

# Women and their stereotypical roles in george eliot's middlemarch



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George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* provides the reader with a valuable insight into the lives of different women in the first half of nineteenth century provincial England. The novel gives its readers a good idea of how people interact with and are formed by society, but it also offers a rather detailed study of some characters' inherent qualities and their impact on interactions with other people and the formation of the protagonists' role in life. In the focus of this paper are the four marriageable young women: Dorothea and Celia Brooke, Rosamond Vincy and Mary Garth. Although Dorothea is often in the centre of attention, Eliot provides her readers with enough information on all four women and an assessment of their characters and life styles can be made. Due to differences in character, ambitions, actions and of course different positions in society, the roles of these four women vary considerably. Additionally, in the course of the novel, various predicaments bring out traits of character that do not adhere to the outward picture of these women. I will try to incorporate both the characteristics of the women during more peaceful times as well as their characteristics in times of crises into the study of their character. All four characters seem to have some preconceptions about how they must act and most of their actions arise from these preconceptions. I will argue that all four women behave according to a role stereotype and that they choose to abide by them voluntarily. With the exception of Celia, who has to endure no hardship, all four women are tried considerably by their fates and having a role stereotype seems to give them a protective shell. This paper is concerned with the question of how they keep themselves within their respective stereotype and how all of these stereotypes adhere, if only in some aspect(s) to the ideal of the Angel in the House. In the following analysis, the influence of society on how the four

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women adhere to their respective role stereotypes is of secondary importance, except for the initial influence of class, which determines their position in society. Of course, the aspects of beauty and the perception of the women as beautiful or plain are strongly intertwined with society; however, it will be treated here only from the point of view of the women. Another important issue is the question of what this fictional reality depicts and how it is depicted (and to what cause). Especially to feminist criticism, which praised Eliot for her criticism of the patriarchal system, Eliot's depiction of women who are not independent in spirit and actions as she was herself seems puzzling (Langland 184). However, in her book *Nobody's Angels* Elizabeth Langland argues that such a depiction is a manifestation of Eliot's desire to capture an "essential truth (187)." She does so by "emphasizing ... the invisibility of women in the wider social world of nineteenth-century genteel society ... (Newman 96)." Below, I will try to show how the women contribute to this by holding themselves within restricted areas of action. The most immediately apparent and best adhered to female stereotype is the one assumed by Celia Brooke. To her, being a housewife and mother comes naturally and it is her greatest wish. Additionally to having a good starting position of being of good birth, she also cares about her appearance; her dress "[has] a shade of coquetry in its arrangements (Eliot 5)." The fact that she is spoken of as having more "common-sense" than her well-read sister also points to her being a perfect specimen of a fine Victorian woman. Although she seems to esteem her sister very much, she is also well aware of the fact that her own sense of what is right for a lady of her social standing is better and more pragmatic, as the jewel scene shows. She is "hurt" by her sister's "assumption of

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superiority (Eliot 10)” that she, Celia, would be interested in jewels, while Dorothea’s mind is above such things, but she also watches her sister carefully, because she almost expects “ that her sister [will] sho[w] some weakness (Eliot 11).” Even Celia’s bodily functions seem to adhere to her role, as she has a colour, or rather blushing “ code” that accompanies her verbal reactions. When she wants to tell her sister about being engaged to Sir James, “[her] colour change[s] again and again (Eliot 229)” and Dorothea concludes that this kind of blushing “ must mean more than Celia’s blushing usually d[oes] (Eliot 229).” Celia has a very good knowledge of what is right for a good woman to do and what isn’t, but the knowledge about proper behaviour is not all. She also seems to fit the stereotype she chose for herself perfectly in her beliefs. Her choice of husband seems to be based on her conviction of the fact that he is a suitable match rather than on love and her perfect rendition of the stereotype of the good Victorian woman makes her the perfect wife for Chettam. Even when Eliot first writes about Chettam realizing that he might like the younger Miss Brooke too, she subtly indicates Celia’s strong consciousness of proper etiquette, since Eliot writes that “[a]way from her sister, Celia talked quite easily (18)” to Sir James. That seems to indicate that while Dorothea is around, Celia lets her talk to Sir James, because she knows of his interest in Dorothea. She only begins thinking about him as a good match for herself after Dorothea is married. Other instances that prove how well Celia is integrated into her stereotype are when she expresses her husband’s opinions on something instead of saying “ I think.” For example: “[h]ow can you marry Ladislaw ...? It shocks James so dreadfully (Eliot 674).” The notion that male opinions are worth more and that man are meant to complete great projects and bring upon

