HEROISM IN MIDDLEMARCH

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS: Traditional avenues of heroism appear, to George Eliot, to be no longer open in modern society. Traditional heroism with the values it embodied and conserved is either irrelevant to, or harmful to modern society. The true, modern hero is one who understands the dynamic interconnections of society, and altruistically works in a practical way for the good of society, forsaking his selfish, or egoistic desires.

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Introduction

Joan Bennett has remarked that George Eliot's theme in Middlemarch "is the adjustment of the aspiring individual to the inhibiting conditions of an actual social world."[1] This remark applies equally to George Eliot's other novels. Romola, Felix Holt, Daniel Deronda, Maggie Tulliver, and Adam Bede, like Dorothea, Lydgate, Rosamond, and Fred Vincy must adjust or reconcile themselves to the actual social world. In short, the principal theme which runs throughout George Eliot's whole canon can be said to be a search for reconciliation between the individual and society.

Bernard J. Paris puts it this way:

> The novel was the means by which she experimentally brought into contact the dispassionate order of things and the passionate subjectivity of human beings in an effort to discover their true relation to each other and to explore the possibilities of a reconciliation between them. [2]

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[1] J. Bennett, George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art (Cambridge, 1948), pp. 175-76.

The actual social world is in George Eliot's view dispassionately ordered in as far as the individual man is concerned. This dispassionate ordering makes the actual social world objective in its treatment of the individual. Man sometimes forgets or ignores this objectivity, and seeks to find in the social world a realization of his passionate subjectivity; he expects a correspondence between subjective aspirations and the actual social world. The social world, however, is largely independent of the passionate subjectivity of individual human beings. Its objectivity and human subjectivity do not coincide. Man then often feels himself to be an alien in his own world.

In her novels, George Eliot is attempting to find some common ground between human subjectivity and social objectivity; she is attempting to repatriate the alien. She writes,

> the inspiring principle which alone gives me courage to write is, that of so presenting our human life as to help my readers in getting a clearer conception and a more active admiration of these vital elements which bind men together . . . . [3]

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[2] B. J. Paris, Experiments in Life (Detroit, 1966), p. 27.

[3] G. S. Haight, ed., The George Eliot Letters (New Haven, 1954-55), IV, 472.

The "vital elements" must be interpreted as the basis of a reconciliation between the individual man and men, for it is these elements which bind men together.

A clear understanding of these "vital elements" to which George Eliot referred is necessary for an understanding of her works. The "vital elements" are simply compassionate understanding and sympathy -- that particular feeling which allows one to sense meaningfully the subjectivity of another. For George Eliot this is not an academic or an intellectual act; it is, as the word "feeling" suggests, basically an emotional act, something from the heart rather than from the head. One ceases to look on a person as an extension of his own ego, as something somehow created to be used in serving one's own particular end, and begins to look on him as a human being with his own inner state. One feels that another person has "an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference."[4] This feeling, GeorgemEliot would argue, is the

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[4]George Eliot, Middlemarch, ed. by G. S. Haight (Boston, 1956), p. 157.

basis on which is built a proper reconciliation between man and man.

In all her novels, George Eliot is concerned with giving her reader a "clearer and more active admiration" of these "vital elements". I have not chosen to discuss all George Eliot's canon; rather, I would concentrate on one novel particularly, Middlemarch. I do this because I agree with Joan Bennett when she writes that Middlemarch is George Eliot's "widest and deepest study of the inter-penetration between the life of a community and the individual lives that compose it."[5] If one accepts this statement, one would expect to find in Middlemarch George Eliot's most comprehensive study of the "vital elements" binding man to man. The question then arises, what aspect of this general theme which I have outlined is George Eliot concerned with in Middlemarch?

George Eliot is dealing in Middlemarch with what I shall call the problem of heroism in a modern, godless world. From George Eliot's essays and letters, we learn that she regarded Christianity and God as outmoded relics of a previous age.

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[5] J. Bennett, George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art, p. 83.

Traditional Christian heroism is no longer possible in a modern world wherein "God-given" values are no longer valid. Because of her ideas on the structure of society, George Eliot felt that it was impossible for a man or woman to single-handedly turn the tide of human affairs. Traditional secular heroism is dead. George Eliot's religious and social theories preclude heroism in the traditional sense. The problem is, however, that people with "heroic" qualities, or "heroic" aspirations, are being born into the modern world. Since the avenues to traditional heroism are no longer open, frustration will beset these people unless they find a means of reconciliation between their aspirations and the limiting conditions imposed by the actual social world. How do these people find a meaningful place in the modern world? This, it seems to me, is the central question of Middlemarch.

In Middlemarch, George Eliot is attempting to point out through her art a means of reconciliation between an individual with heroic aspirations and the world outside him. In this way Middlemarch is a particular aspect of the general theme running

throughout George Eliot's canon. The means of reconciliation which she gives to the reader is the central moral message of Middlemarch. George Eliot suggests that the aspiring hero who forsakes the quest for traditional heroism and finds the "proper" means of reconciliation with the world becomes in fact the true, modern hero. George Eliot's conception of the modern hero is central to the moral message of Middlemarch.

George Eliot did not begin writing prose fiction until she had reached middle age. By the time she began to write her novels, she had established herself as a successful translator, editor, and essayist. Thus George Eliot took to her novels a mature intellect which had delineated for itself systematized artistic, philosophic, and social theories. Bernard J. Paris in the first seven chapters of Experiments in Life convincingly demonstrates this point. It is with George Eliot's social theories that I am most concerned in the first chapter of this thesis for they affect the central problem of Middlemarch. With social

theories I include theories of religion and value.

Social, religious, and value theories are important to the problem of heroism. Heroism involves the embodiment and conservation of a socially significant value. Christianity had traditionally provided society with a system of values. With Christianity -- at least, with the God of Christianity discounted, wherein lay the source of value? An act, a principle, or an institution was no longer of value because God gave it value. George Eliot believed that the ultimate source of value rested within man himself. An act, principle, or institution had value because it fulfilled a human need. A social organization such as a Church, for example, may have value in that it fulfils a human need for companionship and fellowship, and serves as an antidote to loneliness; its value would not stem from its avowed function of glorifying God. Value is not imposed upon man from without -- or above.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I shall discuss George Eliot's ideas or theories of value in as far as they affect the problem of heroism in a modern, godless world. I shall devote the greater part of the chapter, however,

to an explanation of George Eliot's social theory. It seems to me that her ideas on the construction and functioning of society are basic to an understanding of any of her novels. Needless to say, then, it is fundamental to the problem of heroism. In Middlemarch, George Eliot employs a recurring image to express her ideas on the construction of society. Society is compared to a spider's web. This image, we shall also see, gives an insight into the functioning of society. I shall go on to point out the political implications of George Eliot's social theories for they relate to the problem of heroism as presented in Middlemarch.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I shall discuss the frustration of traditional heroism in a modern, godless world. We shall see that illusion is a by-product of this frustration over one's inability to find meaningful reconciliation to society. Here we shall also see as, for example, in the case of Dorothea and Rosamond how George Eliot transforms the basically intellectual theories of value and society discussed in chapter one into an artistic statement.

In the third chapter, I shall examine George Eliot's answer to the problem of heroism.

We shall see that George Eliot suggests that one who finds the "proper" means of reconciliation between himself and his world is the true, modern hero. We shall also see in the case of Lydgate that science has supplanted Christianity in providing an area for modern heroism. However, because of his inability to achieve reconciliation with society, Lydgate did not become a scientific hero. Lydgate's tragic case emphasizes the basic theme: the primary need for reconciliation between the individual and society.

1. Social Faith and Order

George Eliot begins the Prelude to Middlemarch by referring to the Spanish Saint Theresa. She comments that in the three hundred years between the time of Saint Thereas and the time of Middlemarch, there have been social changes which make an heroic life like that of Saint Theresa no longer possible. George Eliot explaines that the "later-born Theresas" found for themselves "no epic life" because they "were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul."[1] This statement implies that the sixteenth century Theresa was helped by a coherent social faith and order. Faith means belief, trust, or even a system of religion. By social faith, George Eliot means the religious or moral principles on which is built the system of values which society as a whole accepts. Traditionally, Christianity had provided these principles. Social order means the structure of society, the arrangement

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[1] Middlemarch, p. 3.

of people or groups of people in such a way that society can function properly. Traditionally, a class system of varying degrees of rank had provided this order. George Eliot felt that by the time of Middlemarch (around 1830) this traditional social faith and order no longer agreed with the actual conditions of society.

George Eliot said that the coherent social faith and order which she saw in Saint Theresa's day performed the "function of knowledge to the ardently willing soul." By this she indicates that Saint Theresa thought her world to be definitely arranged according to a clearly discernible pattern. This arrangement not only extended through the temporal, or mundane world, but also into the moral, or spiritual world. The exactness of the world's arrangement provided definite guides to be used in directing one's life to the greatest possible effect. By the time of Middlemarch, George Eliot would argue, the patterns of arrangement in the moral and temporal worlds were for most people incoherent, blurred, and confused; thus an ardently willing soul was often without certain knowledge of how to order her life to maximum effect.

> A new Theresa will hardly have the same opportunity of reforming a conventual life, any more than a new Antigone will spend her heroic piety in daring all for the sake of a brother's burial: the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is for ever gone.[2]

George Eliot comments that "a human being in this aged nation of ours is a very wonderful whole, the slow creation of long interchanging influences."[3] These interchanging influences divide into two basic types. The one we may call personality influences: these include the various faults and virtues which George Eliot would consider that an individual has built into his personality from birth. She states that "it always remains true that if we had been greater, circumstances would have been less strong against us."[4] This quotation leads naturally into the second basic type of interchanging influence, for in this quotation George Eliot refers to circumstances which help to determine a person's life. By circumstances, she means influences on the individual brought to bear by society. Barbara

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[2] *Middlemarch*, p. 612.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 300.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 428.

Hardy comments that "from Amos Barton to Middlemarch the collective personality of the community acts as a causal agent, making and breaking relations."[5] In Felix Holt, George Eliot writes, "There is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life."[6] In Middlemarch, the effect of society upon the individual is emphasized when George Eliot observes, "There is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it."[7] In order to assess this great determining influence on the individual we will turn to a discussion of the society which George Eliot presents in Middlemarch, and its values.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, English society appeared to be clearly defined in rigid ranks. The response to the French Revolution in England initiated a "panic-struck counter-revolutionary response on the part of the landed

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[5] B. Hardy, The Novels of George Eliot (London, 1963), p. 21.

[6] George Eliot, Felix Holt, The Radical (Toronto, 1902), p. 51.

[7] Middlemarch, p. 612.

and commercial aristocracy", and an accommodation on the part of the industrial bourgeoisie with the status quo.[8] In other words, traditional social order appeared to have been conserved -- with a vengeance. However, as the nineteenth century advanced, society exhibited an ever-increasing unwillingness to determine an individual's worth by his rank; rather, society demonstrated a disposition to judge an individual by his intrinsic personal merits, and by his accomplishments. The industrial revolution had opened a wide avenue for social advancement. Armed with those Victorian virtues, prudence and industry, one might rise from low estate to a position of great wealth. Those who became wealthy industrialists, however, allied themselves, at least in spirit, with the hereditary upper classes in "repressive and anti-egalitarian ideology."[9] But the masses of people were not without voices demanding social reforms. Robert Owen and Thomas Hodgkin represent only two such voices in the first half of the nineteenth century. Popular opinion forced the repeal of

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[8] E. P. Thompson, "The Industrial Revolution and Class Consciousness in the English Working class", in D. L. Dowd, ed., The Age of Revolution, 1770-1870 (Boston, 1966), 647.

