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BLINDNESS AND VISION IN MIDDLEMARCH

A Thesis

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts

by

Ellen Arnold

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
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ABSTRACT

This study explores how George Eliot uses the many instances of impaired vision in Middlemarch to illustrate the theme of egoism. By nature, each of the major characters is egoistic and thus suffers from some form of false perception.

The first part of the paper focuses on some of the specific manifestations of impaired sight that occur in the book. Both Edward Casaubon and Dorothea Brooke are described as being "short-sighted": too preoccupied with the details of personal desires to notice the needs of other people. Other characters, such as Tertius Lydgate and Rosamond Vincy, are able to see the broad spectrum, but only in certain situations, and thus they too are blind to those around them.

Visual metaphors illustrate the "moral stupidity" into which each person is born, but they also give emphasis to the possibility of escaping from that insensitivity. The second part of the paper deals with the theme of disillusionment and its power to change an egoist into a sympathetic person concerned with the needs of other people, and how that theme fits into the metaphorical correlation between sight and sympathy, blindness and egoism.

In Middlemarch, Dorothea is the clearest instance of the saving power of disillusionment. Through the painful experience of marriage to Casaubon, she comes to realize the egoism of her early desires, and she gradually becomes able to genuinely sympathize with her husband and with other people.

BLINDNESS AND VISION IN MIDDLEMARCH

The many images of impaired or distorted vision in Middlemarch illustrate George Eliot's concern with clear perception, particularly its correlation with a person's ability to sympathize with others. In fact the book contains metaphors in a progression from blindness to clear sight according to characters' levels on a scale from self-centeredness to unselfishness. Many characters in Middlemarch struggle, as Dorothea does early in the book, "against the perception of facts." This inability or unwillingness to see clearly, whether it is used only figuratively, as in Lydgate's "blind" ignorance to Rosamond's designs, or whether it is present as a physical as well as a psychological problem (Dorothea's myopia, for example, or Casaubon's incessant blinking) is an indication of a character's egocentricity and his or her obliviousness to the concerns and needs of other people. Likewise, the rare moment of unclouded vision signals an equally clear perception of one's responsibility to others.

In the character of Casaubon, egoism takes the form of extreme sensitivity and self-preoccupation; the images used are narrowed focus and short-sightedness. "Will not a tiny speck very close to our vision blot out the glory of the world and leave only a margin by which we see the blot?," asks the narrator. "I know no speck so troublesome as self" (409). Casaubon sees only the smallest details and is unable to visualize the "larger,

quieter masses"; he focuses on parts only and neglects the wholes. Casaubon never completes his ambitious (though outdated and futile) Key to All Mythologies because he is unable to visualize the finished work. He hopelessly buries himself in his piles of notebooks, perhaps because he is inwardly frightened that the book will prove to be worthless if he ever does actually write it. Indeed, the reason he becomes so angry at Dorothea in Rome is that she gives voice to the insidious question that haunts his subconscious: When will you begin to incorporate your years of work into the promised book? Why have you not yet begun to write? He becomes mired in the particulars of researching and taking notes, expending his effort on obscure details while failing to question their relevance to anything beyond his extremely limited scholarly scope.

Poor Mr. Casaubon himself was lost among small closets and winding stairs, and in an agitated dimness about the Cabeiri, or in an exposure of other mythologists' ill-considered parallels, easily lost sight of any purpose which had prompted him to these labours. With his taper stuck before him he forgot the absence of windows, and in bitter manuscript remarks on other men's notions about the solar deities, he had become indifferent to the sunlight (192).

Casaubon's short-sightedness protects his fragile ego from the painful truth. It is his way of "blinking" at anything that does not fit into his illusions about himself; whatever does not come within that narrow focus is simply disregarded. In this way, Casaubon's egoism causes him to live his life "always in blinkers" (162),

sheltered from anything that might frighten or disturb him as he trudges through his life.

Casaubon's tendency to take the narrowest perspective infects more than just his professional life. His inability to see beyond the minute details of his research is representative of his inability to see outside of his own inner pains and fears to understand those of other people. Casaubon's most distinguishing characteristics are explored in great depth in Chapter 29: he believes that he is expected to fulfill some outward requirement (the completion of the Key, for example, or the proper, formal delivery of information in conversation); he deeply fears that he may not fulfill that requirement; and, greatest of all, he fears that someone (like Dorothea) will sense that self-doubt and pity him for it. All of these are profoundly self-preoccupied, egocentric emotions; his personality is characterized by "that proud narrow sensitiveness which has not mass enough to spare for transformation into sympathy, and quivers thread-like in small currents of self-preoccupation or at best of an egoistic scrupulosity" (273). During their courtship, Dorothea admires Casaubon for his scholarly knowledge and believes him to be equally capable of emotional understanding. But, early in the marriage, she begins to realize that he is unwilling to employ any degree of sympathetic understanding in his dealings with people;

