

[論 文]

Middlemarch:
The Fall of Lydgate

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SUMMARY

The critical attention on Middlemarch has usually focused on the characters of Ladislav and Dorothea. This attention, at least that shown to Ladislav, is misdirected, because the character of Lydgate is much more central to a proper understanding of the structure and theme of the novel. The dynamic of the fall of Lydgate is pivotal, and through an understanding of why Lydgate's moral self is compromised, we arrive at the thematic center and purpose of the novel.

In George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, a great deal of critical attention has been directed towards the relationship between Dorothea and Ladislav. Lloyd Fernando has justly criticized such a critical focus as misdirected, arguing that the character of Lydgate is pivotal to any proper understanding of the novel. The pairing of the characters of Dorothea and Lydgate as twin hubs around which the plot of *Middlemarch* revolves yields a far deeper understanding of the novel than does the pairing of Dorothea with Ladislav. When seen in such a light, the fall and moral destruction of Lydgate becomes of central importance in the thematic construction of *Middlemarch*.

George Eliot introduces the character of Lydgate amidst a flurry of speculation by the people of *Middlemarch*. It is whispered that he has rich relatives in high places, and he is seen as a young man on his way up in the world. Mr. Brooke, Dorothea's uncle, observes: "Lydgate has a lot of ideas, quite new, about ventilation and diet, that sort of thing." (p.62)

After setting the stage and arousing our curiosity, Lydgate is presented, and Eliot soon ushers us into his consciousness. We get to know his dreams, his ambitions, and his fears. Ironically, the first interior observation the reader is allowed to glimpse within Mr. Lydgate's thoughts are his reflections on Dorothea.

"She is a good creature--that fine girl--but a little too earnest," he thought. "It is troublesome to talk to such women. They are always wanting reasons, yet they are too ignorant to understand the merits of any question, and usually fall back on their moral sense to settle things after their own taste." (p.63)

This small insight gives the reader an intimation of Lydgate's fatal flaw : his lack of judgment when choosing a marriage partner. All his dreams and ideals are eroded, piece by piece, by this single, fatal flaw.

Lydgate's fatal mistake in judgment is further highlighted in the very next chapter:

Lydgate, in fact, was already conscious of being fascinated by a woman strikingly different from Miss Brooke: he did not in the least suppose that he had lost his balance and fallen in love, but he had said of that particular woman, "She is grace herself; she is perfectly lovely and accomplished. That is what a woman ought to be: she out to produce the effect of exquisite music." (pp.63-64)

The woman Lydgate is referring to is, of course, Rosamond Vincy, the woman who will shortly become his wife. At this early point Lydgate has no intentions to marry, seeing that event as a matter of years in the future.

Eliot, though, observes that "when a man has seen the woman whom he would have chosen if he had intended to marry speedily, his remaining a bachelor will usually depend on her resolution rather than on his." (p.64) Lee R. Edwards brings up a crucial point when she writes:

It is usual to see Rosamond as simply the typical nineteenth-century heroine exposed by the persistent hostility of George Eliot's vision. This view seems to me to be both distorted and reductive, for it fails to take notice of precisely that facet of Rosamond's character which is most interesting: the strength of her will. (Edwards)

Her will is critical, because in a very real sense Rosamond wills her marriage to Lydgate. She has looked around at the Middlemarch bachelors and none of them will do. She is attracted to outward appearances, and Lydgate's manner of speech, his bearing, plus the fact of his being a mysterious outsider with supposedly aristocratic connections, all combine to promise her a step up from her present social level. She intuitively knows that Lydgate is attracted to her, and her feminine charms, accentuated by a charmingly spontaneous welling up of tears in her blue eyes, vanquishes Lydgate's opposition. "In half an hour he left the house an engaged man, whose soul was not his own, but the woman's to whom he had bound himself." (p.208)

Lydgate's fall is as slow as it is relentless. When the destruction of his character is complete, he "...ends his days a prostitute to the wealthy and a specialist in the treatment of gout." (Hornback) . His tragedy is made all the more telling because of the importance his character assumes in the novel:

At the center of the Middlemarch story stands Lydgate. Around him are circled Mr.Vincy, Rosamond, Fred, the Garths, Mr. Brooke, Ladislaw, Raffles, and Bulstrode. Each of them is related in some important way to Lydgate, except for Mr. Brooke and Fred, whose relationships with him are indirect, through Casaubon and Mr. Farebrother. (Hornback)

The strings of the plot are firmly connected to Lydgate's actions, and when he finds himself slowly drowning in a sea of debt the waves spread out and affect the other characters in the novel.

