying … (1.20:297–98)

Beginning with the distant view, wherein tragedy and heartbreak are so common they have become imperceptible, Eliot zooms in with "keen vision and feeling" on a particular individual's suffering, directing the reader to witness Dorothea's personal tragedy, a moment of painful recognition "which lies on the other side of silence" and might otherwise go unnoticed. Excusing the reader's inability to take into account the unbearable enormity of all human misery, the narrator leads the reader to recognize, along with the heroine herself, a moment of epiphany—that she made an irrevocable error of judgment in marrying Casaubon.

The fact that Dorothea might be culpable for ignoring the warnings of family members and friends necessarily complicates the way readers judge her tragic choice. After all, Dorothea stubbornly charged into a lifelong commitment with a clerical scholar nearly thirty years her senior whom she barely knew, believing he was the next Pascal, Hooker, or Locke. She insisted that she was the only person in town who could understand Casaubon and recognize his "great soul." Dorothea knowingly flouts the whole community, including her uncle and sister, cognizant that "all the world round Tipton would be out of sympathy with this marriage" (1.5:71). Part of her tendency toward martyrdom includes the idea that she would be scorned by the majority but ultimately rewarded for having a more capacious faith and vision. To what extent should the reader blame Dorothea for her bullheaded but ultimately tragic choice? Wasn't her insistence on autonomy the very impulse that allows heroic individuals to succeed where others fail? In my early readings of the novel, I completely sympathized with Dorothea's defiance instead of judging it.

The narrator admires her enterprising protagonist and would never call her stupid, but the humor and irony in her depiction of Dorothea's "self-mortification" tendencies became apparent to me only in later readings. Dorothea embraces this description because it matches the way she likes to think about herself, but when Celia adds that her sister "likes giving up," Dorothea corrects her with, "If that were true, Celia, my giving-up would be self-indulgence, not self-mortification. But there may be good reasons for choosing not to do what is very agreeable" (1.2:24). This is the same scene in which Dorothea determines to stop horseback riding, which she loves but has "always looked forward to renouncing" because "she felt that she enjoyed it in a pagan, sensuous way" (1.2:11–12). Celia responds to her sister's peculiarities with knowing acceptance but not total admiration, which seems to match the narrator's perspective. Before marriage, Dorothea's choice of Casaubon over Chettam implicitly indicates that she was willing to renounce sexual fulfillment in exchange for learning. The neighborhood gossip, Mrs. Cadwallader, throws up her hands at Dorothea's decision, "wish[ing] her joy of her hair shirt" (1.6:88). Our heroine's martyr complex is both funny and a little ominous, which seems to me now what Eliot must have intended. After all, Eliot was a devotee of Shakespeare, whose tragic scenes are typically juxtaposed with comic ones. He knew how to break the tension through laughter that helped the audience achieve a more balanced perspective on the drama. Though the first-time reader may not notice, the narrator of *Middlemarch*, with knowingness that comes from sexual maturity, appears to be using subtle irony to balance our impression of Dorothea's saintliness.

My interpretation of Dorothea and Casaubon's miserable marriage, particularly my judgments about Dorothea's relative responsibility, evolved over years. In my early readings of the novel, it never occurred to me that Dorothea could be blamed for choosing an incompatible spouse, though the narrator regularly throws subtle jabs by describing her, for example, as "enamored of intensity and greatness, and rash in embracing what seemed to her to have these aspects" (1.1:9). For all her love of "giving up," Dorothea had not prepared herself to be shut out of Casaubon's intellectual endeavor after their marriage, which was her real motivation for marrying him. It took me years to sympathize even a little with Casaubon's self-absorbed fears of failure in his

