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Sympathy, Love  
and Marriage:  
Effective  
Reform in  
*Middlemarch*

Hudson Institute  
1015 15th Street, N.W.  
Sixth Floor  
Washington, DC 20005  
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Amy A. Kass

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## Sympathy, Love and Marriage: Effective Reform in *Middlemarch*\*

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It is a great pleasure to be with you this morning and a great boost to the spirit to be in the company of so many people interested in *Middlemarch*, especially in an age that favors the quick, the short, and the new, and that—alas, even in universities— fails to appreciate the value of long great books. The virtue of a long book is precisely that it occupies us for a really long time: time not merely to visit but also to inhabit a different world; time not merely to meet but also to befriend and understand new kinds of people; time not merely to imagine novel decisions but also to live with their consequences. In a word, reading a long great book enables one to live feelingly outside of oneself. For those who teach as a vocation, not just as a job, there is no better gift one can give one's students.

Few books, in my experience, better serve these purposes than *Middlemarch*. In fact, doubly so. For dwelling with *Middlemarch* does for the reader what the novel does for its characters, fulfilling George Eliot's central purpose: to educate us, just as she does her characters, *in the importance and efficacy of sympathetic activity*.

George Eliot wrote *Middlemarch*, between 1869 and 1872, shortly after the passage (in 1867) of Britain's second major reform bill. But she set the novel thirty years earlier, during the time of great national struggle that led to the first Reform Bill (passed in 1832), which radically enlarged the franchise and thus transformed the social and political landscape of Britain. We cannot be certain why she did so. Some have speculated that Eliot used this strategy to show that political reform and evolution,

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however progressive and responsive to the radical changes wrought by the industrial revolution, necessarily proceed with “near-Darwinian slowness.” But I suspect that she is teaching a different lesson: the limited capacity of legislation—or of any *merely rational* program of top-down “reform”—to radically alter and improve the human condition, and also, therefore, the permanent necessity, for any truly humane existence, of her own humanizing narrative activity.

The chief obstacles to social reform and the major source of human misery are not external circumstances but the inborn egoism of the human soul. As Eliot’s narrator pointedly says, “We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves”(XXI.135/198).<sup>\*</sup> And, she poignantly observes: “Anyone 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” (XI.61/88). Through these and other such assertions, Eliot turns our attention not only to the conditions of her characters but also to *our own* habits of heart—our *attitudes, prejudices, and sensibilities*. Throughout the novel, she addresses the insufficiency of legislation by beseeching us to examine ourselves: to bear witness against our own egoism, to sympathize with other “centres of self,” and to transform our “frozen stares.” Eliot’s clever account of history, then, not only highlights the indispensability of small deeds to accomplish historical ends. It tacitly teaches that effective public reform depends first and last on *personal* reform, which politics cannot itself produce.

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<sup>\*</sup> All references are to chapters and pages in both Bert G. Hornback, editor, *Middlemarch* (Norton Critical Edition, Second Edition, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2000), and David Carroll, editor (Oxford World’s Classics, Oxford University Press, 1996).

In *Middlemarch*, sympathetic actions are repeatedly seen to be more effective than rational argument. Consider, for example, Lydgate's willingness to stand with the publicly shamed Bulstrode; or Farebrother's assistance to Fred Vincy in wooing Mary Garth; or Caleb Garth's rescue of Fred from becoming a clergyman; or Harriet Bulstrode's loyalty to her husband. But it is in her heroine, Dorothea Brooke, that Eliot's summons to sympathy is most fully realized—indeed sympathy is elevated to the status of a vocation, but it is also most fiercely tried. Living through Dorothea's various turns and torments, we learn most vividly what sympathy requires and how it can be rendered effective. A full account would examine at least three of Dorothea's illuminating interactions: with the Reverend Edward Casaubon, with Rosamond Vincy, and with Will Ladislaw. Today, we have time only for the first and last. Careful examination of these two relationships, through close working of the text, will show the connection between the vocation of sympathy and the institution of marriage, and indicate how loving marriage can contribute at once to the true reform of personal moral stupidity, to personal happiness, and also to social progress.

### **I. Misguided Longings and The *Germ* of Sympathy: Dorothea and Casaubon**

The Prelude to *Middlemarch* begins with a rhetorical question: "Who that cares much to know the history of man, and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time, has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the life of St. Theresa?" (Prelude, 3) Straightaway, George Eliot subtly invites us into her activity, by assuming that we too care about the history of the "mysterious mixture" that is human nature. More importantly for our purposes, she draws our attention to a singular historical paradigm,

the one that her heroine in the story that follows most closely resembles: St. Theresa, a 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Christian mystic, successful reformer of the Carmelite order, and author of a widely influential spiritual autobiography. Dorothea Brooke is a “later-born” St. Theresa, who like the original has a “passionate, ideal nature.” Dorothea countenances no frivolity, and her “ardently willing soul” yearns to do something lofty, to live a “life beyond self.” But unlike Theresa, Dorothea finds herself in unpropitious circumstances: not in Medieval Spain but in the parish of Tipton; not in an age of confident Christian piety, but in a time that has no “coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge.” Unlike Theresa, the Dorothea we meet at the outset is utterly alone and bereft of fellowship, in a position that bars her from doing significant work. Why, then, does Eliot invite this seemingly fruitless comparison? Let us file away this question for the end, as we examine first Dorothea’s career.

