



# Sick of Each Other: The Diseased Marriages of George Eliot's Middlemarch

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Sick of Each Other: The Diseased Marriages of George Eliot's Middlemarch

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## Abstract

Two extremely common elements of most Victorian-age novels are the depictions of characters getting married and of characters falling ill. Critics have noted, and rightly so, that both of these components are integral to plot facilitation and to captivating the readership. Similarly, much has been discussed in the intellectual world about the portrayal of flawed marriages and of rampant disease as a call on the part of the author to reform marriage practices and sanitation conditions, respectively. What has not been previously discussed, however, is the direct correlation between instances of disease and instances of ill-fated marriage unions.

In this thesis, I examine one of the most well-known 'master novels' to appear in the Victorian era: George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Eliot's is a major voice of her time and exhibits the unique way of addressing the marriage problem through the lens of illness. What is the problem with the Victorian-era institution of marriage according to Eliot? How does she portray these problems within her novel and what is her motivation for doing so? What does the shadow of disease cast on marriages in this text mean? What should marriage be that it allegedly isn't?

Eliot ultimately comes to a realization that marriage, though it should be an institution ripe with selflessness and mutual respect, has degenerated into a festering wound of selfishness and utilitarian function. She demonstrates through the actions of her characters the societal acceptance of this diseased state of marriage as the Victorian norm and strives to instigate reform. For Eliot, the language and instances of illness and infirmity in its many forms

serve as the primary vehicle to transport this message to Victorian readers with the intent to inspire change.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Queen Victoria's England produced some of the most memorable voices of all time. It was a period when what would one day become household names (such as William Makepeace Thackeray, Charles Dickens, and the Bronte sisters) came into literary fruition. Authors like those mentioned above drew upon the vibrant and complex nature of Victorian culture and society to inspire their fascinating works of literature—pieces which still enthrall readers today. The Victorian landscape was ripe with religious, political, and social transformations and these vicissitudes coupled with the rapid growth of industrialization made for interesting material to the great minds and writers of the day.

One of the more prominent of these writers is the estimable George Eliot. Arguably her most highly esteemed novel, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, is just that: a glimpse into the intricacies and intimacies of very realistic (albeit fictional) characters in an equally realistic town in Victorian England. Some of the novel's central themes revolve around ambition, self-determination, and pressures put upon one by society. The theme dominating the novel, however, is the very anti-romanticist abundance of faulty marriages and ill-fated couplings. The reader is privy to the doomed unions of two separate central characters who are themselves walled in by a bevy of peripheral marriages, each toting their own unique failings. Eliot boldly strays away from the more common practice of presenting fairytale-like relationships with

happy and successful endings and instead portrays what she views as very real flaws in the current marriage market as a whole.

Academic scholars and literary critics have for years dissected the marriages of *Middlemarch*, illuminating Eliot's preference of reality (despite its more negative implications) over romanticist fiction. What this thesis will explore is the very specific and intentional situational and linguistic presence of bodily illness encasing each of the 'romantic' relationships of the novel. I will work to uncover the correlation between ailment of the human body and marital practices. Ultimately, close readings and in-depth character analysis in the following pages will, I argue, point to Eliot's strategy of conflating marriage and illness in the minds of her readers with the intention of illuminating the corporeality of the ills of Victorian marriage practices, habits, and traditions. This examination will define the fundamental elements of successful or 'healthy' relationships and will reveal their conspicuous absence from the overall marriage archetype. We will see just how disease-like these practices have become through the involvement of illness in either the buildup or breakdown of all of *Middlemarch's* unions. Illness both mirrors marriage and serves as a catalyst for its destruction. For Eliot, defective marriage customs have blistered and spread like a disease to both the individual and to society at large.



## Chapter 2:

### Background - Disease

The Victorian era was a time when many advancements and changes were constantly occurring and, as a result, the lifestyle of the everyday person was ever in flux. Perhaps the most noteworthy, most defining transformation that occurred at this time was the Industrial Revolution. Thanks to the power of steam innovation, large factories were established all over, lending themselves to a new and exciting efficiency in the workplace. With these new factories came an abundance of opportunities for regular, steady employment for a massive number of people. Both men and women of Victorian England flocked to the cities in hopes of providing successful, stable lives for themselves and for their families. These economic advancements and new opportunities did not come at no cost, however. This new landscape bred overcrowding issues, air and water pollution, poor public sanitation, and an even more staggering juxtaposition of economic and social disparity between the classes. All of these issues together joined forces to create one all-consuming problem for the people of Victorian England: the rapid and omnipotent spread of diseases.

The most common culprits—cholera, measles, scarlet fever, dysentery, typhoid, smallpox, and tuberculosis—were amplified to the extreme given the new environment so well suited to their growth. The Victorian era alone saw not one, but four massive cholera epidemics and “the most severe epidemic of smallpox to occur in Britain during the nineteenth century” (Carpenter xvi). This uptick in the very real threat that one could (and, in many cases,

would) lose their life or the life of a loved one (particularly a child) bolstered fear of infection in the minds of everyone despite their socio-economic standing. (Although I would be remiss to not mention that poor living conditions of the lower classes drastically increased the threat to the impoverished and working classes). Poor water hygiene and shoddy sewerage systems led to “perils that could be clearly seen and smelled in the streets” (Woods 76). Air pollution from industrialization and urbanization as well as poor air quality in general led to many deaths of bronchitis and pneumonia, particularly in the winter months and especially in communities where the mining industry was prevalent. Water- and food-borne diseases, the most prominent of which was diarrhea by dysentery, were often deadly due to its consequential dehydration and malnutrition. The main cause superseding all of these public health and infrastructure issues, however, was the overflowing population residing in cramped quarters. Infectious disease of all kinds “were especially sensitive to the effects of crowding such that infection could spread easily among a large and regularly replenished population of susceptibles” (Woods, Shelton 73). Disease was undoubtedly a firmly established member of society—always lurking in the shadows and never far away. The silver lining to the existence of this newly-empowered force was the reinvigoration in efforts to minimize and, in some cases, eliminate it.

Because of the profusion of the disease threat, the Victorian time became one of significant medical study and advancements. A kind of “sanitary revolution” (Woods, Shelton 76) emerged with the Victorian Public Health Movement of 1848, improving water quality and advancing sewerage systems and resulting in the development of purification technology. Other advancements and reformations included the Vaccination Act of 1840, making a number

of vaccines free and available to the lower classes; the compulsory Vaccination Act of 1853, requiring vaccination of all infants before four months of age; the Medical Act of 1858 calling for the annual registration of all medical practitioners; the establishment of the Nightingale School of nurses in 1862; and the publishing of a number of new books and studies examining the diseases of the time, educating doctors and the public alike on methods of transmission, treatment, and causes, (Carpenter xvi). Despite all of these advancements and the great attention given to the study of eradicating these diseases, the diseases ultimately prevailed during most of the Victorian era and people learned to live with the constant fear of falling victim to them.

Diseases such as cholera and smallpox were very much out in the open and the subject of much everyday conversation. Athena Vrettos speaks of the reflexive craving of members of Victorian culture during this time to preoccupy themselves with the discussion of disease as a means to participate in the study human of relations within society. She goes on to explore the danger of such habits by stating that “to speak of illness is to replicate linguistically the process of transmission from one subject to another,” (Vrettos 2) which ultimately changes the way people view themselves and each other. For Vrettos, this had significant impact on the course of history.

However, there existed an entirely different, yet equally pervasive, subtext of diseases that were not as comfortably discussed in public. There was, at this time, a thriving underbelly of Victorian culture—one which was only whispered about among ‘proper’ members of society. The extremely influential and intrusive presence of the church in Victorian England coupled with harsh societal judgments and expectations on the individual made for a tenuous climate

for all things sexual. As a fundamental part of human nature, however, sex persisted and very often persisted in the form of prostitution. In his seminal critical study, *The Other Victorians*, Steven Marcus offers a vivid examination of one Victorian medical doctor who took particular interest in the problem of prostitution and the great spread of venereal diseases it generated. This doctor, William Acton, had an unlikely sympathy for prostitution workers and authored pieces with the intention (among others) of “humanizing” them. As a result, he captured the essence of what led both men and women to partake in the prostitution subculture:

[Acton] offers some shrewd observations on the reciprocal relation between prostitution and the demand made in the respectable classes for money and position as the requirements for marriage [...] there is no doubt in his mind that the chief cause of prostitution is ‘cruel biting poverty’ and the ‘lowness of the wages paid to workwomen in various trades...unable to obtain by their labor the means of procuring the bare necessities of life, they gain, by surrendering their bodies to evil uses, food to sustain and clothes to cover them.’ Is it any wonder, he asks, that ‘urged on by want and toil, encouraged by evil advisers, and exposed to selfish tempters, a large proportion of these poor girls fall from the path of virtue?’ (Marcus 7)

The unregulated engagement in and practice of prostitution led to a staggering rise in venereal diseases, the most notorious of which was syphilis, known to cause eventual insanity and even death. In response, a series of Contagious Disease Acts were passed between the years of 1864 and 1869 which “permitted police to have surveillance over, arrest, and require medical treatment of prostitutes suspected of having venereal disease” (Carpenter xvi). Dr. Acton pointed out not only the relatively ineffective nature of these Acts (especially since prostitution in England at the time remained unregulated by the government), but also society and the church’s tendency to dissuade the treatment of and fight against venereal diseases. Why would this be? Marcus states that “religious persons [...] opposed preventive and sanitary

measures on the grounds that syphilis was 'the penalty for sin,' and that therefore syphilis should go unchecked and uncured because the chance of contracting it 'is the strongest means of deterring men from being unchaste'" (Marcus 6). In the eyes of the all-powerful church, and therefore much of society in general, sexuality, especially extramarital in nature, is a curse and something that should be met with 'incessant struggle' to repress and ignore (Marcus 19).

