George Eliot's Treatment of Two Women

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ABSTRACT

Substantive and Rare Creatures:

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by

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This thesis discusses the variation and progression in George Eliot's treatment of two of her women characters, Maggie Tulliver in The Mill on the Floss and Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch. George Eliot has been recently subjected to some stringent criticism by various writers of the women's liberation movement, who accuse her of ignoring in her writing problems which she encountered in her own life.

I attempt to show that George Eliot was certainly aware of all the difficulties faced by nineteenth-century women. In examining the different contexts in which Maggie and Dorothea are presented and the progression in George Eliot's awareness, it becomes obvious that Eliot does not refuse to consider the particular problems of women, but rather takes great pains to suggest solutions grounded in the possibilities of her time.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

"George Eliot lived the sexual revolution ... but did not write of it" is the patronizing dismissal by no less an authoritative contemporary voice than Kate Millett's in Sexual Politics[1]. These confident tones possibly result from the understandable temptation to seize on the external facts of Eliot's life as proof that she rejected every convention of her own time. The scorn implicit in Millett's judgment assumes that Eliot chose to withhold her inward convictions from her writing, and contented herself instead with illustrating only the "safe" and expected views of women which she was fortunate enough to have been able to ignore in her own life. This harsh and unnecessarily narrow conclusion is perhaps an instance of women's current disposition to judge their own sex more harshly. Kate Millett devotes considerable time to her detailed denunciations of Miller, Lawrence, and Mailer, but the casual mention of Eliot's supposed capitulation is surely the unkinder cut. In this thesis I will examine Eliot's treatment of two female characters in order to determine to what extent and for what reasons she adhered to the (shadowy) concept of the "ideal" Victorian woman in her fiction. The corollary is inescapable and impossible to resolve -- (speculation is all) -- how profound was Eliot's renunciation of this ideal in her own life?

A first obligation is, of course, to give some sort of substance to this formidable creature, the "ideal" Victorian woman. Not possessing flesh, she would happily combine elements of what she herself desired to be, what others (both men and women) insisted she should be, and possibly some evidence of an actual self. Stereotypes are elusive beings, to be shunned at all costs; yet it seems legitimate enough to assume that the nineteenth-century middle-class

woman did face problems peculiar to her time. Naturally the reactions were not invariable, but the demons wore a common face: the woman was utterly dependent, financially and, thus, in every other tangible way, on a man, whether he was husband, father, or brother. She was restricted in her activities to the extent that petty philanthropy was the only permissible employment outside the home, and within the home she was able only to dabble in the domestic arts. Her physical confinements were matched by her mental ones: "to be perfectly pure the female mind must be perfectly blank ... the well-bred girl was so trained that she perceived only selected phenomena, and that her feelings flowed only along acceptable channels."[2]

In this particular context the external consequences of George Eliot's decision to live with George Henry Lewes are easily imaginable, but the assumption that she was inwardly prepared to exhort all women to free themselves from the traditional limitations overlooks certain aspects of her "revolutionary" private life. Certainly, after intense internal conflict, she was prepared to step beyond the moral boundaries of the time; nevertheless, the fundamental conceptions of a woman's relationship to a man were not so readily transformed as Millett implies they were. A lingering impression, as one reads about Eliot's life, and her "shy shrinking ambitious nature",[3] is her own concern with her place as a woman in the intellectual world. Her right to be there is never disputed, but the recurrent contemporary verdict is that she is fortunate enough to possess a "man's mind". Eliot herself, far from attempting an active redefinition of the situation of women, appears to welcome the particular help that men's strength can provide: she is continually expressing gratitude for the "blessedness of a perfect love and

union"[4], with Lewes regarded as the "kind husband to love and take care of me".[5] The drive to emphasize her own undoubted capacity to survive as a self-sufficient entity (as men were supposed to do) is subsidiary to the desire to understand the capacity of both men and women for mutual assistance in a world plagued by "petty egotistical concerns".

Eliot, of course, could not fail to recognize that women were those most inhibited by social circumstances, those most crippled by the expectations of others. "The angel on the hearth" is too recurrent a convention in Victorian literature not to have had some basis. The concept of woman as an instrument for the "betterment" of man attempts to soften the indisputable fact of her inferiority: "There is something unfeminine in independence. It is contrary to Nature and therefore it offends. A really sensible woman feels her dependence; she does what she can but she is conscious of her inferiority and therefore grateful for support".[6] The convenient idea of woman as agent for good provides yet another set of rules by which woman must live so that she may gain what she has been schooled to most desire: marriage, and in return, the chance "to perform what he (the Ideal Man) did not care to do himself".[7] Both men and women were engaged in "weaving round their personalities romantic webs"[8] which in the end enmeshed them all.

At this point George Eliot steadfastly refuses simple answers. She recognizes the foibles of women of her own time: "If as the world has long agreed, a very great amount of instruction will not make a wise man, still less will a very mediocre amount of instruction make a wise woman. And the most mischievous form of feminine silliness is the literary form."[9] Nevertheless she does not ignore

their obvious miseries, and she in no way ignores or refuses to acknowledge feminist concerns. The development of her thought is perhaps not that which a contemporary radical feminist would welcome, as I hope to prove in the examination of her treatment of two of her principal woman characters, Maggie Tulliver and Dorothea Brooke. Consideration of elements from Eliot's own life, on which Millett bases her accusation, is indispensable in any case if we accept Gordon Haight's reasonable belief that "without his (Lewes') affectionate encouragement she probably would never have written or published any fiction".[10] That George Eliot resented or wished to free herself from this beneficiary is clearly not the issue; she in fact welcomed his assiduous shielding of her from critical eyes, and took great pains to emphasize the all-encompassing importance of her union with him: "For the last six years I have ceased to be 'Miss Evans' for anyone who has personal relations with me -- have held myself under all the responsibilities of a married woman".[11]

Of course, if anyone but Lewes had been concerned, the situation might have been painfully different. He evidently did not succumb to any of the current preconceptions about a woman's place and duties. (Perhaps his earlier "irregular" life is some proof of this.) Nevertheless "sexual revolution", like most catch phrases, falls far short of describing George Eliot's actual life: she appears to have been extraordinarily lucky in her relationship with Lewes, and her own particular abilities enabled her to come to terms with problems which plagued her individually as a woman. Her greatest individual means is of course her art, and again I think that Kate Millett deliberately limits her judgment, in denying that Eliot discusses the position of women honestly. In this thesis I want to study how the problems of women are encountered by George Eliot: that is, in what context Maggie Tulliver and Dorothea Brooke are presented, to what extent the fact that they are female

influences their fate, and finally the differences and possible progression in their treatment.

In considering these characters, the most obvious and troubling impression is George Eliot's determination to present them as forces in their own right, coupled with her eventual placing of them in situations where they are apparently frustrated in their efforts to achieve an independent existence. Since a study of these women's motivations and theories about their own positions would be difficult to maintain in isolation, I will mention, directly or indirectly, various women and their common fortune: the marriage relationship of the Tullivers, the Lydgates, the Chettams, and the Garths, as well as Dorothea's own two marriages. The central concern will be the fate of the two women themselves, with the most detailed discussion given to the ending of Middlemarch: Dorothea having at last found personal happiness by marrying Will Ladislaw, now faces "a life filled also with a beneficent activity which she had not the doubtful pains of discovering and marking out herself".[12]

This statement seems to me the central source of the apparent conflict in George Eliot's own attitude. If we accept it as cheerful fact, the best conclusion that can be drawn from it is that Dorothea receives with but a faint murmur as much as this imperfect world is capable of giving her. On the other hand this dismissal can be seen as bitterly ironic, completely negating everything Dorothea has struggled for, at times mistakenly or naively. The irony of her condition is more painful still if we consider the character of the man who does lead her off to bliss. Ladislaw is never tormented by anything resembling Dorothea's wrestling with the various angels, and in any case there is always an outlet for him which is denied Dorothea and all other women, that of "action". To what extent, then, does Eliot's own "Victorianism"

become a part of her presentation of women? She can be accused, as we have seen, of backing away from problems she cannot help describing. On the other hand, she may well be recognizing the limitations as well as the values of her own condition, sincerely believing that women like Dorothea and Maggie (like herself?), are not "fit to be alone", and that their "need to be loved" can only be finally satisfied by a man's care, cherishing, and necessary guidance. Women experience and act on a similar need to help men -- "Other people's good would still remain "[13], so that the two opposing views of women's situation are constantly present in the books under discussion. Responses are necessarily ambivalent, as can be seen in the sometimes fierce critical reactions to Will Ladislaw and Stephen Guest as objects of love for Dorothea and Maggie. The reluctance to accept them may be due to George Eliot's own doubts about them, and is perhaps understandable if we consider the novels as the work of a woman who faces similar dilemmas in her own life. Her resolutions might be expected to be more personal than social; we have to decide whether she is making a plea for the "Victorian woman" or for a certain type of woman who can exist at any time.

The separate cases of Dorothea and Maggie are, I think, individual instances of these two distinct perspectives on similar difficulties. George Eliot is unable, and possibly unwilling, to free herself from commitment to Maggie's own dreams. Maggie therefore is much more, and at the same time much less, than a "typical" woman of her time, and her somewhat arbitrary end can be seen as an unavoidable failing on the part of George Eliot, who does not wish to provide absolute (and practical) answers for the problems she has raised. She deliberately leads us to feel that women like Maggie exist outside specific historical periods with their specific limitations on women; Maggie is as much threatened by herself as by

men and men's prejudices. This is not to deny that Victorian demands on women did inhibit Maggie at individual points in her life, but this is not really the central issue. Personal struggle takes precedence here over all others, and Eliot's own sufferings are inevitably linked to her creation's. The legitimate extent of this identification is of course unknown, but Eliot's undeniable involvement with Maggie works curiously to provide us with a sense of isolation from her, and our image of Maggie is always that of an eternally separate person.