MIDDLEMARCH:HE FALL OF LYDGATE

George Eliot sees society as a closely woven web which, touched at any point, trembles in all its parts. Hence the awful necessity of right action and avoidance of wrong. (Allen)

What makes the destruction of Lydgate so painful yet instructive is the knowledge that things might have been different if Lydgate had married someone like Dorothea, instead of Rosamond. The twin forces of Rosamond's unsupportive attitude concerning their financial troubles and Lydgate's tender concern for Rosamond's happiness crush any chance he has of escaping his end.

Lydgate is so richly successful a character that we have regretted strongly at moments, for immediate interest's sake, that the current of his fortunes should not mingle more freely with the occasionally thin-flowing stream of Dorothea's. (James)

Henry James had a mixed reaction to *Middlemarch*, acknowledging its greatness while criticizing its shortcomings. But James found nothing to criticize in the depiction of Lydgate's and Rosamond's troubles.

There is nothing more powerfully real than these scenes in all English fiction, and certainly nothing more intelligent. Their impressiveness and (as regards Lydgate) their pathos is deepened by the constantly low key in which they are pitched. It is a tragedy of unpaid butcher's bills, and the urgent need for small economies. (James)

George Stephen makes much the same point when he writes:

The skill with which Lydgate's gradual abandonment of his lofty aims without making him simply contemptible, forces us to recognize the truthfulness of the conception. It is an inimitable study of such a fascination as the snake is supposed to exert upon the bird: the slow reluctant surrender, step by step, of the higher to the lower nature, in consequence of weakness which is at least perfectly intelligible. George Eliot's "psychological analysis" is here at its best. (Stephen)

What is especially ironic is that Lydgate's loss of his hopes and dreams is viewed as a success by most people. His treatment of rich patients suffering from gout assures him of financial success and Rosamond's approval. The price paid for his success is terrible, for he is a moral failure to himself. "He always regarded himself as a failure: he had not done what he once meant to do." (p. 575)

The main theme of *Middlemarch* is not failure, nor is the main point of the characterization of Lydgate to show the inevitable destruction of one's hopes and dreams. In George Eliot's *Letters*, she writes candidly of the moral purpose of her art, and her comments give us the key in understanding both *Middlemarch* and the fate of Lydgate.

If art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally...and the only effect I ardently long to produce in my writings is that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring, human beings. (*Letters*, III, 111)

As in all her art, Eliot has a moral purpose. Eliot is very careful to point out to her publisher, Blackwood, that: "There is no unredeemed tragedy in the solution of the story." (*Letters*, V,296) When coming to terms with the tragedy of Lydgate, we must focus on Eliot's stress on the term unredeemed. The tragedy of Lydgate is redeemed in two ways. First, he ends his days a financial success and as a well-known and envied physician. True, he is a failure to himself, but even this failure is not unredeemed because secondly, Lydgate did not have to fall. He had it within his power to succeed. He was destroyed by the flaw of his lack of insight into Rasond's character. We inevitably feel that a suitable partner would have prevented his abandoning his dreams. Dorothea Brooke and Mary Garth are women that made differences in their spouses lives. We feel certain that Will Ladislaw and Fred Vinny would have failed as human beings had they not had the understanding and support of understanding, compassionate wives.

All our lives are intertwined, and moral decisions have moral consequences. The tragedy of the fall of Lydgate was that he had great possibilities and noble ambitions. George Eliot shows us that actions have consequences, that we are all just one disastrous moral decision away from failure, and it is only by the understanding and compassion of others that tragedies such as Lydgate's can be avoided. This is Eliot's point, this is the lesson of Lydgate, and this is the primary theme of *Middlemarch*.

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