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Questioning Conventionality of Marriage in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*

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The thesis entitled “Questioning Conventionality of Marriage in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*” has been conducted by Thakendra Sunar under my supervision and guidance. I hereby recommend the thesis for *viva voce*.

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## Abstract

This research examines the evolving social and personal attitudes about marriage and love as depicted in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* by arguing that Eliot anticipates modern marriages by critiquing traditional Victorian marital values. For the purposes of this analysis, the applicable aspects of modern marriage are sexuality, shifting gender roles, and a dismissal of social class as the major factor in choosing a partner. Questioning conventionality of marriages involve more than just an emphasis on love, sexuality, shifting gender roles, and a dismissal of social class as the major factor. These play a vital role in modernizing the antiquated understanding of marriage and its social function. Questioning conventionality of marriage as presented in *Middlemarch* is innovative and modern. In order to achieve this end, a modernist approach to examine how *Middlemarch* is conditioned by its modern context has been applied.

Hence this research makes an investigation into the issues of women of the Victorian age who underwent diverse level of oppression and male domination in every respect of life. In the very reflection, the study concentrates on the marriage that is one of the most burning issues of women of the time.

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## I. Reading Victorian Marriages in Eliot's *Middlemarch*

This study aims at looking into the women issues of the Victorian age in Victorian novels especially George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Any Victorian novels are driven by the prospect of marriage, and George Eliot's masterpiece, *Middlemarch*, embodies through its various couples. The major point of this research is to analyze how women's identity and their social lives are conditioned by the historical surroundings and thus women get victimized at the cruel hands of patriarchy. Hence the study is shaped in the new historical frame in order for redrawing the history to make a fair analysis of the conditions women and men get through. Conditions surrounding marriages in Victorian times for women were considerably different from what modern readers would surmise. Partly due to the deprivation of an equal opportunity to education, Victorian women were confronted with limited survival tactics. *Middlemarch* takes place in the years leading up to 1832, the year of the Reform Bill, and this bill was for the benefit of middle class men. Without an education women were subjected to vocations, actually jobs, not callings, that could hardly be called careers. The male defense of this narrowing of options was simply "the female brain was not equal to the demands of commerce or the professions, and women, simply by virtue of their sex, had no business mingling with men in a man's world" (Altick 54). Competing with men and male-indoctrinated commerce without the added benefit of a formal education caused many Victorian women to seek the only alternative available, marriage as a vocation.

*Middlemarch* is a popular novel that has remained at the heart of critical interest and has received a storm of critical appraisals since its publication in 1872. *Middlemarch* is the novel which has made the greatest effort to bring the multiple

narratives, observations to constitute a total representation into meaningful coherence and order. Many critics have researched *Middlemarch* through different aspects. Some tend to interpret it focusing on the social and psychological aspects, whereas some have interpreted it from cultural, religious, moral and regional aspect.

*Middlemarch*, a panoramic fictional account of the life of the English provinces before the Reform Bill, has always been considered Eliot's master piece. Barbara Hardy, in her critical work *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study of Form* (1959), has said: "The novels of Eliot gratified the formal pleasure in balance and opposition and unity, and at the same time present its intellectual and moral analysis of men and society" (17). From this point, Eliot's critical industry has shown no signs of abating; whatever new fashion in literary theory arises, the richness of her texts never fails to offer opportunities for new readings. Eliot says that in this world there are so many of these common coarse people who have not picturesque sentimental wretchedness! Therefore let Art remind us of them your common laborer, who gets his own bread, and eats it vulgarly but creditably with his own pocket-knife. Eliot is not generally considered a feminist but what she accomplished in her carrier unquestionably did much to enhance the status of women. Aglow views:

Eliot struggled to reconcile her senses of duty with a desire to avenge women wronged by society. Her themes reflect her life her ambivalent relationship to the feminism of her day, her focus on relationships of power between men and women, and her attempt to reconcile the traditional masculine and feminine modes of expression and spheres of influence. (53)

Eliot probably did more than anyone else to change the view that the novel could only be regarded as popular entertainment and to win recognition for this genre as a vehicle

for the serious examination of ideas. Like other great novelists, she expanded both the range and the technical resources of the novel. Whereas previous novelist had, in general, emphasized the external events in the lives of their characters, Eliot emphasized their thoughts and feelings. In her novels, her characters' psychological response to an event is almost always more significant than the event itself. The expansion of the subject matter of fiction often requires new techniques of novel writing; Eliot's examination of her characters' mind and emotions is frequently presented through elaborate patterns of imagery which allow her to express the subtleties and complexities of their emotional and ethical dilemmas.

*Middlemarch* is the novel written on the issues of marriage where one goes through different couples and finds that matrimonial feelings serve as both as a blessing and curse. Raising the issue of marriage, Eliot has satirized male for their undoing of marriage. The novel has shown that women play important role for the happy marriage.

Critics have been divided over this issue since the novel's publication, and "the body of criticism from then till now makes surprisingly little case for it is as a great feminist work" (Blake 49). Zelda Austen offers that the reasons why feminist critics have dismissed *Middlemarch* as an anti-feminist text is largely because of Eliot's biography, namely that "George Eliot should have turned the mirror to reflect herself rather than the world out there" (116). These disparaging critics seek to discredit Eliot for "her failure to allow . . . freedom for her heroines even though she achieved it herself" (Austen 117) and therefore "find their expectant feminism disappointed by the novel" (Blake 51).

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue further that Eliot internalizes the patriarchal culture's definition of women and thus resists identification with her own

sex. Eliot therefore creates her own “feminine anti-feminism” by “seeking to legitimize her efforts and then her success as a writer as an unusual transcendence of the limits of gender,” which she attempts by “resisting frequently in her major novels to pledges of deference and doctrines of feminine renunciation that are directly at odds with her own aggressive pursued career” (466). Similarly Kathleen Blake argues that *Middlemarch* is undoubtedly feminist because of “the novel’s focus on the disabilities of a woman’s lot” (51). To support her argument, Blake identifies women’s natures, their need for work, men’s presumption of superiority and its destructive consequences.

As for *Middlemarch* George Eliot investigates human aspirations, in particular the aspirations to serve and to be good under two aspects; there is the part played in their realization by the individual human being himself, with all his frailties his imperfect self-knowledge and his will power, and there are the limits set by the society in which he is born.

Thus this novel shows that the novel presents the individual beings that are headed towards social service and to be good, though there are barriers on the path they have taken. The society has limited them by imposing social norms and values upon them. At the same time the individual being himself is not perfect. Simon Dentith finds mixed elements such as realism and the will to knowledge in *Middlemarch*. She says that it is no less than an attempt at a total representation of a provincial town but also in its intellectual range. Thus she writes:

*Middlemarch* is the novel in which George Eliot makes the greatest effort to bring the multifarious narratives and observations which might constitute a total representation into meaningful coherence and order. The book bears the continuous witness to the pains of that effort.

The chapter is devoted to some of the implications of George Eliot's attempt to comprehend and make sense of English society at an exemplary moment of transition. (81)

Hence the novel is set in the period of transition time. Thus the novel shows the life in Midland along with the will for knowledge of two major characters. Nineteenth century England experienced a great deal of change and upheaval. Societal norms were questioned as Europe experienced numerous revolutions that cried for equality.

Industry and progress forced governmental action as workers fought for their rights in a society long based on status, birthright, and hierarchy. Women's issues also became a major rallying point for those interested in propelling England toward more equal ground. These issues were, of course, inextricably intertwined with the overriding social understanding of marriage. Women were expected to marry men of equal social standing and fulfill three main roles: "obeying and satisfying one's husband, keeping one's children physically and morally sound, and maintaining the household (cleaning, washing, preparing food, etc.)" (Yalom 181). These were to be her only functions, and stepping outside these prescribed roles was generally frowned upon, if not hostilely criticized. As the gross inequality of English society came to light, so too did the disadvantage experienced by women in their own homes and marriages. Writers of both fiction and nonfiction used their writing as a means of expressing the attitudes of long-suffering wives (and women in general) in this changing climate. To understand these changes, however, we must first examine the inhibiting norms that were being questioned.