One noteworthy aspect of human sexuality that was assigned a particularly heinous reputation was masturbation. Acton himself, a well-educated man of medical study, had "no doubt" that masturbation is the main catalyst to a plethora of physical ailments: "Among the multitude of afflictions that it can cause are impotence, consumption, curvature of the spine, and of course insanity" (Marcus 20). How, then, is a Victorian man able to escape the potentially fatal threat of maladies thrust upon him by his very own intrinsic sexual nature? Acton, and society at large, does not leave these poor souls without guidance. There is a two-pronged method of intercepting these dangerous temptations of the flesh—a method that comes in the form of the traditional, well-respected, highly renowned institution of marriage. Acton points out the Victorian notion (inaccurate as it may be) that, unlike men, proper Victorian women are not naturally predisposed to sexual desires and therefore the married Victorian man "need not fear that his wife will require the excitement, or in any respect imitate the ways of a courtesan" (Marcus 29). The removal of such pressures on the man will lead to a much healthier relationship with sex. The second aspect that successful marriage brings about is the proclivity to child bearing. For Acton, pregnancy and child rearing is "the only reliable means of stifling sexual desire" (Marcus 30). Pregnancy and nursing cause a lack of female sexual excitement which will consequently quell the desires of their male counterpart. The

“sobered down” sexual desires will alleviate the couple of the majority of their temptations and release them from the threat of physical harm and societal ill-repute that come along with sexuality.

Of course, looking back today on this way of thinking is appalling and borderline laughable, but it was very real for people at the time. Because Acton and many other professionals and laymen alike believed in these notions wholeheartedly does not mean that all persons of that era agreed. Marriage unions stemming from a fear of venereal and sexually self-inflicted diseases is merely one of many flawed motivations people had (and still have) steering them into the so-called sanctity of marriage. I believe that distinguished minds of the time recognized this charade as well as the undeniable power fear of illness instills in people. George Eliot is one of these great minds. I will argue how Eliot utilizes this very specific fear not to push people into marriage but to illuminate the many ways in which marriage itself had become morphed into a kind of pestilence afflicting the health and well-being of both the individual and society.

## Chapter 3:

### Background – Marriage

What did marriage look like during the life and authorship of George Eliot and what about it fueled her blighted representation of it in *Middlemarch*? Like many of the social and economic institutions of the Victorian period, marriage was on the brink of change. Staunch and unwavering views of traditional marriage were up against progressive, often feminist, voices speaking out for reform. Through the vehicle of her literature, George Eliot was one of these impactful voices. During the Victorian era and represented by Queen Victoria herself, there existed a steadfast ideal of marriage. Even more steadfast was the certainty that there existed a reality of marriage in practice that vastly differed from the rarely attainable ideal. The ultimate goal, as outlined in etiquette guides, popular literature, and magazines of the time was to achieve what became known as the companionate marriage or “a union based on love and mutual affection” (Phegley 2). Marriage practices had largely moved away from the transactional arrangement by families to what we still recognize today as a period of courtship and subsequent marriage based on individual desire and choice. This romantic, fairy tale ending depicted in novels and magazines, and to which many aspired, more often than not failed to take place in the real world. This was due in large part to the way people approached courtship and the way society and courting individuals alike viewed their respective roles within the margins of marriage.

The relatively new practice of courtship as “a trial period in which to examine one’s potential partner to make sure they were suitable for a lifetime commitment” (Phegley 36) was,

while in theory an excellent alternative to basically blind arranged marriages, also intensely flawed. Victorian culture took the idea of courtship and transformed it into a practice wrought with arbitrary rules and regulations. Society's expectation of courtship according to manuals, literature, and popular opinion consumed the original intention of 'getting to know one another' in any type of genuine way. Rather than focusing primarily on complementary personalities and mutual respect and affection, courtship became predominantly a game of deception and etiquette. Women focused on trivial matters such as attire, dancing ability, and economic stability, while men were wont to view their potential partners in terms of domesticity and docility. Each sex was almost exclusively restricted to only consider a member of their own class because to do otherwise would be a scandalous act of social suicide. As a result of these detracting regulations, "courtship [...] kept couples from really getting to know each other before marriage "(Phegley 147).

On top of it all, and further impeding the original intention of courtship, the whole affair took place on a public stage and tended to serve as a form of dramatic entertainment for the vast amount of Victorian society's voyeurs. Such public forums for "standard courtship venues also contributed to the lack of opportunities for private conversations between young ladies and gentlemen" (Phegley 147). Furthermore, Phegley points out that, from a man's perspective, when he "meets a marvelously decked out woman at a ball, it makes him wonder how he could ever hope to keep her in the style to which she seems accustomed" (Phegley 147). Regardless of the shallow and highly damaged nature of Victorian courtship, many (if not most) were still highly pressured to participate in the charade and ultimately matriculate to the marriage community no matter how ill-fit their partnerships were or how little they really knew



their chosen mate. Much of this was in response to a fear of becoming either a perpetual bachelor or a spinster. Many men wished to evade the reputation and whispered rumors that came along with being a career bachelor:

Such negative attitudes toward marriage were considered extremely selfish and career bachelors were often characterized as men with ‘the wish for luxury, the desire to evade responsibility, stinginess, love of comfort, the longing for glory.’ Bachelors were assumed to be channeling their money and their energies (sexual and otherwise) in the wrong—and implicitly immoral—direction. Some bachelors were assumed to be uninterested in women and, potentially, homosexual; others were considered to be rakes. (Phegley 148)

Women, on the other hand, would often rather die than face the barren, shameful future of an old maid. Single women were subject to harsh scrutiny and the pity of society and, as if that weren’t miserable enough, an abundance of fictional publications reinforcing societal ideals of marriage and disparagement of female autonomy:

The majority of old maid tales published in the popular press at the end of the century, however, were not focused on how unmarried women could create their own social networks or cultivate alternative lifestyles. They were often either tragic tales of lost love or uplifting narratives about happy late-life matches; indeed, marriage was preserved as the key to a woman’s happiness. (Phegley 155)

Perhaps one of the most fundamental flaws in Victorian attitudes towards marriage and courtship was the consumerist lens through which young persons on the prowl for a mate viewed their options. Julie Kent captures the essence of the Victorian “marriage market” when she describes it as a “site in which domestic and market-based sentiments become difficult to distinguish” (Kent 127). Men and women ultimately were engaging in an elaborate shopping scheme, looking to purchase or consume an individual who would fill a temporal need, be it

economic or domestic. Men could go out to a party and browse the ornate selection of women and choose one to look pretty on his arm or fulfill his need for a domestic caretaker. Women would look to find a suitor who would have the ability to provide her with financial stability and material comforts. Both sexes had this tendency to enter into the marriage market looking to better themselves and their own positions in life. Marriage, therefore, became an institution of practical (or perhaps even frivolous) procurement rather than emotion, selfishness rather than selflessness. Kent argues that Victorian attitudes “collapse the distinction between feeling love and wanting things” (128). She even goes so far as to claim that the prevalence of the buying and selling mindset intermingled with romantic partnering resembles a kind of legalized prostitution: an entity which, by definition, is supposed to be the antithesis of marriage. Though in all probability unintentional, the Victorian marriage institution gradually morphed more and more into a kind of flesh trade based largely on commodity. Such a combination is rife with limitless potential for a plethora of disastrous unions.

In her book, *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women*, Martha Vicinus discusses the implications of the Victorian question of the role of women: “Women themselves—and particularly middle-class women—were increasingly concerned with what their roles were, and what they should be” (Vicinus ix). Vicinus states that the female role in society (and, consequently, in literature) is transforming with the rise of industrialization and urbanization. Women, at this time, are adopting the responsibility of forming concrete opinions about the world around them and educating children and each other in the face of societal judgment. Vicinus provides a valuable context of what it was like to be a grossly simplified female figure, specifically and especially within the confines of marriage. She talks

about how, according to “common law, a married woman had no separate identity from her husband” (Vicinus xiv), and how, even despite this, marriage was still the most attractive option for women considering their limited choice of employment. The results of these questions led to a call for marriage reform at the hands of women who began to realize their worth and to demand more. This awakening meant that marriage rates dropped and finally a public discourse on women’s employment, education, and individuality surfaced and led to change.

Eliot’s is a voice that contributes significantly to this uproarious political and economic climate in terms of women’s rights and reform at the time *Middlemarch* was authored. Women, inarguably, were most often the primary victims in marriage and reaped the most detrimental consequences. Aside from the reputation-based societal pressures to wed, women had to face the reality that supporting themselves on a single income from limited career options (typically factory worker, house servant, or governess) was extremely difficult and would likely mean a life of hard work and relative poverty. Once securely situated in a financially sound marriage, however, the woman becomes a part of her husband’s property. In fact, “the common law coverture dictated that when a woman married, her legal personality was subsumed in that of her husband” (Shanley 8). Women, upon entering the marriage contract, sacrificed their legal rights to land, property, money, even their own bodies and their own children, all to the deference and legal dominance of their male counterparts. To make matters even less desirable for a woman in an unhappy marriage, dismantlement of their marriage was nearly impossible:

Aggravating a married woman’s plight was the fact that it was extremely difficult for her to extricate herself from the bonds of matrimony. Prior to the Divorce Act of 1857, the only way to end a marriage other than by ecclesiastical annulment was by private

Act of Parliament, an extraordinarily complex and expensive procedure. Even under the Divorce Act, only if a husband was physically cruel, incestuous, or bestial in addition to being adulterous could his wife procure a divorce. If she left him without first obtaining a divorce, she was guilty of desertion and forfeited all claim to a share of his property (even that which she might have brought to the marriage) and to custody of children. (Shanley 9)

These conditions of marriage caught the attention of feminist and intellectual voices of the time and, as a result of hard work in the face of much resistance, reform gradually started to come about. Governmental policies such as the Divorce Act of 1857, the Married Women's Property Act of 1870, and the Infant Custody Act of 1886 came into law. Although legally speaking the rights of women started to gain some traction, the societal view of gender roles within marriage endured (and even continue to endure today) to no avail. While feminists "would have looked askance at the interpretations of many modern historians that 'companionate marriage' [...] was the norm in England [...] by the mid-nineteenth century" (Shanley 7), the popular tendency for the common person was to buy into the false ideals of marriage. While feminist activists chose to wage war against the defective institution of marriage in terms of legal reform, some, including George Eliot, made it their mission to try to reconstruct customary perspectives of marriage by reimagining it in the eyes of the everyday man and woman.

