

Compromise as a happy solution



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In Chapter Twenty of *Middlemarch*, Dorothea Brooke realizes that she has made a grave mistake in marriage: "...for that new real future which was replacing the imaginary drew its material from the endless minutiae by which her view of Mr. Casaubon and her wifely relation, now that she was married to him, was gradually changing with the secret motion of a watch-hand from what it had been in her maiden dream" (178). In considering the future of her relationship, Dorothea's shifting perspective is compared to the insidious motion of time measured on a watch. The "imaginary" hopes of Dorothea's youth yield a more realistic mind-set as she gains life experience. Thus, selfhood is not fixed, but changes with time's progression. Dorothea's vulnerability to time is emphasized by the narrative's focus on her inner life, her attitudes rather than her actions. Judging Dorothea to be a mock-heroic figure whose ambitions are trounced by time's inevitable passage, we might be tempted to read *Middlemarch* as a chronicle of defeat; this conclusion is unfair. In actuality, George Eliot's creation of Dorothea Brooke is an attempt to create a viable epic hero. In grappling with the problem of time, it is evident that Dorothea achieves the only kind of heroism accessible to an intelligent human being who hopes to change the world: the heroism of happy compromise.

Learning to compromise and yet lead a fulfilling life is Dorothea's biggest challenge. In the Finale of the novel, the narrator says: "For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it" (765-6). This apparently straightforward statement is more problematic than it seems. Dorothea can only really experience her life as an "inward being." Her circumstances may "determine" her actions, but

the way in which she understands, justifies and structures those actions is through her own perceptions. Because time passes and she gains experience, she is able to derive new meaning from the decisions she makes. The meaning she can create out of her life choices is ultimately all that matters.

An examination of her circumstances at the start of the novel further illuminate this theme. When we first meet Dorothea, she is nineteen years old, living under the roof of an uncle whom she regards with some “impatience”(4-5). If she wants to escape his roof, she requires a husband. Additionally, she has plans to improve the peasant cottages on the surrounding farmland. This desire to reform the world at large precludes the possibility of her being contented with a cloistered, spinster life. To carry out her plans, Dorothea needs power, capital and, to some extent, freedom. The only hope for these things lies in marriage. Furthermore, her acquaintance with men is limited and, considering the rigidities of the class system, her choice of a spouse is more nominal than actual. So, it is not surprising that Casaubon seems different and appealing when compared with the other men available to her, namely her primary suitor, the self-satisfied Chettham. Casaubon is quite a bit older than her, and he is an intellectual and scholar. Logically, he appears to be the best choice. Considering Dorothea’s lack of experience, can we blame her for marrying him? No, nor does it lessen the genuine goodness of her motivation. In fact, many less heroic women would probably accept Chettham, who is young, handsome, rich, and indulgent “an obvious”

Shortly after she marries Casaubon, Dorothea realizes she has made a bad choice. Interestingly, the implication is not that she should have accepted Chettham (as it might be for Jane Austen), but simply that she begins to change her mind about Casaubon. Most of the narrative's emphasis is on Dorothea's epiphany that she misperceived her husband's true nature. This epiphany is related to her relationship to time as she undergoes a process of maturity whereby she adjusts her ideals to the reality that is set before her. Middlemarch suggests that we can no longer learn from traditional epic forms; heroes who are not affected by time cannot teach us anything. In the case of Dorothea, we can appreciate her changes as they relate directly to her growth over the passage of time. She can only learn the truth about Casaubon by living with him, through the gradually accumulating experience of the everyday. And were she to remain "changeless," Dorothea would merely be foolish. The mistake she makes with Casaubon is didactic, as it necessitates a readjustment of her values and ways of seeing.

However, what is heroic about Dorothea's choice to marry Casaubon lies in its intention: she believes him to be a Milton-like figure, and marries him for this reason. The cognitive process whereby, over time, she discovers he is not the man she initially believed him to be is what makes her story compelling. As Dorothea gets to know Casaubon, so does the reader; in identifying with our heroine's psychological coming-of-age, we learn a valuable lesson.