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change in society is also expressed when Celia tells Dorothea jokingly that maybe Arthur, Celia's son, will go on making great plans such as Dorothea once wanted to devise (Williams Elliott 195). Here Celia does not console her sister by telling her that maybe she herself will someday be able to fulfil her dream, but assumes that a man can do it better. All these instances point to the fact, that Celia is not only abiding by the Victorian "rules" for good female behaviour, but that she is highly content to do so and does not even consider the possibility of thinking differently. The most striking of Rosamond's qualities is her refinement. Her manners and appearance are perfectly graceful and polished. All this makes her the perfect ornamental wife, whom many people regard as a perfect woman. However, all these accomplishments also attest to a high degree of artificiality. The role Rosamond chose is that of a woman who "even act[s] her own character, and so well, that she d[oes] not know it to be precisely her own (Eliot 97)." The fact that she only assumes this part is precisely the problem. Unlike Celia Brooke, who is warm-hearted and loving on the inside as well as being a faultless lady on the outside, Rosamond is selfish and driven only by her desire to climb up the social ladder and be admired by people for her beauty and affluence. As Elizabeth Langland writes, "Rosamond ... is depicted as armoured in a hard social shell that protects the blind egoism of a vulnerable self (Langland 189)." The use of this protective "armour" goes as far that Rosamond is completely unable to address her financial problems. Her qualities as a perfect wife are merely superficial, just like her superior musical talent that is not really her, but the "seized ... manner of playing" of her teacher, Rosamond's qualities are only assumed and superficial.

Rosamond, however, is fully convinced, that outward "behaviour constitutes <https://assignbuster.com/women-and-their-stereotypical-roles-in-george-eliot's-middlemarch/>

the person (Langland 189)” and that therefore, her refined manners mean that everything she does is right and will ultimately lead to her attaining a high social standing. As Langland points out, “ Rosamond sees society as a medium for her quest (188)” and therefore assumes the manner that will charm society. What Rosamond forgets to consider are the effects of her actions, particularly her tendency to overspend money. Rosamond’s decision to marry Lydgate is again based, as many of her actions, on the stereotype she adheres to. She assesses her situation and knows that she can escape her low social class by using her beauty and refinement to her advantage. When she hears that Lydgate is of considerably high birth, she instantly considers him a good match. Additionally, she believes that he will “ increase the practice (Eliot 291)”, as she tells her father, and be able to use his position for social networking. After her marriage, Rosamond assumes a strongly passive role. Not only does she not pay attention to her husband’s aspirations (“ Do you know, Tertius, I often wish you had not been a medical man. [...] And your cousins at Quillingham all think that you have sunk below them in your choice of profession (Eliot 377)”) and problems, Langland also points out her passivity when it comes to her own goal: that of reaching a higher social rank (Langland 192). In order to achieve social advancement, Rosamond should be far more active socially than she is; she should make many social calls and not accept as many social calls from Ladislaw, since that might jeopardize her reputation (Langland 192). An interesting fact about Rosamond, which may explain her passiveness, is that her adaptation to the stereotype she chose goes so far that in moments when she is unprepared for what she encounters, she is completely different. There are two instances where Eliot portrays a different Rosamond. The most

