

**The Complex Web of Gender, Genre, and Agency**  
**in George Eliot's *Middlemarch***

**by**

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In memory of Professor Merla Wolk, who helped me find my emergent  
self.

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## Abstract

My thesis offers a critical examination of the struggle for female agency as seen through the tense relationship between the narrator and the character of Rosamond Vincy in George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch*. Though my decision to focus on the relationship between the omniscient, complex narrator and a self-absorbed, beautiful minor character seems unusual, it is precisely the opposing nature of these figures that provoked my interest.

An anxiety surrounding female agency – a female's ability and potential to perform self-determining acts – arises in the relationship between Rosamond, who conforms to the Victorian patriarchal ideal of women in order to gain power and influence over men, and the narrator, who, while advocating female empowerment, tries to keep Rosamond's conventional conquests in check. I hope that an examination of this anxiety surrounding "agency" provokes readers to consider the implications of the author, narrator, and characters' actions, and to ask: what can a narrator *do* in the context of a novel? What can a female character *do*?

In my first chapter, I explore the way in which the narrator uses her plea for sympathy to weaken Rosamond's agency. Drawing on the scholarly work of Dwight H. Purdy's "One Poor Word in Middlemarch," I argue that the narrator's use of the adjective "poor" in conjunction with Rosamond reflects a tone of irony rather than sympathy, emphasizing Rosamond's limitations. Even a close examination of Rosamond's redemptive scene with Dorothea reveals violent imagery and a fluctuating point of view that greatly diminish Rosamond's potential to solicit sympathy from the reader.

In my second chapter, I move from narrative sympathy to narrative spectatorship, studying how the struggle for agency is depicted through the physical descriptions of Rosamond and their implications. Extending the work of Patricia E. Johnson in "The Gendered Politics of the Gaze: Henry James and George Eliot," I explore the problem of how to interpret the gendered spectatorship of the narrator through Rosamond, a character who willingly submits to the male gaze in order to attain agency.

In my third and final chapter I argue that the tension of this relationship extends outside the text itself – the anxiety surrounding the portrayal of Rosamond can be found in George Eliot's own revisions and notes on her *Middlemarch*. Using Jerome Beaty's meticulous research of the original *Middlemarch* manuscript, I show that Eliot's many revisions to Rosamond's character reveal the author's own struggle to depict this static, conventional beauty. These revisions, I suggest, are evidence that Eliot herself, as well as her narrator and characters, is entangled in this complex web of female agency.

## CONTENTS

Short Titles.....	i
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Poor Rosamond.....	10
Chapter Two: The Problematic Perception of Rosamond.....	21
Chapter Three: The Revision of Rosamond.....	32
Conclusion.....	44
Works Consulted.....	49



Short Titles

*Middlemarch*: Eliot, George. *Middlemarch: a Study of Provincial Life*. Peterborough:  
Broadview, 2004.

## **Introduction:**

George Eliot weaves a complex web of action in her novel *Middlemarch*, a web that entangles her female agents: her characters, her narrator, and even the novelist herself. The novel's main concern is its protagonist Dorothea Brooke, a young, wealthy Victorian woman who yearns to make an impact on the world, and to lead, as scholar Bernard J. Paris puts it, an "epic life" (54). What Dorothea desires most is to do significant acts, yet, "enamored of intensity and greatness, and rash in embracing whatever seemed to her to have those aspects," Dorothea blindly and boldly searches for agency – the power and means – that will allow her to perform these acts (Eliot *Middlemarch* 34). We see Dorothea's ambitions blind her to the reality of a marriage with Edward Casaubon: "That more complete teaching would come – Mr. Casaubon would tell her all that: she was looking forward to higher initiation in ideas, as she was looking forward to marriage, and blending her dim conceptions of both" (Eliot 95). With childlike enthusiasm and naïveté Dorothea imagines that her marriage will be "like marrying Pascal. I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it. And then I should know what to do, when I got older: I should see how it was possible to lead a grand life here – now – in England" (Eliot 51). Instead of achieving her great goal, Dorothea eventually devotes her life to a happy marriage with Will Ladislaw; at the end of the novel, however, Dorothea couldn't help "feeling that there was always something better which she might have done, if she only been better and known better" (Eliot 638). The development of Dorothea's search for agency reveals that is not only a complicated struggle, but also a common concern in Eliot's nineteenth century female readers' lives. This is clear in the narrator's appeal to the reader in the final pages of the novel, where George Eliot subtly criticizes society's suppression of

female agency: “But we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas, some of which may present a far sadder sacrifice than that of the Dorothea whose story we know” (640). A fascinating and contrasting struggle for female empowerment exists in *Middlemarch* in the tense relationship between the narrator and the character of Rosamond Vincy, who strives to *be* significant. The anxiety surrounding agency that emerges out of this relationship is at the heart of my thesis.

What makes this relationship so interesting is the opposing nature of the figures themselves – the narrator, whose function and motive critics agree to be one of the most complex to comprehend, and Rosamond, a minor, static character often categorized as a conventional Victorian female. As the voice who guides readers through the intertwined lives of Middlemarch residents, Eliot’s narrator acts as the medium through which readers gain understanding of the text. Yet by frequently shifting her style of discourse, directly challenging readers’ perceptions, and employing a tone that is simultaneously sympathetic and satirical, the narrator gives perplexing and often contradictory guidance to understanding herself. As scholar Barbara Hardy once remarked, George Eliot “created a story-teller who tells everything except a personal life-story” (*Particularities* 126).

In his article, “George Eliot’s Reflexive Text: Three Tonalities in the Narrative Voice of *Middlemarch*,” John L. Tucker discusses a complex network of relationships between the narrator’s diverse tones in *Middlemarch*. Tucker argues that the tone of Eliot’s narrator cannot be simplified to a single general tone, but, like Eliot’s novel itself, is an intricate web. This web is created by the narrator’s use of comedic, historic, and scientific discourse. The overlapping of and conflicts among these modes of speech, Tucker asserts, create four distinct tones: ironic wit, detachment, a Wordsworthian sense of loss, and fear (744). He

presents commentary from the narrator displaying each of these discourses and documents the ways in which the narrator distorts the discourse to create tone. To illustrate the ironic tone of the novel, for example, Tucker points to the narrator's comedic commentary on marriage as a "home epic," which ironically praises the beginning of Dorothea's miserable marriage to Casaubon (Eliot 635). In the Finale of the novel the narrator concludes the historical account of Dorothea's "unhistoric acts," reflecting both irony and a Wordsworthian sense of loss in the tone (Eliot 640). Tucker uses the first line of the novel to demonstrate how the narrator often combines a scientific discourse with a tone of detachment: "Who that cares much to know the history of man and how that mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time..." (780). Examining each of the discourses through close readings of the text, Tucker shows how the tensions between these tones create a "balance of self-awareness" in the narrator and the novel itself (787). The complexity of the tone, Tucker argues, is reflective of the complex web of relationships between the Middlemarch residents.

These relationships are made even more complex when Tucker, in agreement with many other scholars such as Barbara Hardy and Jeanie Thomas, encourage the reader to think of the *Middlemarch* narrator as another character of the novel. While I would refrain from arguing, as Hardy does, that all of Eliot's narrators can be thought of as "one coherent narrating character," I do believe that the constant presence of this "disembodied" voice warrants its categorization as a character in *Middlemarch* (*Particularities* 126). *Middlemarch's* narrator, as well as Eliot's other narrators, "express ideas, opinions, and emotions, which give them colour, substance and continuity" (Hardy *Particularities* 126). And it is precisely

the frequency of these narrative interjections that, I would argue, establish relationships between the narrator and the other characters of *Middlemarch*.

Even the gender of this disembodied voice is difficult to discern. Feminist writers Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argued that the narrative voice of *Middlemarch* “transcends ‘gender distinctions’ by virtue of its ‘meditative, philosophical, humorous, sympathetic, moralistic, scientific’ qualities” (523). This voice, they conclude, contains “a man’s mind and a woman’s heart” (Gilbert and Gubar 523). Barbara Hardy, on the other hand, felt that *Middlemarch*, with its critical commentary on female roles, suggested a strong feminine narrative presence (*Particularities* 138). In my thesis I will employ the feminine pronoun to describe Eliot’s narrator, not only to avoid confusion but also because of the feminist nature of my focus, namely the agency of female characters in *Middlemarch*.

At the same time, however, the difficulty of studying an omniscient, ever-present character, whose knowledge is evident in her wide range of discourses and allusions, is great. And not only is Eliot’s narrator omniscient and therefore ostensibly bound to tell the truth, she is also extremely self-conscious of her influential role. This is clear in her complex ethic of sympathy, a prevalent theme in *Middlemarch*. The narrator’s frequent pleas for sympathy fill the pages of *Middlemarch*, and are often directly addressed to the reader. Jeanie Thomas writes: “The sympathetic heart, like everything else in George Eliot’s world, is deprived of absolutes and struggles for direction through shadowed fields of value, bounded forever by complexity, limitation, compromise” (9). This constant call for compassion is problematic, as Thomas observes, because it is by no means equally distributed throughout the story or the characters. Yet the narrator fully acknowledges this unequal compassion, thus making it more difficult for the reader to evaluate narrative

commentary. Nor is the sympathy free of satire or irony, thus making it a mark of narrative judgment and criticism in the novel.

