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The Weight of "Glory":

Emily Dickinson, George Eliot, and Women's
Issues in *Middlemarch*

Megan Armknecht

"What do I think of *Middlemarch*? What do I think of glory—except that in a few instances this 'mortal has already put on immortality.' George Eliot is one." (L254). So wrote Emily Dickinson in response to a question posed by her Norcross cousins. Although we do not know exactly what her Norcross cousins asked her, Dickinson's response shows her strong admiration of both *Middlemarch* and its author, George Eliot (the pseudonym of the English writer Mary Ann Evans). Dickinson expressed her admiration in more ways than writing. Not only did Dickinson equate *Middlemarch* to "glory" and say that Eliot had put on "immortality," but Dickinson also had a portrait of Eliot in her room, considering Eliot a close friend, even though she had never met her (Heginbotham 22). When Dickinson heard of Eliot's death in December 1880, she wrote to her Norcross cousins that she was devastated by the loss of "my George Eliot" (L260). Whereas Dickinson was unequivocal in her praise of Eliot and *Middlemarch*, other Americans had mixed feelings about both Eliot and her masterpiece. Some critics generously praised the novel, saying it was "as nearly perfect as any novel can be," whereas others felt the story "far too long." (Spaulding, 352 and *Middlemarch* The Literary World 131). For example, in the

Old and New, H.G. Spaulding wrote that as “a work of art, ‘Middlemarch’ is as nearly perfect as any novel can be. The reader rushes on untired, lays the book down with a sigh, and always, as he does so, says, ‘How perfectly well done it is!’” (352). Similarly, *Middlemarch* was described by other critics as “matchless”, and Eliot as “more than simply a great writer (“‘Deronda’ and ‘Middlemarch’” 698). She is a prime elemental literary power” (“Quality of George Eliot’s Novels” 685). However, some reviewers felt the story was “far too long,” and that even though the reader grew “richer for [the] toil” of reading *Middlemarch*, he or she also would become “undeniably weary” from such an endeavor (“Middlemarch” *The Literary World* 131). Other critics preferred Eliot’s earlier novels such as *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*, since they did not think that *Middlemarch* had “the charm of plot” as these other novels (“Middlemarch” *Scribner’s Monthly* 648).

It is likely many reviewers responded negatively to *Middlemarch* because they knew George Eliot was a woman. Contemporary male literary critics downplayed George Eliot’s importance in literary history and patronized her genius. They argued that “the remarkable thing about George Eliot’s genius [was], that though there [was] nothing at all unfeminine in it,” and that she had achieved the “highest point which, in a woman, [could reach] in our literature” (“George Eliot” 256). This condescending observation suggests that Eliot’s writing was good—but only for a woman—thereby perpetuating the misogynistic viewpoint that women were not as capable as men in thinking, writing, and reasoning.

Dickinson, on the other hand, gloried in the fact that Eliot *was* a woman—a thinking, interesting woman whom she could idolize. While other American critics felt obligated to find fault in *Middlemarch*, Dickinson had no qualms about equating the novel with sheer “glory” (L254). Although this might seem like a sentimental reaction, it poignantly shows the strong connection Dickinson had with British female writers—particularly George Eliot—and their need to express the essence of their souls and their acquired knowledge. While it is well-established that Emily Dickinson admired George Eliot and *Middlemarch*, there has been debate as to why Dickinson compared *Middlemarch* to “glory.” Although there is little remaining evidence from Dickinson as to why she deeply admired *Middlemarch*, there are connections between the women’s issues of *Middlemarch* and many of Dickinson’s poems. Resonances in both *Middlemarch* and Dickinson’s poetry suggest that Dickinson’s admiration for *Middlemarch* is deeply rooted in Eliot’s ability, as a successful female writer, to

address prominent women's issues of the time, especially surrounding the difficulties of finding love for intellectual, ambitious women in the nineteenth century. Analyzing the character of Dorothea in *Middlemarch* alongside Dickinson's own poems about thwarted love allow for a deeper understanding of why Dickinson may have related to Eliot's novel.