When we first meet the orphaned, not yet twenty-year-old Dorothea Brooke, she is living with her foolish, misogynistic uncle and her too amiable and conventional sister. A young woman who would eagerly trade shining jewels for spiritual joy, Dorothea applies her efforts, futilely, first, to the establishment of a school for the children in the village, then to improving the design of cottages for the poor. Lacking in guidance and opportunity for herself, and enamored of intensity and greatness, she rashly embraces the first man who appears capable of leading her to a life filled with “action at once rational and ardent.” Accepting his proposal of marriage even before it is proffered, Dorothea becomes the wife of a man thirty years her senior: the dusty, spare, pale and pedantic, perversely proud yet incurably insecure cleric, Reverend Edward Casaubon, life-long scholar and would-be author of the “Key to all Mythologies.”

Had Casaubon not met Dorothea, we are told, he “would presumably have gone on to the last without any attempt to lighten his solitariness.” But meet her he does, and on scant acquaintance, woos, proposes, and marries her. On his own dry amorous reckoning, he perceives in Dorothea a “rare combination of elements both solid and attractive, adapted to supply aid in graver labours and to cast a charm over vacant hours” (V.28/40). Although their reasons for marrying differ significantly, each idealizes the other while looking mainly for selfish advantage from the marriage.

Casaubon will be disabused of his illusions even before the knot is tied, Dorothea, very soon thereafter. Casaubon’s disenchantment, stemming from both his pride and his insecurity, is prompted by the very things that first attracted him to Dorothea: her rare combination of youthful vigor and profound seriousness. He becomes colder, more arrogant, and more overtly dismissive of Dorothea’s interests and opinions, yet, at the same time, also more jealous of her adoration and esteem. He both pushes her away yet seeks to hold her tight. His true colors are first revealed already during their honeymoon in Rome, when he deposits Dorothea all alone in the Vatican Museum and goes off to do his research on ancient fertility gods. As we see her standing forlornly beside the statue of Ariadne, we realize that her would-be savior is no better than the abandoning hero Theseus, or perhaps even the devouring Minotaur he had slain.

But the shattering of Dorothea’s illusions takes an altogether different turn. As her tour guide through Rome’s many labyrinthine marvels, Casaubon, always bored and clearly acting only from duty, succeeds only in making Rome seem “stupendous[ly] fragmentary” and impenetrable. And spending many solitary hours at his scholarship, he makes himself seem more cold and remote. Dorothea’s chance meeting with Casaubon’s

cousin, Will Ladislaw, makes evident Casaubon's lifelessness; Will's "young equality" and "openness to conviction" make evident the sterility of her marriage. But even more disheartening is the "annihilating pinch" Ladislaw administers to Dorothea's expectations about her new husband's scholarly aspirations. Almost off-handedly but leaving no doubt, he tells her that Casaubon's scholarship is already outdated, and that his lifetime of devoted efforts will come to naught. Her illusions punctured, Dorothea is forced to confront her own foolishness, and no one would blame her had she chosen to flee. But when Casaubon arrives just moments after Will's revelations, she takes his side.

Dorothea is alarmed, but on Casaubon's behalf. For the first time in her relation to her husband, she is "stirred to pitying tenderness." Rather than disdain him, she turns toward him more than ever before. Eliot emphasizes the great significance of this turning:

Dorothea had early begun to emerge from [moral] stupidity, yet it had been easier [even for] her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr. Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling . . . that *he* had an *equivalent centre of self*, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference. (Emphasis added, XXI.135/198)

Just at this moment, fed by the reality of Casaubon's lot, this supremely unselfish character discovers that *she* had been thinking too self-centeredly: why, *he too* has a center of self, with its own aspirations and needs, hopes and sorrows. Thus, although Casaubon persists in his previous self-absorption, Dorothea resolves to see sympathetically and feelingly. Little did she know what it would take, and Eliot is too much the realist not to show us.

Fast-forward several months. The Casaubons are back home at Lowick. Dorothea has tried ardently to find new ways to do her duty, to express her vitality, and to enliven Casaubon's morbidity. But utterly unsuspecting by nature, she is blind-sided by the

jealous anger that a letter from Will Ladislav produces in Casaubon. Unable to “stride the blast” of her husband’s sudden bad temper, they argue and she stomps out. But when, in the immediate aftermath, Casaubon suffers a heart attack, Dorothea, both remorseful and resolute, redoubles her efforts to serve her husband. Casaubon, for his part, redoubles only his suspicions, eventually regarding it as his “duty” to hinder any designs, real or imaginary, that Will Ladislav might have on Dorothea or her inheritance—a “duty” which eventuates in the codicil he adds to his will. But when Casaubon learns from Dr. Lydgate a few months later of the mortal gravity of his illness, his self-absorption and his cruelty toward his wife immediately reach new heights.