The case of Dorothea is quite different, as George Eliot's concerns have visibly widened. Dorothea from the first walks far more freely than Maggie, in terms of Eliot's own attention to her. This is probably due in part to the sheer number of characters in Middlemarch; we see a more particularized world than the menacing mass of St. Ogg's. Despite a sense that she is "different", which resembles Maggie's feeling of isolation, Dorothea is a victim of specific circumstances, the most telling circumstance being that she is a woman. ("Since I can do no good because a woman/ Reach constantly at something that is near it"[14] is the first of those important epigrams.) Single problems seek single solutions, theoretically more attainable than those posed by a multitude of barely distinguishable difficulties. There are choices for Dorothea, as for all Victorian women, but any significant breaking of the bonds would be an enormous and unimaginable step. Still the limitations of the female condition are keenly experienced, and Eliot never refuses to come to terms with any aspect of women's situation.

The most obvious difficulty, then as now, is "love" and the subsequent acceptance of the man as mentor. The complication in these books is the obvious inferiority, moral or otherwise, of the male characters to the female. This is perhaps more blatant in The Mill on the Floss, but whereas we feel that Maggie's choices

would always doom her, in Dorothea's case there is the thought that somehow a man more "suitable" for her than the flighty Ladislaw might have appeared. But does that matter? The fault, if fault it is, lies in the woman herself; regardless of who is the receiver, capitulation and abandonment of personal dreams are the essential elements in Dorothea's fate. It seems that in this particular world, with its accompanying expectations of women, Dorothea is helpless. The process by which we are led to this realization is complex and arduous; we are forced to extract meaning from the intricacies of treatment given to each character, and to consider how the different situations -- Rosamond's and Lydgate's, the Garths', Celia's -- reflect on each other. The process of Middlemarch is a gradual awareness, paradoxically through Eliot's detachment from Dorothea, of the choices and limitations which she faces, and which all women face, because Dorothea is far more a generalized character than Maggie. The conclusion -- an absolute compromise -- is presented with grave awareness of the series of adjustments which have been made. We may find this unpalatable; we may feel that Eliot herself only half believes in the affirmations she is offering. Still her uncertainty becomes a measure of her realism, and the doubts extend themselves to every character's process of adjustment.

This thesis will examine in detail the very different contexts in which Maggie and Dorothea are placed, in an attempt to define the development of George Eliot's attitudes towards women. This progression cannot help being governed by her own ambivalence about the nature of woman's lot, and therefore never takes refuge in the absolute answers which we might seize for comfort.

Footnotes - Chapter I

[1]Kate Millett, Sexual Politics, Doubleday and Co., Inc., New York, 1970, p. 139.

[2]C.W. Cunnington, Feminine Attitudes in the Nineteenth Century, William Heinemann Ltd., London, 1935, p. 89-90.

[3]Gordon S. Haight, George Eliot: A Biography, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1968, p. 240.

[4]Ibid., p. 247.

[5]Ibid., p. 228.

[6]Cunnington , p. 70.

[7]Ibid., p. 75.

[8]Ibid., p. 23.

[9]George Eliot: A Biography., p. 209.

[10]Ibid., p. 319.

[11]Ibid., p. 336.

[12]George Eliot, Middlemarch, Riverside Edition, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1956, p. 610. Subsequent references are to this edition.

[13]Ibid., p. 593.

[14]The Maid's Tragedy by Beaumont and Fletcher, quoted in Middlemarch, p. 5.

CHAPTER II

We have learned to take for granted the Victorian convention of authorial intrusion, and in The Mill on the Floss George Eliot leaves us in no doubt of her own presence. The first chapter informs us not only that she is there, but also that she has no intention of retreating: what we are to read is her dream, and she does not wish to disguise the fact that the world of Maggie Tulliver is to be separated with difficulty from that of George Eliot, woman and creator: "I remember the stone bridge ... Before I dozed off, I was going to tell you what Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver were talking about . . . on that very afternoon I have been dreaming of."[1] There is an implicit warning in this introduction, which arises from the consciousness that it is always dangerous to describe the progress of a dream. Knowing that those outside the limits of that dream are always tempted to impose their expectations and demands on it, George Eliot tries valiantly throughout The Mill on the Floss to circumvent these difficulties: half in love with her own creation, she cannot help but transmit to us a complex tangle of experience.

The establishment of Maggie as a child at odds with her surroundings of course serves to win her our sympathetic support, a support which soon becomes an obsessive concern. The first words spoken about Maggie -- "too 'cute for a woman, I'm afraid,' continued Mr. Tulliver dubiously"[2] -- epitomize only one of the attitudes against which Maggie must struggle throughout her childhood years. She is the outsider who must strive constantly to become herself rather than the dream-child of her mother's yearnings; yet after refusing to work diligently at her patchwork she is unable to go too far in what seems her natural direction: " 'It's bad -- it's bad,' Mr. Tulliver added, sadly, 'a woman's no business wi' being so clever; it'll turn to

trouble, I doubt.'"[3] Not surprisingly, Mr. Tulliver is troubled by no excess of cleverness or sensitivity on the part of his spouse. Mrs. Tulliver (reminding me irresistably of Austen's Mrs. Bennett), who could become a millstone to any discerning neck, is never considered in this light by her (reasonably) affectionate husband. As one who "wasn't going to be told the rights of things by my own fireside"[4], he has never regretted his bargain, but on the contrary revels in "the natural pride of a man who has a buxom wife obviously his inferior in intellect."[5]

Maggie is a most unlikely child of this apparently placid match. From the first we see that she is not in the least inclined to accept uncomplainingly either her well-meaning mother's idealized version of a perfect little girl, or her father's conception of the "little wench" who never gives too much trouble by her quickness. Maggie has evidently been quick to become conscious of herself as a misfit and has resorted to her own means of adjustment. The Fetish bears the brunt of "all her misfortunes" and the Mill becomes a much-needed "little world apart from her outside everyday life."[6] The figure of Tom always strides resolutely through this everyday life; for Maggie he is"'better than anyone else in the world'." We soon realize that he is not completely the god-like companion whom Maggie has created for herself, but rather someone who exerts as many demands on her life and happiness as her parents. He is quite content to accept Maggie's unwavering adoration as his due, continually reminding her that she suffers by comparison with him in all important respects. His self-satisfaction appears in the refrain: " 'I never <u>do</u> forget things . . . I don't' ", and he is complacently aware that "he wouldn't have minded being punished himself, if he deserved it; but then, he never <u>did</u> deserve it."[7] He flaunts "the justice that desires to hurt culprits as much as they deserve to be

hurt, and is troubled with no doubts concerning the exact amount of their deserts."[8]

At this point these rather irritating assumptions of Tom's hold no threat of enduring danger; in this barely conscious state Tom and Maggie are "still very much like young animals"[9], and wounds do heal after a kind touch. Nevertheless we are constantly being warned, as George Eliot hovers around her creation, steering her through "those bitter sorrows of childhood"[10] that we must see this series of miniatures, the "mother tongue of the imagination"[11] as reflections of some future state beyond the inexplicable present. Maggie herself is not so much a "young animal" as to be able to forget each day's hurts with the sunset. Her most frequent reaction to the slings and arrows hurled in the name of "family" or "good manners" is to "refashion her little world into just what she would like it to be . . . this was the form in which she took her opium."[12] Strong words, we might think, to apply to the early struggles of this "rough, dark overgrown puppy"; but such a patronizing reaction on our part is exactly what George Eliot is warning against so insistently. Life does not necessarily increase in pain as we grow older, although we certainly pride ourselves on being able to better recognize and analyze suffering, but Maggie the woman is to be understood only through the attempt to comprehend her first reactions to the buffets of fortune: "Every one of those keen moments has left its trace, and lives in us still, but such traces have blent themselves irrecoverably with the firmer texture of our youth and manhood."[13] As we shall see, her afflictions change in kind rather than in degree, and our opinion as to whether Maggie changes at all is perhaps the basis of any approach to The Mill on the Floss.

In one very important respect, of course, she cannot change. She is a female living in the nineteenth century, and the creation of a Victorian woman,

evidently an unusual one. The women who surround Maggie during her childhood, in fact throughout her life, are for the most part perfectly willing to accept a comfortable life where their place is that of a charming ornament: "and now the women were gone, they could carry on their serious talk without frivolous interruption."[14] Aunt Glegg, of course, would provide strident objections to this view, as she would to every view that was not first voiced by herself. Her interruptions are far from frivolous; we are told that she never hesitates to assume the "responsibilities of a wife as a constituted check on her husband's activities, which are hardly ever of a rational or commendable kind."[15] The outrageousness of her extreme views negates any strength she might seem to have in comparison with the other women. Surrounded as she is by such examples, it is hardly surprising that Maggie is from the first that most dreaded of beings, a non-conformist: "the oddest mixture of clear-eyed acumen and blind dreams"[16], not the best combination of qualities for a young lady of the time. Her father's early hints are reiterated by Tom in response to her confident declarations about her future: " ' I shall be a clever woman' . . . 'Everybody'll hate you.'"[17] These "single threads"[18] of early childhood will never be untangled now, and it will be as difficult for us as for George Eliot to extricate only one. The craftsmanship draws us into an automatic scorn of Tom's rigidity and reliance on his own judgment: "the external remained to him rigidly what it was in the first instance."[19] His reactions are violently contrasted with Maggie's "tenderness for deformed things" -- the first and very important description of her feeling for Philip -- and her wish for extremity in emotion is part of the "opium" which the pragmatic Tom would reject: "it was no use to talk so."

