

# [Gender roles and marriage in eliot and trollope](https://assignbuster.com/gender-roles-and-marriage-in-eliot-and-trollope/)

In law a husband and wife are one person, and the husband is that person…A woman…has got to put up with the life her husband makes for her…In Middlemarch, George Eliot offers a portrayal of a closely-knit, semi-rural community, but in fact transcends this simplistic framework to consider a number of social and political questions, thereby positioning herself as one of the great dialectical writers of the Victorian era. Eliot’s interest fails to be ignited by the gossip and petty politics of rural life, and her amused contempt, which vacillates from the cynical to the scathing when she describes the locals of Middlemarch, points to the fact that she requires protagonists who are intellectuals to prevent her works from sliding into the depths of irony and condescension. Since Eliot seems not to be writing about the society of Middlemarch itself, the novel coheres on the theme of marriage; it is here that the disparate points of the plot converge, and here where Eliot’s real strengths lie. Similarly, in He Knew He Was Right, Anthony Trollope focuses not on the political workings of a particular town (in this case, Barchester) or institution (such as the Church of England), but instead on the choices made in marriage. In particular, Eliot and Trollope contemplate estrangement and the consequences of wrongful decisions, drawing on a series of explorations of male authority to bring their works into the larger Victorian debate over women’s rights. During the late 17th and 18th centuries, society witnessed the onset of a shift away from the notion that married love could only exist as an ideal, and towards an ethical imperative to marry for love. Although by no means constituting a radical maneuver away from the status quo espoused by Blackstone, the murmurings of John Locke’s contractual ethic began to insinuate themselves into the institution of government, as well as the family. Locke defined “ contract” as a mutually voluntary agreement, contending that any violation of the terms of the contract would render it dissoluble. However, as soon as this contractual ethic was applied to marriage, it opened up a conversation about the contractual foundations of marriage, which ensure that the husband should not subordinate or undermine his wife. Adding to this was an argument about the economic consequences of marriage: women’s rights were a necessary corollary of the progress enjoyed during the Victorian period. These factors all converged on the campaigns leading to reforms, including the Factory Acts of 1844, 1847, and 1850 (affecting women and children), the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 (giving a legally separated wife the right to keep her own earnings, and allowing, in the case of a man divorcing his wife for adultery, the wife to argue that her adultery was aggravated by cruelty or desertion), and finally, in 1870, the first Women’s Property Act. Set in the 1830s against the background of the frenzied appeals and counter-attacks centred on the legal denial of female subjectivity, Middlemarch is a novel focused on the debate over women’s property and the right to marry for love. Eliot incorporates examples both of characters that fail to conform to societal expectations (whom she clearly feels are admirable), as well as characters so consumed with traditional ideas of male authority and female subservience that Eliot feels they ought to be taught a lesson. She therefore successfully narrates and criticises simultaneously. That Dorothea is described as having a nature “ altogether ardent, theoretic, and intellectually consequent…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 mazy of small paths that led no wither” seems to suggest that Eliot intends to highlight the damaging effects the provincial society of Middlemarch can have on even a strong-willed teenager. For further emphasis, Eliot writes in her prelude: “ Women were expected to have weak opinions; but the great safeguard of society and of domestic life was, that opinions were not acted on.” The power of custom is also expressed through several of the major male figures in the novel, not least from the rather unenlightened Arthur Brooke. Mr Brooke’s dialogue is largely comprised of traditional attitudes concerning the nature of women, who he thinks are suitable only for “ music, the fine arts, that kind of thing.” His dismissal of Dorothea’s knowledge and aspirations directly impacts the topic at hand – marriage – since the cultural assumptions concerning female inferiority and male intelligence propel bright female characters like his niece into a difficult position in the domestic sphere. Dorothea is clearly not a “ perfect” character – Eliot makes no attempt to hide her distaste for Dorothea’s self-damaging characteristics – and in chapter 4, Celia chides her sister, saying, “ You always see what nobody else sees…yet you never seen what is quite plain.” However, while the character of Dorothea speaks in intense, beautiful metaphors and is presented as a selfless innocent, Eliot’s depiction of Mr Casaubon borders at times on caricature. Eliot seems to work through superlative juxtapositions in order to emphasise the importance of making “ right” choices in marriage, and although she does portray Casaubon attempting to show kindness to Dorothea, she takes every opportunity to describe him as “ repulsive” and “ death’s head” – and, at one point, as Milton’s “ affable archangel”. Trollope employs a similar tone of socio-historical observation of the individual experiences that, born out of society’s unenlightened attitudes, evidently shape the marriages of his characters. Hugh Stanbury is one case in point: he becomes a hero because he marries despite his lack of money. “ There came upon him some dim ideal of self-abnegation, – that…the poetry of his life was, in fact, the capacity of caring more for other human beings than for himself.” Similarly, Nora Rowley rejects Lord Peterborough’s proposal of marriage, and says, “ there is a time when a girl must be supposed to know what is best for herself, just as there is for a man” when she is reprimanded by her parents for having chosen Hugh. Trollope’s character is thus engaging in fairly radical feminist talk. Trollope re-emphasises the contractual ethic of married love in his articulation of Trevelyan’s obsession with his perceived right to “ mastery” and the monomania that ensues. He cannot trust Emily, and