“When the commonplace ‘We must all die’ transforms itself suddenly into the acute consciousness ‘I must die—and soon,’” Eliot notes, “then death grapples us, and his fingers are cruel.” But unlike many others in similar circumstances, “Casaubon’s immediate desire was not for divine communion and light divested of earthly conditions; *his* passionate longings, poor man, clung low and mist-like in very shady places” (Emphasis added, XLII.264/394). It is here that Dorothea’s true agony begins. For only now does she understand how *difficult* it is *genuinely* to care for another “centre of self.” Only now does sympathy become her vocation. As with her earlier misguided longings, so here with her call to sympathy, Dorothea’s ardent passions will be painfully educated. Because of its crucial importance, I will examine this scene most carefully.

## **II. The *Education* of Sympathy: Dorothea’s Night of Agony**

Rightly intuiting what Dr. Lydgate had told Casaubon, Dorothea, concerned about her husband’s fragility yet protective of his pride, waits for the right moment to approach



him. As she sees him advance, she cautiously moves toward him. To another man, her look and gesture—respectful and compassionate—might have represented, Eliot notes, “a heaven-sent angel coming with a promise that the short hours remaining should yet be filled with that faithful love which clings the closer to a comprehended grief” (XLII. 264/398). But not to Casaubon. His already cold and shriveled soul shrank still more: “His glance in reply to hers was so chill that she felt her timidity increased” (264-5/398). Even so, she persists, turning toward him and passing her hand through his arm. But Casaubon also persists, keeping his hands behind him and “allow[ing] her pliant arm to cling with difficulty against his rigid arm.” Their macabre “dance” continues:

Dorothea did not withdraw her arm, but she could not venture to speak. Mr. Casaubon did not say, “I wish to be alone,” but he directed his steps in silence towards the house, and as they entered by the glass door . . . Dorothea withdrew her arm and lingered on the matting, that she might leave her husband quite free. He entered the library and shut himself in alone with his sorrow.” (XLII.265/399)

Anticipating our disbelief of Casaubon’s hard-heartedness, Eliot asks “why, in the name of manliness, Mr. Casaubon should have behaved in that way,” and offers this suggestion:

Consider that his was a mind which shrank from pity; have you ever watched in such a mind the effect of a suspicion that what is pressing it as a grief may be really a source of contentment, either actual or future, to the being who already offends by pitying? Besides, he knew little of Dorothea’s sensations, and had not reflected that on such an occasion as the present they were comparable in strength to his own sensibilities. (XLII.265/399)

A self-centered man, incapable of sympathy, distrusts and rejects those who offer it to him.

More important for *our* purposes are the effects that Casaubon's ruthless rejection now produces in *Dorothea*—a descent into the abyss, followed by a spiritual “conversion.” We follow closely its several stages.

She went up to her boudoir. . . . She threw herself on a chair, not heeding that she was in the dazzling sun-rays: if there were discomfort in that, how could she tell that it was not part of her inward misery?

She was in the reaction of a rebellious anger stronger than any she had felt since her marriage. Instead of tears there came words:—

“What have I done—what am I—that he should treat me so? He never knows what is in my mind—he never cares. What is the use of anything I do? He wishes he had never married me.” (XLII.265/399)

Contrasting Dorothea's indifference to the dazzling sun with her attention to her own burning anger, Eliot exposes the abyss of marital estrangement into which Dorothea is falling. Yet as she gives words to her anger and self-pity—“What have *I* done . . . What is the use of anything *I* do?”—Dorothea, astonishingly, “began to hear herself, and was checked into stillness.”

But although censoring her words, her silence does not calm her soul.

Like one who has lost his way and is weary, she sat and saw as in one glance all the paths of her young hope, which she should never find again. And just as clearly in the miserable light she saw her own and her husband's solitude—how they walked apart so that she was obliged to survey him. If he had drawn her towards him, she would never have surveyed him—never have said, “Is he worth living for?” but would have felt him simply a part of her own life. Now she said bitterly, “It is his fault, not mine.” In the jar of her whole being, Pity was overthrown. Was it her fault that she had believed in him—had believed in his worthiness?—And what, exactly, was he?—She was able enough to estimate him—she who waited on his glances with trembling, and shut her best soul in prison, paying it only hidden visits, that she might be petty enough to please him. (XLII.265/399-400)

Falling still further, Dorothea's anger has turned to bitterness, not only toward Casaubon but also toward herself. Tormented by the fact that her own best feelings can never be revealed, her earlier self-pity turns to resentment. Abandoning her true nature, she

becomes utterly pitiless. “In such a crisis as this,” Eliot understatedly concludes, “some women begin to hate.” Dorothea’s hatred is palpable.