[9] Ibid., p. 647.

of the Corn Laws in 1847, thus lowering food prices for the common man. Trade unions grew from a humble beginning at the first of the century into a powerful force by the time George Eliot was writing Middlemarch. Such events and developments as these indicated a growing social consciousness. And such a social consciousness reflected an increasing tendency to de-emphasize concerns of rank which fragmented society in favour of concerns for society as an integrated whole. Along with this social development, there appears to have been a correspondingly increased attack on the basic tenents of traditional religion. The Oxford Movement at mid-century, and the revival of religion among the working classes somewhat later could not off-set the attacks, scepticism, and atheism of prominent thinkers.

Middlemarch society stands at the beginning of the period wherein the traditional concepts of social faith and order were being questioned, and were giving way to change. Evidence of traditional social faith and order is still to be found, and is still to be reckoned with. But during the progress of the novel, it soon becomes evident that traditional social faith with its values

based on Christianity, and traditional social order with its hierarchical arrangement are being re-assessed. George Eliot felt that she recognized certain basic changes in ideas which would have a telling effect on the development of society. She saw early manifestations of these changes at the time of the Great Reform Bill of 1832. The Reform Bill of 1867 was passed shortly before George Eliot began writing Middlemarch. The development of social opinion over the years between the reform bills justified, she felt, her views in Middlemarch concerning the changes affecting society.

The division of society into various classes or ranks, and the arrangement of these classes of ranks on a vertically ascending scale had formed the traditional basis of social order. George Eliot observed that in Middlemarch society there was a clear distinction of rank.[10] Rank was still the determining factor in social prestigue. Mrs Cadwallader's attention to questions of rank is the source of much amusement in Middlemarch; nevertheless, this still reflects a serious concern felt by a large sector of Middlemarch

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[10] Middlemarch, p. 65; p. 170.

society. On the subject of Celia and Dorothea's dress, George Eliot observed that there was a "well-bred economy, which in those days made show in dress the first item to be deducted from, when any margin was required for expenses more distinctive of rank." Flippery in dress was "naturally" regarded "as the ambition of a huckster's daughter."[11] There is in these statements a strong suggestion of social snobbery based on a consciousness of rank.

Chapter ten sees the last of the dinner parties held at the Grange as "proper" preliminaries to Dorothea and Casaubon's wedding. Here at the party are gathered many of the leading figures of Middlemarch society, and it is possible to observe their preoccupation with rank. Mr Brooke did not invite Mayor Vincy's daughter, Rosamond, "for Mr Brooke, always objecting to go too far, would not have chosen that his nieces should meet the daughter of a Middlemarch manufacturer, unless it were on a public occasion."[12] During the course of the party, the conversation turned to an assessment of the merits and demerits of a

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[11] Middlemarch, p. 5.

[12] Ibid., p. 66.

new medical man, Tertius Lydgate, who had recently come to Middlemarch. Some of the discussion centered around the suitability of medicine as a profession for a man of Lydgate's birth. Mrs Cadwallader observed that Lydgate was a gentleman. Lady Chettham followed with a comment on Lydgate's "good connections", and then added, "One does not expect it in a practitioner of that kind. For my own part, I like a medical man more on a footing with the servants . . . ."[13]

Many of the sections in the novel which devote themselves to relating the gossip of various characters reflect a preoccupation with rank, or social status. Mrs Plymdale gloated over her son's marriage to a member of the Toller family for that represented a rise in rank.[14] Mrs Bulstrode reflected that it was "more respectable" to be saved in the Established Church than in a Dissenting Church.[15] The love affair between Mary Garth and Fred Vincy upset Fred's mother because she felt that Fred would lower himself socially through such a union. When Fred declined the clergy in favour of working for Mr Garth, Mr Vincy thundered,

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[13] Middlemarch, p. 67.

[14] Ibid., p. 477.

[15] Ibid., p. 449.

"You've thrown away your education, and gone down a step in life, when I had given you the means of rising, that's all."[16] Sir James objected to Dorothea's marriage to Ladislaw because it would take her "out of her proper rank."[17]

There was in Middlemarch society a social stigma attached to making one's money through trade or industry. Rosamond Vincy, for example,

> felt she might have been happier if she had not been the daughter of a Middlemarch manufacturer, She disliked anything which reminded her that her mother's father had been an innkeeper. [18]

Ned Plymdale and Caius Larcer had no knowledge of French, nor could they speak on any subject with striking knowledge, "except perhaps the dying and carrying trades, which of course they were ashamed to mention."[19] These trades were not genteel. Among such people of means in the so-called middle-classes, there was a keen desire for attaining the trappings of gentility. It was not Rosamond alone who desired "connections which offered vistas

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[16] Middlemarch, p. 414.

[17] Ibid., p. 597.

[18] Ibid., p. 75.

[19] Ibid., p. 197.

of that middle-class heaven, rank."[20] In the same vein, George Eliot observes that Mr Standish, the old lawyer, "had been so long concerned with the landed gentry that he had become landed himself."[21] He thereby attained a measure of social status. Bulstrode's purchase of Stone Court fits into the same pattern of motivation.

Sir James Chettham was deeply concerned with the traditional social order based on rank. At one point in the novel when he was exasperated with Brooke's political activities, Chettham said, "I do wish people would behave like gentlemen." George Eliot goes on to comment that Chettham felt "that this was a simple and comprehensive programme for social well-being."[22] The implication of this statement is that if all people in all ranks or classes acted in a manner befitting their station (however that may be), then society would function properly. In Chettham's statement the term "gentleman" implies worth as well as status, and we know from other things which Sir James has said that he believes a gentleman is

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[20] Middlemarch, p. 88.

[21] Ibid., p. 65.

[22] Ibid., p. 280.

a gentleman because of his birth. In other words, a man's status as a gentleman is not determined by his intrinsic personal merit. This view contrasts with that expressed in Ladislaw's statement to Bulstrode: "It ought to lie within a man's self that he is a gentleman."[23] Here is a definite statement that one's worth and status in society should be determined by one's qualities as a human being. George Eliot implies the same belief when she writes, "Whatever has been or is to be narrated by me about low people, may be ennobled by being a parable."[24] Character -- good or bad -- is not confined by class boundaries. This view represents some of the change in social ideas which George Eliot sees beginning in Middlemarch society.

Fairly early in the novel, in referring to the change going on in society, George Eliot states, "Old provincial society had its share of this subtle movement." She goes on to observe that,

> a few personages or families that stood with rocky firmness amid all this fluctuation, were slowly presenting new aspects in spite of solidarity,

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[23] Middlemarch, p. 457.

[24] Ibid., p. 249.

> and altering with the double change of self and beholder. [25]

Sir James Chettham would feel that he was standing with rocky firmness concerning his beliefs in the traditional social order; yet George Eliot shows that in this regard he too was affected by the subtle movement. Sir James modified ~~in~~ his attitude toward Dorothea after her marriage to Ladislaw. The social order which Sir James so jealously guarded appears to be giving way at the end of the novel.

> It became an understood thing that Mr and Mrs Ladislaw should pay at least two visits during the year to the Grange, and there came gradually a small row of cousins at Freshitt who enjoyed playing with the two cousins visiting Tipton as much as if the blood of these cousins had been less dubiously mixed. [26]

George Eliot's views on the inter-relationships in society help to explain why she felt that the traditional social order could no longer be regarded as a meaningful basis for social organization. At the beginning of chapter fifteen of Middlemarch,

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[25] Middlemarch, pp. 70-71.

[26] Ibid., p. 612.

George Eliot tells of the "lusty ease" with which Fielding proceeded in his writings; but she adds that in her day there is not enough time for such a leisurely pace.

> I at least have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe. [27]

This comment introduces an important metaphor in Middlemarch, wherein the lives of the various characters are compared to the intertwining threads of a web. Different threads touch each other at various places just as various lives come into contact repeatedly. These contacts hold society together as a unit just as a web is held together by the interconnecting threads. This metaphor is used repeatedly in describing the most intimate intertwining of human lives, marriage.[28] In this metaphor is found the core of George Eliot's belief that society consists of dynamic interconnections between individuals.

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[27] Middlemarch, p. 105.

[28] In Middlemarch, for example: Dorothea and Casaubon p. 16; Sir James and Celia, p. 45; Rosamond and Lydgate, p. 253.

In the "Address to Working Men by Felix Holt", George Eliot illustrates, again by means of metaphor, the effects of the interconnectedness of society.

> Society stands before us like that wonderful piece of life, the human body, with all its various parts depending on one another. . . . Because the body is made up of so many various parts, all are likely . . . to feel the effect if any one of them goes wrong. [29]

An individual harmful action ultimately hurts the whole of society because of the interdependence and interconnection of the individual social units. By the same token, a beneficial action will have wide-spread good effect. "So I think," said Felix Holt,

> "I shall be borne out in saying that a working man . . . can understand that a society, to be well off, must be made up chiefly of men who consider the general good as well as their own." [30]

Bernard J. Paris summarizes the point when he writes,

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[29] G. Eliot, "Address to the Working Men, by Felix Holt", in her Impressions of Theophrastus Such, Essays, and Leaves from a Note-Book (Toronto, 1902), p. 196.

[30] Ibid., p. 196.

> Because of the dynamic interconnection of the social elements, the fate of each individual is largely determined by the state of the whole, and the state of the whole is modified by the actions of individuals.[31]

George Eliot's opinion of the composition of society is perhaps best summarized by Mr Brooke when he was attempting to persuade Mr Mawmsey, the grocer, to give him political support. Mr Brooke's intellectual acumen was often less than acute; but, as George Eliot said, "wrong reasoning sometimes lands poor mortals in right conclusions."[32] Mr Brooke pointed out to Mawmsey that society is "all one family, you know -- it's all one cupboard."[33]

The dynamics of social interconnections defy social barriers. In discussing Joshua Rigg's background, George Eliot comments on the importance of "low people", for by their "interference, however little we may like it, the course of the world is very much determined."[34] George Eliot believed that the traditional social order had

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[31] B. J. Paris, Experiments in Life, p. 42.

[32] Middlemarch, p. 18.

[33] Ibid., p. 36.

[34] Ibid., p. 302.

accentuated the particular, often selfish, interests of the various classes. Such an order, dividing society into rigid groupings, each with its own particular interests, was socially undesirable: since the dynamic interconnectedness of the individual social elements disregards class barriers, there is need for common concern for society's interests. In the "Address to Working Men by Felix Holt", George Eliot writes that "class distinctions must inevitably change their character and represent the varying Duties of men, not their varying Interests."[35]

George Eliot was not suggesting a revolutionary eradication of the class system. She was not objecting to upper classes as such; rather she was objecting to selfish class interests. She wished those with wealth and authority to use these assets in a socially beneficent way; thus they could initiate the process of change. In Daniel Deronda, for example, Gwendolen Harleth-Grandicourt wished to give up her wealth, but Daniel Deronda advised her to use it to bring joy and happiness to people who were in contact with her

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[35] G. Eliot, "An Address to the Working Men, by Felix Holt", pp. 198-199.

and needed aid. If she gave up her wealth, she would be unable to give such aid. Such a life of charity, Deronda argued, would place Gwendolen "among the best of women, such as made others glad that they were born."[36] George Eliot's position in this regard is summarized by Farebrother when he says to Dorothea, "The stronger thing is not to give up power, but to use it well."[37] As she suggested in the "Address to the Working Men by Felix Holt", George Eliot felt that when the various classes began to use their particular assets to benefit all society, not just a particular segment, then the rigidity of class structure would begin to disappear. It is the "stealthy convergence of human lots" which produces this "subtle movement".[38] The use of the words "stealthy" and "subtle" suggest a slow gradualness in this process. George Eliot was not a revolutionary; she was essentially a conservative.

