

## Feminine Aspirations with the Real World of Men in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*

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The story treats each individual's vision as well as social reality that the author intends to describe. The purpose of this article is to search for the conflict between vision and reality, especially in feminist problem that critics have treated on the works of women writers. Though some articles have studied on the issue similar to this article, I try to analyze the narratives in the text that the author herself confesses to us. I think that we can find out clear messages from the individuals who construct the human relationship and build up their personal history through their dialogue or monologue. We can also catch their main problems in the community. I discuss the topic by mentioning the detailed discourses referred to the heroine and other characters in the text. The passages mentioned by the characters in the story may be a confession for the present and future generation that the author tries to confess. From the excerpts of some discourse, I can conclude that though Dorothea has a vision for her ideal, she is a failed feminist, for society is too strong for her as Miller (1990) argues.

[Victorian fiction/George Eliot/Middlemarch/feminist issue]

### I. INTRODUCTION

*Middlemarch* written by George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) in 1871 through 1872 implies various sorts of characters who lived about forty years ago before its publication. Their lives were vividly described through *Middlemarch*, a small province. As the subtitle of the work says as 'A Study of Provincial Life,' many characters who lived in the period of the Reform Bill in 1832 were breathing in the small village interacting with their life style and idea. That is, "Middlemarch is the microcosm of a wider world"

(Speaight, 1968, p. 105) where the social value was being changed. The author depicts the trend of the early nineteenth century society. That is, “the novel looks at what has changed between the 1830s and 70s, and what remains insufficiently changed (like women's opportunities)” (Beer, 2003, p. 211). The changing social background imperatively affected the areas that they think and behave as a gigantic stream in their consciousness. The overall trend can be summarized; the profound and explosive changes in human society were condensed artistically into expressions to denote the history and cultural landscapes of the nineteenth century. In this era, the general system of human society was dominated and repeatedly restructured fundamentally by the concept of masculine energy (Lee, 2004, p. 227). In other works, Lee (2007) argues that the characters take ideas and values from their social world and thrive or fail: obsession, generational value systems, and alienation. The three common features are the elements of ordinary people's tragedies. On the other hand, *Middlemarch* depicts each individual's desire or vision as well as social value, so we are concerned with the individuals who constructed the human relationship and brought out their history. We can analyze their main problems in the community.

To identify the topic, vision and reality that the characters pursue, I first choose one of the important problems in this work that is an issue of women within a strict society. I try to find out the author's description in the text and the reason why they failed in attaining in the vision. That is, I explain the author's intention with some passages and critical quotations in detail: to treat the feminist problem, the author introduces a typical character, Dorothea who hopes to approach her ideal view. As an ordinary woman, she is not radical or positive but innocent in obtaining her purpose. After all, she has a trouble in attaining her aspiration within a limited boundary of the society.

Second, though the topic in this study focuses on the feminist issue that has been studied by critics and researchers as a crucial issue in *Middlemarch*, I discuss the topic by mentioning the detailed discourses spoken by the heroine and other characters in the text. From the statements or the excerpts of the discourse, I study the essence of the story that the author implies and try to demonstrate that “Dorothea is a failed feminist but we can hardly blame her, for society is too strong for her” (Miller, 1990).

## II. WOMAN IN THE SOCIETY

The industrial revolution changed the entire scale of human history, culture, and society. The axes of politics and economics in the previous era were decentralized and newly organized through industrialization during that era (Lee, 2005). The author intends to analyze the changes such as political, social, and economic trends through a series of characters. The characters show how people are affected by the social changes

at that time, and how those changes happen in their lives. The crucial changes are the Catholic emancipation, the death of George IV, the dissolution of Parliament in 1831, the outbreak of cholera in 1832, and the passage of the Reform Bill (Carroll, p. X-XI).<sup>1</sup> The author concerns with the issues and expresses the trends through characters and narratives. An issue that the author tries to treat is how people react to it. The point is that people can be dependant on the value of the society but they are humans who have flaws in many respects. They can make a lot of mistakes or wrong judgments themselves, but it would be impossible to criticize only for their faults. We can only interpret them through the inspection of the society and their personal consciousness. Woolf (1919) advocated Eliot's issue on the feminist problem and her attitude toward the society where she lived.