The sun was low when Dorothea was thinking that she would not go down again, but would send a message to her husband saying that she was not well and preferred remaining up-stairs. She had never deliberately allowed her resentment to govern her in this way before, but she believed now that she could not see him again without telling him the truth about her feeling, and she must wait till she could do it without interruption. He might wonder and be hurt at her message. It was good that he should wonder and be hurt. Her anger said, as anger is apt to say, that God was with her—that all heaven, though it were crowded with spirits watching them, must be on her side. (XLII.265-266/400)

At this moment, Dorothea becomes more like her husband than ever before, in fact, she out-Casaubons Casaubon. She not only calculates how best to take revenge. She dresses up her self-righteousness in spiritual garments and readies herself to gain satisfaction. But, as we quickly learn, she is denied the chance. Casaubon sends word that he will dine alone that night, and she retires for the evening, even forgoing dinner. Dorothea’s budding sense of agency Casaubon nips in the bud, leaving her, we imagine, more angry, more resentful, and utterly humiliated.

But Dorothea’s native nobility cannot allow these ugly passions to triumph.

Dorothea sat motionless in her meditative struggle, while the evening deepened into night. But the struggle changed continually, as that of a man who begins with a movement towards striking and ends with *conquering* his desire to strike. The energy that would animate a crime is not more than is wanted to inspire a resolved submission, when the noble habit of the soul reasserts itself. That thought with which Dorothea had gone out to meet her husband—her conviction that he had been asking about the possible arrest of all his work, and that the answer must have wrung his heart, could not be long without rising beside the image of him, like a shadowy monitor looking at her anger with sad remonstrance. It cost her a litany of pictured sorrows and of silent cries that she might be the mercy for those sorrows—but the resolved submission did come; and when the house was still, and she knew that it was near the time when Mr. Casaubon habitually went to rest, she opened her door gently and stood outside in the darkness waiting for his coming up-stairs with a light in his hand. If he did not come soon she thought that she would go down and even risk incurring another

pang. She would never again *expect* anything else. (Emphasis added, XLII.266/400-1)

In the end, Dorothea's "meditative struggle" enables her not only to hear and silence herself, but also to upbraid, contest, and finally conquer her-self. The rebellious demons in her soul give way to its more "noble habit." If virtue or goodness ultimately requires conscious self-overcoming, one can say that, during this ordeal, the ever-dutiful Dorothea newly manifests her real virtue. She does not react reflexively, she "resolves" consciously—she chooses—to submit. Indeed, as a result of her agony, something more extraordinary—even miraculous—seems to have happened: the stirrings of sympathy she first felt for her husband in Rome now return full force. Dorothea recognizes and willingly heeds the call to genuine sympathy, now fully aware of what it demands, and even more, of its possibilities for good. Beginning with this vocational moment, sympathy thereafter becomes and remains her calling.

Prior to her marriage, Dorothea's philanthropic efforts, all rationally planned, were governed by her own visions of what the less fortunate should need and want. Post-marriage, thanks first to her disappointment with Casaubon, then to his sudden illness, and, most forcefully now, to her own inner torment, Dorothea acquires a wholly different perspective on doing good. Her personal torment teaches her that a person's misery of soul is every bit as painful as bodily hunger and poverty. Looking away both from herself and from Casaubon's fragile body, Dorothea is now able to look directly at *his* dark and contorted *soul*. Realizing how wrenching Lydgate's grim tidings must have been for him, she resolves to act on her desire to assuage the pain. "It cost her," Eliot comments, "a litany of pictured sorrows and silent cries that she might be the mercy for [Casaubon's] sorrows—but the resolved submission did come." Dorothea, in effect, resolves to be a

mother of mercy, and to live out her once-stated creed: “That by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don’t quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil—widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower” (XXXIX.244/367).

As the night continues to advance, and the house was still, Dorothea rises to her vocation. Surrendering all expectations yet arming herself with hope, Dorothea stands outside her door in the darkness and waits for Casaubon to come up-stairs to bed. Marvel of marvels, her efforts are more than repaid.

[S]he did hear the library door open, and slowly the light advanced up the staircase without noise from the footsteps on the carpet. When her husband stood opposite to her, she saw that his face was more haggard. He started slightly on seeing her, and she looked up at him beseechingly, without speaking.

“Dorothea!” he said, with a gentle surprise in his tone. “Were you waiting for me?”

“Yes, I did not like to disturb you.”

“Come, my dear, come. You are young, and need not to extend your life by watching.”

And as if to dispel cynical misinterpretation, Eliot adds: “When the kind quiet melancholy of that speech fell on Dorothea’s ears, she felt something like the thankfulness that might well up in us if we had narrowly escaped hurting a lamed creature. She put her hand into her husband’s, and they went along the broad corridor together” (XLII.266/401).

This is undoubtedly the finest moment in Dorothea’s marriage to Casaubon. But how to explain it? How to explain how this man, so pre-occupied by fear and sorrow, so full of self-pity, so racked by jealousy and suspicion, and already planning the codicil to his will—his last ditch effort to possess Dorothea, even from the grave—can suddenly be so gentle and kind? Let me hazard an explanation.

