

# Identities in the Collective Mind of George Eliot's Middlemarch

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**Master's thesis / Diplomski rad**

**2019**

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište u Rijeci, Filozofski fakultet**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:186:873481>

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*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2024-09-22**



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**IDENTITIES IN THE COLLECTIVE MIND OF GEORGE  
ELIOT'S *MIDDLEMARCH***

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the M.A. in English Language  
and Literature and Pedagogy at the University of Rijeka

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September 2019

## **Abstract**

George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, considered to be the greatest Victorian novel, extensively illustrates the societal and industrial changes that occurred in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. *Middlemarch* provides a critique and refusal of the Victorian norms present in the everyday lives of the Middlemarch community that is deeply interconnected and forms an interwoven web of relations.

This paper closely examines the individual identities in the collective Middlemarch, how their actions are influenced and affected by others. Small community is cautious of strangers until they prove themselves successful, though they are oftentimes the main topic of the town's never-ending gossip.

The changing female identity is a prevalent theme in the novel, discussed through different characters. Celia Brooke and Rosamond Vincy represent and accept the Victorian female ideal, while Dorothea Brooke and Mary Garth actively seek vocational and educational opportunities that are limited to women in the patriarchal society. Theme of disillusionment in both relations and marriage also highlights the effect of the past actions and strength of the female characters that are taking over the masculine roles.

Eliot delves into the psyche of the characters, their expectations, choices and consequences of their actions. Sharing similar lifepaths, Dorothea and Lydgate, are two comparable characters further accentuating changing gender roles in the Victorian community and society overall.

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## Introduction

Victorian era, a period widely recognised as a time of repression, prudishness and Victorian morality, saw a complete and much expected change in the values and society in the last decades of the turn of the century. Great Victorian novelists, such as Charles Dickens, were replaced by others, among which were George Eliot, Lewis Carroll and Thomas Hardy, willing to blatantly question the established norms, no longer applicable to the changing society. Though many still enjoyed the older works, an appreciation for new fictional and psychological literature was evident in the reader community.

George Eliot nowadays oftentimes referred to as the greatest Victorian novelist, who triumphed in psychological analysis of the characters, was born on November 22, 1819 as Mary Anne Evans (Pinion, 1981). Born as a third child in a working-class family, Eliot had access to education due to her father's position and close relations to religious and political circles. Though growing up in a religious family, an adult Eliot started to question Christianity and her own faith, themes generally present in her works, expressing the sceptical and rather oppositional views to those of the time and her father's. Now, calling herself Mary Ann Evans, on some occasions written as Marian, living in a rather scandalous open relationship for the Victorian society with a married man, at the age of 37, her first writings were published under the pseudonym George Eliot, a male name to protect her anonymity and avoid any unfavourable criticism given to female writers of the time (Pinion, 1981).

What started as a story about Miss Brooke, written for a gravely ill second son of her unmarried husband, became a tremendously successful and sometimes referred to as the greatest Victorian novel, *Middlemarch*, first published in the December of 1871 as an eight-

month serialization. (Levine, 2010). A novel written in her late life, it certainly very well presented her refusal of conventions, established morality in a strict and established English society. Whereas the complexity of the novel, to some extent, can be undoubtedly attributed to its length, the extensive portrayal of the changes that occurred during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century England, abundant with political and societal reforms induced by the Industrial Revolution, greatly determines it as novel written for and portraying all the social groups affected by the changes.

Eliot had a strong desire to express her own opinion and vision of the society, its intricacies enwoven with numerous facets which are hard to plainly portray. Employing language to its fullest with many instances of metaphor in her works, she breaks away and separates herself from other Victorian writers by focusing on the truthful portrayal of complex psychological drives of the characters, their doings, choices and eventual consequences of their actions. She provides an in-depth, realistic and oftentimes sarcastic view of everyday lives and activities of individuals in the private and public domain of the society. An individual cannot avoid being a part of the community, with its own challenges and inevitable ordinariness.

To further examine and expand on the notion of an individual being a part of the society, this paper will focus on the complexity of individuals, their characters in the close-knit provincial Victorian community of Middlemarch. Each identity present in the novel is influenced by the others surrounding them.

*Middlemarch* is a novel ahead of its time, and the author openly tries to oppose Victorian norms. Although there are many characters in the novel, this paper will focus on some of the few most important characters. An extensive look into the fact how individuals' choices

and expectations have consequences for themselves and others will be provided through parallel of Dorothea and Lydgate.

One of the main focuses in the novel are relationships between both sexes and social classes, mainly through, at times difficult to follow, interconnected relationships between characters, family ties and marriages. As such, this paper will take a closer look at the position and the depiction of women and how Eliot approached the women question in the Victorian time. Marriage, also one of the main themes of the novel, alongside other important close relations, will be explored through the notions of disillusionment and gratification.

## 1. Web of collective minds

*Middlemarch*, a novel George Eliot wrote in her later years is her most accomplished work. This historical novel, written and published in 1871-1872, illustrates the Midland community life during an earlier time period, from September 1829 to May 1832. This was a time just before the passing of the Reform Bill, period of great changes in the politics and the public, with advancements in science and technology.

The subtitle of the novel, *A Study of Provincial Life*, connected and understood with what might be interpreted as the “middle land”, can give a great insight in to the novels plots and lives that it portrays. Middlemarch is a provincial community, where every single character is somehow tangled up with others, constantly interwoven and, in an instant, placed into the centre of the community. It is a “network of circumstances, opinion and individual motives”, in which each individual is connected by some kind of pressure, whether family ties, society, politics, religion, money or some other (Levine, 2010, 63). Oftentimes, these inescapable ties simply come into existence whether we liked it or not. Whichever bond forms, it is present, and if nothing else, must be tolerated. Embodying the mentality of living for others, concentrating on the opinions and expectations of the community affect the life satisfaction of the characters.

It was a time of Industrial Revolution, growing usage of Gutenberg’s press which enabled the spread information from towns to villages via newspapers, and as Eliot herself mentions the construction of the railways in the novel, many other forms and means of communication, alongside ever present face to face talk, were starting to emerge and made it possible to connect more and more quickly with others. One’s knowledge can greatly influence and enrich the knowledge of the other, even if it might only be a piece of information about



their citizens, which was oftentimes the case in the novel (Otis, 2001). Middlemarch, the town and the minds constituting it, can be seen as a character in itself, omnipresent throughout the novel, as the narrator openly expresses particular viewpoints equal the views of the people, whether directly addressing the people or through certain commentary of its residents, “the landed gentry, the middle class including the professionals, and the working classes”, all of which are almost equally represented (Palmer, 2010, 70).

*“Old provincial society had its share of this subtle movement: [...] constantly shifting the boundaries of social intercourse and begetting new consciousness of interdependence. Some slipped a little downward, some got higher footing: [...] perhaps found themselves surprisingly grouped in consequence; [...] Municipal town and rural parish gradually made fresh threads of connection— [...] and even lords who had once lived blamelessly afar from the civic mind, gathered the faultiness of closer acquaintanceship” (Eliot, 2000, 61).*

Old established inhabitants of Middlemarch became acquaintances and formed close relations with newcomers, coming from many different backgrounds and as it was the case in England at the time, individuals with same or similar interests eventually formed tight-knit groups, weary of other new settlers who still have not established themselves in the rest of the community. Entering a new society or a group of people requires commitment to developing relationships. If indifference towards others stays present, no new connections are formed, a source of possible help when in need of one remains unavailable. Someone’s impact on an individual’s life and the magnitude of their role cannot be known from the very first interaction. Lydgate’s coming to Middlemarch offers an excellent example of a stranger forming new relations. Before arriving to town, Lydgate had never thought he would end up tangled in a

messy Middlemarch web and would need help from good-natured Dorothea Brooke and Farebrother.