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[36] G. Eliot, Daniel Deronda (Toronto, 1902), pp. 771-775.

[37] Middlemarch, p. 375.

[38] Ibid., p. 70.

In Middlemarch society there was a tension between the traditional social order and the new order wherein mutual social interests were gradually eroding the rigidity of class distinctions. This new order, George Eliot would argue, growing out of the dynamic interconnectedness of individual social units, is rooted in the very nature of society. Its movement is directed toward the future. This, however, is only a part of the change which was taking place in Middlemarch society. Traditional social faith was also undergoing a change. George Eliot wrote that this was an age which had no "guiding visions and spiritual directors."[39]

Traditionally, an object, thought, or act, had value because God gave it value. George Eliot does not accept this belief; nor does she believe that society itself ever really did. She feels that society was merely deluding itself by such beliefs and was unconscious of its real motives. The following scene provides an example of how George Eliot finds unseen motives in a certain Christian

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[39] Middlemarch, p. 64.

doctrine. Casaubon had just learned that he was going to die. Casaubon, George Eliot wrote,

> held himself to be, with some private scholarly reservations, a believing Christian, as to estimates of the present and hopes of the future. But what we strive to gratify, though we may call it a distant hope, is an immediate desire . . . .[40]

Here George Eliot states that hope for the future is really a disguised attempt to gratify an immediate desire. Hopes for the future, as indicated in the quotation, figure importantly in Christianity. Such hopes are centred around Heaven. George Eliot would explain the Christian doctrine of heaven in this way: man has a desire to enjoy heaven-like conditions now on earth. Since this desire is presently unattainable, man has projected Heaven into the future as a kind of desire-fulfilment.

George Eliot wrote that she saw in Christianity "the highest expression of the religious sentiment that has yet found its place in the history of mankind."[41] Nevertheless, she felt that

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[40] *Middlemarch*, p. 311.

[41] G. Eliot, *Letters*, III, 231.

Christianity was not suited to the needs of modern society. In the Mill on the Floss, she commented,

> Expensive sermons and treatises, newly issued leave all things as they were before . . . . They are written on velvet cushions to teach endurance to those who are treading with bleeding feet on the stones.[42]

George Eliot sensed that much of the value of Christianity was lost in the egoism nourished by certain Christian doctrines. She appears to have been greatly impressed by Ludwig Feuerbach's ideas on Christianity, which she translated in The Essence of Christianity. "With the ideas of Feuerbach," she wrote, "I everywhere agree."[43] Bernard J. Paris summed up one of Feuerbach's central arguments when he wrote, "Many Christian doctrines are the expression of man's egoistic desire that his consciousness have unlimited freedom and power."[44]

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[42] G. Eliot, The Mill on the Floss (Toronto, 1902), p. 305.

[43] G. Eliot, Letters, II, 153.

[44] J. B. Paris, Experiments in Life, p. 95.

In the story of Bulstrode, George Eliot illustrates the force of egoism in shaping religious doctrine. George Eliot does not question Bulstrode's sincerity: "For the egoism which enters our theories does not affect their sincerity; rather, the more our egoism is satisfied, the more robust is our belief."[45] Bulstrode lived "uniting . . . distinguished religious gifts with successful business", until "as age made egoism more eager but less enjoying, his soul had become more saturated with the belief that he did everything for God's sake, being indifferent to it for his own."[46] When Bulstrode's nefarious past was exposed, he felt "that God had disowned him before men and left him unscreened."[47] When his egoism was no longer gratified, Bulstrode was not so robust in his belief. Mrs Sprague summed up the religious effect of the Bulstrode affair when she commented, "And of course it is a discredit to his doctrines."[48] So George Eliot meant it. "What can the fitness of

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[45] Middlemarch, p. 382.

[46] Ibid., pp. 450-51.

[47] Ibid., p. 533.

[48] Ibid., p. 544.

things mean if not their fitness to a man's expectations? Failing this, absurdity and atheism gape behind him."[49]

The relationship which George Eliot discerned between egoism and traditional Christianity did not prejudice her presentation of characters who were closely associated with the Christian religion. In her novels George Eliot has created a number of clergymen, representatives of traditional social faith, who are truly admirable characters. Mr Tryan in Janet's Repentance is the first of a series of such characters who include Mr Irwine in Adam Bede, Dr Kenn in The Mill on the Floss, Mr Lyon in Felix Holt, and Mr Cadwallader and Mr Farebrother, to mention a few. These men speak with voices of authority in the novels but without exception their religious doctrines play no part in determining either their voice of authority or their admirable traits. Lydgate put his finger on the central issue when he spoke to Dorothea on behalf of Mr Farebrother: "he is only a parson among parishioners whose lives he has to try to make better."[50]

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[49] Middlemarch, p. 100.

[50] Ibid., p. 363.

Farebrother, like the other clergymen mentioned, exhibited a genuine concern for the well-being of others. For George Eliot, this is his chief good. Lydgate went on to discuss Mr Tyke who was more "apostolic"; that is, he was more concerned with doctrinal issues than with social ones. Lydgate observed that "a good deal of his doctrine is a sort of pinching hard to make people uncomfortably aware of him."[51] Nowhere in the novel is there any mention of any concern felt by Mr Tyke for the social well-being of others. By setting up a comparative parallel between Mr Farebrother and Mr Tyke, George Eliot illustrates the uselessness of religious doctrine insofar as social well-being is concerned, and at the same time stresses the importance of actively working toward making one neighbour's life on earth better.

George Eliot stated that "religion can only change when the emotions which fill it are changed."[52] As we have already seen, she felt that selfish desire, or egoism formed the emotional basis for traditional Christianity. George Eliot's

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[51] Middlemarch, p. 363.

[52] Ibid., p. 454.

meaning of egoism is made clear in her comments on certain characters. She pointed out that Rosamond Vincy "had little been used to imagining other people's states of mind except as a material cut into shape by her own wishes."[53] The effects of such an egoistic attitude are shown when Mrs Garth admonished Fred Vincy,

> "Yes, young people are usually blind to everything but their own wishes, and seldom imagine how much those wishes cost others."[54]

Egoism prevents one from realizing that another person has an "equivalent centre of self."[55]

George Eliot outlined her idea of the kind of emotional basis needed for a changed religion. She wrote,

> there is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow-men.[56]

If instead of selfish desire, sympathetic altruism

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[53] Middlemarch, p. 569.

[54] Ibid., p. 419.

[55] Ibid., p. 157.

[56] Ibid., p. 453.

formed the emotional basis of religion, traditional religion would change into something which could answer the needs of society. The morality of the new religion develops wholly out of human altruism, and a recognition of the implications of the dynamic interconnectedness of individuals in society. The social logic of this development insures its meaningfulness.

In Middlemarch, then, we see two kinds of morality. The one is based on Christian doctrines, and the other is based on direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow men. In one of her letters George Eliot repudiates an argument that "there is nothing in the constitution of things to produce, to favour, or to demand a course of action called right" apart from the central dogmas of Christianity.[57] George Eliot firmly held the belief that moral attitudes were the products of ingrained, sympathetic feelings. Her novels, she states,

> have for their main bearing . . . a conclusion without which I could not have cared to write any representation of life -- namely, that the

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[57] G. Eliot, Letters, VI, 338-39.

> fellowhip between man and man which has been the principle of development, social and moral, is not dependent on conceptions of what is not man: and that the idea of God, so far as it has been a high spiritual influence, is the idea of a goodness entirely human (i. e., an exaltation of the human).[58]

During the course of discussing Dorothea's effect on Will Ladislaw, George Eliot noted,

> There are some natures in which, if they love us, we are conscious of having a sort of baptism and consecration: they bind us over to rectitude and purity by their pure belief about us; and our sins become the worst kind of sacrilege which tears down the invisible altar of truth.[59]

By using such words as "baptism", "consecration", "sins", "sacrilege", and "altar", George Eliot gives a definite religious overtone to this passage. This is not misleading. As Reva Stump argues, George Eliot implies "that human beings, in their very capacity as human beings, can affect each other in such a way as to create what is essentially a religious experience, as for example in the upper roomscene in Adam Bede."[60] This is the scene in which Dinah Morris comforts Hetty Sorrel on the

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[58] G. Eliot, Letters, VI, 98.

[59] Middlemarch, p. 565.

[60] R. Stump, Movement and Vision in George Eliot's Novels (Seattle, 1959), p. 177.

eve of the day set for Hetty's execution. In spite of Hetty's prayer to God, George Eliot comments that "it was the human contact she clung to."[61] This human contact is the basis of George Eliot's "religion without the aid of theology."[62] In one of her letters, George Eliot stated,

> A public tribute to any man who has done the world a service with brain or hand, has on me the effect of a great religious rite, with pealing organ and full-voiced choir. [63]

For George Eliot, moral progress is found in the progress from an egoistic to an altruistic outlook on life. Egoism would seem to stem from the primitive urge for self-survival. Altruism appears to be the consequence of man's relation to society. "The moral education of the individual is the process by which his animal egoism is subdued and transformed into altruism by his social experience."[64] George Eliot wrote, "We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world

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[61] G. Eliot, Adam Bede (New York, 1964), p. 440.

[62] Middlemarch, p. 185.

[63] Letters, IV, 196.

[64] B. J. Paris, Experiments in Life, p. 56.

as an udder to feed our supreme selves."[65] A person sensitive to the nature of social interconnectedness and its implications, sensitive to the facts that "scenes which make vital changes in our neighbour's lives are but the background of our own",[66] realizes the importance of the "self-subduing act of fellowship".[67] Through such acts the conditions of the world are gradually improved.

Middlemarch has in it many characters who aspire to heroism, each in his own way. In the Introduction to this thesis, I wrote that the hero embodies and conserves a socially significant value. George Eliot, we have seen, feels that modern society is man-centered rather than God-centered. God does not give value to things on earth; man does. The modern ardent soul, as George Eliot would term it, must somehow realize this. If he does not,

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[65] Middlemarch, p. 156.

[66] Ibid., p. 238.

[67] Ibid., p. 588.

the values he may seek to embody and conserve may be at best superfluous, or at worst harmful to modern society. This person must also realize how society is truly organized, and how differences between classes are in the final effect artificial. If he realizes this, he will understand that it would be unlikely that he could suddenly and single-handedly change the direction of society. Social change can be wrought only by one member of the social organism affecting another, and he another, and so forth, until a sizeable momentum is built up. Social amelioration is a slow and gradual process.

Unless the ardent soul recognizes all this, he may well become frustrated in his search for heroic channels for his life. At least one critic has suggested that Middlemarch is a study in frustration.[68] Such a reading, although it may be justified in as far as it goes, seems to me to be essentially a negative reading. George Eliot has certain very positive things to say in Middlemarch, as we shall see in the last chapter of this thesis. To read Middlemarch as a study

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[68] E. Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the English Novel (New York, 1943), p. 326.

in frustration, and stop there seems to neglect the more positive suggestions for social amelioration which George Eliot presents. Reva Stump puts it this way:

> this novel explores the imperfectly fulfilled life, what would be necessary for fulfillment, the attempts which are made, the nature of the failure, and the known extent of the success. [69]

In the next chapter, I shall attempt to demonstrate how failure to understand what is for George Eliot the real nature of social faith and order results in frustration and unfulfilment for those who would seek the heroic life. Then in the last chapter, I shall discuss George Eliot's presentation of the fulfilled life, and attempt to show how for her such a life represents true, modern heroism.