In general, the eighteenth century England emphasized rational thought and viewed emotion as more than just a weakness – it was a sickness of sorts. The Age of Enlightenment advocated sense over sensibility, and marriage still functioned as a

way of maintaining social structure and order, much as it had for centuries. As Stephanie Coontz notes, “conservatives had warned that unions based on love and the desire for personal happiness were inherently unstable” (175), and thus discouraged. People fall in love, of course, but love is not necessarily a predominant factor in making a good match and is not always expressed within the confines of marriage. Love is not for spouses who have made practical marriages. In fact, the idea of marriages based on love raises a number of questions that (in theory) threaten to undermine the very structure of society:

If love was the most important reason to marry, how could society condemn people who stayed single rather than enter a loveless marriage? If love disappeared from a marriage, why shouldn't a couple be allowed to go their separate ways? If men and women were true soul mates, why should they not be equal partners in society? (175-6)

The answer is often to ignore these dangerous questions and maintain the status quo. Something changed, though, at the end of the eighteenth century that continued far into the nineteenth century and, in fact, gained momentum in the midst of the social upheaval in Victorian England. Historians now note “that modern Western marriage emerged in the period between the American Revolution and around 1830. During those fifty years, love became the most celebrated criterion for choosing a spouse, even if property, family, and social status continued to weigh heavily in the decision” (Yalom 175-6). The exact reasons for this newfound focus on love in marriage are not entirely known, but Marilyn Yalom offers some possibilities:

Was it a natural evolution of the ideal of companionate marriage...?  
Was it the general spirit of revolution that helped release children from their parents' tutelage and allowed for more independent choices? Was

it backlash to the Age of Reason that permitted the passionate torrents of Romanticism to flow among readers of love poetry and fiction? Was it the revival of Christianity by Anglo-American evangelicalism, which spread the belief that heaven-sent marriages should have the urgency of divine love? Was it the result of nascent industrialization, which removed many young women from the home and placed them in mills and factories, where they were no longer under the watchful eye of parents? (176)

The answer is, of course, all of the above. Rarely is there one solitary catalyst for a shift in social values. Nonetheless, the result was “the gradual emancipation of young adults from their parents and the primacy accorded love matches [that] solidified during the nineteenth century” (Yalom 176). However, the doctrine of separate spheres, which relegated women to the private home sphere while men had freedom outside in the public sphere, prevailed throughout the nineteenth century, and made “men and women dependent upon each other by insisting that each gender was incomplete without marriage” (Coontz 176). As the nineteenth century wore on and the sweeping changes of Victorian England began to take effect – industrialization, social reform, scientific discoveries—the social values regarding love and marriage changed, too.

Coontz notes that, contrary to popular contemporary belief, “the Victorians were the first people in history to try to make...married love the principal focus of their emotions, obligations, and satisfactions” (177). Despite the stilted language of the era, this new emphasis helped move England from the Victorian Age into the Modern Age by prefiguring “all the hopes for romantic love, intimacy, personal

fulfillment, and mutual happiness that were to be expressed more openly and urgently during the early twentieth century” (Coontz 177-8).

These modern marriages involve more than just an emphasis on love, however. Other factors such as sexuality, shifting gender roles, and a dismissal of social class as the major factors in choosing a partner also have played a large role in modernizing the antiquated understanding of marriage and its social function.

Nineteenth century literature inevitably reflects this changing attitude. The theme of marriage in literature is nothing new, of course; authors from Shakespeare to Jane Austen repeatedly treat the subject in their works. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, however, authors like George Eliot in *Middlemarch* transcend the serious Victorian conventions and anticipate the revision of social attitudes toward marriage that would carry England into the Modern Age.

Published in 1871-2, but set in the years preceding the Reform Bill of 1832, Eliot’s *Middlemarch* is more than just “A Study of Provincial Life” that the novel’s subtitle declares; it is a reflection of England’s changing values regarding social status, medicine, politics, education, philanthropy, and male-female relationships. Eliot’s purpose in setting her novel forty years prior to the time she wrote it was to adopt the role of imaginative historian, even scientific investigator who seeks to analyze recent political and social changes by means of the particular human stories she tells by weaving together several strands in such a way that an individual’s lot is seen to be affected by those historical changes as they happen. As Rosemary Ashton states, “*Middlemarch* is above all about change and the way individuals and groups adapt to, or resist, change. In their marriages, in their professions, in their family life and their social intercourse, the characters of the novel are shown responding in their various ways to events both public and private” (3).

The pre-Reform Bill era in which Eliot situates her novel is of especial note. It was a time of unprecedented social change in England prompted by the violent revolutions that had recently swept across Europe. To quell the rising unrest in England, Parliament passed a Reform Bill in 1832 that transformed England's class structure. The greatest change that the Reform Bill of 1832 achieved was in extending "the right to vote to all males owning property worth £10 or more in annual rent. In effect the voting public thereafter included the lower middle classes but not the working classes, who did not obtain the vote until 1867, when a second Reform Bill was passed," an event that preceded the publication of *Middlemarch*. The Reform Bill therefore "broke up the monopoly of power that the conservative landowners had so long enjoyed" and thus "represents the beginning of a new age, in which middle-class economic interests gained increasing power" (Christ, Robson 982). Although the first Reform Bill was not inclusive, it did blur the lines between the stratified classes in England and allowed for social mobility that was hitherto impossible. By setting *Middlemarch* in the period immediately before the passage of the first Reform Bill, Eliot was able to situate her characters in a time when the changes they experience would have been new and different, perhaps even exciting.

In addition to its social significance, *Middlemarch*'s treatment of marriage is also structurally significant. Writers have typically used marriage as a device of finality to bring the action of a work to a tidy conclusion—recall the "Reader, I married him" ending of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. *Middlemarch* instead has marriage as a primary focus. The novel's heroine Dorothea Brooke is married to Mr. Casaubon. This placement allows Eliot to explore the vexed unions that traditional ideas of marriage create rather than the harmonious ones that are alluded to in the conventional resolutions of many antecedent texts, such as Austen's novels.

Therefore, by treating marriage as the subject of the story rather than the effect, complex and dynamic representations of marital unions emerge. The reader observes the Casaubons' utterly disappointing marriage as Dorothea's hopeful expectations are shattered by her husband whose expectations of marital life prove to be the exact opposite of hers. Dorothea anticipates that her marriage "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" (29). Because Casaubon is a (self-proclaimed) scholar and her greatest desire is for knowledge, she muses, I should learn everything then, she said to herself, still walking quickly along the bridle road through the wood. It would be my duty to study that I might help him the better in his great works. There would be nothing trivial about our lives.

Everyday things with us would mean the greatest things. It would be like marrying Pascal. I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by. And then I should know what to do, when I got older: I should see how it was possible to lead a grand life here – now – in England..." (29). Casaubon, on the other hand, "believed that he had found even more than he demanded: "[Dorothea] might really be such a helpmate to him as would enable him to dispense with a hired secretary because she is a modest young lady, with the purely appreciative, unambitious abilities of her sex, [who] is sure to think her husband's mind powerful" (279). Although their motives are not necessarily poor ones, they do adhere to the traditional concept of the wife being submissive to her husband and thus prove to be problematic for Dorothea and Casaubon's marital union. Dorothea's admiration for Casaubon's intellect dwindles after she learns that Casaubon's ambitious and perpetual work-in-progress entitled "Key to all Mythologies" has already been completed by the Germans. Casaubon also begins to understand that by marrying

Dorothea in order to gain more of a utilitarian adornment than a wife, marriage is not particularly blissful. Their marital crisis worsens, as does Dorothea's regret, as Casaubon's health fails. Dorothea descends into a "reaction of a rebellious anger stronger than any she had felt since her marriage" as she "saw her own and her husband's solitude" (426).