## Chapter 4:

### Background – Biography

Mary Ann Evans, whose pen name was George Eliot, was known to her peers to possess an exceptionally astute intellect. As with many exemplary minds of the past, Eliot's was one not free from the burden of extreme turmoil and psychological scruples. At the relatively young age of 22, Eliot, having endured years of internal religious tumult, made the bold and unpopular decision to go against the conservative tradition of her family and surrounding community and renounced organized religion. Having come to the revelatory conclusion that "religion was not a requisite to moral excellence" and the disturbing recognition of "the apparent union of religious feeling with a low sense of morality" (Haight 39), Eliot bravely followed her own conscience, much to the disapproval of even her own family. In a letter to her father, Eliot wrote "whatever judgment may be passed on their truth that I could not without vile hypocrisy and miserable truckling to the smile of the world for the sake of my supposed interests, profess to join in worship which I wholly disapprove. This and this alone I will not do even for your sake" (Haight 42). It is clear from Eliot's rejection early on of hypocrisy and vapid 'truths' she believes were fundamentally wrong that she maintained the strength of her integrity. The fact that she chose to live in a way that she viewed as right, even though it was intensely frowned upon by those most dear to her, is proof of the lengths she was willing to go to honor her beliefs. Her aversion to acquiescence and silence in the face of inherent wrongs defined her character for the rest of her life and, I believe, translated into her view of and own relationship with marriage practices.

Eliot's critical view of evangelical, organized religion and her subsequent denunciation of falsely engaging for the sake of appearances was not a decision she came to lightly. She struggled immensely with her views and grappled with her decision and what her actions ultimately meant. Though she, herself, described a kind of euphoric freedom having finally realized and accepted her truth, she eventually came to understand that such unpopular enlightenment comes with being ostracized and isolated. She describes these feelings of loneliness and despair in a letter to her friend Sarah Sophia Hennell in 1843. In it, she describes her eventual realization that, as much as she may be inclined to explicitly proselytize her truths, radical transformation of one's habitual way of thinking must be a process undergone by the individual themselves: "We begin to find that with individuals, as with nations, the only safe revolution is one arising out of the wants which their own progress has generated. It is the quackery of infidelity to suppose that it has a nostrum for all mankind, and to say to all and singular, 'Swallow my opinions and you shall be whole'" (Eliot 519). One way, I would argue, to go about planting the seeds of mindful revolution would be to provide the individual with an anecdote of sorts to help them realize the truth on their own and with merely gentle prodding in the right direction. Hence, Eliot's *Middlemarch*.

Eliot's renowned novel, however, does not persuade the reader to take a critical view towards organized religion. Rather, it subtly calls into question the organized marriage practices of the Victorian era. Eliot's skirmish with religion was only the first of her life's battles between her own consciousness and the opinions of the world around her. The next, and perhaps most poignant struggle, was one concerning her romantic relationship with George Henry Lewes. Eliot's conscious decision to enter into an extra-marital union with a married

father of seven, (though only three were his biological children), was, at the time, scandalous and reputation-shattering to say the least. The scandal stemmed from the flawed marriage rules of the time with specific respect to Lewes' marriage. Essentially, the rules of the church had a punitive effect on him, even as a man, merely for maintaining mercy in the face of his wife's infidelities:

Before Agnes bore Hunt a second child, Lewes had ceased to regard her as his wife. He still kept on friendly terms with her, however, coming to see her from time to time, writing to her when he was away, and contributing to support her and her illegitimate brood as long as he lived. Today a divorce would have set him free; but then divorce was out of the question. Even if he had had the hundreds of pounds it required for the cumbersome legal process, Lewes, having once condoned her adultery, was forever precluded from appealing for divorce. (Haight 132)

Eliot's reaction to the situation was nothing short of enraged and served to fuel her dismissal of common marriage practices: "To Marian the law that upheld such a vicious relation seemed utterly immoral [...] Marian felt strongly about the injustice society displayed, winking at a man who associates with a 'light woman' but refusing to let him form a 'true union with a true and loyal wife.'" (Haight 145-146). Despite the persisting binding marriage between Lewes and his wife, the genuine love Eliot had for him ultimately trumped the legality of the situation.

Eliot made the highly controversial decision to openly live with and publicly engage in a 'non-marriage' with Lewes. Such behavior was quite shocking at the time and the willingness Eliot displayed to potentially sacrifice her reputation and relationships with specific friends and family is proof of her sincere devotion to Lewes. It is through this decision what one may discern what the true meaning of love and marriage is to Eliot. Namely, that she supports "the

distinction between ‘self-interested love’ and ‘the true human love’, which ‘impels the sacrifice of self to another’” (Haight 137). In Eliot’s own words,

But marriage—we mean, of course, marriage as the free bond of love—is sacred in itself, by the very nature of the union which is therein effected. That alone is a religious marriage which is a true marriage, which corresponds to the essence of marriage—of love...Yes, only as the free bond of love; for a marriage the bond of which is merely an external restriction, not the voluntary, contented self-restriction of love, in short, a marriage which is not spontaneously concluded, spontaneously willed, self-sufficing, is not a true marriage, and therefore not a truly moral marriage. (Haight 137-138)

Eliot’s decision to go against the grain of her community and live on the outskirts of ‘acceptable’ society was not one she approached lightly. Much like her early rejection of organized religion, her non-marriage to Lewes was a defining action on her part and sealed her status as a woman of conviction and moral fortitude amongst her closest friends.

Eliot’s and Lewes’ non-marriage was not without its difficulties, however. One of their more constant struggles was with their health. Lewes often suffered chronic health problems and Eliot was never far from the clutches of rheumatic arthritis pain and migraines. Their constant physical ailments were doubtless never far from Eliot’s consciousness and, I believe, seeped into her literary work and mingled with her on-paper relationship with marriage. Perhaps the greatest shock to her system, both mentally and physically, was when her soul mate, the great love of her life, George Henry Lewes died in 1878 at the age of sixty-one. This loss shook Eliot to her core and would prove somewhat revelatory in her reaction and later actions.



There is no denying that Eliot's relationship with Lewes, in which she chose true love over arbitrary societal customs, defined her strength and resiliency in the face of intense and persevering controversy. The loss of Lewes, however, took a massive toll on Eliot's mental fortitude and revealed a deeper layer of her internal struggle with her own renegade tendencies. With the absence of her life partner, Eliot began to display exhaustion with her reputation for being an example of courage to those around her. A friend described this new heaviness within Eliot:

Her manner was even gentler and more affectionate than usual, and she looked so unfit to do battle with daily life, that in spite of all her power and protecting feeling towards her rose in my heart. She seemed loth to go, and as if there was something that she would have said, yet did not. I have always remembered, though, the weariness she expressed of the way in which wisdom was attributed to her. 'I am so tired of being set on a pedestal and expected to vent wisdom.' (Haight 537)

In an unexpected turn of events, Eliot, one and a half years after the death of Lewes, decided to marry a man who had proposed to her several times and whom she eventually accepted. John Cross was 20 years her junior and, although expressed a great amount of affection towards Eliot, had notably less of an emotional connection with her than Lewes did. Those in her peer group couldn't help but be astonished by her somewhat rapid regression into custom, "Some of her radical friends like Mrs. Peter Taylor, who had stood loyally by her through a quarter-century of marriage outside the law, were shocked by her lapse into convention. They underestimated her essential conservatism. After her few years of rebellion Marian—like Wordsworth—reverted quickly to traditional ways, which her equivocal position made her particularly anxious to follow in other respects" (Haight 543). Gertrude Himmelfarb

argues that Eliot was never entirely comfortable with the arrangement she had with Lewes and secretly longed to be engaged in a 'proper' union sanctified in the eyes of the Church and the State. Himmelfarb suggests that so powerful was Eliot's yearning to be considered a normal and respectable member of society that it ultimately drove her into a hasty marriage with the first eligible man she came across:

Nor did Eliot enjoy the freedom of not being married. That freedom was more onerous to her than any of the "burdens of respectability" of which she is presumed to have been happily relieved. Indeed, she voluntarily assumed the stigmata of respectability. She publicly referred to Lewes as her "husband" and to herself as his "wife" [...] These are not the actions of a woman cherishing her independence, rebelling against law and convention, resisting the bonds of matrimony. And when those bonds dissolved with the death of Lewes, she took the first opportunity to unburden herself of her freedom. (Himmelfarb 16)

It is entirely plausible that Eliot engaged in an unrelenting internal battle between doing what she felt to be morally correct and desiring to be a fit member of Victorian society.

The many years she spent with Lewes, and consequently as a social outcast of sorts, is clearly reflected in *Middlemarch*. In a 2016 article, Zelda Austen highlights a feminist critique of Eliot's Dorothea, citing that "'the objection is not that Dorothea should have married Will, but that she should have married anybody at all, that she should ultimately be denied the opportunity given Will to find her own paths and forge her energies into some new mold' [...] In other words, George Eliot should have turned the mirror to reflect herself rather than the world out there" (Austen 549). I would argue, however, that George Eliot did indeed turn the mirror towards herself and saw reflected in it her regressed marriage to Cook rather than her triumphant non-marriage to Lewes. Dorothea's eventual marriage to Ladislav is a kind of

somber homage to Eliot's own folding under the pressures of society. While Eliot's rejection of convention for the sake of appearances remained steadfast through her relationship with both religion and with romantic love, she ultimately succumbed herself to the internal desire to be accepted. Dorothea's seemingly happy ending is Eliot's admittance of her own defeat. As we will see, Eliot's staunch critique of the marriage institution as well as her complex personal emotions around it are inconspicuously intermingled throughout much of *Middlemarch*.