Thus, we behold her, a memorable figure, inordinately praised and shrinking from her fame, despondent, reserved, shuddering back into the arms of love as if there alone were satisfaction and, it might be, justification, at the same time reaching out with 'a fastidious yet hungry ambition' for all that life could offer the free and inquiring mind and confronting her feminine aspirations with the real world of men. Triumphant was the issue for her, whatever it may have been for her creations, and as we recollect all that she dared and achieved how with every obstacle against her - sex and health and convention - she sought more knowledge and more freedom. (Woolf, 1919, p. 7)

Though there was no explicit feminist movement at the period of the novel, George Eliot tried to express the problem that she had always concerned with. To clarify the failure of a heroine, the author creates some typical characters related to the issue and compares their values and consciousness. The author especially focuses on a heroine, Dorothea, who is endowed all virtues requiring the society of the period but does not overcome the strong environment by which she is overwhelmed. It is natural for Dorothea to have a psychological conflict as a failure.

From the beginning of the work, the author describes the limitation of women's ability in the society. Women are forced to have a passive attitude in many aspects such as in her inner or out of life. That is, even though the society was changing and wanted to accept the changed values, women's role was strictly limited to the domestic life only to keep their home and serve men. Woman was also treated as an imperfect creature and a dependant subject compared to the stream of the value of the society. In the prelude of the story, the author tends to passive attitude for woman in the society; "some have felt that these blundering lives are due to the inconvenient indefiniteness with which the Supreme Power has fashioned the natures of woman" (p. 3). Yet, she suggests that the

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<sup>1</sup> The text in this research is *Middlemarch in the world classics* published by Oxford University in 1989. In the passage I adopt the chapters and pages from the text of *Middlemarch*.

order might be altered by any opportunity that a woman can take; "the lot of woman might be treated with scientific certitude." (p. 3).

In the problem of education, women should keep a low standard of level enough to support themselves or understand the basic knowledge of their surroundings. They were not allowed to see the deep social problems as cited from the domestic conversation from the first part of the story; "Young ladies don't understand political economy, you know, ... But some say, history moves in circles; and that may be very well argued; I have argued it myself." (p. 15). Furthermore, they were restricted to express their explicit opinions. The virtue for women is that "Women were expected to have weak opinions; but the great safeguard of society and of domestic life was, that opinions were not acted on. Sane people did what their neighbours did, so that if any lunatics were at large, one might know and avoid them." (p. 9). The talk is a typical expression that the author deeply feels and anguishes as a woman in the community. The social prejudice causes women to sacrifice their identity, for women should not possess their right to lead their own lives.

Dorothea as a heroine who feels intellectual thirsty strives to fill the vacancy. She is so enthusiastic that she always keeps the desire in her subconsciousness and waits for the opportunities to realize it. The author introduces the intention by a monologue that implies the future conflict. The passage also indicates that the woman is able to have two aspects of characters regardless of the prejudice or value in the society.

"I should learn everything then," she said to herself, still walking quickly along the bridle road through the wood. "It would be my duty to study that I might help him the better in his great work. There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday-things with us would mean the great things." (p. 24)

She naturally possesses in some senses opposite characteristics to her sister, Celia. While Celia is an egoist and understands the reality of a society with her own view, Dorothea is described as 'child, childish, poor child, very naive, blessed Virgin, or Virgin Mary.' Her figure and clothes style are explained as "Blessed Virgin" (p. 7). In Rosamund's view, who is an egoist and selfish woman, Dorothea is regarded as "looked almost as childish, with the neglected trace of a silent tear." (p. 650) and Lydgate thinks that Dorothea has a heart of "The young creature has a heart large enough for the Virgin Mary" (p. 629). Her inner character stays in a level of a child. She retains "very childlike ideas about marriage," (p. 9) so she can easily accept Casaubon's love "so child like, and according to some judges, so stupid, with all her reputed cleverness; as, for example, in the present case of throwing herself," (p. 42) without enough judgment or consideration. She respects her husband's knowledge and wishes to be wise, only having an innocent

vision like a "poor child" or "very naive" (p. 52). When she confesses and decides to follow Will Ladislaw, she also says "in a sobbing childlike way" (p. 663).