lifelong scholarly project, his imposter complex, or the intense jealousy he felt toward Will Ladislaw, his attractive young cousin. What conception could I have had of the fears of an aging scholar? Then, I could only bristle at Casaubon's businesslike letter of proposal and resent his intention to limit Dorothea's role to that of a secretarial assistant who would prove useful in saving his eyes from excessive strain (1.5:60–62). It is a testament to Eliot's writing that I experienced Dorothea's unrequited love and her missed opportunities as if they could have happened to me. Dorothea's enthusiastic acceptance of a role that demanded complete subjugation was disastrous, of course, but surely, I assumed, not caused by her own immaturity or myopia, even though Dorothea admits to being, literally, "rather short-sighted" (1.3:42). Instead, I blamed Casaubon for expecting unquestioning worship from a woman as intelligent and idealistic as Dorothea, for figuratively slamming and locking the door of her prison after she has become enmeshed in the patriarchal fantasy of what a wife should be. I either missed or chose to ignore the narrator's interpretive guidance to consider both sides. It took rereading years later to appreciate how Eliot points a gentle finger at society, at Casaubon, and at Dorothea, whose ignorance and lack of healthy self-preservation prove to be dangerous, and avoidable.

Although the narrative generates sympathy for Dorothea by explaining her feelings and showing the pain caused by her husband's lack of interest or affection, at the same time the narrator builds a case for sympathizing with Casaubon. In chapter 29, the narrator famously switches gears as she is about to launch into a new paragraph about Dorothea's feelings. She stops herself and interjects, "—but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage?" (2.29:9). "Poor Casaubon" has discovered on his honeymoon that his "stream of affection" has turned out to be "an exceedingly shallow rill" (1.7:91). He is humiliated and disillusioned by the marriage too, but he is a man of the cloth and no doubt believes in the authority of the biblical injunction "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Mark 10:9). In any case, before England's Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, marriages were virtually impossible to escape legally. Throughout history, unhappy marriages have been difficult for many people, especially women, to leave, whether for religious, legal, economic, or other reasons. There is

nothing for Casaubon and Dorothea to do other than endure in silence, hiding their misery even from the servants. Though other characters disparage Casaubon throughout the novel, even after he is known to be gravely ill, the narrator never articulates negative judgment: "For my part," she says, "I am very sorry for him" (2.29:12). The narrator's rhetoric doesn't seem to match the realities of the relationship described, a distancing that invites readers to weigh behavior against intention. As coercive and cruel as Casaubon proves to be, the narrator who witnesses and describes his conduct doesn't explicitly condemn him. Like those of a parent who loves two children who hurt one another, or a child who loves both quarreling parents, the narrator's sympathies shift back and forth, but she refuses to settle the blame on either side. There is no villain in this novel—only different ways of interpreting behavior. Without being prescriptive, the narrator models the kind of generous attitude she wants to encourage in the reader.

I conceptualize the relationship between Dorothea and Casaubon differently with every reading, and with age and experience have become somewhat more sympathetic to Casaubon's case. By contemplating Casaubon's wasted years, his missing out on love, friendship, and community as he toils alone in dim libraries in search of "the Key to all Mythologies," I recognize the trade-offs and sacrifices inherent in pursuing an academic career and share some of Casaubon's fears about the value of my scholarly labor. I've also known the dread of waiting nervously for biopsy results and can imagine Casaubon's anxious fear as he confronts his own mortality shortly before he succumbs, appropriately, to his degenerated heart. Even though Casaubon rejects pity, the narrator asks readers to consider the man's sensitivity and desperation. Eliot never lets the reader forget that we are witnesses to a failed but feeling human being. Eliot's ability to develop fully realistic individuals across the usual lines of gender and class is extraordinary in itself, but to produce both contempt and pathos in the same reader for a single character is an astonishing and rare achievement in fiction.

