Ellie Feis

19th Century Married Women's Rights, Feminism, and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* was a tremendous success, both financially and critically, when it was first published in Britain in 1871-2 and it remains a staple of Victorian literature classes today. It tells the psychologically realistic story of two disastrous marriages, Dorothea's and Rosamond's. From the first, readers have judged the heroine Dorothea as a victim whose idealism caused her tragic error, whereas they have judged Rosamond as the perpetrator of her ruined marriage to Lydgate. The women have always been read as opposites. Even today, critics continue to emphasize the women's differences. A closer look at the dynamics of these two marriages, however, will show that they have much more in common than has been previously acknowledged. Both are psychologically accurate portraits of women responding to domestic violence in which their husbands coercively assume all control, and they are both portraits of the coping strategies of disenfranchised wives. By telling the story of two women who are different in personality, but who are alike in their experiences of marital abuse, Eliot implies that abuse could be universal. Through these relationships, Eliot calls for a reform in the system of marriage and an improvement in women's rights.

In *Middlemarch,* Eliot shows the most common form of marital violence, wherein the husband is the primary aggressor and the wife is the abused party. Dorothea is the more obvious victim in the novel. First, Casaubon abuses Dorothea by refusing to let her express her own opinions; he only wants the company of Dorothea if she incessantly worships him and his work and serves him as an assistant. Casaubon's unwillingness to assign any but the most menial tasks to his intelligent young wife is painful and humiliating for her. She wanted to contribute something more substantial to his work. Instead, she has to deny "everything in herself except

the desire to enter into some fellowship with her husband's chief interests" (Eliot 129). Casaubon's control over Dorothea is best described by Celia, who observes that Dorothea "had wonderfully good notions about…things. But now Casaubon takes her up entirely" (Eliot 238). In her marriage, Dorothea has to sacrifice everything, but Casaubon is indifferent to her submission because he simply expects it from her. Dorothea's constant denial of self, and Casaubon's burdensome expectations of her, shows that Casaubon keeps Dorothea in emotional slavery.

Casaubon's abuse is far worse than simply disappointing her reasonable expectations that she would be able to partner with him in his intellectual endeavors; he also shuts her out of his emotional life and is thoroughly insensitive to her and her feelings. He ignores her completely. Andrew Dowling remarks that the silence between Dorothea and Casaubon "operates as one of the most powerful signs of alienation" (322). This lack of attention causes Dorothea to suffer intensely. The narrator remarks that "if he would have held her hands between his and listened with the delight of tenderness and understanding, and would have given her the same sort of intimacy in return" or "if he would have made any other sign of acceptance," then Dorothea would have been able to overcome the other injustices that Casaubon had committed towards her (Eliot 127). All she wants is to have an emotional connection with the man she married, and to feel validated and loved. Dorothea is only free to express emotion, however, "as soon as she…[is] securely alone" (Eliot 130). She asks herself, "What have I done—what am I—that he should treat me so? He never knows what is in my mind—he never cares" (Eliot 265). Casaubon dictates what emotions she can or cannot express. The fact that Casaubon makes her feel unsafe, unloved, and exiled clearly shows that he is emotionally manipulative.

However, it is often argued that the narrator is overly biased towards Dorothea. Some sympathy is justly earned for Casaubon, who suspects that his work may be obsolete. He had hoped for a simple-minded wife from whom he would receive the "uncritical awe of an elegant-minded canary-bird" (Eliot 128). It is also true that they both suffer when they realize their spouse does not live up to their expectations. The difference in their relative suffering, however, is that Casaubon intentionally harms Dorothea. He planned to exercise complete control even before he married Dorothea. He had "observed with pleasure that Miss Brooke showed an ardent submissive affection which promised to fulfil his most agreeable previsions of marriage" (Eliot 40-41). His malicious intent is further shown when he writes his will, systematically strategizing to exercise control over Dorothea even after his death. His demands have exhausted her, and his coercive control fatigues Dorothea to the point where she nearly agrees "to say 'Yes' to her own doom: she was too weak, too full of dread at the thought of inflicting a keen-edged blow on her husband, to do anything but submit completely" (Eliot 298). In these ways, Casaubon has infected every single part of her being, and positioned himself as the dictator of his wife's actions. Although both Casaubon and Dorothea are disillusioned by their choice of spouse, Casaubon's intentional neglect, coercive control, and active emotional abuse of Dorothea is meant to illustrate the secret evil of domestic violence.