The expressions mentioned by the heroine may be the device that the author makes use of intentionally at the beginning and in the course of the plot. The following passages, however, express the opposite aspect of her desire.

And then I should know what to do, when I got older: I should see how it was possible to lead a great life here-now-in England. I don't feel sure about doing good in any way now: everything seems like going on a mission to a people whose language I don't know;-unless it were building good cottages-there can be no doubt that. (p. 24)

Her nature is an innocent type, which means that she can lead a happy life only within a boundary of a woman. The desire, however, to escape from her situation accompanies her with hardships and leaves her a failed heroine. Her lack of experience sometimes makes her an egoist, but we can say that "She is not a hypocrite but simply too young and ignorant to know herself and the world" (Adam, 1969, p. 42). The idea can be found in Dorothea's utterances, "I should feel more at liberty.... You must have misunderstood me very much... if you think that I should not enter into the value of your time." (p. 71).

### III. VISION OF MARRIAGE

In marriage, Dorothea has an idealistic vision. She aspires to attain her intellectual perfectability or spiritual maturity by marrying Casaubon. She was enchanted with his knowledge and intellectual ambition which seem to be in his highest state. Her unhappy marriage results from her misunderstanding of the reality and ignorance of realistic conditions with her husband. As a result, she searches for another world only with an idealistic view.

"I should not wish to have a husband very near my own age," said Dorothea, with grave decision. "I should wish to have a husband who was above me in judgment and an all knowledge." (p. 34)

"I know that I must expect trials, uncle. Marriage is a state of higher duties. I never thought of it as mere personal ease," said poor Dorothea. (p. 34)

She does not agree with others' opinions but has a self-righteous view. On the other hand, her sister, Celia, has more egoistic idea about her marriage than Dorothea. Celia's

rather snobbish idea, however, explains that she keenly understands the reality of a society. To support Celia's cleverness, Mrs. Cadwallader and Sir James have an opposite attitude for the marriage between Dorothea and Casaubon. They doubt Casaubon's role as a husband; "He[Casaubon] is no better than a mummy!" (p. 47). "He has one foot in the grave" (p. 48).

Dorothea's view of marriage is absolutely different from her husband, Casaubon. She wishes to be a faithful student or a daughter of her husband as "Milton's daughters" (p. 52). She does not think of him as a husband, her partner for her life, but considers him "fathers and teachers, Milton and Hooker" (Hardy, 1982, p. 21). He, however, regards his marriage as getting a helper for his old age and does not show any concern about the realization of Dorothea's ideal. He might think that his aspiration for academic achievement equals to the value of Dorothea's vision. The conflict on the marriage begins by explaining the passage that shows his inner dissatisfaction.

The author depicts the conflict again in Book II: Old and Young. The passages in Chapter XX show the struggle between the people with explicit explanation and narratives. Yet, Dorothea had no distinctly sharpen grievance that she could state even to herself; "and in the midst of her confused thought and passion, the mental act that was struggling forth into clearness was a self-accusing cry that her feeling of desolation was the fault of her own spiritual poverty" (p. 158). The reason of failure in their marriage can be explained by their characteristic drawbacks. Most of them are relied on the husband, Casaubon, who comes into conflict with her aspiration after problem of marriage. Finally, their marriage is plunged into destruction when Casaubon incessantly displays his desire for controlling his wife and ignores her singularity. However, Dorothea becomes a person who can "converse" with other people (Lee, 2004, p. 227). Dorothea's innocent nature begins to develop toward the egoistic state and conflict with Casaubon's egoism. From the beginning of their marriage, we can see the negative aspects of their lives in many aspects. She comes to realize her husband's shallowness of knowledge. As a result, she thinks that she can not attain her intellectual aspiration and can not avoid the situation of accusing "the intolerable narrowness, the purblind conscience of the society around her" (p. 31).

When he said, "Does this interest you, Dorothea? Shall we stay a little longer? I am ready to stay if you wish it,"-it seems to her as if going or staying were alike dreary. Or, "Should you like to go to the Farnesina, Dorothea? It contains celebrated frescos designed or painted by Raphael, which most persons think it worth while to visit."