any "capacity of thought and feeling as had ever been stimulated in him by the general life of mankind had long shrunk to a sort of dried preparation, a lifeless embalment of knowledge" (191). He twists the most unselfish aspect of human feeling until it revolves solely around himself: he marries Dorothea not for unselfish love but because of self-flattering egoism, believing that she is "providentially made" for him and considering her only in the light of her fitness to help him (83); he supports Will not out of a sense of unthinking generosity but out of a self-congratulatory feeling of doing his duty. Just as he constricts the energy of his professional life into the research for his meaningless project, so he concentrates the energy of his personal life on his own self-centered desires and fears. The narrow focus of a person like Casaubon is tragic because, in order to protect himself from the unknown, the painful, or the uncomfortable, he must limit his experience to what is familiar, dull, and mundane. George Eliot's portrayal of the limiting and ultimately self-defeating capacity of an egoism such as Casaubon's is masterful:

It is an uneasy lot at best, to be what we call highly taught and yet not to enjoy: to be present at this great spectacle of life and never to be liberated from a small hungry shivering self -- never to be fully possessed by the glory we behold, never to have our consciousness rapturously transformed into the vividness of a thought, the ardour of a passion, the energy of an action, but always to be scholarly and uninspired, ambitious and timid, scrupulous and dim-sighted (273-4).

Despite the refreshing lack of morbid self-consciousness that makes Dorothea so different from Casaubon, she shares with her husband a narrowness of vision that leads her to make false judgments and even blocks other people out of her range of concern. Near the beginning of the novel, Celia comments on this trait of her sister, injecting, as she will throughout the book, a dose of common sense into Dorothea's over-zealousness: "You always see what nobody else sees; it is impossible to satisfy you; yet you never see what is quite plain" (36). And, much later, the narrator reminds us that "of lower experience such as plays a great part in the world, poor Mrs. Casaubon had a very blurred, short-sighted knowledge, little helped by her imagination" (742). The impression which the reader receives is of Dorothea with a book held close to her myopic eyes, preoccupied with "great thoughts," absent-mindedly bumping her way through everyday life. She quite literally steps on Celia's little terrier because she cannot see it, and she treads on poor James Chettam's heart for the same reason. She unconsciously leads him to believe that she might accept an offer from him and then engages herself to Casaubon. Sir James's heart mends quickly -- he is soon courting the other sister with equal enthusiasm -- but other consequences of Dorothea's short-sightedness are more drastic. Most notably, she idealizes Mr. Casaubon before they are

married, exaggerating his positive qualities and failing to notice the undesirable aspects of his character.

After only their first meeting, she announces to Celia that Casaubon has a "great soul"; she saw it in his face at dinner (20). Upon the conclusion of their first conversation with one another, Dorothea has already begun to think of him as a prospective husband, and her reasons for feeling so are strongly narcissistic:

Dorothea by this time had looked deep into the ungauged reservoir of Mr. Casaubon's mind, seeing reflected there in vague labyrinthine extension every quality she herself brought (23).

The image is doubly critical of Dorothea: not only is she attracted to Casaubon primarily because she imagines him to possess the same qualities she (rather self-righteously) values in herself, but she fosters the illusion that those qualities are amplified and extended in Casaubon. Barbara Hardy refers to this passage in her exploration of the mirror imagery in Middlemarch: "When Dorothea saw herself reflected in the waters of the reservoir, she saw a distorting mirror reflecting herself, not showing through clear glass a true image" (Novels of George Eliot 228). The illusion of Casaubon which Dorothea creates is so stubborn that it blinds her to contradictory facts. "Dorothea's faith supplied all that Mr. Casaubon's words seemed to leave unsaid," as she listens to his chilly proclamation of love for her. "What believer sees a disturbing omission or infelicity?" (50).

According to Hardy, the egocentricity expressed by the mirror image is an example of Dorothea's "inturned vision," but we might group this interpretation with other aspects of Dorothea's distorted vision. Her short-sightedness is, after all, an inability to focus on anything far away from her, an unwillingness to see beyond herself and her desires. No less than Casaubon, though perhaps in a more subtle way, she views her future spouse as "providentially made" for her. She does not look for Casaubon's worth as an individual, but only sees him as a fulfillment of her own need for knowledge and a worthwhile purpose.

The union which attracted her was one that would deliver her from her girlish subjection to her own ignorance, and give her the freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest path.

"I should learn everything then. . . . There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday-things with us would mean the greatest things. It would be like marrying Pascal. I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by" (28).