The connections that each and every life in the Middlemarch community forms are extremely complex, hard to unravel at first sight, although if one thread of this web is closely followed true connections can be seen. Though natives to Middlemarch, the ones who accept newcomers into society, the Vincys also create and nurture these threads of connection as they change their appearances and status. The children of the family are known in the community since birth, but their actions as adults were greatly influenced by the arrival of the newcomers. Bulstrode was accepted after marrying into the family, and Lydgate after a success in his medical career. Eliot delineates the magnificent power of entangled communication webs, whether it serves to enrich the lives and possibly free some of their restrictions or perhaps, as in the case of the Vincys, “violating and disturbing private sphere” (Otis, 2001, 90).

“Although from her first stories forward she wrote about the church and clergy with a compassionate knowingness, she built a powerful case against Christianity; and while she constantly celebrated the value of childhood experience, traditional community, and traditional family structures, she almost bitterly portrayed the failures of community and family” (Levine, 2010, 2).

Eliot found inspiration for writing in her own life, childhood memories and experiences which she, despite family disputes, still cherished. Her adult life was anything but ordinary, considered scandalous and intriguing due to a long-term relationship with a married man, George Henry Lewes. Lewes, an intelligent and “immensely versatile editor and novelist”, drama critic, adept at science and philosophy impacted Eliot’s life and writing. (Levine, 2001, 27). A pair of highly-respected intellectuals formed connections with other prominent European

personas of the nineteenth century as they often travelled, visiting Berlin, Munich, Rome and Florence. Exchange of ideas with Herbert Spencer, close collaboration with Lewes on biological research and writing undeniably left an impact on Eliot and inspired her to include such interconnectedness into her novel, drawing a thread between almost all characters (Otis, 2001, Pinion, 1981). Middlemarch, a provincial Midland town, is populated by many intriguing individuals, each bringing something to society in their respective way, creating “a complex social environment”, realistically portraying aspects of social life and the gossipy nature of small, intricately interconnected towns (McWeeny, 2009, 539). However, the novel does at times provide an insight into individual mind, different from the opinion of others, such as in the case of vicar Farebrother, who is not as eager to judge and wish hurt to his friend Lydgate, or Nicholas Bulstrode, the town businessmen, even though he never liked him much (Palmer, 2010).

Such webs in the mind, connectedness of the ideas, thoughts and eventual conclusions, Eliot also employed in one of the characters, Nicholas Bulstrode. His own thoughts of his superiority caused more entanglement in personal relations. With great desire to avoid embarrassment of others finding out about his dishonesty and previous deception, as he concealed the truth about his first wife’s daughter, his actions brought about even more devious behaviour which eventually caused his downfall. Social stability can only be achieved if everyone behaves according to “well-specified ways” only then an individual’s identity can be accepted” (Palmer, 2010,73).

*"I believe that people are almost always better than their neighbours think they are," said Dorothea. Some of her intensest experience in the last two years had set her mind strongly in opposition to any unfavourable construction of others; [...]" (Eliot, 2000, 453).*

Although Dorothea Brooke's statement can hardly be applied to Bulstrode's situation, nevertheless the majority of the Middlemarch society, unlike Dorothea, would still rush to construct the unfavourable opinions, no matter the consequences. Members of the community are not foreign to gossip and spreading it widely and quickly throughout, not ever stopping to morally and logically question the gossip at hand, or the source for that matter. Middlemarch, a small provincial community, is a perfect place for gossip to take place in, on any subject and individual. It is without a question one of the recurring themes of the novel, a way of uniting or dividing the members of the community. The judgments of the Middlemarch people are perfectly interconnected and related to all the social and aesthetic norms of the community, where class and morality cannot be separately examined (Palmer, 2010).

*“But this gossip about Bulstrode spread through Middlemarch like the smell of fire. Mr Frank Hawley followed up his information by sending a clerk whom he could trust to Stone Court on a pretext of inquiring about hay, but really to gather all that could be learned about Raffles and his illness from Mrs Abel. [...] The business was felt to be so public and important that it required dinners to feed it, and many invitations were just then issued and accepted on the strength of this scandal concerning Bulstrode and Lydgate; wives, widows, and single ladies took their work and went out to tea oftener than usual;” (Eliot, 2000, 443 – 444).*

As it is the case with any other gossip, half-truths, overheard conversations, and above all speculations and ridiculous conclusions of almost insignificant characters were most often the source of the gossip, whose daily lives it occupied the most. Citizens can become so consumed by the lives of others that “putting of two and two together” became necessary, never actually bothering to get to the bottom of the speculations, talking with those concerned and finding out the complete truth (Eliot, 2000, 444).

## 2. Strangers in the community

The representation of strangers in the novel is also one of the facets pointing to the connectedness of the Middlemarch inhabitants. What is particular for them is that despite the threads interwoven between the characters, they are still in many ways strangers themselves, close to one another, but only truly paying close attention and engaging with their neighbours when a favour is needed or a scandal occurs, placing one person in the centre of attention of the town. To some extent, Eliot tried and managed to incorporate some societal norms of urban places into an interconnected rural town. It can even be concluded that despite the industrial and political changes that occurred at the time, and represented in the novel, the society somewhat has not evolved as much as it entertains gossip on a daily basis. Nonetheless, the notion of strangers can be looked at from different angles, depending on the character, though eventually “no one is unknowable in the social, narrative, and ethical field of *Middlemarch*, there are only the unIntroduced” (McWeeny, 2009, 541)

For instance, Bulstrode, a stranger, who wanted to remain as such, eager to keep secret that he fraudulently obtained inheritance and sold stolen goods, is accepted into society but then again retakes the role of the stranger due to his transgressions, or Lydgate, a stranger who does not remain as such for long, due to many relations he establishes.

The past actions leave a grave impact on the present and future actions and consequences, creating an intricate web. It is not possible to avoid an outcome which one should have been able to predict if only taking personal capabilities into consideration. Bulstrode’s past secrets caught up to him in the form of John Raffles and his unfortunate demise. The loss of his position in the community caused the loss of his own identity and self-worth, and even

though he never expressed considerable need to fit into Middlemarch community, his created image was of great importance to him. So much so that he was willing to resort to a murder, to keep the truth from coming out and maintaining his position. With one action, all of his accomplishments and connections ceased to exist, his involvement with the hospital was stopped and taken from him, leaving him only one possible option – arrange everything to leave the community, remove himself and the lost identity to maintain what was left of his dignity (Conklin, 2005). The impact others have on one's self-esteem, identity and overall perception of abilities is far greater and more deeply implemented in one's mentality.

Nicholas Bulstrode is not one of the central characters of the novel, but his omnipresent connectedness to all the characters is attributed to his wealth, which although unrightfully obtained, made him the eminent benefactor in the Middlemarch community, one to be looked upon and envied for his religiousness, devotedness and success.