## Chapter 5: Character Examinations

*Middlemarch* is an eloquent depiction of ill-conceived marriages. In order to decipher how these unions came into fruition, one must examine the mindsets of each of the characters. Dorothea, Casaubon, Lydgate, and Rosamond all maintain unique and unwavering attitudes towards marriage and each firmly upholds their own definitions basically as scripture. Beginning with perhaps the most fervent of them all, Dorothea Brooke is clearly a lone fish swimming against the current of her community. At first glance, one may assume Dorothea, in her rebellion against communal tradition and her brazenness in the face of societal critique, mirrors Eliot herself and her own admirable actions upholding true love in the face of harsh judgment. Bert Hornback argues that Dorothea represents a struggling morality trying to maintain itself in the face of characters marred by more nefarious traits. In his opinion, Dorothea “is utterly mistaken about Casaubon, [...] her ambition is selflessly and even nobly based” (Hornback 610). However, acting honorably and upholding true love is a far cry from what Dorothea’s intentions are with respect to her desire for the objectionable Casaubon. The language surrounding Dorothea’s nascent relationship with Casaubon as well as her motivation for marrying him is peppered with red flags and laden with connotations reminiscent of popular marriage misconceptions of the time. Great emphasis is put on the haste with which Dorothea ‘falls for’ Casaubon and decides to marry him. Indeed, she solidifies her decision in less than twenty four hours: “If it had really occurred to Mr. Casaubon to think of Miss Brooke as a suitable wife for him, the reasons that might induce her to accept him were already planted in

her mind, and by the evening of the next day the reasons had budded and bloomed" (Eliot 24). Even in the face of warnings from multiple people close to her to carefully consider her actions and their encouragement for her to take her time with a decision of such magnitude, Dorothea makes up her mind swiftly and with no hesitation whatsoever. In response to her uncle's question of her taking enough time to think about her response to Casaubon's proposal, Dorothea quickly quips that "There was no need to think long, uncle. I know of nothing to make me vacillate. If I changed my mind, it must be because of something important and entirely new to me," (45). Such unfettered impudence coupled with the tendency to make speedy decisions without adequate time to reflect on potential outcomes is often attributed to youth. Dorothea's immaturity is another pivotal facet strategically illuminated in the text. She is depicted as viewing her potential husband as a father figure and caretaker who can guide and raise her. This points to a mentality still largely rooted in childhood.

The text reaffirms such immaturity when stating that "Dorothea, with all her eagerness to know the truths of life, retained very childlike ideas about marriage [...] The really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was as sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it" (10). Dorothea's haste and immaturity are merely precursors to her ultimate misconception which lies in her fundamental definition of a husband. For her, the ideal husband is not her equal but her superior in every way. In her mind, where there should be romantic love and mutual affection, Dorothea values idolatry and supplication. She believes that a husband is not someone to be "fond" of (36), but someone to worship and serve. Upon her first inklings that Casaubon may consider her for a wife, she felt "reverential gratitude" (28) and, rather than the selfless expression of a love and care for an individual other than one's

own self, Dorothea is fixated on what her union with Casaubon will do for her. She is almost entirely focused on how such a match will elevate her own intellect and enlighten her. This is typified when she declares, "I cannot imagine myself living without some opinions, but I should wish to have good reasons for them, and a wise man could help me to see which opinions had the best foundation, and would help me to live according to them" (40-41). Dorothea is clearly preoccupied with utilizing Casaubon as a kind of sculptor who will undertake the task of molding her into her idealized version of self. These self-interested motivations are the antithesis of what Eliot sees as the means to true marriage and we quickly realize (as does Dorothea, as we will see) the unavoidable downfall Dorothea has fashioned for herself. Dorothea embodies the arbitrary haste, immaturity, and self-interest that plagued so many courting couples of the time and led to the infected nature of Victorian marriage.

The object of Dorothea's so-called affection is yet another culprit of tainted marriage motivations. Having spent the majority of his life and the entirety of his adulthood deeply enmeshed in his mythological and religious studies, Casaubon has learned to care for little else aside from the completion of his 'great work.' His overall demeanor is devoid of even a nuance of personality, let alone romance. He is basically little more than a walking, talking, pontificating corpse and is quite clearly incapable of engaging in any kind of meaningful, transcendent interpersonal or intimate relationship. He does, however, fall victim to the very base (and commonly masculine) effects of egotism and self-interest. Such are the qualities which lead him to reevaluate his 'need' for a wife. Hornback accurately brings to light Casaubon's mentality, clarifying that he does not take women seriously and merely "wants 'to adorn his life with the graces of female companionship' and to relieve his gloomy fatigue"

(Hornback 612). Casaubon is piqued by Dorothea's unfettered adoration of his work (which is the only thing of value to him) and of, by extension, himself: "[Dorothea was] pouring out her joy at the thought of devoting herself to him, and of learning how she might best share and further all his great ends. Mr. Casaubon was touched with an unknown delight (what man would not have been?) at this childlike unrestrained ardour: he was not surprised (what lover would have been?) that he should be the object of it" (Eliot 50). The reaffirmation of his ego is only the tip of the iceberg for Casaubon, however. As an individual more machine than man, Casaubon is overly excited by the logistical aid Dorothea will be to his intellectually laborious undertaking. His introduction to Dorothea does not unlock in him some deeper, previously uncharted chamber of his soul as the introduction of a true lover should; rather, he recognizes an administrative need and Dorothea's ability and willingness to alleviate that need.

Casaubon conflates logistics with love, as is seen in the following excerpt from his written proposal of marriage to Dorothea:

I am not, I trust, mistaken in the recognition of some deeper correspondence than that of date in the fact that a consciousness of need in my own life had arisen contemporaneously with the possibility of my becoming acquainted with you. For in the first hour of meeting you, I had an impression of your eminent and perhaps exclusive fitness to supply that need [...] I have discerned in you an elevation of thought and a capability of devotedness, which I had hitherto not conceived to be compatible either with the early bloom of youth or with those graces of sex that may be said that once to win and confer distinction when combined, as they notably are in you, with the mental qualities indicated. It was, I confess, beyond my hope to meet with this rare combination of elements both solid and attractive, adapted to supply aid in graver labours and to cast a charm over vacant hours; and but for the event of my introduction to you (which, let me again say, I trust not to be superficially coincident with foreshadowing needs, but providentially related thereto as stages towards the completion of a life's plan), I should presumably have

gone on to the last without any attempt to lighten my solitariness  
by a matrimonial union. (43-44)

In translation, he is basically saying that God has graced him with a young, attractive assistant to help him get his job done and he's very happy for the convenience of it all, and if it weren't for the benefits to himself of the arrangement, he would never otherwise partake in the ridiculous waste of marriage. Not a very romantic proposal! The catastrophic nature of his impending marriage to Dorothea radiates in between the lines of his emotionally vacant proposal to her.

Tertius Lydgate is a man much younger in age than Casaubon, yet equally uninterested in detracting from his life's work by falling prey to the bondage of marriage. For the up-and-coming doctor of a town in dire need of medical reformation, Lydgate is laser-focused on establishing himself as a modern man of medicine and transforming the antiquated medical notions holding Middlemarch back. Despite his attempts at avoiding marriage, however, Lydgate succumbs relatively swiftly to the weakness of his own superficiality. For all his progressive and forward thinking views concerning medicine, Lydgate firmly subscribes to a conventional and misogynistic view of women. For him, the primary purpose a woman with relation to a man is aesthetic decoration. A woman with her beauty and enchanting aura "is grace itself; she is perfectly lovely and accomplished. That is what a woman ought to be: she ought to produce the effect of exquisite music" (94). Lydgate, though at this particular point in his life has no overt desire to marry, is quite sure of what the perfect wife should be and spends a considerable amount of time thinking about it. For a man of such intelligence and practicality, his vision of an ideal wife is surprisingly naïve and simplistic, not to mention wildly unrealistic.



The more time Lydgate spends with Rosamond Vincy, the more transparent his superficiality becomes:

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 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.” (164)

Hornback sums up Lydgate’s overall outlook when writing that “Lydgate thinks Rosamond as but ‘a creature who would bring him the sweet furtherance of satisfying affection’” (Hornback 612). It is interesting how both Casaubon and Lydgate envision their prospective wives in terms of how they will be useful to them and to their professions. While Casaubon is eager to obtain a secretary of sorts, to aid in the advancement of his professional agenda, Lydgate places the practicality of a wife with her ability to provide escape and relaxation from his arduous medical duties. These opposing views of the role of a wife become abundantly apparent when Lydgate compares the idea of Dorothea as a wife against his idea of Rosamond:

To his taste, guided by a single conversation, here was the point on which Miss Brooke would be found wanting, notwithstanding her undeniable beauty. She did not look at things from the proper feminine angle. The society of such women was about as relaxing as going from your work to teach a second form, instead of reclining in a paradise with sweet laughs for bird-notes, and blue eyes for a heaven. (Eliot 95)

Though they both maintain differing opinions on the role of a wife, they both inarguably view marriage from a highly self-interested vantage point. They both look at a woman and ask themselves what marrying her would do for them and how would it better their situation in life.

Such questions do not belong in the conversation of marriage if that marriage is to be true and pure. The reader is practically bombarded over and over again with the callousness of Lydgate's one-dimensional interpretation of Rosamond as an object "sweet to look at as a half-opened blush-rose, and adorned with accomplishments for the refined amusement of man" (269). Eliot is going to great lengths here to make clear to her readers that Lydgate's approach to marriage and his overall mentality with regard to the female sex is an example of a real societal flaw. Though a man of medicine, Lydgate reveals his fundamental misogyny all over the pages of the first half of the novel. When the fateful moment finally arrives where Lydgate succumbs to his temptations and proposes to Rosamond, the reader is challenged to discern the subliminal message of what is actually taking place. Rather than an outpouring of authentic love or two selfless lovers joining together in a union of equality, respect, and emotion transcending the temporal, we can see that Lydgate is merely acting on an "impulsive lavishment," (300) driven by his underlying sexual desire for Rosamond and his reflexive nature of assuaging the discomfort of her anger and tears:

Lydgate, forgetting everything else, completely mastered by the outrush of tenderness at the sudden belief that this sweet young creature depended on him for her joy, actually put his arms round her, folding her gently and protectingly – he was used to being gentle with the weak and suffering – and kissed each of the two large tears. This was a strange way of arriving at an understanding, but it was a short way. (301)

This marriage agreement could not have been designed in shallower waters and is doomed to fail.

Rosamond Vincy, Lydgate's betrothed, is easily the prevailing tenor of superficiality among Eliot's cast of characters. She is forthcoming in who she is and what she wants and shamelessly flaunts her agenda in expert fashion. Rosamond, simply stated, is bored and unimpressed with her marriage prospects in the town of Middlemarch. She wants someone different and exciting who stands out from the tired crowd she has entertained for her brief adult life. As she confidently tells her mother, she will not settle for the "pick" of the men around her but only for the "best" of them (99). Superiority is key for her as well as a family name that touts a distinguished reputation. Even if a man may not have the amount of money preferable to an impending bride, for Rosamond, "it always makes a difference to be of good family" (100).