At times, one can hardly suppress the desire to exclaim, along with George Eliot, "Poor Dorothea!" Dorothea's ambitions are, after all, well-intended; she wants only to learn how she can use her life to better serve her fellow humans.

She did not want to deck herself with knowledge -- to wear it loose from the nerves and blood that fed her action. . . . But something she yearned for by which her life might be filled with action at once rational and ardent; and since the time was gone by for guiding visions and spiritual directors, since prayer heightened yearning but not instruction, what lamp was there but knowledge?

Surely learned men kept the only oil; and who more learned than Mr. Casaubon? (85).

Nevertheless, despite their apparent air of selflessness, Dorothea's ambitions are manifestations of egoism, for they are her personal dreams. Dorothea convinces herself that her reasons for marrying were unselfish -- she says that she wants to assist Casaubon in his work -- but she inwardly hopes that marriage will satisfy her personal ambitions. Her frustrated hope to help Casaubon in his work and perhaps learn a great deal in the process leads her to question Casaubon insensitively about his notes in Rome, causing their first disagreement. While telling herself that her only desire is to help Casaubon, she hypocritically remains aloof from his innermost fears and pains, content with imagining "how she would devote herself to Mr. Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom" (205). Again, emotional insensitivity is expressed in terms of a physical impairment of the senses: "She was as blind to his inward troubles as he to hers: She had not yet learned those hidden conflicts in her husband which claim our pity. She had not yet listened patiently to his heart-beats, but only felt that her own was beating violently" (194). Thus, Dorothea's short-sighted tendency to ignore anything outside of her personal desires not only causes her to form faulty and sometimes disastrous judgments, but it also makes her callously oblivious to the feelings of other people.

Certainly the logical method of correcting a visual field as narrow as that of Casaubon or even Dorothea is to broaden it. But if the novel proposes that one's focus may be too narrow, it also insists that it may be too broad; oversight of small details is as debilitating as preoccupation with them. Mr. Farebrother recalls Lydgate's early saying that "there must be a systole and diastole in all inquiry. . . . a man's mind must be continually expanding and shrinking between the whole human horizon and the horizon of an object glass" (628). The giant Tom in the story which Mary asks Farebrother to tell to the small Vincy children at the New Year's Day party is an exaggerated personification of vision which is not discerning enough. According to Mary, the story is about "ants whose beautiful house was knocked down by a giant named Tom, and he thought they didn't mind because he couldn't hear them cry, or see them use their pocket-handkerchiefs" (631). The ants's tears are evidently too minute to be discerned by giant eyes.

Farebrother's fictional invention is not the only character who fails to perceive detail because of a focus that is too coarse. Rosamond, especially, has removed herself from the details of everyday life and lives in a world that is determined by her personal desires alone. She somehow connects Will Ladislaw's visit to Middlemarch with Lydgate's agreement to move to London since both of these are events which she wishes

to occur; she comes to believe that Ladislav's visit will somehow bring about the move to London. But in focusing on the future events which she desires, Rosamond neglects to consider the details of how they will happen:

To see how an effect may be produced is often to see possible missings and checks; but to see nothing except the desirable cause, and close upon it the desirable effect, rids us of doubt and makes our minds strongly intuitive. That was the process going on in poor Rosamond (759).

Not only does Rosamond's oversight cause her to be unable to foresee events which may affect or prevent what she desires, but it also makes her unable to foresee possible undesirable effects brought on by the same cause, and it makes her unable to consider any alternative to what she wants. When Lydgate tells her that to go out riding again with Captain Lydgate will certainly risk their unborn baby and her own health, Rosamond simply disregards his warning. "There is the chance of accident indoors," she tells Lydgate (570). She wants the pleasure of being seen on a fine horse with a baronet's son beside her, and she will not consider any reasons for why she should not follow her inclination: "What she liked to do was to her the right thing, and all her cleverness was directed to getting the means of doing it" (570). Even after she has an accident and loses the baby she insists that she did not do anything wrong; she believes that even if she had

stayed at home the baby would have been born prematurely.

Inevitably, along with missing the details and additional consequences of what she desires, Rosamond also overlooks the feelings of the other people who are affected by her actions. She not only ignores the possibility that her horseback ride might cause her to lose the baby; she also ignores the pain and worry that she will give to Lydgate by disregarding his warning. Toward the end of the novel it is clear that Lydgate recognizes his wife's self-centeredness. As Lydgate and Dorothea discuss the possibility of his continuing to live in Middlemarch and work in the New Fever Hospital, Dorothea learns that Rosamond's determination to leave Middlemarch has severely weakened Lydgate's resolve to stay. "She has set her mind against staying," Lydgate tells Dorothea,

"She wishes to go. The troubles she has had here have wearied her." . . .