With each successive incident it becomes clear that to speak of the "progress" or "development" of Maggie is not to fully understand the movement of the

book. As circumstances change the explanations of and justifications for them occur in the same terms. Tom's early resentment of Maggie's demonstrations of intellectual superiority becomes more articulate in his partly justified rebuke to her after the disaster: " ' You're always setting yourself up above me and everyone else . . . you're almost always wrong. I can judge much better than you can.' "[20] At the same time her mute submission to his unthinking insensitivity at last finds voice: " ' You are always so harsh to me' . . .the resentment was rising again."[21] Maggie's need for a dream world is still a gnawing one, although books have taken the place of the Fetish and her own hopes have become more definite. She now longs for "all that was beautiful and glad . . . with a blind, unconscious yearning for something that would link together the wonderful impressions of the mysterious life and give her soul a sense of home in it."[22] The impressions subsequently become less "wonderful" as life for Maggie comes to mean descent into the "Valley of Humiliation". The only linking force in the experience of the same dull round over and over again is the conflict within Maggie's imaginative passionate nature "between inward impulse and outward fact." The dream world is gradually receding in proportion to the development of what are popularly known as "adult sensibilities". In Maggie's case these reactions are manifestations of her earliest inclinations, put into words fit for more mature understanding -- "no dream would satisfy her now."[23]

Yet for Maggie dream worlds can assume various forms and names. Religion appears to grant respite, and the words of St. Thomas a Kempis help her to endure the previously mentioned "wide hopeless yearning for that something, whatever it was, that was greatest and best on this earth."[24] The help which the saint provides

-- or rather Maggie's interpretation of it -- is that of self-renunciation, "giving up wishing"[25], quite a different direction from Maggie's earlier ones. Philip, a voice from the past (perhaps the only sort of voice to be trusted), does not hesitate to point out the limitations of this road, and Maggie much to her discomfiture is told that she is indulging in "narrow self-destructive fanaticism."[26] His denunciation is of course partially justified, for to be "in love with the world again"[27] is Maggie's most obvious calling. The "little wench" should indeed be a woman "all wit and bright imagination", as Philip helpfully points out, and she should not choose this "long suicide". The sweeping and emotionally charged term is characteristic of Maggie's generally extreme reaction to crisis -- no specific disastrous circumstances are described. Nevertheless a sense of future undefined gloom descends.

Yet Maggie's great need, which George Eliot has impressed on us through dwelling so carefully on each aspect of Maggie's life and hopes, leaves Maggie nowhere else to turn. As a woman, the "dustier, noisier" warfare confronting Tom is forever closed to her. No woman, we are reminded, is ever granted the outlet of action which men can seize at any moment; Maggie must cope with the "woof of her actual daily life"[28] and its limited possibilities as best she can. As she reaches yet another impasse Philip appears as her ideal "guardian angel"; he is sensitive to her dilemmas and yet sufficiently removed from them to be able to offer practical guidance. Her first tenderness for the vulnerable boy naturally revives (what does Maggie ever forget?), and of course Tom resumes his old position of ogre where Philip is concerned. Once again Maggie gives an ineffective though more articulate attack on her brother's limitations: "You have

not a mind large enough to see that there is anything better . . . than your petty aims."[29] At this point Philip and Tom represent much more clearly two opposing states: the heart and mind of Maggie herself. Both men deserve to be heard and she can ignore neither. She is cursed with the human inability to "unperplex joy from its neighbour pain" (Keats; "Lamia"), and she is all the more her own self because she is conscious of her dilemma: "the mingled thread in the web of their life was so curiously twisted together that there could be no joy without a sorrow coming close upon it."[30] After this long submission to "the bad habit of being unhappy"[31], we -- and Maggie -- have almost forgotten the old self who revelled in dreams of her own making.

When the dream world of which we once heard so much suddenly reappears in the form of Stephen Guest, it is not surprising that Maggie is slow to recognize it. She retreats from it as from disaster. Up to this point we have seen her nature fragmented; other characters -- her mother and father, Tom, Philip -- grasp what they see as the essential Maggie, while the whole person whom George Eliot has been nourishing remains to be formed. It is easy to dismiss Stephen Guest as totally inadequate as an object of love for Maggie, but does he suffer so badly in comparison with the other well-intentioned males in her life? All of them have been sure that they know exactly what Maggie should be; Tom especially never restrains himself in pointing out "terrible cutting truth": " 'You would be led away to do anything . . . you're always in extremes -- you have no judgment and self-command; and yet you think you know best, and will not submit to be guided.' "[32] This is the consummation of all his earlier condemnations and there are elements in it which Maggie cannot ignore.

After the "negative peace" and long submergence of her "highly strung, hungry nature"[33] it is to be expected that she would rejoice at the appearance of Stephen, an inhabitant of "a world of love and beauty and delight, made up of vague, mingled images from all the poetry and romance she had ever read, or had ever woven in her dreamy reveries."[34] Yet another strand of that first weaving has appeared; Maggie is unable to isolate any thread without suffering herself in some part of that "passionate sensibility which belonged to her whole nature."[35] She herself admits that she is unable to grasp at joy unalloyed with pain :" 'I begin to think there can never come much happiness to me from loving. I have always had so much pain mingled with it.' "[36]

Each facet of Maggie's life clings to her and she herself does not wish to lose any one of them -- " 'I desire no future that will break the ties of the past.' "[37] She is thus unable to disregard the voices of Philip and Tom telling her in different ways that her actions are folly, and Stephen's call to life can never be the complete answer. George Eliot herself has reached an impasse. Her painstaking presentation has given each part of Maggie's life a valid claim, but each part is so distressingly less than the whole, "all that her nature craved . . . the full existence she dreamed."[38]

The future now lies before Maggie like a long nightmare, filled with warring elements all of which are beloved to George Eliot. The dream has turned sour and frightening, and Maggie's old childhood cry rings true: "I must be patient . . . this life is not long." The sort of life which awaits her is very plain, for "We don't ask what a woman does -- we ask whom she belongs to," and Maggie belongs to none of those who have claimed her. Even to Stephen she declares that

"I have never consented to it with my whole mind." She is overwhelmingly George Eliot's, and the creator has left no part untouched by her love and care. It is probable then that Maggie, after living for a time with her decision of renunciation, would revert again to other parts of her earlier dream world. She will always long for one or other of the opiates which have appeared, and her life will never be "so various, so beautiful, so new" as we and George Eliot believe she deserves. For we too have become untangled -- our responses are Eliot's, and as such, contradictory. Death seems to be the only alternative to the deadly repetitious life facing Maggie, but we feel cheated at the swiftness of her destruction and the lack of any further choice.

This dissatisfaction is intensified through the shapelessness of her future woes; the movement of the book has been the enumeration of a series of misfortunes which do not seem to be tackled individually; in fact not encountered realistically at all. The remorseless cataloguing of disasters eventually makes "the lively little wench" unimaginable, and although we were warned, the initial resolution to let Eliot's dream world involve us as it will is unfortunately easy to forget. The tyranny of the ending is inescapable: Eliot has kept herself within the limits she first prescribed. She too has no choice but to doubt her own ability to provide answers. According to Walter Houghton, in The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870, the apparent optimism of the Victorians was not as deep rooted as is generally believed; convictions were often only tenuously held, and so many sides of the same question were considered that in Mill's words "they feel no assurance of the truth of anything." Nevertheless they were convinced that eventually truth will come; the transitional period of doubt must be endured. George Eliot "solves" the problem that she has

explored, and at this point, in Maggie's particular case, it is not valid to question her own commitment to this solution.

Footnotes - Chapter II

[1] George Eliot, The Mill on the Floss, Riverside Edition, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1961, pp. 7-9.

[2] Ibid., p. 12.

[3] Ibid., p. 16.

[4] Ibid., p. 18.

[5] Ibid., p. 22.

[6] Ibid., p. 27.

[7] Ibid., p. 35.

[8] Ibid., p. 48.

[9] Ibid., p. 35.

[10] Ibid., p. 33.

[11] Ibid., p. 38.

[12] Ibid., p. 44.

[13] Ibid., p. 59.

[14] Ibid., p. 67.

[15] Ibid., p. 108.

[16] Ibid., p. 100.

[17] Ibid., p. 130.

[18] Ibid., p. 69.

[19] Ibid., p. 148.

[20] Ibid., p. 207.

[21] Ibid., p. 207.

[22] Ibid., p. 208.

[23]Ibid., p. 251.

[24]Ibid., p. 252.

[25]Ibid., p. 264.

[26]Ibid., p. 268.

[27]Ibid., p. 267.

[28]Ibid., p. 295.

[29]Ibid., p. 304.

[30]Ibid., p. 313.

[31]Ibid., p. 325.

[32]Ibid., p. 342.

[33]Ibid., p. 335.

[34]Ibid., p. 336.

[35]Ibid., p.350.

[36]Ibid., p. 361.

[37]Ibid., p. 389.

[38]Ibid., p. 402.

CHAPTER III

At first it seems that our introduction to Dorothea will be similarly guided by George Eliot's solicitous hand: we can hardly ignore the significant and lengthy reference to Saint Theresa. We immediately create a connection between the saint and the as yet unknown heroine. The mention of "certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the mean-ness of opportunity" and of the heroine who "fed from within, soared after some illimitable satisfaction"[1] immediately conjures up remembrances of Maggie's strivings, but we are conscious from the first of a difference in tone. George Eliot here is no dreamer ready to plunge into other worlds and seas; she is immediately prepared to outline problems, and there is a still more telling change. A curious irony, which was absent from The Mill on the Floss, has already crept in. The voice which speaks of "the inconvenient indefiniteness with which the Supreme Power has fashioned the natures of woman"[2] is obviously more detached from its creation than was the dreamer by the bridge. Still the limits of this irony are hardly clear: "heart beats and sobs"[3] contrast strangely with the "blundering lives", although these opposing impressions are intermingled so that there is no single indication of Dorothea's position in relation to the saintly ideal of the Prelude.

