

Women in middlemarch



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

A major theme in George Eliot's novel, *Middlemarch*, is the role of women in the community. The female characters in the novel are, to some extent, oppressed by the social expectations that prevail in *Middlemarch*. Regardless of social standing, character or personality, women are expected to cater to and remain dependent on their husbands and to occupy themselves with trivial recreation rather than important household matters. Dorothea and Rosamond, though exceedingly dissimilar, are both subjected to the same social ideals of what women should be. Dorothea and Rosamond are on different levels of the intricate social spectrum in *Middlemarch*. As a Brooke, Dorothea's connections "though not exactly aristocratic, were unquestionably good" (p. 7). Rosamond is of a slightly lower status, especially given that her father has married an innkeeper's daughter, thus further lowering the family's social rank. Although Dorothea and Rosamond enjoy similar amenities such as servants, the detailed social continuum of *Middlemarch* separates them. Dorothea and Rosamond's responses to their respective social classes differ much more widely than the actual social gap between them. Rosamond is particularly aware of her social standing; she "felt that 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" (p. 101). While Dorothea does not dissociate herself from her wealthy peers, she shows an affinity for the lower class by helping to improve the standard of living among them through new cottages. Dorothea's philanthropic view of the lower class contrasts with the disdain Rosamond feels for them. Accordingly, the two women's material views differ as well. Not only is Rosamond painfully aware of her social position vis-a-vis Dorothea's, she actively seeks to increase it by marrying

Lydgate. When Lydgate's material wealth reaches its limit and Rosamond's dreams of social supremacy vanish, the marriage quickly deteriorates. Contrastingly, Dorothea relinquishes a great deal of money for her love of Will. Dorothea's lack of concern for material goods and Rosamond's preoccupation with them are a striking example of the disparity between them. In spite of the vast differences between them, Middlemarch society applies the same tenets to both Dorothea and Rosamond. As females, both women are expected to follow certain social norms that hinder their personal objectives, material in Rosamond's case and intellectual in Dorothea's. A key function of women in Middlemarch society is that of a wife. Lydgate marries Rosamond expecting someone who will compliment his busy lifestyle by making his home-life pleasant. He compares women to geese and men to ganders when reflecting on the psychological differences between them, namely: " the innate submissiveness of the goose as beautifully corresponding to the strength of the gander." (p. 356) He presupposes Rosamond's obedient devotion. Caussabon, too, expects that Dorothea will aid him in his work. In his proposal to her, he writes: " But I have discerned in you an elevation of thought and a capability of devotedness - " (p. 43). His letter is not a profession of love but an indication that he finds Dorothea worthy of assisting him. The men expect nothing but support from their wives. Not only do the men demand complete dedication, they fail to comprehend the women's autonomous nature. To them, Dorothea and Rosamond entered into marriage not as equal partners, but as compliant, dependent supporters. Caussabon willingly recognizes that Dorothea will assist him with his work but refuses to entertain the idea that she has her own intellectual goals. Dorothea doubts her own intellect but retains her

thirst for knowledge. " She would not have asked Mr. Caussabon at once to teach her the languages, dreading of all things to be tiresome instead of helpful; but it was not entirely out of devotion to her future husband that she wished to know Latin and Greek." (p. 64) When Caussabon fails to fully include Dorothea in his studies, he undermines her intellectual ambitions and alienates her within the marriage. Lydgate's views of women become apparent when, upon meeting Dorothea, he muses that a woman with her intelligence and strong views would make a tiresome wife. He seeks a wife who will be complacent and not interrupt his budding career. As such a wife, Rosamond is supposed to occupy her time with trifling pursuits such as needlework and music. Lydgate presumes that Rosamond will help to reduce his debt from within the household by lowering expenditures, but refuses to listen to her ideas about appealing to the wealthy Sir Godwin. This forces Rosamond to go behind his back and ask for a loan herself. Not only does the request for help injure Lydgate's pride, but also, Rosamond's disobedience enrages him. He rebukes her, " - Have you sense enough to recognize now your incompetence to judge and act for me to interfere with your ignorance in affairs which it belongs to me to decide on?" (p. 665) Lydgate cannot accept anything but Rosamond's ineptitude in managing financial affairs. In addition to her husband's lack of confidence in her, Rosamond must deal with skepticism from other members of the community. When Sir Godwin receives her letter, he immediately assumes that Lydgate is behind it and admonishes him for dealing through his wife. It does not cross Godwin's mind that Rosamond herself generated the request. In Godwin's reply to Lydgate, he insists, " Don't set your wife to write to me when you have anything to ask - I never choose to write to a woman on matters of

business." Lydgate's and Godwin's treatment of Rosamond in the matter of her request reveal general misogynistic tendencies of the society in Middlemarch. Society puts pressure on Dorothea to conform to its model of the ideal woman as well. After the death of Caussabon, society deems it inappropriate for her to continue living at Lowick alone, managing the parish. Even another woman, Mrs. Cadwallader, warns her, " You will certainly go mad in that house alone, my dear. You will see visions." (p. 537) Society frowns upon the dependence of women, even Dorothea with her great inner strength. Although Dorothea and Rosamond differ in almost every aspect, their husbands and society consider them simply as women and apply the same standards to each. By holding Dorothea and Rosamond to the same standards and ignoring the vast dissimilarity between them, society minimizes the unique nature of the two women and contributes to the oppression of females throughout the community.