The issue of sympathy is especially relevant to the narrator's relationship with Rosamond, a self-absorbed beauty whose aspirations are limited to the Victorian conventions of marriage, wealth and social status, and one character of the novel that is never fully awakened out of her egoism. She marries the young, ambitious doctor Tertius Lydgate, and her ignorance of his financial standing, as well as her refusal to accept their debt, contributes to the tension and decay of their marriage. And though Rosamond has a brief moment of redemption when she tells Dorothea of Will Ladislaw's love for her after Dorothea comes to speak to her on Lydgate's behalf, Rosamond does not change. At the end of the novel, the narrator informs us that:

She simply continued to be mild in her temper, inflexible in her judgment, disposed to admonish her husband, and able to frustrate him by stratagem. As the years went on he opposed her less and less, whence Rosamond concluded that he had learned the value of her opinion; on the other hand, she had a more thorough conviction of his talents now that he gained a good income...In brief, Lydgate was what is called a successful man. But he died prematurely of diphtheria, and Rosamond afterwards married an elderly and wealthy physician, who took kindly to her four children. She made a very pretty show with her daughters, driving out in her carriage, and often spoke of her happiness as "a reward" – she did not say for what, but probably she meant that it was a reward for her patience with Tertius (Eliot 637-638).

The narrator's matter-of-fact tone in this passage reflects the simplicity of Rosamond's logic in understanding the unfolding of events. While Dorothea's goals undergo a dramatic and drastic change by the conclusion of the novel, Rosamond's aims have not. Her character "simply continued" as it always had, and her happiness is a direct result of the achievement of her original goals: marriage, wealth, and status (637). This passage makes it easy to understand why Rosamond is often disliked by readers or dismissed as a static figure representing the limited, conventional Victorian woman. Critics too tend to place Rosamond in one of two categories: the victim of Victorian values or its despised proponent. Jeanie Thomas wrote of Rosamond: "Her ambitions are the natural ones of a girl who has been given the most pretentious of provincial educations. She thinks about houses, dresses, and the fact that her husband's uncle is a baronet..." (298). Paris, on the other hand, calls Rosamond "a master manipulator" who is "devoid of empathy and can entertain only her own point of view" (64, 75). Feminist scholars Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, however, assert that Rosamond is "Eliot's most important study of female rebellion," a beauty trapped by her Victorian "miseducation" and her disappointing marriage, who enacts her "silent anger" toward her husband (514-516). Yet whether Rosamond is pitied or persecuted, her attempts to attain attention, happiness, and influence are consistently viewed in a negative light.

While the narrator often admires Dorothea's desire to better the world, she is not afraid to criticize her method of doing it, such as when Dorothea decides to marry Casaubon: "It was this which made Dorothea so childlike, and, according to some judges, so stupid, with all her reputed cleverness; as, for example, in the present case of throwing herself, metaphorically speaking, at Mr. Casaubon's feet, and kissing his unfashionable

shoes-ties as if he were a Protestant Pope” (Eliot 68). Ultimately, however, the narrator encourages Dorothea’s efforts to increase her agency as a female in Victorian society. I use the word “agency” here because I feel that it best encapsulates the focus of my thesis, namely the way in which the acts of the narrator and the acts of characters intersect.

*Middlemarch* is very much a novel about the implications of individual’s actions in a small provincial town. Scholar Stephanie Markovits argues, quite persuasively, that when it comes to action, “George Eliot ‘puts things inside” (1). The significance of minimizing physical action and focusing on the inner turmoil, conflicts, and development of characters, Markovits asserts, is that it exploits the “narrative’s potential to describe the invisible – willing, judging, desiring, and feeling gain the same ontological status as acting” (1). Her assessment seems especially relevant to Eliot’s discussion of Victorian women such as Dorothea and Rosamond, whose actions and influence are greatly limited by their sex. In continuing her discussion on action Markovits notes that “actions, both our own and those of others, inevitably constrain our future choices” (1). Thus I define “agency” for the purpose of my thesis as an individual’s ability to perform such self-determining acts; acts that establish and influence the outcome of one’s life. I am interested in seeing how this issue of agency – of the desire and potential for action – is seen through the relationship between the narrator and the character of Rosamond.

Rosamond attempts to gain agency throughout *Middlemarch*, primarily through her beauty, which she employs to achieve marriage, wealth, and status. Her methods, which exploit the alluring vision of the submissive angel in the house, clash with the narrator’s more feminist tale of Dorothea, who tries to step outside the limits of her gendered role. As the previous passages have illustrated, Rosamond is the female who ultimately succeeds in



the establishment of her own happiness, wealth, and status. She is not forced to settle – yet Dorothea is. Thus an anxiety surrounding female agency arises in the relationship between Rosamond, who conforms to the Victorian patriarchal ideal of women in order to gain power and influence over men, and the narrator, who, while advocating female empowerment, tries to keep Rosamond’s conventional conquests in check. I hope that an examination of this anxiety surrounding “agency” provokes readers to consider the implications of the author, narrator, and characters’ actions, and to ask: what can a narrator *do* in the context of a novel? What can a female character *do*?

After re-evaluating his own initial reading of Eliot’s work, Bernard J. Paris concluded: “I think that George Eliot’s rhetoric is a fairly reliable guide to characters of whom she is critical – such as Rosamond, Casaubon, and Bulstrode – but that it tells us much more about the author than it does about the characters like Dorothea Brooke and Mary Garth, with whom she is closely identified” (26). I agree with Paris – I believe that the treatment of Eliot’s narrator towards the character of Rosamond reveals the author’s struggle to reconcile with the dilemma of female agency. From the tense relationship that emerges out of this struggle, George Eliot provokes the question of how to attain female agency in the Victorian period, a difficult question that we can explore through the narrator’s relationship with Rosamond. And what makes this relationship so fascinating are its constraints: we are able to study a female character whose potential for agency is limited by a female narrator in a story written by a female writer whose action is limited to the context of her novel.

George Eliot, Markovits claimed, clearly understood the complex “connection between gender and action, and also, implicitly, genre” (3). Eliot’s subtle struggle to

weaken Rosamond's influence is seen through both the language the narrator employs in conjunction with Rosamond, and the gendered perspective on Rosamond the narrator presents to the reader. It is evident in both the *Middlemarch* text in its current form and the revisions to the original manuscript. In the next chapter, for example, I will demonstrate how the narrator, while expressing a plea of sympathy for Rosamond, actually diminishes Rosamond's potential for agency in the eyes of the reader through her narrative techniques.

## Chapter One: Poor Rosamond

There are many ways to attack the agency of an individual – we can mock her character, ignore her presence, or criticize her choices. Eliot’s narrator manages to do all three through the imagery, diction and metaphor she employs in conjunction with Rosamond. With these techniques the narrator subtly questions Rosamond’s sympathetic agency, her ability to gain compassion from the reader. Drawing on the work of Dwight H. Purdy, I plan on showing how the narrator’s employment of the adjective “poor”, rather than evoking sympathy reflects an ironic tone that emphasizes the emptiness of Rosamond’s character. Much of this chapter will be devoted to the close reading of a key scene in *Middlemarch*, the moment of awakening between Dorothea and Rosamond. Through a careful examination of the narrator’s language, as well as her treatment of Rosamond in comparison with characters such as Casaubon and Dorothea, I hope to emphasize the subtle ironic and condescending tone in which Rosamond’s potential agency is repressed.

One of the most fascinating and effective ways in which the narrator weakens Rosamond’s agency is through her plea for sympathy. The narrator repeatedly emphasizes the emptiness of Rosamond’s character through her frequent association of Rosamond with the adjective “poor.” In his article “The One Poor Word in *Middlemarch*” Dwight H. Purdy reveals the great implications of this “single monosyllabic adjective” in Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (805). With this simple adjective, Purdy argues, Eliot distributes sympathy and irony throughout the novel, and that by studying the recipients of the adjective, the reader can more fully understand Eliot’s intent in her combination of irony and sympathy. Purdy’s meticulous research confirms his argument: the word “poor” appears 145 times in

*Middlemarch*, and 26 times with Rosamond, 22 times with Dorothea, 12 times with Casaubon, and 9 times with Lydgate (805). In comparison, another one of Eliot's favorite adjectives, "ardent" appears only 27 times in the entire novel. Purdy devotes the rest of his article to a detailed study of the adjective's impact with the four main characters of *Middlemarch*, citing many of the instances in which the adjective is used.

Though his focus is a small adjective, Purdy's argument greatly centers on the word's most frequent user, the narrator of *Middlemarch*. Each examination of the association of "poor" with a character is also an examination of the relationship between the narrator and that character, which offers detailed insight into the development of the narrator's attitude toward characters other than Dorothea. This is especially true with the narrator's frequent employment of the word with selfish Rosamond, which stresses both the areas in which Rosamond is truly poor (intellect, imagination, moral understanding) and the irony in Rosamond's fear of being financially poor. Purdy concludes: "The narrator's particularity about Rosamond, the range of feelings she encourages us to share about her, and the subtlety of those feelings indicate her special relevance to George Eliot's ethic of sympathy" (821).