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[69] R. Stump, Movement and Vision in George Eliot's Novels, p. 143.

II. Heroic Frustration

Dorothea, Lydgate, and Rosamond each aspired to a kind of heroism. Dorothea wished to be a heroine in the order of the Christian saints. Lydgate wished to be a scientific hero. Rosamond desired to be a romantic heroine; that is, to be a heroine of the type found in romance. Bulstrode, Casaubon, and Fred Vincy also longed for a kind of heroism. Bulstrode parallels Dorothea in his desire for eminence as a Christian. Casaubon, in his scholarly pursuit for the key to all mythology, parallels Lydgate's search for the biological primitive tissue. Fred's desire for the gentlemanly life, in the traditional sense, parallels Rosamond's longing for social prestige. Each of these characters, with the possible exception of Lydgate, looked to find heroism within the context of traditional social faith and order, failing to understand that this social faith and order did not meaningfully apply to the actual conditions of their society. Some came to this realization; others did not.

Failure to comprehend the nature of social faith and order stemmed from two basic types of causes. The one type is social in nature, and the other personal. Social causes represent certain influences on the characters brought to bear by society. Personal causes are influences which are rooted in one's personality. For example, George Eliot considers egoism to be one of the strongest personal causes, and education one of the more important social causes which blind certain characters to the real nature of social faith and order.

Because the traditional concepts of religion and rank do not reflect the real nature of Middlemarch society, attempts to find heroism along traditional lines are met with frustration. The idea that heroism can be found along such lines is an illusion. Frustration can either drive a character to disillusionment or deeper into illusion. Disillusionment may in certain cases serve as the first step in coming to an understanding of the real nature of social organization and values.

The first part of this chapter will centre around a discussion of the motivations for, and the scope of the heroic aspirations of Dorothea,

Bulstrode, Rosamond, Fred, Lydgate, and Casaubon. There will also be a discussion of the system of values influenced by these aspirations for heroism. An understanding on these matters will be helpful in assessing the frustration which besets the six characters mentioned. The last part of the chapter will then deal with an analysis of the frustration suffered by those whom we see aspiring to heroism.

George Eliot wrote that Dorothea was "enamoured of intensity and greatness". Her "mind was theoretic",

> and yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world which might fairly include the parish of Tipton and her own rule of conduct there . . . . [1]

When thinking of her marriage to Casaubon, Dorothea emphasized greatness, and abhorred trivialities.

> There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday things with us

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[1] Middlemarch, p. 6.

> would mean the great 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. 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.[2]

The association of Dorothea with such female saints as Saint Theresa, Saint Barbara, Saint Catherine, and Saint Clara underscores Dorothea's love of intensity and greatness. Dorothea's intense admiration of such men as Milton, Pascal, Jeremy Taylor, Bossuet, Saint Augustine, and Hooker would indicate that she wished to identify her life with persons whose lives were noted for Christian piety. Dorothea's was a "nature altogether ardent, theoretic, and intellectually consequent."[3]

"All Dorothea's passion," George Eliot comments, "was transfused through a mind struggling toward an ideal life."[4] This ideal life represents for Dorothea her conception of heroism. There may be, as one critic has suggested,[5] some degree of egoism in Dorothea's "desire to make

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[2] Middlemarch, p. 21.

[3] Ibid., p. 21.

[4] Ibid., p. 32.

[5] B. Hardy, "The Moment of Disenchantment in George Eliot's Novels", Review of English Studies, N.S., V (July, 1954), 263.

her life greatly effective."[6] Dorothea's repeated emphasis on greatness and grandness appears to suggest such a taint of egoism. George Eliot wrote that even "ardent souls, ready to construct their coming lives are apt to commit themselves to the fulfilment of their own visions."[7] In fairness to Dorothea, however, one must admit that she did exhibit a genuine social concern for the well-being of others in her plans for building good cottages. But Dorothea wanted to lead a more effective life than this. She felt that by overcoming her ignorance in intellectual matters she would be able to lead such a life. Her marriage to Casaubon, she believed,

> 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.[8]

> She was going to have room for the energies which stirred uneasily under the dimness and pressure of her own ignorance and petty peremptoriousness of the world's habits.[9]

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[6] Middlemarch, p. 20.

[7] Ibid., p. 399.

[8] Ibid., p. 21.

[9] Ibid., p. 32.

Casaubon, Dorothea believed, "united the glories of doctor and saint"; his work "would reconcile complete knowledge with devoted piety."[10] "Those provinces of masculine knowledge seemed to her a standing-ground from which all truth could be seen more truly."[11]

Dorothea was on the right track in connecting social duties with the grand life; but George Eliot hints that Dorothea had a "sad liability to tread in the wrong places on her way to the New Jerusalem."[12] Dorothea's extraordinary pre-occupation with learning and knowledge led her to ridiculous conclusions. Just before her marriage to Casaubon she came to the conclusion that,

> Perhaps even Hebrew might be necessary -- at least the alphabet and a few roots -- in order to arrive at the core of things, and judge soundly on the social duties of the Christian.... Miss Brooke was certainly very naïve....[13]

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[10] _Middlemarch_, p. 18.

[11] _Ibid._, p. 47.

[12] _Ibid._, p. 28.

[13] _Ibid._, p. 47.

George Eliot pointed out the cause of such naiveté in Dorothea. She stated that Dorothea was,

> struggling in the bands of a narrow teaching, hemmed in by a social life which seemed nothing but a labyrinth of petty courses, a walled-in maze of small paths that lead nowhere. [14]

Dorothea's education, including both her schooling and her devotional reading, had left her only a "thimbleful of matter in the shape of knowledge."[15] The chief part of her education consisted of a "toy-box history of the world adapted to young ladies."[16] This was complemented by the "shallows of ladies'-school literature."[17] Given a naturally ardent nature, Dorothea would find her social life restrictive.

> The country gentry of old time lived in a rarefied social air: dotted apart on their stations up the mountain they looked down with imperfect discrimination on the belts of thicker life below. And Dorothea was not at ease in the perspective and chillness of that height. [18]

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[14] Middlemarch, p. 21.

[15] Ibid., p. 18.

[16] Ibid., p. 63.

[17] Ibid., p. 18.

[18] Ibid., p. 238.

Dorothea thought she saw a means of escape from this restriction through greater learning.

Oppressed by the confines of her social life, and misguided by the shallowness of her education, Dorothea married the Reverend Edward Casaubon. As we have seen, Dorothea felt that with Casaubon's instruction and guidance she would "see how it was possible for her to lead a grand life here now -- in England."[19] Dorothea's pre-occupation with the grand life was so powerful that she looked at Casaubon only in terms of the grand life, only in association with saints and men noted for piety. She saw in Casaubon an image of her own making, not another human being. The image did not coincide with the actual man, and thus it turned out to be illusionary.

Dorothea's conception of the grand life was formed within the frame of traditional Christianity. Perhaps she found certain limitations to Christian doctrines. "Prayer," she felt, " heightened yearning but not instruction." Dorothea found her religious beliefs and exercises had to be supplemented with knowledge in order that "her life

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[19] Middlemarch, p. 21.

might be filled with action at once rational and ardent."[20] In spite of the possible limits which Dorothea may have found in her Christian doctrines, it remains that the knowledge which Dorothea sought was to be found in the works of great men of the past, virtually all of whom worked within the Christian tradition. Dorothea did mention ~~such~~ non-Christians such as the Stoics, but mainly she looked to great Christians who lived in former ages. Dorothea saw Casaubon as a man who in the present incarnates the qualities of great Christians of the past. She looked on him as a "living Bossuet" and a "modern Augustine".[21] Dorothea was attempting to pattern her life after models left by Christian heroes of a former age. In a sense, she was trying to reconstruct in the present, the past; she did not -- or perhaps could not yet -- face up to the realities of her society. In George Eliot's terms, she had not yet come to understand the nature of social faith and order.

Bulstrode was like Dorothea in that he

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[20] Middlemarch, p. 64.

[21] Ibid., p. 18.

sought to find a kind of heroism within the framework of traditional Christianity. George Eliot wrote that "Bulstrode had aimed at being an eminent Christian."[22] Mayor Vincy said to Bulstrode, "you must be first chop in heaven, else you won't like it much."[23] There is a great deal of egoism in Bulstrode's desire for Christian eminence. He was

> a man whose desires had been stronger than his theoretic beliefs, and who had gradually explained the gratifications of his desires into satisfactory agreement with those beliefs.[24]

Bulstrode salved his conscience concerning the source of his fortune by rationalizing that Providence pointed "the way for him to be the agent in making the best use of a large property and withdrawing it from perversion."[25]

As a young man in London, Brother Bulstrode was distinguished among only a few people as a pious Christian,

> but they were very near to him, and stirred his satisfaction the more;

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[22] *Middlemarch*, p. 386.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 97.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 453.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 452.

> his power stretched through a narrow space, but he felt its effects the more intensely. He believed without effort in the peculiar work of grace within him, and in the signs that God intended him for special instrumentality.[26]

In his passionate desire for personal power, Bulstrode used Christian doctrines, as he saw them, principally as a means to an end.

> But a man who believes in something else than his own greed, has necessarily a conscience or standard to which he more or less adapts himself. Bulstrode's standard had been his serviceableness to God's course:"I am sinful and nought -- a vessel to be consecrated by use -- but use me!" -- had been the mould into which he had constrained his immense need of being something important and predominating.[27]

Bulstrode was engaged in philanthropic endeavours; but here too, his desire, as his brother-in-law put it, "to play bishop and banker" dominated a sense of social duty. The New Fever Hospital was truly a philanthropic institution, and it was mainly supported by Bulstrode. However, when Bulstrode feared exposure by Raffles, he informed Lydgate that he planned to withdraw his support

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[26] Middlemarch, p. 450.

[27] Ibid., p. 453.

from the Hospital, explaining, "it is contrary to my views of responsibility to continue a large application of means to an institution which I cannot watch over and to some extent control."[28]

For Bulstrode, the value of anything was determined by the extent to which it satisfied his egoism, his desire for power. Such a system of values is socially harmful; thus a hero who embodies and attempts to conserve such a system of values is socially harmful. Although Bulstrode and Dorothea both sought a kind of heroism within the context of traditional social faith, Dorothea's system of values differs from Bulstrode's. For Dorothea, the value of anything was determined by the extent to which it promoted the ideal, or grand life. Thus whatever or whoever tended to foster knowledge was of value. Dorothea's conception of the grand life was illusionary; it did not apply to contemporary social conditions. Her ideal life, although it may have had a trace of egoism in it, was basically misdirected altruism resulting from a failure to understand the nature of social faith and order. The effect on society of Dorothea's

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[28] Middlemarch, p. 499.

type of heroism along with its system of values is rather superfluous.

Rosamond and Fred Vincy had different ideas of heroism from those of Bulstrode and Dorothea. Whereas Dorothea and Bulstrode sought heroism mainly within the structure of traditional social faith, Rosamond and Fred sought their kind of heroism within the context of traditional social order. George Eliot wrote that Rosamond had "a great sense of being a romantic heroine", and "played the part prettily."[29] Fred, believing "that the universal order of things would necessarily be agreeable to an agreeable young gentleman", thought it "irreconcilable with those cheerful intuitions implanted in him by nature" that he should have to "wear trousers shrunk with washing, eat cold mutton, have to walk for want of a horse, or to 'duck under' in any sort of a way."[30] Unfortunately for him, Fred had ample funds at his disposal only in

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[29] Middlemarch, p. 219.

