

Dorothea, the Saint of *Middlemarch*

1. Introduction.

Middlemarch has been called a “novel of religious yearning without religious object.”¹ This problem is most clearly characterised in the story of Dorothea who is on a quest to find God in a Godless world. The changes that her character goes through are therefore symptoms of the same religious feeling that began in her childhood. In the beginning, Dorothea is viewed as a saint, a later-born Theresa, and desires submission to a higher power. She enters into marriage with Casaubon because she believes that his presence will provide the sense of purpose that she craves. However, when she realises the limits of the mind, Dorothea becomes aimless and loses faith. Through Will, she rediscovers the sense of youthful hope that had been lost. Both relationships affect her because of the spiritual nature of her character. The final test is passed as she rejects material wealth, receiving joy and affection in return. This paper will begin with a focus on Dorothea Brooke. We will then analyse the affect that her relationship with both Edward Casaubon and Will Ladislaw has on her. The paper will end with remarks on the broader motive of the novel.

2. Dorothea Brooke.

The preface tells us of Saint Theresa who has “spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity.”² That is, the opportunities she is presented with in reality do not match the passionate nature of her inward life. Similarly, for Dorothea “all existence seemed to beat with a lower pulse than her own.”³ For both women, “the rapturous consciousness of life beyond self,”⁴ life beyond personal Ego, is considered a resolution to the conflict between mind and reality. The narrator advises us that Theresa found her “epos in the reform of a religious order.”⁵ However, Dorothea's conflict, which is driven by the spiritual desire to impose order and meaning onto the world, must be resolved without depending on the Christian faith:

These later-born Theresas were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul.⁶

1 Terry Wright. '*Middlemarch as a Religious Novel, or Life without God.*' In *Images of Belief in Literature* ed. By David Jasper (London: Macmillan, 1984) pg 138.

2 George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pg 3.

3 *Ibid.*, pg 275.

4 *Ibid.*, pg 3.

5 *Ibid.*, pg 3.

6 *Ibid.*, pg 3.

Dorothea is a 'later-born Theresa.' The name 'Dorothea' is derived from the Greek. For the ancients, the name Dorothea meant "gift of God."⁷ The character is referred to as a "Saint,"⁸ an "Angel,"⁹ and she "has a heart large enough for the Virgin Mary."¹⁰ Dorothea is "animated by Christian sentiment – sensuous force controlled by spiritual passion."¹¹ Such religious connotations make it clear that Dorothea's character is aware of a spiritual realm of existence that is beyond the physical and emotional; and her "religious faith was a solitary cry, the struggle out of a nightmare."¹² This woman is deeply religious, and this disposition exercised "coercion...over her life."¹³ Despite this, we are told that Dorothea cannot accept the "coherent social faith"¹⁴ of Christianity, and it could no longer "perform the function of knowledge."¹⁵ Her heart craves God, but her mind is unable to accept the limits:

Such a nature, struggling in the bands of a narrow teaching...seemed nothing but a labyrinth of petty courses, a walled-in maze of small paths that led no whither.¹⁶

Dorothea is saintly, but is also described as "ardent, theoretic, and intellectually consequent"¹⁷ The "narrow teaching"¹⁸ of the Christian faith destroys the curiosity of Dorothea. However, her life is committed to finding a replacement for this faith, and "into this soul-hunger...all her youthful passion was poured."¹⁹ Throughout the narrative, pursuits of science, art, theology and mythology are considered substitutions for God in the sense that order is imposed upon a chaotic world.²⁰ Similarly, Dorothea desired "the freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest path."²¹ Crucially, however, she only submits because her religious nature demands it of her. Dorothea has the strength of mind to critique accepted beliefs and see beyond the appearances of social norms. She finds freedom in submission precisely because "devotedness...was

7 Douglas Harper. "Dorothea." Online Etymology Dictionary: Accessed May 1, 2017. url: http://etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=dorothea

8 George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pg 216.

9 Ibid., pg 209.

10 Ibid., pg 768.

11 Ibid., pg 190.

12 Ibid., pg 275.

13 Ibid., pg 28.

14 Ibid., pg 3.

15 Ibid., pg 3.

16 Ibid., pg 29.

17 Ibid., pg 28-29.

18 Ibid., pg 29.

19 Ibid., pg 29.

20 Terry Wright. 'Middlemarch as a Religious Novel, or Life without God.' In Images of Belief in Literature ed. By David Jasper (London: Macmillan, 1984) pg 140.

