

# [A study of the character of lydgate in george eliot’s middlemarch](https://assignbuster.com/a-study-of-the-character-of-lydgate-in-george-eliots-middlemarch/)

One of the most important aspects of defining a character as courageous in George Eliot’s novel Middlemarch is self-recognition. In this novel, one of the keys to such recognition is through an understanding of one’s surroundings, the environment in which that character operates. When one looks at the character of Dr. Tertius Lydgate, one discovers that, although he comes close to being considered courageous, he comes shy of the mark. I believe, and I hope this paper shall show, that Lydgate is an idealist who, unlike the protagonist of the book, Dorothea, is too much of a realist to be able to give in to one of the most material aspects of the real world – money. Another way of putting it would be to say that through the character of Lydgate, Middlemarch explores a junction of spiritual and social forces which can produce horrendous results.

In Chapter 15, the text presents Lydgate as someone who “ felt the growth of an intellectual passion” and as “ an emotional creature, with a flesh-and-blood sense of fellowship which withstood all the abstractions of special study. This is a seemingly heroic portrait, of an aspiring scholar who maintains feelings for his fellow man. However, the text is framed by two interesting quotes. Before this portrait appears the following: “ he had no more thought of representing to himself how his blood circulated than how paper served instead of gold”. In addition, it is followed by the following sentence: “ He cared not only for “ cases,” but for John and Elizabeth, especially Elizabeth.

The irony rings loud here, and the reader may even laugh aloud when reading this, but when looking at the character of Lydgate, this shows one of his “ spots of commonness”, as the texts calls them. Although he may be a man of great learning, he cannot understand a simple aspect of life – money. And this spot, I believe, is that which blocks Lydgate from seeing himself, much to the same degree as it blocks him from seeing truths about the world. To wit, the ambitious Lydgate, who may be able to see the embodiments of illnesses in others, cannot see the problems within himself.

Middlemarch, pp. 138-140) Interestingly enough, most of Lydgate’s dealings with money involve the character who can easily be considered the one with the lowest moral stance on anything, and the one who controls the most money – the banker, Mr. Nicholas Bulstrode. When the young physician has to make a choice regarding someone else’s money – to choose who will receive the position of hospital chaplain – he chooses the person Bulstrode prefers, Tyke, and not his friend, Farebrother, who has explained why he needs the money quite clearly to him.

Lydgate has to make the choice between some one he likes as a person, and who needs money and someone who he needs help from, who has plenty of money. Interestingly enough, in comparing these three men, an interesting tension can be seen. On the one hand, there is Farebrother, who is at once a realist and an idealist, for he gambles in order to make up for the poor wages from the clergy. He needs money in order to pursue the science he loves (his bug collection), and to fund those dependent on him.

On the other hand you have Bulstrode, who has forsaken his position of minister, honor and trust combined, in favor of the lure of money, which he then employs as he wishes. These two are, it seems, at the opposite polar points of a binary system, wherein the theoretic beliefs of the former are superior to his desires, and the latter places desire over beliefs. And by placing Lydgate between these two, the novel portrays the tension between these two aspects of human life. And in looking at this tension, one must ask the role of money in the novel, as a theme. And truly, the question of money as controlling one’s life and choices is quite obviously central to the novel, as each of the story lines deals with money as well, such as Fred Vincy’s betting problem, Lydgate’s debts, Dorothea’s choice to relinquish Casaubon’s property and Mr.

Featherstone’s will. As J. Jeffrey Franklin states: Almost every character in novels such as Middlemarch…

is connected to other characters by specified and publicly observed monetary relations. In Middlemarch, for example, Fred Vincy is connected to his miserly uncle Featherstone by inheritance; Rosamond Vincy’s marriage to Dr. Lydgate comes to be dominated by the issue of debt; Dorothea Brooke’s relation to Lydgate, as to Reverend Farebrother, is one of charity; the banker Bulstrode is bound to the disreputable character Raffles (and to his own past deeds) by ill-gotten money and blackmail. While money is by no means the only, and often not the primary, determinant of relationships in Victorian fiction, it is the primary form that social evaluations of relationships assume. So while Dorothea’s scandalous second marriage to Will Ladislaw is not about money, it is evaluated by Middlemarch society in terms of money.