Yet I believe that a closer examination of the adjective, especially when comparing its appearance in conjunction with Casaubon and Dorothea, reveals the narrator's tendency to employ irony while pleading sympathy for Rosamond. The narrator frequently calls upon the reader to have compassion for Casaubon, another unpopular character of the novel. By stressing Casaubon's insecurities about his work, his failing health, and his wife's devotion, the narrator builds a strong case for sympathy:

Poor Mr. Casaubon was distrustful of everybody's feelings towards him, especially as a husband. To let any one suppose that he was jealous would be to admit their (suspected) view of his disadvantages: to let them know that he did not find marriage particularly blissful would imply his conversion to their (probably) earlier disapproval. It would be as bad as letting Carp, and Brasenose generally, know how backward he was in organizing the matter for his "Key to all Mythologies." All through his life Mr. Casaubon had been trying not to admit even to himself the inward sores of self-doubt and jealousy (Eliot 314).

Through her use of free direct discourse, the narrator gives the reader an intimate look at the fears that motivate and drive Casaubon's behavior towards Dorothea and Will. Her adaptation of Casaubon's arrogant voice, combined with the reality of his fears, show the reader how Casaubon attempts to fight away his fears—he does not let "anyone suppose that he was jealous" or "let them know" he is disappointed in his marriage (314). In the last sentence of the passage, however, when the narrator steps out of free direct discourse and clearly identifies the flaws of Casaubon's character that eventually motivate him to betray Dorothea, it is evident that she expects and desires the reader to understand Casaubon's actions. By giving the reader insight into Casaubon's deepest insecurities, the narrator makes a convincing case for compassion. At the same time, however, the narrator refrains from using the word "poor" once the contents of Casaubon's will make public his distrust of Dorothea, signaling that Casaubon has gone too far with his codicil. Instead, the last "poor Casaubon" is said by Mr. Brooke, a man who often overlooks or excuses his own flaws, thus creating a satiric gesture of sympathy (Purdy 5). The appearances of "poor

Casaubon" are an excellent example of the narrator's ability to evoke genuine or satiric sympathy from her reader.

When the adjective is applied to Rosamond, however, one does not see the same clear distinction. Instead, the appearance of "poor Rosamond" almost always carries with it a tone of irony. Furthermore, while the narrator's sympathetic "poor" often gave insight into Dorothea and Casaubon's characters, the adjective merely emphasizes the limitations of Rosamond (Purdy 5). "Poor Lydgate! or shall I say, Poor Rosamond! Each lived in a world of which the other knew nothing" (Eliot 162). Here the narrator critiques both Lydgate's and Rosamond's distorted perception of each other and their future life together. Rosamond believes that since Lydgate is of "good birth," marrying him will mean "rising in rank and getting a little nearer to that celestial condition on earth in which she would have nothing to do with vulgar people" (Eliot 163). Her narrow understanding of their financial position contributes to the decline of intimacy in their marriage, which is most evident after Rosamond's miscarriage (caused by her riding and disobeying her husband's instruction): "Lydgate could only say, 'Poor, poor darling!-but he secretly wondered over the terrible tenacity of this mild creature" (Eliot 571). Here, notes Purdy, the "emptiness" behind Lydgate's "poor" reveals the distance that has grown between himself and Rosamond during their marriage (6). The narrator employs the word "poor" to emphasize Rosamond's stubborn refusal to see beyond her own needs: "The poor thing saw only that the world was not ordered to her liking, and Lydgate was part of that world" (Eliot 509). All of these instances of narrative commentary serve to distance Rosamond from the reader's sympathy with their ironic tone.

Purdy notes that as Dorothea adapts the self-reflective tone of the narrator in the later part of the novel, the appearance of an ironic “poor Dorothea” becomes less frequent. Thus, assuming that irony is a mark of distance between the narrator and a character, what does the ironic “poor” tell us about the narrator’s relationship with Rosamond? Although Purdy argues that “poor Rosamond” is simply a greater challenge for the reader’s sympathy, I believe that the appearance of irony signals the narrator’s attempt to distance herself from Rosamond. At the conclusion of the novel, Rosamond has achieved her goals of marriage, status and wealth. Yet the means by which she attains them are within the bounds of Victorian patriarchy. I believe that the narrator, unable to stray from her sympathetic rhetoric, instead uses it to subtly highlight the various points at which Rosamond is “poor” – morally, financially, intellectually. Thus while asking for compassion the narrator reaffirms Rosamond’s flaws in the eyes of the reader, creating much more opportunity for criticism rather than compassion of Rosamond.

The most interesting and persuasive evidence of this struggle is in Rosamond’s interaction with *Middlemarch*’s sympathetic protagonist Dorothea, in which Rosamond, moved by Dorothea’s emotional gesture, confesses Will Ladislaw’s attachment to Dorothea. These female characters share striking similarities – both have limited power because of their positions as females in society, both trying to do all they can to make more of themselves. Yet Rosamond’s shining moment of compassion is subtly undermined through the narrator’s depiction of her transformation. The scene opens with Dorothea coming to talk to Rosamond on behalf of Lydgate, hoping to ease the tension between the married couple. Rosamond, convinced that Dorothea has come to lecture her on the impropriety of her relationship with Will, immediately prepares to defend herself: “Rosamond, wrapping

her soft shawl around her as she walked towards Dorothea, was inwardly wrapping her soul in cold reserve” (Eliot 610). Here the narrator subtly slips into a critique of Rosamond, even while constructing her redemptive moment. The repetition of the word “wrapping” stresses Rosamond’s ability to deceive others of her character – she simultaneously wraps a “soft shawl” around her body as she wraps “her soul in cold reserve” (610). The alliteration of the words “soft shawl” and the absence of alliteration with “cold reserve” abruptly alert the reader to the stark contrast between Rosamond’s soft feminine appearance and her stubborn, self-centered perspective (610). Thus the juxtaposition of these contradictory images reveals the narrator’s tension in her telling of Rosamond’s brief awakening. Though her purpose is to present Rosamond’s highest moment as a character of *Middlemarch*, the narrator continues to hold a continuing critical view of Rosamond. And despite the subtlety of these narrative slips, they nevertheless weaken the positive portrayal of Rosamond.

The narrator’s struggle to depict Rosamond’s act of kindness is also betrayed through her fluctuating point of view. Surprisingly, the narrator pays little attention to Rosamond’s inner conflict throughout the scene. In describing the emotional exchange between the two women that awakens Rosamond briefly out of her egoism, the narrator remains primarily centered on Dorothea and her emotions: “Dorothea, completely swayed by the feeling that she was uttering, forgot everything but that she was speaking from out the heart of her own trial to Rosamond’s” (Eliot 610). Here the narrator firmly focuses on the effect Dorothea’s emotions have on *Dorothea* herself; it is she who, “swayed” by the strength of her own feelings, “forgot” everything but the trials of herself and Rosamond (610). Yet the irony is that Dorothea does not actually know the source of Rosamond’s



distress. The narrator, however, does not acknowledge this, nor does she transition to Rosamond's perspective. Instead, she appears to be swayed by Dorothea's feelings, and continues to build the intensity of Dorothea's emotions: "The emotion had wrought itself more and more into her utterance, till the tones might have gone to one's very marrow, like a low cry from some suffering creature in the darkness" (Eliot 610). Here the emotion is so great that it becomes practically personified, wringing itself "more and more into her utterance" (610). Most interesting, however, is the emphasis on Dorothea's emotions rather than her words. Even the narrator's simile, comparing Dorothea's tone to that of an inarticulate pained animal, stresses that it is her strong feelings – her "tone" – which holds the persuasive power (610). Analyzing the scene, Barbara Hardy remarked: "The sense of physical strain and of mutual recognition is finely rendered. Even when the women talk, the words make less immediate impact than the tones of their voices. The imagery is excellently sensitive to the physical communication" (*Particularities* 95). This emphasis on the power of Dorothea's feelings is another way in which Rosamond's moment of goodness is weakened. More importantly, by portraying Rosamond as taken hold of by Dorothea's emotions, the narrator is able to present Rosamond as being without agency in the scene.

Only after the narrator has firmly established the power of Dorothea's emotional monologue does she transition back to Rosamond's point of view: "Rosamond, with an overmastering pang, as if a wound within her had been probed, burst into hysterical crying" (Eliot 611). Yet this is only a glimpse of Rosamond's inner turmoil, for the narrator immediately switches back to her protagonist: "Poor Dorothea was feeling a great wave of her own sorrow returning over her" (611). One cannot help but see the irony of a narrator who near the beginning of the novel interrupts her own description to ask "but why always

Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one...?" (Eliot 242). For at the end of Dorothea and Rosamond's visit, the reader is left asking why Dorothea, in the very moment of Rosamond's brief revelation, is the focus. Here the narrator has the power to bestow agency on Dorothea through her attention. This attention suggests that it is Dorothea whose transformation is more significant, because the knowledge of Will Ladislaw's love for her opens the door for her future in which she can better the world. Rosamond is reduced to the small, insignificant role of the messenger who is moved by Dorothea's sympathetic address.