*“At that moment she would not have liked to say anything which implied her habitual consciousness that her husband's earlier connections were not quite on a level with her own. Not that she knew much about them. [...] She so much wished to ignore towards others that her husband had ever been a London Dissenter, that she liked to keep it out of sight even in talking to him. He was quite aware of this; indeed in some respects he was rather afraid of this ingenuous wife, [...] “ (Eliot, 2000, 379-380)*

He came to the well-established community as an already successful man, who, by marrying into the Vincy family, gained his high position in the society that had no knowledge of his past and the origins of this wealth. As a young prospective preacher, he married a rich widow, from whom he inherited everything, after withholding the truth that her lost daughter is in fact still alive and with living children. This tightly-kept secret started Bulstrode's

misfortunes, as he hoped the truth will never catch up to his new life, a life of a man devoted to his religion, a successful and wealthy town banker, a devoted family man. His arrival to Middlemarch and settling down served as a new beginning, a creation of a new identity perhaps worthy of the community, which was never truly “fond of strangers coming into town.” (Eliot, 2000, 185). Nonetheless, he still holds himself above others, as his economic power and greater social status are not on the same level as community’s. No matter what close relations he has formed, his sense of morality separates him from the rest. And for a person to be truly a member of Middlemarch, connections are more than necessary for marriage is not enough of a relation to ensure the position one obtains in the community (Conklin, 2005).

Tertius Lydgate, another newcomer, highly-motivated town doctor, soon enough became an accepted member and respected individual in Middlemarch community. Even though his new approaches to medical treatments proved successful, citizens remained disapproving of his practice. Lydgate’s identity changes throughout the novel, which will be discussed later on drawing comparisons with the central female character, Dorothea Brooke, as their characters were greatly impacted by their expectations, choices, delusions.

### **3. Female identity**

Novel's many plots and subplots deal with crucial questions of the time period – marriage relations, vocational opportunities and obligations and the woman question which will be discussed in detail by examining the position of women in society and specific examples of the central women in the novel – Mary Garth, Rosamond Vincy, and Celia and Dorothea Brooke.

An ideal woman in the Victorian society resided inside a domestic ideology, representing an always graceful female, helpful, and above all supportive and united with the husband in front of the judging society, never putting in question his reputation, never too outspoken or disobeying. Young ladies were supposed to be submissive to men, innocent and without any formed opinions to be desired and accepted as wives devoted to motherhood, otherwise, they were seen as too independent and damaging for the reputation of the whole family. An ideal Victorian wife was “the helpmate, the means for making the male self” (Garton, 2002, 47).

Women of lower class had fewer educational opportunities and looked for vocational opportunities to subsist. No matter their social status, all young women were expected to marry. Men were expected to acquire various skills, work hard to prove their masculinity and had more opportunities for social gatherings. On the other hand, women were primarily the ones tasked with running the household, birthing and caring for many children, especially when we look at upper-middle and upper class (Tosh, 1994). However, working and lower middle-class families, struggling to survive benefited greatly if the women of the family were also employed.



Despite the reluctance of the upper classes, society was changing rapidly, with gender roles being questioned and blurred as the new vocational opportunities emerged. While men were still able to actively participate and have the final word in both spheres, the strict distinction of public and private sphere started to dissolve as more and more women took on the masculine roles, slowly but surely stepping into public sphere by becoming active workers.

Each female character in the novel represents a particular position and a role a female could have taken in the earlier 19<sup>th</sup> century, accentuating changes that occurred in the later years. Women of the time were considered to be inferior to men, unable to think intellectually, delve deeper into politics and business, with such views present in both younger and older male generations, Chettam and Mr. Brooke, respectively. The novel illustrates examples of strong, masculine women, though most still very feminine in their manners, nonetheless express opinions, interests and even hobbies and vocational desires far more suited for male members of the society.

George Eliot, “a conservative-reformer”, artfully and in disguise, resisted the social and moral conventions of the time. She was and to some extent still is, a true representative of “women’s achievement” (Levine, 2010, 2). Eliot incorporated her personal crisis into the plots of the novels that thematically detailed everyday life taking place mostly in rural locations, developing similar characters. Earlier novels, *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*, describe conventional country life interwoven with her childhood memories and Christianity. In contrast, later novels, *Felix Holt*, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, illustrate the impact of changing society and political reforms. Eliot incorporated political reforms to elaborate that social, moral and economic reforms are also necessary. The woman question in the Victorian society was questioned with the Reform Bill in 1832, while the plot of *Middlemarch* takes place during few years leading up to the Bill. Eliot writes about historical changes and advances through notions

of utopian socialism, “an indirect means to explore women’s emancipation” (Alison, 2011, 724). The position of women portrayed in *Middlemarch* did not differ much from the actual position of women in the Victorian society, but their strong wilfulness was ahead of the time (Levine, 2010). Eliot is aware of the “assertiveness of the suffrage movement” although her conflicted feelings about women’s emancipation and equal position of the genders in the society are evident through the commentary of “the injustice of women’s lots” (Allison, 2011, 728).

Eliot starts and ends *Middlemarch* with Dorothea Brooke, the novel’s heroine, with many central scenes including or revolving around a female character. The women of *Middlemarch* are certainly not as fragile and vulnerable as the community sees them and wants to etiquette them.

*“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 illmatched with the meanness of opportunity; [...] but after all, to common eyes their struggles seemed mere inconsistency and formlessness; for these later-born Theresas were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul. Their ardour alternated between a vague ideal and the common yearning of womanhood; so that the one was disapproved as extravagance, and the other condemned as a lapse.” (Eliot, 2000, 3)*

From the very beginning of the novel, Eliot introduces the figure of Saint Theresa of Avila, a great religious reformer, and compares other women to her and her endeavours, where for many of them achievement of great things is unreachable and they simply give up their efforts after experiencing hardships and give into the attainable goals.

Celia and Dorothea Brooke, although sisters close in age who had the same upbringing, are two very different women. While Dorothea, as discussed later on, is rational in thought and not shy to share her opinions, modest, good-natured and willing to help in any situation, Celia Brooke represents her opposite. While not as clever as her sister, Celia approaches life far more cautiously, calmly and observantly. Sisters had equal educational opportunities, but their view of it is entirely different. Unlike Dorothea, Celia is satisfied with her education, which is not too extensive.

From the first introduction of the sisters into the community, people preferred and identified Celia, “as being so amiable and innocent looking, knowing and worldly-wise” (Eliot, 2000, 7). She embodies an ideal woman of the time, more concerned with overall appearance presented in the community, never expressing her opinions publicly. Celia loves her sister and openly objects to Dorothea’s interest and later engagement to Casaubon, for she sees Sir James Chettam more fitting for her sister. Interestingly, each sister saw him more fit for the other, but eventually, in their mutual dislike of Casaubon, Celia and James found company and comfort in each other. Celia is perceived as a young, polite, unimpulsive and calm woman, far more compatible for Chettam than Dorothea. Such compatibility in personality proved more important in the Victorian society than whether the future husband and wife remained equal. Middlemarch citizens saw them as better marriage companions. Their marriage also illustrates one of the happy unions, almost never critiqued since their prescribed social and gender roles remained the same in society. Nevertheless, Celia had more of a say on certain matters, as Chettam, to make her happy and content, tried to fulfil all of her wishes concerning her sister and their relationship.

Despite Mary Garth might have had the hardest life path of all the female characters, her life ended fulfilled with both successful marriage to Fred and achievements in writing

children's book. Coming from a lower-class working family, and working herself at Stone Court, nursing old and difficult Featherstone, Mary was known in the community for her modesty. As one of the true realists in the novel, she early in life accepts her origins from a working family and what her opportunities are. While, for instance Rosamond and her own father Caleb pity her for the fact she has to work, she takes joy in working. Nursing is not a vocation she would primarily choose, and without any hesitation looks for other opportunities, knowing she has to help out financially. The prospect of becoming a teacher as her mother Susan is not as horrid to her. She is "perhaps the chief foil to the egoists" of the novel, mainly Rosamond Vincy, Bulstrode and Featherstone (Paris, 2003, 82). Her modesty and fairness became even more evident when she refused Featherstone's money if she burned the second will which annulled the first will, leaving the inheritance to Mr. Joshua Rigg. She chose to listen to her consciousness and moral judgement and did what she thought was right. While the Garth's would have benefited from the money, she would not have felt guilty over the fact that her action, or inaction for that matter, caused Fred the loss of inheritance.