Throughout *Middlemarch*, characters misunderstand the signs that seem to indicate the motivations of others; they act on false assumptions and learn to face the consequences of their mistakes. Only the narrator can read minds—everyone else, as in life, is only guessing. Differentiating between reality and delusion is as difficult for the

characters involved as it is for the readers to decipher. Judgment is left to the reader, and one of the pleasures I find in rereading *Middlemarch* is the surprise of discovering a new detail that alters my previous assumption or conclusion. I had focused until now on Dorothea and her marriage to Casaubon because that was what initially drew me into the novel. To more fully explain how my initial connections with *Middlemarch* have shifted over subsequent readings, I want to consider two other relationships in the novel that I've been rethinking recently: the marriage of Lydgate and Rosamond and the friendship between Lydgate and Dorothea. Obviously, my personal experiences have influenced my sense of what details matter during a particular rereading, which may be further evidence that interpretations are at least partially dependent on the reader's evolving priorities and values.

Eliot's novel started as two separate projects, both variations on the theme of incompatibility in married life. Although the "Miss Brooke" section ultimately was placed at the front of the novel and tends to dominate discussions of *Middlemarch*, Eliot's first inclination was to narrate the experience of a handsome young doctor, Tertius Lydgate, whose "plan of the future [is] to do good small work for Middlemarch, and great work for the world" (1.15:225). Lydgate's story of moving to Middlemarch, meeting his future bride, and then capitulating to pressures of financial insecurity that gradually ruin his marriage and career are events that run parallel to but separate from the Dorothea-Casaubon story for most of the novel's first half. These two narrative strands are brought into conversation when Lydgate becomes Casaubon's physician and, deeply moved by Dorothea's wifely devotion, learns to appreciate her value. In his intellectual passion and his aspiration to "do good," Lydgate resembles Dorothea. They seem temperamentally well suited.

When I first read the novel, I recall hoping, like many readers, that Lydgate and Dorothea would fall in love, but Eliot never considered this option. Now I believe the novel is far better for developing the relationship between these two as a bond of sympathetic friendship that rehabilitates Lydgate's character. An analysis of Lydgate's development throughout the novel helps to demonstrate Eliot's extraordinary rendering of the complexities of human psychology—the aspect of the novel that has always interested me most. Lydgate is arguably

Eliot's greatest achievement in characterization, the most complicated individual she ever created. Noticing not only his altruism but also the darker side of his nature is key to appreciating his wholeness.

Lydgate is attracted to the beautiful but dangerous femme fatale type, exemplified by his first love, Madame Laure, the French actress who murders her husband to escape the constraints of marriage. Lydgate's romantic history is relevant because his infatuation with the fragile-looking but fiercely determined Rosamond Vincy shows he remains attracted by the same sort of woman. He has no time for "plain women," whom he initially "regarded as he did the other severe facts of life, to be faced with philosophy and investigated by science" (1.11:140). Rosamond is the town beauty, a gorgeous blonde, the highly accomplished "flower" of Mrs. Lemon's finishing school, who knows exactly the kind of life she wants to lead—comfortable, respected, and far from Middlemarch (1.11:143). Although the narrator suggests that "[a] woman dictates before marriage in order that she may have an appetite for submission afterwards" (1.9:107), the notion of submitting after marriage never strikes Rosamond as necessary. Her rebellion takes the form of passive resistance to her husband's attempts to direct and manage her behavior. The narrator sums up Rosamond as "mild in her temper, inflexible in her judgment, disposed to admonish her husband, and able to frustrate him by stratagem" (3.87:460). Although Rosamond is not blameless, certainly, and seems cruelly selfish in her reluctance to sympathize or compromise with her husband in the early days of their financial distress, I recognize now that she is not evil, that mistakes were made on both sides, and that Rosamond's willfulness can be read as a strategy of self-preservation. The narrator interjects, "Poor Lydgate! or shall I say, Poor Rosamond! Each lived in a world of which the other knew nothing" (1.16:251). The unknowability of other people, even in marriage, is at fault, perhaps, rather than Rosamond or Lydgate themselves.