Some are inclined to attribute Casaubon's unlikely tenderness to Dorothea's "moral seductiveness." But this really begs the question: What is it that makes her morally seductive? What makes him—what will make others—so susceptible? It is, I suggest, the contagious effect of her genuine sympathy, expressed feelingly between equal and equally vulnerable centers of self.

If Casaubon earlier mistook Dorothea's gestures as condescending or saw his grief as a source of pleasure to her, he cannot do so now. Taken by surprise, and finding her "looking up at him beseechingly," he cannot mistake her sympathy for gloating. Her silent, patient, and watchful presence, in the cold dark stairwell, cannot possibly be taken as offensive. If Casaubon had earlier thought little, if at all, about Dorothea's feelings, or worse, found them utterly inferior to his own, he cannot do so now. He recognizes that *she* is waiting, that *she* is watching, and that *she* is a creature equal in fragility—a person whose neediness mirrors his own. The "quiet melancholy" of his beseeching speech—"Come, my dear, come"—his gentle and seemingly genuine solicitude—"You are young [Dorothea], and need not to extend your life by watching"—and his readiness now to walk with her hand-in-hand manifest his recognition and gracious acceptance of sympathy.

Dorothea's moral seductiveness, here and elsewhere, stems from her prodigious capacity for sympathy, from her genuine capacity not only to feel together with another human being but also to locate—and to see the world from—someone else's center of self. For many people, "sympathy" means imagining *oneself* migrating into and inhabiting the soul and suffering of one's neighbor, and then acting to mitigate his troubles as *you* would want them mitigated. Dorothea's deeper sympathy, in contrast,

rests on her extraordinary ability imaginatively and feelingly to inhabit her neighbor's soul *as he inhabits it*, feeling his—not her own—hopes and fears, aspirations and concerns, joys and sorrows. The tacit maxim of Dorothea's new philanthropy is not "love your neighbor as yourself," but rather "love your neighbor as himself." It is this ability and outlook that will enable many other people whom she touches, to "change their lights"; it is this ability and outlook that will enable her to save Lydgate's marriage and will move the supremely self-absorbed Rosamond to forget her own pride and envy for a moment—and to repay her in kind. If such genuine sympathy has the power to be so transformative, can we doubt its promise or its more enduring efficacy if it were practiced more regularly and more generally?

But there is also a danger in Dorothea's superior kind of sympathy: Her ability to adopt the other person's standpoint, and to conform her actions only to that person's needs, can easily lead to utter self-denial, and self-sacrifice. Thus, when Casaubon next asks Dorothea "to let him know, whether, in case of [his] death, she will carry out his wishes: whether [she] will avoid doing what he should deprecate, and apply [herself] to what he should desire" (XLVIII.296/448-49), Dorothea, after another night in agony, resolves to submit. Although she knows the uselessness of Casaubon's scholarship, and suspects *for the first time* that he may demand even more from her than he had asked, the call of sympathy, in the end, subdues all other voices: Dorothea "could not smite the stricken soul that entreated hers" (XLVIII.299/452). Her act of self-sacrifice is averted only because Eliot as providence intervenes. Before Dorothea can convey her acquiescence Casaubon dies, and she is spared what *we* know would have been a fate worse than death.

The question for the reader, then, is this: Where and how can we learn to regularly practice appreciating the equally precious self-hood of another human being without surrendering our own being and chance of happiness? Eliot's novelistic answer is simple and straightforward—loving marriage. Let us consider, then, the relationship between Dorothea and Will Ladislaw.

### **III. Loving Marriage: The *Practice of Mutual Sympathy and Self-Fulfillment***

Following the death of Casaubon, Dorothea's life will educate her admirable capacity for sympathy, revealing both to her and to us the relation between sympathy for others and proper regard for self. Sympathy, rightly understood, turns out to be self-affirming not self-forgetting, self-enlarging not self-denying, enlivening not deadening. Though seemingly self-sacrificing, it is in fact self-fulfilling. For it requires the capacity and desire not only to give of oneself but also to accept oneself as an equal needing to receive. It requires the ability to recognize not only the neediness of others but also one's own neediness, especially one's need for love and intimacy. Enter Will Ladislaw.

Shortly after her husband's death, Dorothea learns of the codicil to his will, which revealed clearly and addresses precisely Casaubon's jealous fantasies: If, after his death, Dorothea were to marry his cousin, Will Ladislaw, she would be completely disinherited. But Casaubon's preemptive strike backfires, producing in Dorothea the opposite of its intended effect. Its cruel decree, surpassing even her worst imaginings, creates a convulsive change in Dorothea, "a metamorphosis" in which "[e]verything [changed] its aspect" (L.304-5/461). The perverse stipulation of his will turns Dorothea toward, not away from, Will Ladislaw. She now yearns for Ladislaw, and, for the first time, even



thinks of him as a lover and herself as a beloved—indeed, as a person desirous of loving and being loved in turn. In little more than a year after Casaubon’s death—much to the consternation of everyone in Middlemarch and also many readers—she will marry him. But this marriage, unlike the last one, is founded on love, and provides Dorothea with an outlet for the successful expression of her native and ardent goodness, securing her a flourishing and self-fulfilling existence.