From the beginning Dorothea is presented, unlike Maggie, within a definite social context. She is a young woman of means ("a Christian young lady of fortune")[4] with the obvious step of marriage waiting to be taken, for after all "what could she do, what ought she to do?"[5] In The Mill on the Floss the presence of the insidious social web is only gradually felt, since Maggie is, irretrievably, an outsider, incomprehensible even to her parents and Tom. The situation in

Middlemarch is hardly comparable, as Dorothea is loved and accepted by those who surround her and thus does not suffer Maggie's constant, jarring sense of isolation. Dorothea's longings are described in terms similar to Maggie's -- ("into this soul-hunger as yet all her youthful passion was poured"[6]); yet they are treated with occasional playfulness so that there is a double reaction: admiration for Dorothea's struggle against the "labyrinth of petty courses",[7] tempered by concern for the naivete which could lead her to consider a marriage to Casaubon as a giant step along the "grandest path". This ambivalence is very different from the sometimes irritating idealization of Maggie, which caused us to see her consistently as far superior to all those who propose to guide her. We are governed by no such presumptions about Dorothea; delightful as Miss Brooke may be, even more delightful is the whimsicality of her presentation compared to the almost cloying devotion which accompanies Maggie's.

In Dorothea's case, of course, we do not witness childhood's extremities of joy or pain, but rather meet her with the problems of a near-adult. Her social sense is far more evident than that of Maggie, whose initial frustrations are caused by very private griefs. Dorothea wants to escape from the "trivia" and "indefiniteness"[8] of her present life to a "grand" future one in the company of an as yet unknown master -- "a wise man who could help me to see which opinion had the best foundation, and would help me to live according to them." The contradictions in her situation are immediately evident. She is individualistic and idealistic, yet she wants and needs a guide; and the very guide she chooses and delights in is a "mummy", as the chagrined Sir James describes him, in inadvertant allusions to death, which are echoed later. Casaubon himself informs

the newly-won Dorothea that "the great charm of your sex is its capability of an ardent self-sacrificing affection" and other voices are as willing to define this "grand" path to Dorothea as she abandons single blessedness. The pontificating Miss Cadwallader insists that "when a woman is not contradicted she has no motive for obstinacy in her absurdities." "It is a narrow mind which cannot look at a subject from various points of view" is Mr. Brooke's eminently safe reaction to his niece's decision to marry Casaubon, and George Eliot herself subjects us to every possible shade of uneasiness in presenting us with various dubious pictures of Dorothea's future state. As the "preliminaries of marriage rolled smoothly along", and Dorothea contemplates the font of wisdom which her marriage will make available, some barely defined dissatisfaction is already present: "She wishes, poor child, to be wise herself. Miss Brooke was certainly very naive with all her alleged cleverness".[9]

Even as we are assembling an idea of Dorothea as Mrs. Casaubon, Ladislaw, another arbitrator of her life, is introduced. Again we are conscious of no lasting judgment on him. While we perhaps disdain his "pouting air of discontent"[10], his spontaneity and sense of the ludicrous are very obviously presented for our sympathy: "it was the pure enjoyment of comicality and had no mixture of sneering and self-exultation".[11] Yet Ladislaw's most characteristic qualities are those which suffer in comparison with Dorothea's, particularly since the youth of the two and their mutual dependence on Casaubon make contrasting inevitable. The most striking difference between them lies in their respective self-appraisals; at this point Ladislaw suffers few qualms of self-doubt. "Genius, he held, is necessarily intolerant of fetters",[12] and he proposes to conquer the

entire world alone. Dorothea wishes only for a "grand" life, "here in England", and she assumes that she is incapable of finding this herself. She is swept along, through her "full current of sympathetic motive", and "veneration" for Casaubon's learning, in quest of a "higher initiation in ideas".[13]

Our introduction to the substance of Middlemarch life, among which Dorothea's and other quests will be carried out, is the dinner party hosted by Mr. Brooke just before the Casaubons' honeymoon journey. The previous picture of Dorothea as a woman unlike the others is undisturbed by Lydgate's suspicion that "she did not look at things from the proper feminine angle"[14]. To him her evident seriousness of purpose would not be "relaxing". Such specific statements about Dorothea's "failings", which already hint at Lydgate's own requirements in a wife, make us immediately conscious of opposing attitudes among those whose lots are converging. This demands efforts of judgment on our part; in The Mill on the Floss, however, Eliot's obvious delight in Maggie removes any judgment which we might intend to offer to a subsidiary level.

Rosamond Vincy, the darling of these worthy gentlemen who have caught a last glimpse of Dorothea as Miss Brooke, provides an obvious antithesis to the bridal figure. Rosamond too is drawn within a definite social context, but she is content with her place in it, and has "woven a little future" which includes the unwitting Lydgate. The men, on the other hand, while partaking of a desire for spectacular achievement, are prey to none of the doubts which plague Dorothea, although her tremulous wish to make a difference is similar to Lydgate's "generous wish that his action should be beneficent". The man, with definite ideas of their own capabilities, are naturally very clear as to what they expect of the women

who are to adorn their lives. Lydgate articulates the requirements as he contemplates Rosamond's advantages: "polished, refined, docile . . . moulded only for pure and delicate joys."[15]

The women's demands of men are predictably governed by the ideal of man as guide and leader. Dorothea longs for wisdom in her beloved; for Rosamond on the other hand, "it was not necessary to imagine much about the inward life of the hero . . . but the piquant fact about Lydgate was his good birth." Through Rosamond, the pride of Middlemarch, we are given a fairly accurate idea of the life of an eligible young lady. Depending on the presence or absence of the inevitable male, she lives internally, in dreams of questionable worth, "that inward repetition of looks, words, and phrases, which makes a large part in the lives of most girls".[16] The outcome of such an existence is not difficult to imagine; there are no possible choices under "the hampering pressure of small social conditions", which at this point seems to engulf Rosamond and Lydgate to a greater extent than Dorothea.

Dorothea on her marriage finds herself in a rarefied atmosphere, but alas, one which is not quite of the quality of her dreams. Yet the description of the illusion's crumbling is not as wholeheartedly sympathetic to Dorothea as we might expect. It is quite clear that her own naivete has been partially responsible, "her own life a masque with enigmatical costumes"[17], which she has been only too eager to don. Discovery for Dorothea is a swirling realization of emotional and intellectual disappointment, "like melting ice floating and lost in the warm flood"[18]. Her mind, like Maggie's ("a current into which all thought and feeling were apt sooner or later to flow") is unable at this point to distinguish or define

her own part in this stream of error. We are aware of other currents, principally that of Casaubon himself, who is not free from the tyranny of his own dream world and the place a wife must take in it. His desire for the "uncritical awe of a canary bird", which Dorothea unfortunately lacks, indicates that preconceptions are in fateful collision.

Unlike Maggie, whose perceptions are defiantly unchanged, Dorothea is capable of re-adjusting her expectations despite the accompanying pain. The ecstatic belief that all happiness will be heaped upon her through Casaubon's guidance soon dissolves into acceptance of disillusionment, and this requires a conscious effort. Her sense of action is not dissipated, as Maggie's would have been, but rather reasserts itself in "the reaching forward of the whole consciousness towards the fullest truth, the least partial good. There was clearly something better than anger and despondency."[19] This is a grim falling away from her initially indestructible confidence; the very indefiniteness of her new aims indicates that naivete, too, can partake of compromise, and can also engender action, as she wishes to "emerge from that stupidity".

The Casaubons are not the only pair who form mutual judgments from unthinking, ill-chosen expectations. Dorothea and Ladislaw at first project each other ideal qualities which are equally unfounded. Ladislaw's cultivated Byronic aspects predictably hold no charms for the earnest Dorothea; she is "shocked at this mode of taking all life as a holiday".[20] Will, for his part, does not hesitate to exchange his first judgment of Dorothea, as a pitiably incomprehensible young thing, for another equally hasty and limiting one: she is now "an angel beguiled"[21], and must be viewed as such, inviolate, by the crass world: "She was not a woman

to be spoken of as other women were."[22] Dorothea's glorification is thus inseparable from her position as an ill-treated female, and Will's outraged speeches about her "martyrdom . . . her fanaticism of sympathy"[23] are clearly governed by his ideas of what an angel should be doing.

Footnotes - Chapter III

[1] *Middlemarch*, p. 3.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 58.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 59.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 70.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 121.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 128.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 143.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 147.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 151.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 153.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 155.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 161.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 163.

CHAPTER IV

The first two books of Middlemarch work towards establishing the nature of the illusions and dreams to which the various characters are subject. The implications for the future of these intermingling images are ominous. Once the different "marriage-groups" have been set up, Eliot begins to point out the limitations of their respective expectations. This is necessarily a lengthy process, precisely because of the number of characters involved, and the cumbersome nature of the background against which they exist. The irony which was muted at first is now quite explicit in showing the effects of self-delusion.

The ideal courtship and marriage of Rosamond and Lydgate is Eliot's first prey. Rosamond, sitting back receiving Lydgate's attentions, "had never enjoyed the days so much in her life before"[1] and Lydgate, while arrogantly unaware of the extent of her hopes, is convinced of his own ability to delight this "half-opened blush-rose", for "he held it one of the prettiest attitudes of the feminine mind to adore a man's pre-eminence without too precise a knowledge of what it consisted in". He is of course quite pleased to accept Rosamond's conscious homage, adorned as she is with "accomplishments for the refined amusement of man". It is difficult to believe that this irony is directed only at the lovers; the ludicrous conditions which force encounters and interplays of this sort are obviously being underlined as firmly as the more ridiculous aspects of Rosamond and Lydgate.