The violent undertone of the narrator's imagery used to describe the effect of Dorothea's moving plea on Rosamond further serves to strip Rosamond of her agency. Rosamond, unlike Dorothea, is not another "suffering creature in the darkness" – witnessing Dorothea's genuine empathy gives her an "overmastering pang", and feels as though "a wound within her had been probed" (Eliot 610, 611). The narrator's diction seems to suggest that Rosamond, rather than being overwhelmed with relief by Dorothea's kindness, is "overmastered" by physical pain (611). This juxtaposition of Dorothea's external display of emotion with Rosamond's internal distress stresses the power of Dorothea's expressive compassion. The narrator states that Dorothea's emotions don't merely master Rosamond, they overmaster her. The power of these sentiments is seen when the narrator once again veers away from Dorothea to state:

It was a newer crisis in Rosamond's experience than even Dorothea could imagine: she was under the first great shock that had shattered her dream-world in which she had been easily confident of herself and critical of others; and this strange unexpected manifestation of feeling in a woman...made her

soul totter all the more with a sense that she had been walking in a unknown world which had just broken in upon her (Eliot 611).

In this passage the narrator presents a complex portrait of Rosamond's state of mind. While there is no question that Rosamond is affected by Dorothea's exposed emotions, her awakening holds a sense of brutality – it “shattered her dream-world” and makes her “soul totter” (611). The aggressive, violent connotations of the narrator's verbs emphasize this violent awakening. More interesting is Rosamond's passive position throughout the chapter. Here the narrator remarks that this unknown, strange experience breaks in “upon” Rosamond (611). Even when Rosamond confesses Will's attachment to Dorothea she is described as having been “taken hold by a stronger emotion than her own” and “under the subduing influence of Dorothea's emotion” (Eliot 612-613). Each of these passages portrays Rosamond as under, held by, or broken upon by intangible sentiments. The narrator's language firmly places her in a passive position, thus allowing Dorothea to attain agency in this pivotal scene.

The portrayal of this emotional assault on Rosamond escalates as Dorothea describes the difficulty of marriage: “I mean, marriage drinks up all our power of giving or getting any blessedness in that sort of love. I know it may be very dear – but it murders our marriage – and then the marriage stays with us like a murder – and everything else is gone” (Eliot 612). Though there are many parallels between Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon and Rosamond's marriage to Lydgate, the narrator's focus throughout the novel is the murderous effect that Lydgate and Dorothea's “giving” has on their own ambitions and character; Dorothea by her husband's insecurity and distrust, and Lydgate by Rosamond's selfishness and material desire. At this point, however, the narrator refrains from attaching

the word to any specific character, thus suggesting sympathy for all four characters involved in these mismatched marriages.

The potential for sympathy diminishes, however, when the narrator remarks how Rosamond "...while she was still feeling Dorothea's arms round her – urged by a mysterious necessity to free herself from something that oppressed her as if it were blood guiltiness" decides to tell Dorothea about Will's feelings (Eliot 612). The narrator insinuates Rosamond's sudden impulse to reveal her knowledge about Will stems from her desire to be free of something that is like "blood guiltiness" (612). These words imply that Rosamond is moved by guilt. Furthermore, her simile, shortly following Dorothea's observation of marriage, immediately calls to mind the image of a murderer, and suggest the possibility that Rosamond is merely attempting to free herself from the violent feelings of guilt evoked by Dorothea's honest emotions. This is further implied with the narrator's remark that as Rosamond confessed Will's attachment to Dorothea "she gathered the sense that she was repelling Will's reproaches, which were still like a knife-wound within her" (Eliot 613). Ultimately then, Rosamond's moment of compassion is complicated by the violent imagery used by the narrator to describe her response. This imagery, with its emphasis on Rosamond's pain and subtle suggestion of guilt, strips much of the physical and moral agency she gains in her redemptive moment.

The language of the narrator employed in conjunction with Rosamond reflects a subtle effort to suppress the sympathetic agency of this conventional female character. Her ironic plea for sympathy, her lack of attention towards Rosamond, and her violent imagery all undermine Rosamond's potential for compassion in the eyes of the reader. This is an important distinction, for while the narrator cannot control Rosamond's influence over the

other characters of *Middlemarch*; she can decide the *way* in which she presents the events to the reader. The depiction of the scene between Dorothea and Rosamond is significant because of the outcome of the novel – Dorothea stifles her wishes to become the wife of Will Ladislaw, while Rosamond acquires her dreams of wealth, status, and marriage. Thus Dorothea must be presented with agency during her encounter with Rosamond. The narrator's subtle techniques ensure that it is Dorothea whose sympathetic potential has no limits.

## Chapter Two: The Problematic Perception of Rosamond

An eminent philosopher among my friends, who can dignify even your ugly furniture by lifting it into the serene light of science, has shown me this pregnant little fact. Your pier glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. These scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent – of Miss Vincy, for example (Eliot 232).

One of the most famous passages of *Middlemarch*, the narrator's pier-glass parable is used to illustrate the egoism prevalent in each character of *Middlemarch*, and the way in which their egoism blurs their own self-perspective. I believe, however, that this metaphor could just as easily be applied to the narrator's perspective. Though we consider the narrator another character in *Middlemarch*, her importance is elevated by the fact that she acts as the eyes of the reader. And while she cannot change the "scratches" – the events of *Middlemarch* – she can direct the angle at which the light from her "candle" illuminates these events, thus influencing how these events are perceived by the reader (232). Thus the reader cannot help but consider the problematic issues that arise from an omniscient narrator who knows and sees all, but is given the power to decide how the reader sees.

Studying narrative spectatorship – the narrator’s “exclusive optical selection” – is imperative in understanding the narrator’s relationship to Rosamond (232). For both characters reveal a constant awareness of their audience and attempt to make that ever-present audience work to their advantage. Thus the reader, left with no other lens through which to view *Middlemarch*, is unknowingly implicated in the narrator’s point of view through her spectatorship.

While the words of the narrator reflect an effort to repress Rosamond’s agency, her narrative gaze is more difficult to discern. (When I use the word “gaze,” I am referring not only to the narrator’s descriptions of the physical appearance of characters, but the implications and allusions of these descriptions.) In her article “The Gendered Politics of the Gaze: Henry James and George Eliot,” Patricia E. Johnson explores omniscient narrators’ representations of female characters through the theoretical framework of the male gaze, which she defines as a symbolic narrative sight subjecting women to an all-powerful, male-dominated cultural gaze (40). Drawing upon film criticism associating the gaze with the powerful male figure, Johnson examines how an omniscient narrator’s adoption of the male gaze in Henry James’s *Portrait of a Lady* and George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* affect the portrayal of the female protagonists Isabel Archer and Dorothea Brooke. Johnson justifies her comparison through the novels’ similarities: both are 19<sup>th</sup> century realist fiction novels, both employ omniscient narration, both reflect motifs of vision, and both closely associate artwork with women. It is precisely through a comparison of the novels’ art gallery scenes that Johnson shows how each narrator takes on a male gaze, portraying the female protagonist through the eyes of male characters and objectifying each protagonist as artwork herself.

Through her extremely detailed readings of the gallery passages, Johnson stresses the relationship between the narrator's vision and the agency the female protagonist attains or loses through this omniscient spectatorship. Eliot's narrator, Johnson argues, changes perspectives throughout the gallery scene in Rome to challenge and question the male gaze (seen through the observing characters of Will Ladislaw and his artist friend Naumann), thus allowing Dorothea to resist conforming to the male perspective and attempt to create her own (55). Johnson develops a strong argument through her equally divided close analysis of the gallery passages, carefully choosing quotes that support her argument, drawing parallels between the two texts, and highlighting their differences. Introducing many sources to support her assertions, including a creative comparison to sexual aesthetics in Hollywood films, Johnson's argument is an engaging analysis of 19<sup>th</sup> century work using 20<sup>th</sup> century theoretical framework.

While Johnson only offers an analysis of the relationship between Dorothea's representation and the narrator's perception, I believe that the article provokes an investigation into the narrator's gaze with other female characters of *Middlemarch*, such as Rosamond, who encourages male spectatorship. How does one interpret the gendered spectatorship of the narrator through a female character that submits willingly to the male gaze? *Middlemarch* is filled with scenes positioning of Rosamond in front of a mirror, fixing her hair or practicing her poses. She even seems to enjoy being under male observation. And while one could argue that this vanity emphasizes the limitations of Victorian ideals on women, I believe that the text subtly suggests Rosamond assumes agency through the male gaze. Her beauty and her ability to attract men's attention are her greatest assets in achieving her goals of marriage, status, and wealth. By analyzing the physical portrayal of



Rosamond I hope to gain insight into the narrator's struggle with female agency through an analysis of her complex perspective.

Assuming that Johnson's conclusion, that the narrator is struggling against a male gaze, is correct, Rosamond directly challenges the narrator's efforts. She encourages and attracts male observers. This is most evident in the scenes of Rosamond viewing herself. "Rosamond was arranging her hair before dinner, and the reflection of her head in the glass showed no change in its loveliness except a little turning aside of the long neck" (Eliot 462). Every aspect of this scene emphasizes Rosamond's awareness of her appearance—she is standing in front of a mirror, as she does in many scenes throughout the novel, positioning herself to be an image of perfect beauty. What's striking about this passage is the narrator's observation of Rosamond's neck, which she frequently mentions in reference to Rosamond's beauty: "...turning her head towards Mary, but with her eyes swerving towards the view of her neck in the glass" (Eliot 116). This reference, I believe, signals the narrator's uneasiness with the agency Rosamond gains through her appearance. The neck controls the direction in which the head turns, just as Rosamond attempts to direct her own fate through her looks. The narrator repeatedly notes that Rosamond is "having always an audience in her own consciousness" (Eliot 156). And it is precisely this consciousness that gives Rosamond agency; her well-positioned beauty is what catches Lydgate's eye and eventually leads him to marry her.