Eventually, Dorothea does succeed at deriving satisfaction from her knowledge of the world and her situation within it. Although she never builds the cottages, she does fall in love with Will Ladislaw and, in doing so, is able

to finally make sense of her life experience. The narrator says: “ 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” (722). This moment is remarkable because it demonstrates Dorothea’s ability to accept who she is while concurrently acknowledging the importance of the “ manifold wakings” and “ palpitating life” of the outside world.

Sympathy with her fellow man is finally actualized not in the physical reality of cottages, but through a process of interiorization. Hence, specific actions prove less important for Dorothea than her overall ability to extract meaning from her life.

Dorothea goes on to renounce her fortune and marry Ladislaw. This decision involves compromise “ giving up money that might have been used for social good” but it also makes Dorothea happy. When her sister objects that she will no longer have the means to build cottages, Dorothea replies: “ I have never carried out any plan yet.” (750). Is she a failure because she never builds the cottages? Ruskin asserts that: “ No great man ever stops working till he has reached his point of failure: that is to say, his mind is always far in advance of his powers of execution” (92). Dorothea reaches a “ point of failure”: she will never be able to execute the plans for the cottages, but she herself is not a failure. Like Ruskin “ great man,” she has a tendency to dream of things she cannot actually achieve the fundamental human problem. We will never do all that we dream because as human beings we are subject to time and, eventually, death. In coming to realize that she is

susceptible to time's passage, Dorothea "grows up." And, if she desires happiness, she must readjust her perception of her own life, which no longer need be focused on her "plans." In distinguishing between the individual and her achievements, Eliot reconfigures the terms of heroism. *Middlemarch* suggests that our inner reality must be superior to outer reality if we are to prevent ourselves from being crushed by time.

Nevertheless, failing to recognize that renouncing her inheritance is a necessary step in her quest for happiness, many critics disapprove of Dorothea's second marriage. The codicil on Casaubon's estate, which prevents her from keeping the money in the event of her marrying Ladislaw, is a symbolic as well as literal impediment to her spiritual freedom. She has to give up the money in order to rid herself of Casaubon's yoke.

Dorothea is not utterly free from the pressures of her circumstances: nobody is. But by making the brave decision to renounce her fortune and marry Ladislaw, she feels free. Her transgressive attitude towards her society and her willingness to give up money for love is indicative of Dorothea's success. With time, her outlook changes; she realizes that her own ideas have made life more difficult than it needs to be; her inner reality has hampered her outer reality. The compromises she makes at the end of the novel are the correct ones, because they are resultant of her decision to "satisfy (her) spirit" and thus marry Ladislaw. Dorothea learns that just as she can only experience the world through her own perceptions, she must hope to change the world in the same way.

In lieu of all this, why do so many readers find it difficult to accept Dorothea as heroic? The tendency to judge her based on her actions and not the meaning she construes from those actions creates countless problems of interpretation. Assessing her character is difficult, because the narrative coaxes us to deny her heroism by comparing Dorothea with obsolete models. Traditional heroes like St. Teresa and Antigone, are not represented, as she is, in relationship to time's passage. Therefore, the astute reader must make sense of Dorothea through a complex critical process that involves deconstructing and then reconstructing forms of epic heroism.

But, of what use is an epic hero if she is perfect, if we cannot learn anything from her? How can we learn from a hero who has no inner life and is not subject to the pressures of time? Reading Antigone, for instance, will teach us more about the worldview of the Greeks than how to make decisions in our own lives. With Dorothea, Eliot creates a hero who functions successfully in the relativistic modern epoch. Dorothea's psychological journey is marked by her discovery of self-significance and a re-evaluation of her circumstances. The narration of *Middlemarch* focuses on the formative the years in which she readjusts her values in order to achieve these aims, transcending the naiveté of her youth through the real life experience that time's passage forces upon her. Compromise arises from the exercise of supposed free will in a world that is not actually free. But, ultimately, Dorothea is able to make sense of these compromises, imbuing her decisions with meaning and learning to lead what she perceives to be a fulfilling and happy life. What more can anyone hope for?