"But when she saw the good that might come of staying --" said Dorothea, remonstrantly, looking at Lydgate as if he had forgotten the reasons which had just been considered. He did not speak immediately.

"She would not see it," he said at last, curtly (755).

In insisting to Lydgate that they move away from Middlemarch, Rosamond selfishly closes her eyes to what Lydgate wants and what would be best for him. "No one quicker than Rosamond to see causes and effects which

lay within the tracks of her own tastes and interests" (571), but it is only within those limits that she is truly farsighted. She is able to focus on and, usually, obtain what she desires, but in doing so she overlooks the undesirable results of her actions, ignores alternative actions, and neglects to consider the interests of others.

In a similar way, Lydgate also overlooks important details in the face of a broader vision. At one of his first introductions to Middlemarch society, a dinner at the Vincy's, Lydgate has already begun, quite innocently, to alienate himself from the other members of the medical profession. Lydgate finds himself in a debate with Chichely over the appropriateness of legal training for a coroner. Lydgate takes the position that formal training in law will not help a coroner at all during a medical investigation; in fact, he says, it will make him more incompetent. A lawyer, he argues, "is no better than an old woman at a post-mortem examination" (155). Caught up in proving his argument, Lydgate succeeds in insulting Chichely, who is Middlemarch's coroner and who has undoubtedly received the legal training which Lydgate disparages. To make matters worse, he also insults Dr. Sprague, one of the most influential doctors in the area, by implying that country doctors (excluding Lydgate himself, of course) are as incompetent, if not more so, than coroners.

Characteristically, Lydgate spies a broad generalization which he feels to be true and tramples any minor (but nonetheless important) considerations as he rushes to grasp it.

Another aspect of Lydgate's obtuseness is his tendency to overlook important aspects of his personal life and the people in it as he focuses on his professional aspirations. This trait appears again and again in George Eliot's description of Lydgate's character. His "spots of commonness," she tells us, exist despite his evident potential for greatness in medicine: "That distinction of mind which belonged to his intellectual ardour, did not penetrate his feeling and judgment about furniture, or women, or the desirability of its being known (without his telling) that he was better born than other country surgeons" (147-8). After his first conversation with Rosamond at the Vincy's dinner party, he goes home to read a book on typhoid fever, "bringing a much more testing vision of details and relations into this pathological study than he had ever thought it necessary to apply to the complexities of love and marriage" (161). Within scientific study, Lydgate is well aware of the need for attentiveness to detail, but he does not apply his capacity for intent observation to his personal life. It is part of his nature to have "numerous strands of experience lying side by side and never compare them

with each other" (574). Lydgate's personality is pulled in two directions. One aspect of his character is dominated by his scientific study, and here observation is thorough, both precise and all-encompassing. But the other half, the personal side of his life, relies on generalizations only, rarely examined in any detail.

The most striking dramatization of this characteristic is Lydgate's mistaken assessment of each of the women with whom he becomes romantically involved. In Chapter 15 we learn something of Lydgate's background, including his past infatuation and disillusionment with Madame Laure, a simple case of being deceived by external appearances. He falls in love with Laure after merely seeing her on stage, before he has even spoken with her. When she stabs her husband, Lydgate is quick to champion her; he is perfectly convinced of her innocence although he has no proof of it. Really, the only proof he thinks that he needs, George Eliot implies, is readily before him: "Dark eyes, a Greek profile, and rounded majestic form, . . . that sort of beauty which carries a sweet matronliness even in youth," and a "soft cooing" voice (148). He is understandably devastated when she tells him that she did, in fact, murder her husband and for no stronger reason than that he wearied her. Suddenly he faces an unknown aspect of her character to which her beauty had previously blinded him.

Lydgate vows that he will never again make the same mistake, that he will devote himself to his work. But, ironically, the woman he eventually marries is very much like Laure. Despite her lack of physical likeness to Laure, Rosamond is similarly selfish and almost amoral -- both women judge the right or wrong of an action according to whether it will help or hurt themselves, regardless of how it affects others. When he meets Rosamond, Lydgate is happy enough to flirt with her, believing that she is the kind of girl who will understand such things as they are meant. But what he sees as an innocent flirtation with Rosamond is regarded by her as courtship in earnest. While he returns home to his medical studies and his search for the primitive tissue, undisturbed by their conversations, she plans their future together. "Circumstance was almost sure to be on the side of Rosamond's idea, which had a shaping activity and looked through watchful blue eyes, whereas Lydgate's lay blind and unconcerned as a jellyfish which gets melted without knowing it" (266). Thus he finds himself helpless when he learns of Rosamond's attachment to him; his state of mind at the moment when he suddenly realizes Rosamond's infatuation with him is "warm-hearted," "rash," "lavish," and "impulsive" (293), quite different from the measured care with which he

approaches medicine. In a moment of surprised reaction, he marries her against all of his earlier resolutions.