Yet the narrator seems unsure of how to handle Rosamond's agency gained through her appearance. Initially she repeatedly acknowledges Rosamond's awareness of her audience, emphasizing the intense role this consciousness plays in her life: "(Every nerve and muscle in Rosamond was adjusted to the consciousness that she was being looked at.

She was by nature an actress of parts that entered into her physique; she even acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own.)" (Eliot 119). The narrator's use of the parenthetical implies that she is offering intimate insight into Rosamond's character. While recognizing Rosamond's ability to match her personality to her charming looks, the narrator also makes the unsettling suggestion that Rosamond performs her "character" so well "she did not know it to be precisely her own" (119). The implication of the narrator's observation is somewhat ambiguous, for the reader is unsure whether to take note of Rosamond's talent or her loss of self. The reader encounters the same ambivalent attitude later in the novel, when the narrator comments on Rosamond's appearance amidst a fight with Lydgate: "In reality, however, she was intensely aware of Lydgate's voice and movements; and her pretty good-tempered air of unconsciousness was a studied negation by which she satisfied her inward opposition to him without compromise of propriety" (Eliot 504). Once again, the narrator acknowledges both Rosamond's self-control in her own appearance, and the inner turmoil which she suppresses. One of the narrator's remarks, however, indicates a subtle satirical tone towards Rosamond. Comparing the appearances of Dorothea and Rosamond, she notes: "They were both tall, and their eyes were on a level; but imagine Rosamond's infantine blondness and wondrous crown of hair-plaits, with her pale-blue dress of a fit and fashion so perfect that no dressmaker could look at it without emotion, a large embroidered collar ...and that controlled self-consciousness of manner which is the expensive substitute for simplicity" (Eliot 353). Though she praises Rosamond's beauty, the narrator's final comment is on her "controlled self-consciousness of manner", which she suggests is an "expensive substitute for simplicity" (353). The words "expensive substitute" associate

Rosamond's appearance with artificiality, creating a critical appraisal of her beauty (353). The narrator's frequent acknowledgement of Rosamond's awareness proves that it is not Rosamond's looks she is uneasy or critical about, but rather the way in which Rosamond acquires agency through her looks.

The narrator's anxious gaze is most evident in the object Rosamond is constantly in the presence of: a mirror. Eliot establishes this pattern of perspective early in the novel, employing it in the first elaborate description of Rosamond as she examines herself next to Mary Garth in Peter Featherstone's house: "Mary Garth seemed all the plainer standing at an angle between the two nymphs—the one in the glass, and the one out of it, who looked at each other with eyes of heavenly blue, deep enough to hold the most exquisite meanings an ingenious beholder could put into them, deep enough to hide the meanings of the owner should they happen to be less exquisite" (Eliot 115). In this passage the narrator explains the complexity of Rosamond's character through a visual comparison of Rosamond and the nymph on the mirror. Tellingly, it is the eyes of these female figures on which the narrator centers her visual comparison. Initially, it appears as though the narrator introduces the mirror artwork as a means to stress Rosamond's divine beauty, observing that both nymphs have "eyes of heavenly blue" (115). But the narrator goes on to notice that the eyes were "deep enough to hold the most exquisite meanings an ingenious beholder could put into them, deep enough to hide the meanings of the owner should they happen to be less exquisite" (115). With this observation the narrator subtly reveals the two functions of Rosamond's beauty: to "hold" and to "hide" (115). As her defining characteristic, Rosamond's beauty is the trait which captures the attention of both sexes in the novel. The parallel structure of the narrator's observation suggests that Rosamond's beauty is a mirror

itself, in which images can be manipulated to both reflect other's desires (the beholders) rather than Rosamond's true thoughts and intentions (the owner). Thus the narrator's elaborate diction now appears exaggerated and mocking, creating a critical tone in her depiction of Rosamond. Through her mirrored vision, the narrator establishes Rosamond's complex ability to deceive others, which could be interpreted as weakening Rosamond's agency with its sad suggestion that Rosamond is lost in her own looks, or emphasizing Rosamond's effective employment of her beauty to influence others.

The narrator cleverly attempts to contain Rosamond's agency by adopting the gaze of other characters such as Lydgate and Dorothea. Through the eyes of Rosamond's admiring husband and the compassionate female protagonist, the narrator presents two visions of a submissive, affectionate wife rather than an active woman attempting to control her own fate. Yet this technique also reveals the biased eyes of the beholders, thus weakening these characters' perceptions of Rosamond. The narrator frequently assumes the gaze of Lydgate, whose conventional beliefs regarding women create an unconscious self-deception in which he views Rosamond's beauty as confirmation of her female perfection—the Victorian ideal of the angel of the house. The tension between these two visions of Rosamond is betrayed through the irony of the narrator's descriptive language. In relating one of Lydgate's initial encounters with Rosamond, the narrator states that, "Lydgate was almost forgetting that he must carry on the conversation, in thinking how lovely this creature was, her garment seeming to be made out of the faintest blue sky, herself so immaculately blond, as if the petals of some gigantic flower had just opened and disclosed her..." (Eliot 151). Here the narrator ironically depicts Lydgate's perception of Rosamond. She states that Lydgate is so blinded by Rosamond's beauty that he cannot

even carry on a conversation; though he hears none of her words, he is convinced that Rosamond's beauty "discloses" her character to him. Yet the narrator warns the reader that Lydgate is merely reminded of his love for Laure, a beautiful actress who went on to murder her husband: "Remember that ambitious man who was looking at those Forget-me-nots under the water was very warm and rash" (Eliot 259). Lydgate's confidence is even more ironic as the narrator describes his vision of the "lovely" Rosamond in dress made of the "faintest blue sky" revealed from the petals of a "gigantic flower" – the narrator's overflowing nature imagery is a stark contrast to the materialistic Rosamond, whose greatest fear is poverty (151). The narrator's use of the word "creature" reflects the double perception of Rosamond, associating her with natural beauty and with something that is not quite human (151). The narrator goes on to depict the scene: "She blushed and looked him as the garden flowers look at us when we walk forth happily among them in the transcendent evening light: is there not a soul beyond utterance, half nymph, half child, in those delicate petals which glow and breathe about the centres of deep colour?" (Eliot 295). Once again the imagery used to describe Rosamond implicates Lydgate's bias in his blindness of her true character. Her "nymph" reference emphasizes the fantastic aspect of Lydgate's vision, while "half child" seems to allude to Lydgate's desire for an obedient and dotting female (295).

To further complicate things, the narrator doesn't simply allude to Lydgate's idealized female image; she clearly confirms his clouded perception of Rosamond. "Lydgate relied much on the psychological difference between what for the sake of variety I will call goose and gander: especially on the innate submissiveness of the goose as beautifully corresponding to the strength of the gander" (Eliot 298). Here the narrator's

direct and simple style serves to win the trust of the reader. She clearly articulates Lydgate's expectations of marriage, namely, Rosamond's "innate submissiveness" to his "strength" (298). The use of a common cliché further acts as a critique of Lydgate's primitive notions. And the narrator only grows more ironic in her evaluation of Lydgate's image of his wife. After Lydgate and Rosamond fight, the narrator notes "...how far [Lydgate] had traveled from his old 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, using her comb and looking-glass and singing her song for the relaxation of his adored wisdom alone" (Eliot 462). Though often sympathetic to Lydgate's situation, the narrator is frank in admitting that Lydgate viewed Rosamond as an embodied ornament who would praise his talent and wisdom. "Lydgate's anger rose: he was prepared to be indulgent towards feminine weakness, but not towards feminine dictation. The shallowness of a waternixie's soul may have a charm until she becomes didactic" (Eliot 509). The narrator's critique of Lydgate's conventional ideas about women, and their distorting effect on his perception of Rosamond, assure the reader that the narrator herself is not blind to this distortion, nor is she advocating it. At the same time, however, this highlights the suggestive power of Rosamond's beauty. Thus the reader is left with a blurred vision of Rosamond as influential yet submissive wife.