The women Lydgate is drawn to are completely opposite to Dorothea in temperament and in their responses to their husbands. Neither the selfish Rosamond nor the selfless Dorothea achieves a happy first marriage. Dorothea seems more admirable and Rosamond seems more repugnant to most readers, a response that may be related to social conditioning of people to see submissive women as good, long-suffering, and heroic, whereas powerful women who resist domination

are seen as bad. Recently, I have noticed striking parallels in Dorothea's and Rosamond's dysfunctional marriages and have argued that these are related case studies showing opposite responses to controlling husbands that culminate in nearly identical results. Too much selflessness is as debilitating to the partnership as too much selfishness.

Middlemarch's narrator assesses Lydgate's positive and negative qualities in an interesting passage that acknowledges both his aspirations and potential goodness as well as his deficiencies:

> 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 ardor 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. (1.15:227)

In my early readings of the novel, I attended to Lydgate's "noble intention and sympathy" and failed to notice that the narrator also offered specific criticism. Lydgate's "spots of commonness" didn't matter to me in my early reading as much as his appealing "intellectual ardor." His large hands and powerful body were similarly alluring, especially in contrast with descriptions of Casaubon's unhealthy appearance—his sallow skin, hairy facial moles, and skinny legs. In the same passage above in which the narrator praises Lydgate's "distinction of mind" and his "noble intention and sympathy," we find mention of his social pride and his "prejudices" in which his "feeling and judgment about furniture, or women" are lumped together (1.15:227). Lydgate's objectification of women rankles me today more than it did years ago when I was new to feminist criticism; to the Victorians, I suspect, it would have been so common as to be unnoticeable. Nevertheless, Lydgate's disrespectful attitude about what a wife should be clearly contributes to the failure of his marriage. "[G]uided by a single conversation," Lydgate had determined that Dorothea "did not look at things from the proper feminine angle" and that the "society of such women was about as relaxing as going from your work to teach the second form, instead of reclining in a paradise with sweet laughs for bird-notes, and blue eyes for a heaven" (1.11:141). Rosamond flirts and projects feminine helplessness to attract Lydgate, but it is his arrogance

and willful blindness that cause him to view her as that sweetly singing bird who would give him nothing but pleasure as he reclines in a marital paradise.

After I began to compare Lydgate to Casaubon, noticing their similar egotistical behavior and the way they both dominate their wives, for example, I became far less sympathetic to Lydgate's disappointments in his marriage. More attuned to issues of social justice and better informed about the warning signs of domestic abuse than I used to be, I noticed the clues the narrator was also leaving regarding Lydgate's narcissism. In the following passage, for example, the narrator comments casually on Lydgate's claim of superiority and expectation of deference from those he views as his inferiors: "Lydgate's conceit was of the arrogant sort, never simpering, never impertinent, but massive in its claims and benevolently contemptuous. He would do a great deal for noodles, being sorry for them, and feeling quite sure that they could have no power over him" (1.15:226–27). Lydgate is clearly concerned about maintaining the balance of power in his own favor, not only in his relations with the lowly townsfolk who become his patients but also in his expectations of the deference a husband is due. What first attracts Lydgate to Dorothea, in fact, is her wifely submission and devotion to her husband, a whole-hearted self-sacrifice that, according to Dorothea, is motivated by a combination of duty and feeling.

Lydgate's young bride refuses to submit when she feels she is right, even to her husband. Sometimes she *is* right, sometimes not, but her instinct is to dig in and resist Lydgate's attempts to control her behavior. Lydgate's muscular body and his barely contained rage are threatening to Rosamond, who uses silence and passive-aggressive tactics to deflect her husband's potential violence and to assert her equal status in running the household. When Rosamond offers to ask her father for money or suggests that Lydgate should write to his wealthy family members for a loan, he forcefully shuts her down. Later, when he believes the idea originated with him, Lydgate decides to try these same options, but he is too late. His assertive wife has taken the matter into her own hands and has already investigated these alternatives. If Rosamond's attempts to rectify the problem had succeeded instead of falling flat, she wouldn't be condemned for disobeying her husband and going behind his back; instead, she would be appreciated as