21 George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pg 29.

so necessary a part of her mental life.”²² Her marriage to Casaubon is not based on companionship or affection, but on the belief that he would “deliver her from...her own ignorance.” Much like a disciple following Christ, he becomes an article of faith who would offer deliverance and salvation.

3. Edward Casaubon.

Dorothea “looked deep into the unguaged reservoir of Mr Casaubon's mind.”²³ Initially, she considered such a mind “instructive as Milton's affable archangel”²⁴ as Casaubon expresses “himself nearly as he would have done to a fellow-student.”²⁵ Thus, Dorothea's Theresa-like quest continues, driven by the belief that “high knowledge...was to make life worthier.”²⁶ Theology and philosophy taught by Casaubon will be worthy of her faithful submission. We can thus see Dorothea's allegiance to Casaubon as spiritual in nature. That is, she marries him because of a spiritual desire to impose meaning and order onto a seemingly chaotic and empty existence:

Dorothea was altogether captivated...here was a living Bossuet, whose work would reconcile complete knowledge with devoted piety; here was a modern Augustine who united the glories of doctor and saint.²⁷

By comparing Casaubon to these historical characters, Dorothea's true intentions are clear. Casaubon is not viewed as a man, but as an Augustine-like figure who will offer “the glories of doctor and saint.”²⁸ “Of course I submitted to him, because it was my duty,”²⁹ she admits. Dorothea's thoughts go beyond the affections of a caring wife who wants to see her husband cheerful. For Dorothea, the marriage is not a union between two equal partners, but a religious devotion to a husband that symbolises knowledge and piety. However, she married Casaubon because her beliefs caused her to “fall under...illusion.”³⁰ It is only when Dorothea realises the limits of the mind that she craves further companionship. Her sense of duty and charity morphs into anger and resentment as Casaubon's scholarly work becomes “uninspired...timid...and dim-sighted.”³¹ With Dorothea's change in perception, we receive the image of a saintly woman who has lost faith:

22 Ibid., pg 194.

23 George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pg 24.

24 Ibid., pg 24.

25 Ibid., pg 25.

26 Ibid., pg 479.

27 Ibid., pg 25.

28 Ibid., pg 25.

29 Ibid., pg 736.

30 Ibid., pg 734.

31 Ibid., pg 280.

Like one who has lost his way and is weary, she sat and saw as in one glance all the paths of her young hope which she should never find again...Her anger said, as anger is apt to say, that God was with her – that all heaven...must be on her side.³²

Dorothea clings “with silent love and faith”³³ to Casaubon, however she eventually “lost belief.”³⁴ God was with her because she had acted from a religious motive. Dorothea wanted to replace the biblical obedience to God with obedience to a human deity, and this submission would act as substitution for her lapsed Christian faith. The narrator advises that “the consolations of the Christian hope in immortality seemed to lean on the...still unwritten Key to all Mythologies.”³⁵ This phrase can be applied equally to Casaubon as to Dorothea. The hope of religious faith depended on Casaubon and his life’s work. However, this was an illusion, an error in perception that Dorothea had committed. She begins to question her submission to the modern Augustine because it is discovered that his teachings are of no importance. When it becomes clear that Casaubon cannot offer the “life beyond self”³⁶ that she set out to discover as a young Theresa, the saint loses faith.