Their growing disparity as the foundations for their marriage fade causes Casaubon to regard Dorothea with an "unresponsive hardness" (425), leading her to wonder if he regrets having married her at all. The narrator regards Dorothea in a sympathetic manner, stating that "in such a crisis as this, some women begin to hate" (426). It would be understandable for Dorothea's resentment to turn to hate over the failure her marriage has become; however, such a reaction would be counter to Dorothea's kind and understanding nature. The fact that Dorothea is overcome by misery and anger, albeit tempered, is a testament to the loss of hope for any chance of the sort of marital life she had envisioned for herself and Casaubon. Had this union been the culmination of the novel's action rather than a prominent part of the main action, such nuances would be lost.

By placing the marriage of Dorothea and Casaubon as a centerpiece of her novel, Eliot uses structure to further critique outdated notions of marriage. Because love and companionship are not top priorities in choosing a spouse at this time, many couples marry without spending a significant amount of time together and therefore knew little of each other when they bind themselves together for life. This practice is also a holdover from the previous century in which "even the most enthusiastic advocates of love matches had believed that love developed after one had selected a suitable prospective mate. People did not fall in love. They tiptoed into it" (Coontz 178). The need for couples to become acquainted before they marry is therefore

negated by the idea that they have their entire lives to learn about and grow to love each other.

Eliot reflects this expediency with the structure of *Middlemarch*. Dorothea meets Casaubon in chapter two, and after “three more conversations with him, [she] was convinced that her first impressions had been just” (32). Chapter five opens with Casaubon’s engagement letter to Dorothea in which he proposes, “To be accepted by you as your husband and the earthly guardian of your welfare, I should regard as the highest of providential gifts” (44). She eagerly accepts him, and they are married five short chapters later. In a statement meant to dictate the inner anxiety of Rosamond and Lydgate, Eliot could just as easily be referring to Dorothea and Casaubon: “Between him and her indeed there was that total missing of each other’s mental track, which is too evidently possible even between persons who are continually thinking of each other” (587). Because the Casaubons follow the timeline dictated by society, they fail to understand each other’s true nature; thus their marriage is doomed to fail.

The subtext here is that the social norm of quick engagements is a folly; “hence Dorothea is a victim of the conditions of civilized courtship, which do not allow the parties to gain much knowledge of each other” (Paris 29). By fusing structure with substance in order to evaluate the hegemonic standard, Eliot offers a harsh critique of marriage in a revolutionary way. If “the typical English novel of this period ended in marriage, as if acquiring a spouse would resolve all of life’s problems” (Yalom 185), Eliot diverges from this pattern with *Middlemarch*. The novel does conclude with marriages—the most notable of which is that of Dorothea and Will Ladislaw—but theirs is a singular union. Though often argued to the contrary,

Dorothea and Will's marriage is representative of the type of modern marriage that was beginning to replace the more traditional unions of the early Victorian Age.

The essential issue in feminist criticism of *Middlemarch* is whether or not Eliot allowed the women in her novel to fully realize their potential. Critics have been divided over this issue since the novel's publication, and "the body of criticism from then till now makes surprisingly little case for it as a great feminist work" (Blake 49). Zelda Austen offers that the reasons why feminist critics have dismissed *Middlemarch* as an anti-feminist text is largely because of Eliot's biography, namely that "George Eliot should have turned the mirror to reflect herself rather than the world out there" (116). These disparaging critics seek to discredit Eliot for "her failure to allow...freedom for her heroines even though she achieved it herself and therefore find their expectant feminism disappointed by the novel" (Blake 51). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue further that Eliot internalizes the patriarchal culture's definition of women and thus resists identification with her own sex. Eliot therefore creates her own "feminine anti-feminism" by "[s]eeking to legitimize her efforts and then her success as a writer as an unusual transcendence of the limits of gender," which she attempts by "resort[ing] frequently in her major novels to pledges of deference and doctrines of feminine renunciation that are directly at odds with her own aggressively pursued career" (466).

However, the critics who argue for *Middlemarch*'s feminism reject this biographical emphasis in favor of textual analysis informed by a historical perspective. Kathleen Blake argues that *Middlemarch* is undoubtedly feminist because of "the novel's focus on the disabilities of a woman's lot" (51). To support her argument, Blake identifies "women's natures, their need for work, men's presumption of superiority and its destructive consequences" (50) as some of the feminist views of

the period that Eliot shared with other women writers such as Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft. This view of *Middlemarch* offers a more comprehensive understanding of Eliot's work because the critics who emphasize Eliot's biography do so at the expense of other more pertinent considerations, such as the social and cultural norms of nineteenth century England.

The feminist readings of *Middlemarch* are predominantly focused on the novel's protagonist Dorothea Brooke. It is Dorothea's fate that most angers feminist critics "because [Eliot] did not permit Dorothea...to do what George Eliot did in real life: translate, publish articles, edit a periodical, refuse to marry until she was middle-aged, live an independent existence as a spinster, and finally live openly with a man whom she could not marry" (Austen 115). Dorothea's greatest desire is for education, not marriage, in order to enact social change.

This hunger as Kate Flint calls it is the source of the ardor and energy that characterize Dorothea. Dorothea "conceives of education as something that will enable her to act" (Blake 55), but because the Victorian society in which she lives offers her no educational opportunities, Dorothea's energy which is greater than anyone else is in the book is tempered "precisely because energy is not expected of a woman" (Blake 56). Rather than allow her energy to be "squelched or diffused or redirected," Dorothea instead "grasps at the closest objects of enthusiasm, Mr. Casaubon and his work" in order to save herself from "the haze of undirected energy" (Blake 54). While no critics argue in favor of Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon, many do not understand it as Eliot's indictment of the lack of educational opportunities for women.

Dorothea's attraction to the aloof Casaubon arises from the social "conditions that make a poor dry mummified pedant appear to an ardent young woman who has

seen nothing better as a sort of angel of vocation and of the education that enables vocation” (Blake 55). Eliot does not simply allow her heroine to meekly submit to her wifely role, but rather implies that Dorothea’s decision to marry Casaubon is her attempt to achieve the education she so desires through the only means available to a woman in her society. By removing the authority from the male in the situation and thus allowing Dorothea to maintain her own agency, Eliot’s feminism in this respect is affirmed.

Ultimately, Blake, Flint, draw the same conclusion—“Women are especially vulnerable because society offers them so little to do, expects less, and never imagines that they need work as much as men do. A woman’s life offers a paradigm of the novel’s theme—lack of vocation as tenuousness of identity” (Blake 51). This is the crux of Eliot’s feminism in *Middlemarch*. By portraying Dorothea as suffering from a lack of vocation, Eliot criticizes, rather than reinforces, the restrictive and conventional society that offers marriage as the only outlet for female energy.

The subject of marriage in *Middlemarch* is the one that frustrates feminist critics the most. The argument is that “George Eliot should have seen that while she was imitating reality in depicting the misery of the unconventional heroine and the placidity of the conventional wives and mothers, she was also sanctioning the norm and making it normative” (Austen 120). This is, however, a complicated argument that cannot be examined outside of the context of Victorian society. Austen’s argument continues in support of this contextualization: “The feminist’s insistence that literature show women as more than bride, wife, and mother is admirable, but it cannot be applied to novels that were written when most women were either brides, wives, mothers, or dependent spinsters—unless George Eliot had written exclusively about herself”(118). Flint takes up this line of argument by insisting that “it may well

be misguided, in addition to being often disappointing, to assess George Eliot by late twentieth-century...feminist standards” (163). What these critics argue is that applying contemporary feminist standards to a Victorian author (even a female one) writing a Victorian novel for a Victorian public is essentially anachronistic.