resourceful. As Rosamond's husband, Lydgate is shown at his worst—an incommunicative, condescending, and threateningly angry husband, whose "outbursts of indignation either ironical or remonstrant" were considered a "kind of violence" and "totally unwarranted" by his coolly calm wife (3.69:259). Regardless of what kind of wife Rosamond is, Lydgate has all the hallmarks of an emotionally abusive husband. Although he does restrain himself from physical violence, his hot temper is terrifying. He stops short of hitting his wife, but the implication is that he is so frustrated with her that he is barely maintaining control. Rosamond's refusal to engage with his tantrums leaves him "bruised and shattered" and entirely dumbfounded that he cannot win the battle for power in the relationship (3.69:259). The power dynamics depicted in the Lydgates' marriage further demonstrate the depth and insight with which Eliot dissects the psychology of human relationships, especially dysfunctional domestic partnerships.

Although I have been interpreting Lydgate as an abusive husband, he is certainly not a villain. Throughout the novel, he is a consistently positive influence on others, and though he makes his wife miserable behind closed doors, Lydgate is shown to improve and learn from his mistakes. Consider the development of his friendship with Dorothea. The novel brings Lydgate and Dorothea together in three scenes that demonstrate their increasing emotional understanding and trust in one another. These scenes of friendship used to convince me that Eliot meant us to read Lydgate as a victim of a cruel spouse, perhaps even as much as Dorothea is, but as I reread the novel over time, my views changed again. Even more than Casaubon, Lydgate is realistically multifaceted; he can be an angry, controlling bully in his private relations with his wife, while showing great sympathy and love for others outside his marriage.

The extent to which Lydgate develops as a character can be traced in his changing responses to Dorothea. The two meet at a dinner party held in honor of her engagement, where Dorothea exhausts his patience by "talking cottages and hospitals with him" while "nothing could seem much less important to Lydgate than the turn of Miss Brooke's mind" (1.10:136). Throughout their encounter, Lydgate is comparing Dorothea unfavorably with Rosamond, whom he regards as not only "strikingly different from Miss Brooke" but also "what a woman ought to be" (1.10:141). They are two inexperienced,

short-sighted young people confident in their mistaken first impressions and not yet subjected to the rude awakening in store for them both. After this inauspicious meeting, Lydgate next encounters Dorothea in a professional context. He is the physician who diagnoses Casaubon's first heart attack and breaks the news to both patient and caregiver regarding the precariousness of the older man's health. Dorothea's sobbed response is both surprising and deeply affecting:

> "Advise me. Think what I can do. He has been laboring all his life and looking forward. He minds about nothing else. And I mind about nothing else—"
>
> For years after Lydgate remembered the impression produced in him of this involuntary appeal—this cry from soul to soul, without other consciousness than their moving with kindred natures in the same embroiled medium, the same troublous fitfully illuminated life. (2.30:27)

Lydgate is so struck by this second, counterbalancing meeting with Dorothea that "for years after" he remembers it as a heartfelt moment of illumination of their "kindred natures" (2.30:27). He believes they are experiencing "the same" troubles in their private lives and imagines they both are victims, which is surely how Lydgate feels, even though, objectively, this conclusion is debatable. Although Lydgate seems to be deluding himself into believing he bears no responsibility for his marital breakdown, at least his feelings of suffering allow him to recognize and respond to Dorothea's with genuine compassion.