Perhaps the most problematic perception of all is that of Dorothea, precisely because it largely parallels Lydgate's conventional male gaze in its imagery. In the scene of Rosamond's intimate conversation with Dorothea the narrator states that Rosamond's "eyes met Dorothea's as helplessly as if they had been blue flowers" (Eliot 611). Not only does the narrator's use of flower imagery echo Lydgate's descriptions of wife, but the narrator

explicitly describes the flowers as being helpless. This image of female fragility, though by this time a common motif in *Middlemarch*, is complicated precisely because it depicts Rosamond submitting to Dorothea, the female protagonist who herself struggles to gain power in a patriarchal world. Even more interesting is the way in which Dorothea, much like Lydgate, goes away from the experience feeling empowered by the sense that she has saved Rosamond: “The fragile creature who was crying close to her – there might still be time to rescue her from the misery of false incompatible bonds; and this moment was unlike any other: she and Rosamond could never be together again with the same thrilling consciousness of yesterday within them both” (Eliot 611). The phrase “fragile creature”, employed by both Lydgate and Dorothea, embodies the tension of the narrator’s gaze, highlighting Rosamond’s alluring weakness, which elicits sympathy from her observers, and the ironic way that Rosamond uses this sympathy to influence others. The parallel between Dorothea and Lydgate’s vision of Rosamond and their heroic role in relation to Rosamond presents new problems to the reader. Lydgate’s proposal to Rosamond “is triggered by his sense of Rosamond’s need for him” (Paris 66). Dorothea, with her constant desire to help others, eagerly offers to talk to Rosamond for Lydgate: “I have very little to do. There is nothing better that I can do in the world” (Eliot 588). Bernard J. Paris goes as far to say that “as Dorothea sets off once more to see Rosamond” she “envisions herself as a savior” (54). And in a way, Paris is right, for Dorothea, walks away from her conversation with Rosamond feeling as though she has rescued Rosamond from her troubled marriage. This is precisely the image that the narrator wants the reader to walk away with.

Johnson, in setting up her argument for the gendered gaze, cites Michel Foucault’s association of the gaze with power and surveillance, noting “the person who gazes is

empowered over the person who is the object of the gaze" (1). The relationship of the narrator, a spectator resisting the male gaze, and Rosamond, an object encouraging the male gaze, reveals a much more complex struggle for power through spectatorship. Rosamond acts as a mirror herself, she is the object that both manipulates and strengthens her spectators. These spectators include the narrator, who, in struggling to resist the dominant male gaze that Rosamond enjoys and encourages, adopts the views of others to subdue Rosamond's agency. This is evident in her choice of characters, Lydgate, Rosamond's lover, and Dorothea, the compassionate protagonist. Yet each of these gazes fails to completely strip Rosamond of her power and influence. The narrator, though trying to reconcile with Rosamond's agency, cannot change her own self-consciousness, and must acknowledge the biases of her characters in order to maintain her honest relationship with the reader. The evasive ambiguity of Eliot's narrator in articulating her perception of Rosamond reveals the narrator's most pressing problem: How can a narrator struggling sustain female agency reconcile with a female who attains agency through patriarchal conventions?



### **Chapter Three: The Revision of Rosamond**

“George Eliot herself later told her husband that Rosamond was one of the most difficult characters for her to sustain.” -Jerome Beaty, *Middlemarch from Notebook to Novel*, 41

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the narrator’s relationship to Rosamond is the tension extends beyond the text itself – the anxiety surrounding the portrayal of Rosamond that can be found in George Eliot’s own revisions and notes on her *Middlemarch* manuscript. Eliot scholar Jerome Beaty revealed much evidence of this in his book, *Middlemarch from Notebook to Novel: a Study of George Eliot’s Creative Method*, in which he studied Eliot’s creative composition through a careful examination of her letters, journals, the notebook she kept while writing the novel, the *Middlemarch* manuscript, and the corrected proof of the first few editions of the book (vii). While Beaty’s purpose in embarking on his study was simply to answer: “How did George Eliot write that great novel *Middlemarch*?” his discoveries offer great insight into how the reader can understand the relationship between Rosamond and the *Middlemarch* narrator (viii). The *Middlemarch* manuscript is complex in and of itself, for it actually began as two separate stories, one short story entitled “Miss Brooke” and another novel called “Middlemarch” (Beaty vii). Following Eliot’s method from her first mention of a projected novel called *Middlemarch* on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1869 to the completion of the ‘Finale’ on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1872, Beaty divides his book according to the developments that influenced Eliot’s project (vii). He begins by studying the first eighteen chapters of *Middlemarch*, which were the result of Eliot merging her prose works “Miss Brooke,” a story that closely resembles the first book of *Middlemarch* novel as we know it now, introducing the protagonist Dorothea, which Eliot began writing in the winter of 1870, and “Middlemarch,” a novel about provincial life whose “hero” was meant to be Lydgate,

which she had started working on in the summer of 1869 (Beaty 3). Yet Eliot inexplicably combined these two stories by March of 1871, and Beaty's first chapter explores the changes made to merge the two works together. He then shifts his attention to the changes made to the next fifteen chapters of *Middlemarch*, changes that were necessary to allow the novel to be published in serial form (Beaty vii). Beaty next relocates his focus to the notebook Eliot used to plan and outline *Middlemarch*, observing the ways in which Eliot altered these plans throughout the writing process to achieve the final draft. Finally, Beaty devotes his last chapter to an in-depth study of Eliot's revision process by analyzing Chapter 81 of *Middlemarch* to reveal insight into Eliot's creative method.

One of Beaty's remarkable discoveries in his study of the *Middlemarch* manuscript is the extensive revisions of Rosamond's character, which, I would argue, are proof that Eliot did in fact struggle in her portrayal of Rosamond. When describing the changes following Eliot's merging of the "Miss Brooke" story and her "Middlemarch" project, Beaty scrutinized page numbers, paper type, character name changes, and page spacing to determine where Eliot made revisions. While studying the changes made to the first section of the novel, in which Eliot combined her two prose works, Beaty observed: "...it seems that George Eliot changed her presentation of Rosamond's character and actions. Almost every scene in which Rosamond appears in this part of the novel can be identified as a later-than-'Middlemarch' draft" (40). While the need for Eliot to rewrite her characters to create one comprehensive narrative is understandable, Beaty asserts that the nature of these revisions reflect a clear motive for Eliot—to portray Rosamond in a harsher light. In the prose work "Middlemarch," Beaty notes that only one scene echoes the irony seen in the later drafts (41). The first of these revisions begins in Chapter Eleven of Book One, which

depicts the breakfast scene at the Vincys. My own close reading of Chapter Eleven agrees with Beaty's conclusion. This chapter, which explains Lydgate's preference for Rosamond over Dorothea, is filled with irony in its description of Rosamond as "the flower of Mrs. Lemon's school...where the teaching included all that was demanded in the accomplished female—even to extras, such as getting in and out of a carriage," emphasizing Lydgate's preference for a female of limited education and fashionable, domestic talents (Eliot 103). The scene progresses as Rosamond, Fred, and Mrs. Vincy discuss the newcomer Dr. Lydgate, with the narrator remarking that "Rosamond wished that her father would invite Mr. Lydgate" to dinner, for she was "tired of" the Middlemarch men (Eliot 104). Rosamond's desire to elevate her status is further stressed by the narrator's comment that "Rosamond felt that she might have been happier if she had not been the daughter of a Middlemarch manufacturer" (Eliot 107). The purpose of this scene, Beaty suggests, is meant to reveal "Rosamond's imperiousness and her deliberate planning to meet Lydgate" (40). Not only does Chapter Eleven highlight Rosamond's motives, it does so in an ironic manner that suggests the reader is supposed to look critically upon Rosamond.

Continuing through the manuscript into Chapter Twelve, Beaty observes that Rosamond's conversation with Mary Garth in front of the nymph mirror at Peter Featherstone's house "had also been added some time after the rest of the chapter was written; this passage again presents Rosamond as complacent and vain, putting her in a particularly poor light by contrasting her with the intelligent and forthright Mary" (Beaty 40). Beaty's remarks come from the dialogue between Mary and Rosamond, where Mary, standing behind Rosamond admiring herself in the mirror, laughs saying:

“What a brown patch I am by the side of you, Rosy! You are the most unbecoming companion.’

‘Oh no! No one thinks of your appearance, you are so sensible and useful, Mary. Beauty is of very little consequence in reality,’ said Rosamond, turning her head towards Mary, but with eyes swerving towards the new view of her neck in the glass.

‘You mean my beauty,’ said Mary, rather sardonically” (Eliot 116).

As I discussed in the second chapter of my thesis, the image of Rosamond watching herself, as well as the narrator’s reference to her neck, are often used to emphasize the power of Rosamond’s beauty and her awareness of that power. Thus Rosamond’s statement that “Beauty is of very little consequence in reality” while simultaneously admiring her own beauty in the mirror is, as Beaty asserts, an inarguable instance of vanity (116). As the scene continues, Beaty notes, the readers are presented with another instance of Rosamond scheming to meet Lydgate, further emphasizing her manipulative and vain personality (40).

“Oh Mr. Lydgate!’ said Mary, with an unmistakable lapse into indifference. ‘You want to know something about him,’ she added, not choosing to indulge in Rosamond’s indirectness.

‘Merely, how you like him.’

‘There is no question of liking at present. My liking always wants some little kindness to kindle it. I am not magnanimous enough to like people who speak to me without seeming to see me.’

‘Is he so haughty?’ said Rosamond, with heightened satisfaction. ‘You know that he is of good family?’ (Eliot 117).