Connections Between Eliot and Dickinson

Modern scholars have said much about the relationship between Dickinson and Eliot. For example, Karen Richardson Gee points out that Dickinson avidly read everything by and about George Eliot—including contemporary Eliot biographies—"to draw close to a writer whom she loved" (26). Dickinson most likely came to love Eliot's writing after reading *The Mill on the Floss* as "early as November of 1862, when her first epistolary reference to *The Mill on the Floss* occurs" (26). Interestingly, Dickinson often refers to Eliot as Marian Evans or Mrs. Lewes in her letters, suggesting that Dickinson connected strongly with the woman writing these novels as well as the novels themselves. For example, in a November 1861 letter to Thomas Higginson, Dickinson writes: "Mrs. Hunt's Poems are stronger than any written by Women since Mrs. - Browning, with the exception of Mrs. Lewes—but truth like Ancestor's Brocades can stand alone -" (L368). To Dickinson, "Mrs. Lewes" was a genius on the same (or even on a higher plane) than Elizabeth Barrett Browning or Helen Hunt Jackson. Gee also suggests that by calling Eliot "Mrs. Lewes," Dickinson was simultaneously pitying and "personally blessing Evans's unsanctified union with George Henry Lewes. Unlike many members of Evans' society, including many of her friends and relatives, who rejected her for her unconventional life, Dickinson insinuates here that she understands and approves of Evans' marriage" (32). By doing so, Dickinson demonstrates loyalty and friendship for one of her favorite authors.

Not only have modern scholars noted Dickinson's affinity for Eliot, but also the similarities between Dickinson's and Eliot's writings. Eleanor Elson Heginbotham suggests that Dickinson's famous "*Middlemarch* letter" has a polyvocality about it which mirrors the voices of the town in *Middlemarch*. Heginbotham analyzes the way that Dickinson wrote the letter and compares it

to Eliot's "comic tone" which she uses on the sanctimonious citizens of her rural English village" (21). For example, in the *Middlemarch* letter, Dickinson gently mocks her pious neighbors of Amherst: "I know of no choicer ecstasy than to see Mrs. [Sweetser] roll out in crape every morning, I suppose to intimidate antichrist; at least it would have that effect on me" (L389). In the next paragraph, Dickinson abandons Amherst gossip and instead talks about the wonders of spring: "Spring is a happiness so beautiful, so unique, so unexpected, that I don't know what to do with my heart. I dare not take it, I dare not leave it—what do you advise?" (L389). Heginbotham argues that this "polyvocality" is "reflective of Eliot's own multiple voices: the social commentator, the psychological prober of human hopes and disappointments, the literary critic, and the seeker of whatever solace or encouragement may come from mortal or immortal power" (20). Similarly, Margaret Freeman notes the "artistic kinship" (37) between Dickinson and Eliot through their use of "play" within their prose, and how this "play" was important to both women, specifically Dickinson's "aesthetic and world view" (38).

Although the similarities between Eliot's and Dickinson's writing styles are important to understanding each woman's art, it does not give a completely satisfying answer as to why Dickinson admired Eliot so much. One of the more intriguing possibilities for Dickinson's admiration of Eliot and *Middlemarch* is that Dickinson would have resonated with an intellectual woman who wrote literature that highlighted women's experiences (Showalter xxxiii). Paula Bennett contends that Dickinson "saw herself as part of a female literary tradition which she and [American female poets] shared. British in origin, this tradition had found its richest, most complicated expression in the work of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the Brontë sisters, and George Eliot" (*Woman Poet* 1415, qtd. in Stonum 60). It was not simple to be a creative woman in nineteenth century England and America. Indeed, "nineteenth-century, middle-class femininity demanded self-abnegation, while the artistic life required egoism. Domesticism demanded woman's silence, while her artistic vocation required that she believe enough in her opinions to express them" (Gee 33-34). This psychological and social struggle of the woman writer has been well presented by Gilbert and Gubar, who argue that the woman who desired to be creative—indeed, the woman who desired to rebel against the societal norm—was diagnosed as "diseased" (1536). Women writers of the nineteenth century struggled to find their voice and express their stories in "an attempt to make [themselves] whole" (1535). Both Eliot and Dickinson sought to express their experiences

through writing—not only to make themselves whole, but to legitimize women’s experience in an extremely patriarchal society.