The third scene between Lydgate and Dorothea is even more intimate and adds to the emotional sympathy that has begun to develop between the two. Lydgate, who is called after Casaubon suffers a second heart attack, arrives to find he has two patients to care for: the unconscious Casaubon, who is approaching death, and Dorothea, who is emotionally shattered. The previous day, Casaubon had asked his wife to give her word that she would complete his life's work, his "Key to all Mythologies," if he should die before its publication. After deliberating all night, fully understanding the futility of the project and the many years of labor it would take to complete, Dorothea had prepared herself to make that disastrous vow to her husband. She had been on her way to tell him when she found him unconscious. She urges Lydgate to convey to Casaubon that she is ready to give her life over to

completing his work. Dorothea may be rambling, but she has definitely decided and urgently wants Casaubon to know her answer. The narrator reports that Dorothea knows Lydgate "and call[s] him by his name" and that she appears to think it right that she should explain everything to him, and again and again begs him to explain everything to her husband. "'Tell him I shall go to him soon; I am ready to promise. … Go and tell him.' But the silence in her husband's ear was never more to be broken" (3.48:318). Dorothea is saved from having to promise by the author's decision to end Casaubon's life before he can hear her vow. Although many critics view this plot device as unfittingly melodramatic in a realistic novel, I see this authorial rescue as a brilliantly appropriate way for Eliot to maintain the characters' psychological consistency. Lydgate had been moved by Dorothea's wifely devotion after her husband's first attack, but in this scene, the narrator doesn't explain Lydgate's response to Dorothea's resolute martyrdom, leaving the reader to assemble disparate clues.

A detail I had previously overlooked, and other readers seem not to have discussed, strikes me as noteworthy, if not hugely significant: that Lydgate appears to play a crucial role in rescuing Dorothea from her own self-sacrificing generosity. There is never any doubting Dorothea's sincerity, though she recognizes her husband's work as futile: "Bound by a pledge given from the depths of her pity," the narrator explains, "she would have been capable of undertaking a toil which her judgment whispered was vain for all uses except consecration of faithfulness which is a supreme use" (2.50:335). At this point, however, Dorothea is still unaware of something Lydgate detects, that Casaubon's request had been made out of "hidden alienation, of secrecy and suspicion" (2.50:335). Lydgate's intuition and insight into the Casaubons' marriage, the narrator proposes, "had enabled him to form some true conclusions concerning the trials of [Dorothea's] life" (2.50:332). Because he recognizes Dorothea as a person of integrity who will keep her vows, Lydgate perceives

Casaubon's request as a particularly cruel attempt "to keep his cold grasp on Dorothea's life" (2.50:335). As Lydgate attends at the bedsides of both Dorothea and Casaubon on the night Casaubon passes, Dorothea feels the urgent need to confess and "explain everything" to the sympathetic doctor. He feels deeply for her plight and understands the nature of her distress. If Lydgate had relayed Dorothea's insistent message to her husband that she was "ready to promise," she wouldn't have had to beg him "again and again" to go to her husband and "tell him" (2.48:318). Lydgate either does not deliver Dorothea's message or does not deliver it in time. Whether or not his failure to act is intentional, no further comment about it seems to be made by any character or by the narrator. Nevertheless, Lydgate's lack of response to Dorothea's request may have helped prevent her from sabotaging her future. Because the narrator reports on the scene of Casaubon's last night without revealing Lydgate's thoughts, the reader is seemingly invited to speculate on what motivates the doctor's apparent reluctance to act on the foolish entreaties of a woman he has grown to care about. Did Lydgate insist Dorothea stay in her own bed that night as her husband languished in another room? The narrator won't implicate him in any assertion whatsoever—he is described merely as a witness. How we interpret this scene, I think, reveals more about our own values than it does about the text itself. It is one of those intriguing little gaps in the narrative that keep readers invested in returning to *Middlemarch*. There is always the possibility that substantiating clues may be hidden in plain sight in another part of the novel, but that isn't as important as acknowledging that my new reading must be exposing a new interpretive bias I have brought to the novel this time that I didn't bring to previous readings. *Middlemarch*, remarkably, can sustain them all.