Since early childhood, Mary knew the Vincy children, forming a close friendship with Rosamond, and harbouring deep feelings for Fred.

*"Miss Vincy was the best girl in the world, and some called her an angel. Mary Garth, on the contrary, had the aspect of an ordinary sinner: she was brown; her curly dark hair was rough and stubborn; her stature was low; and it would not be true to declare, in satisfactory antithesis, that she had all the virtues. Plainness has its peculiar temptations and vices quite as much as beauty; [...] At the age of two-and-twenty Mary had certainly not attained that perfect good sense and good principle which are usually recommended to the less fortunate girl, as if they were to be obtained in quantities ready mixed, with a flavour of resignation as required. [...] Advancing*

*womanhood had tempered her plainness, which was of a good human sort [...]*" (Eliot, 2000, 72–73).

The two women could not have been more different in physical appearances. Despite her plain appearance, having brown hair and less accentuated feminine features, she is still liked by others due to her "truth-telling fairness" and humorous side she often presents when in good spirits, even at her own expense. (Eliot, 2000, 73). She completely differs from other central female characters. Her appearance is not representative of the Victorian ideal, her different outlooks on life and especially the fact she works for a living taught her to have a cautious approach to life and marriage.

*"[...] a woman, let her be as good as she may, has got to put up with the life her husband makes for her. Your mother has had to put up with a good deal because of me."*

*Mary turned the back of her father's hand to her lips and smiled at him.*

*"Well, well, nobody's perfect, but"—here Mr Garth shook his head to help out the inadequacy of words—"what I am thinking of is—what it must be for a wife when she's never sure of her husband, when he hasn't got a principle in him to make him more afraid of doing the wrong thing by others than of getting his own toes pinched. That's the long and the short of it, Mary. Young folks may get fond of each other before they know what life is, and they may think it all holiday if they can only get together; but it soon turns into working-day, my dear. However, you have more sense than most"* (Eliot, 2000, 163).

When Caleb comments on the possible relationship between her and Fred Vincy, warning her of the lasting bond of marriage and to choose wisely, Mary shows great respect for

her father and family's opinion, honestly assuring Caleb she will never rush into something she is not entirely sure of. Regardless of her long-lasting love for Fred, she understands Fred cannot be a clergyman and to consider marriage, he needs to choose the career that fulfils him. She manages to control her affections without them clouding her judgement of character and the situations she encounters. She does not rush into any decision and to marry Fred is perhaps the hardest one since their union will not be fully accepted in the community as they are not a compatible pair. Her future mother-in-law even said she is "a dreadful plain girl", proclaiming the opinion of all of the members of Middlemarch that the marriage between Fred and Mary is not a fitting one, the two opposing classes should not mingle to such extent as it greatly degrades the upper class (Eliot, 2000, 66).

Nevertheless, their marriage has a gratifying outcome, each bringing out the best in the other. She only had sons whose lives would not be as hard as hers, although Mrs. Vincy was still showing some objection to their union as she was strongly opposed to the fact that the working Garth family were connected to the upper-class Vincy family. Provincial Middlemarch citizens never truly recognized Mary's full potential and abilities, going as far as attributing her writing accomplishment to Fred. On the other hand, they attributed her the authorship of Fred's farming book as he, an educated upper-class Victorian man who attended university, would never write of agriculture. Society perceived woman to be incapable of such endeavours as their intelligence, education and comprehension were limited. Looking at the Victorian society, members of the upper class were the ones who set societal norms, ideas of what each gender was capable of accomplishing.

Rosamond Vincy, born into an old, rich, well-established family in the community, lived in luxury, never lacking anything she desired.

*“Rosamond Vincy, who had excellent taste in costume, with that nymph-like figure and pure blondness which give the largest range to choice in the flow and colour of drapery. But these things made only part of her charm. She was admitted to be the flower of Mrs Lemon's school, the chief school in the county, where the teaching included all that was demanded in the accomplished female—even to extras, such as the getting in and out of a carriage. (Eliot, 2000, 62).*

Rosamond displayed ladylike and feminine manners, possessed exceptional musical skill and had the opportunity for an education. Her education and “knowledge is of a different sort” than of men (Eliot, 2000, 102). Coming from an upper class being the daughter of the mayor, she learned how to be an ideal and desirable woman while attending Mrs. Lemon’s school. Her appearance and clothing are what she is defined for, standing out from the other girls her age in the community. Her “deep-souled womanhood” is rooted in her physical appearance, almost entirely defining her identity and diminishing any intellect she possesses (Eliot, 2000, 366). She had no need to seek work, and no desire to work because she was only occupied with her own lavish desires and the search for a husband who would support her. In this regard, Mary Garth and Rosamond Vincy are very similar – each aware and accepting of her role and opportunities. Rosamond exemplifies a flirt conscious of her beauty, “that she was being looked at” (Eliot, 2000, 75) and noticed by many eligible bachelors.

*“And a stranger was absolutely necessary to Rosamond's social romance, which had always turned on a lover and bridegroom who was not a Middlemarcher, and who had no connections at all like her own: [...]” (Eliot, 2000, 76).*

Rosamond always claimed that she “shall not marry any Middlemarch young man” (63), so when Lydgate came to town, her interest was only heightened when the gossip about

him coming from a well-standing family started to circulate. Her desire to escape provincial traditions and people by marrying an outsider had a possibility of becoming a reality with Lydgate. They fell in love with each other at first sight, Rosamond even vividly dreaming up possible “vaguer elevations which might ultimately come”, without thinking of finances needed for such life, which ultimately leads to the disappointment in marriage (Eliot, 2000, 76). Both her and Lydgate’s notions of love, marriage and the other person were idealistic and mistaken, clearly revealing their incompatibility. Rosamond’s selfish aspirations, the need for expensive lifestyle led to her resentment towards Lydgate when financial troubles finally surfaced. Though delineating an ideal woman, Rosamond’s ladylike appearance concealed unidealistic personality, more prideful, stubborn and selfish than any other character in the novel. She based her choice of husband on his origins outside of Middlemarch, wealth and success, and when Lydgate lost the money and successful practice, she started to regret her choice, “she would never have married him” if she knew anything such would happen (Eliot, 2000, 368).

Rosamond’s selfish nature, unwilling to accept the unfortune that befell them, due to Lydgate’s poor management of money and reluctance to seek financial aid, resulted in her reckless behaviours and actions. Her spite and disobedience led to a miscarriage while riding a horse and even more bad blood between Lydgate and his distant family. Her egotism becomes apparent in her close relationship with Will Ladislaw, whom she thought to be in love with her, a delusion that helped her cope with a growing resentment towards her husband.

*"People will talk," he said. "Even if a man has been acquitted by a jury, they'll talk, and nod and wink—and as far as the world goes, a man might often as well be guilty as not. It's a breakdown blow, and it damages Lydgate as much as Bulstrode. I don't pretend to say what is the truth. I only wish we had never heard the name of*



*either Bulstrode or Lydgate. You'd better have been a Vincy all your life, and so had Rosamond." (Eliot, 2000, 463).*

When Lydgate is accused of murder and taking bribe from her uncle, Rosamond's disappointment in marriage and her place in the society are further accentuated by her father's remark to her aunt Harriet Bulstrode. Both women would have been better off if they had never married strangers that came to Middlemarch since they would not have suffered the public disgrace. Their approach to the shameful situation differentiates the women, as Rosamond's solution is to pack and leave the place where they are no longer welcome. Dorothea proved to be the true friend, succeeding at convincing Rosamond of Lydgate's innocence and helping to regain their status. All these heavy misunderstandings and misfortunes still did not change Rosamond, "she simply continued to be mild in her temper, inflexible in her judgement, disposed to admonish her husband", though she did think better of her husband and his professional capabilities as he earned more money, further accentuating her vanity (Eliot, 2000, 512).