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memorable one is probably the talk between her and Dorothea in chap. 81. However, there is another moment when emotions let Rosamond forget her acting let her appear natural and vulnerable. She is “made nervous by her struggle between mortification and the wish not to betray it (Eliot 249),” Lydgate sees “a certain helpless quivering (249)” in her eyes and “[t]hat moment of naturalness [is] the crystallising feather-touch [that shakes] flirtation into love (249).” The fact that Rosamond appears vulnerable proves that she uses her stereotypical “perfect Victorian lady” behaviour as a protective shield. When Lydgate falls in love with her, she naturally assumes, that he will be the one who will protect her, provide and think for her. Her stereotypical behaviour complies with what was expected of a young lady like Rosamond at that time. Mary is the opposite of the egoist Rosamond (Paris 83). She also stands in stark opposition to every careless, carefree, imprudent or immodest character in the novel. Mary is content with her social class, because she came to accept it. Since early childhood she had been taught that girls like her (“dreadful plain,” poor, not very high birth) are not to expect much from life. Over the years Mary even seems to have developed a slight bitterness and sarcasm (Paris 84). When Rosamond tries to reassure Mary, who sees herself as looking like “a brown patch (Eliot 93)” next to Rosamond, by saying that “[b]eauty is of very little consequence in reality (93),” Mary answers “sardonically (93)” that Rosamond must be speaking only of Mary’s beauty, since she knows very well how important Rosamond’s beauty is. Mary confines herself to the restrictions of her class and does not wish to be a social climber. Through that complacent role “she is less vulnerable to frustration and less likely to be destructive to others (Paris 83).” Her pragmatic approach to life and its problems, however, seems

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to be just the key to her happiness. Mary's chosen stereotype is also that of a young woman who has stern standards and principles. These principles help her taking a rather active part in Fred's life. When she tells him that she could never marry a man who is as careless and indifferent as he is, she indirectly contributes to Fred's improvement of character. Although here must be emphasized one more time that Mary, as all Middlemarch women, abides by the rules dictated by the stereotype she chooses for herself. She participates in Fred's path of recovery from careless youth to responsible young man, but she does not take part actively (Langland 203). Instead she waits for fate to take its turn, knowing that in the long run, she may be harmed by it. However, this behaviour also reinforces the impression that Mary does not want to use Fred's love for her to gain a higher social status. She proves that on several occasions. For example she tells Mr Farebrother that she believes that " Fred has sense and knowledge enough to make him respectable, if he likes ... [but h]is being a clergyman would only be for gentility's sake, and I think there is nothing more contemptible than such imbecile gentility (Eliot 426)." Mary shows concern not for herself and her possibilities of respectfulness and a higher status, but for Fred's life and his happiness, which, as she thinks and he proved by dropping out of College, he could never find by being a clergyman. Mary's stereotype acts protectively in a sense that it helps her to achieve happiness and contentment as well as escape having to work as a governess to earn a living. We can see that Mary actively chooses this stereotype by the fact that she would rather stay with the irritable and ungrateful old Mr Featherstone, who treats her just like he would treat any maid. Her other option would be to go away and work as a governess, which she detests and for which she feels absolutely unfit. Paris