But Lydgate's preoccupation with his career can also take on a more egocentric aspect, and what is sometimes a lack of awareness of other people becomes a lack of interest and concern; often, he is not so much unable to see those around him as he is unwilling to take his eyes off of his professional ambitions in order to look at them. Lydgate's assumption that Rosamond Vincy's charms are his to monopolize at will before their engagement is indicative of the way he will think of her as merely an ornament to his own life when they are married. Preoccupied with distant dreams of where his medical research might take him, he is often blind to the feelings of the wife right under his nose.

In a prophetic scene while the Lydgates are still newlyweds, Rosamond plays the piano as her husband reflects upon the life and work of Vesalius. The music forms the background for his thoughts; likewise, the presence of Rosamond is to him "no more than a spoonful brought to the lake" of his contentment (449). The scene is marked by Rosamond's indifference to Lydgate's passionate devotion to medicine, but it also shows Lydgate's own lack of concern with his wife's feelings. When Rosamond expresses disgust at the idea of robbing graves in order to study anatomy, Lydgate virtually ignores her, "going on too earnestly to take much notice

of her answer" (449); when she says that she sometimes wishes, like the cousins at Quallingham, that he were not a doctor, he asks her not to say it again instead of trying to understand why she feels that way. Lydgate, in a phrase that echoes Farebrother's tale of the giant Tom, is an "emotional elephant," too preoccupied by his giant dreams and ambitions to notice how he is crushing those around him. When, much later, Rosamond and Lydgate are described as being "adrift on one piece of wreck and look[ing] away from each other" (746), we cannot be too surprised at the distance they have come; from the beginning both of them have been unable to clearly see that which was closest to them -- each other.

Of course there are many more examples of characters who fail to see clearly; in fact, the perception of almost every major character in the book is somehow imperfect. Mr. Brooke allows himself to ignore the hardships of his tenants until the criticism of the "Trumpet" forces him to look at his duties as a landlord in a new light and make improvements. Similarly, Bulstrode blocks out the memory of his past sins, believing that they are hidden from everyone, even from the eyes of God. But, regardless of the particular metaphor, the characters who suffer from "visual" impairments are alike in that each indulges the illusion that he or she is of central importance. It is this

sense of self-importance, in fact, which causes faulty perception, for such subjectivity necessarily affects the aspect of events and other people, as we have seen. The oft-quoted but nonetheless apt parable of the pier glass encapsulates this idea so central to the novel:

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 a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent (258).

Although the passage refers directly to Rosamond, it is also relevant for any character in the novel, or for any of its readers. To J. Hillis Miller, the extremely subjective viewpoint of egoism is the only one possible:

Seeing . . . is for Eliot not a neutral, objective, dispassionate, or passive act. It is the creative projection of light from an egotistic center motivated by desire and need. This projected radiance orders the field of vision according to the presuppositions of the seer. The act of seeing is the spontaneous affirmation of the will to power over what is seen (138).

For Miller, the terribly lonely fate of going through life encountering only projections of oneself is escapable only by the narrator of the novel. But Philip Fisher convincingly suggests that the self-interested point of view is only the starting point of all

interpretation and interaction. This, Fisher argues, is what Eliot means by the "moral stupidity" into which each of us is born, an inherent self-centeredness where everyone begins but out of which it is possible to grow (185). The disparity between the interpretations of Fisher and Miller revolves around Fisher's incorporation of this essential aspect of the novel, which Miller fails to acknowledge: the potentially enhancing effect of experience on a character's perception. In Adam Bede, Eliot tells us that sorrow and pain, especially, have the power to teach a more sympathetic point of view:

Deep, unspeakable suffering may well be called a baptism, a regeneration, the initiation into a new state. . . . Doubtless a great anguish may do the work of years, and we may come out from that baptism with a soul full of new awe and new pity (309-10).

And later in the same work she reiterates this idea:

"Our sorrow lives in us as an indestructible force, only changing its form, as forces do, and passing from pain into sympathy -- the one poor word which includes all our best insight and our best love " (353).

