

**Show how any two of the relationships portrayed in *Middlemarch* illustrate the balance of power between men and women.**

'*A study of provincial life*' is the subtitle of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and throughout her study, Eliot uses her well-developed characters to embody many different aspects of Victorian society. Power is one of the elements of the novel which is constantly alluded to through its close associations with a subject near to the heart of the residents of Middlemarch: money. Indeed, money can be seen as a pivotal thread within many of the book's subplots, such as Fred Vincey's future with Mary and Bulstrode's history and subsequent downfall with Raffles. Money is used to demonstrate power between the four protagonists in their respective relationships, but as the reader learns more about each of them in the course of the novel, other examples of the distribution of power are also apparent.

Within their particular relationships it is Casaubon and Rosamund that ultimately demonstrate their hold over their spouses. Casaubon is portrayed as a wealthy bachelor who considers the idea of a wife to be an attractive proposition, but he perceives Dorothea to be a "rare combination of elements both solid and attractive, adapted to supply aid in graver labours, and to cast a charm over vacant hours" (Eliot, 1994, p43ff). In this he demonstrates his absolute egocentricity in considering not what he could possibly offer her, but only that which should could do for him. Worryingly, this situation seems to satisfy the touchingly naïve hopes of marriage that Dorothea harbours, as to her, the prospect of Casaubon even considering her as a wife, "touched her with an almost reverential gratitude" (*ibid.*, p28). In the same way in which Casaubon only considers what she can offer him, Dorothea seems concerned only with serving him as she questions herself "how she could be good enough for Mr Casaubon" (*ibid.*, p51) when it is made clear to the reader that could otherwise have far more potential.

Throughout the novel Dorothea can be seen to be putting other people ahead of herself, such as her obsequious behaviour towards Casaubon's study, asking him to consider supporting Ladislav financially, and her charitable concern for the labourers and the school. Her deference towards Casaubon only serves

to give him a stronger hold over her, and makes the possibility of any compromise from him within their relationship even more remote.

Even in the event of his death, Casaubon continues to exert his power over Dorothea with a codicil in his will stipulating that “all the property was to go away from [her] if [she] married [...] Mr Ladislaw” (*ibid.*, p489). Casaubon’s motives in leaving this addendum could be considered mixed, but without any doubt it is a heartless addition as far as Dorothea is concerned and Eliot describes it in no uncertain terms as a “cold grasp on Dorothea’s life” (*ibid.*, p493). It should be noted that Casaubon is not the only character to use his money malevolently *post mortem* to display his power by forcing his will on other, as Featherstone’s will has repercussions for Mary Garth and Fred Vincey along with several other minor characters.

While both Dorothea and Casaubon enter their marriage seemingly aware of their relative positions within the scale of power, Lydgate displays a particular quaintness in expecting the manipulative Rosamund to be the quintessential Victorian wife, concerned only with “flowers and music”, and “being moulded only for pure and delicate joys” (*ibid.*, p164). To this end, he enters their relationship unaware of the situation; indeed he was under the misapprehension that he was only flirting “and that they did nothing else” (*ibid.*, p268). In total contrast to this, everything about their meetings is carefully constructed by Rosamund, culminating in her contrived moment of intimacy over her dropped chain-work, which leads to Eliot describing Lydgate’s soul as no longer being his own, but belonging to “the woman to whom he had bound himself” (*ibid.*, p302). Allowing Lydgate to feel empowered in the belief that he is only flirting, and thereby toying with Rosamund’s affection, only serves to reinforce Rosamund’s utmost command of the situation that she has devised from her first meeting with Lydgate.

In the same way as Dorothea always puts others first, Lydgate is a very dutiful individual, especially towards his wife, and it is through this that Rosamund is easily able to remain the more powerful partner. Her frailty, an image embodied in the intricate lace that Mary Garth makes for her wedding, emphasises

this by consequently putting him in a position where he feels obliged to endeavour to do even more for her. In chapter 58, Eliot summarises this side of her character concisely: “What she liked to do was to her the right thing and all her cleverness was directed to getting the means of doing it” (*ibid.*, p585). Her conceitedness is not at all dissimilar to Casaubon’s egoism, and while there is no direct parallel for the cruel conditions of Casaubon’s will, Rosamund’s success in controlling Lydgate’s choice of practice after his metaphorical death in Middlemarch could be viewed in the same light. As Dorothea acknowledges Casaubon’s hold over her by renouncing his wealth to marry Ladislaw, Lydgate is also painfully aware, although far less proactively, of his position as he compares himself to a “murdered man” (*ibid.*, p845), with the clear implication that Rosamund is his murderer, placing the emphasis on his brain’s death as a result of her scheming.