Upon meeting the intriguing new town physician, Doctor Lydgate, Rosamond (in true Victorian fashion), decides that he fits the bill for her after a mere handful of flirtatious conversations and brief inquiries. Even though they barely know each other and have spent a very small amount of time together, Rosamond is satisfied that Lydgate checks off all of her desired qualities in a husband and decides to pursue him: "And here was Mr. Lydgate suddenly corresponding to her ideal, being altogether foreign to Middlemarch, carrying a certain air of distinction congruous with good family, and possessing connections which offered vistas of that middle-class heaven, rank: a man of talent, also, whom it would be especially delightful to enslave" (118). The word "enslave" is crucial here as it not only foreshadows the future of

Lydgate becoming a slave to pay for all Rosamond requires but because it indicates the flippant and reckless approach Rosamond has toward the very serious business of marriage.

Rosamond's immaturity and insincerity are illuminated in the game-like way she seduces Lydgate and practically tricks him into marriage. Along the way, she tricks even herself into believing that the child-like antics in which she is engaging is in any way true love. As we can see, the moment these two 'fall in love' is no more than an romantic fantasy carefully constructed in Rosamond's imagination and acted out in real life: "Yet this result, which she took to be a mutual impression, called falling in love, was just what Rosamond had contemplated beforehand. Ever since that important new arrival in Middlemarch she had woven a little future, of which something like this scene was the necessary beginning" (117-118). Rosamond's attraction to and eventual obtaining of Lydgate is nothing more than an elaborate shopping venture. She and Lydgate (and Dorothea and Casaubon, too, for that matter) all act as consumerist players in the marriage market and all ultimately acquire the commodity which they seek. Casaubon gains an employee, Dorothea a tutor, Lydgate a pretty decoration for his arm, and Rosamond a man-shaped toy she can manipulate in any way she sees fit. This goods-and-services exchange in place of genuine, unadulterated love, as Eliot sees it, serves to exemplify all that is wrong with Victorian marriage practices. The proof of this lies in the rapid degeneration of each of these marriages and the sobering realization each character faces upon recognizing the error of their ways.

It is not only the primary characters of the novel who engage in marriages that represent other common attitudes toward the prospect of 'til death do us part.' The secondary characters too harbor important messages about marriage attitudes of the time and it is in their

actions where we mostly see glimmers of sanity. There is Dorothea's sister Celia, who displays wisdom beyond her years when expressing fear in the knowledge that her sister is making an ill-fated match with Casaubon. There are the Garths whose strong bond and complementary personalities guide them successfully through a lifetime of financial hardship. There's even the Bulstrodes who, though the very foundation of their marriage is called into question when Bulstrode's secret past is threatened to be revealed, remain steadfast in their devotion to each other.

The most notable of these tangential characters, however, is Mary Garth: a woman simultaneously touched by genuine love and graced with the fortitude to uphold her personal values *despite* that love. Mary has been loved and pursued by Fred Vincy for her entire life. Fred's feelings for her are sincere and he has never wavered in his devotion to her and his desire to make her his wife. Mary feels the same about Fred, yet, unlike the other characters in the novel, is not impaired by haste, immaturity, or hollow indulgences. She is not motivated by self-interest or affected by naïve ideals. Unlike Rosamond, for instance, Mary views the fleeting attentions of men as "one of the most odious things in a girl's life, that there must always be some supposition of falling in love coming between her and any man who is kind to her, and to whom she is grateful. I should have thought that I, at least, might have been safe from all that. I have no ground for the nonsensical vanity of fancying everybody who comes near me is in love with me" (136). She clearly does not fall victim to the romanticized notions of love to which so many impressionable young women of Victorian times subscribe. While others in the novel harp on the reputation of their prospective partners, Mary bases her opinion of Fred not on what those in the community gossip about, but by her own interactions with him. When he

expresses concern to her that her judgment of him will be shaped by what others say, she replies simply and honestly that “however naughty you may be to other people, you are good to me” (138). For Mary, her relationship with Fred is just that: a relationship between two people, not one person and a society’s view of the other. What really sets Mary apart from the crowd and elevates her lightyears above all the others is her ardent belief that an individual should know and accept themselves before they are fit to give themselves to another. When Fred insinuates (quite immaturely) that a man cannot be good for anything unless he has the love and support of a woman, Mary responds that she “thinks goodness should come before he expects that” (139). Mary is smart enough and mature enough to see the growth Fred needs to do before he is ready for marriage. What is significant about this is that she does not want this for her own benefit—she knows that Fred must find his way and refuses to be with him because that is what is in *his* best interest.

So often in this text and in the world people equate love and marriage in a way where one cannot or does not exist without the other. This idea is at the root of many diseased marriages. Mary has the wherewithal and the sincerity to know that loving a person does not necessarily mean marrying them is the best decision for either party. Although she truly loves Fred, she loves him enough to want only what is best for him even if that means sacrificing him to another:

“I have too strong a feeling for Fred to give him up for any one else. I should never be quite happy if I thought he was unhappy for the loss of me. It has taken such deep root in me – my gratitude to him for always loving me best, and minding so much if I hurt myself, from the time when we were very little. I cannot imagine any new feeling coming to make that weaker. I should like better than anything to see him worthy of ever one’s respect. But please tell him I will not promise to marry him till then; I

should shame and grieve my father and mother. He is free to choose some one else." (517)

Mary is willing to sacrifice her own happiness before allowing Fred to prematurely enter into a situation she feels in her heart he is not ready for. The virtue Mary possesses is unmatched by any other character in the novel. The veracity and endurance of her love for Fred is most apparent when he acts in a way that is severely detrimental to her and her family. He loses her father's money in an imprudent horse-selling scheme and consequently puts the Garth family in a very vulnerable financial situation. Although Mary is deeply upset by his actions, her love for him and ability to see his goodness despite his flaws reigns supreme:

There is often something maternal even in a girlish love, and Mary's hard experience had wrought her nature to an impressibility very different from that hard slight thing which we call girlishness. At Fred's last words she felt an instantaneous pang, something like what a mother feels at the imagined sobs or cries of her naughty truant child, which may lose itself and get harm. And when, looking up, her eyes met his dull despairing glance, her pity for him surmounted her anger and all her other anxieties." (254).

The element that sets Mary's love apart from all the others' is that it is unconditional. Eliot provides her readers with a bevy of examples of what is wrong with popular approaches to marriage, but she takes care to deliberately present a character who embodies what she sees as the correct and lasting path to happy marriage. By juxtaposing Mary with everyone else, we are able to discern lessons of best practices directly from the author herself.

## Chapter 6:

### Close Readings

George Eliot is a woman who lives the majority of her life in a manner that goes against the grain of societal norms—particularly with relation to her romantic coupling with George Henry Lewes. She also happens to live at a time in which the spread of disease of all kinds was rampant and a real and constant threat to the everyday person. She, as well as Lewes, were themselves no strangers to a plethora of physical ailments and chronic sicknesses, which is indicative that weakness of the physical body was never far from her mind. Eliot's most widely acclaimed novel, *Middlemarch*, is inarguably a testament to her criticism of Victorian marriage practices as she sees them based on her own personal experience living against the arbitrary social constructs of the time. What is not so readily apparent, however, is the subtle method in which she lays the brickwork of her agenda.

Eliot utilizes the implicit fear of illness harbored by the Victorian public as a literary tool to spread her message. Her method is twofold: she directly implicates sickness and disease in both the building up to and the breakdown of the two main marriages of the novel and she subliminally encases the pseudo-romanticism of these pairings in language reminiscent of illness. Doing so subconsciously conflates within the reader the flawed ethos towards marriage with the danger and negativity of physical harm. This strategy is discussed by Katherine Byrne in her book, *Tuberculosis and the Victorian Literary Imagination*. In her work, she depicts tuberculosis as a direct reflection of cultural obsessions and anxieties surrounding its actual threat in nineteenth-century Britain. She connects the language and metaphors surrounding



this and other diseases to larger scale cultural issues such as gender roles, degeneration, and sexual transgressions. She bases much of her theories on work by Dickens, among others. Byrne argues that “the health of a nation is necessarily dependent upon the health of its citizens; disease disrupts social functioning by negatively intervening in the lives of the people” (Byrne 1). Some of her noteworthy statements focus on how disease in society lends itself to a “pathological split” where one tends to associate the ‘healthy’ as ‘self,’ and the ‘sick’ as ‘other,’ creating a schism detrimental to the overall societal stability. Byrne argues that the fluid nature of disease and its ability to manifest itself in a multitude of forms renders it a manifold metaphor in literature and culture as a whole (Byrne 1). Consumption, or tuberculosis, in particular, has an elusive nature and affects an “inscrutable selection of victims” (Byrne 3). Consequently, consumption served as a ripe catalyst of social expression and discussion for many writers. The discussion Byrne focuses on primarily is that of the ills of capitalism and how disease in literature serves as both a metaphor and disrupter of the capitalist mindset. This argument parallels the argument that disease is both a metaphor and disrupter of the marriage mindset for Eliot.

The first inklings of this strategy are seen in the nascent stages of Casaubon’s and Dorothea’s attraction to each other. Eliot is quite subtle in her word use surrounding the circumstances of the two unlikely lovers joining together. One of the most ubiquitous harbingers of malady of any kind is the presence of pallor in an individual. Turning pale is also suggestive of blood draining from the body—a kind of weakening or death. When Dorothea has secretly accepted Casaubon’s proposal of marriage, Celia cannot help but note Dorothea’s sickly visage and expresses concern for her physical wellbeing. She begs her to not “sit up,

Dodo, you are so pale to-night: go to bed soon” (Eliot 47). She says this “in a comfortable way, without any touch of pathos” (47). Not only is it meaningful that Dorothea’s excitement is confused for illness, but the use of the word ‘pathos’ is strategic in that it calls pathology to mind, further linking Dorothea’s impending fate with physical affliction. Furthermore, when Dorothea finally confesses the truth of her engagement to Celia, her immediate physiological response is to turn extremely pale. In fact, Eliot writes “perhaps Celia had never turned so pale before” (49). Eliot goes on to describe that “the paper man she was making would have had his leg injured, but for her habitual care of whatever she held in her hands. She laid the fragile figure down at once, and sat perfectly still for a few moments. When she spoke there was a tear gathering” (49). The fragile human figure subjected to potential injury, if not for the sensitivity of Celia is an appropriate representation of the fragile body of marriage into which Dorothea is about to enter. Celia, is able to recognize the vulnerability of this arrangement and how susceptible it is to injury. The paper doll in her hands serves as the symbol of this delicate union and Celia’s somber resignation to it.