At least at first glance, this match seems utterly unlikely. Dorothea Brooke and Will Ladislaw, when we first meet them, are polar opposites by every standard. Dorothea, propertied by birth, becomes even more so by marrying Casaubon; Will, despite being Casaubon’s cousin, is property-less. She, acutely aware of her ignorance, actively looks to others for guidance; he, convinced of his genius, follows his own free spirit, while passively waiting for an epiphany, as Eliot wryly observes: “Genius, he held, is necessarily intolerant of fetters: on the one hand, it must have the utmost play for its spontaneity; on the other, it may confidently await those messages from the universe which summon it to its peculiar work, only placing itself in an attitude of receptivity towards all sublime chances”(X.53/76). If Dorothea’s most significant trait is her steadfast ardency, Will’s is his ability to vary his looks and his outlooks: he not only assumes many poses but tries out many modes of experience, including alcohol, asceticism, and drugs, and tries on many vocations, including drawing, poetry, painting, and sculpture. No single-minded Theresa-type he.

Morally speaking, they are also far apart. Ever morally serious, Dorothea longs for “perfect Right, that it might make a throne within her.” Concern for justice and duty

are at her core. By contrast, Will shocks Dorothea by proudly proclaiming to “take life as a holiday,” and by denouncing her sense of duty, insisting that the “best piety is to enjoy—when you can.” The novel’s ultimate opprobrium—“dilettantish”—is twice applied to Will.

Yet, although everything seems stacked against their match, Dorothea will give up position and fortune to marry this seeming ne’er-do-well. And we are explicitly told that she not only “never repented” her decision but that “they were bound to each other by a love stronger than any impulses which could have marred it” (Finale.513/782). Why? How could this be?

Though we first meet Casaubon’s poor, young, and financially dependent cousin at Lowick, in the provincial English midlands, Will Ladislaw becomes prominent in the novel in cosmopolitan Rome. At Lowick, Will’s judgment of Dorothea was negative at best: he viewed her, like the man she was then about to marry, as cold, unfeeling, and judgmental. But when he happens upon her in the Vatican museum, standing forlornly beside the statue of Ariadne, his outlook changes: he is most unexpectedly and thoroughly smitten. Suddenly, he sees Dorothea as “a most perfect young Madonna”—“beautiful,” “adorably simple,” “full of feeling,” “an angel beguiled.” He now sees her as the opposite of Casaubon, whom he regards as an animalistic monster—a “dragon who carried [Dorothea] off to his lair with his talons,” “a devouring Minotaur.” In the ensuing days, Ladislaw, casting himself in the role of Theseus, a heroic and courtly lover, avails himself of every opportunity to be alone with Dorothea, and each meeting deepens his adoration and affection. Will’s romantic effusions are, to be sure, largely the result of his “hyperbolic tongue” and his having fallen in love with a damsel in distress. But, as we

readers have already seen, he is not altogether wrong, neither about Casaubon nor about Dorothea. Although Dorothea does not immediately reciprocate his love, he begins, as already noted, to deliver Dorothea from the bondage of her own illusions. What is less well observed is that Dorothea repays him in kind.

In a later conversation in Rome, Will declares his intention to cease pursuing painting as a vocation, thus prompting the following pregnant exchange:

*Dorothea*: “I am quite interested to see what you will do. . . I believe devoutly in a natural difference of vocation. . . I wonder what your vocation will turn out to be: perhaps you will be a poet?”

*Will*: “That depends. To be a poet is to have a soul so quick to discern that no shade of quality escapes it, and so quick to feel, that discernment is but a hand playing with fine-ordered variety on the chords of emotion—a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge. One may have that condition by fits only.”

*Dorothea*: “But you leave out the poems. . . I think they are wanted to complete the poet. I understand what you mean about knowledge passing into feeling, for that seems to be just what I experience. But I am sure I could never produce a poem.”

*Will*: “You *are* a poem—and that is to be the best part of a poet—what makes up the poet’s consciousness in his best moods . . .”

*Dorothea* (“laughing out her words”): “I am very glad to hear it. . . . What very kind things you say to me!”

*Will* (with “fervour”): “I wish I could ever do anything that would be what you call kind—that I could ever be of the slightest service to you. I fear I shall never have the opportunity. . . .”

*Dorothea* (“cordially”): “Oh, yes! . . . It will come; and I shall remember how well you wish me. I quite hoped that we should be friends when I first saw you, because of your relationship to Mr. Casaubon.” (XXII.142-3/209-10)

Dorothea needs no guide to sort through Will’s romantic conventions about the soul. And she knows without having to be told of the power of feeling to animate human life. But through her sincere and innocent responses, she begins to puncture Will’s self-delusion. Unwittingly, she poses for Will the *central question* of his life: Can genius exist without something to show for it? Can it flourish without a specific summons to act?