However, in Lydgate’s case, I believe, the novel explores the way in which someone who does not realize what money is, and the appropriate place it should play – no matter how idealistic and heroic that character may be – will become its victim. At the same time that she presents Lydgate as a materialist, both through his profession as a physician and biologist, and through his involvement with Rosamond, Eliot presents him as an idealist who chooses the ideal beauty of Rosamond, and who buys expensive clothes, furniture and cutlery. Another important point Lydgate fails to see is that of making money through prescriptions. In order to succeed in any profession, you must know how to sell and market your trade. On this issue, Lydgate has made all sorts of decisions, and – [o]ne of these reforms was to act stoutly on the strength of a recent legal decision, and simply prescribe, without dispensing drugs or taking percentage from druggists. This was an innovation for one who had chosen to adopt the style of general practitioner in a country town, and would be felt as offensive criticism by his professional brethren.

But Lydgate meant to innovate in his treatment also, and he was wise enough to see that the best security for his practising honestly according to his belief was to get rid of systematic temptations to the contrary. (Middlemarch, p. 143) Lydgate, in other words, believes he can get by without paying his bills, for the only way of making money at the time for a physician was by dispensing drugs, or by taking a percentage. However, not only was he losing money himself, he was also undermining the income of other physicians who would be considered expensive if they took their – well-deserved according to the contemporary practice – cut. In short, by not dispensing drugs, he was undermining the whole economic system of physicians at the time, which cannot be considered a very smart move. And although “ his belief was to get rid of systematic temptations to the contrary”, he falls under the weight of the more serious aspects of money – not the wealth you can gain through prescription, but rather the debts you obtain by not dealing with money appropriately.

In Middlemarch, this lack of an appropriate appreciation of money is linked to a problem of understanding oneself. As Franklin says, “ the falsity of romance, as in the case of Dorothea or Lydgate… arises from a dual mis-valuation.

It involves an over-valuing of the other, which is tantamount to a negation of the intended partner through self-projection, and an under-valuing or negation of one’s self. ” Thus, extending Franklin’s argument, by not seeing the true value of money, you cannot see the true value of yourself. And, to compare, at the end of the novel Dorothea knows what money is worth, and can give it up in favor of Will; Farebrother is always aware that money is just a means, and not an end. Lydgate “ mis-values” this tool, and thus loses sight of himself as well. In examining the way Lydgate loses this inner perspective, one must examine his relationship with Bulstrode. On the one hand, we are told that he “ did not mean to imitate those philanthropic models who make a profit out of poisonous pickles to support themselves while they are exposing adulterations, or hold shares in a gambling-hell that they may have leisure to represent the cause of public morality.

(Middlemarch, p. 143) However, later in the novel, as Franklin points out, “ this is a chillingly accurate description of Bulstrode, who, we discover, “ won his fortune” through a speculative marriage and foul play and is attempting to absolve himself through a combination of hospital charity and self-righteous condemnations of others’ lack of religious zeal (Middlemarch, Chapter 74, pp. 701-4). ” And so, through the novel, Lydgate slowly moves away from the model presented by Farebrother. This model is shown in Chapter 17, where the physician and vicar discuss two vital things for this discussion: the scientific endeavor which they can share, and the position Farebrother is vying for.

To note, in neither case does the vicar mention the money involved, as the end to which he strives is the product which money helps obtain, and not vice versa. The model Lydgate slowly moves towards is that which views money as superior to all, as the ultimate end – that represented by Bulstrode. The first step towards this way of life is the election of the hospital chaplain. The second, and that which is more important, is Rosamond.

She is also Bulstrode’s niece and also someone who sees money as the purpose in life – because of the status it brings. By marrying Rosamond, Lydgate binds himself to the notion of “ keeping up appearances”, at the expense of his science. She cannot convince him to prescribe for money, because she cannot see how it would help him help society (which would make him a hero, in other words, as opposed to making him rich). As Lydgate made the choice of not paying attention to one of the most real aspects of modern society – “ paper.

.. instead of gold” – he entraps himself, with Bulstrode’s willing help – especially the bribe at the end of the novel, within the never-ending cycle of enslavement to money. Lydgate accepts the modus operati of this model, and so in the end must give in to Rosamund’s pressure to move to London (and become a rich doctor). Another important aspect of understanding one’s self through understanding what money is all about is in Dorothea’s gift to Lydgate. Franklin writes: Through financial charity, in combination with a prescription to work, Dorothea saves Lydgate from gambling, debt, and the tainted charity offered by Bulstrode; by the same means, she reforms Farebrother from gambling, redirecting his energies toward a more industrious religious practice.