In Middlemarch, the metamorphosis from selfishness through experience to sympathy is not so miraculous or spontaneous as the earlier work might suggest, but the correlation remains. Bernard J. Paris has said that this moral growth stems from an "awakening to the disparity between the inward and the outward" which "makes clear to the individual the real relations of

things and is the baptism of sorrow which renders him capable of true sympathy and fellowship" (28-29). With experience comes disillusionment, what Paris calls a recognition of the "real relations of things" and what Barbara Hardy terms the "moment of disenchantment." It is literally a removal of illusion, primarily that "flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement," and its ideal result is the ability to acknowledge the validity of others' points of view and the willingness to enter into sympathy with them. By some, usually painful, encroachment of reality upon the illusory world in which a character occupies the position of most importance, the character is jarred into recognizing his or her true place in the world of reality.

Barbara Hardy cites evidence from Eliot's own life that illustrates this pattern. She quotes a letter from Eliot to Sara Hennell which speaks of an experience common to all people of awaking from the poetry of the past to the "naked prose" of the present ("Moment of Disenchantment" 55). The poetry which Eliot speaks of, says Hardy, is "erected on a dream, a dream in which the dreamer occupies the centre, and disenchantment is the waking which forces the dreamer to look painfully at a reality which puts him in his place" (61). Once this is accomplished, one is able to look outside of oneself to recognize the importance of others.

In Middlemarch, the experience of Dorothea is the best illustration of this pattern of moral growth. Her marriage to Casaubon is the initial painful experience which leads her from egoism to genuine sympathy. Dorothea's growth out of the insensitivity which we have already explored is a continuous process composed of several instances of disillusionment and enlightenment, but perhaps the most important of these are two scenes in which she is rejected outright by Casaubon.

The first of Dorothea's disillusionments occurs while she and her husband are in Rome, after they argue over Dorothea's question of when Casaubon will begin to organize his notes. Dorothea is at first indignant and resentful, but, helped by Ladislaw's hint that Casaubon's work is really worthless, she gradually realizes that Casaubon's pain must feel very much like her own recently wounded pride, and she begins to feel some true sympathy for him, "the first stirring of a pitying tenderness fed by the realities of his lot and not by her own dreams" (203), which leads her to humble herself and apologize for her behavior. Casaubon's rejection of her heartfelt apology is the final blow to her dream of ever establishing an ardent, reciprocal relationship with her husband, and, along with the grief that she feels at the death of that dream, she becomes aware of a possible similar sadness in his life:

Dorothea remembered it to the last with the vividness with which we all remember epochs in our

experience when some dear expectation dies, or some new motive is born. To-day she had begun to see that she had been under a wild illusion in expecting a response to her feeling from Mr. Casaubon, and she felt the waking of a presentiment that there might be a sad consciousness in his life which made as great a need on his side as on her own (204-5).

This day marks the beginning of her departure from seeing things only in the light of how they may affect her, toward the knowledge that Casaubon -- and, by a logical extension, any other person -- has "an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference" (205).

The second scene comes at the end of Book IV, when Lydgate tells Casaubon that his illness might result in early death and the end of his life's work. Dorothea has learned, through the months of marriage, to read the signs of her husband's mood, so she senses that he is deeply troubled by the news. She goes out to join him in the garden after Lydgate leaves, hoping to relieve his burden in some way, or at least to share his grief. But Casaubon perpetually fears that someone might pity him. He responds to her sympathetic look with a chilly glance and remains impassive when she attempts to link arms with him. When they reach the house, Casaubon locks himself alone in the library without a word of explanation or apology to Dorothea. Her reaction to this rejection is anger, "stronger than any she had felt since her marriage" (416). But after her initial

outburst of self-justification, she checks herself and has a sudden clear vision of her situation:

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. And just as clearly in the miserable light she saw her own and her husband's solitude -- how they walked apart so that she was obliged to survey him (417).

From this moment of intense disillusionment, she is able to feel an even greater sympathy for her husband. It takes her the whole evening to fully conquer her anger, but she remembers her earlier feeling of how much it must have hurt him to learn the seriousness of his illness, and she finally resolves to meet him when he comes upstairs, even if it means facing rejection again; "she would never again expect anything else" (418). But when he sees her waiting for him on the stairs with a light in her hand, he seems almost grateful and gently warns her against using up her young life in waiting for him. Dorothea rejoices that her powers of sympathy won over her anger, feeling "something like the thankfulness that might well up in us if we had narrowly escaped hurting a lamed creature" (419).

Dorothea's experiences during her marriage better enable her to sympathize with other people after her husband dies. When she learns that Lydgate is suspected of taking a bribe from Bulstrode, she immediately plans to do something to convince them of his innocence. "'I believe that people are almost always better than their neighbours think they are,'" she tells Farebrother.