Women’s Issues in *Middlemarch* and in Dickinson’s Poetry

One prominent woman’s issue in both *Middlemarch* and in many of Dickinson’s poems is the idea of impossibility of happy love for an intellectual woman in the nineteenth century. Both Dickinson and *Middlemarch*’s Dorothea are described as having intellectual ambitions. Dickinson was a precocious child and learned to “read, write, and do simple arithmetic in a common school, which she began attending by age five” (Habegger 96). After her common school education, Dickinson attended Amherst Academy in the 1840s, where she studied many subjects including Latin, geology, and botany, and had “freedom to be herself as well as competent instruction” (Habegger 140). Dickinson wrote about her self-awareness of her talents and intelligence in many of her poems. Her poem “It was given to me by the Gods –” describes her realization of her talent in poetry, and compares her talent to a “present” of “gold” (3, 14). By saying that this gift was “given to [her] by the Gods –” Dickinson recognizes that her creative talent is something special—sacred, even.

Unlike Dickinson, Dorothea never had a formal education. Even though Dorothea might not have had a formal education, she still views herself as a capable woman with desires to do good with her talents. Dorothea’s mind is described as “theoretic and yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world” (6). Furthermore, she has a great “soul-hunger” to “make her life greatly effective” and attempts to do good in the world by being creative (51). For example, she wants to design and build better cottages for poor estate tenets (14). Although Dorothea’s pride and naivety get in the way of her happiness, she never entirely gives up on her desire to do good and to be good. Indeed, one reason she wants marry Casaubon is because she believes that he will educate her. She thinks marrying him will be like “a neophyte about to enter on a higher grade of initiation,” and believes that she would “have room for the energies which stirred uneasily under the dimness and pressure of her own ignorance” (45). Her decision to marry Casaubon results in disaster, but Dorothea’s reasons for marrying him—although misguided—are sincere. Dickinson would likely

have related to Dorothea's character because both were intellectual, creative women who were not fully appreciated by those closest to them.

One of the difficulties of being a misunderstood, creative, intelligent woman during the nineteenth century was finding an equal, loving marriage partner. This is especially evident in the case of Dorothea, who enters into a terrible marriage at the beginning of *Middlemarch*, and then has to live with the repercussions of that marriage throughout the rest of the novel. Dorothea marries Casaubon, thinking that she will be able to use her creative talents to help Casaubon write his *Key to All Mythologies* (525). However, Casaubon does not "delight in what [Dorothea is]" and rather "demands much interest and labour from her" (385). Essentially, he makes her his research assistant without any pay, let alone thanks. He certainly is not the "Saint Augustine" Dorothea held him up to be, and her marriage begins and ends in disaster, leaving her emotionally and spiritually broken (205).

Although Dickinson never married, she did realize the limitations marriage placed on nineteenth-century women. Dickinson critiques the ignorant "Christian" housewives of her society in "What Soft – Cherubic Creatures –" (Fr675). In this poem, she satirizes the way society expects women to be: "soft," "Plush," "Gentlewomen" (1-3). However, this expectation does not prepare women for the "freckled Human Nature" everyone encounters in their lives (7). By mocking these "Gentlewomen," Dickinson also critiques the society that demands them to be uneducated and sheltered. Furthermore, Dickinson's poem "She rose to His Requirement" (Fr857) describes the way women are required to "drop" everything—their "playthings," talents, and "Awe" in order to take up the "honorable Work/Of Woman, and of Wife" (1,2, 5, 3-4). She laments that women have to give away the things that make them unique and interesting in order to meet their husbands' demands; they give up their own dreams in order to fit their husbands' dreams.