Dorothea is a victim of a different sort from the fair Rosamond. Eliot, in describing the process of disillusion with Dorothea's daily life in the company of the admired "Locke", does not conceal problems which Dorothea would have encountered in a union with any other eminent Victorian gentleman. We are

left in no doubt as to the true extent of Dorothea's troubles, and of Eliot's opinion of their source:

> the stifling oppression of that gentlewoman's world, where everything was done for her and none asked for her aid, where the sense of connection with a manifold pregnant existence had to be kept up painfully as an inward vision, instead of coming from without in claims that would have shaped her energies.[2]

Again, the existence of this pervasive and compelling external force gives a social context to Dorothea's struggles which is lacking in Maggie's similar desire for a sense of "connection". It seems that any solution for Dorothea will have to be rooted in that background which now holds her in "moral imprisonment", whereas there are simply no imaginable social circumstances to which Maggie might adjust. Dorothea's differences from the women surrounding her have been constantly emphasized, but nonetheless when Dorothea looks for aid "without" it is to their world. And despite her painful sense of isolation, the hapless Casaubon's problems are very pointedly introduced: "but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage?"[3] No such determined intrusions are present in Maggie's case; we have seen how resolutely we were swept along by the current of her feelings alone. Casaubon's confusion because of his bride's evident disappointment is not only acknowledged but explained: "Society never made the preposterous demand that a man should think as much about his own qualifications for making a charming girl happy as he thinks of hers for making himself happy."[4] Casaubon, pursuing his Key devotedly, would have had contact with women only in the most predictable of social circumstances, in which the acknowledge aim of all young ladies was to acquire a suitable husband. Since

he has inadvertently chosen a woman as far removed from this implicit ideal as possible, his dismay is understandable, and we are permitted to understand it, just as we are permitted to understand Dorothea's chagrin at her everyday hell. We are caught here: "when two characters are presented to you as solid people and you, the reader in the middle, can see them misunderstanding."[5]

We see that all of them are victims in turn, in very specific senses. Lydgate, for example, is judged and doomed for the serious strategic error of "interfering with the prospects of any girl."[6] Each reaction becomes a matter of respect for one's bargaining partner, and each person's private adjustment depends on how soon and to what extent he realized that he is trapped by the demands of his particular stereotyped situation (of wife, husband, suitor). Dorothea's and Lydgate's respective difficulties are undoubtedly paralleled, but the urgency in each case has a different source. Lydgate's predicament is usually described in reasonably matter-of-fact and specific terms; because Dorothea is a woman, and thus not expected to strive for anything lofty, her dilemma of discontent is characteristically described as "a dream-like association of something alien and ill-understood with the deepest secrets of her experience seemed to mirror that sense of loneliness which was due to the very ardour of Dorothea's nature."[7] Lydgate is never prey to internal troubles of this kind, and possibly no man of his time and position could be. The "rarefied social all" granted room for action to the men, whereas the women could only resort to charitable works of the most respectably innocuous sort. It is hardly surprising that self-doubt, or undefined "lack of ease", in a thinking woman could so easily breed self-disgust out of the dead land of loneliness and discontent. The eventual "capitulation" of Dorothea

is not as precise an issue as it seemed previously, and to me the sources of the ambiguity of her position are the gradually encroaching social demands of which she is aware. That same force is the key to the difference in the self-awareness of Maggie and Dorothea. Both women correctly perceive themselves as extraordinary, but Eliot consciously creates very different solutions for them, raising this central question of compromise.

Maggie is deliberately isolated from her surroundings, and we are led to understand that in no circumstances could she be assimilated. Dorothea accepts her world as the only one to be endured, and this, strangely, makes her position all the more painful. To me Maggie's apparent tragedy fades in comparison with Dorothea's heroic compromise. The social network enveloping Dorothea is intricately outlined; yet unlike Maggie she does not insist on standing perpetually alone in the midst of all conceivable fire and brimstone. Ladislaw of course is quite a pleasant intermediary between Dorothea and the world she will not forsake, so that heroics are certainly not without their compensations, and domestic tragedy can, oddly enough, be laughed at. The occasionally barbed remarks about marriage and the subordination of women might jar us, for "self-mockery, particularly sexual self-mockery, is not expected in a woman, and it is irrestible in the criticism of women to describe what was expected."[8] Eliot consistently juggles with our expectations in describing, with varying emphases, the existing situation and its inherent prejudices. Without partaking of these prejudices, she laboriously seeks out and described their source. The respective situations of Dorothea and Lydgate, constantly juxtaposed and indirectly compared, form the core of her considerations. On the one hand, Dorothea, as a woman whose own self is by

definition deficient, is forced to look outward at her life and discover great gaps and contradictions. On the other hand, Lydgate is presumed, both by the world and himself, to be s self-sufficient entity. (Ironically, Rosamond alone was able to shatter, however briefly, that cold image.) Possessed of both "egoism and naivete"[9], he proceeds to spin the web of completeness "from his inward self" rather from the external and limited sources from which Dorothea thinks she must choose. Naturally Lydgate regards the woman whom he decides to take as a wife as an extension of his own unquestionably integrated whole. Despite the despair to which Rosamond later drives him, it is hard to consider him entirely undeserving after such pronouncements as "this constancy of purpose in the right place was adorable" . . . "perfect womanhood would venerate and never interfere, would create order in the home and accounts with still magic . . . (would be) instructed to the true womanly limit", and more tellingly, "marriage would not be an obstruction but a furtherance."[10] This purposeful utterance of the traditional (male) expectations of marriage, completely oblivious of any view Rosamond might hold of the matter, eventually becomes a source of bitter mockery to the presumptuous bridegroom who unthinkingly demanded "the innate submissiveness of the goose as beautifully corresponding to the strength of the gander". Expectations of both goose and gander crumble when put to the inevitable tests, and Eliot does not steer our sympathies completely towards Lydgate. Nevertheless the element of moral judgments seems more explicit in this case than anywhere else, and Rosamond is very obviously to be blamed for her smallness of spirit in thwarting the greater aims of her husband. Her adherence to specifically "wifely" concerns serves with disconcerting thoroughness to tear apart the far grander substance of Lydgate's aspirations.

Dorothea and Ladislaw walk in an atmosphere of extremes which is far removed from the enforcedly trivial concerns which plague the Lydgates. From the beginning Will's appearance, as a "kind of Shelley" -- no dour Milton with determined views on (his) woman's place -- provides tangible hope for Dorothea's eventual rescue. He is predictably loud in protest against Casaubon's use of his bride -- "the most horrible of virgin sacrifices"[11] -- but his own doubtful remedy is to "watch over her"[12]. Dorothea, although unaware of this resolution, responds indirectly to it in her possession of "the ardent woman's need to rule beneficently by making the joy of another soul".[13] Their early encounters are bathed in innocent delight and deliberately emphasized "naturalness", just as the Dorothea - Casaubon interchanges are accompanied by oppressive images of darkness, and any hint of sexuality is hastily glossed over after its inevitable appearance -- "he started up as from an electric shock, and felt a tingling at his finger-ends."[14] There are many references to flowers and (bodiless) sunshine, culminating perhaps in the solemn pronouncement that "we mortals have our divine moments when love is satisfied in the completeness of the divine object."[15]

The pattern of Dorothea's personal encounters is not drawn solely from this lofty precedent. The apparently indestructible conception of her marriage as fulfillment of her hopes to "help someone who did great works" has crumbled in the face of the unimaginable reality of Casaubon, so that she is "no longer struggling against the perception of facts, but adjusting herself to their clearest perception." If her once invincible dreams of her husband can become "the remoteness of pure pity and loyalty"[16], cannot other dreams be similarly dissolved? Will the whole process of Dorothea's life be one of "adjustment" which will subsume all questions of love, personal happiness, and the other untouchables?

In this light the sentimentality, or worse, evasion, of which we might previously have accused Eliot disappears: absolute compromise is as painful to endure and to watch as most absolutes. The extent to which we partake of this knowledge with Dorothea is a measure of how the process of Middlemarch serves as a gradual realization for us as well. The inherent difficulties are partially those posed by Dorothea herself: "All the energy of Dorothea's nature went on the side of responsibility -- the fulfillment of claims founded on our own deeds, such as marriage and parentage." This "energy" is a force which her well-meaning friends had not reckoned on, and its eventual fate is the most complicated question which we are forced to consider.

The death of Casaubon and Dorothea's reaction to it is the initial step in the process of realization. Dorothea, on the discovery of the depths of Casaubon's incomprehension, does not permit herself to be satisfied with mere inactive disillusionment. The men who surround her offering guidance are perplexed by this attitude; despite their appreciation of her obvious merits, they persist in considering her in traditional terms: "We must not have you getting too learned for a woman, you know."[17] Eliot treats Mr. Brooke's inanities with obvious lightheartedness, but she takes greater pains to describe with precision Ladislaw's attitude towards the woman whom he sees as "having taken a vow to be unlike all others." The inconsistencies in his behaviour are to be taken more seriously,for Will, unlike Stephen, is not presented only as the idealized ardent lover whose one idea in life is to get his woman.

Ladislaw is potentially aware of Dorothea's capabilities, but, deprived of any precedent, is baffled as to how to react to them personally. Naturally all

his responses to Dorothea's problems are governed by his interest in her future as it is linked to his. He is understandably bewildered by the "chilling sense of remoteness", for "a man is seldom ashamed of feeling that he cannot love a woman so well when he sees a certain greatness in her, nature having intended greatness for men."[18] This careful articulation of possibilities in attitude and action is utterly absent from The Mill on the Floss: in Middlemarch we are faced with conflicting issues, rather than the sympathy which seems to be directed at Maggie alone. Dorothea is aware of the outlines of her life, and can place her desires within a context which recognizes the limits of her situation: "that by desiring what is perfectly good, even though we don't know quite what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil -- widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower."[19] Maggie's penchant for extremes would prevent any similar acknowledgement of uncertainty; it becomes evident that Dorothea's idealistic longings do not whisk her off to the unknown and ultimately bewildering regions of Maggie's self-imposed isolation. Dorothea is too aware of the different levels of struggle to wish to ignore her apparent adversaries, and their needs. The luckless Casaubon is never allowed to become merely a source of amusement or derision, although his reservations about Dorothea's "affectionate ardour or Quixotic enthusiasm" are reminiscent of Tom's patronizing assumptions about his sister's susceptibility. There is no doubt that Casaubon, at the same time as Dorothea discovers the true substance of their life together, experiences his own dismay at "the certainty that she judged him"[20], and we are obviously meant to consider him a victim in his turn: "Are there many situations more sublimely tragic than the struggle of the soul with the demand to renounce a work which has

been all the sign of its life?" Whereas in The Mill on the Floss the characters seem to move singly, usually in hopeless opposition, in Middlemarch the depths of personal disasters are not self-contained; this question concerning Casaubon could apply equally well to Lydgate or to Dorothea herself.