Austen puts it into perspective thus: “While a George Eliot might defy *Middlemarch* and pay all her life suffering the stony rejection of her family as well as social exile, hundreds of other girls could not and did not have the talents of a George Eliot to take them out of that medium” (120). Therefore, the critique that Eliot was not as feminist as she should have been for her time is an unfair projection and neglects the commentary she does include in her treatment of marriage, especially Dorothea’s marriages, in *Middlemarch*.

Viewing Dorothea’s marriages in a socio-historical context involves equating a woman’s marriage with vocation. This comparison combats “the strength of feminist readers’ horror and anger at the novel’s substitution of marriage for work” by instead positioning marriage as work. Elaine Showalter uses a facile, though succinct, phrase to clarify this position: “Women’s work is men” (61). For women like Dorothea who have no formal education, “men are just about all the work women have” (Blake 61). This is an important distinction in understanding Dorothea’s marital decisions. Her motivation for marrying Casaubon is to help him in his scholarly pursuits and thereby gain knowledge for herself. Her reasons for marrying Will are more complex, as will be examined later, but being his wife likewise offers her chances that she would not have had if she had not married.

Dorothea’s second marriage to Will Ladislaw at the end of *Middlemarch* is arguably the most critically contested event in the novel. Feminist critics view the union “as a copout of some magnitude” (Austen 115), a view based on the idea that

“[w]hen [Eliot] allows the only possible happy route for Dorothea to be marriage, even though this was in fact perhaps the only happy route for her heroine, she is giving tacit or implicit approval to that course” (Austen 120). When viewed in light of the argument for marriage as vocation, and, as I will argue, the inclusion of progressive marital values, Dorothea’s marriage to Will is hardly such a capitulation. Unlike in Dorothea’s marriage to Casaubon, no “separation of interests, or of emotional power relations” (Flint 164) exists in her marriage to Will. Dorothea does not have to act covertly in order to assert her agency because her husband neglects to consider her; instead it is Dorothea “whose principles, whose values of duty, of action rather than posturing, [who leads] Will into a purposeful life” (Flint 164). Dorothea likewise recognizes her influence and takes pleasure in it.

She refers to their (early) relationship with an “open smile” as “a little kingdom” where she “shall give laws” (Eliot 367). Dorothea has found in Will a man who is receptive to her thoughts and ideas and wants nothing more than to hear what she has to say. While this receptivity and inspiration should be viewed by feminist critics as positive, they instead prove to these critics that Dorothea is simply a woman who needs a man. Blake insists, however, that this is a reductive view because it “pays very little attention to...what she needs him for” (61).

Will’s desire to please Dorothea and his unconditional acceptance, adoration, and support of her give Dorothea a power that she lack in any of her other relationships in the novel. Therefore, Dorothea’s marriage to Will does not disempower her as is so often argued, but rather it empowers her. Will’s later role as an “ardent public man” (Eliot 836) also proves Dorothea’s empowerment through her second marriage; her adjective “ardent” is used to describe the man he becomes as Dorothea’s husband. Compared to her disappointed expectations in her marriage to

Casaubon, Dorothea's desire to do good in the world finds an outlet in her marriage to Will. If Dorothea "could not be an M.P....she could be an M.P.'s wife" (Austen 119). As Eliot states in the novel's Finale, "Dorothea could have liked nothing better, since wrongs existed, than that her husband should be in the thick of a struggle against them, and that she should give him wifely help" (836). Eliot therefore represents in Dorothea and Will's union a recognition of marriage's necessity for women in nineteenth century England, but by allowing Dorothea to willingly and joyfully support, if not influence, her husband's activities, Eliot implies that even though superior women like Dorothea were "still not able to transcend circumstances" (Austen 127), they could use marriage to their own advantage.

In relation to the novel's ending, there is a passage that is often cited by critics on both sides of this debate: "Many who knew [Dorothea], thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother. But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done..." (836). Flint asserts that the narrator anticipates the objections of both contemporary and modern critics with this passage, and that it "may also suggest a touch of unease on George Eliot's own part" (164-5). While it may have been true that Eliot would rather have left Dorothea to her independence, "Dorothea's role is bound up in the gradual social amelioration which will come through cooperation, and within which women may have an important intercessionary part to play" (Flint 165). Eliot knew that in her Victorian society Dorothea would have had little recourse to enact change. Blake offers an emotional historical example to illustrate this point:

The present for Eliot's readers was the recent passage of the second Reform Bill. *Middlemarch* treats the period of the first, and though it

ends with its defeat, the historical perspective that shows this to be but temporary is built into the novel; for instance, to locate the story in ante-reform times is to locate it in relation to the ultimate passage of reform. Dorothea, through a husband who works for this passage, contributes something to a movement that is not defeated and that qualifies...as a far-resonant action. (68)

By emphasizing Dorothea's "wifely help" in this significant way, it is much harder to categorize the "woman's text in *Middlemarch* [as] the fall of Dorothea" (Showalter 149). It is quite the contrary: Dorothea's propensity for good is promoted by her companionate marriage to Will.

## II. Sexuality and the Modern Marriage

The present study exposes a drastic change in the marriage process that makes the marriage modern rather than traditional. The theme of marriage as presented in Eliot's *Middlemarch* reflects the shift to the modern marriage from the conventional one practiced in the contemporary context the novel was written in. In the shift from Victorian marriage to modern marriages, one major factor is sexuality. Spouses have always had sex, of course, but a sexual relationship was not something to be outwardly acknowledged or recognized, especially in the Victorian Age that stressed propriety over passion. Sex for reproduction was, of course, an important part of marriages, but the idea of a woman enjoying sex was abominable and offensive. In the Middle Ages, women were widely acknowledged as sexually insatiable—the Latin phrases *semper parata ad coitum* (always ready for sex) and *lassata sed non satiata* (tired but not satisfied) were applied directly to women and described their sexual appetites. Theologians like St. Jerome and Augustine warned men of the dangers of oversexed women who would destroy their chances of getting into heaven. Over time, the emphasis on separate spheres and a strict adherence to prescribed gender roles became firmly ensconced in the public consciousness, and the belief that women desired sex changed.

Men “were now considered the more lustful creatures” because exalting women as angel[s]...stripped [them] of all physical desire” (Yalom 182). Though wives were expected, if not obligated, to ensure their husbands were sexually gratified, there existed a quandary: how could a wife be a lover without being a sexual creature? Women were certainly not sexually educated; that type of knowledge was for prostitutes, not respectable women. This lack of a sexual education for women can to some degree be understood from the nineteenth century mindset. The prevailing

belief was that the only purpose for a woman to have sexual knowledge outside of marriage would be to engage in prostitution. Therefore, education on how to relate to men sexually was focused on virtue before marriage (with virtue equating to ignorance) and obedience and monogamy after marriage. The apparent fear was that too much knowledge of sexual matters could prompt women to engage in lewd activities. David Trotter notes Sally Shuttleworth's objection "that the novel grants Dorothea a strongly passionate sexual nature and then forbids her to understand its workings. It insists throughout on the desirability of integrating intellect with ardor, but then makes an exception where sexuality is concerned" (44).

This is only partially correct, however; it is not necessarily Eliot who maintains her heroine's sexual ignorance, but rather society's refusal to allow women to understand the mechanics of their own sexuality. Instead, Eliot covertly examines this predicament in *Middlemarch* as Dorothea's sexual repression wanes under her desire for Will Ladislaw.

Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon, "a sickly clergyman, old enough to be her father is generally viewed by critics as an unconsummated union" (837). Like other women of her class, Dorothea has lived a sheltered existence that leaves her unprepared for the sexual reality of marriage. Her husband—the man who is to introduce her to sexuality—is much older than she is, and he seems uninterested in the physical aspect of marriage. Dorothea is entirely unaware of this, of course, nor does she seem to mind either at first. Her sister Celia, however, attempts in her own limited way to make Dorothea realize that Casaubon is not the right mate. Celia's comments about Mr. Casaubon's moles highlights for the reader the flaws and infirmities that Dorothea has chosen to ignore. Helena Michael observes that this "contrast...between modes of perception between the sisters enables Eliot to resolve the literary problem

of representing a heroine who is simultaneously innocent and desirable, sexually repressed and highly erotic” (Trotter 56). Casaubon, however, is entirely de-sexualized. On their honeymoon in Rome, Casaubon spends most of his time in the Vatican library researching his “Key to all Mythologies” rather than enjoying the company of his new, young bride.

It is while on her honeymoon that Dorothea’s sexuality is recognized, though not by herself or her husband. Casaubon’s cousin Will Ladislaw is present in Rome studying art, and it is there that his sexualization of Dorothea begins. He and his friend Naumann observe her in the Vatican Museum, and Naumann’s assessment of her “sensuous force controlled by spiritual passion influences Will’s perception of Dorothea’s beauty and sexuality” (190). The wayward dilettante then “discovered his calling, the worship of the divine Dorothea” (Paris 46). When Dorothea poses as Santa Clara for Neumann’s painting, “Will was divided between the inclination to fall at the Saint’s feet and kiss her robe, and the temptation to knock Neumann down while he was adjusting her arm” (216). His reverent desire for her escalates from this moment, and his agonizing love for her is only heightened by his contempt for her situation.

Eliot has the two meetings at Logic Manor before Dorothea’s marriage, and the contrast between her future husband and his young cousin is apparent. In the midst of “a sparse remnant of yellow leaves falling slowly athwart the dark evergreens in a stillness without sunshine,” Casaubon “had no bloom that could be thrown into relief by that background” (74). Will, on the other hand, appears in the same setting as “a figure, conspicuous on the dark background of evergreens” (78). Will gives the appearance of sunny brightness while Mr. Casaubon, on the contrary, stood rayless. Trotter notes that this direct contrast is Eliot’s use of form “to be extraordinarily frank

in assessing the prospects of the two men who want to marry Dorothea Brooke. Mr. Casaubon...as a man, has no distinctive shape. He does not stand out" (40). This, Trotter argues, signifies Casaubon's inability or unwillingness to "reproduce himself"; thus he "does not stand a chance against Will Ladislaw" (40).

The demarcation Lydgate shows between the plain women and graceful exquisite women associating the former ones with philosophy and science. What he says is the matter of bitter criticism since he discloses his ruling mentality to dominate the women sex. The condition he highlights for women that they should produce the effect of music is the expectation of men from women. Men do not want women to be intellectual and philosophical. Rather they prefer graceful and perfectly lovely who could produce the exquisite music. In fact here Eliot has drawn the realistic scenario of her contemporary time to show the mean-spirited and biased males.

Eliot denies her heroines the same sort of success at transcending gender role she had enjoyed. Working against the idea that women's fiction should provide libratory role models, both Austen and Blake praise Eliot for realistically depicting the possibilities open to most nineteenth century women and for refusing to set up as a model the extraordinary person at the expense of more compromised and less successful women. While feminist objections to Eliot do continue, defenses on the grounds of realism also continue to appear. According to these defenses, Eliot's tendency to resolve her heroines' life crises with marriage becomes fidelity to the truth of ordinary women's lives. Eliot's mouthpiece, Dorothea is depicted as such:

Yet Dorethea had no distinctly shaped grievance that she could state even to herself; and in the midst of her confused thought and passion, the mental act that was struggling forth into clearness was a self-accusing cry that her feeling of desolation was the fault of her own

spiritual poverty. She had married the man of her choice, and with the advantage over most girls that she contemplated her marriage chiefly as the beginning of new duties; from the very first she had thought of Mr. Casaubon as having a mind so much above her own, that he must often be claimed by studies which she could not entirely share. (160)

As a matter of fact, Dorothea has seen a lot of intellectual potentialities in Mr. Casaubon and appreciates him much due to his high study and knowledge. She does not see as much as spiritual richness in her as she does in Mr. Casaubon. This has indeed been the matter of attraction in Mr. Casaubon. Her marriage with him has delighted Dorothea and she feels much comfortable with her life partner. Her expectation from her husband that he must have had higher mind than her is completed when she is entangled in the marriage bond with Mr. Casaubon. But one thing that Dorothea has been ignoring the emotional aspect of her husband plays a vital role in strengthening the conjugal bond. She does not see the dark side of marriage with a man twice older than her. She is completely blind and feels delighted enough that her husband is highly studious person. After all, she does seem farsighted and speculative. Dorothea's conflicting state can be seen:

She was as blind to his inward troubles as he to hers; she had not yet learned those hidden conflicts in her husband which claim our pity. She had not yet listened patiently to his heart-beats, but only felt that her own was beating violently. In Mr. Casaubon's ear, Dorothea's voice gave loud emphatic iteration to those mere fancy, the illusion of exaggerated sensitiveness [. . .] and this cruel outward accuser was there in the shape of a wife-Nay, of a young bride, who, instead of observing his abundant pen scratches [. . .] with the uncritical awe of

an elegant-minded canary-bird, seemed to present herself as a spy watching everything with a malign power of inference. (165)

Dorothea Brook is presented in such a way that she is not critical and rational. The above extract clarifies that she is very ignorant and never understands the innermost feelings of other as here she does not feel the heart-beats of Mr. Casaubon which adds to her blindness. Her sensitiveness is falsely exaggerated and emphasized. In fact that is fanciful and illusive. She thinks that she has got a lot of critical senses and has been capable enough of observing things so minutely but she is in illusion and lives less or more the life of a hypocrite. The situation turns opposite of Dorothea's expectation when she finds her judgment made earlier wrong and hasty. She realizes that she committed a great blunder marrying Mr. Casaubon as she finds him somebody else beyond the person she expected and wanted. Here she feels deluded and criticizes herself. In this regard Eliot asserts:

To Dorothea's inexperienced sensitiveness, it seemed like a catastrophe, changing all prospects; and to Mr. Casaubon it was a new pain, he never having been on a wedding journey before, or found himself in that close union which was more of subjection than he had been able to imagine, since this charming young bride not only obliged him to much consideration on her behalf (which he had sedulously given), but turned out to be capable of agitating him cruelly just where he most needed soothing. (168)

A sort of psychological tussle emerges between Dorothea and Mr. Casaubon when he gets agitated due to her capacity and sexual wants. In fact there is not physical compatibility between them. However, their relationship like the wall of sand has been established on the intellectual and ideal ground. When they face the bitter truth

of conjugal life, they feel that both of them have committed a great mistake. The youth of Dorothea seeks for maximum strength and energy that Mr. Casaubon fails to provide her which makes the relationship much critical and serious. The age factor plays a very crucial role in the conjugal life. The marriage naturally turns unhappy when there is incompatibility between the spouses. Life is mysterious and people are much more mysterious than this life. What they are determined to doing once does not mean they do the same and have the similar attitude towards the very thing. After all changes are tangible in human life due to the fact that everything is in the flux. Dorothea an idealistic lady once committed to living her whole life with Mr. Casaubon, seems a little disappointed when she finds oddity and lack of physical strength to fulfill her desire in Mr. Casaubon. They are psychological detachment between them.

In fact the society does not accept the pair which is established on the ideal ground rather than on the real and natural one. The relationship of Mr. Casaubon and Dorothea is not intolerable to Will:

Will saw that she was offended, but this only gave an additional impulse to the new irritation of his latent dislike towards Mr.