The majority of the descriptors of both Casaubon’s appearance and, later, of his property are rife with connotations of infirmities. Casaubon is described as having “the complexion of a *cochun du lait*,” (20) of being the human equivalent to a “dried bookworm,” (23) and his “sallowiness” is repeatedly noted. He is old, slow, monotonous, feeble, and basically the polar opposite of all that is lively and healthy. He is often depicted early on in the novel juxtaposed against the spritely, robust Sir James Chetham, which only further emphasizes his decrepitude. When Dorothea goes to tour the Casaubon estate where she will reside after her marriage, she is met with dilapidation that is seemingly an extension of its proprietor. The

property grounds are “confined” (73), the walls of the building are tinted with a “greenish” (73) color, and the windows are “melancholy-looking” (73). The entire scene emanates the stench of decay: “In this latter end of autumn, with a sparse remnant of yellow leaves falling, slowly athwart the dark evergreens in a stillness without sunshine, the house too had an air of autumnal decline, and Mr. Casaubon, when he presented himself, had no bloom that could be thrown into relief by that background” (74). All of this graphic language surrounding Casaubon and his home foreshadows the downward trajectory Dorothea is embarking upon by marrying him under false pretense.

In their book, *The Male Body in Medicine and Literature*, Andrew Mangham and Daniel Lea point out the significance of Eliot’s proximity to Lewes as a medical scholar and, as a result, the likelihood that their library included works by Samuel-Auguste Tissot. For Mangham and Lea, these two factors coupled together had a direct impact on Eliot’s creation of Casaubon. In their work, Mangham and Lea argue that the descriptive language of illness and being ‘dried up’ surrounding Casaubon and his scrupulous studies is indicative of a direct connection to Tissot’s ‘death by masturbation.’ They write:

Casaubon’s scholarly directed ‘labours’ – the antithesis of the (re)productive labours expected of a newly married man – are reminiscent of medical texts’ depictions of masturbation as a purposeless sexual act; Casaubon has ‘achieved nothing’ here. His ‘morbid consciousness’, moreover, is a symptom of his underlying scholarly vanity, the morbidity of which saps him of energy. Importantly, the repetition of the term ‘consciousness’ emphasizes Casaubon’s overdeveloped self-absorption, serving as a reminder of the self-directed autoerotic energies he expends upon his ‘Key’ and upon himself. (Lea, Mangham 78)

This interpretation adds an entirely new element of connection between Casaubon and disease.

One can see how Casaubon’s continuous and repetitive engagement in the monotonous activity

of his introverted studies mirrors a kind of obsessive masturbation. His physical deterioration, most notably his loss of sight, is very much in line with Tissot's symptoms of masturbation-related illness. Ultimately, Casaubon's "scholarly endeavors culminate in a 'fit' suffered, fittingly, in the library" (Lea, Mangham 78). For Lea and Mangham,

Casaubon's 'Key' is ultimately a succubus, draining him of vital moisture and energy that would otherwise generate offspring and health. Acton, whose works could be found on the shelves of Eliot and Lewes's library, had called masturbating scholars 'intellectual suicides,' and his pithy expression nicely summarises [sic] the medical script that had been written for the (autoerotic) scholar (Lea, Mangham 79)

The language of decay surrounding Casaubon as well as the added connection to masturbation further seals Casaubon's and Dorothea's fate as, much like the "Key to all Mythologies," a complete and utter failure.

The most straightforward instance of Eliot's cross-contamination of marriage and illness occurs within a passage she chooses to reference directly before presenting us with Casaubon's robotic declaration of 'love' for Dorothea in his written marriage proposal. She pointedly selects the following excerpt from Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* to open the chapter:

Hard students are commonly troubled with gowts, catarrhs, rheums, cachexia, bradypepsia, bad eyes, stone, and collick, crudities, oppilations, vertigo, winds, consumptions, and all such diseases as come by over-much sitting: they are most part lean, dry, ill-coloured...and all through immoderate pains and extraordinary studies. If you will not believe the truth of this, look upon great Tostatus and Thomas Aquainas' works; and tell me whether those men took pains. (43)

The explicit enumeration of specific bodily ailments commonly afflicting men of intense and laborious study all but spells out the fate not only of Casaubon as a man, but also, given the contextual location of this section, of his marriage to Dorothea as well. The reader is forced to

embark upon Casaubon's marriage proposal with this list of unpleasant maladies fresh in their mind. This serves further to taint the proposal itself in an unfavorable light. Despite its subtlety, which can be easily overlooked by a hasty reader, those who take the time to consider the abundance of decay-related language peppered throughout the early stages of Dorothea's and Casaubon's relationship will be rewarded with the insider knowledge of Eliot's true agenda. Eliot displays before her readers a prime example of two individuals entering into a sacred union under severely defective motives and, before the union is even official, uses language of disease to infect her readers with the looming virus which the marriage eventually becomes.

The terminology evocative of disease that encapsulates the formation of Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon is significantly increased towards the latter part of their time together. In fact, it is Casaubon's diagnosis of terminal illness that serves as the catalyst for each party to realize the mistakes they made in marrying one another. The starkness of their differences and the lack of communication between them comes to light moments after Casaubon is made aware of the gravity of his failing health. As soon as Dr. Lydgate finishes informing Casaubon of his likely imminent demise, he astutely ascertains his patient's desires at the moment and acts accordingly: "Lydgate, certain that his patient wished to be alone, soon left him" (424). Dorothea, on the other hand, is overtaken by the need to satisfy her own reflex to go be with Casaubon, despite knowing it probably is not what he needs or wants on this particular occasion. The revelation of her mistake not only in going to him at this time but in their very existence as husband and wife is immediately illuminated:

Dorothea had been aware when Lydgate had ridden away, and she had stepped into the garden, with the impulse to go at once to her husband. But she hesitated, fearing to offend him by obtruding herself [...] she wandered slowly round the nearer

clumps of trees until she saw him advancing. Then she went towards him, and might have represented a heaven-sent angel coming with a promise that the short hours remaining should yet be filled with that faithful love which clings to the closer to a comprehended grief. His glance in reply to hers was so chill that she felt her timidity increased; yet she turned and passed her hand through his arm. Mr. Casaubon kept his hands behind him and allowed her pliant arm to cling with difficulty against his rigid arm. There was something horrible to Dorothea in the sensation which this unresponsive hardness inflicted on her. That is a strong word, but not too strong: it is in these acts called trivialities that the seeds of joy are for ever wasted, until men and women look round with haggard faces at the devastation their own waste has made[...] (425).

At this moment of deep fear and sorrow, true lovers should be joined together closer than ever.

A true wife should, as Eliot says, be like an angel bringing alleviation to her suffering husband.

Dorothea's presence should be a beacon of comfort in Casaubon's darkest moments and they both should be taking solace in each other. Instead, the space between them is immense and impenetrable. Feeling the magnitude of this newfound cognizance, Dorothea retreats to her boudoir and vehemently reflects on what she now recognizes as her doomed marriage:

She was in the reaction of a rebellious anger stronger than any she had felt since her marriage [...] '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.' 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 [...] If he had drawn her towards him, she would never have surveyed him – never have said, 'is he worth living for?' [...] Now she said bitterly, 'It is his fault, not mine.' In the jar of her whole being, pity was overthrown [...] In such a crisis as this, some women begin to hate. (426)

Though the effects of Casaubon's illness blatantly reveal the baseless nature of the Casaubon marriage, it does not stop there. We see Casaubon's weakening condition taking its toll by manifesting itself in severe jealousy. With death likely on the near horizon, Casaubon must consider the state of his affairs after he is gone. His primary concern stems from his wariness of Ladislaw and the influence Casaubon feels he has over Dorothea: "This man has gained Dorothea's ear: he has fascinated her attention; he has evidently tried to impress her mind with the notion that he has claims beyond anything I have done for him. If I die – and he is waiting here on the watch for that – he will persuade her to marry him. That would be calamity for her and success for him" (Eliot 262). Casaubon becomes so consumed with the notion of Dorothea marrying Ladislaw after he is gone that he creates a codicil to his will, stipulating that if Dorothea were to enter into such a union, she must forfeit her claim to his estate. This codicil becomes common knowledge throughout the community after Casaubon's death and serves as a catalyst for much speculation and judgment. Unfortunately for Casaubon, Dorothea's reaction to the threat of losing her inheritance does anything but dissuade her; in fact, it forces her to reflect on her departed husband as someone more pathetic than she ever would have considered him before this knowledge. Furthermore, it transforms her view of Ladislaw from a relation of her husband's to someone *who could* potentially be her husband. This transition of thought begins instantly after Celia informs Dorothea of the codicil:

She might have compared her experience at that moment to the vague, alarmed consciousness that her life was taking on a new form, that she was undergoing a metamorphosis in which memory would not adjust itself to the stirring of new organs. Everything was changing its aspect: her husband's conduct, her

own duteous feelings towards him, every struggle between them  
– and yet more, her whole relation to Will Ladislaw. (Eliot 304)

Casaubon's illness gave him the chance to consider his world without him in it and, in doing so, he chose to preoccupy himself with visions of his arch enemy taking Dorothea as his own wife. Ironically, his actions as a result of this reflection enhance rather than hinder the union of Dorothea and Ladislaw.

Eliot connects the beginnings of Dorothea's and Casaubon's relationship with illness through somewhat subtle language techniques and contextual word play. The role of sickness as a prominent player in the construction (and eventual destruction) of Lydgate's and Rosamond's marriage is far more direct. There is, of course, the obvious fact that Lydgate is a doctor: a modern and progressive man who has presumably made the treatment and eradication of illness his life's main priority. It is not necessarily surprising, then, that he and Rosamond become familiar with each other by way of Fred Vincy's illness. When he would go to attend to Fred, "he almost always saw her before going to the sickroom, and she appealed to him as to what she could do for mama. Her presence of mind and adroitness in carrying out his hints were admirable, and it is not wonderful that the idea of seeing Rosamond began to mingle itself with his interest in the case" (265). Not surprising does not mean not strategic, however. Eliot very purposefully chooses a quarantined environment where the air is tinged with the vapors of sickness to be the garden in which this relationship grows. It is as if Eliot wants her readers to know that this 'love' is contaminated from the very beginning.