Once again, the discussion between Mary and Rosamond merely highlights the contrast in their character – Mary, with her plainness and direct honesty, and Rosamond, with her beauty, vanity, and coyness. The peak of the narrator’s irony with Rosamond, however, comes immediately following Lydgate and Rosamond’s first meeting: “...Rosamond could not doubt that this was the great epoch of her life. She judged of her own symptoms as those of awakening love, and she held it still more natural that Mr. Lydgate should have fallen in love at first sight of her” (Eliot 120). The narrator’s use of scientific discourse to describing Rosamond’s evaluation of herself, of her “symptoms,” marks a stark contrast the descriptions of Dorothea’s passionate desire to marry Casaubon, suggesting that it is not merely love that drives Rosamond’s desire for Lydgate (120). These small observations of Rosamond’s character are made more significant by Beaty’s realization that none of these revisions of Rosamond were necessary for plot development, giving more support to his theory that they were meant to further character development.

What was the purpose of this revision of Rosamond’s character? Beaty doesn’t attempt to address this question, only suggesting the narrator’s “irony and cynicism” that accompany her descriptions of Rosamond may have been “a rather late insight of George Eliot’s into her character” (25). I would like to suggest another possible motive for the shift in Rosamond’s character, one that was made apparent with Eliot’s decision to merge the stories “Middlemarch” and “Miss Brooke.” Although George Eliot never articulated why she decided to combine the beginnings of “Miss Brooke” and “Middlemarch,” Beaty suggests that it arose from the author’s recognition of the stories’ similar themes. He writes:

To the reader of the finished novel the similarity between the careers of Lydgate and Dorothea is obvious. Both have high ideals which come to nothing or little more than nothing; in both cases an unwise and unhappy marriage plays a part in obstructing the realization of these ideals. That is the theme of the Dorothea story, with the added implication that for a woman in nineteenth century England the only possible way of realizing these ideals was through marriage, is clear in the 'Prelude' and in that part of the 'Miss Brooke' story we know was written before it was joined to 'Middlemarch' (Beaty 9).

Assuming that Beaty's hypothesis is true, George Eliot would have been very aware of the agency of women as she began to merge together her stories. I think it is possible that Eliot changed Rosamond's character to create a contrasting model of female agency for Dorothea in *Middlemarch*. Rosamond was the perfect candidate—of all Eliot's female characters she was closest to resembling Dorothea in age, class, beauty, wealth, and most importantly, in her desire to alter her own life.<sup>1</sup> Yet I have shown in my first two chapters, Rosamond, is a complex foil to Dorothea.

Even in studying Eliot's plans for the novel in her notebook, Beaty comes across more evidence of Eliot's struggle to portray Rosamond. Examining a list of events Eliot had planned to depict in the novel, Beaty realizes that: "The only event in the list which does

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<sup>1</sup> The other two females closest to Dorothea's age—her sister Celia Brooke and Mary Garth—do not share as many similarities as Rosamond and Dorothea. Mary Garth, as a working girl who helps support her family, does not have the wealth or opportunities that Dorothea has. Celia, though in the same rank as her older sister, is content to fill her role as the submissive wife of Sir James Chettam, and has no desire to alter her life in any great way like Dorothea and Rosamond.

not come to pass in the novel is the birth of Rosamond's baby; that birth becomes, in *Middlemarch*, a miscarriage brought on by Rosamond's vanity and stubbornness and is a brilliant stroke in depicting her shallow, willful character" (100). That Eliot had actually planned on the birth of Rosamond's child is further supported with the appearance of details in other parts of the notebook, such as the date of the child's birth (Beaty 72). While I don't agree with Beaty's quick assessment of Eliot's motive to depict Rosamond as a "shallow, willful character," I believe that Eliot's apparent change of events does indicate her desire to limit Rosamond's potential for sympathy from the reader (100). For the point at which Rosamond's miscarriage occurs is in the midst of mounting incidences of Rosamond's selfishness – her rushed marriage, her lavish taste, her ignorance of her financial situation. The birth of her child could have been a turning point for Rosamond, an opportunity to awake her out of her egoism and an opportunity for the reader to pity her. Yet instead, as Beaty's research shows, Eliot made a conscious decision to remove this redemptive moment.

Instead, Rosamond's only redeeming act comes as a result of her intimate conversation with Dorothea, which we have already explored in Chapter One, where my analysis revealed that Rosamond's redemptive moment is subtly undermined by the narrator's violent imagery and emphasis on Dorothea's emotional impact on Rosamond. Interestingly enough, the chapter in which this scene takes place – Chapter 81 – is precisely the chapter that Beaty chose to meticulously examine Eliot's revisions in order to gain insight into her method. This chapter was of particular interest to Beaty because Eliot's husband John Cross claimed in his *Life* biography that Eliot:

...told me that, in all that she considered her best writing, there was a 'not herself' which took possession of her, and that she felt her own personality to be merely the instrument through which this spirit, as it were, was acting. Particularly she dwelt on this in regard to the scene in 'Middlemarch' between Dorothea and Rosamond, saying that, although she always knew they had, sooner or later, to come together, she kept the idea resolutely out of her mind until Dorothea was in Rosamond's drawing room. Then, abandoning herself to the inspiration of the moment, she wrote the whole scene exactly as it stands, without alteration or erasure, in an intense state of excitement and agitation, feeling herself entirely possessed by the feelings of the two women (Beaty 106).

If Cross's claims were true, Beaty reasoned, this chapter would be the perfect place to explore Eliot's creative energy. He quickly discovered, however, that Cross's statement was incorrect; there was much evidence of Eliot's revisions to Chapter 81 in the manuscript (Beaty 111). He even goes as far to say that "this chapter was more heavily revised than were most of the others in *Middlemarch*" (Beaty 111). It seems instead that George Eliot, or Cross himself, assumed a popular 19<sup>th</sup> century belief among writers that the presence of genius was seen through moments in which the writer is possessed by his or her inspiration, which produced such brilliant work that there was no need for revision (Beaty 105-106).

Much of the revisions to this chapter alter Rosamond's confession of Will Ladislaw's love for Dorothea. The issue, Beaty concludes, is Rosamond's redemptive transformation. "How can George Eliot motivate such a change? How can she present it?" (Beaty 118).



Such a drastic transformation of Rosamond wouldn't align with her character, so Eliot's task is to make Rosamond's confession seem realistic and probable. I agree with Beaty, and also would argue that the portrayal of the interaction is problematic to Eliot's development of female agency. If this is Rosamond's moment to shine in selflessness, she would be the character who walks away with the reader's sympathy and Dorothea's gratitude. Yet many of Eliot's revisions work to suppress that self-provoked compassion in Rosamond. Instead, Eliot rewrites the passage with "a growing awareness in the plans that Rosamond confesses because she is 'wrought upon' by Dorothea, rather than because she fears that Dorothea will tell Lydgate of the episode or for some other reason" (Beaty 110). This shift in agency to Dorothea is evident in the discrepancies between the passages below, in which the passage on the left marks the original manuscript, and the passage on the right reflects how the passage appears in the final published form of the novel:

"Dorothea's face had become animated, and as it beamed on Rosamond very close to her, she felt something like **awe of a supernatural presence at this self-forgetful ardour in look and speech.** Blushing she said, with embarrassment, "Thank you: you are very kind" (Beaty 115)

"Dorothea's face had become animated, and as it beamed on Rosamond very close to her, she felt something like **bashful timidity before a superior, in the presence of this self-forgetful ardour.** She said with blushing embarrassment, "Thank you: you are very kind" (Beaty 115)

The changes in this passage affect the effect Dorothea's emotions have on Rosamond. In the original draft, Dorothea's emotion-filled speech, her "self-forgetful ardour," is described as being a "supernatural presence" to Rosamond (115). Yet the words "awe" and "supernatural" suggest an obvious narrative praise for Dorothea (115). Thus with her revision Eliot replaces this godlike association with "bashful timidity before a superior, in the presence of this self-forgetful ardour" (115). Though Beaty argues that the changes to

this passage help to tone down the praise of Dorothea, so as to not annoy the reader, I believe that Eliot's motive goes beyond that, to firmly keep the reader sympathizing with Dorothea. Dorothea's passionate "ardour" is still present in both passages; the difference lies in the effect her "ardour" has on Rosamond (115). In the second passage, there is a much clearer submission on Rosamond's part—instead of being vaguely in awe of some supernatural presence, she is meek in the presence of a superior. Thus the revisions attribute much more agency to Dorothea than the original draft, by identifying Dorothea as the more powerful character.

As I mentioned in the first chapter of my thesis, the narrator's fluctuating point of view often lands on Dorothea, despite the fact that this is the moment of Rosamond's transformation, thus stripping Rosamond of her ability to gain sympathy from the readers.

This technique is most evident in the following revisions:

"The fragile creature who was crying close to her—there might still be time to **bring her back into the confidence and faithfulness from which she was wandering was unlike any other**: she and Rosamond could never be together again with the same thrilling consciousness of yesterday within them both" (Beaty 116)

"The fragile creature who was crying close to her—there might still be time to **rescue her from the misery of false incompatible bonds; and this moment was unlike any other**: she and Rosamond could never be together again with the same thrilling consciousness of yesterday within them both. **She felt the relation between them to be peculiar enough to give her a peculiar influence, though she had no conception that the way in which her own feelings were involved was fully known to Mrs. Lydgate**" (Beaty 116)

One can clearly see that all of the alterations to this passage emphasize Dorothea's influence over Rosamond without, as Beaty suggested, annoying the reader with Dorothea's goodness. The first revision clarifies Dorothea's act of kindness in this scene; she is not merely bringing Rosamond "back into the confidence and faithfulness from which she was

wandering,” but she is actually rescuing Rosamond “from the misery of false incompatible bonds” (116). The diction of the revised sentence emphasizes Dorothea’s power to rescue while simultaneously stressing the dreadful situation that she is saving Rosamond from. At the same time, however, the narrator acknowledges an important contrast between Dorothea’s agency and Rosamond’s, for though Dorothea realizes that she has a “peculiar influence” on Rosamond, she is not aware that Rosamond knows of her feelings for Will Ladislaw (116). Thus not only does this passage remain entirely from Dorothea’s point of view, Eliot’s revisions further draw upon Dorothea’s unconscious, selfless influence over Rosamond.