Casaubon's infliction upon Dorothea injures her psychologically, and this abuse causes her personality to change dramatically. When we first see Dorothea, she is optimistic, strong in her beliefs, and eager to change the world around her. After marriage, she becomes a dark shadow of her former self. Barbara Hardy describes Dorothea as being "forced from the centre to the periphery, from the dream of self which filled the world to a reduced consciousness" (262). She finally speaks of the effect that Casaubon's abuse had on her when she confesses to

Will Ladislaw "Sorrow comes in so many ways. Two years ago I had no notion…of the unexpected way in which trouble comes, and ties our hands, and makes us silent when we long to speak" (Eliot 337). Dorothea depicts her role as a wife as being similar to slavery. Specifically, Dorothea's description of how her hands were bound suggests she is incapable of escaping, and her admission that she must be silent though she longs to speak indicates that she has been compelled to silence about her pain, though she has experienced unspeakable despair. This experience resonates with her throughout the rest of *Middlemarch*, and even after Casaubon dies, she still feels guilty about not finishing his work. The traumas of the evils that were committed towards her prevent her from being the person that she was before marriage; "Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth" (Eliot 515). Dorothea spent all her emotional strength on submitting to Casaubon. He stole her innocence and determination, and in doing so, psychologically alters Dorothea for the rest of her life. George Eliot may reward her for her endurance of a miserable marriage with a superior marriage to Will Ladislaw, but she is irrevocably damaged, and is never again the bright, ambitious, and socially conscious modern day Saint Theresa we met in the novel's opening.

Rosamond, although completely different in personality from Dorothea, is also an example of a woman who suffers from marital abuse. However, unlike Dorothea, Rosamond is usually not seen as a victim. The narrator is quick to view Dorothea as saintly because she decides to endure abuse, and is quick to condemn Rosamond as spoiled and uncaring because she stands up for herself and refuses to listen to Lydgate. Although Rosamond's determination to make her own decisions would be seen as empowering today, the narrator decries them as appalling. Here is an instance in which the narrator's rhetoric belies the story she tells, a

narrative technique Bernard Paris suggests reveals the author's own internal conflicts and defense strategies. The narrator's bias often clouds the reader's judgement of Rosamond; she is reduced to nothing but a spoiled child who is only upset because she has not gotten everything she wants. Peter Winnington argues that Rosamond displays all of the characteristics of a narcissist, and many critics and the narrator agree. But this judgment of her is not entirely justified. There is a break in the narrator's bias when she asks the reader to "Think no unfair evil of her [Rosamond]…she had no wicked plots, nothing sordid or mercenary… she never thought of money except as something necessary which other people would always provide. She was not in the habit of devising falsehoods" and she "intended to please" (Eliot 169). Had Rosamond been submissive, the abuse she experiences would have been sympathized with as much as Dorothea's. Doreen Thierauf is one of the few scholars who notices that "Rosamond is a flawed character precisely because she does not give up her aspirations when her marriage comes under critical pressure" (481). But Thierauf does not push this interpretation to its logical conclusion—that Rosamond's resistance to abuse is contrasted unfairly with Dorothea's submission by a narrator who clearly supports the later response. Regardless of what Rosamond's personality is, and how the narrator views her abuse, Lydgate's attitudes toward and treatment of his wife cannot be justified.

Lydgate intends to make every decision for Rosamond from the start, and even tells her that "surely I am the person to judge for you" (Eliot 361). And judge he does in every aspect of Rosamond's life. First, he does not allow her to make a decision to ride on horseback, to which she defies him and angers him further. Although his judgement was correct, and horseback riding caused Rosamond to miscarry, it emphasizes the lack of power and rights that Rosamond has and how Lydgate attempts to take away her ability to judge for herself. Next, he delays

telling her that there is an issue at all with their debt—simply because he "wished to save her from any perturbation" (Eliot 290). Even though Lydgate may tell himself that he simply does not want to upset her, his resolute silence about their increasing debt is due to the fact that he believes that it is entirely his responsibility to deal with the family finances. When Rosamond does discover their debt, he does not allow her to do anything to fix the situation because he cannot suffer the injury to his pride. He is perfectly comfortable with letting Rosamond suffer humiliation from the debt, but he refuses to let her help remedy the situation. His shame causes him to blame Rosamond's for their debt, when he actually deserves the blame.

Lydgate's behavior was actually quite common in Eliot's time. A. James Hammerton writes that, "Husbands routinely accused their wives of extravagance with the housekeeping money, and wives answered that their husbands were unreasonably parsimonious in providing money for household expenses which they did not understand" (278). Rather than accept the blame for his own faults, Lydgate blames Rosamond's expensive taste, which she has been taught to cultivate all her life. He plays the victim, saying that Rosamond has ruined his chances of a successful career as a physician, when Rosamond is the person who suffers the most from their situation. She has no work, nothing in her life other than being a wife, and she is the one who has to shoulder humiliation from her peers. He allows her no choice but to remain helpless, though she is understandably resentful at this mistreatment and she begins to hate Lydgate for repressing her. Lydgate abuses his wife by expecting she will submissively entertain and live for his pleasure after they are married, by physically threatening her when he is angry that she is showing independence, and by refusing to let her have any input in their mutual financial crisis.