We can see inklings of their mismatched relationship by the feeble foundation it is built upon in the sickroom. It is here that they share "brief, impersonal conversations" (266) and grow increasingly uncomfortable when making eye contact with one another. Is this innocent



shyness and embarrassment consequent of feelings of love or is this two people with a hollow attraction for each other that gains momentum with each happenstance meeting? The fact that these meetings take place in the midst of fever (which is, in itself, suggestive of delusion) coupled with them making Lydgate feel “like an ill-worked puppet” (266) suggest the latter is more likely. The phrase, “ill-worked” is again attaching sickness to the relationship and the word, “puppet” insinuates that Lydgate is not acting of his own accord but is being manipulated by the seductive powers of Rosamond. At this point, Rosamond is basically a huntress aggressively trapping her prey.

As if this correlation between Lydgate’s and Rosamond’s budding relationship and disease weren’t distinct enough, the seedling of their life together is planted in Rosamond’s mind in yet another sickroom of sorts. Before Rosamond even lays eyes on Lydgate, she joins her brother on an excursion to visit their wealthy Uncle Featherstone who happens to be in failing health. While the reason for Fred’s visit is to try to maintain his position as Featherstone’s preferred relation and secure his inheritance upon his uncle’s highly anticipated death, Rosamond traveled to see her consumptive uncle primarily so she could gather intelligence from Mary Garth about Lydgate: “indeed, this *tête-à-tête* was one of Rosamond’s objects in coming to the court” (109). Because Mary has encountered Lydgate a number of times while he treats the illness of Mr. Featherstone, Rosamond deems her the perfect target for her pointed questions about Lydgate’s potential as a viable romantic interest. The frivolity of Rosamond’s litmus test is apparent in the questions she asks Mary—questions like if he is “agreeable” and “interesting” and “what sort of looking man is he” (114)? Mary, wise beyond her years, is rather appalled at Rosamond’s immaturity and provides her with answers that

reveal her emotional and intellectual superiority. This conversation between Mary and Rosamond foreshadows the falseness of the impending relationship when Rosamond suggests that a gentlemen will “fall in love with” with a woman when he has occasion to see her “almost every day” (114).

This is exactly what is soon to come about when Fred falls ill and, as a result, Rosamond and Lydgate often see one another. Mary’s response, however, blatantly rebuffs this silly statement when she retorts “Does that always make people fall in love? [...] it seems to me quite as often a reason for detesting each other” (114). Mary identifies the ridiculousness of the prospect of two people building and harnessing a true connection of undeniable and indestructible love within the fleeting pleasantries of momentary encounters. Rosamond, as we see soon after this illuminating conversation, could not disagree more. She wholeheartedly thrusts herself into the calculated role of a desirable female in order to capture Lydgate during their very brief encounters. To her, it is as if every sighting of Lydgate before he attends to his patient is a sliver of opportunity to add another brushstroke to her masterful creation of ‘love.’ Mary’s words come back to haunt, however, when we see that with more time spent together getting to actually know each other after their marriage, Lydgate’s and Rosamond’s feelings for each other morph more into the detestation referenced by Mary than the love imagined and meticulously constructed by Rosamond.

While Casaubon’s terminal illness is what ultimately brings about his and Dorothea’s realization of their mistakes, it is Lydgate’s medical aptitude and his profession as a whole that bring about his gradual understanding that his marriage is also a grave miscalculation. As the two spouses get to know each other better, Rosamond begins to realize and display that she

has very little respect for her husband, his profession, and his inability to provide the materialistically demanding lifestyle she so arrogantly expected. Lydgate, meanwhile, is flabbergasted at the minimal respect he receives and at his own powerlessness within the marriage. Each of them harbored baseless expectations pre-marriage and were stunned when these assumptions failed to come to fruition. Perhaps the most flagrant illustration of Rosamond's flippancy toward her husband and his medical acumen is when she haughtily disregards his firm instructions not to go horseback riding while pregnant with their first child. This impetuosity is noteworthy because it is proof not only of her disregard for Lydgate as a man but also for him as a doctor as well. Even when she falls and loses her baby, validating Lydgate's initial concern, she still will not give him any credit: "In all future conversations on the subject, Rosamond was mildly certain that the ride had made no difference, and that if she had stayed at home the same symptoms would have come on and would have ended in the same way" (585). Rosamond's miscarriage as a direct result of ignoring her husband's advice and her stubbornness to admit guilt of any kind takes a toll on Lydgate's overall perception of his marriage to her. He begins to realize that the exact opposite of what he assumed their marriage would be has come to transpire before him:

There was gathering within him an amazed sense of his powerlessness over Rosamond. His superior knowledge and mental force, instead of being, as he had imagined, a shrine to consult on all occasions, was simply set aside on every practical question. [...] She had seen clearly Lydgate's pre-eminence in Middlemarch society, and could go on imaginatively tracing still more agreeable social effects when his talent should have advanced him; but for her, his professional and scientific ambition had no other relation to these desirable effects than if they had been the fortunate discovery of an ill-smelling oil. And that oil apart, with which she had nothing to do, of course she believed in her own opinion more than she did his. Lydgate was astounded

to find in numberless trifling matters, as well as in this last serious case of the riding, that affection did not make her compliant.  
(586)

It is physical injury and the miscarriage of Rosamond's unborn child that bring about Lydgate's above epiphany. He realizes for the first time that, despite his masculinity, he is powerless within the confines of his marriage. His previous image of a compliant wife deferring to him in all matters and treating him as a superior completely dissolves. This is proof that the elements of power and compliance have no place in a true marriage and it is Rosamond's physical affliction which serves as the catalyst to this unwelcome revelation.

Rosamond's palpable disrespect and the crux of her ill-suited marriage to Lydgate is brought about with her physical ailments; however, the reader can glean from earlier conversation that they are headed down a tumultuous path. It is the philosophy of illness and its treatments which exposes one of the first significant inclinations that Lydgate and Rosamond are destined to fail as a couple. Lydgate has devoted his life to the controversial career of progressive medicine in the face of widely accepted but antiquated practices. He spends his days diagnosing and treating people afflicted with illnesses of all kinds. His career motivation revolves around the prospect of opening up a new cholera ward in the town of Middlemarch, where his name can go down in history for advancing the town with innovative treatments. One night, after another day of curing the sick, Lydgate comes home and engages in a revealing conversation with his new bride about his idol, Vesalius, who utilized eccentric methods of anatomical study. Rosamond is nothing short of horrified and disgusted at the turn of the conversation and shares with Lydgate that she wishes that he "had not been a medical man" (458). This prospect is, of course, disturbing to the young doctor. He tells her "that is like

saying you wish you had married another man” (458). These words prove to be spot on as we see their relationship unravel and Rosamond show interest in and affection for a variety of different men throughout her marriage. Lydgate makes a futile attempt at defending his profession, saying that medicine “is the grandest profession in the world, [...] and to say that you love me without loving the medical man in me, is the same sort of thing as to say that you like eating a peach but you don’t like its flavor. Don’t say that again, dear, it pains me” (458). Although she does not say it again with words, the reader, and Lydgate, is now aware that Rosamond resents Lydgate’s passions and, by extension, him as a husband. We are now aware, or should be, that Rosamond does *not*, in fact, love Lydgate. This conversation foreshadows the remainder of Lydgate and Rosamond’s disastrous relationship and their subsequent misery.

Because Rosamond and Lydgate are both young and healthy and because divorce was, at the time, so thoroughly frowned upon and legally challenging, the incompatible duo were essentially stuck with each other. Rosamond suffers another attack of ‘illness’ late in the novel which comes about in a very revealing manner and which provides a glimpse into the pathetic nature of the future Lydgate marriage. After weeks of engaging in flirtation with and attempting to charm Will Ladislaw, everything finally comes to a head when Rosamond’s actions toward Will are inadvertently witnessed by Dorothea. The scene threatens Will’s reputation in Dorothea’s eyes and basically eliminates the small existing possibility of him being able to eventually marry her, which is his one true intention. He erupts in anger towards Rosamond’s carelessness. Rosamond’s reaction is visceral and, in addition to her shock, she falls victim to a sudden attack of illness as if rejection is a kind of disease in and of itself:

Rosamond, while these poisoned weapons were being hurled at her, was almost losing the sense of her identity, and seemed to be

waking into some new terrible existence. [...] all her sensibility was turned into a bewildering novelty of pain; she felt a new terrified recoil under a lash never experienced before. [...] When Will had ceased to speak she had become an image of sickened misery: her lips were pale, and her eyes had a tearless dismay in them. If it had been Tertius who stood opposite to her, that look of misery would have been a pang to him, and he would have sunk by her side to comfort her, with that strong-armed comfort which she had often held very cheap. (780)

Rosamond, in this moment, is quite literally plagued by her own jealousy, embarrassment, and failure to get her way. For her suffering to go without concern or immediate attempt by Ladislaw to alleviate only adds to her infirmity. She “said that she had felt suddenly sick and faint” and when Lydgate comes home, his reflexive tendency to shower her with concern and affection in hopes of assuaging her distress comes to light once again:

The perception that she was ill threw every other thought into the background. When he felt her pulse, her eyes rested on him with more persistence than they had done for a long while, as if she felt some content that he was there [...] Clinging to him she fell into hysterical sobbings and cries, and for the next hour he did nothing but soothe and tend her. He imagined that Dorothea had been to see her, and that all this effect on her nervous system, which evidently involved some new turnings toward himself, was due to the excitement of the new impressions which that visit had raised. (780)

Though at this point in the novel Lydgate is aware he and Rosamond are not right for each other, he cannot help but gauge her symptoms and do his best to diagnose the problem. He, of course, misinterprets the cause of Rosamond’s physical distress and subsequent warming towards him and dismisses it as something far less malicious than it actually is. Rosamond, grateful for the familiar concern shown towards her by her reliable husband, momentarily relinquishes herself to his comforts. She does this not out of feelings of true affection for Lydgate, but because his actions serve to appease her bruised ego and remind her that she is

still in control of at least this particular man if not all men. After this scene, it is undeniable that the Lydgate marriage is a loveless one and that Rosamond will spend the rest of their days taking advantage of Lydgate, deceiving him, and using him for her own selfish and trivial purposes. This pattern of deception will go on until Lydgate eventually dies and Rosamond moves on to her next husband-victim.