Women presented in *Middlemarch* without a doubt provide an interesting view of what their roles were and how they differently approached limited opportunities in the patriarchal society. Their actions and achievements are judged and questioned, never fully managing to freely accomplish their full potentials.

#### 4. Parallel identities

Two characters of utmost importance in the novel, Dorothea Brooke and Tertius Lydgate, each central to their own stories that later intertwine, are oftentimes compared as their lives had similar hardships caused by their own assumptions and devastating consequences. Their lives are nonetheless different, but the possibility to compare a life of a female and a male persona in the small, rigid community furthermore points to the changing society, positions and roles of particular genders.

Central heroine, the one that connects all the other plots and stories is the character of Dorothea Brooke, a young woman compared to St. Theresa because of her efforts and decisions throughout life.

*“With all this, she, the elder of the sisters, was not yet twenty, and they had both been educated, since they were about twelve years old and had lost their parents, on plans at once narrow and promiscuous, first in an English family and afterwards in a Swiss family at Lausanne, their bachelor uncle and guardian trying in this way to remedy the disadvantages of their orphaned condition.” (Eliot, 2000, 6).*

Dorothea comes from an affluent family, gaining even more “prestige” after her uncle, Mr. Brooke, took her and her sister in. Orphaned at a young age, her proper education was lacking, never fully systematic and consistent, and without a question, not in line with the education men were able to obtain. Nonetheless, her interest in many things and strong desire to learn can be noticed from the first introduction, “her mind was theoretic, and yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world” (Eliot, 2000, 6). One of the main reasons she became interested in Reverend Edward Casaubon, a wealthy middle-aged scholar, was the fact

that she perceived him as a wise, educated man from whom she can learn great things. She considered him “the most interesting man she had ever seen” with dignified manners (Eliot, 2000, 12). Out of all female characters, only Dorothea wishes to achieve more out of education and life. She aspires to accomplish something greater than herself that would leave an impact on the world. She wants her life to have a purpose, never passively approaching situations and always willing to make the self-sacrifice to help others. Such wishes, alongside her “large eyes” and religion seemed “too unusual and striking” for the members of Middlemarch community, who had strong negative opinions about women unafraid to learn and eagerly express their opinions. Unlike her sister, and despite the fact that they had money to spend on expensive clothing, Dorothea never stood out, dressing plainly, though Rosamond did find her fascinating and “worthy of her study” (Eliot, 2000, 268).

*“I think we deserve to be beaten out of our beautiful houses with a scourge of small cords—all of us who let tenants live in such sties as we see round us. Life in cottages might be happier than ours, if they were real houses fit for human beings from whom we expect duties and affections.” (Eliot, 2000, 21).*

Dorothea’s aspirations to enrich her studies and her willingness to help others can be seen when she devotes a great deal of her time to her cottage plans. She also comprehends that she cannot realise any of her plans if lacking support from Mr. Brooke or Sir Chettam. Finding the passion to build homes for families in need and becoming painfully aware it might not be fulfilled can certainly affect one’s perceptions of abilities and purpose.

Her desire for education and guidance influences her view on marriage and possible suitors, for she has “childlike ideas about marriage”, never even considering Sir James Chettam as a husband and instantaneously accepting Mr. Casaubon as a possibility, and eventually a

husband (Eliot, 2000, 7). Middlemarch citizens are more than dissatisfied by the choice she makes; they do not expect her to do so or see them compatible. To Dorothea, a woman of strong opinions and interests unfitting for women, he was the most suitable choice, “a man of profound learning, [...] having views of his own which were to be more clearly ascertained on the publication of his book.” (Eliot, 2000, 8). She admires his rich knowledge, overlooking the age difference between them, equating love with learning (Paris, 2003).

Not long after getting married, Dorothea realised why everyone was against the union, why they were appalled by her choice without consulting or listening to her family. One’s decisions are brought into question by the society and Dorothea’s decision to marry is only supported by her own illusions about married life. She dreamed of some extraordinary things which were only usual for the marriage of the time (Tadlock, 2015).

*“Nor can I suppose that when Mrs Casaubon is discovered in a fit of weeping six weeks after her wedding, the situation will be regarded as tragic. Some discouragement, some faintness of heart at the new real future which replaces the imaginary, is not unusual, and we do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual.” (Eliot, 2000, 124).*

Dorothea spent more time alone during her honeymoon than with her husband, almost to the point of boredom and depression, taking on the role of the Victorian ideal dutiful woman, the identity she would not choose for herself. Time spent in Rome, a city with rich, astonishing history, emphasised her changing view of her life and her husband (Paris, 2003). She wanted more out of marriage in every aspect, but never actually attaining those wants and everything she admired before now irritated her. A marriage based on vague assumptions, without mutual understanding, respect, and any form of intimacy was hopeless before it became a reality.

Casaubon envisaged Dorothea as someone who would obediently submit and work alongside him almost as “a secretary which he dreaded so much” (Eliot, 2000, 130). The incompatibility of the two independent persons is evident hence when the man feels threatened his position is questioned and for that matter, he is unwilling to allow the women to broaden her role even in the private sphere secluding himself in the studies.

When Casaubon’s health starts to decline, Dorothea’s sense of duty controls her everyday life for she cannot abandon him in his distress, no matter his coldness and growing jealousy. From the resentment, anger and disappointment, Dorothea accepts her life and dismisses illusions she naively conceived. She completely submits, acting against her own better judgement and self-destructively internally accepting his wishes for her future in case of his impending death, before knowing it would have grave consequences (Paris, 2003). In this marriage, Dorothea represents the submissive wife, the behaviour that is expected of a woman in the patriarchal Victorian society. She is the one to keep her husband’s legacy, it is expected of her in such small provincial community to complete his work and remain a widow.

Before marriage, Dorothea met Will Ladislaw, Casaubon’s cousin, whom he financially supported to obtain scholarly education. Will and Dorothea showed similar interests and views on the world, immediately painting a better match than her future husband. Though she never truly found out reasons for Casaubon’s resentment towards Ladislaw, which only grew as he spent more and more time in Middlemarch, it was one of the main reasons for their failing marriage. Dorothea dutifully reduced and stopped communication with Will so as to not cause any more pain. Bourgeoning friendship and feelings between the two young people, through mutual understanding and need for affections, Dorothea started to question after encountering Ladislaw in the private company of Mrs. Lydgate. The knowledge about the

codicil to Casaubon's will forbidding Dorothea to marry Will specifically or else she should lose all the inheritance temporarily divided the two lovers.

Casaubon's death is freeing for Dorothea, an end providing a new beginning, a start of a more fulfilling life. Although in mourning, she was ready to live at her estate and achieve something worth remembering, beneficial for others. She was willing to use her inheritance and the large estate possession to finally put her idea of cottages for working people into reality. Now, as a rich widow, she has more influence and resources to achieve something meaningful. Dorothea's freed spirit, rational reasoning and kind nature, despite her initial anger towards Rosamond due to misunderstanding of the relationship with Will, saved Lydgate's reputation and consequently his marriage. The two women comforted one another and helped each other grow and mature as wives, though remaining themselves and prevailing their strong wills.