Dorothea's disillusionment is not simply a case of an anguished series of questions followed by the "resolved submission" to an overlord. "The struggle changed continually", as the process of her life is to vary, and the "thankfulness" she feels at not hurting a "lamed creature" gives us yet another image of her husband. The essential design of Middlemarch refrains from clinging to single impressions. Dorothea, when she finds Ladislaw and Rosamond together, feels "confusedly unhappy"; "the image of Will which had been so clear to her before was mysteriously spoiled."[21] Adjustment to facts is momentarily and predictably beyond her control. It is interesting that at this point of Dorothea's bewilderment about her feelings for Will, Lydgate sees him as "rather miscellaneous and bric-a-brac", and Eliot deliberately echoes this view in the description of him as a "sort of gypsy."[32] By attempting to form a picture from this array of judgments we are forced to see Ladislaw in more particularized terms than is possible with Stephen Guest, who, being "dream-like" is insubstantial and annoying. Great care is taken, too, to outline the complexities and progressions of Ladislaw's feelings for Dorothea. In the Maggie-Stephen affair, physical impressions seem to form the only basis of Stephen's attraction.

The point I am emphasizing is that Middlemarch, with admirable clearsightedness, makes us fully conscious of the problems which are only implied in The Mill on the Floss. Dorothea, when faced with her first crucial decision

after her induction as Mrs. Casaubon -- whether to promise to carry on her husband's futile work after his death -- is as tormented as Maggie in her moment of crisis with Stephen. In both cases, long-cherished theories and attitudes to life find their trial in the common round. The doom to which Maggie resigns herself is never made explicit, but we are left in no doubt as to the implications of Dorothea's present struggle and its distasteful end: "even the sustaining thoughts which had become habits seemed to have in them the weariness of long future days in which she would still live with them for her only companions."[23] This is exactly the sort of emptiness and "living in a tomb" to which Maggie wilfully condemns herself, but we are left to imagine the extent of this dreariness ourselves, and there is little hint of any other possibility. In Middlemarch Eliot wishes us to know that she is aware of the wider choices that Dorothea must consider; they are made more tangible through the emergence of a definite marriage relationship. Casaubon, too, has submitted to a few adjustments: "her husband, with all his jealousy and submission, had gathered implicit trust in the integrity of her promises."[24] At this point the tone of The Mill on the Floss (the creator reaching out to a creation) is echoed as Dorothea becomes a "poor child . . . helpless as a child . . . beautiful, gentle creature"[25], and, inevitably, in the eyes of her benefactors, "sacrificed once."[26]

Dorothea, however, does not readily embrace this image of her martyred self: "neither law nor the world's opinion" acts as a force in the formation of her attitudes, but rather her own conception of "the ideal and not the real yoke of marriage". We are distinctly told that Dorothea "saw clearly enough the whole situation", whereas in Maggie's case we are in doubt that she grasps all the implications of her choice, precisely because Eliot does not choose to dwell on them. In Middlemarch we are not spared.

Footnotes - Chapter IV

[1] Middlemarch, p. 197.

[2] Ibid., p. 202.

[3] Ibid., p. 205.

[4] Ibid., p. 206.

[5] Margaret Drabble, quoted in "The London Times", 27/3/72.

[6] Middlemarch, p. 220.

[7] Ibid., p. 238.

[8] Mary Ellman, Thinking About Women, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1968, p. 38.

[9] Middlemarch, p. 255.

[10] Ibid., p. 257.

[11] Ibid., p. 264.

[12] Ibid., p. 264.

[13] Ibid., p. 265.

[14] Ibid., p. 284.

[15] Ibid., p. 266.

[16] Ibid., p. 269.

[17] Ibid., p. 284.

[18] Ibid., p. 285.

[19] Ibid., p. 287.

[20] Ibid., p. 306.

[21] Ibid., p. 367.

[22] Ibid., p. 338.

[23] Ibid., p. 348.

[24]Ibid., p. 349.

[25]Ibid., p. 352.

[26]Ibid., p. 356.

CHAPTER V

In the revelation of Casaubon's petty-mindedness regarding a future alliance between Dorothea and Ladislaw, the ideal yoke of widowhood abruptly gives place to the real. Dorothea experiences a "metamorphosis . . . a state of convulsive change . . . a violent repulsion from her departed husband".[1] And with one capacity to change comes another; Ladislaw's sunny attractions become more specified in Dorothea's mind. She understands him as "a creature who entered into everyone's feelings" and since her husband and family have notoriously neglected to understand her own feelings, her susceptibility is inevitable, and the previously acceptable distance between them now seems "an impassable gulf".[2] In their situation and in Lydgate's, what Mary Ellman terms "varieties of hetero-sexual compromise" are now recognized and commented on by each member (victim) of the network. Farebrother ironically refers to the "stress of action"[3] to which men and not "young ladies" are subject, and around which in varying degrees, all the men (and the exceptions who are women) must construct their lives. "But even while we are talking and meditating about the earth's orbit and the solar system, what we feel and adjust our movements to is the stable earth and the changing day."[4] The unexceptional women of course find the day's changes predictable. To Celia "quite the best part of the day"[5] is her baby's bathing, and Mrs. Cadwallader gives her impression of woman characteristically and accurately: "We have all got to exert ourselves a little to keep sane, and call things by the same names as other people call them by . . . a woman's choice usually means taking the only man she can get."[6] Dorothea is aware that she is somewhat removed from these lines of thought; nevertheless she must continue in these surroundings.

The evolution of the Ladislaw-Dorothea relationship involves a transition from the initially "natural", innocent, dream-like atmosphere which was also characteristic of the descriptions of Maggie's and Stephen's encounters. Here we are not asked to participate in this dream wholeheartedly. "How could it be otherwise?"[7] is a question which is never posed in The Mill on the Floss . because Maggie's and Stephen's mutual feeling merely existed. In Middlemarch we are forced to examine the elements of Dorothea's passion, although the analogy justifying Will's attraction may be a little laborious (even reminiscent of the "Italian with white mice"). "If a princess in the days of enchantment had seen a four-footed creature from among those which live in herds come to her once and again with a human gaze which rested upon her with choice and beseeching . . . what would she look for when the herds passed her? Surely for the gaze which had found her, and which she would know again. Life would be no better than candlelight tinsel and daylight rubbish if our spirits were not touched by what has been, to issues of longing and constancy."[8] Ideas which were previously hinted at are stated here; the past and its claims are not to be ignored; dead hands join with those of the living, old strivings retain their urgency, and resolutions never carry finality in their core, because they cannot smother what has gone before. Adjustment to the present, then usually means suppression. Necessity will teach us the "correct" view: that what we have relinquished was immature, or impractical, or harmful. Unfortunately this "superior" knowledge does not negate the pain of abandonment, does not make the process any less wrenching. Dorothea experiences this in a temporary sense in the "sad necessity"[9] of her separation from Will, made harsher because their mutual "electric" effect on each other is becoming more

obvious. Yet the problem of Will (so happily resolved) is only one manifestation of Dorothea's powerlessness in the face of the world's demands, and she is able to define her own difficulties: "I used to despise women a little for not shaping their lives more, and doing better things. I was very fond of doing as I liked, but I have almost given it up."[10] This "playful" explanation to Will is further evidence of Eliot's ability to treat lightly and ironically subjects to which she will give graver consideration at other times. Dogmatic pronouncements are thus impossible to grasp; previous certainties are constantly being transformed.

Unfortunately the expectations which form the basis of the characters' mutual judgments are all too static. Having become a widow, Dorothea now is subjected to "certain oblique references to excellent matches"[11] by her well-meaning femal acquaintances and to the determination of her self-appointed protector, Sir James, that "there was something repulsive in a woman's second marriage".[12] In the period immediately following Casaubon's death, attention shifts from Dorothea to the other married pairs who are encountering various difficulties. The Garths in their solid and contented married bliss, pass amiable judgment on those not quite so established. Dorothea is respected as having "a head for business most uncommon in a woman"[13], while Mrs. Garth immediately seeks to ensure that she is "womanly, I hope" and hopes that Dorothea holds "the true principle of subordination". Again, the ironic touch is instantly tempered by Caleb's grave pronouncement that "A true love for a good woman is a great thing, Susan. It shapes many a rough fellow."[14] Fred, who is to be thus "shaped", is identified with the "majority of young gentlemen" and Mrs. Garth is quick to wish for a better prospect for Mary -- "she might have had a man who is worth 20 Fred Vincys."[15] It is inevitable that we match all these

miniature situations with Dorothea's major one, but by far the greatest depth of observation is given to the troubles of Rosamond and Lydgate. They, far more than anyone else, serve to point out the deceptions inherent in thoughtlessly embarking on marriage. Initial obliviousness and slavery to images of self-delight lead only to disaster. The "resignation" mentioned previously is now tinged with bitterness on Lydgate's part, and it is abundantly clear how they are disappointing each other: "marking how far he had travelled from his own dreamland, in which Rosamond Vincy appeared to be that perfect piece of womanhood who would reverence her husband's mind after the fashion of an accomplished mermaid." Lydgate had begun to distinguish between that imagined adoration and the attraction towards a man's talent because it gives him prestige."[16] Eliot's implicit disdain for Rosamond's petty concerns indirectly glances at Dorothea's obviously superior outlook. "The terrible tenacity of this mile creature"[17] is quite remote from Dorothea's willingness to submerge herself and her preferences where her help is needed. Lydgate is thus forced to reconsider. "He had regarded Rosamond's cleverness as precisely of the receptive kind which became a woman"[18]; now he experiences "an amazed sense of powerlessness", and is "astounded". Together, though less consciously in Rosamond's case, they discover "the total missing of each other's mental track".[19] Lydgate's dismay is presented most thoroughly as he becomes aware of "less and less interfering illusion at the blank unreflecting surface her mind presented to his ardout"[20], but his egotistical conceptions of the "ideal wife" are unmistakably partial causes for his sinking to the level of "petty degrading care". The "swamp", we must not forget, is partly of his own making; Rosamond is equally culpable in her implacable refusal to deal with unpleasant daily events in their "swamp".