Another poem which talks about the potential terrors of matrimony is "I had not minded – Walls" (Fr 554). In this poem, the speaker hears the "silver Call" (3) of her future husband, but instead of being rescued from "Walls" (1), she finds the limitations of marriage: "A limit like the Vail/Unto the Lady's face" (13-14). To her, marriage is a prison that confines her soul. Furthermore, instead of finding her archetypal "knight in shining armor," the speaker finds "Dragons – in the Crease –" (16), suggesting that some marriages can go horribly, terribly wrong. This is certainly the case in *Middlemarch*; indeed, Casaubon is actually described as a "dragon" who has "carried [Dorothea] off to his lair"

(223). It is significant that Dickinson wrote “I had not minded – Walls –” in 1863, eleven years before *Middlemarch* had been written. Dickinson would have pitied Dorothea’s state as a woman who had given up her identity and desires to conform to a man that was jealous of her talents and personality.

Indeed, happiness in marriage for an intellectual, creative woman seems almost impossible in both Emily Dickinson’s poetry and in *Middlemarch*. Although some of Dickinson’s poetry talks about the wonders of the possibility of love, a number of them talk about the exact opposite—how the speaker will never experience love or has lost a great love. Many of Dickinson’s poems about lost or impossible love were written from 1861-1863, which is also when her “productivity climaxed” (Habegger 405). Most Dickinson scholars agree that there was some sort of terror or pain that compelled Dickinson to write these “pain poems” (409). It is possible that this pain was brought on by the loss of someone she was very close to, however, the exact reason why Dickinson wrote these pain poems “remains an unsolved problem” in Dickinson scholarship (Habegger 410). However, since many of the poems from 1861-1863 are about hopeless love, it is quite possible that Dickinson lost someone whom she loved deeply, but realized that they could never be together.

One of the poems Dickinson wrote during this time which fully captures the despair of a woman thwarted in love is “I cannot live with You” (Fr706). In this poem, the speaker laments the fact that she cannot be with the person she loves, because “It would be Life –/And Life is over there –/Behind the shelf” (2-4), suggesting that even though she does love him, “Life” is something that is not allowed to her—it is beyond her reach; “Behind the shelf.” She cannot even “die – with You –” (13), because she could not bear to die or live without him, and knows that “Where You were not/That self – were Hell to me –” (43-44). In short, she does not want to be separated from him, but it is impossible for them to be together. The tone of the final stanza is full of longing and despair at the hopeless situation:

So we must meet apart –
 You there – I – here –
 With just the Door ajar
 That Oceans are – and Prayer –
 And that White Sustenance –
 Despair – (45-50)

The last word of this stanza underscores the theme and meaning of the entire poem—despair. Even though the speaker has chosen her love, there is no

possible way for them to be together happily, and so she gives him up. The pain of this poem is echoed in Fr713, which states that her love “left me – Sire – two Legacies –/A Legacy of Love” and “Boundaries of Pain” (1-2, 5), suggesting that the vulnerability of falling in love is coupled with the certainty of pain. These two “legacies” of love are inseparable.

Similar legacies of love, pain, and despair at hopeless love are easily seen in Dorothea’s story, especially in her interactions with Will Ladislav. After Casaubon’s death, Dorothea is left broken, hurt, confused, but also liberated: “Her world was in a state of convulsive change; the only thing she could say distinctly to herself was that she must wait and think anew” (522). However, even as she contemplates her new life, she cannot explain the “sudden strange yearning of heart towards Will Ladislav” (522). As this “yearning of heart” deepens and as Dorothea continues to interact with Will, she realizes that she wishes to know that he loves her and that he knew she loved him because “then we could be quite happy in thinking of each other, though we are for ever parted” (587). Still, she also feels the full weight of the world