Wintle (2000) examines the psychological aspects of power in *Middlemarch* by looking at *The Mill on the Floss* where Mr Tulliver wants to retain a position of power in a difficult situation. As a result of her interest in science, Eliot’s understanding of the unconscious keeps his character on horseback because

“If a man means to be hard, let him keep in his saddle and speak from that height, above the level of pleading eyes, and with the command of a distant horizon” (Eliot, 1981, p79).

Horse riding is therefore closely associated with power, as it is in so many portraits of leaders and descriptions of heroes. If horse riding is considered within *Middlemarch* there is an obvious dichotomy between Rosamund’s and Dorothea’s attitudes towards it. At the outset of the book Dorothea declares during dinner, “I shall not ride any more” (Eliot, 1994, p18), and through this she is unwittingly choosing another way in which to exhibit her innate submissiveness to the world. In stark contrast to this, Rosamund is a very keen rider and it is her obstinacy to ride out with Captain Lydgate in chapter 58 that leads to the loss of her baby. This impetuously selfish desire to satisfy herself, in this case by riding, despite Lydgate’s cautioning, is apparent throughout the novel in her behaviour towards Lydgate. The other horse riding thread is concerned with Fred Vincey’s purchase of a horse in the hope of financial gain. While he does not make specific comments about riding, parallels to his life can be seen as he is

initially in the monied position to buy the horse, only to end up close to the same position when the deals have all been executed.

Throughout the novel it is the interaction of the characters that allow the relative positions of power to be so readily discerned by the reader. Without Rosamund, Lydgate is portrayed as an ambitious, forward, and potentially powerful individual. In turn, without her foil Rosamund is initially seen as a delicate person wholly at home in the stereotypically Victorian female role. It is only when the two individuals are brought together that their innocuousness disappears and the reader is presented with Rosamund's cunning maliciousness and Lydgate's gentlemanly subservience.

In the same way, Casaubon is firstly portrayed only as a bookishly dusty intellectual, and it is Dorothea, like Lydgate, that has all of the plans for the many things that she aspires to achieve, portraying an infinitely more colourful character. In different circumstances it could be thought that Dorothea would eventually be a wielder of power as she has the money to put her grand plans into action, thereby giving her a greater hold over the labourers who she assists as they will be constantly in her debt, and that Lydgate would go on to be an eminent scientist in his field commanding respect from the medical world as a whole. However, as with Lydgate and Rosamund, it is only when the Casaubon and Dorothea are brought together that their comparative positions of power become clear. Eliot herself acknowledges this aspect of human interaction through her characterisation, and in the Finale she explains succinctly her insight where she declares that "there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it" (*ibid.*, p838).

It can therefore be seen that while money is certainly a very important factor in the power struggles between all of the characters in *Middlemarch*, human nature and Eliot's understanding of it are also important factors in illustrating the delicate balances of power between the sexes that permeate both fictional and real societies throughout history.

(1505 words)

## Bibliography and References

- Bennett, J (1954) *George Eliot: Her mind and her art*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Eliot, G (1994) *Middlemarch: A study of provincial life*, London: Penguin Group
- Eliot, G (1981) *The mill on the floss*, Oxford, OUP
- Hardy, B (1971) *The appropriate form – an essay on the novel*, London: The Athlone Press
- Hardy, B (1963) *The novels of George Eliot*, London: The Athlone Press
- Harvey, WJ (1961) *The art of George Eliot*, London: Chatto & Windus
- Peck, J (ed) (1992) *New Casebooks: Middlemarch*, London: Macmillan
- Wintle, S (2000) 'George Eliot's Peculiar Passion', *Essays in Criticism: Volume 50 Issue 1*, OUP  
([http://www3.oup.co.uk/escrit/hdb/volume\\_50/issue\\_01/pdf/500023.pdf](http://www3.oup.co.uk/escrit/hdb/volume_50/issue_01/pdf/500023.pdf) [14/02/2002])