[30] Ibid., p. 169.

his hopefulness.[31] His particular idea of heroism was to be a gentleman -- or at least, to enjoy the benefits that a gentleman's wealth and prestige could bring him.

Rosamond had been educated at Mrs Lemon's school, the chief school in the county,

> where the teaching included all that was demanded of an accomplished female -- even to extras, such as the getting in and out of a carriage.[32]

Such an education, along with its extras, no doubt fostered Rosamond's notion of being a romantic heroine. Besides this, Rosamond's mother and father were both concerned with social prestige, and actively encouraged their children to seek social advancement. "It's a good British feeling," according to Mr Vincy, "to try and raise your family a little."[33]

These influences of family and education acting on Rosamond from without were supplemented by the egoism of her own inner nature. Rosamond's egoism is emphasized time and again throughout the novel. The adjective "infantine" which often

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[31] Middlemarch, p. 168.

[32] Ibid., p. 71.

[33] Ibid., p. 95.

appears in connection with Rosamond[34] would seem to support an opinion that Rosamond is morally immature. Hers is a naïve egoism: Rosamond appears to be unconscious of the self-centeredness of her desires. When she wrote to request money of Sir Godwin, "Rosamond was naively convinced of what an old gentleman ought to do to prevent her from suffering annoyance."[35] The "ought to do" suggests that Rosamond felt Sir Godwin had a duty to prevent annoyances from bothering her merely because she would be uncomfortable. The word "annoyance" suggests a pettiness to the whole affair; it was not a hardship in the sense of severe privation. Rosamond virtually never thinks of anyone except in the light of how he may further her ambitions as a romantic heroine. It was in this light that she saw Lydgate. Lydgate was a stranger to Middlemarch,

> And a stranger was absolutely necessary to Rosamond's social romance, which had always turned on a lover and bridegroom who was not a Middlemarcher, and who

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[34] E.g., Middlemarch, pp. 118, 316, 580.

[35] Ibid., p. 481.

> had no connections at all like her own . . . . [36]

Rosamond looked at Lydgate in the same manner as Dorothea looked at Casaubon, in that she did not see the actual man; rather she read into the man what she wanted to see. After she had first met Lydgate, Rosamond,

> had registered every look and word, and estimated them as opening incidents of a preconceived romance -- incidents which gather value from the foreseen development and climax. In Rosamond's romance it was not necessary to imagine much about the inward life of the hero, or of his serious business in the world. . . . the piquant fact about Lydgate was his good birth, which distinguished him from all Middlemarch admirers, and presented marriage as a prospect of 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, and perhaps at last associate with relatives quite equal to the country people who looked down on Middlemarchers. [37]

Just before her marriage to Lydgate, Rosamond felt that she would find an "ideal happiness",

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[36] Middlemarch, p. 88.

[37] Ibid., p. 123.

> of the kind known in the Arabian Nights in which you are invited to step from the labour and discord of the street into a paradise where everything is given to you and nothing claimed.[38]

The reference to the Arabian Nights underlines Rosamond's desire for romance in the traditional sense of the word. Flirtation could provide delightful diversion for Rosamond, the romantic heroine, as the imagery in the following quotation suggests.

> How delightful to make captives from the throne of marriage with a husband as crown-prince by your side -- himself in fact a subject -- while the captives look up forever helpless, losing their rest probably, and if their appetite too, so much the better![39]

Fred's idea of heroism, like Rosamond's, was social in nature. He wished to be a gentleman in the traditional sense of the word. As he told Mary Garth, he was "not fit to be a poor man", and if he were rich, he would not make a "bad fellow".[40] Like Rosamond, Fred was influenced by his parents who actively supported his social aspirations. Again, Fred can be compared to Rosamond in that the

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[38] Middlemarch, p. 257.

[39] Ibid., p. 319.

[40] Ibid., p. 102.

education which he received tended to promote a desire for distinctive social status. Fred was educated at one of the English universities, and George Eliot directs some barbed criticism at the kind of education which was to be found in these institutions. When Fred's gambling debts were becoming bothersome to him, George Eliot seems unable to withhold the comment that Fred's "share in the higher education of this country did not seem to help him."[41] Rather, Fred's share in the higher education of this country appeared only to have " exalted his views of rank and income."[42] Fred's father gave him a university education so that Fred could become a clergyman. Mary Garth pointedly observed, "His being a clergyman would be only for gentility's sake."[43]

These pressures on Fred from without found a willing ally in Fred's inner nature. George Eliot comments that "Fred disliked bad weather within doors."[44] Like Tito Melema in Romola, Fred wished to avoid personal discomfort, whether psychological

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[41] Middlemarch, p. 100.

[42] Ibid., p. 103.

[43] Ibid., p. 379.

[44] Ibid., p. 169.

or physical. Thus he looked for the easiest way out of a situation -- the easiest way being that which was accompanied by minimal personal discomfort, regardless of the discomfort caused to others. This attitude led Fred into an unconscious egoism. It was not that Fred wished to hurt anyone: concerning Fred's relationship with Featherstone, George Eliot says that Fred "had kindness enough in him to be a little sorry for the unloved."[45] It was rather that Fred's aversion to suffering discomfort was stronger than kindness. Mary Garth pointed out Fred's weakness when she said to him, "But selfish people always think their own discomfort of more importance than anything else in the world."[46] This egoism encouraged Fred's dreams of wealth and social status for in these Fred would find the maximum amount of personal comfort and satisfaction.

Both Rosamond's and Fred's particular kinds of heroism took their character from the traditional social order. Rosamond longed for the world of fair princesses and charming knights on white horses,

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[45] Middlemarch, p. 83.

[46] Ibid., p. 187.

and Fred longed for the kind of life in which, merely because he felt he deserved it,

> he should hunt in pink, have a first-rate hunter, ride to cover on a fine hack, and be generally respected for doing so . . . . [47]

George Eliot, however, comments that "this was a world in which even a spirited young man must sometimes walk for want of a horse to carry him."[48] Rosamond had fashioned her ideal world out of the romances read at Mrs Lemon's school, and such a world had little, if any correlation with the world in which Rosamond actually lived.

In their search for heroism within the context of traditional social order, Fred and Rosamond demonstrate a complete insensitivity to, and unawareness of, the developments in the society about them. Their favorite ideals had blinded them against seeing the effects which the increasing industrialization was having on society. Perhaps one cannot be too severe in his criticism of Rosamond and Fred for failing to see this: it is given to very few to see historical trends while living in their development; however, the fact remains that Rosamond

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[47] Middlemarch, p. 250.

[48] Ibid., p. 416.

and Fred were looking back into the unattainable past, rather than assessing their current situation. Neither Fred nor Rosamond had come to understand the nature of the social order, and its implications. Their system of values was out of touch with what were for George Eliot the realities of the social order. For them, anything had value which tended to elevate their social status. Wealth was the greatest factor relevant to social status in Fred's eyes, and his system of values was oriented accordingly. Wealth was seemingly taken for granted by Rosamond when anything or anyone was associated with rank. George Eliot indicated this when commenting on Rosamond's thoughts concerning marriage.

> There was nothing financial, still less sordid, in her previsions; she cared about what were considered refinements, and not about the money that was to pay for them.[49]

Refinements indicated for Rosamond a distinctive social status, and anything tending to promote such a social status had value for her.

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[49] Middlemarch, p. 88.

The difference between the heroism of Lydgate and that of Casaubon makes an interesting study in balanced contrasts. Both men were engaged in research of which the aim was to discover originals. Casaubon's Key to All Mythologies, as the title suggests, purposed to discover the original myth or protomyth from which all other myths derived. Lydgate in his search for the primitive tissue hoped to discover that substance which all parts of the human anatomy share as a common basis. Each of these men felt that the successful completion of his work would provide for him a kind of heroism. Casaubon would have his revenge on Carp for the latter's adverse criticism, and he would achieve a certain immortality in his work. Although he was a Christian clergyman, Casaubon bent all his efforts toward achieving earthly immortality, and gave the appearance of being distrustful of, or at least uninterested in heavenly immortality. Lydgate upon the successful completion of his research would take his place among the immortal men of science.

George Eliot did not discuss to any extent the outward social pressures which affected Casaubon's idea that his personal heroism was to be found in scholarship. We may infer from Casaubon's jealous watch over his scholarly reputation that he had at some time in his earlier life gained a reputation for scholarship, and that he must preserve this reputation in society's eyes or suffer loss of dignity. Casaubon's inner nature was dominated by his egoism. George Eliot said that Casaubon had "risked all his egoism" on his Key to All Mythologies.[50] All Casaubon's desires, all his ambitions were linked to the Key. Casaubon's work on the Key was purely selfish, for its primary purpose was to immortalize Casaubon's name; any other purpose it might serve was secondary. So great was the psychological risk for Casaubon that he procrastinated in the completion of his work, fearing that if he exposed himself in publication, someone might find there a basic weakness. Yet paradoxically, Casaubon had at the same time to keep up at least the pretense of working on his Key lest he lose

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[50] Middlemarch, pp. 350-51.

his reputation.

In his marriage to Dorothea, Casaubon exposed all his egoism along with all his pathetic fears. Casaubon was like Dorothea in that he did not marry a real person, but rather an ideal he had constructed to suit his purposes. As his wife, Dorothea

> might really be such a helpmate to him as would enable him to dispense with a hired secretary, an aid which Mr Casaubon had never yet employed and had a suspicious dread of. (Mr Casaubon was nervously conscious that he was expected to manifest a powerful mind.) Providence, in his kindness, had supplied him with the wife he needed. A wife, a modest young lady, with the purely appreciative, unambitious abilities of her sex, is sure to think her husband's mind powerful. Whether Providence had taken equal care of Miss Brooke in presenting her with Mr Casaubon was an idea which could hardly occur to him. [51]

Casaubon led a narrow, pathetic life: he was, George Eliot says, "present at this great spectacle of life"; yet he was never liberated from his "small shivering self".[52] His egoism like a tiny speck close to his vision blotted

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[51] Middlemarch, pp. 205-206.

[52] Ibid., p. 206.

out "the glory of the world", and left only a margin by which he saw the blot.[53] Lydgate, by way of contrast, was absorbed "in the ambition of making his life recognized as a factor in the better life of mankind."[54] George Eliot comments that Lydgate was "generous and unusual in his views of social duty."55 Lydgate's ambition is directly connected with his idea of heroism. If Lydgate were to "work out the proof of an anatomical conception and make a link in the chain of discovery,"[56] the greatest worth of this discovery for Lydgate would be that it would benefit mankind by further advancing the conquest of disease. Lydgate does not disregard the fact that this would give him personal fame; but this is essentially a secondary consideration.

As a youth, Lydgate "'did' his classics and mathematics." There is a touch of irony in George Eliot's observation that

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[53] Middlemarch, p. 307.

[54] Ibid., p. 123.

[55] Ibid., p. 111.

[56] Ibid., p. 108.

> no spark had yet kindled in him an intellectual passion; knowledge seemed to him a very superficial affair, easily mastered: judging from the conversation of his elders, he had apparently got already more than was necessary for mature life. [57]

Lydgate's schooling did not guide him toward his chosen profession; rather, it was a chance reading of an article on Anatomy in an old Cyclopoedia which directed him. "Through this crevice came a sudden light startling him with his first vivid notion of finely-adjusted mechanism in the human frame."

> The moment of vocation had come, and before he got down from his chair, the world was made new to him by a presentiment of endless processes filling the vast spaces blanked out of his sight by that wordy ignorance which he had supposed to be knowledge. From that hour Lydgate felt the growth of an intellectual passion. [58]

The sudden, inspirational conversion of Lydgate with its accompanying, startling light, the use of the word "vocation", and Lydgate's rebirth, as it were, into a new world, would tend to suggest associations with a religious conversion.