Many Middlemarch citizens and her family perceived it unsuitable for Dorothea to marry again at all, let alone marry Will Ladislaw, perhaps even more inappropriate choice for a husband.

*“Sir James never ceased to regard Dorothea's second marriage as a mistake; and indeed this remained the tradition concerning it in Middlemarch, where she was spoken of to a younger generation as a fine girl who married a sickly clergyman, old enough to be her father, and in little more than a year after his death gave up her estate to marry his cousin—young enough to have been his son, with no property, and not well-born. Those who had not seen anything of Dorothea usually observed that she could not have been "a nice woman," else she would not have married either the one or the other.” (Eliot, 2000, 514).*

Dorothea always looks for something fresh, unexpected in her life, and Will epitomises that need for new experiences. She lost her freedom and identity while married to Casaubon only to find it again with Will, filling her life with love and the feeling of specific usefulness (Tadlock, 2015). Her role in the feminine, private sphere as a wife and a mother is supported by mutual “love stronger than any impulses” which lacked in her first marriage bringing her on the verge of boredom and resentment (Eliot, 2000, 513). With Ladislav, Dorothea’s self that looks for greatness, to be “a new Theresa [having] the opportunity of reforming a conventional life”, is prevailed by the self that longs for unconditional love (Eliot, 2000, 514; Paris, 2003). Their marriage benefited them both, maybe Ladislav even more as he softens his strong personality and opinions under Dorothea’s supportive influence.

Becoming a respected man in the Victorian society required an employment with steady income, sufficient enough to start a family. Work and its influence in the community impacted the way a man was perceived, in both private and public sphere, or his masculinity and capabilities were questioned if the vocational opportunities were slowly declining, or in the worst-case scenarios, left without a job entirely (Tosh, 1994). A husband was the one responsible for the entire estate and household, even though the wives put most of their time into running it.

Taking the provided description of the male/husband’s duty, Tertius Lydgate provides an interesting parallel and a contrast to Dorothea Brooke’s own life path, choices and consequences. The two characters are young, ambitious people disappointed in life due to the experiences and hardships they faced, though Lydgate’s ending induces less satisfaction than Dorothea’s. The two characters did not become fast friends from the beginning, their mutual understanding and respect developed over time as they interacted more and more. Lydgate advised Dorothea how to help Casaubon after his illness, while Dorothea saw him as a striving

and loyal doctor in need of a friend after finding himself in trouble due to unfulfilled ambitions and failing marriage. The compassion they showed for each other helped them come to terms with their own decisions and the consequences they had to face in the harsh provincial community.

*“Lydgate believed that he should not marry for several years: not marry until he had trodden out a good clear path for himself away from the broad road which was quite ready made. [...] But Lydgate was young, poor, ambitious. He had his half-century before him instead of behind him, and he had come to Middlemarch bent on doing many things that were not directly fitted to make his fortune or even secure him a good income. To a man under such circumstances, taking a wife is something more than a question of adornment, [...]” (Eliot, 2000, 61).*

Lydgate comes to Middlemarch shortly after finishing his medical education he obtained in London, Edinburgh and Paris. He discovered his interest in medicine at a young age after reading an anatomy book. During his time in Paris, Lydgate “knew Broussais”, a controversial French physician who encouraged his innovative ideas (Eliot, 2000, 59). After falling in love with a French actress who refused his proposal, he decided to return to England, keep away from London’s busy everyday life and settle and reform the provincial, old approaches to medicine. His first and foremost ambition is to achieve something greater in his life, to “do good small work for Middlemarch, and great work for the world” (Eliot, 2000, 96)., become a big reformist of the medical practice to succeed on his own, with no initial desire to marry before he made a proper man of himself, able to provide for his family. This first insight into his innermost thoughts about marriage is foreshadowing of his plans not going according to his wishes. Although he comes from a respectable family, he is not a wealthy man. Despite his “openness [and] good-will”, intriguing as he is, citizens of Middlemarch still have some



reservations towards him, even question his medical abilities as he implements new techniques and procedures, with only Bulstrode and Rosamond who “liked him the better for being a stranger” (Eliot, 2000, 80). Mr. Farebrother also shows certain generosity towards the novice doctor, mainly due to his chivalrous behaviour towards his family (Eliot, 2000, 113). Lydgate’s importance in the community started to rise as he proved himself to be a skilful doctor, especially after curing Fred Vincy, which eventually led to a completely new and different role in the society.

*“Certainly, if falling in love had been at all in question, it would have been quite safe with a creature like this Miss Vincy, who had just the kind of intelligence one would desire in a woman —polished, refined, docile, lending itself to finish in all the delicacies of life, and enshrined in a body which expressed this with a force of demonstration that excluded the need for other evidence. Lydgate felt sure that if ever he married, his wife would have that feminine radiance, that distinctive womanhood which must be classed with flowers and music, that sort of beauty which by its very nature was virtuous, being moulded only for pure and delicate joys.” (Eliot, 2000, 105)*

Lydgate’s fascination with Rosamond and his vision of her as a wife is greatly in line with the Victorian norm that woman possesses feminine attributes and is skilled in activities belonging to private sphere. As such, Rosamond represents the perfect, ideal woman for Lydgate, a perspective man in need of womanly assistance who still holds conventional attitudes towards women. The two see only the “flattering versions of stereotyped gender expectations” (Moscovici, 2000, 671). Fallen a victim of unrequited love and rejected engagement once before, Lydgate still befriends Rosamond quickly, the two spend a lot of time together and he eventually falls in love. Their close friendship and growing romance become a

town gossip, causing him to distance himself, though eventually once again impulsively proposes. Lydgate, although an ambitious, scientific man, is unable to dismiss the affection of the women he loves, easily falls under their manipulations to feel the love he might have missed growing up. The need to be loved, and to love, to provide Rosamond with everything, even though he is unable to, is stronger than any rational thought in him at specific moments (Paris, 2003).

The initial plan Lydgate sets for himself when he first comes to Middlemarch, to not marry for several years, quickly fell through. Within a year he married Rosamond, with everything else in his life slowly getting out of control. His partial involvement in town matters concerning the new hospital, his involvement with Bulstrode and huge expenses in marriage are intertwined events, “product of both character and circumstance, and they lead to demoralization that renders Lydgate incapable of coping with his problems” (Paris, 2003, 67). Devoting most of his time to practicing medicine and failing to appreciate his wife’s elegance and need for social occasions, Rosamond seeks company in Ladislaw. Lydgate’s preoccupation with work and growing debt and Rosamond’s preoccupation with herself divides the two lovers, nonetheless Lydgate loves her and is completely devoted to her needs.

To keep the extravagant lifestyle Rosamond is used to, and Lydgate as well initially not fond of abandoning, “with his intense pride – his dislike of asking a favour” only deepens the debt, putting him in “miserable isolation of egoistic fears and vulgar anxieties” (Eliot, 2000, 364; 400). Much like Dorothea, Lydgate gives up on his ambitions, isolates himself from people who might be able to help him at a cost of his inner happiness and intellect (Moscovici, 2000). Rosamond’s knowledge of the debt and vain attempts to secretly fix the situation further anger and agitate Lydgate, who is slowly realising his faults. Rosamond directly blames him and only him for the hardships that befell them, much the same as the community does. The debt cannot

hidden any longer, evidently putting Lydgate in spotlight as a man unable to provide for his household, with almost all of his attempts to rectify the situation being ruined by or objected to by his wife, and as such lost his masculine position in both family and society. His authority is subjected to the insensitive, manipulative wife, leaving him in self-hatred with an only option to beg (Paris, 2003).

