

# Illusions and reality collide in middlemarch



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BUSTER**

In George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch*, each character struggles to reconcile his desires with the realities of his life. This struggle often leads to an imaginative construction of reality in the "fellowship of illusion." In this novel, the characters of Dorothea Brooke and Tertius Lydgate share a similar form of imagination, both constructing in their minds an ideal marriage vision. As these illusions are forced to surrender to reality, the characters must attempt to understand the desires that fueled their imagination in the first place, and must try to make peace with their situation. The narrator attempts to show through these two characters this common tendency of humanity to create what we desire as a tool for dealing with a disappointing and limited life.

Dorothea and Lydgate imagine strangely coincidental forms of the ideal marriage partner. Dorothea seeks an intellectually dominant man who will guide her to her higher purpose, while Lydgate seeks a submissive woman who will share in his difficulties and help him achieve his lofty goals. In many ways, it seems they were looking for each other. The common element in this ideal was someone with whom they could share their higher goals, but both ended up with someone quite different. Dorothea is described as looking for "the union? that 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" (23). Dorothea's ideal of herself in a state of submission seems a strange contrast to her remarkable self-reliance. This, however, is a manifestation of her imagination. She imagines herself free from mortal constraints, and a marriage that is "trials" and "a state of higher duties" (35) is an exhibition of this freedom from the

worldly. She is acting against the passion in her character, imagining that she does not need to fulfill these base desires, and wants a husband that is more like a father. We see later that this elevated illusion cannot be long sustained.

In the absence of this ideal person, Dorothea and Lydgate imagine the virtues they seek in the people at hand. With little experience, Dorothea concludes Casaubon to be “ a man who could understand the higher inward life” (17) in what the narrator tells us is an assessment in which “ She filled up all blanks with unmanifested perfections, interpreting him as she interpreted the works of Providence, and accounting for seeming discords by her deafness to the higher harmonies. And there are many blanks left in the weeks of courtship, which a loving faith fills with happy assurance” (66).

Lydgate too at first believes Rosamund to be the ideal woman he has imagined, “ an accomplished creature who venerated his high musings and momentous labors” (320). Each of them is filling in the blanks of their lives with another person, Dorothea envisioning that she’s found the father figure she has always been lacking, and Lydgate imagining he has found the companion to make his great labors easier.

Great desires are present in these two characters to fuel such leaps of the imagination, and sustain the illusions created. Each of them imagines an ideal companion in someone who is in fact very different from that ideal and gives no encouragement towards the illusion. Lydgate and Dorothea both create such tremendous illusions because they have such extensive goals. Lydgate, like Dorothea, imagines himself to be above everyday cares, with romance and financial concerns having little relevance to his plans. He is

torn in the novel between the good things he can do and the everyday life, which interferes. In order to achieve great accomplishments, these characters must imagine freedom, and they do in their renunciations of village concerns. These illusions, however, end up trapping them. Lydgate believes that his flirtation means nothing to anyone, and finds himself entangled more completely than he would have been if he had acknowledged social norms. He forgets that every great scientist “ had to walk the earth among neighbors who thought much more of his gait and garments than of anything which was to give him a title to everlasting fame” (133), and these threads of social pressure work their immense power to draw him into marriage. Both Lydgate and Dorothea find themselves governed by desire, though they believe they are immune, and it is the desire itself which creates this illusion of freedom. Once trapped in marriage, Lydgate spins illusions in an effort to gain some happiness out of a marriage that was not what he desired.

The illusions created by Dorothea and Lydgate in their attempts to find fulfillment end up harming them. Both are disappointed in their marriages, having let their imaginations trap them with people who don't understand them and in fact work against their goals. Dorothea, after her marriage to Mr. Casaubon, is reduced to an incarnation of surrendered passion and desire, saying “ I have no longings” (356). Lydgate finds that his delusions and ideas of femininity have gotten him into a situation he can't handle, and sees himself doomed to “ a future without affection” (592). The illusions these characters created also contribute to keeping their marriages unmanageable, by creating obstacles to understanding by a refusal to see

their mates in their reality. The result for both these characters is a retreat of their dreams from an active fulfillment to a secret desire.

Lydgate is still further harmed by the illusions he has created. His renunciation of worldly concerns not only draws him into financial trouble, but tarnishes his reputation and hurts his practice. The financial trouble he accrues by imagining himself to be above such concerns leads him to accept money from Bulstrode that is perceived in Middlemarch as a bribe. His lofty treatment towards those people has also led to an animosity against him in Middlemarch, creating still more problems. The “petty medium of Middlemarch had been too strong for him” (170).

The narrator is quick to tell us, however, that imagination is not all bad. She tells us, instead, that it is a shared human experience necessary for survival. That, “if we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heartbeat, and we should die of that roar” (177). Some illusion, she argues, is necessary to protect us from the overwhelming full reality of the world. The narrator also comments that it is impossible to know everything about another person in a short time, especially through formalized courtship, so some characteristics must be imagined in order for a relationship to progress. “Life could never have gone on at any period but for this liberal allowance of conclusion, which has facilitated marriage under the difficulties of civilization” (17).

Imagination is also useful in this novel in that it provides the characters an opportunity for moral victory in getting past their illusions and understanding some of the real complications of the world. After Dorothea “had begun to

see that she had been under a wild illusion" (193), she continues to be devoted to Mr. Casaubon, a man she had deceived herself about in marrying. This devotion is morally elevated above the devotion she exhibited from within her delusion. Dorothea realizes that her disappointment come from her own imagination, not his failings, and pledges to continue, as she promised, in her duty as a wife. In this way imagination offers Dorothea a chance to exhibit her high morality in a way that is in touch with reality, in contrast with her earlier delusional attempts to show herself free from passion through self-sacrifice.

The shared human experience of imagination as a buffer to reality pervades the plot of Middlemarch. Each character is led by vanity to imagine themselves independent of social pressures that in fact determine their lives. Dorothea and Lydgate both engage in extreme creations of the imagination out of a desire to fulfill goals that go beyond the everyday provincial life, and in an attempt to be happy in the situations in which they find themselves. They are not, however, looked down upon for this, but accepted as only more proof of this human need to fill in the blanks. As each character begins to "emerge from that stupidity" (193), they are given the opportunity to show their true moral standing through the way in which they deal with the realities with which they are confronted. Dorothea morally elevates herself in this post-imaginative situation, showing her ability to accept her duties. Lydgate is less satisfying, forcing himself into a perpetual compromise in which he maintains some of his illusion while completely sacrificing his goals and himself to the consequences. The temptation to imagine is inescapable in the world of Middlemarch, and, the narrator tells us, in the world at large.

“ We are all of us imaginative in some form or other, for images are the brood of desire” (324).

## **Works Cited**

Eliot, George. Middlemarch. New York: Bantam Books, 1985.