"But do you care about them?" was always Dorothea's question. "They are, I believe, highly esteemed. Some of them represent the fable of Cupid and Psyche, which is probably the romantic invention of a literary period, and cannot, I think, be reckoned as a genuine mythical

product. But if you like these wall-paintings we can easily drive thither; and you will then, I think, have seen the chief works of Raphael, any of which it were a pity to omit in a visit to Rome. (pp. 161-162)

In her religion, Dorothea's ancestors were Puritan and her uncle, Mr. Brooke, keeps the "hereditary strain of Puritan energy" (p. 8). Unlike Celia, Dorothea's 'pure' or 'childlike' images suggest that she sustains Puritan consciousness. During her wedding journey in Rome, her cloth style implies that she has a religious consciousness, especially 'Quakerish' mentioned by a German artist, Naumann. The facts enhance her gloomy image. Her marriage is against her religious view, which means that her desire for human perfectability in knowledge is impossible in Puritanic view. Moreover, she was educated narrowly as a Puritan young idealist, so it is an irony that "she regards her marriage with pedant husband as marrying Milton or Pascal" (Ashton, 1983, p. 70).

Another dark image of her marriage is sexuality. Sexuality is hidden in the work except for a few passages. Regarding Casaubon's age, nearly forty-five, Sir James suggests his age as fifty, and he says that the marriage is not desirable. The rumor around Dorothea implies that she will lose her sexuality from his age; "For this marriage to Casaubon is as good as going to a nunnery" (p. 48). Before her marriage she understood that her age was less than half of Casaubon's, but she did not recognize that she would have sexual problem. The problem of sexuality is an opposite image compared to other issue such as religion that the author treats in this story at the same time. The intention also means a device of feminist value that a woman can control the problem with her own subjective attitude.

For in truth, as the day fixed for his marriage came nearer, Mr. Casaubon did not find his spirits rising; nor did the contemplation of that matrimonial garden-scene, where, as all experience showed, ... his surprise that though he had won a lovely and noble-hearted girl he had not won delight,-which he knew all the classical passages implying the contrary; but knowing classical passages, we find, is a mode of motion, which explains why they leave so little extra force for their personal application. (p. 69)

Though it is not openly revealed, her psychological conflict tells us the author's intention through the story. "Like most English novelists of her time, she is reticent [in sexual problem], sometimes evasive, about sex" (Hardy, 1982, p. 18). Even if the author never tells us that "Casaubon is impotent" (Hardy, 1982, p. 18), we can find that he is indifferent to physical desire. The opinion can be rather an intense criticism in that period, especially for women's social and moral attitude. The author makes a device of the situation by avoiding her direct expression: "Surely I am in a strangely selfish weak

state of mind," she said to herself. "How can I have a husband who is so much above me without knowing that he needs me less than I need him?" (p. 72). The passages can be matched with the attitude which Casaubon has had in his mind though it might not a real consciousness. As the day of his marriage comes nearer, he does not feel any spiritual content, which means that he already lost his vitality because of "his long studious bachelorhood" (p. 69). Casaubon does not feel delight by marrying her who also does not win sexual desire. So her marriage seems to be a perfect failure physically as well as mentally. She may well be isolated from her desire, and her inner conflict results in a situation like a prisoner that the author mentioned "regarded as tragic" (p. 159).

#### IV. THE ESCAPING FROM REALITY

She mirrors herself watching the portrait of Casaubon's aunt, Julia, who had an unfortunate marriage and led a failed life. In dark image of Julia, Dorothea predicts her miserable situation of future as well as present. She does not expect to have a hope but a desperation which means a nightmare of her life.

The solution of escaping from her present failure is a divorce from Casaubon, but the author substitutes the solution by his death in order to avoid the criticism of the stern society at that times. As a woman and a wife, "Dorothea is not obliged to call upon the divorce laws: Casaubon conveniently dies" (Beer, 1986, p. 185). The treatment can be a natural and general plot in that period, for "Death often has to provide a substitute for divorce in Victorian fiction" (Hardy, 1982, p. 33).

Dorothea begins to think about her husband's death. Watching Featherstone's funeral, she imagines Casaubon's dismal death without leaving any person who loves him. She even thinks about Casaubon's will for her inheritance. Her intentions may be noticed by his keen observation. If Dorothea felt his intellectual shallowness and sexual inadequacy, he might also have perceived her selfish purpose and felt jealous of her new relationship with Will Ladislav. The conflict consequently leaves Casaubon's will. Although she gets freedom from the prison of the marriage, she is still a failure having a consciousness of guilt instead of getting inheritance only if she marries Will Ladislav.