Beaty indirectly addresses the issue of agency when he discusses the revisions made to Rosamond’s confession. The changes to the following passage, he argues, reflect Eliot’s desire to stress the unconscious effort made by Rosamond under the power of Dorothea’s emotions (Beaty 119):

“You are thinking what is not true,’ said Rosamond while she was still feeling Dorothea’s arms round her—a necessity to free her from something that oppressed her as if it were blood-guiltiness” (Beaty 118)

“You are thinking what is not true,’ said Rosamond, **in an eager half-whisper**, while she was still feeling Dorothea’s arms round her—**urged by a mysterious necessity to free herself from something that oppressed her as if it were blood-guiltiness**” (Beaty 118)

The connotations of the diction added to this passage support Beaty’s analysis of the revision; now instead of being confessing to remove the burden of her “blood-guiltiness,” Rosamond is “urged by a mysterious necessity to free herself from something” to tell Dorothea the truth (118). Her reasons for confessing are much more ambiguous in the second passage, even to Rosamond herself. Beaty explains the revisions of this chapter,

stating “the shift from the hateful to the sympathetic Rosamond cannot be made too quickly – Rosamond must act with uncharacteristic selflessness only under the impact of Dorothea’s influence” (113). Yet more importantly, these revisions reflect a conscious effort by Eliot to remove the agency from Rosamond in this climatic scene and place it onto her protagonist Dorothea, thus ultimately suggesting that the reader sympathize with and cheer for Dorothea.

## **Conclusion:**

Thus the problematic issue of agency in *Middlemarch* implicates not only the two figures involved directly in the relationship—the narrator and Rosamond—but also the reader, and more interestingly, the author herself. In my first chapter, I've shown the ways in which Eliot's narrator places constraints on Rosamond's agency through what is normally seen as the narrator's kindest gesture—her passionate plea for sympathy. Yet since the narrator's call for compassion is often accompanied by irony, it serves to highlight Rosamond's flaws rather than help her gain sympathy from the reader. This directs the reader's attention to the reasons why Rosamond is “poor” instead of thinking “poor Rosamond.” Furthermore, the scene that holds the most potential for Rosamond to gain sympathy—the scene of her confession to Dorothea—is thwarted by the narrator's fluctuating point of view and violent undertone, which weakens Rosamond's sympathetic opportunity.

The source of the tension between Rosamond and the narrator is more evident in the second chapter of my thesis, which discusses the narrative gaze, or more specifically, how we as readers can interpret the narrator's perception of Rosamond through the novel's physical descriptions of Rosamond. Thus what the narrator sees gives insight into how the reader sees the narrator's relationship with Rosamond. And since Rosamond is a female who gains power and influence through the constraining male gaze, the issue of narrative spectatorship becomes riddled with gender implications. A close examination of Lydgate and Dorothea's vision of Rosamond, as well as Rosamond's vision of herself, further complicates the issue of spectatorship, for both Rosamond and Dorothea's perspectives echo that of a male's. The eyes of the ever-present narrator are implicated in every gaze,

resulting in a blurred vision of Rosamond as both a subtly clever beauty and a confused and misguided creature. It also makes it difficult to distinguish a male/female gaze. This struggle to simultaneously attain and constrain agency through gendered spectatorship suggests that the author herself is torn in her representation of agency in her novel.

By introducing the work of Jerome Beaty in my third chapter, I assert that evidence of this anxiety surrounding agency can be seen in Eliot's own writing. Her many revisions to Rosamond's character reveal the author's own struggle to depict this static, conventional beauty. What's interesting about these revisions is that they actually attribute more agency to Rosamond; emphasizing Rosamond's scheming tactics to win Lydgate's heart, while simultaneously weakening the reader's opinion of Rosamond. Beaty's observations indicate a pattern of rewriting Rosamond in a harsher light – a pattern that, I suggest, shows Eliot's struggle to portray female agency in *Middlemarch*.

Why then did Eliot struggle to sustain the character of Rosamond? And why is this struggle seen through the narrator tense relationship with Rosamond? There are, of course, no simple answers to these questions. It would be possible to explain this relationship with biographical information about Eliot herself. Scholars such as Deirdre David have taken this approach, arguing that nineteenth century female writers such as Eliot "struggled against an authority which defended itself against the unsettling conjunction of powerful intellect and female sex" – namely, the Victorian patriarchy (viii). The "disjunctions" that we find in Eliot's portrayal of characters like Rosamond, David writes, reflect Eliot's "indignation about woman's subjugation and unease with her own problematical position" (229-230). As a successful female writer who is both empowered and limited by the Victorian culture, Eliot is "forced into evasion and contradiction and to the adoption of

strategies of containment to manage the ideological contention in her cultural and political thought" (David 229-230). Thus "Eliot's sympathetic explorations of disappointed female lives" David asserts, emerge as "segments of the larger discussions about Victorian culture and society in which they participated" (ix). While I admire David's fusion of Eliot's biography with her fiction, that is not what I am trying to do with this thesis. Instead, I am interested in how we can understand the tension surrounding female agency in the context of the novel itself.

For after all, the novel *Middlemarch* is framed by a story of female agency – the failure of Dorothea Brooke, one of the nameless "Theresas...who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action" (Eliot 31). Yet as the narrator points out to the reader, Dorothea still contributed to the "growing good of the world" with her "unhistoric acts" (Eliot 640). Stephanie Markovits writes that "George Eliot stresses the limits placed on female activity throughout her writing" (3). To a certain extent, Eliot, in her attempt to portray realism, embraces this gendered limitation, so, Markovits argues, an acceptance of one's limitation is "really a liberation to *do*" (3). And that is precisely what Rosamond does – she learns to work within the boundaries of her gender. She succeeds in achieving her goals of marriage, wealth, and status. More interestingly, she thinks of her achieved "happiness as a 'reward' of her passive acts (Eliot 638). "Arguably," Markovits states, "Rosamond is the most effective agent – almost demonically so – in all of George Eliot's writing. Her passive-aggressive purposiveness represents a nightmarish realization of the kind of novelistic activity George Eliot seems to be advocating: it is habitual and *petit-bourgeois* in the extreme" (3). This is perhaps the most overlooked difference between Rosamond and Dorothea: Rosamond is always aware of her

agency as a female, and uses it to the best of her ability, while Dorothea is constantly struggling to understand how she can be useful or significant to others. Thus Rosamond makes the very task which Dorothea and the narrator ponder for 600 or so pages seem obviously simple.

While Markovits suggests that Rosamond's well-cultivated agency forces Eliot to hate her character, I believe that the narrator's tense relationship with Rosamond, as well as the revisions to Rosamond's character, are evidence of a more complicated concern for the entire novel. As Markovits notes in her essay, the Finale of *Middlemarch* declares "every limit to be 'a beginning as well as an ending'" (5). The task of George Eliot, her narrator, her characters, and her readers, is then to discover the beginnings and endings of agency in the novel; to understand where potential begins and where possibilities end. The tension that lies between Rosamond, a character who is fully aware of her potential, and the narrator, who is extremely familiar with Rosamond's limits, conveys the difficulty in understanding this complex web of gender, genre, and agency in *Middlemarch*. And we cannot forget that George Eliot herself is not exempt from this web. As her revisions to Rosamond's character show, Eliot's writing determines the actions of her characters, but these actions are constrained to the form of the novel. While it might seem that an author or narrator has complete control over the story she tells, George Eliot believed in submitting herself as a novelist to the same web of community ties that limit the agency of her characters. Markovits notes that Hannah Arendt, a female scholar interested in the relationship between thought and action, closely resembles Eliot's opinion on action, when she states: "It is because of this already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions, that action almost never achieves its purpose; but it is also



because of this medium, in which action alone is real, that ‘produces’ stories” (2). Eliot, Markovits asserts, acknowledges that “because of this web, individual action (especially action conceived on a grand scale; this distinction is important to George Eliot) rarely achieves its purpose” (2). Rosamond, as a character who accepts her limited power, is able to achieve her ultimate aims of wealth, marriage, and happiness, while Dorothea, as long as she yearns to perform grand acts, faces continual disappointment. The role of the narrator, as the voice of *Middlemarch* who portrays these acts, is pivotal in both emphasizing and minimizing the agency of these characters through her narrative techniques. And George Eliot, in determining the actions of her narrator and characters, must navigate through the restrictions of the novel’s form. Character, narrator, author – each female figure, though fully aware of her potential for agency, is caught in the constraints of *Middlemarch*’s web.

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