Ostensibly, the narrator portrays Lydgate as the victim in the marriage, and Rosamond as the abuser. However, upon closer examination, Lydgate is found to have abusive qualities. In

fact, this behavior is nearly as abusive as Casaubon's. Lydgate has more unreasonable expectations and demands on Rosamond. He is angry that Rosamond is not "an accomplished mermaid…singing her song for the relaxation of his adored wisdom alone" (Eliot 360). He is deeply upset that she has failed to be submissive, for "he was prepared to be indulgent towards feminine weakness, but not towards feminine dictation" (Eliot 402). Like Casaubon, Lydgate wants a quiet, complacent being to call his wife, and he deliberately coerces and attempts to control Rosamond's behavior. He decides to whom she can and cannot write; he commands when she will or will not ride her horse. Moreover, he will not entertain any of her reasonable suggestions for how they might be able to pay off their debts. When Rosamond does not live up to Lydgate's expectations, he becomes so angry that "he wanted to smash and grind some object on which he could at least produce an impression, or else to tell her brutally that he was master, and she must obey" (Eliot 408). Even though Lydgate may say Rosamond manipulates him, he knows that he is in the position of authority. Rosamond even remarks that "Tertius is so angry and impatient if I say anything," which implies that she is forced to remain silent (Eliot 490). Lydgate may be typical in his role of authoritative nineteenth-century husband, but by showing that even an admirable man bullies his wife into submission, Eliot is criticizing the institution of marriage itself.

Through the depictions of Dorothea and Rosamond's marriages, Eliot gives insight into what marriage was like for women during the 19th century. Even though Dorothea and Rosamond are different in personality, they both suffer from abuse and are faced with the reality of submitting their opinions and their own aspirations to the guidance of their husbands. They both are able understand each other's pain and suffering, and after the conversation in which Dorothea tells of her troubles in marriage and convinces Rosamond to stay with Lydgate, and

Rosamond tells Dorothea the truth about Ladislaw, they both "clasped each other as if they had been in a shipwreck" (Eliot 491). The feeling of disappointment, of living in an emotional hell is common. Although Eliot does depict a few couples who are happy in their marriage, such as the Mary Garth and Fred Vincy and Caleb and Susan Garth, she decides to make two sorrowful marriages her main focus. These happy relationships only serve as a contrast to emphasize Dorothea, Rosamond, and even Mrs. Bulstrode's disastrous marriages. By having two women of completely different personalities both go through similar disappointment, Eliot shows that marital suffering was not limited any one type of woman; regardless of background or education, married women were faced routinely with harsh realities that forced them to submit their self-will to their controlling husbands.

However, it is because of this depiction of Dorothea and Rosamond's abuse that Eliot receives criticism over her choice to portray the women in *Middlemarch* as victims. Zelda Austen explains that "Feminist critics are angry with George Eliot because she did not permit Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* to do what George Eliot did in real life: translate, publish articles…refuse to marry until she was middle-aged, [and] live…openly with a man whom she could not marry" (549). However, to show Dorothea transcending her situation and her psychological injuries would be to violate the theme of realism emphasized throughout *Middlemarch* and indeed through all of Eliot's *oeuvre*. Rachel Mroz writes that "Eliot's focusing on their [the character's] human condition allows readers to connect with each character's situation. This attachment…enables Eliot to present a convincingly real world and enables her novel to convey the essential truths about human nature…the women in Eliot's novel…are faced with the same life decisions and responsibilities as the women in Victorian society." Rosamond's disastrous marriage also promotes a change in the marital system. Rosamond is the

portrait of a perfect late-19th century woman; she is refined, talented, and beautiful, and raised to be a wife. She is the kind of women that many would expect to be content in marriage. And yet, even she is bothered by her lack of rights and her inability to speak or pursue her own interests. By showing that a woman like Rosamond suffers in marriage, Eliot implies that there is something wrong with the way that women in society are treated in marriage as a whole, and that there is a lack of education about what to expect in marriage. Through Dorothea and Rosamond's limitation and psychological abuse, Eliot criticizes marriage's role in the life of a woman, and by doing so, she promotes the concept of women's rights.

Works Cited

Austen, Zelda. "Why Feminist Critics Are Angry with George Eliot." *College English* 37.6 (1976): 549-61. *JSTOR.* Web. 24 Aug. 2015.

Dowling, Andrew. "'The Other Side of Silence': Matrimonial Conflict and the Divorce Court in George Eliot's Fiction." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 50.3 (1995): 322-36. *JSTOR.* Web. 6 Sept. 2015.

Eliot, George. *Middlemarch*. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2000. Print.

Hammerton, A. James. "Victorian Marriage and the Law of Matrimonial Cruelty." *Victorian Studies* 33.2 (1990): 269-92. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 25 Sept. 2015.

Hardy, Barbara. "The Moment of Disenchantment in George Eliot's Novels." *The Review of English Studies* 5.19 (1954): 256-64. *JSTOR.* Web. 6 Sept. 2015.

Mroz, Rachel. "George Eliot's Complex Characters in *Middlemarch*." *The Victorian Web.* N.p., 18 Aug. 2004. Web. 27 Aug. 2015.

Paris, Bernard J. *Imagined Human Beings: A Psychological Approach to Character and Conflict in Literature.* New York: NYU Press, 1997. *EBSCO.* Web. 25 Sept. 2015.

Thierauf, Doreen. "The Hidden Abortion Plot in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*." *Victorian Studies* 56.3 (2014): 479-89. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 27 Aug. 2015.

Winnington, Peter G. "The Narcissism of Rosamond Vincy." *The Victorian Web.* N.p., 1 Dec. 2014. Web. 27 Aug. 2015.