Casaubon. It was too intolerable that Dorothea should be worshipping this husband: such weakness in a woman is pleasant to no man but the husband in question. Mortals are easily tempted to pinch the life out of their neighbor's buzzing glory, and think that such killing is no murder. (172)

Will's inclination towards Dorothea and his concern about her is the matter of study here. Dorothea's marriage has been based on her ideals and moralities which are indeed not tangible and natural. This is why they cannot make their conjugal life

much strong. There is not any compatibility on the natural grounds between them. Will as a young man does think of their relationship and sympathize with Dorothea much is very much probable. He sees lots of similarities between himself and Dorothea on the natural grounds and wants to have her even though she is already unified with Mr. Casaubon in a marriage bond. To turn jealous is also much agreeable since he does not think that Mr. Casaubon is any more suitable to the person he does love a lot. He gets surprised why she has chosen Mr. Casaubon as her life partner and blames the whole woman race regarding the hasty and unnatural decision that they make being tempted to the hypocritical and baseless things. He further states that the weakness that women have is not taken in the positive way by the males rather they simply ignore it and never try to take notice of it.

Women's devotion to their husbands is the foundation of trust but men do not find it any more pleasant. This is also a sort of irony of conjugal life. As a matter of fact conjugal life becomes strong and sustainable when there is reciprocal trust and understanding between wife and husband. But when any of them lacks the belief and devotion for other, it turns a source of misery and pain. In this regard Eliot says:

Marriage, which was to bring guidance into worthy and imperative occupation, had not yet freed her from the gentlewoman's oppressive liberty: it had not even filled her leisure with the ruminant joy of unchecked tenderness. Her blooming full-pulsed youth stood there in a moral imprisonment which made itself one with the chill, colourless, narrowed landscape, with the shrunken furniture, the never-read books, and the ghostly stag in a pale fantastic world that seemed to be vanishing from the daylight. (227)

Hence everything is crystal clear that Dorothea expected her conjugal life would be delightful and praiseworthy. She would be more independent and feel emancipated in the company of Mr. Casaubon since she found him too much considerate and learned but her expectation takes an opposite mode and she gets entrapped in the net of oppression and feels morally imprisoned now. It is the irony of marriage in patriarchy. More or less the position of women in the marriage bond is fragile and uncertain since male ideologies are given a lot of priority due to the male dominated structure of society. In the oppressive environment Dorothea's every moment of conjugal life becomes intolerable and tormenting to her. She feels as if she were in the world of human imprisonment where she didn't feel delighted even in her leisure. Her dreamed life is badly destroyed here and she gets paralyzed in making further decisions. Moreover she feels blocked on the middle of her life destination. This miserable condition that she faces is the matter of great contemplation as women of the contemporary time were more or less fated to face the same. Eliot has successfully drawn the picture of her time to show how women were victimized due to their hearty devotion and blind love for their husbands in the patriarchic society. A critic, Rachel Blau Duplessis in this concern states:

*Middlemarch's* conclusion is as characteristic of contradictions in how Victorian women writers transmit a cultural ideology that demands both heroic individualism and domesticity: "as a gendered subject in the nineteenth century, Dorothea has barely any realistic options in work or vocation, so her heroism lies in defining herself as a free agent, freely choosing the romance that nonetheless, in one form or another, is her fate. The female hero turns herself into a heroine; this is her last act as an individual agent. (14)

Duplessis seems to have stressed on the plight of female heroes in the Victorian Time how they were provided with roles by the writers. The cultural ideology of Victorian Time demanded both heroic individualism and domesticity. It shows the fact the women of time were doubly loaded with responsibilities: one as an individual and next as a housewife. To play both roles simultaneously requires lots of courage and strength that women should have had in order to meet the cultural ideology. If anyone failed in any of the appointed responsibilities she would be considered as a failure in her life. Thus the above study displays the concrete reality that women were oppressed and their feelings and attitudes were not taken notice of by the male figures that had created ideologies unfairly and biased. Dorothea is here as the representative of women of the time whose role reflects the tangible plight of women of then.

Women were taken as subordinates to the males in the contemporary time. Their role was instrumental. Thus their position was terribly affected by the roles provided to them in patriarchy. Dorothea though saw Mr. Casaubon much considerate and having distinct human qualities from other males does not seem different in the conjugal life as he does take Dorothea as a helpmate to him while conducting his job. He thinks that she will assist him a lot. Hence Eliot highlights his male chauvinist nature:

And when he had seen Dorothea he believed that he had found even more than he demanded: she might really be such a helpmate to him as would enable him to dispense with a hired secretary, an aid which Mr. Casaubon had never yet employed and had a suspicious dread of. (Mr. Casaubon was nervously conscious that he was expected to manifest a powerful mind.) providence, in its kindness, had supplied him with the wife he needed. A wife, a modest young lady, with the purely

appreciative, unambitious abilities of her sex, is sure to think her husband's mind powerful. (231)

Mr. Casaubon's male chauvinist nature gets pretty clear in the above extract. He is here as the representative of the Victorian males. He takes his life Dorothea and thinks that he has been fortunate enough to have had such a hired secretary. It is the matter of bitter criticism how inhumanly and irrationally he judges the position of Dorothea that she is just as an employee to him. Hence everything is going on beyond Dorothea's expectation. If she had had any clue of his evil and oppressive nature, she would not have been unified with him in the so-called pious and holy marriage bond. But she saw him a lot of human potentialities and commendable notion. Along with this she took him more educated and considerate who could supple her knowledge in the course of their Conjugal life. She didn't think of him in the other way that had been paved by the male-dominated society of the time. That is why a beautiful young lady got married to man twice older than her and was determined to playing the role of a good life partner. Her over devoted nature and belief takes antagonistic mode and ruins her expected life.

Furthermore Mr. Casaubon takes Dorothea as a lady without any ambitions and purpose so serious. Hence he humiliates the female sex and finds it useless. He considers women as the matter of appreciation and source of entertainment. This biased attitude based on the sex discrimination creates a rift between Dorothea and Mr. Casaubon who stand contrary to each other regarding the way they see the human world. He is more or less opportunist in the sense that Dorothea has taken him a man having higher thought and the very belief he takes her weakness and attempts to get benefited from her innocence and ignorance about his true face. He does not speculate

that mean- spirited thought will lead to mistrust and emotional detachment from her one day.

Hence the issues of women become significant and how the modern women critics perceive the things, is the recursive process of analysis. Charlotte Brontë in her *A Modern Woman* asserts that her novels speak volumes for the oppressed woman. Thus establishing Charlotte Brontë as one of the first modern women of her time proves fruitful. To refer to Charlotte Brontë as a feminist would, however, be an insufferable misrepresentation. Unlike George Sand, who by appearances and her standard of living epitomized the nineteenth-century feminist, Charlotte Brontë withdrew from a society that would not entirely accept her, and expressed her stifled ideals through her words. Slight in size, perpetually modest, it was Brontës suppressed spirit that gave way to her literary fantasies. She often likened herself to others in her oppressed situation; the ugly daughter or poor spinster, which she equated to slaves imprisoned by circumstances beyond their control.

The options for the proper yet impoverished woman during the time were limited a governess or teacher, roles Charlotte Brontë considered forms of bondage, as well. She believed that a governess had no existence, and was not considered a living or rational being except in connection with the wearisome duties she was forced to perform.

Marriage was always a viable solution, yet Charlotte Brontë would only marry a man she respected, no matter his status or fortune. She resigned to live in the role society placed upon her, yet no one, not even a stringent society, could hamper her burgeoning emotions. It was through her words that Charlotte Brontë created a woman of free thought, intellect, and strong moral character; the same traits Charlotte herself possessed.