Using “ sympathy without check,” she puts aside all considerations of self and attempts to rescue Rosamond Vincy Lydgate from the selfishness that threatens to destroy the Lydgates’ marriage (Middlemarch, pp. 754-60)…

The terms in which Dorothea justifies her charity to Lydgate are also interesting in this regard: “ It is so difficult to make shares at all even. This is one way” (Middlemarch, p. 729). In short, the selfish approach of money as an end unto itself is that which Dorothea opposes, and that which Lydgate must accept in the end.

In addition, Dorothea can give up money in favor of something else only because she understands what she is giving up (despite the 700 pounds allowance, which at the time was a formidable amount to live off of). She chooses to face herself, and in understanding what that means, she must understand the value of money. Lydgate fails to do so, and so ends up as the physician in a clinic for the rich: He had gained an excellent practice, alternating, according to the season, between London and a Continental bathing-place; having written a treatise on Gout, a disease which has a good deal of wealth on its side. His skill was relied on by many paying patients, but he always regarded himself as a failure: he had not done what he once meant to do. (Middlemarch, p.

791)These closing words regarding Lydgate, show the real failure of Lydgate, which is not living up to his own standards. But in order to live up to the standards one sets for oneself, a basic understanding of the tools required is necessary. And the text shows how he totally misses the point, for in Chapter 73 he thinks: If he had been independent, this matter of a patient’s treatment and the distinct rule that he must do or see done that which he believed best for the life committed to him, would have been the point on which he would have been the sturdiest..

. Whereas, again and again, in his time of freedom, he had denounced the perversion of pathological doubt into moral doubt and had said–“ the purest experiment in treatment may still be conscientious: my business is to take care of life, and to do the best I can think of for it. Science is properly more scrupulous than dogma. Dogma gives a charter to mistake, but the very breath of science is a contest with mistake, and must keep the conscience alive.

” Alas! the scientific conscience had got into the debasing company of money obligation and selfish respects. Middlemarch, p. 703) He is trapped within the “ dogma” of viewing money as something you deserve, and not something you earn in order to achieve great deeds. He ties “ money obligation” with “ selfish respects” not realizing that the one is a tool and the other a value unto its own. True, both are vices, but whereas the first is a material issue which can be dealt with through its own tools (money), the other is an issue of the ego, one’s self, which is at the core of Lydgate’s problem.

He cannot see what his selfishness precludes – money. And in Chapter 75, he still feels that “ the whole trouble had come out of his desperate want of money”, and “ that they should be one in the resolve to do with as little money as possible” (Middlemarch p. 720). He still views his problem as lying with wanting money itself instead of wanting money for a higher purpose. And in Chapter 76, when Dorothea reproaches him, he still misses the point: “ Now that is not brave,” said Dorothea,–“ to give up the fight.

” “ No, it is not brave,” said Lydgate, “ but if a man is afraid of creeping paralysis? Then, in another tone, “ Yet you have made a great difference in my courage by believing in me. Everything seems more bearable since I have talked to you; and if you can clear me in a few other minds, especially in Farebrother’s, I shall be deeply grateful. The point I wish you not to mention is the fact of disobedience to my orders. That would soon get distorted. After all, there is no evidence for me but people’s opinion of me beforehand.

You can only repeat my own report of myself. ” (Middlemarch, pp. 729-30) The way Lydgate views his courage, i. e. the way he faces himself, relies on someone else believing in him.

He faces up to the reality of money not by prescribing pills and continuing his research, but by setting up a clinic for rich people in London. He gives in to the reality of money as Bulstrode and Rosamond see it, not as a tool to achieve greatness but as an end unto itself. In running away from Middlemarch, Lydgate is not brave at all. In fact, he is a coward for he avoids the future he could have had if he had thought about it in the proper terms.

If he had really wanted to perform the research, he should have acquired the funds for it through prescription from the start, and not gone and wasted the money on furniture. His biggest “ spot of commonness” which block his inner perspective is his own defiance of viewing his surroundings, and therefore himself as well. He wants the world to work for him, not vice versa. Unfortunately for the young physician, the “ paper which serves as gold” has to be understood just as well as how the blood circulates within his body.

Understanding the world without is a key for understanding the world within, and it is precisely that which Lydgate misses. And so, by “ mis-valuing”, as Franklin puts it, Lydgate does not dream the impossible dream, as does the Don of La Mancha, but rather only an impractical one.