One can only speculate about the sequence of decisions Will henceforth makes or their true causes. But it is probably no accident that he soon decides to stop wandering, to cease drawing on Casaubon's coffers, and to return to England to work and find his own way. It is no accident that he heads straight to Middlemarch and accepts the first position he is offered, working for Dorothea's uncle, as editor of the *Pioneer*, a newspaper committed to social reform. Will's love of Dorothea not only motivates and sustains him. It also begins to transform him.

Months later, when the two meet again by chance, this time at Tipton, they discuss religion. To Dorothea's query about the belief that most assists him, Will, no longer spouting the hedonic principle he uttered in Rome, answers: "To love what is good and beautiful when I see it," and quickly adds, "[b]ut I am a rebel: I don't feel bound, as you do, to submit to what I don't like." Though still a self-declared rebel, time, patience, and—above all—love have evidently taught him to submit to what is truly loveable; not only Dorothea's innocence and beauty, or even her goodness, but also what she looks up to as good. Will submits to *what Dorothea reveres*, and, moreover, he does so in her spirit.

Well before he marries Dorothea, well before he is elected to Parliament, Will Ladislaw becomes an ardent public man. In contrast to his boss at the *Pioneer*—who publicly endorses political reform but privately embraces his own selfish interests—Will is sincerely devoted to social betterment and reform. Especially kind to the vulnerable—from small children to old maids—he becomes known for his ability to enter "into every

one's feelings, and [taking] the pressure of their thought instead of urging his own with iron resistance" (L.309/467).

Under Dorothea's sway, then, Will, hitherto a casual and amorous aesthete, becomes politically and humanly more serious. Meanwhile, Dorothea, hitherto a self-denying moralist, becomes more aware of her own desires, more amorous, and, eventually, more self-fulfilled. Each re-forms the other, as, in parallel, they reform themselves. Together they embody mutual respect, steady love, and lasting intimacy; together they model the transformative possibilities of sympathetic understanding. Readers who thus understand their marriage will have no regrets that "so substantive and rare a creature" as Dorothea was absorbed into Will's life or he into hers. And they will not regret the fact that she is known, in the larger world, only as a wife and mother.

On the contrary, we should cheer for the fact that Dorothea has found a better, less illusory foundation for marriage. We should cheer, too, for the reliable and steady anchor of everyday married life, which enables her confidently to move outward and effectively into the community. And we should be heartened by what love frees her to enjoy and do. True, in addition to being a husband and father, Will eventually enjoys a successful public career. But though less visible and unsung, so does Dorothea. As Eliot notes in the Finale: "Her finely touched spirit still had its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth."(Finale.515/785) But through these numerous channels, Eliot implies, Dorothea's sympathetic presence and beneficent disposition—her real vocation—flowed fruitfully and without limits. And "the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive." Thus, although seemingly

stuck in a merely domestic role, and bound by unpropitious circumstances, marrying Will Ladislaw in fact enables Dorothea to liberate and enlarge herself. Thanks to the particularistic love of married life, the world around her also reaps the fruit of her sympathetic soul, which she bears without self-sacrifice.

Although George Eliot, from the start of the novel, warns us against the romantic mode of frivolous women, she is herself clearly sanguine about love and marriage in general and about Dorothea's in particular. Elsewhere, Eliot famously wrote, "The first condition of human goodness is something to love." And in *Middlemarch*, speaking of Dorothea's love, she explicitly suggests why. Far along in the novel, while speaking of Dorothea's love for Will, Eliot tells a fairy tale:

If a princess in the days of enchantment had seen a four-footed creature from among those which live in herds come to her once and again with a human gaze which rested upon her with choice and beseeching, what would she think of in her journeying, what would she look for when the herds passed her? Surely for the gaze which had found her, and which she would know again.

This comparison would seem to cast Dorothea as a lonely princess touched only by the beseeching gaze of the most human member of an animal herd—not a very encouraging foundation for love. But Eliot immediately corrects this impression, with this general and memorable reflection: "Life would be no better than candle-light tinsel and daylight rubbish if our spirits were not touched by what has been, to issues of longing and constancy" (LIV.334/507). Dorothea's experience of Will's attentive solicitude gives birth to the love and devotion—what Eliot calls "the issues of longing and constancy"—that elevate and further ennoble her life. Love humanizes princesses and, perhaps, even bulls.

Eliot also famously noted that the second condition of human goodness is “something to reverence.”\* And this is the key to the understanding of marriage she seems to share with her heroine, Dorothea. “Marriage,” Dorothea explains to Rosamund, “is so unlike everything else. There is something even awful [literally, awe inspiring] in the nearness it brings” (LXXXI.491/748). The profound and profoundly mysterious intimacy of marital love turns out also to be the perfect nursery—and schoolhouse—for the sympathetic imagination, permitting it to work concretely and efficaciously in the myriad encounters of daily and communal life. Dorothea herself had recognized how she had been empowered by the sympathetic experience in her otherwise loveless marriage to Casaubon. But where love-born intimacy teaches each partner how constantly to tend another equal center of self, sympathy is not only empowered but also instructed, elevated, and rendered effective—and, in being reciprocated, achieves its glory without self-sacrifice.