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[57] Middlemarch, p. 106.

[58] Ibid., p. 107.

Lydgate's working toward the betterment of mankind in a practical and concrete way appears to equate with a religious act.

George Eliot would consider that Lydgate was directing his life toward a laudable goal. It does not really matter that Lydgate's search for the primitive tissue could be as futile as Casaubon's search for the Key to All Mythology. The important thing was that Casaubon was motivated principally by egoism; Lydgate was motivated by an ambition "to do a good small work for Middlemarch, and great work for the world."[59] Lydgate believed that "human life might be made better", and this belief is for George Eliot closely associated with "the abundant kindness of his heart".[60] Like Dorothea, Lydgate looked to great men of the past, such as Bichat. He found a certain sustenance in "the memory of great workers . . . who hover in his mind as patron saints, invisibly helping."[61] Lydgate's "patron saints" differed from Dorothea's in that his were

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[59] Middlemarch, p. 110.

[60] Ibid., p. 114.

[61] Ibid., p. 334.

all connected with science or medicine. There is a significance in this difference. Dorothea's saints were principally concerned with preparing man for the spiritual, or heavenly world, rather than with the temporal world which was only something to be endured for a short time before entering into the eternal Hereafter. Lydgate's "patron saints" directed their effort toward ameliorating the temporal world in some concrete, practical way. It is a worth-while endeavour, Lydgate felt, to concentrate on improving life on earth. In this regard, Lydgate stressed that man must look to his own efforts, not to Providence to make his life better. Once when Bulstrode feared a cholera epidemic, he said to Lydgate, "We may well besiege the Mercy Seat for our protection." Lydgate replied that "using good practical precautions" was the "best mode of asking for protection."[62]

In presenting Lydgate's conversion to a medical vocation in terms reminiscent of Saul's conversion to Christianity, George Eliot stresses

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[62] Middlemarch, p. 498.

the inspirational, as opposed to the rational aspects of the conversion. Emotion, sympathy, or whatever else she may call "feelings" is important for George Eliot. All the academic knowledge in the world is coldly inhuman without it.

> There is hardly any contact more depressing than that of a mind in which years full of knowledge seem to have issued in a blank absence of interest or sympathy. [63]

But there is a kind of knowledge which is very important for George Eliot. This is not an academic knowledge; rather it is , as we have seen, the knowledge -- or call it awareness -- of the nature of social faith and order. Lydgate with his "faults capable of shrinking or expanding" had not come to a full awareness of the nature of the social order. Lydgate had what George Eliot called "spots of commonness".

> Lydgate's spots of commonness lay in the complexion of his prejudices, which, in spite of noble intention and sympathy, were half of them such as are found in ordinary men of the world . . . . [64]

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[63] Middlemarch, p. 146.

[64] Ibid., p. 111.

Lydgate was, George Eliot goes on to say, rather careless in his judgment in everyday affairs, and he had a conceit "massive in its claims and benevolently contemptuous".[65] Later in the novel, George Eliot indicates that Lydgate's enlightment did not extend to any appreciable extent beyond his vocation.

> Lydgate's tendency was not towards extreme opinions: he would have liked no barefoot doctrines, being particular about his boots: he was not radical in relation to anything but medical reform and the prosecution of discovery. In the rest of practical life he walked by hereditary habit; half from that personal pride and unreflecting egoism which I have already called commonness, and half from that naiveté which belonged to pre-occupation with favorite ideas.[66]

Lydgate's favorite ideas were laudable. There was in Lydgate's society possible scope for his kind of heroism -- and only because his heroism was primarily concerned with "making his life recognized as a factor in the better life of mankind." Lydgate's heroism tended to answer a social need, unlike the

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[65] Middlemarch, p. 111.

[66] Ibid., p. 255.

kinds of heroism sought after by the other characters discussed. However, Lydgate's naiveté coupled with his personal pride and unreflecting egoism, would tend to hinder his vocation. These character traits caused within Lydgate . . a curiously dichotonomous system of values, partly forwarding and partly retarding his ambition. Lydgate's system of values was divided, based half on the altruism reflected in his vocation and half on the spots of commonness to which he was liable to fall prey. This system then tended on the one hand toward values which are basically altruistic and on the other hand toward values which are essentially egoistic. His massive conceit, his unreflective egoism -- these spots of commonness, suggest that Lydgate, in spite of his unusually generous views of social duty in regard to his vocation, had not reached a full understanding of the dynamic interconnectedness of society.

Lydgate's system of values is, as I have said, unlike that of any of the other characters discussed so far. Although it is divided between a disposition toward beneficial social action and a tendency toward a negative social effect, it has

more scope for possible social amelioration than Dorothea's. Hers is in essence socially superfluous, after she gave up her plans for building cottages. In the same vein, Lydgate's values have more redeeming qualities than those of Rosamond, Fred and Bulstrode. Whereas the latters' are essentially selfish or egoistic, Lydgate's are at least partly altruistic. In the same way, Lydgate's values contrast with those of Casaubon who appeared to prize only that which tended to serve or promote his hollow, scholarly reputation. Anyone or anything which detracted from this reputation, Casaubón viewed as harmful; his egoism became the criterion of all worth. Lydgate's system of values, then, afforded him the most possible scope for socially beneficent action of any of the other five characters. It is therefore the more tragic that his search for heroism was to be as equally frustrated as theirs.

Both Dorothea and Rosamond had this much in common, that each hoped to achieve her particular idea of heroism through her marriage. To Dorothea, Casaubon stood in the line of great saintly men who

might teach her to achieve spiritual greatness. To Rosamond, Lydgate was a man of high birth who might raise her to a realization of her social romance. Both of these women then expected their heroism to be realized through association with the man they chose for a husband. The association between marriage and the realization of heroism was so intimate that if the marriage partner turned out other than he was anticipated to be, the prospect of heroism was shattered. Both Dorothea and Rosamond were under illusions concerning the men they married because they had chosen what really amounted to an ideal of their own fashioning rather than a man who they realized had an equivalent centre of self.

Dorothea began to feel a certain disillusionment concerning Casaubon while in Rome on her wedding trip. Casaubon's personality irritated her; but even more seriously, Ladislaw's mention that Casaubon's ignorance of German language and studies seriously hampered his work, sowed in Dorothea's mind doubts concerning the scholarly worth of Casaubon's key.[67] Gradually her doubts solidified into certainty.

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[67] Middlemarch, pp. 150-151.

> 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. [68]

Casaubon was no longer looked upon by Dorothea as a great Christian saint. He had become all too mortal. When Casaubon banned Ladislaw from Lowick Manor, Dorothea resented the action.

> Dorothea had thought she could have been patient with John Milton, but she had never imagined him behaving in this way . . . . Mr Casaubon seemed to be stupidly undiscerning and odiously unjust. [69]

Just as he felt the imminence of death's approach, Casaubon invited Dorothea for the first time to share in his work; Dorothea, however, realized the meaninglessness and futility of this endeavour.

> . . . It was clear enough to her that he would expect her to devote herself to sifting those mixed heaps of material, which were to be the doubtful illustrations of principles still more doubtful. [70]

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[68] Middlemarch, p. 312.

[69] Ibid., p. 208.

[70] Ibid., p. 350.

The desire for knowledge which had been so ardent became cool as Dorothea saw that Casaubon's knowledge could not lead her on the path to the New Jerusalem when it was bemiring him in pedantry and futility. Dorothea's religious faith, grounded in traditional religion, underwent a change as disillusionment with Casaubon began to grow. After her wedding trip to Rome, Dorothea's "religious faith was a solitary cry, the struggle out of a nightmare in which every object was withering and shrinking away from her."[71] A few months later, Dorothea had reached the point where she could say to Ladislaw, "I used to pray so much -- now I hardly ever pray."[72] Traditional religion and its exercises were less meaningful to Dorothea as the disillusionment and the frustration of her heroic ideals became more pronounced.

Just as Dorothea expected Casaubon to lead her to the New Jerusalem, so Rosamond looked to Lydgate to carry her off into the paradise of social romance. Before she and Lydgate were married Rosamond felt that "Lydgate should by-and-by get some first-rate position elsewhere than in Middlemarch"

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[71] Middlemarch, p. 202.

[72] Ibid., p. 287.

-- preferably in London, so that her social condition would be improved, and so that she would be saved the embarrassment of having her family shock her noble relatives.[73] Despite this necessary adjustment which she saw no hindrance in fulfilling, Rosamond still felt Lydgate to be the ideal of her romance. However, as her marriage grew in months and years, Rosamond, like Dorothea, found disillusionment and met frustration. Lydgate did not agree with Rosamond that his profession was not "nice" because it was not socially accepted as genteel.[74] Moreover, Lydgate did not comply with Rosamond's desire that they quit Middlemarch and settle in London. When financial worries began to plague their household, Rosamond answered Lydgate's request that she assist him in curbing expenses with "the most neutral aloofness": "What can I do, Tertius?" Rosamond no more identified herself with Lydgate or his problems "than if they had been creatures of a different species and opposing interests."[75] Responsibility

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[73] Middlemarch, p. 261.

[74] Ibid., p. 335.

[75] Ibid., p. 434.

was part of the ordinary, mundane world, and Rosamond envisioned no responsibility as a romantic heroine. Rosamond was becoming disillusioned with Lydgate who was not rising to her expectations.

> The thought in her mind was that if she had known how Lydgate would behave, she would never have married him. 76

Rosamond's fanciful paradise of romance soon collapsed, and Rosamond fell into the realities of the mundane world -- the world where there are such things as debts, and hostilities, and odious tradesmen demanding payments. As Lydgate's debts became more oppressive, Rosamond's impelling action took the form of surreptitious ways of counteracting Lydgate's measures for economy, and of finding means for release from debt. Rosamond appealed to Lydgate's uncle at Quallingham for money. The Baronet's flat refusal of help further frustrated Rosamond's romance. The disappointment which she felt at this refusal was not as keen as the anguish suffered when Lydgate became implicated in the Bulstrode scandal, and

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[76] Middlemarch, p. 435.

was suspected of complicity in the death of Raffles. This scandal represents a serious reversal in Rosamond's climb to romantic heroism.

> The shock to Rosamond was terrible. It seemed to her that no lot could be so cruelly hard as hers -- to have married a man who had become the centre of infamous suspicion . . . . And she had innocently married this man with the belief that he and his family were a glory to her. [77]

The final props were kicked out from under Rosamond's romance when she found that her flirtations had not enslaved Ladislaw as her amorous victim. Rosamond was shattered when Ladislaw told her that he would prefer to touch Dorothea's hand if it were dead than he would touch any other woman's living.[78] All Rosamond's dreams of romantic heroism tumbled down around her. As she realized the meaning of Ladislaw's words, she

> was almost losing the sense of her identity, and seemed to be waking into some new terrible existence. [79]

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[77] Middlemarch, p. 554.

[78] Ibid., pp. 570-71.

[79] Ibid., p. 571.

> The terrible collapse of the illusion towards which all her hope had been strained was a stroke which had too thoroughly shaken her: her little world was in ruins, and she felt herself tottering in the midst as a lonely bewildered consciousness.[80]

Like Dorothea, Rosamond found her quest for heroism was frustrated. Marriage lead neither to the paths of their expectation. Their illusion was cracked. It then became apparent to both Dorothea and Rosamond that the conditions in which they lived prohibited the attainment of the kind of heroism after which they sought. Their worlds would not allow them such a kind of life.