"Some of her intensest experience in the last two years had set her mind strongly in opposition to any unfavourable construction of others" (723). Reluctantly, she allows Farebrother, Sir James, and Mr. Brooke to convince her that any direct action would have adverse effects, but when Lydgate comes to discuss the hospital, she leaps at the opportunity to let him know that she believes in his innocence and is willing to support him. For the first time since the trouble began, he is able to tell his story from the beginning, with the assurance that his listener believes in his innocence.

Lydgate also finally decides to talk to Dorothea about his married life because he knows she has had a similar experience and will sympathize. "Why should I not tell you?," he asks her. "-- you know what sort of bond marriage is. You will understand everything" (755). Dorothea is able to help Lydgate as few people could, intuitively knowing what to say and what to avoid saying. "Dorothea refrained from saying what was in her mind -- how well she knew that there might be invisible barriers to speech between husband and wife. This was a point on which even sympathy might make a wound" (756). At the end of their conversation she is able to give him some hope by promising to talk to Farebrother and Rosamond and lending him the money to pay back Bulstrode.

But marriage to Casaubon is not the only experience which heightens Dorothea's awareness of others through

pain; the book holds yet another trial for Dorothea. Her pain and sorrow when she believes Will is having an affair with Rosamond are greater than any she has ever felt, and her emergence from preoccupation with her own feelings to concern for the other three people involved is proportionately dramatic. At first, as in her previous struggles, her reaction is accusation and proud indignation. As she leaves Rosamond's house, she is

animated by a . . . self-possessed energy. . . . It was as if she had drunk a great draught of scorn that stimulated her beyond the susceptibility to other feelings. . . . She had never felt anything like this triumphant power of indignation in the struggles of her married life, in which there had always been a quickly subduing pang; and she took it as a sign of new strength. . . . 'Dodo, how very bright your eyes are!' said Celia . . . 'And you don't see anything you look at, Arthur or anything' (765).

Dorothea's sense of self-possession, her indignation, and her blindness to everything around her all prove that she is facing this tragedy in her old egoistic way. She goes through the rest of the day driven by the energy from her anger, but when she is at last alone in her room, the terrible pain of the situation overtakes her. She wrestles with her anger and pain all night, but she finally overcomes them and reminds herself of yesterday's errand. She draws upon her grief and her knowledge of the troubles in the Lydgates' marriage, converting them into sympathy:

All the active thought with which she had before been representing to herself the trials of Lydgate's lot, and this marriage union which, like her own, seemed to have its hidden as well as evident

troubles -- all this vivid sympathetic experience returned to her now as a power: it asserted itself as acquired knowledge asserts itself and will not let us see as we saw in the day of our ignorance. She said to her own irremediable grief, that it should make her more helpful, instead of driving her back from effort (776).

From this experience she finally comes to a level of unselfishness toward which she has been moving all along: "The objects of her rescue were not to be sought out by her fancy: they were chosen for her" (777). As she realizes this supreme relinquishment of egoism and asks herself what she should do to help the other three people involved in the incident, she sees that it is daylight. In a scene which brilliantly reverses the self-concern which had distorted her vision, she looks out of her window to see a man with a bundle, a woman carrying her baby, a shepherd and his dog -- and for the first time she realizes that she is only one of the living things that make the whole of life; she finally sees herself in correct proportion with everything and everyone around her:

Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining (777).

Mrs. Garth tells Fred Vincy that "young people are usually blind to everything but their own wishes, and seldom imagine how much those wishes cost others" (560 emphasis added), suggesting that the experience that

comes with age automatically brings a more sympathetic understanding. But, as we have seen, there are old people who suffer the same blindness; likewise, there are characters who experience pain but nevertheless fail to see more clearly as a result. Lydgate and Rosamond are two such characters.

Lydgate, instead of growing morally through his experiences with Middlemarch society and with Rosamond, is finally defeated and embittered by them. He convinces himself that the only way to deal with his problems in Middlemarch is to run away from them, so he makes up his mind to move away and establish a practice that will bring money, not controversy. Dorothea offers to give him financial help until he can support himself and his wife again, but he has already given up:

It is very clear to me that I must not count on anything else than getting away from Middlemarch as soon as I can manage it. I should not be able for a long while, at the very best, to get an income here, and -- and it is easier to make necessary changes in a new place. I must do as other men do and think what will please the world and bring in money; look for a little opening in the London crowd, and push myself; set up in a watering-place, or go to some southern town where there are plenty of idle English, and get myself puffed -- that is the sort of shell I must creep into and try to keep my soul alive in (757).

It is a pitiful speech, especially when we remember that Lydgate is trying to provide for Rosamond. But it is also bitter, and in the Finale we learn that there will be many times when Lydgate's resentment of the burden of Rosamond's life upon him will overcome his sympathy for her: "He once

called her his basil plant, and when she asked for an explanation said that basil was a plant which had flourished wonderfully on a murdered man's brains" (821). Lydgate sacrifices his dreams of scientific success, but in the end his bitterness defeats any positive consequences of that sacrifice.