The marriage of Dorothea to Will sheds light also on Eliot’s teaching regarding political reform: effective political reform begins with personal moral reform. In marrying Dorothea to Will, the man devoted to political reform, Eliot literally embodies reform’s abiding need for sympathetic understanding, for learning to see the world through the eyes of another. What better way to demonstrate the importance of private and spiritual means for the pursuit of salutary political ends?

#### **IV. The Life of Later-born Therasas: Lessons for Readers**

In the Prelude, Eliot spoke of the life of St. Theresa, drawing our attention to her

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\* The quote— “The first condition of human goodness is something to love; the second something to reverence.”—is from *Scenes of Clerical Life*, “Janet’s Repentance,” Chapter 10. It was chosen, as well, to put on the memorial stone, erected for Eliot, in the Poet’s Corner in Westminster Abbey.

age's "coherent social faith and order that performed the function of knowledge," which enabled this woman of "spiritual grandeur" to achieve her epic life. By contrast, she warned, later-born Therasas—people of similarly fine spirits and aspirations, but lacking such "faith and order"—were likely to be "tragic failures," caught in webs of mediocrity and doomed to merely middling marches. Despite the redemptive turn in her life, Dorothea Brooke, unlike her soul-mate St. Theresa, never becomes a publicly recognized "foundress" of anything. But a tragic failure she isn't. Far from it.

But it is not only Dorothea whom we are invited to compare with St. Theresa. A comparable connection exists also between Theresa and the author, George Eliot herself. For St. Theresa of Avila was both subject and author, not only living but also leaving us the autobiographical account of her inspiring life. Dorothea Brooke lived the life George Eliot created her to have, and Eliot, as it were, memorialized her inspiring story. Surveying the modern world in need of moral and political reform, yet lacking the human and spiritual understanding to achieve it, Eliot set herself the task of supplying the knowledge most needful. Eliot surely knew that a life of humane and genuine sympathy is difficult to practice steadily, even with those we love most. But that is why, in presenting her brilliant portrait of real life in the new age aborning, Eliot singles out Dorothea for our special attention. For, although Dorothea, like Theresa, is a sport of nature, she models for us a way of life all aspirants of moral and social reform can try to imitate. By giving us her example, Eliot supports her large claim that "the growing good of the world is [in no small part] dependent on unhistoric acts"—acts of love and acts of sympathy between kith, kin, and neighbors. Through her most idealistic character, Eliot, the hard-headed realist, makes us aware of the enormous debt we owe all those who "live



*faithfully* a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”(Finale.515/785) Through the life of Dorothea, Eliot offers us, in other words, a “coherent [albeit secular] faith” that may serve as knowledge for modern times.

But as creator of Dorothea, and the many other characters that inhabit the world of *Middlemarch*, Eliot goes even further, and in the process, perhaps, finds her own invisible “movement.” Eliot’s authorial voice, heard in her many bold and memorable assertions and exhortations, turns our attention not only to the fate of her characters but also to our own habits of heart—our *attitudes, prejudices, and sensibilities*. Dwelling with Dorothea and the many other characters in *Middlemarch*, enduring their trials, and recognizing the reasons for their triumphs and failures help “extend and intensify” also *our* capacity for sympathy. And if, as a result of reading and living with *Middlemarch*, any one of us is brought to a “keener vision and feeling of ordinary life”; if *we* are moved to hear, understand, and give voice to the silences in lives we might otherwise simply dismiss; if we are in fact moved beyond our own moral stupidity—then we should be most profoundly grateful to George Eliot. George Eliot too lived no epic life, but once they take hold, her characters and her teachings can have epic reverberations—then, now, and always.

Title: Middlemarch. Author: George Eliot. Release Date: May 24, 2008 [EBook #145]. Language: English. Character set encoding: ISO-8859-1 \*\*\*.Â She found her epos in the reform of a religious order. That Spanish woman who lived three hundred years ago, was certainly not the last of her kind. Many Theresas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action; perhaps only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity; perhaps a tragic failure which found no sacred poet and sank unwept into oblivion.Â The really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it. Casaubon proposes Dorothea for marriage and the latter accepts the proposal at once, though her sister tries to stop her. Meanwhile, Chettam is encouraged to woo Celia, who ultimately develops an interest in her. Fred and Rosamond Vincy, the eldest children of town mayor who could not finish university.Â Fred is in love with Marry Grath (niece of Featherstone) and wants to marry her. Shattering of Dorotheaâ€™s Idealism.Â Fred becomes ill and is cured by Mr Lydgate, the newest doctor in Middlemarch. Rosamond (sister of Fred), who is well educated and attractive, decides to marry Lydgate and uses Fredâ€™s sickness as an opportunity to get close to the doctor. In the beginning, he views their relationship as pure flirtation.