Frustration also beset Casaubon's quest for heroism. We have seen that Casaubon was perpetually defensive of his reputation: he had "a morbid consciousness that others did not give him the place which he had not demonstrably merited"; nevertheless, he still felt "a passionate resistance to the confession that he had achieved nothing."[81] In his married life, Casaubon found that Dorothea

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[80] Middlemarch, pp. 571-72.

[81] Ibid., p. 306.

> nursed him, she read to him, she anticipated his wants, and was solicitous about his feelings; but there had entered into the husband's mind the certainty that she judged him, and that her wifely devotedness was like a penitential expiation of unbelieving thoughts.[82]

More than anything Casaubon feared judgment and exposure. Casaubon's paranoiac attitude was a determining factor in holding back the completion of his work. Casaubon refused to allow Dorothea to participate in his work until he realized that his death was imminent, and realized that only with her help could he finish the work. He attempted to exact from Dorothea a promise that, in the case of his death, she would labour to the completion of the work. Dorothea was "the only hope left that his labours would ever take a shape in which they could be given to the world."[83] Casaubon's death prevented Dorothea from giving her answer, until she wrote on the envelope containing the Synoptical Tabulation for the use of Mrs Casaubon,

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[82] Middlemarch, p. 306.

[83] Ibid., p. 351.

> "I could not use it. Do you not see now that I could not submit my soul to yours, by working hopelessly at what I have no belief in?" [84]

If Dorothea could have seen worth in Casaubon's work, she would have seen it to its completion. Thus it was not so much Casaubon's death which frustrated her quest for heroism as it was the futility and worthlessness which lay at the very basis of the heroism. Casaubon's quest for heroism contained in its very nature the seeds of its own destruction.

The frustration of Fred Vincy's aspirations for heroism came in a simple way. He was excluded from Mr Featherstone's will and inherited neither Stone Court nor a fortune. Fred's hopes for leading a gentlemanly life, in the traditional sense of the word, were thus squashed. The fact that Fred went back to his studies at the university in compliance with his father's wishes did not mean that Fred had resurrected his former ambitions and hopes to achieve his idea of heroism by joining the clergy. Fred felt unsuited to the clergy and was disinclined to enter the Church. "Of course", he said, "if I an obliged to be a clergyman, I shall try and do

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[84] Middlemarch, p. 393.

my duty, though I mayn't like it." Fred did feel obliged to enter the clergy.

> "And of course I can't begin to study for law or physic now, when my own father wants me to earn something. It's all very well to say I'm wrong to go into the Church; but those who say so might as well tell me to go into the backwoods." [85]

The clergy was the only apparent means of livelihood open to Fred. He felt, metaphorically speaking, that he would be banished to the backwoods if he were to earn a living in a profession with lower social status than that of physic, law, or the Church. It is not, as I have said, that Fred, had revived his former ambitions; it is rather that Fred, with his education and upbringing influencing him, could not see himself "ducking under" in any radical way. Fred's condition in life would not allow him his hoped-for heroism, so he was trying to find the path of least discomfort in the world in which he actually found himself.

The frustration which thwarted Bulstrode in his search for heroism and that which hindered Lydgate have certain elements in common. Perhaps

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[85] Middlemarch, p. 376.

an observation which Farebrother made after he had been listening to Lydgate expound on his ideals will make these elements clear.

> "You have not only got the old Adam in yourself against you, but you have got all those descendants of the original Adam who form the society around you." [86]

Farebrother isolates two factors working against Lydgate in the attainment of his ideal: the one is faults in Lydgate's character, corresponding to what George Eliot called his spots of commonness; the second is social interference. These two factors may be equally applied in Bulstrode's case, for he, like Lydgate, was frustrated by his own character traits as well as by society in his attempt to achieve what he considered an ideal, or heroic life. Yet in both the case of Lydgate and of Bulstrode, the character faults to some extent came before, and are indeed the basis of the social interference. Lydgate's massive conceit and unreflecting egoism initiated some of the social antagonism which was to frustrate his plans. Bulstrode's passion to rule, to play

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[86] Middlemarch, p. 129.

both bishop and banker, disposed the community to be ill-favoured toward him, and consequently toward plans which favoured his eminence.

George Eliot illustrated the involvement of Middlemarch society in Bulstrode's downfall by means of two highly dramatic scenes. In chapter seventy-one, she showed how the gossip concerning Bulstrode's past was spread throughout Middlemarch. Sparked by Mr Bambridge's story picked up from Raffles, fueled by Mr Hopkins' recount of Raffles' funeral, and fanned by the general dislike and suspicion of Bulstrode, the "gossip about Bulstrode spread through Middlemarch like the smell of fire."[87] Later in the same chapter, at the "sanitary meeting", the committee of "gentlemen" cleansed itself of Bulstrode's presence by publicly charging him with his sins and requesting him to quit the room. By presenting Bulstrode's downfall in this public way, by detailing the steps, and by allowing the reader to witness them dramatically, George Eliot emphasized the dramatic interconnectedness of society, with its significant relationship between society and the individual. The frustration of Bulstrode's ambitions for heroic eminence was

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[87] Middlemarch, p. 526.

wrought by an egoism which alienated the community and pre-disposed it to accept without question and without any possibility of mercy the scandal circulated concerning him.

Lydgate's is perhaps the most detailed story in the novel of how social interference can thwart individual plans for greatness even if achievement of that greatness were to benefit the very people engaged in the interference. But as in the case of Bulstrode, it was not so much that society was of its own impetus disposed to hinder Lydgate; it was rather that Lydgate himself on occasion gave society the initiative. It is true that there were vestiges of reaction in the form of prejudices which would militate against Lydgate, but such appeared of lesser account when compared to Lydgate's spots of commonness which goaded the prejudices, offended sensitivity, and ignored economy. Lydgate failed to understand the subtleties of society with its web of interconnections. Although he tried to defer to Mr Wench in the case of Fred Vincy's attack of typhoid fever, and although he shunned the dubious fame he got from such "cures" as Nancy Nash's tumour, Lydgate neverthless succeeded in alienating the medical

men of Middlemarch with his careless insensitivity. Lydgate's distinctiveness 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.[88]

Early in his career, Lydgate vowed that he would keep himself free of any entanglements that would interfere with his work. But almost immediately upon his arrival at the fever hospital, he was forced by circumstances to decide the chaplaincy question. George Eliot does not present a situation in which there is a clearly cut right or wrong choice between Mr Tyke and Mr Farebrother; both men had their recommending qualities as well as disadvantages. The complexities of the decision emphasize that

> for the first time Lydgate was feeling the hampering threadlike pressure of small social conditions, and their frustrating perplexities.[89]

In his decision Lydgate became identified with

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[88] Middlemarch, pp. 111-112.

[89] Ibid., pp. 133-134.

Bulstrode, and thus alienated a section of the community. This entanglement, however, is really only minor when compared to Lydgate's choice of Rosamond for a wife. Lydgate's judgment of women was seen to be faulty in the Laure episode in Paris. One cannot blame Rosamond for frustrating Lydgate's ambition; one must rather lay the fault at Lydgate's feet for making such a choice.

Marriage brought to Lydgate a wife who was so wrapped up in her own ambitions that she could not understand his. Marriage also brought to Lydgate a debt. His lack of judgment in financial affairs, along with his disdain of "thread-bare doctrines" involved him so deeply in financial problems that he neglected his work. When Lydgate reached this point in his life, George Eliot comments,

> Only those who know the supremacy of the intellectual life -- the life which has a seed of enobling thought and purpose within it -- can understand the grief of one who falls from that serene activity into the absorbing soul-wasting struggle with worldly annoyances. [90]

By the time Lydgate became implicated in the Bulstrode scandal, he was so wasted with the

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[90] Middlemarch, p. 540.

frustrations which had hindered his progress that, despite Dorothea's proffered help, he capitulated. "Alas! the scientific conscience had got into the debasing company of money obligation and selfish respects."[91]

Each character met his frustration in his own way. Rosamond, after she had moved to London, appeared to have revived her same old ambitions. After Lydgate died, she married an elderly and wealthy physician, and spoke of her happiness as "a reward".[92] Lydgate, however, "always regarded himself as a failure; he had not done what he once meant to do."[93] It was at least partly due to Lydgate's goodness that he had given up his ambition and gone to London. He could not ask Rosamond to stay in Middlemarch and fight for survival there though he had Dorothea's support; he felt responsibility for Rosamond's unhappiness.

> He had chosen this fragile creature, and had taken the burthen of her life

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[91] Middlemarch, p. 542.

[92] Ibid., p. 610.

[93] Ibid., p. 610.

> upon his arms. He must walk as he could, carrying that burthen pitifully.[94]

George Eliot writes that "In brief, Lydgate was what is called a successful man." One suspects irony in this observation when one considers what Lydgate said to Dorothea, "I have not taken a bribe yet. But there is a pale shade of bribery which is called prosperity."[95] Lydgate suffered prosperity -- in both senses of the word.

Bulstrode, like Lydgate, accommodated his frustration by leaving Middlemarch. We hear nothing of him after this. None of the three characters mentioned -- Bulstrode, Rosamond, or Lydgate, (Casaubon died) -- appears to have benefited morally from ~~their~~ his or her experience. The over-burdening catastrophe in these three characters' lives comes near the end of the novel. The corresponding catastrophe in Dorothea's and Fred's lives comes relatively early in the novel. This is meaningful, for especially in Dorothea's story, George Eliot provides herself with scope for a detailed presentation of the emergence out of frustration into an awareness

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[94] Middlemarch, p. 586.

[95] Ibid., p. 563.

of what makes a meaningful life. Thus George Eliot presents both sides of her moral message. Frustrated heroism is the negative side; the positive side of the message we shall consider in the next chapter.

III. The Modern Hero

True, modern heroism for George Eliot is so unlike the traditional concepts of heroism that one almost hesitates to use the term "heroism". But heroism it is, for the modern hero embodies and conserves socially significant values. The values of that kind of heroism which was based on traditional social faith and order were at best meaningless to modern society, or at worst harmful to it. The problem then is to discover values which are meaningful to modern society.

An examination of the stages of Dorothea's moral development may prove helpful in attempting to come to grips with this problem. George Eliot has very carefully structured the key passages in this development. In each of these passages Dorothea is found looking out of an upper window at Lowick Manor down on the scene below. The first occasion is that of Peter Featherstone's funeral. Dorothea

had just returned from Rome where she had suffered the initial stage of disillusionment with her marriage and her prospects for the grand life. This scene,

> aloof as it seemed to be from the tenor of her life, always afterwards came back to her at the touch of certain sensitive points in memory, just as the vision of St. Peter's at Rome was interwoven with moods of despondency. Scenes which make vital changes in our neighbours' lot are but the background of our own, yet, like a particular aspect of the fields and trees, they become associated for us with the epochs of our own history, and make a part of that unity which lies in the selection of our keenest consciousness.[1]

Here George Eliot draws the reader's attention to the interconnectedness of human life. As she continues in the passage, George Eliot intimates that Dorothea, prompted by the very ardour of her nature, felt a loneliness. Her association with her neighbours' lot was a "dream-like association of something alien and ill-understood"; she was somehow aloof, up in the window, and could only look "with imperfect discrimination on the life below".[2]

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[1] Middlemarch, p. 283.

[2] Ibid., p. 238.

Dorothea's discontent with this position shows for George Eliot that she is moving in the right direction morally. She is groping for closer identification with her neighbours' lot, which represents society's condition, but she does not yet know what action to take.

By the time of the second window-scene, Dorothea had returned to live at Lowick Manor after Casaubon's death. One morning, Dorothea was seated in her boudoir attempting to make an exact statement of her income and affairs. She looked out "along the avenue of limes to the distant fields."