*“Lydgate had so many times boasted both to himself and others that he was totally independent of Bulstrode, to whose plans he had lent himself solely because they enabled him to carry out his own ideas of professional work and public benefit—he had so constantly in their personal intercourse had his pride sustained by the sense that he was making a good social use of this predominating banker, whose opinions he thought contemptible and whose motives often seemed to him an absurd mixture of contradictory impressions [...]” (Eliot, 2000, 419).*

If Lydgate were able to put his pride aside some time sooner, his future misfortunes, caused by the association with Bulstrode, would have never happened. Bulstrode, at the time, distraught by Raffles reappearance, offers to help seeing their alliance as a solution, which backfired greatly on both men, leaving Lydgate in an even more compromising situation. With “uneasy consciousness”, Lydgate realises the true motives behind the loan Bulstrode so hastily provides him with (Eliot, 2000, 441). The town gossip leaves a malignant effect on Lydgate’s reputation and overall well-being, the accusations of being the accomplice to alleged murder made him miserable, and yet again without clear solution to the debt as the given money cannot be used.

The saviour of Lydgate’s demoralised persona in the condemnatory Middlemarch community is Dorothea Brooke. Regardless of her initially resentful feelings towards

Rosamond, she manages to persuade her of his innocence and help them, just as Lydgate helped her. Lydgate faced and accepted certain undesirable truths about his remaining life.

*“Lydgate's hair never became white. He died when he was only fifty, leaving his wife and children provided for by a heavy insurance on his life. He had gained an excellent practice, alternating, according to the season, between London and a Continental bathing-place; [...] His skill was relied on by many paying patients, but he always regarded himself as a failure: he had not done what he once meant to do.”*  
(Eliot, 2000, 512).

Even though successful in his work, he never attained gratification in his life, never achieved the great things he aspired to, never reformed the medical practice. Everything he did, he did it out of obligation to his family. Where Dorothea eagerly sacrifices her dreams as she finds happiness in Ladislaw, Lydgate “sacrifices himself to Rosamond but blames her bitterly, partly because he is externalising his hatred of himself” (Paris, 2003, 79). The noble self-sacrifice Dorothea almost agreed to; Lydgate was unable to escape.

## 5. Disillusionment and happiness in relations and marriage

Detailed portrayal of married life and how spouses approached and settled difficult situations were not dominant topics in the novels of the time. Looking at the Victorian set values, gender roles in marriage were strictly specified for either female or male. Men were considered to be the head of the family, allowed to publicly socialise, while married women sole duty was to privately oblige the men. Eliot questions these roles by depicting marriages where the women's opinions and support determine whether marriage is gratifying.

As previously mentioned, George Eliot herself was never actually married, though she lived as if she were, with George Henry Lewes. Lewes, on the other hand was married, even when in a relationship with Eliot, unable to divorce due to complicated legal circumstances. Their untraditional relationships "cast her out of the respectable London society", Lewes supported and encouraged her writing (Levine, 2001, 4). Eliot accompanied him to Germany where he researched Goethe, helped raise his three sons who significantly impacted her life. She also lost her mother when quite young, so an exemplary marriage is lacking in her life, which without a question influenced her own views on married life and happiness in one. To some extent, even her alienation from religion might have also been an influence (Levine, 2010).

*"In Middlemarch a wife could not long remain ignorant that the town held a bad opinion of her husband. No feminine intimate might carry her friendship so far as to make a plain statement to the wife of the unpleasant fact known or believed about her husband; but when a woman with her thoughts much at leisure got them suddenly*

*employed on something grievously disadvantageous to her neighbours, various moral impulses were called into play which tended to stimulate utterance.” (Eliot, 2000, 458)*

Many of the marriages in *Middlemarch* turn out to be rather unfortunate and even though some marriages encounter difficulties, they manage to overcome them, owing to the female strength in the marital union. The wives, their lives and relations with other members of the community, were greatly impacted by the misdoings of their husbands, the prominent Middlemarch men. Bravely taking on every accusation against their husbands, wrongful or truthful, female citizens strongly endured the consequences and the gossip, eventually managing to maintain their status in the community, in some cases women even gave example how to handle demanding marital situations. Such instances can be primarily observed in Mr. and Mrs. Bulstrode and the Garths’ marriage.

Disillusionment in marriages is one of the central themes of the novel, but instances of disappointing family and personal relations are also present, with multiple examples. The case of Fred Vincy is an interesting one to take a closer look at. His character connects the stories of family disillusionment, courtship hardships with Mary Garth and Mr. and Mrs. Garth, luckily only temporary matrimonial hardships.

*“[...] perhaps after drinking wine he had said many foolish things about Featherstone's property, and these had been magnified by report. Fred felt that he made a wretched figure as a fellow who bragged about expectations from a queer old miser like Featherstone, and went to beg for certificates at his bidding. But—those expectations! He really had them, and he saw no agreeable alternative if he gave them up; besides, he had lately made a debt which galled him extremely, and old Featherstone had almost bargained to pay it off. The whole affair was miserably small:*

*his debts were small, even his expectations were not anything so very magnificent”*  
(Eliot, 2000, 77)

Fred Vincy, son of the Middlemarch mayor, admired manufacturer, found himself in financial troubles accumulating debt, mostly thanks to his almost naïve nature, reckless impromptu decisions and above all his disinterest in his decided future. He was unsure of his future designated profession, though he was sure he did not want to be a clergyman. Many saw him as a bored rich inheritor, to whom gambling was an enjoyable way to spend free time. The amount of debt he accumulated was almost negligible. As he was Peter Featherstone’s favourite nephew, Fred did not hide his expectations about inheriting his uncle’s estate, Stone Court, what was expected by all the Middlemarch citizens. Citing Bulstrode as the source, Featherstone learned “that Fred has been borrowing or trying to borrow money on the prospect of the land”, Fred’s troubles escalated as his uncle of failing health demanded written disproof of such allegations. (Eliot, 2000, 83). From a favoured relative, Fred fell out of grace and was eventually left without any inheritance. The old man’s dying attempt to rectify the will’s outcome, so that Fred does in fact inherit the estate, was not fulfilled by Mary Garth as she refused the bribe she was offered. All his hopes and widely known expectations dissolved with the second will, which generated more debt due to reckless decision to buy a horse, leaving him even more indebted to Mr. Garth, whose own family troubles were caused by this whole ordeal.

Fred’s connection to the Garth family does not end with his initial arrangement with Mr. Garth. He was, from a very young age, in love with Mary. Though they loved each another, they each felt too liable of their own doings that affected the future wellbeing of the other. For a longer while, Fred was remorseful for putting her family in debt, never believing her mother will ever trust him again, even though he knew she was a forgiving woman. Mary, on the other hand, felt responsible for Fred’s loss of the inheritance and property, though she was only

following her righteous nature when refusing to burn the will for a great sum of money Featherstone offered her at his death bed.

Their satisfying ending can be attributed to Farebrother's intervention, despite his own feelings for Mary. Left without any other options, Fred finished his degree, proving to everyone in Middlemarch who considered him to be only an overindulgent privileged slacker that he is in fact capable of finishing university, despite the fact he had no desire to work in the profession. Mr. Garth's offer of employment opened the path to Fred and Mary's happiness. Though at first seemingly unfit for the work post, he proved himself to be worthy and respected in the society, alongside Mr. Garth. Mary finally saw him as a hardworking man capable of taking care of himself and others and devoted to rectifying any of his previous misdoings. They were able to achieve "a solid mutual happiness", each accomplishing some of their goals. The members of Middlemarch community had their reservations as to who actually did what in the marriage, as their fit for union and capabilities were always questioned (Eliot, 2000, 511).