Adjustment for these two is dependent on internal circumstances; the discarding of individual ill-founded hopes. The apparent triviality of Rosamond's aims is no more blameworthy than Lydgate's narrow expectations of her. Although Lydgate is undoubtedly the chief victim of the "mistake at work in him like a recognized chronic disease"[21], it is interesting to examine precisely what elements thwart him. The greater his attempts to assign Rosamond her supposed wifely "place", the more she ignores his presumptions. The outright comparison of Rosamond and Dorothea in Lydgate's mind of course redefines Rosamond as a destructive element in the evil which encompasses them, since she is incapable of looking beyond the hollow of her mind. Dorothea is regarded by Lydgate's temporarily jaundiced eye as "deep-souled womankind . . . her tones were a music from which he was falling away."[22] When Lydgate is faced with his wife's "neutrality" regarding his own important and active concerns, Dorothea's solicitude for the failing Casaubon's comfort and futile desires understandably appears to be the characteristic of an ideal wife. Thus it is consistently impossible for him to face the real woman he has chosen; he persists in attempting to point out the "right" way to her: "You must learn to take my judgments on questions you don't understand."[23] Rosamond for her part, aware of the deterioration of her hero and the unpleasant pressure of their mutual "yoke", asserts simply that"if she had known how Lydgate would behave she would never have married him."[24]

Pains are taken to outline the slow decay of the trivial live Rosamond had wanted so badly. She is prey to "that dissatisfaction which in women's mind is continually turning into a trivial jealousy." She has been brought up to expect and thrive on a small limited network of objects and desires, and when these are

disregarded for no readily comprehensible reason, she resorts to the only available defences: flirtation with Ladislaw and wilful disregarding of Lydgate's requests for economy. Lydgate similarly resorts to his own particular devices, so that their failures and those of everyone except Dorothea are essentially private ones.

They are all absorbed in their particular vision and pointedly lack "the deep-seated habit of direct fellow feeling with individual fellow-men".[25] Ladislaw and Lydgate, for example, exhibit similar reactions to Bulstode's "low" behavior; they are alike in their pride, both refusing to be beholden to other people and both disregarding Bulstrode's need to ask mercy from them. Thus the just men retreat even further from this "fellow-feeling". Dorothea however thrives on and is consistently associated with her own "feelings" and her (occasionally) naive regard for those of her fellow-men, and through acting on these instincts she is marked out from both men and women. Although she has her own conception of the world she never allows previous theories and abstractions to govern her judgments: "when thoroughly moved she cared little of what anyone thought of her feelings."[26] With each new crisis she is forced and does manage to change cherished and sustaining ideas: "the world was turning ugly and hateful, and there was no place for her truthfulness."[27] The implication is that a place will be found; just as Dorothea's past "comes back to her with larger interpretation", so will the future widen, perhaps in unimaginable ways.

For Rosamond and Lydgate, the ignorant and undesired present only tightens its grasp while their friends and neighbours continue to judge them by past impressions. Farebrother for example "believed, as the rest did, that Rosamond was an amiable creature, though he had always thought her rather uninteresting -- a little too much the pattern-card of the finishing-school."[28] Her mother insists,

too, that she was "never the girl to show temper". For Lydgate, forced to deal with this girl with "the angel of a temper", and knowing the extent of his own deception by these images, "suicide seemed easier" than to ask even the amiable Farebrother for help. Any compromise to Lydgate, at this point, has the appearance of disaster; like Dorothea he is discovering that the great world which seems available for the taking, can disappear abruptly in the face of pettiness. He is appalled and rendered powerless by "the sense that there was a grand existence in thought and effective action lying around him while his self was being narrowed into the miserable isolation of egotistical fears."[29]

It is clear that the "ideal yoke" of marriage for both members of the unhappy pair has transformed itself all too painfully into the real one, and neither of them is prepared to act in re-arranging this wearisome manner of living. They move more irrevocably apart as their original ideas steadfastly refuse to change: "the poor thing saw only that the world was not ordered to her liking. In her secret soul she was utterly aloof from him."[30] Lydgate forges ahead, unable as before to regard his wife in any but the terms he reserves for all women. He believes in and makes allowances for "the delicate poise of woman's health both in body and mind", but patronizing concern has its limits; he is "prepared to be indulgent towards feminine weakness but not feminine dictation."[31] Although Lydgate is forced to realize that "life must be taken up on a lower stage of expectation", he is unable to recognize any possible culpability on his part: "what can a woman care about so much as a house and furniture? A husband without them is an absurdity."[32] It is certainly galling for him to be a victim of Rosamond's limited designs, but we are reminded that the "poor thing" had been led to expect nothing

else from the "delightful dreams" of marriage. Its "inflexible relation's" less attractive aspects had easily glossed over in training for marriage as the only (delightful) path open to a young lady. For Rosamond too a great gulf opens between *anticipation* and *actuality*: "It is a terrible moment in young lives when the closeness of love's bond has turned to this power of galling."[33] The collapse of their admittedly fragile union is due as much to the careful formation of Rosamond's young ladylike demands as to Lydgate's manly expectations. The only hint that Lydgate is vaguely conscious of Rosamond's own difficulties is again coloured by his incurably patronizing attitude towards her, and does not in any case bear much conviction: "He told himself that it was ten times harder for her than for him: he had a life away from home . . . it was inevitable that he should think of her as if she were an animal of another and feebler species. Nevertheless she had mastered him."[34] Lydgate, of course, is oblivious to the fact that his own misunderstanding of the nature of this "weakness" has led to her "victory". Limited people grasp at the only means available; not for them the subtlety of approach on which a man of Lydgate's aspirations might pride himself. Precisely because Rosamond has been restricted to a life in the home, deprived of the "stress of action", she fights back with the weapons born of the trivia which has always been assigned to her. The luxury of love in Lydgate's terms is unknown to her, "yoked loneliness" incomprehensible, because she is essentially an utterly self-sufficient person. Their marriage is a study in irremedial blindness and incapacity for growth. Compromise implies recognition of the issues at stake: for both of them this is impossible. The only realizations of which either of them is capable concern their individual external circumstances; but acknowledgement of this limitation is clearly impossible

as they seek to avoid recognition of "how little a comfort they could be to each other".[35] They can offer each other no solace because the marriage yoke was received by both of them for the "right" conventional reasons, beneath which they are never able to probe.

Comfort must of necessity come from another way of thinking entirely; Dorothea provides that "current of feeling" which is conspicuously absent from the Lydgates' situation. When she attempts to vindicate Lydgate, she actively embraces "an ardent faith in efforts of justice and mercy which would conquer by their emotional force."[36] Her friends naturally put their own construction on her attitudes; in Farebrother's ever comfortable words: "A woman may venture on some efforts of sympathy which would hardly succeed if we men undertook them."[37] Her other well-meaning advisors join the chorus, Sir James earnestly insisting that "a woman is bound to be cautious and listen to those who know the world better than she does." Celia dutifully echoes, "You always will (get into a scrape) when you set about doing as you please . . . A husband would not let you have your plans . . . and of course men know best about everything." Dorothea, instead of attempting to dispute on this level, merely insists that "I only want not to have my feelings checked at every turn."[38] This has been the basis of her struggle all along, and she has been repeatedly "checked" by the fact that those whom she most loves are those who wish to smother her with their ideas about the "correct" diverting of her feelings.

Lydgate has been similarly "thwarted"[40] by failures of understanding, but his vexations have a different emphasis. In his case the intellectual rather than the emotional force of his disappointment is stressed. Although both he and Dorothea possess "the life which has a seed of ennobling thought and purpose within it", we

are conscious that Lydgate has seen the world only as its horrifying turnings affect himself. Their "soul-wasting" struggle has different origins (and obviously different results); is this because Lydgate, as a man, has always been more able to mold external circumstances to his liking? In any case Rosamond is the one external circumstance against which he is powerless, and in the end, despite the indirect mention of his guilt, she is taken severly to task for her desire for "titillation of vanity and sense of romantic drama".[41] She has failed abysmally to separate the ideal from the real marriage. Her "neutrality and misconception" are unalterably in opposition to the "conditions of marriage itself, to its demand for self-suppression and tolerance". Her fantasies about Ladislaw arise from the inability to learn that past "ennuie" and "vague uneasy longings" will not be relieved by new romantic idealizations. When disgrace falls upon Lydgate the essential egocentricity of husband and wife is the striking point; to Rosamund "it seemed that no lot could be as cruelly hard as hers . . . life seemed to have no meaning for her in such a position"[42], and in this (social) crisis they are seen as "adrift on one piece of wreck", wilfully disregarding both each other and the inimical surroundings. Lydgate has been forcing adjustments on himself throughout the decline of his fortunes, so that now it is he rather than Rosamund who must "bend himself to her nature".[43] For Rosamond "bending" of any sort in unimaginable because of this statis view which embraces both herself and others.

Footnotes - Chapter V

[1] *Middlemarch*, p. 359.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 372.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 379.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 386.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 391.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 392.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 393.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 393.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 396.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 397.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 400.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 401.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 402.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 411.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 412.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 425.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 427.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 427.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 428.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 428.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 431.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 433.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 435.