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claims that this is partially due to the fact that being a governess would be a step down from her current position (88 f.), which does not correspond to the fact that she resists the possibility of social advancement in any other way (by marrying Farebrother or pushing Fred to become a clergyman, which would elevate her own status if she would marry him). Further, Paris proposes that Mary's resistance to working as a governess may be explained by her desire to stay at home rather than leave and have to live on her own (Paris 88 f.). Paris attributes this to Mary's craving for stability in life, which he sees rooted in the fact that, growing up, she had to endure the trauma of being inferior to her peers in ways of looks, status and wealth (Paris 87). It is interesting to compare Mary and Rosamond, since they make a series of decisions and take several actions that are complete opposites. Since Mary grew up in a family who was never wealthy, she is accustomed to thinking about financial problems and possible solutions. Rosamond, on the other hand, "had not yet had any anxiety about ways and means, although her domestic life had been expensive as well as eventful (Eliot 477)." While Mary's first reaction to her father telling her that he needs some money to pay up for Fred's debt is to give him her own savings, Rosamond asks Lydgate "What can I do [...]?" (Eliot 489)," instead of asking "what can I do?" Rosamond's instant idea is to ask her father or any other relative for money, whereas Mary's pride (and that of her family) would not allow anything like that. Mary's strict principles, her pride and common-sense forbid her to answer Fred's feelings when he is indebted and thereby maybe help to steer him onto the right path, which ultimately leads to a pleasant life together. Rosamond's pride, however, is based merely on outward appearance and manners and does not forbid her to ask a relative of Lydgate's for money, <https://assignbuster.com/women-and-their-stereotypical-roles-in-george-eliot's-middlemarch/>

which shames Lydgate. Rosamond's careless conduct, spending habits and disregard of her husband's wishes and feelings lead to an unhappy marriage and contribute to Lydgate's ruin. Hence, in the end it is the plain, poor Mary, who had impossibly worse starting conditions, who achieves happiness, while Rosamond, on whom nature and her comparatively wealthy family bestowed every possible advantage, lives in an unhappy marriage and never reaches her primary goal of being a woman whom others regard an important member of society. Dorothea seems to be the most free-spirited of the women, yet also strongly constructs her personality. In the beginning she is a young woman who wishes to elevate herself above others by being more intelligent and less concerned with everyday things ("to her the destinies of mankind, seen by the light of Christianity, made the solitudes of feminine fashion appear an occupation for Bedlam (Eliot 6)"). This quote, as well as others, show Dorothea's ideal to be directed against the general opinion of what is feminine and of how proper ladies should behave. However, she chooses a feminine stereotype for herself by marrying Casaubon. Before she marries him, she devises great plans of how she may alleviate the burdens of the poor and she seems to really believe in her cause. Everyday, pragmatic things seem to not be enough for her, since she strives to raise above others through matters of "higher" value. In marrying Casaubon she seeks to assist a man she believes to be great in completing his great work. However, as ironic as it is, Dorothea ends up being confined within the prison of typical womanhood of the time. She is denied to participate in the completion of Casaubon's work and becomes more and more unhappy and bored. Interestingly enough, the situation of her married life echoes a situation where Sir James Chettam offers her a Maltese lapdog, a breed very

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fashionable among ladies of higher social ranks (Eliot 24). Dorothea refuses the gift, saying: "It is painful to me to see these creatures that are bred merely as pets. [...] I believe all the petting that is given them does not make them happy. They are too helpless: their lives too frail. A weasel or a mouse that gets its own living is more interesting." (Eliot 24) Dorothea's comment about the dog seems to apply to her life with Casaubon. Just like the lapdog, she is not content with the fact that he thinks she is a nice young lady and just like the lapdog's existence, hers is filled with passivity and dullness. This passivity, as Langland points out, does not pass after Casaubon dies.

According to Langland, Dorothea seems to be sitting around in Lowick most of the time (Langland 192 f.). Additionally, Eliot seems to belittle Dorothea's existence by describing the errands she makes in town as "little" ("little" is joined by other adjectives that belittle Dorothea's and the other women's lives), which seems to indicate that Dorothea's significance is marginal (Langland 193). The fact that Dorothea is affluent, influential and intelligent enough to be able to act differently, indicates that it again must be her who confines her to the stereotypical female passivity. Williams Elliott claims that the "philanthropic heroine was meant to fail (Williams Elliott 190)," since George Eliot wanted to show as real a picture as possible of nineteenth-century provincial England and having great reforming plans was regarded unfeminine (Williams Elliott 196). Also, she points out, Dorothea is talked out of realizing her project of building a village with a school for industry by men, namely Mr Brooke and Sir James (Williams Elliott 196). Since Dorothea does not act against that she chooses to not "ste[p] out of her place as a woman (Williams Elliott 196)". Not only does Dorothea not object to being patronized by her uncle and brother in law, she betrays her initial ideals completely by <https://assignbuster.com/women-and-their-stereotypical-roles-in-george-eliot's-middlemarch/>