Charlotte herself was determined to marry a man she respected. In fact, she refused several offers of marriage that would have afforded her a life of ease, simply because the offers did not come from men she deemed her equal, or rather she felt them intellectually and morally deficient. She believed that a good woman, like any decent man, could not live without self-respect. She believed passion a temporary emotion that could easily give way to disgust, or worse, indifference. "God help the woman who is left to love passionately and alone" (Gaskell, Chap IX).

Sir James who initially made efforts to stop Dorothea from marrying Mr. Casaubon analyses the previous mistakes committed by Mr. Brook, the Dorothea's uncle when he finds them failure in their conjugal life. In fact he has always loved Dorothea and imagined good things to happen in her favor but he failed to stop her from marrying with Mr. Casaubon a man whom he has always discarded and seen incompatible for marriage with Dorothea. He expresses his thought regarding the past drawbacks on the part of Dorothea's relatives as such:

It was wicked to let a young girl blindly decide her fate in that way, without any effort to save her. Sir James had long ceased to have any regrets on his own account: his heart was satisfied with his engagement with Celia. But he had a chivalrous nature: his disregarded love had not turned to bitterness; its death had made sweet odours- floating memories that clung with a consecrating effect to Dorothea. He could remain her brotherly friend, interpreting her actions with generous trustfulness. (236)

His interpretation about the marriage of Dorothea is just and rational. In one way it is reasonable that guardians are responsible for youths and they should not be left to make any decisions basically decision about marriage which is serious and long lasting matter. Rather guardians should think of whether the youths make right decisions. Along with this Sir James finds Dorothea over confident in her decision and knowledge a failure in her conjugal life. Sir James whose love was disregarded once by Dorothea is happy after getting unified in the marriage bond with Celia the sister of Dorothea.

There is a great irony of marriage in patriarchy in the sense that Dorothea fails who thought Mr. Casaubon would be far better and more considerate and sensitive than Sir James and in contrary to her Sir James is happy with his marriage with Celia who was disappointed when Dorothea ignored him and his marriage proposal. However, Sir James does not take Dorothea otherwise as he still loves her as a brotherly friend. On this ground he does not seem selfish and opportunist. Moreover she feels sorry on the desolate and tasteless marriage of Dorothea. He blames Mr. Brook Dorothea's uncle that he freed her a lot in deciding about marriage alone.

Dorothea now realizes that her uncle was just that he wanted her not marry Mr. Casaubon. She regrets that she herself wished her uncle not to invite Will Ladislaw. Furthermore Mr. Casaubon did dislike him. as a matter of fact she is sorry for all these mischievous acts and wants to restore her happiness by creating new world of reality with full hopes and energy which could help her feel live life with pleasure and ecstasy. After death of Mr. Casaubon she becomes totally destroyed and feels alienated from the real world that she did feel somehow when she was in the company with Casaubon since there was also psychological detachment. Now

onwards she prefers to be real not ideal as she has found idealistic life fully ruthless and tasteless.

Dorothea marries Ladislaw, according to her account, because she loves him and he loves her. *Middlemarch* in this respect is a classic Victorian love story, with the woman giving her estate to marry the man she loves, and the man giving up his inheritance to gain the respect of his beloved. Ladislaw attracts Dorothea precisely because he is morally flawed, an imperfect human being which provides her with her mission: to redeem him. It is her love for him and faith in him that make him a better human being, so that he can be worthy both of her and of her society. His is not an exalted mission; Ladislaw in parliament is not going to be a heroic character aspiring to transform society. But he will be a sensible, moderate reformer.

As a matter of fact Will Ladislaw has not been a pure person regarding his illicit relationship. His relationship with Rosamond is very much illicit before his marriage with Dorothea. Similarly Rosamond has been very much dishonest in her conjugal life. Her husband Lydgate a simple-minded person is deceived by Rosamond. Regarding Will's relationship with Rosamond Eliot states:

Now that she was alone in her drive, she heard the notes of the man's voice and the accompanying piano, which she had not noted much at the time, returning on her inward sense; and she found herself thinking with some wonder that Will Ladislaw was passing his time with Mrs. Lydgate in her husband's absence. And then she could not help remembering that he had passed some time with her under like circumstances. ( 357)

The extract above is the observation of Dorothea and her analysis of Rosamond's character. It echoes the long drawn-out treatment of the failed marriage of the parallel

couple Lydgate and Rosamond. Both marriages go from strong physical attraction to boring concern with domestic finance.

While Dorothea's interest in such things clarifies her characterization as admirably unselfish in contrast to that of Rosamond. Marriage is presented simply and, in the case of Will and Dorothea's love scene, concisely as a place where virtuous wives must support husbands' ambitions and worry about the bills. Furthermore the unhappy marriage between Lydgate and Rosamond gets reflected through Eliot's perception on their marriage life:

Rosamond had a gleam of returning cheerfulness when the house was freed from the threatening figure, and when all the disagreeable creditors were paid. But she was not joyous: her married life had fulfilled none of her hopes, and had been quite spoiled for her imagination. In this brief interval of calm, Lydgate, remembering that he had often been stormy in his hours of perturbation, and mindful of the pain Rosamond had had to bear, was carefully gentle towards her.

(618)

Rosamond's discontent in her marriage is due to the conditions of marriage itself, to its demand for self-suppression and tolerance, and not to the nature of her husband; but the easy conception of an unreal person having sentimental charm. Her hopes remain unfulfilled and rather get destroyed in the course of time. Thus their conjugal life turns disastrous and meaningless. The shock to Rosamond is terrible. It seems to her that no lot can be so cruelly hard to hers to have married a man who has become the centre of infamous suspicions. In many cases it is inevitable that the shame is felt to be the worst part of crime; and it would require a great deal of disentangling reflection, as such has never entered into Rosamond's life, for her in these moments to

feel that her trouble is less than if her husband has been certainly known to have done something criminal. All the shame seems to be there. And she has innocently married this man with the belief that he and his family were a glory to her. But ultimately every hope gets ruined and she becomes a failure in marriage. The Lydgates' marriage is a failure because Rosamond does not understand the nature of marriage; she thinks her discontent is with her husband, whereas it is with the conditions of marriage itself and its demand for self-suppression and tolerance.

Marriage is supposed to have been pious and sacred bond between two opposite sexes. A modern critic from England, Harry Ben mentions his views regarding marriage in this way:

Related to the unequal status of marriage was the sexual double standard that treated lack of chastity in a woman as a serious social offense. Woolf herself was almost certainly the victim of some kind of sexual abuse at the hands of one of her half-brothers, as narrated in her memoir *Moments of Being*. More broadly, she was highly conscious of the ways that men had access to and knowledge of sex, whereas women of the middle and upper classes were expected to remain ignorant of it. (12)

Hence the sense of women exploitation at different phases of history in the name of marriage gets clear. She often puzzles about the possibility of a literature that would treat sexuality and especially the sexual life of women frankly, but her own works discuss sex rather indirectly.

In contrary to Rosamond, Dorothea never makes that mistake. Even when she was most displeased with Casaubon, she did not rebel against marriage itself. There is no discussion of the suffrage, or any other overtly feminist subject, in *Middlemarch*.

But the text is undeniably a challenge to modern feminist. In this regard, An English critic Bobby Warren states:

The idea that only in marriage can Dorothea find her personal happiness as well as her moral mission seems peculiarly Victorian. And so it is. For the Victorian even for Victorian feminists, marriage and family were the primary human relationships, so that champions of women's suffrage, university education, divorce reform, property rights, birth control, or any other feminist cause had to demonstrate that their proposals were compatible with marriage and family. Victorian families, recent scholarship has shown, were not nearly as oppressive or patriarchal as was once thought [... ] that idea implied that men and women had distinctive natures and virtues which bound them together in a complex relationship of rights, duties, and, if they were fortunate, love. (55)

Warren's view regarding women of Victorian time seems very critical and observatory since he has attempted his best to picture women and their marital conditions. His study of Victorian marriages based on the common consent of male and female is no more oppressive. No doubt there are differences at the level of their thoughts and virtues.