[24] Ibid., p. 435.

[25] Ibid., p. 453.

[26] Ibid., p. 460.

[27] Ibid., p. 460.

[28] Ibid., p. 468.

[29] Ibid., p. 473.

[30] Ibid., p. 474.

[31] Ibid., p. 475.

[32] Ibid., p. 480.

[33] Ibid., p. 487.

[34] Ibid., p. 482.

[35] Ibid., p. 513.

[36] Ibid., p. 537.

[37] Ibid., p. 539.

[38] Ibid., p. 539.

[39] Ibid., p. 539.

[40] Ibid., p. 540.

[41] Ibid., p. 551.

[42] Ibid., p. 554.

[43] Ibid., p. 555.

CHAPTER VI

It is here that the two women are most sharply defined and compared; here that Rosamond receives the most stringent judgment through Dorothea's reaction to Lydgate's trials. Dorothea's striving for the "active good within her reach"[1] would be meaningless to Rosamond; when Dorothea is determined to ignore remainders of her "youth and sex" and to show her "human fellowship", their differences become immeasurable, since her youth and sex are the prime elements of Rosamond's self-image. Dorothea recognizes the "irrelevance" of the insistent references to her young womanhood.

Dorothea is filled with chagrin at the limitations which she can do nothing to change. "I have very little to do. There is nothing better that I can do in the world."[2] Not surprisingly Lydgate's encounter with a living "real" woman, who nevertheless exhibits "ideal" qualities, touches off in his mind a series of exaltations of Dorothea, at the expense of his own wife who has shown only the most distressingly "real" characteristics: "A heart large enough for the Virgin Mary . . . her love might help a man more than her money."[3] Amidst these individual idealizations is the reminder that Lydgate's general view of women has not undergone much revision: "She seems to have what I never saw in any woman before -- a fountain of friendship towards men -- a man can make a friend of her."[4]

Lydgate's passionate all-embracing conviction of Dorothea's uniqueness is not our only final picture of her; even St. Theresa must be shown to have specific virtues, and Eliot, as always, provides us with reasons, a basis for her virtue: "her own passionate faults lay along the easily-counted open channels of her ardent character . . . that simplicity of hers, holding up an ideal for others in her believing

conception of them, was one of the great powers of her womanhood."[5] Dorothea looks outward, gradually aware as we are of the network in which she must function. With time her consciousness acquires a wider, less naive base. Her expectations about her own life are modified to be free of the uncomfortable preoccupations of others: "She would have thought it very sinful in her to keep up an inward wail because she was not completely happy . . . she could bear that the chief pleasures of her tenderness should lie in memory."[6] Resignation to the unchangeable is always possible. Nevertheless before her final reunion with Ladislaw, when she assumes that he is consumed with passion for "poor Rosamond", the "inward wail" appears to take control,and her omnipresent optimism suffers an abrupt disappearance. The supposed needs of other people for once hold no sway as her own apparently endless sorrow is her chief concern: "We are on a perilous margin when we begin to look passively at our future selves and see our own figures led with dull consent into insipid misdoing and shabby achievements."[7]

This is the precise fate to which Maggie resigns herself and from which she is saved by death by drowning. Again we discover Dorothea's explicit reactions to the dull shapeless future which apparently faces her. Without self-deception she is aware of what she seems to have lost: Will is remembered as the "bright creature . . . the spirit of morning." Dorothea "discovered her passion to herself in the unshrinking utterance of despair."[8] But in the effort to find new meanings for the past, she has learned to forge a new future from the ruin of her hopes. "It was not in her nature to sit in the narrow cell of her calamity"; nor does she see "another's lot as an accident of her own."[9] These are similar terms to those which describe Maggie's resolution of her predicament ("I cannot take a good for myself that has

been wrung out of their misery"[10]), but there is none of the enforced moralizing, or the sense that a passive woman is being placed in situations which she does not fully understand. Dorothea is able to discard illusions continually, even those which seem very firmly based. This ability has been intrinsic to her life throughout. We never feel, as we may possibly in Maggie's case, that Dorothea wants to abandon control; her sense of active direction never fails: "she yearned towards the perfect Right, that it might make a throne within her and rule her errant will."[11] This will directs her to participation in the fellowship of "that involuntary, palpitating life"[12], so that she "could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining."[13] The attitudes of the two women are here crystallized: it is unthinkable for Dorothea to retreat into narrow despair, whereas for Maggie there is no alternative.

Inevitably the others, in their separate crises, are affected by Dorothea's personal means of resolution. Rosamond, in Ladislaw's rejection of her half-formed advances, encounters "the first shock that had shattered her dream-world in which she had been easily confident of herself and critical of others."[14] She is bewildered by "the sense that she had been walking in an unknown world which had just broken in upon her"[15], but "impulses which she had not known before" are aroused by the influence of Dorothea's "emotion". This same emotion provides Dorothea's salvation from that bleak despair, even as it forms Rosamond's tenuous commitment to her "blundering husband". Lydgate thus faces "his narrowed lot with sad resignation", while Dorothea, who has succeeded in warding off even greater disaster from him, herself faces the responsibility of an inconceivably wider future, under the slightly different status of Ladislaw's wife.

The tone in which Eliot "disposes" of Dorothea is what most concerns us: to what extent is Dorothea aware of her position, and how wide will her possibilities be? Marriage as the beginning of the domestic epic has already been touched on ironically, and there is no reason to believe that Eliot offers marriage as the best solution for Dorothea. What Ladislaw does is to grant emotional release and social acceptability to his wife, and these are obviously convenient appendages to a woman's life at any time. Marriage for Dorothea is therefore not so much a personal fulfillment as a means to a more general aim, but her personal emancipation through emotion is a prerequisite to her ability to function in the world as she has always desired. Unfortunate as it may be, Dorothea's (or any woman's) freedom to act in these specific social circumstances is dependent on these rather ambiguous necessities: a husband, or acceptable love-object.

Footnotes - Chapter VI

[1] *Middlemarch*, p. 557.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 559.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 563.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 563.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 565.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 566.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 574.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 576.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 577.

[10] *The Mill on the Floss.*, p. 240.

[11] *Middlemarch*, p. 577.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 578.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 578.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 583.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 585.

CHAPTER VII

George Eliot, through the characters of Maggie and Dorothea, has shown the progression of self-awareness, from Maggie's defiant and ultimately destructive abandonment of her surroundings, to Dorothea's arduous and complex "coming of age". In Middlemarch, as we have seen, each aspect of Dorothea's and other's lives is explored more thoroughly, and the sense of waste and frustration is far more intense, precisely because Eliot does not state outrightly that it is a waste. And how could she? "No one stated exactly what else that was in her (Dorothea's) power she ought rather to have done"[1], least of all Eliot, because her concerns are not so specific as the contemporary political commentators might wish. Eliot is a woman of her time, and painstakingly seeks solutions grounded in the possibilities of her time.

In The Mill on the Floss she dismisses the problem of Maggie's assimilation (or capitulation) through her death, which has a certain appropriateness because Maggie's hell was a particularized one from which there is a very particular escape. In Middlemarch, however, the problem of Dorothea's assimilation is forced to a conclusion, and Eliot insists on an explanation of the compromise. This explanation is understandably half-hearted in tone: "Many . . . thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should be absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother."[2]

In The Mill on the Floss we can imagine no other possible end for Maggie; in Middlemarch we are not deprived so arbitrarily of our opportunity to connect, to shift perspectives. We must struggle to realize with Dorothea that freedom is possible, but possible only within certain social limits. These limits, with maturity, are seen

not as thwarting agents, but as the necessary demands of human fellowship, which recognizes human need.

Eliot is presenting us with two women who by contemporary standards cry out for soul-shattering liberation. The process by which this might be accomplished is being furiously debated at the present time; in Eliot's time, the present importance of the women's liberation movement would have been unimaginable. A cry in the dark is not what Eliot desired to make; rather she, her characters, and we ourselves are asked to subject demands to "the rousing of the nobler emotions which make mankind desire the social right, not the prescribing of special measures."[3] Our problem is to reconcile ourselves to the fact that our unthinking expectations would have been regarded as extraordinary and impossible measures. Eliot knew too well what she was facing, and through her own attempts to describe the world of Maggie and Dorothea, she herself moves ever further away from the "narrow self-delusive fanaticism" of which Maggie was accused. In studying these two women, we can see a consistent widening of the scope of Eliot's thought. The early ideals are never abandoned, but the martyrdom which Maggie seems to accept as inevitable is seen as only one (limited) alternative in Middlemarch. Dorothea suffers, indisputably, but with the greater elaboration of her difficulties comes corresponding willingness to battle with the strength born of suffering.

It is my conclusion that Eliot cannot be taken to task for refusing to tackle problems of women's freedom which she faced and apparently surmounted in her own life. In presenting the characters of Maggie and Dorothea she is thorough, extremely conscientious, and solemnly committed to the issues she raises. We may have "come a long way, baby", when we consider the disappearance of old taboos

and the current position of women's liberation in popular culture, but smugness should not let us scornfully assign Eliot's earnestness and carefully considered solutions to the distant world of Victorian mammas and antimacassars. In her private life George Eliot was responsible only to herself and her own convictions. In her art she is responsible to herself and to her readers, of whatever persuasion and to whatever extent they may be committed to radical feminism. Eliot never flinches from this responsibility; she too "reaches constantly" at something that is near to an ideal and workable solution for her women characters. Dorothea and Maggie are memorable, finally, both as women and human beings, and Eliot gives full recognition to the double fact of their femaleness and their humanity. When we too "reach" with Eliot in understanding the basis of these women's struggles, she will never disappoint us.

Footnotes - Chapter VII

[1] *Middlemarch*, p. 611.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 611.

[3] *The George Eliot Letters*, VII, ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven, 1954), quoted by William Harvey, *The Art of George Eliot*, (London, Chatto and Windus, 1961), p. 38.

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