Lydgate never fully becomes the man he expected he'd be as a direct result of his marriage and is essentially reduced to a fool by her actions. When Ladislav returns a short while after the incident which upsets Rosamond so violently, Lydgate unknowingly makes his naiveté obvious by demonstrating his outright ignorance of the situation and Rosamond's capabilities. He explains to Ladislav that Rosamond has had "only a slight nervous shock – the effect of some agitation. She has been overwrought lately. The truth is, Ladislav, I am an unlucky devil. We have gone through several rounds of purgatory since you left, and I have lately got on to a worse ledge of it than ever" (781). This instance of Lydgate's obliviousness of his misdiagnosis of Rosamond and of the situation as a whole is reminiscent of his first brush with potential marriage. In his younger years, there was a time when Lydgate rushes to aid a French actress injured on stage and subsequently becomes enamored with her. He proposes marriage to her in a rush of juvenile jubilation only to learn the true villainous nature of the object of his obsession. He is relieved to have been spared from certain disgrace and from that moment forward swears off women and marriage:

Three days afterwards Lydgate was at his galvanism again in his Paris chambers, believing that illusions were at an end for him. He was saved from the hardening effects by the abundant kindness of his heart and his belief that human life might be made better. But he had more reason than ever for trusting his judgment, now that it was so experienced; and henceforth he

would take a strictly scientific view of woman, entertaining no expectations, but such as were justified beforehand. (153)

Vrettos astutely points out that

Indeed, what most disturbs Lydgate about this Parisian interlude are the implications of his own sympathy. During his infatuation with Madame Laure, Lydgate loses the will to control his emotions. He experiences a passive, uncritical, and uncontrolled participation in the visual scene. When he discovers that, in fact, he is neither protecting nor “treating” Madame Laure, but that she has all along been in control of the drama, Lydgate’s masculine authority and medical expertise are threatened. He has not correctly diagnosed the situation. (Vrettos 106)

With misdiagnosing Rosamond’s true condition, Lydgate has repeated his mistake with Madame Laure all over again and is none the wiser for it. The confident and promising young physician who held such firm notions of a wife’s inferiority to her husband at the beginning of the novel has now been replaced by a besieged town doctor repeatedly emasculated by his wife and doesn’t even know it. Unfortunately for him, there is no medical treatment for an unhappy marriage.

Eliot unabashedly thrusts upon her readers the severely unhealthy marriages of her main characters. She does not, however, leave us without example of what a healthy, successfully functioning marriage looks like. Much like her method of juxtaposing Mary Garth as a necessary contrast to Rosamond and Dorothea, Eliot astutely inserts into her novel a vivid glimpse into the commendable marriage of Mary’s parents. It is clear to see that Mary’s resounding sensibility is a direct result of having been privy to the example set forth by her parents, her mother in particular. The vitality of the Garth pairing emerges during Eliot’s description of Susan Garth and her approach to marriage and life as a whole. Susan Garth (who, along with her husband, are almost exclusively referred to as ‘Mrs. and Mr. Garth’,



reinforcing the significance of their roles as model marriage partners), is a woman who knows who she is and who her husband is. She functions in her brief scenes in the novel at a level of maturity unmatched by any other character. Eliot writes of Mrs. Garth: “[...She] never committed herself by over-hasty speech; having, as she said, borne the yoke in her youth, and learned self-control. She had that rare sense which discerns what is unalterable, and submits to it without murmuring. 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” (242). Eliot goes on to describe how Mrs. Garth is not swayed or impacted by the whispers or judgments of the community in which she resides. Despite her husband’s flaws, Mrs. Garth respects him and refuses to speak ill of him to others. She accepts his financial missteps as consequences of his good nature and rather than fault him, she immediately applies constructive solutions to any problem that arises. This quality is perfectly exemplified when Fred Vincy comes to the Garth household to confess to them that he has lost the money Caleb Garth lent him to invest in a horse. Such a loss is a substantial financial blow to the household, one they will feel the effects of for some time. Despite this, Mrs. Garth’s reaction remains true to her nature: “Mrs. Garth had not again looked at Fred, and was not in the least calculating what words she should use to cut him the most effectively. Like the eccentric woman she was, she was at present absorbed in considering what was to be done, and did not fancy that the end could be better achieved by bitter remarks or explosions” (248). Later, after Fred leaves feeling “for the first time something like the tooth of remorse” (248), the exchange between the Garths captures the essence of their success as a married couple. Caleb apologetically admits that he “was a fool” (249) and she responds “‘That you were,’ said the wife, nodding and

smiling. 'But I should not have gone to publish it in the market place'" (249). The fact that Caleb has the humility to admit that he was wrong and be apologetic towards his wife is crucial to the breakdown of gender dynamics often practiced in Victorian marriages. Mrs. Garth's reaction in turn of holding her husband accountable while not allowing his mistakes to affect her feelings toward him is representative of the equality and mutual respect between the two. Eliot writes that "the Garths were poor, and 'lived in a small way'. However, they did not mind it" (251). Unlike the other married couples in the novel, the Garths do not subscribe to a union based on material comforts, superficial physicality, unrealistic expectations, self-interest, or power dynamics. They are happy to just be together and work through life's obstacles as a team. The Garth marriage is, for Eliot, the pinnacle of what marriage should be.

## Chapter 7:

### Conclusion

There is some controversy as to whether or not the ending to *Middlemarch* is a happy one. Dorothea does end up giving up her inheritance in order to marry the man she feels she truly loves: Will Ladislaw. Some argue that Dorothea finally experiences a pure and lasting connection with Ladislaw and, by marrying him despite its challenges, is able to correct the mistakes she made previously in marrying Casaubon. I would argue, however, that Dorothea's decision to 'end up with' Ladislaw is, instead of an example of true love, another instance of her rebellious, somewhat impulsive inexperience. It is almost as if Dorothea is attracted to Ladislaw merely because he is the exact opposite of Casaubon and, logically speaking, if Casaubon was a kind of disease, maybe Ladislaw will be a kind of antidote. Regardless of Dorothea's true feelings and the lasting success of her second marriage, Eliot is sure to make clear that her questionable actions do not go unnoticed by the ever watchful community surrounding her:

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 837-383)

There is no denying the similarities between Dorothea's second marriage and Eliot's marriage to John Cross after Lewes' death. They both marry a year and a half after the death of their first significant other and both to a man who is much younger than the first was. The marriage in

both instances was a shock to friends and family and harshly criticized by their larger communities. They both seem to care deeply for their new partners, but at the same time, their primary motivations revolve more around a compulsive need to be properly married. Eliot was herself seemingly driven by a need to satisfy the pressure of having a legal marriage partner recognized by the church, the law, and society at large and when the opportunity came along, she (albeit reluctantly) took it. Dorothea is driven by a similar desire—the desire to correct her past faults and be married to someone more appropriate for her in terms of age and demeanor. Eliot concludes her novel by writing of Dorothea’s legacy with a somber undertone not easily missed:

Certainly those determining acts of her life were not ideally beautiful. They were the mixed result of a young and noble impulse struggling amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state, in which great feelings will often take the aspect of error, and great faith the aspect of illusion. For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it [...] But we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas, some of which may present a far sadder sacrifice than that of the Dorothea whose story we know. (Eliot 838)

Eliot is arguably referencing not just Dorothea in this last excerpt but herself as well—and Lydgate, and Casaubon, and all of us. In a letter written to her friend Sara Sophia Hennell, Eliot’s internal struggle with the predominantly conformist community surrounding her is evident. Eliot describes a sensation of joyous freedom that one may feel when they reject what, although widely accepted to the majority, one believes to be inherently wrong: “When the soul is just liberated from the wretched giant’s bed of dogmas on which it has been racked and stretched ever since it began to think there is a feeling of exultation and strong hope” (Eliot 519). This ‘bed of dogmas’ is clearly reminiscent of the marriage dogma to which young people

of the time were forced to conform or be brutally judged. This feeling of liberation for Eliot is, at first, a motivation to spread these newfound revelations of truth to others, but soon these feelings come to a crashing halt. Eliot says that it far from easy to change peoples' way of thinking and confesses that it is discouraging dealing with the inevitable feelings of emotional isolation that results from differing from the majority. Interestingly, she compares a nonconformist person of influence to a disease that spreads throughout a group of people and breaks down their very structure:

The results of nonconformity in a family are just an epitome of what happens on a larger scale in the world. An influential member chooses to omit an observance which in the minds of all the rest is associated with what is highest and most venerable. He cannot make his reasons intelligible, and so his conduct is regarded as a relaxation of the hold that moral ties had on him previously. The rest are infected with the disease they imagine in him; all the screws by which order was maintained are loosened, and in more than one case a person's happiness may be ruined by the confusion of ideas which took the form of principles. (Eliot Norton Critical Edition, 519)

She asks how we solve this issue and stresses the importance a solution would have on stopping the regeneration of harmful practices and ideals throughout multiple generations. Eliot's words that compare a nonconformist (presumably herself) to a disease help to reaffirm the structural purpose behind the use of disease in her novel and that there is a direct correlation between it and her message of nonconformity. It seems to be that a novelistic or anecdotal approach to leading the crusade against conformity is one that Eliot would be more comfortable operating under considering her fears of emotional isolation from her community. This particular piece of writing demonstrates the very real and prevalent turmoil Eliot experienced in life with regard to her own nonconformist views and actions. This mentality

inevitably seeps into her writing and guides her pen when she creates the flawed marriages of her characters.

In an earlier passage, Mr. Farebrother tells Dorothea that a person's "character is not cut in marble – it is not something solid and unalterable. It is something living and changing, and may become diseased as our bodies do," to which she replies "then it may be rescued and healed" (734-735). There is hope for the individual, but is there hope for society as a whole? Eliot seems to have resigned herself to the fact that the disease of society is far too powerful to be overcome by us mere mortals—that we will almost always succumb to its infection just as Eliot did herself. In this vein, the ending to *Middlemarch* is not a happy one but a sober representation of the superficial dressing we put on the wounds inflicted upon us by the world in which we reside. For Eliot, the institution of marriage has become plagued by society's approach to it. She harnesses the aura and fears of illness and conflates it with the demonstrative marriages in her novel as a means to deliver her warning and criticism to her readers. The process seems to lead her, however, toward an unexpected conclusion where ultimately society itself is the disease and the disease will always conquer despite the best efforts of the individual—despite Eliot's own best efforts. For the Dorotheas and Eliots of the world, life is a constant struggle against the disease of society: a disease to which we all ultimately succumb.

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