Along with his possible role in preventing Dorothea's capitulation to Casaubon's final request—one that would have conscripted the next fifteen years of her life—Lydgate's sympathetic understanding of Dorothea's miserable marriage redeems his character. There is one more scene of connection between Lydgate and Dorothea demonstrating his compassionate nature I find fascinating. After hearing that Lydgate plans to leave Middlemarch, Dorothea summons him to her home to inquire how her inheritance could benefit the hospital. As she waits for Lydgate, she thinks back on her own marital troubles and on what she has divined about his. She has also heard rumors that Lydgate

accepted a large loan from Mr. Bulstrode, the banker, as blackmail. That backstory isn't relevant to my point about Lydgate's character and his relationship to Dorothea. What matters is Dorothea's response to this rumor; she states matter-of- factly, "You would not do anything dishonorable," which was "the first assurance of belief in him that had fallen on Lydgate's ears" (3.76:351). Dorothea does not know Lydgate well, but they share two significant emotional moments and she trusts her instincts that his integrity matches her own. In response,

> … he gave himself up, for the first time in his life, to the exquisite sense of leaning entirely on a generous sympathy, without any check of proud reserve. And he told her everything. …
>
> "Why should I not tell you?—you know what sort of bond marriage is. You will understand everything." (3.76:353–57)

One of the reasons Lydgate's marriage had broken down was his unwillingness to communicate with his wife about their financial difficulties and about the stress it caused him. He had resorted to making prescriptive statements without listening to her or trying to work out a compromise together. It was apparently too late to resurrect Rosamond's love for him, but when Lydgate responds to Dorothea's implicit trust in him by telling her that he can't stand to see Rosamond miserable, he is signaling a momentous breakthrough in which he prioritizes his wife's feelings instead of his own. Lydgate confesses, "She married me without knowing what she was going into, and it might have been better for her if she had not married me" (3.76:357). It is the admission of a man who seems ready to change. The long conversation between Lydgate and Dorothea in this scene and the sympathetic moments of emotional connection they experienced in their previous interactions leads not to a romantic attachment but to a "fountain of friendship" in which Lydgate learns that "a man can make a friend of her" (3.76:362). He has come a long way from his initial objectification of women.

From alluring intellectual to abusive husband to compassionate friend, my readings of Lydgate have emphasized different aspects of his complex character depending, in part, on what was relevant in my own experience. And when I return to the novel, I will be a different person again, ready to discover different stratums and gradations in the temperaments and relationships of the characters and other aspects of George Eliot's masterpiece.

As I peruse my various editions of *Middlemarch*, I find I'm most attached to my old Norton, edited by Bert G. Hornback, too broken now to use but too precious to discard. Faded yellow highlighting and underlining along with notes in pencil and at least three different inks remind me of the physical and emotional spaces I inhabited as I read. These pages also bring back some of the layered associations I was making, usually subconsciously, with some of the novel's settings, circumstances, and characters. For example, in Dorothea there was some of my own enthusiastic shortsightedness; in Mary Garth, my daughter's studious sensibility; in Fred Vincy, my son's carefree optimism; and in Camden Farebrother, my husband's willingness to put others' recognition ahead of his own. *Middlemarch*, for me, includes all of this and still holds the promise of more because it invites readers to consider the important, always open-ended questions in life. How do people understand themselves? What motivates them? Why do they make the mistakes they do? And most of all, what can we learn from their stories? I am fortunate to have discovered "my Victorian novel," *Middlemarch*, a brilliant work of art that continues to surprise, delight, and teach me, and no doubt will reward the scrutiny of another thirty-five years or so. It's that glorious.

Notes

1. Emily Dickinson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, letter number 389.
2. George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, vol. 1, chap. 2, p. 30. I cite here the standard version for citations, the Cabinet edition, which represents Eliot's final corrections to Blackwood's 1871–1872 edition. Further references to volume, chapter, and page number will be given parenthetically. This edition is available online at the *George Eliot Archive*: https://georgeeliotarchive.org/.

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