4. Will Ladislaw.

Through Will, Dorothea rediscovers the inner-child that seeks only joy and a love based on feeling rather than duty. Will feels a “passionate love”³⁷ for Dorothea, and the scholarly life of Casaubon is set aside as Will holds that “our good depends on the quality and breadth of our emotion.”³⁸ Such an attitude is in complete contrast to Casaubon who is convinced “that the poets had much exaggerated the force of masculine passion.”³⁹ The two men are radically different, and the impact each has on Dorothea reflects this difference. In a conversation between Dorothea and Will, Dorothea’s words imply a rediscovery of religious faith. Dorothea defines religion as “the belief that helps most.”⁴⁰ Thus, when Dorothea speaks of belief, she refers to the religious urge that has guided her:

I have a belief of my own, and it comforts me.

32 George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pg 426.

33 Ibid., pg 786.

34 Ibid., pg 786.

35 Ibid., pg 280.

36 Ibid., pg 3.

37 Ibid., pg 632.

38 Ibid., pg 469.

39 Ibid., pg 63.

40 Ibid., pg 392.

What is that?' said Will, rather jealous of the belief.

That by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don't quite know what it is...we are part of the divine power against evil...making the struggle with darkness narrower...I have always been finding out my religion since I was a little girl.⁴¹

As we have seen, Dorothea lost her belief in Casaubon, and she experiences a sense of anger when the marriage fails. However, in the presence of Will, Dorothea rediscovers her belief, and it is once again a source of comfort. We are also told that Dorothea and Will “were looking at each other like two young children talking confidentially of birds.”⁴² Christ instructs that “unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3).⁴³ With Casaubon, Dorothea can only glance at the youthful hope that had been lost; whilst with Will, she becomes the child that Christ demands of his disciples. In no way does this imply that Dorothea accepts the Christian theology, but she clearly begins to rediscover the ideals that have directed her since childhood.

However, the ultimate temptation comes at the very end of the novel. “I don't mind about poverty – I hate my wealth,”⁴⁴ Dorothea admits to Will before he embraces her. Many in the Middlemarch community think Dorothea foolish for rejecting Casaubon's wealth in return for matrimony with Will. This rejection of material wealth can be read in multiple ways, and the interpretation depends on Middlemarch's influence over Dorothea. If Dorothea was concerned with earthly wealth, she would have rejected Will. However, the essence of her character is not concerned with gold or jewels. She is a religious woman that cares, first and foremost, for spiritual wealth. When Dorothea accepts Will as a husband, she is becoming the poor child that Christ advises. For “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24). However, as Dorothea would be aware, the poor child is rich in spiritual wealth. Dorothea has accepted key tenets of the Christian morality without accepting its theology. Dorothea is Christian in essence because by being a poor child she has come to know the essence of the teachings of Christ. However, she still rejects the ideology, the “narrow teaching,”⁴⁵ created under the name of Christianity. Thus, her spiritual goal is achieved, whilst earthly wealth is rejected as of little consequence. In this way, she has found God in a Godless world. Not because of voluntary submission to Will, but because she has found the freedom of the ascetic that rejects wealth and the

41 George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pg 392.

42 Ibid., pg 392.

43 All Scripture quotations are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

44 George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pg 811.

45 Ibid., pg 29.

demands of the Ego. The same freedom from personal Ego that Theresa discovered when nursing the sick and feeding the poor.

5. Conclusion.

The subtitle of the book, *A Study of Provincial Life*, leaves us with the impression that Eliot was conducting a scientific experiment in her writing. As both author and thinker, Eliot is concerned with the modern problem of reconciling human spiritual needs with a scientific community. Dorothea is at once ardent and intellectual, however also keeps her inner-child. Through this character, Eliot is offering an alternative ethic. One that rejects the mechanistic view of the human animal, and in doing so gives the individual dignity, whilst also demanding rationality and critical debate based only on the cold disinterest of logic. The religious urge is not rejected, it is respected as a human feeling. However, meaning is found in charity, art, science and relationships, rather than submission to an omnipotent power that can cause heartbreak and isolation. Ultimately, however, the reader is invited to make their own judgement. The fate of various characters can be read in various ways, and thus Eliot is leaving moral arbitration in the hands of the reader. However, she makes it clear that perception of the problem is crucial, and one man's success is another man's failure.

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