The author introduces other characters, Lydgate and Will Ladislav, to relieve Dorothea from her tragic situation. The role of two characters is a passage of shelters so that she can escapes from her present pressures. Other role is the source of power by possessing true affection between them (Cho, 1982, p. 5). Her guilty consciousness seems to be concerned about the social burden, for she may be afraid of being criticized by the society around her after the treatment of Casaubon's will. It should be a clear proof of her unfaithfulness for her husband, so she has no choice but to look for any



other way in order to eliminate the criticism.

Her concern about the criticism of the society causes her to take part in Lydgate's plan, the New Fever Hospital. Though she participates in the beneficent activity for the project as a sponsor, she concerns with Lydgate who is a "young, poor, ambitious[doctor]" (p. 77). She imagines that Lydgate can help realize her ideal hope through his scientific enthusiasm. His purpose of "intellectual conquest and the social good" (p. 119) means the same vision that she has long pursued. She tries to realize it by marriage, while Lydgate tries to realize his ambition in a small society, Middlemarch. His future plan, "to do good small work for Middlemarch, and great work for world" (p. 122) means his ultimate aspiration for human perfectability that Dorothea has been looking for. The author supports the situation by clearly explaining Lydgate in the introduction of Chapter XI. That is, "he had come to Middlemarch bent on doing many things that were not directly fitted to make his fortune or even secure him a good income. To a man under such circumstances, taking a wife is something more than a question of adornment, however highly he may rate this." (p. 77).

Will Ladislaw also has a shadow side of past experience. His falling in love with Laure, an actress, in Paris, implies that he tried to pursue for an ideal by marriage. He was also a failure in getting an innocent vision to realize it. I think that the author's intention is to introduce another hero who can rescue the heroine by matching the similar experience. In this aspect, Dorothea unconsciously feels sympathy with him though she does not realize his past. Furthermore, in the society of Middlemarch, nobody recognizes his past darkness and her consciousness of guilt, which brings out sympathy of psychological rapport each other. When she hears Bulstrode's renunciation to support Lydgate's plan of the New Fever Hospital, she is willing to accept the proposal and take the role. She thinks of it as a kind of compensation or beneficence for the community that Lydgate should have.

Casaubon realizes that Dorothea has loved Will Ladislaw in her heart, which results in his will as a document that makes it impossible to marry them after his [Casaubon] death. Will's character such as young, poetic, and artistic is opposite to those of Casaubon. He has bright images which are the object that Casaubon feels jealousy of but Dorothea is yearning for. Will Ladislaw, as his own name itself, expresses a hope and vitality to Dorothea who has lost her ideal in the relationship with her husband. In the final passage Dorothea resolves to marry Will, which is the technique that the author compromises with in order to realize her inner expectation.

"I am going to London," said Dorothea.

"How can you always live in a street? And you will be so poor. I could give you half my things, only how can I, when I never see you?" ..... "You know what mistakes you have always been

making, Dodo[Dorothea], and this is another. Nobody thinks Mr. Ladislav[Will] a proper husband for you. And you said you would never be married again."

"It is quite true I might be a wiser person, Celia," said Dorothea, "and that I might have done something better, if I had been better. But this is what I am going to do. I have promised to marry Mr. Ladislav[Will]; and I am going to marry him." .....

"Is he fond of you, Dodo?" "I hope so. I am very fond of him[Will]." (p. 670)

Will Ladislav, however, also has another shadow of his origin relating to Bulstrode's hidden past. After Bulstrode's confession about his past guilt, Will refuses to accept the financial compensation. The resolution implies that Will has a strong will or courage to change his shadow origin into the bright future. His bright image attracts Dorothea's ideal vision, which can rescue her, the author suggests.

Casaubon instinctively foresees their marriage. In his replies, he mentions his correct relationship with Will. Will is not his[Casaubon's] nephew but his cousin (p. 66, p. 271), which is a clue that Dorothea can marry Will after Casaubon's death. After all, Casaubon's jealousy leaves a will that she will not be able to possess his property in case of her marrying Will. That is, Casaubon forces her to live in a stern social rule, which means a chain for her.