slowly turning into a stereotypical romantic heroine whose wish to follow her heart's desire is stronger than reason. By marrying Ladislav she chooses to give up her fortune, which already puts her in a position where she can help less (and therefore fulfill her initial ambitions less). Additionally, she voluntarily, out of love and desire for Ladislav, confines herself to a life in which she is the weaker part. She does, as described in the Finale, help Ladislav with his career in politics, but this is not a great contribution and it reduces Dorothea to a merely supporting role, whereas she could have been in a leading position supervising the work on her housing projects. An important issue is Dorothea's wish to do good no matter what. In a conversation with Will, Dorothea talks passionately about her wish to contribute to a higher good and "power against evil." She says that she is aware of her insignificance, but she feels that "... by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don't quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil ... (Eliot 323)." This, she claims, "is [her] life," which she "cannot part with (Eliot 323)." Williams Elliott observes that, in the end, Dorothea is still a person who is passionate about creating an improved living condition. However, she adds, she confines herself to a lesser part, she gives up her greater ideas and becomes the "woman behind a man" who helps Ladislav contributing to the higher good (Williams Elliott 199). This position is not an active one, but I would still argue that it is better than Dorothea's initial position, in which she seemed to be deluded of what this "higher cause" is. The fact that she becomes a more stereotypical good Victorian woman, helps Dorothea recognize that she can contribute to a higher good by doing rather trivial things. The four women all need their respective shells of stereotypes to

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provide a protective layer over their lives and actions. Celia is sure that adhering to the stereotype of the good housewife and mother who leaves the thinking to men guarantees her a highly respectable social position, a happy, wealthy existence with a good husband and happy children. Rosamond is fully convinced that her composed behaviour and pleasant appearance are all she needs to be content in life, since these qualities of hers bear the promise of a marriage that will elevate her in society. When she betrays her husband by going behind his back, she never realizes that she is doing something wrong. Mary's protective shell lies in the fact that she tells herself, that she cannot expect much of her life, because she is not wealthy, beautiful or of good birth. Her approach of expecting the worse (as for example her position as a teacher, a prospect she does not like) appears like a protection against disappointment. In this way, her prospects in life can only improve. Dorothea first tries to live up to a stereotype that she deems more worthy than the others and that, as she assumes, will elevate her intellectually above others. Instead of following her wish of being active herself to help the less fortunate than herself with her plans for improved living, she chooses to help Casaubon and degrades herself to a completely passive woman. By marrying Will and giving up the fortune that would have permitted her to complete some plans, she again chooses an existence that is more passive and where she can only support her husband, instead of being active herself. Dorothea now adopts a new stereotype - that of the perfect wife and mother. Her reasoning that she is still doing something good, if only on a smaller scale is again only part of that new role, since all she does is part of what her husband does and therefore cannot be regarded as independent action. All four women assume a passive part to a certain

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degree, relying on men to help them achieve their ultimate goal. Even Dorothea, who at first appears to be more independent in her thoughts and less prone to confine herself to a stereotypical female role than the other women, voluntarily succumbs to male support in both marriages. The same stands for Mary, who, by telling him that she cannot marry someone as irresponsible as he, takes a part in correcting Fred's flaws, but never really acts, waiting for fate to take its course and the men in her life to achieve the kind of order in which Fred would seem a fit match for her. In depicting the struggles for happiness of the four young women, George Eliot stresses ever and anon that in 1830s reality, women would not take risks and try to escape their stereotypes. Instead, they saw these stereotypes as supporting the correct order of society and facilitating their own lives. The women at that time would rather take on a life of "feminine selflessness (Marks 30)" than try and change the order of the world in which they live.

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