therefore believes she requires the “ rigours of surveillance”. However, by hiring a personal detective, Trevelyan undermines the entire basis of the consensual contract that feminists hoped to see introduced to the institution of marriage. Eventually, Trevelyan destroys his own home, symbolically destroying the domesticity that he had always longed for. Trollope therefore appears to equate female subjectivity with domesticity, demonstrating that a marriage must be based on mutual love and respect in order to function. It is significant that Eliot’s most remarkable passages are centered on the troubles of marriage. For example, after Dorothea’s wedding, she reflects: But the door-sill of marriage once crossed, expectation is concentrated on the present. Having once embarked on your marital voyage, it is impossible not to be aware that you make no way and that the sea is not within sight – that, in fact, you are exploring an enclosed basin. This metaphor of the “ voyage” of marriage aptly describes the burgeoning loss and hopelessness that Dorothea feels as her marriage fails to live up to her expectations. Later in the novel, Lydgate describes his disappointment in his marriage by saying that he feels “ as if he had opened a door out of a suffocating place and had found it walled up.” Here, Eliot uses the language of imprisonment to describe the emotions of a male victim of the contemporary culture. Indeed, the novel’s strength is its presentation of the tragedy of a failed marriage. In a truly consensual contract, both partners would be able to continue to fulfil their ambitions, each enjoying the other’s encouragement. However, the murder of both Dorothea and Lydgate’s raison-d’Ãªtres – social reform and scientific progress, respectively – emphasises once again the importance of the contractual ethic and the damaging effects of the legal denial of female subjectivity. A remarkable incident in He Knew He Was Right occurs when Miss Stanbury is told of Dorothy’s rejection of Mr Gibson, at which point she declares that it was “ as though I were asking her to walk the streets.” Ironically, prostituting herself is exactly what Miss Stanbury is asking Dorothy to do in saying she should marry a man for purely mercenary reasons. The main question in the reader’s mind throughout Middlemarch – besides whether Dorothea will indeed eventually marry Will Ladislaw – is the question of why she married Casaubon in the first place. Despite her self-deprecating statements and desire for knowledge, it seems inconceivable that someone as feisty and romantic as Dorothea could ever fall for some as cold and unfeeling as Casaubon. And yet Dorothea fails to ask herself this question. While Celia is happy in a more superficial, traditional partnership, Dorothea is unable to reconcile her desire for independence with this conventional practice, and so requires a more modern marriage of consensual love and respect. However, one could posit that Dorothea is unable to love at the time of her introduction to Casaubon as a result of the damage she sustained having been orphaned and brought up by her uncle. In addition, it is clear that Dorothea is a fantasist, and to some degree she is indeed marrying a father-figure. She attempts to treat the relationship as a fantasy, musing over absence and loss, treating Casaubon as both a lover and a father. This approach, however, ultimately fails, inspiring her to turn to Will as a release from the monotony. It is important to acknowledge that neither George Eliot nor Anthony Trollope can really be labeled proto-feminists. The Lockean appeal on the principle of contract permeated the 19th century, and although Eliot was enlightened (she clearly would have had more of a vested interest in women’s rights than Trollope, being a woman herself), Trollope appears fundamentally ambivalent about feminism; both have clearly been conditioned by the society in which they exist. In He Knew He Was Right, Trollope seems to suggest that male authority is right, but ought to manifest itself through loving persuasion rather than harsh coercion. It is certainly not a radically feminist polemic, and both Trollope and Eliot are clearly interested in other social questions as well as those pertaining to women’s rights. Trollope does point to Locke and idealize marriages borne of love, but he also highlights the general issue of progress – both economic and domestic – beyond the arena of women’s rights. It is significant also that Eliot focuses on the relationship between pity and marriage – Bulstrode is pitied by his faithful wife, and yet Rosamund has no sympathy for her husband’s aspirations. The place of women, Eliot certainly seems to maintain, is to support their husbands, as Mary expresses in a surprising moment of sardonic observation: “ husbands are an inferior class of men, who require keeping in order.” Indeed, when men and women make comparable mistakes in Middlemarch, the men are found culpable, while the women are not. Both Lydgate and Dorothea make bad marriage choices, and although our sympathy may lie with both, Lydgate is presented as a fool, while Dorothea an innocent victim. To some extent, there is no escape for the characters of Middlemarch and He Knew He Was Right – they exist solely within the framework of Victorian society. Both heroines are admirably strong-willed, but Dorothea and Emily lived before 1870, and the authors are realistic in their presentations of their situations. They do not seem to be forcefully pushing for change, and Eliot in fact altered her remarkably feminist ending to a more conventional one prior to publication. The era was steeped in debate about women’s rights with regards to marriage and property, and it would be surprising if the debate failed to seep into social novels such as these. Of course, the authors choose to make more of the topic than this, focusing on estrangement in marriage as an example of the outcome of contemporary conventions, but what they created are by no means a one-sided radical polemics. Indeed, both authors are admirably objective in their narrative and characterisation, pointing out the good and bad points of all the characters. Thus they create novels that focus on particular people living during the Victorian era, under Victorian conventions, and participating in a Victorian dialogue. Eliot and Trollope are interested in the legal denial of the rights of women because the characters are subject to this, but it is a subtle and character-based exploration, not an aggressive radical polemic.