In spite of her independent energy, that with this idea of Will as in need of such help and at a disadvantage with the world, there came always the vision of that unfittingness of any closer relation between them which lay in the opinion of every one connected with her. . . . How could he dream of her defying the barrier that her husband had placed between them – how could she ever say to herself that she would defy it? [587-88]

Dorothea realizes that she loves Will, but she is also struck by the impossibility of them ever coming together, as she is inhibited by both her former husband’s demands and societal norms. This “hopeless love” is illuminated in the parlor scene at Lowick, where Dorothea and Will realize the hopelessness of their situation. When Will mentions that they must “always be divided,” a “vivid flash of lightning” lights “each of them up for the other, and the light seem(s) to be the terror of a hopeless love” (860). Both Dorothea and Will realize the hopelessness of their situation, yet they are still drawn to each other.

Instead of letting these star-crossed lovers pass out of each other’s lives, Eliot allows them to come together, thus giving some kind of hope to the seemingly impossible situation of an intellectual woman falling and staying in love. Even though Will is decidedly below Dorothea’s station and her intellect, Dorothea “never repented that she had given up position and fortune” to marry him (887). Indeed, “they were bound to each other by a love stronger than any

impulses which could have marred it” (887). Dorothea chooses Will, and doing so makes both of them incredibly happy.

Some believe that Dorothea’s choosing Ladislav inhibits her agency and exacerbates the problem of the intellectual woman marrying someone who does not deserve her. However, as Jeanie Thomas argues, although this scene is objectionable to many feminists, this conventional movement of Dorothea’s mind—towards the man who gratifies her emotional needs—actually clinches the argument for George Eliot as a feminist. . . . In the careful, detailed narration of Dorothea’s movement towards that choice, George Eliot exposes and critically ponders all the inner and outer forces that conspire to confound a woman’s public aspirations and to steer her towards a private conclusion which is at once a disappointment compromise and a sort of fulfillment [399-400]

In short, Dorothea does not blindly enter this marriage with Will as she did with Casaubon. Her choice to love Will is precisely that—her choice. She uses her agency to choose the man who loves her for her soul *and* her mind. By having Dorothea choose Ladislav, Eliot allows some kind of happiness for Dorothea, even if it might not be entirely satisfactory to the modern reader.

It is hard to say exactly what Dickinson thought of the Dorothea-Ladislav match, but since Dickinson compared *Middlemarch* to “glory,” and since she had such a high opinion of Eliot, it is possible that one reason Dickinson enjoyed *Middlemarch* so much was because it gave hope to women in her circumstance—that there might be men who appreciated intellectual, creative women. Of course, *Middlemarch* is fiction. However in many respects, the match between Dorothea and Ladislav matches Eliot’s own relationship with Lewes—it might not have been sanctioned by society, but they were both very happy together and viewed each other as intellectual equals (Powell 293-294). Reading about an intellectual woman finding a happy match—both in the case of George Eliot and Dorothea in *Middlemarch*—might have given hope to Emily Dickinson. Certainly, reading about real women’s issues by a well-respected woman writer would have appealed to Dickinson.

Eliot’s impact on Dickinson implies how deeply Dickinson engaged with the intellectual world around her and shows her need for deep, loyal connection—not only in her personal life, but in the kinships she formed through literature. Contrary to popular myth, Dickinson did not isolate herself from the world around her, but rather was intellectually engaged in the transatlantic literary world. She created her own networks, with Eliot as an important node in this web of women authors. Dickinson not only “gloried” in the beauty of

Middlemarch's prose, but also in the fact that there were women writers like her whom she could connect with. Neither Eliot nor Dickinson were trying to write like men; they wrote like women and addressed important women's issues—particularly the difficulties of being an intelligent woman in the matters of love and marriage. Like Dickinson wishing that she could “stop one Heart from breaking” (Fr982), neither Eliot nor Dickinson “lived in vain,” because they wrote their experiences as women writers, impacting future generations of women poets and authors.

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