The scene in which Dorothea finally carries out her promise to speak to Rosamond about Lydgate, besides illustrating Dorothea's hard-won powers of sympathy, also invites comparison of the two women and underscores the qualities which allow Rosamond to remain unaffected and unsoftened by what happens to her. Dorothea is motivated by concern for Rosamond, while Rosamond is concerned about her own feelings only. Dorothea takes off her gloves, "from an impulse which she could never resist when she wanted a sense of freedom," and puts out her hand when she sees Rosamond; Rosamond prepares herself to meet Dorothea by wrapping a shawl about her shoulders, "inwardly wrapping her soul in cold reserve" (781). Each of the women is initially uneasy because of Ladislav, but for very different reasons. Dorothea thinks that Rosamond has been involved in some sort of affair with him, and she is anxious not to appear jealous or critical. Rosamond believes that Dorothea is her rival, that she knows she is the "preferred" woman and has come to flaunt it in front of her. Dorothea's energetic concern radiates outward; she looks out away from herself to find the needs of the other person involved. Rosamond, on the other

hand, is still ruled by her inner feelings and wants; she worries about how the meeting will affect her personally, how she will appear to the other woman, and how she can protect herself from further pain.

Rosamond does have a moment of disorientation, in which she is momentarily aware of an alternative to her selfishness, but its effects are diluted and short-lived. Rosamond realizes that she is wrong about Dorothea, that in fact Dorothea has come to tell her the truth about Lydgate, and her accustomed foundation of easy confidence in herself and criticism of others begins to crumble:

This strange manifestation of feeling in a woman whom she had approached with a shrinking aversion and dread, as one who must necessarily have a jealous hatred towards her, made her soul totter all the more with a sense that she had been walking in an unknown world which had just broken in upon her (784).

Dorothea mistakenly assumes that Rosamond's tears of confusion and hysteria are tears of guilt over Ladislav. She begins gently, fearfully, to tell Rosamond that her duty is with her husband when Rosamond realizes what Dorothea is thinking. Acting on a sudden impulse, Rosamond tells Dorothea that Ladislav is not in love with herself but with Dorothea. Dorothea, typically, overestimates the goodness in Rosamond's words, which are partly a reflection of her own energy and partly a reaction against Ladislav's hurtful words of the day before. In the Finale, we learn that Rosamond's generous impulse was only temporary, practically

accidental, for although she "never committed a second compromising indiscretion," she "simply continued to be mild in her temper, inflexible in her judgement" -- that is, as self-centered and blind to others as she ever was (821).

It is important to recognize that Dorothea, in learning to sympathize and to acknowledge others' points of view, does not leave her individuality behind. As Karen Chase points out, the pier-glass image implies that everyone remains bound by his or her unique perspective. "Still, and crucially," says Chase, "this limitation does not damn Dorothea to moral stupidity. She will grow, not by leaving her subjectivity behind, but by learning to feel within it that other subjectivities are equivalent" (168). This point is important to an understanding of Eliot's vision of a person's place among other human beings. Conversion to altruism does not entail abolition of the individual personality, but expansion of the self to include all people in its field of sympathetic vision. The last paragraph of the novel contains a pungent image of expansion and comprehensiveness. It compares Dorothea to a river that has been divided into many small channels for the good of the land around it: "Her finely-touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent

itself in channels which had no great name on the earth" (825).

Philip Fisher draws a wonderful analogy between this idea of expansion as it refers to the experience of a character in the novel, such as Dorothea, and as it applies to the reader of the text:

The word experience is the great goal of the novel, and the alternative to the egoism of a fixed point of view is not some other charitable, selfless, fixed point of view, but an epic comprehensiveness that weakens the drama of the self by developing the drama of a "world," a comprehensiveness that replaces the single candle with a prismatic, complex way of reading experience that reaches behavior. This epic exhaustiveness is the method of the novel itself (185).

Through the multiple points of view which Eliot presents in the book, the reader vicariously lives the experiences of the characters, gains a sympathetic view of each of them, and comes away from the novel with a better understanding of his or her fellow human beings

It is partly through the use of metaphors of vision that Eliot accomplishes her message of the narrowness of egoism and the worthiness of sympathetic altruism. In her hands, blindness or impaired vision illustrates crippling self-centeredness; disillusionment represents the figurative removal of the "speck" of self which distorts vision; and clear sight becomes a metaphor for understanding others and sympathizing with them.

Through this device, an abstract philosophy of doing good for others takes on personal meaning, a "distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling

-- an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects" (205).

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