The Garth family can perhaps be seen as one of the only families in the Middlemarch community that is built on strong foundations, despite being a working-class family and encountering financial hardships, which were eventually successfully resolved. The family was large, "for Mary had four brothers and one sister", though each member was still very caring and understanding, both towards each other and others (Eliot, 2000, 153). Mrs. Garth was a governess before marrying Caleb, the transition from her "higher position" into "housewife had wrought itself a little too strongly into her consciousness" as she never stopped herself to freely, even critically comment on the doings of others (Eliot, 2000, 154). She was educated, sometimes even more than those holding themselves higher than her, who learned not to object her and use her in any way. As a caring mother, she put an effort to transfer at least some of her knowledge to her children, from their earliest age.



*“Adoring her husband's virtues, she had very early made up her mind to his incapacity of minding his own interests, and had met the consequences cheerfully.”*  
(Eliot, 2000, 153)

Susan Garth, is an example of a perfect, ideal woman and wife, who cares for her husband deeply, despite his occasional blunders that even put their family's existence in danger. When Caleb agreed to help Fred and loan him money, Mrs. Garth had no knowledge of the arrangement. As to why Mr. Garth chose to withhold this fact, it is never said. When the truth eventually came to the surface, she was disappointed, but all the while very cheerful and supportive, claiming that in marriage there should be no need to keep anything from the other spouse, as in these situations she “might have been ready with some better plan” (Eliot, 2000, 158). Susan is strict and fair as a mother, although she extends her supportive and forgiving nature even towards other members of the Middlemarch society. Looking at the Garth family and the power relations, it is possible to conclude that the women of the family, Susan and Mary, had the upper hand, being strong, rational and straightforward women, who strongly held their superior position over male members of the family.

The Garth family disgrace in the society, due to Caleb's naively natured personality, willing to help those in need and Fred's wrong choices and disastrous decisions, in fact brought the whole family even closer together in the end.

Harriet Bulstrode is another example of a supportive wife, willing to forgive and support her husband after he became a disgraced figure in the society. Harriet is respected in the community, considered to be a “comfortable woman, honest as a day” (Eliot, 2000, 458). So, when her husband's past indiscretions resurfaced, people did not blame her, she was pitied.

*“[...] but now along with her brother's look and words there darted into her mind the idea of some guilt in her husband—then, under the working of terror came the image of her husband exposed to disgrace—and then, after an instant of scorching shame in which she felt only the eyes of the world, with one leap of her heart she was at his side in mournful but unrepenting fellowship with shame and isolation. All this went on within her in a mere flash of time.” (Eliot, 2000, 462).*

When the scandal broke out, Mr. Vincy informed his sister of it, dispersing her own ideas. He also assured her that no matter what he will support her. She loved her husband deeply, never prying too much into his past, accepting him as he is and by becoming a member of a renowned Middlemarch family, Nicholas Bulstrode not only secured his successful position, but also improved his wife's status.

Bulstrode was unquestionably well aware of her good-naturedness. When his attained Middlemarch status started to slowly dissipate, “the loss of high consideration from his wife” was one of the worst things that could have possibly happen to him (Eliot, 2000, 380). His wife's opinion meant more to him than the opinion of others in the community and could cause him great distress, which it eventually did. They were both agitated, first in private and then together, by the events that occurred and impacted their family.

*“But this imperfectly-taught woman, whose phrases and habits were an odd patchwork, had a loyal spirit within her. The man whose prosperity she had shared through nearly half a life, and who had unvaryingly cherished her—now that punishment had befallen him it was not possible to her in any sense to forsake him. [...] She knew, when she locked her door, that she should unlock it ready to go down to her unhappy husband and espouse his sorrow, and say of his guilt, I will mourn and*

*not reproach. But she needed time to gather up her strength; she needed to sob out her farewell to all the gladness and pride of her life.” (Eliot, 2000, 463)*

Harriet was not someone who would abandon her loved ones when they were in need of support, her loyalty went far beyond any trouble, however dishonourable and deceitful its origins are. Thinking of her future, making peace with it and accepting the forthcoming humiliation, she mourned her past life in private and gathered huge amount of strength so she could help and support her husband in his own misery. Compassion and tenderness for which she was known did not disappear in the light of hardships. Harriet was a loyal wife, standing by her husband no matter what or how disgrace he was in the community. She accepted her own faith, courageously entering “a new life in which she embraced humiliation”, standing as a pillar of support for her cowardly husband. (Eliot, 2000, 463).

Bulstrode managed to redeem himself in his wife’s eyes by complying with her wishes. As he already planned to leave Middlemarch to avoid humiliation, which eventually came before he managed to escape, it was still an only option for him, to get away from the community he no longer belonged to and recover physically. Harriet’s family also encountered troubles and the only thing she wanted was to help them, in any way possible. She was aware that there was no help they could provide to Rosamond and Lydgate, as Bulstrode was partially responsible for their demise, so leaving the Stone Court estate in Fred’s hands was a redemptive act (Conklin, 2005).

Perhaps the only truly fulfilling marriage, which follows and accepts the Victorian norm and gender roles is the marriage between Celia Brooke and James Chettam. Chettam expressed his fondness and wishes to marry Dorothea, heavily objecting to her marrying a much older Casaubon. After his attempts failed, he almost accidentally started to devote more time to

Celia, who eventually grew fond of him. Their love grew from initial mutual dislike of Casaubon and Dorothea's decision, into a courtship and happy marriage. Celia Brooke is the perfect example of women in the Victorian society, belonging and thriving in the private sphere of the home and family. She had no other desire than to become a dutiful wife, obliging to her husband, devoted to her family and children. Chettam was a working nobleman, but very caring towards his wife, indulging her wishes. "Where women love each other, men learn to smother their mutual dislike" perfectly defines the relationship between Ladislav and Chettam, men willing to do anything to make the women they love happy (Eliot, 2000, 514).

## Conclusion

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* undeniably provides an extensive study of a provincial life. She vividly describes the complex social life of the community, delving deep into the psyche of the characters, the motives for their actions and the possibilities in life when faced with difficulties. She employed cultural, gender related or religious issues to present the ideals of the Victorian era and questioned their limitations in the changing society. The novel's structure and thematic patterns accentuate its complexity. Many characters and situations can be contrasted and compared, creating a strong network of individuals that are interconnected and interdependent, creating one intertwined community. This small closed community is cautious towards strangers and oftentimes provides a judgmental commentary on the hardship's individuals face.

The prevalent themes in the novel include marriage and women question, both interconnected. The disillusionment in many aspects of life, though throughout the novel it is closely related to various relations and marriage. The female identity is explored through different characters, some portraying the ideal Victorian women, while some deviate from the Victorian norm, the set of values regarding social interaction, morality and self-repression. They actively seek vocational opportunities and education, providing a look at the future independence of the gender. While Dorothea seeks educational prospects, Celia is content with her status as a wife. Mary Garth and Rosamond Vincy illustrate the two opposite social classes.

Various characters have particular visions of their lives, making choices based on their expectations and eventually face the consequences of their actions. Eliot does not spare either gender of their disillusionments, though men face severe consequences. Women manage to

overcome the challenges, often times taking on the main role in the family as the masculine woman superior to the husband. While such reversal of the roles is positive for Fred or Mr. Garth, in the case of Lydgate and Bulstrode it is destructive and shameful.

Through her occasional intrusive commentary, Eliot creates a tangled community which is still under unequivocal influence of individuals, expertly challenging many well-established aspects of society of the time through representation of complex characters and relationships.

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