Dorothea wishes to relieve herself from this boundary and pursuits for true love by attaining a desirable relationship with Will. She rejects her realistic value for her ideal.

"Oh, I cannot bear it-my heart will break," said Dorothea, starting from her seat, the folly of her young passion bearing down all the obstructions which had kept her silent-the great tears rising and falling in an instant: "I don't mind about poverty-I hate my wealth." In an instant Will was close to her and had his arms round her, but she drew her head back and held his away gently that she might go on speaking, her large tear-filled eyes looking at his very simply, while she said in a sobbing childlike way, "We could live quite well on my own fortune-it is too much-seven hundred a-year-I want so little-no new clothes-and I will learn what everything costs." (p. 663)

She even says that she wants to be free from the pressure of the social value for a weak woman. In the conflict of marriage, the author tried to consider the women's situation attentively and compromise the conflict between the heroine and the strict convention in the community. This technique is partly approved by Woolf (1919) who insisted that triumphant was the issue for her, whatever it may have been for her creation, and how with every obstacle against her. However, the solution should be found in comparison of the conflict between love and art. In the article, Han (1991) suggests that the problem can be treated by considering the reader in that period and the situation of

the historical background.

This seems to be the deliberate strategy of Eliot who is conscious of her duty to the Victorian readers as a writer and wants to hide her ongoing concern of woman question under her apparent conservative attitudes to the woman question at the same time. Thus, we come to know better Eliot's feminist awareness on the woman question by analyzing three women artists' conflict between love and art in these three works (Han, 1998, pp. 307-329). The comment can be applied to the author's view that is the implication of the relationship between society and woman. The conflict is an initial and definite implication that the people in the community have can not but untie it, especially in young woman; "how do people make sense of the world? What is the relationship between the individual and the community?" (Carroll, 1989, p. ix).

## V. CONCLUSION

*Middlemarch* is a novel by George Eliot, a pseudonym for the female author Mary Ann Evans. It was first published in 1871. It is set in the 1830s in Middlemarch, a fictional provincial town in England, based on Coventry. Widely seen as Eliot's greatest work, it is almost unanimously acclaimed as one of the great Victorian era novels (*Middlemarch*, 2007).

Virginia Woolf (1991) describes *Middlemarch* as one of the few English novels written for grown-up people. She argues that the author focuses on the feminist issue, and the character as a woman should go through the hardship in order to escape from her present situation because "For her, the burden and the complexity of womanhood were not enough; she must reach beyond the sanctuary and pluck for herself the strange bright fruits of art and knowledge. Clasp[ing] them as few women have ever clasped them, she would not renounce her own inheritance- the difference of view, the difference of standard - nor accept an inappropriate reward (Woolf, 1919, p. 7). She solves her troubles by the second marriage which seems to be a successful conclusion as the author intends. She has struggled "amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state" (p. 682) to achieve her identity, but she can not express her free opinions and acts because of "negative public opinion about woman [in her period and community]" (Hutton, 1971, p. 307). We can imagine her psychological anguish from the social torture as a solitary feminist.

As a result, Eliot decided to create two characters, Dorothea and Casaubon, and built a world, a provincial community, where a lot of people weave themselves within a limited boundary and existing variables. Though both lead their unhappy marriages, Dorothea sought for her aspirations and found the way by confronting with the societal pressure.

The solution was the acceptance of remarriage to another character, Will Ladislaw, within a permission of the society rule. The author makes a device to solve the crisis of her life.

Dorothea herself had no dreams of being praised above other women, feeling that there was always something better which she might have done, if she had only been better and known better. Still, she never repented that she had given up position and fortune to marry Will Ladislaw, and he would have held it the greatest shames as well as sorrow to him if she had repented. (p. 680)

In conclusion, the author describes that Dorothea is a failed feminist having a passive attitude in leading her own life. However, "the reader can hardly blame her, for society is too strong for her" (Miller, 1990). The general issue in this article can partly be agreed with the description and the passages cited in the story, and the discourse may help find out the issue, vision and reality in the community, that the author tried to pursue.

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