> Every leaf was at rest in the sunshine, the familiar scene was changeless, and seemed to represent the prospect of her life, full of motiveless ease -- motiveless, if her own energy could not seek out reasons for ardent action.[3]

Dorothea has progressed beyond the stage of mere discontent as witnessed in the first scene. She realizes that the motive for breaking out of this seemingly odious ease must come from within herself: her own energy must seek out reasons for ardent action. She could not rely on a Casaubon with his knowledge, or even upon prayers, or on

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[3] Middlemarch, p. 394.

God to give her the reasons for action -- action which meant involvement in her neighbours' lot. The reasons for action must be entirely human to apply meaningfully to a human situation. And human reasons can be found only within human beings. Dorothea realizes this; nevertheless she is still unable to find reasons for ardent action. She has not yet reached that stage of moral development.

This last stage is presented in the third window-scene. Dorothea had spent a harrowing night, doubting Ladislaw's love of her after finding Rosamond and Ladislaw in a seemingly compromising situation. In the early morning, Dorothea drew aside the curtains of her boudoir window, and

> looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view, with fields beyond, outside the entrance-gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving -- perhaps the shepherd with his dog. 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.[4]

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[4] Middlemarch, p. 578.

Here Dorothea experiences a feeling of involvement in all the human life and activities which she sees around her. This experience of feeling is her salvation. Her search for knowledge could not bring her this sense of involvement; for George Eliot, the sense of involvement seems to be basically an emotional experience. The will to be involved is, of course, prerequisite. But this will is not easily made genuine. One cannot be truly involved in society and at the same time desire selfish ends. True involvement means relinquishing egoistic desires and submitting to altruistic motivations. Dorothea's behaviour immediately after this experience shows the basis of her motivation. She returned to Rosamond to speak on Lydgate's behalf when she believed that Rosamond had captured the man whose love she desired. Such an act testifies to Dorothea's altruistic motivation.

The differences in the scenes which Dorothea witnessed are important in their implications. The first scene is one of death, and of burial. The last scene is one of rebirth. The coming of dawn suggests this, as well as the presence of the mother and baby. Perhaps the implication here

parallels the Christian paradox wherein death becomes the necessary prelude to life. For George Eliot, the death and burial of selfish considerations with their socially divisive tendencies is a necessary prelude to the rebirth into a meaningful relationship with society. In the second scene, the complete absence of people would tend to suggest that the motives for ardent action can never come without the involvement of human considerations. The signs of new life in the last scene contrast with the death of the first scene, in bringing a sense of hopefulness and meaningfulness in the involvement with life. It may be noted also that in this sense of involvement in the life around one, there is no distinction of rank. Dorothea shared the same communal life as the labourers going out to work. The sense of aloofness, so apparent in the first scene, has vanished.

George Eliot's moral purpose is not answered solely in these three short scenes. These scenes illustrate her emphasis on the feeling of emotional involvement in the life of the whole community. This means, in short, a sensing of the dynamic interconnectedness of society, and from

this, developing a tendency towards altruistic action. Dorothea had reached this stage of development; yet before her marriage to Ladislaw she intimated that she felt a kind of failure in her life. Dorothea's life had been full of plans basically benevolent in their conception, but with the exception of her cottages, these plans were unrelated to basic social needs. To Lydgate she said, "there is no sorrow I have thought more about than that -- to love what is great, and try to reach it, and yet to fail."[5] She confided to Celia, "I have never carried out any plan yet."[6] Dorothea sensed a failure in not accomplishing anything concretely practical which was adapted to definite social needs. This assessment of failure may be modified if one considers the intangible and small effects which Dorothea had on various characters. Her spiritual goodness affected both Rosamond and Lydgate. Her beneficence helped Farebrother and his family. Certainly others' lives would have been more unpleasant if it had not been for Dorothea. Nevertheless, it still remains that Dorothea felt a failure in not carrying out any plan, and perhaps

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[5] Middlemarch, p. 560.

[6] Ibid., p. 600.

this says something for George Eliot's emphasis on practical works, answering a definite social need.

Concrete, practical objectives were very important for George Eliot. This is the meaning which may be taken from Fred Vincy's redemption. Fred's story goes back beyond Dorothea's. Fred came to realistic terms with the community around him because of the effect which Mary Garth had on him. When he failed to pay the debt which Caleb Garth had guaranteed, Fred caused the Garth family a great deal of trouble, the greatest being that the family could not pay the premium needed for Arthur to attend engineering school. On this occasion, Fred felt for "the first time something like the tooth of remorse."[7] Fred was beginning to realize that other people had an "equivalent centre of self." Mary fostered the growth of this altruistic concern. She also stressed something which appears to have been bred in all the Garths, the need for concrete work aimed at serving some social need. In this regard Arthur's education stands in ironic contrast to Fred's. The latter's education was only for gentility's sake; whereas Arthur's served a definite social need in a practical way. Mary

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[7] Middlemarch, p. 183.

heartily encouraged Fred to make his life useful. She said it was "very painful" for her to see in Fred an "idle frivolous creature". She admonished Fred:

> How can you bear to be so contemptible when others are working and striving, and there are so ~~many~~ many things to be done -- how can you bear to be fit for nothing in the world that is useful? And with so much good in your disposition, Fred -- you might be worth a great deal. [8]

Usefulness or worth involves working at any task which genuinely serves a social need.

Fred renounced the three traditional professions -- law, medicine, and divinity -- in favour of a much more humble kind of work. Fred, as we have seen, had to give up considering either law or medicine as professions because of his financial prospects; however, he did have a definite chance to take up divinity as a profession. It is important to note that Fred, unlike his family, did not feel that he was lowering himself in accepting the socially less prestigious work offered by Caleb Garth: any work which benefited society had dignity.

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[8] Middlemarch, p. 188.

It is in this way that Fred's story goes beyond Dorothea's, for Fred, encouraged by Mary and Caleb, began to work with Caleb Garth in his business. Dorothea is not shown in the story to take up any such work, unless -- and this cannot be discounted -- her wifely devotion to Ladislaw and her motherhood be considered as such. This aspect of Dorothea's life, however, extends beyond the scope of the novel. Within the novel, the definition of George Eliot's moral purpose appears to unfold through a series of characters, with each adding a particular aspect to the purpose until it reaches its clearest representation in the character of Caleb Garth. Fred Vincy's association with Caleb Garth's business provides a smooth transition to George Eliot's most clear statement of her moral purpose in Middlemarch.

George Eliot would appear to suggest that a sympathetic awareness of an equivalent centre of self is at the basis of her religion of mankind, replacing traditional social faith. The rites of this religion are exercised in work -- work which is socially beneficial. Caleb Garth spoke of his "business", or work in terms of reverence which suggest that work for him is equated with a

religious act. Business is referred to as Garth's "sanctuary";[9] it never met money transactions for him, "but the skilful application of labour".[10] When Garth talked of business, he felt "himself to be saying something deeply religious".[11] Business was a "sacred calling".[12]

Garth defines the purpose of work and the rewards it brings; he said to his wife,

> Its a fine thing to come to a man when he's seen into the nature of business: to have the chance of getting a bit of the country into good fettle, as they say, and putting men into the right with their farming, and getting a bit of good contriving and solid building done -- that those who are living and those who come after will be the better for it. I'd sooner have it than a fortune. I hold it the most honorable work that is . . . . It's a great gift of God, Susan.[13]

From this passage we can also see that Garth's work is motivated by altruism. Elsewhere George Eliot brings out this motivation by emphasizing Garth's basic weakness: when asked to manage the

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[9] *Middlemarch*, p. 294.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 402.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 409.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 292.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 295.

estates at Freshitt and the Grange, Garth exclaimed, "A man without a family would be glad to do it for nothing!"[14] Garth was so concerned with his work, which was always done on behalf of others with a view to improving conditions for others, that he was largely unmindful of his own needs. George Eliot is perhaps indicating in this regard that altruism must be tempered with a degree of self-concern; altruism can be taken advantage of by others less scrupulous unless a degree of concern for self-preservation is present. Caleb Garth failed in business, not because he was a poor or dishonest workman, but because he neglected the realities of sound finance in his passion for working and was taken advantage of. Fortunately Garth had a wife who helped to compensate for his weakness in this regard.

George Eliot stressed not only Caleb Garth's "reverential soul", but also his strong "practical intelligence".[15] If work represents the rites of George Eliot's religion of mankind, such work must be clearly practical; that is, it must

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[14] *Middlemarch*, p. 295.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 185.

of itself generate new social reforms.[18]

The desirability of basic, practical objectives in work can be explained in terms of George Eliot's conception of the dynamic interconnectedness of society. If one's work brings about a basic improvement in the life of one's neighbour, this improvement will ultimately have its effect on the whole community because of the dynamic interconnectedness of society. Anything so simple as the building of a good fence, over which Garth expressed concern, will, ultimately affect the whole community. Small, seemingly insignificant deeds will ameliorate society. Such deeds do not bring immortality; Susan Garth observed that her husband's "good work remains though his name may be forgotten."[19] Such a man, however, is the true, modern hero. "Heroism," Barbara Hardy writes, "is supplanted, in George Eliot, by the diffusion of good works."[20] George Eliot eloquently reinforces this idea at the end of the novel.

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[18] G Eliot, Felix Holt, pp. 295-296.

[19] Middlemarch, p. 295.

[20] B Hardy, The Novels of George Eliot, p. 34.

be directly applied to some social need. Garth roundly applauds Dorothea's plans for cottages for labourers because after the work on these cottages is completed, "men are better for it".[16] In the same vein, Garth appears to be largely distrustful of political action:"What people do who go into politics I can't think: it drives me almost mad to see mismanagement over only a few hundred acres."[17] Garth would agree with Mr Cadwallader in saying that improvements or reforms which bring about an immediately defineable improvement in one's neighbour's lot are of greater significance than legislative or political reforms. Mr Cadwallader said that if he were Brooke, he would give Garth"carte blanche about gates and repairs", adding "that's my view of the political situation." The implication here is that legislative reforms are useless unless those conditions which most directly affect man are first improved. This argument falls in line with Felix Holt's idea that social amelioration must begin at the most basic levels; when basic improvements are made, then the resultant social amelioration will

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[16] Middlemarch, p. 402.

[17] Ibid., p. 295.

> The growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.[21]

At the beginning of the second book of Middlemarch George Eliot wrote:

> For in the multitude of middle-aged men who go about their vocations in a daily course determined for them much in the same way as the tie of their cravats, there is always a good number who once meant to shape their own deeds and alter the world a little. The story of their coming to be shapen after the average and fit to be packed by the gross, is hardly ever told even in their consciousness; for perhaps their ardour in generous unpaid toil cooled as imperceptibly as the ardour of other youthful lovers.[22]

Middlemarch is the story of such people who meant to shape their lives and alter the world a little. It is the story of their frustration. But with the exception of Lydgate, it is also the story of

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[21] Middlemarch, p. 613.

[22] Ibid., p. 107.

the futility of their quests: they did not understand the nature of man and the world, and themselves. Lydgate sensed the high value of altruistic service, but character faults frustrated his chances of success.

Yet most of all, Middlemarch is the story in praise of generous unpaid toil, of toil unrewarded by immortality. It is the story in praise of of countless heroes, such as Caleb Garth. Although their names are buried by mortality, their deeds are preserved because they have refused to be motivated by egoistic considerations; they felt that society's concerns were the individual's concerns; they did their work under the impulse of altruistic promptings. Such are the modern heroes. Their countless, small and humble deeds form the basis of social progress.

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