But it is the marriage that unifies them in a complex bond that finally turns as the knot of love and they feel responsible for happiness of each other. Dorothea the central figure of *Middlemarch* feels responsible for happiness of her family even when she gets reunified in marriage bond with Will Ladislaw and she takes marriage and union with Will as such:

She entertained no visions of their ever coming into nearer union, and yet she had taken no posture of renunciation. She had accepted her whole relation to Will very simply as part of her marriage sorrows, and would have thought it very sinful in her to keep up an inward wail because she was not completely happy, being rather disposed to dwell on the superfluities of her lot. (636)

In fact marriage is the union of two opposite sexes whose attitudes and opinions about things extant in the world vary from each other. Marriage becomes the source of pleasure when they have faith in each other and sacrifice for the happiness and pleasure of one another. To feel what conjugal life is one must come out of the superficial world and face the bitter realities of human life. Until one remains in the confined domain of superficiality s/he does not face the things one has to see and assimilate with. Dorothea until was in the world of illusion and false ideals which are not practical and realistic did never feel pleasant and happy. Rather she simply fulfilled the demand of the conjugal relationship with Mr. Casaubon.

But now she is out of that illusive world and takes Will all in all since both of them love each other with common understanding and respect. But on the other hand the conjugal life of Rosamond and Lydgate has turned as a source of misery and pain due to mistrust and disrespect to each other's existence. While marrying they would dream of living a comfortable life in the marriage bond but their dream of such happy life turns opposite and becomes a burden to them. Eliot stresses on Rosamond's plight and her feelings:

Rosamond, while these poisoned weapons were being hurled at her, was almost losing the sense of her identity, and seemed to be awaking into some new terrible existence. She had no sense of chill resolute

repulsion, of reticent self-justification such as she had known under Lydgate's most stormy displeasure; all her sensibility was turned into a bewildering novelty of pain; she felt a new terrified recoil under a lash never experienced before. (638)

The extract above discloses the realistic condition of Rosamond a Victorian woman facing a number of problems due to being unified into a marriage bond. She seems to have lost individual identity and gets introduced through her husband Lydgate. She is doubly cheated one by her husband and next by Will who has also stopped speaking with her. She is short of emotional support and sensual pleasure which turns her life into a deserted and wasteful land. She is confused that she cannot decide ahead and do something her betterment.

Thus she is victimized in the male-dominated society of the Victorian time. There is no escape for her from the well of misery and pain. After all her long expected pleasant life gets ruined that is the irony of marriage in patriarchy. Dorothea does see an irony of marriage in the life of women of *Middlemarch*. Thus she expresses her attitudes towards marriage:

Marriage is so unlike everything else. There is something even awful in the nearness it brings. Even if we loved someone else better than those we were married to, it would be no use'-poor Dorothea, in her palpitating anxiety, could only seize her language brokenly-'I mean, marriage drinks up all our power of giving or getting any blessedness in that sort of love. I know it may be very dear but it murders our marriage-and then the marriage stays with us like a murder-and everything else is gone. And then our husband-if he loved

and trusted us, and we have not helped him, but made a curse in his life... (654-5)

As a matter of fact marriage is a pious and holy conciliation between two opposite sexes for companionship of each other to continue the natural process of human race. In the marriage bond naturally both of the partners are equally crucial and essential. Their roles vary due to distinct biological structure and potentiality. Neither of them can live happily and naturally alone. This incapability makes them unified in the conjugal bond. The intention and natural purpose of this sacred union is much democratic and fair. However, social realities do affect the very sacred union and pave a path of inequality to them. The nature and notion of society does play a prominent role in determining their positions. In fact in the male dominated society women are taken as puppets and playthings and their husbands play with them as they wish and prefer. They never think of the fact that women do have mind and can think and feel as they do and can. Rather they ignore the vitality and potentials of women in the human life.

"Marriage is crucial because it is the only accessible form of self-definition for girls in her society" (Gilbert and Gubar 127). Austen's subject, argues Moers, is not courtship but "marriageship: the cautious investigation of a field of eligible males, the delicate maneuvering to meet them, the refined outpacing of rivals, the subtle circumventing of parental power (his and hers), and the careful management, at the end of the story, which turns idle flirtation into a formal offer of marriage with a good settlement for life. All this must be carried on in a way that the heroine maintains her self-respect, her moral dignity, her character as daughter, sister, friend, and neighbor, and her youth; it must be done quickly, in a year or two, before her bloom fades. (Persuasion is the exception—Austen's heart-rending final fantasy of the second

chance.) . . . . Marriageship is one of those subjects that must be read imaginatively from the woman's point of view, which here differs from that of the man" (71).

The marriage that is initially intended to preserve and provide both of them pleasure and companionship becomes the source of pain and misery. Dorothea has also faced similar agony and undergone the ordeal of marriage in patriarchy and this is why she understands the life after marriage. Everything turns opposite. The equal partner of life wheel becomes an assistant and dependent slave after getting unified in marriage bond. Each expectation of women turns opposite and this is indeed the irony of marriage in patriarchy. Women lose their identity and get identified through their husbands and at the same time they cannot rationalize since their words become just unheard voice. Moreover their voice sounds clamorous to the husbands. After all, marriage drinks up pleasure and happiness of women and empowers males to rule over women often considered as second sex in patriarchy.

The doctrine of separate spheres that ordered society in the nineteenth century ensured that wives stayed firmly ensconced in the private sphere of the home while their husbands reigned in the public sphere. In Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon, these separate spheres exist within the home as well. Their "marital disputes provoke a retreat into mutually exclusive gendered space in which the other is not welcome or especially wanted" (Trotter 48). Casaubon's domain is his library, while Dorothea is very often found in her "blue-green boudoir with its tapestry of a stag who looked more like a ghost in his blue-green world and the portrait of Will's grandmother, which acts as a continual reminder of him in its resemblance" (273). Upon returning from their honeymoon, both Dorothea and Casaubon are frustrated by the disappointment that their marriage has proven to be. They each, therefore, withdraw "into what one might think of as an extremity of gender identification: all male, all

female” (Trotter 49). Because the propensity of each [is] to adhere to the developing doctrine of separate spheres, they are grounded in the social convention of marriage, which proves disastrous.

Dorothea’s marriage to Will, however, shifts the dominant social gender roles, and their relationship is therefore more equitable and thus modernized. The essential problem Dorothea faces is “What is a noble, ardent, gifted woman to do in nineteenth century England, with its demeaning attitudes toward women, its refusal to give them a real education, and its exclusion of them from socially important work?” (Paris 29). Her only real option is to marry: “Because she is a woman, Dorothea cannot dream of doing splendid deeds herself but must live vicariously through a man...She longs to marry a great man, not only to participate in his glory but to facilitate his achievements and thus do something of world-historical importance herself. She needs him to need her help” (Paris 34). Dorothea had thought that her marriage to Casaubon would fulfill this need because he initially expressed his desire for her help in his scholarly pursuits. His later rejection of her “reinforce[d] the sense of uselessness and inferiority that she married him to escape” (Paris 39). Will does truly need Dorothea, though. Her ardent nature saves him “from a sense of aimlessness and failure,” while he provides “a wonderful antidote to Casaubon because Will Ladislav always seemed to see more in what she said than she herself saw” (Eliot 361). With the validation and devotion that Will provides her, “Dorothea cannot help wanting to be with a man who thus confirms her sense of her own value” (Paris 47).

Applying gender theory to Will further highlights the shift in gender roles exhibited in his relationship with Dorothea. As Michael Cohen observes, “Ladislav, alone of the male characters who come within the sphere of Dorothea’s charm, does

not assess her from a male supremacist view” (100). This analysis partly explains why Will is an appropriate match for Dorothea.

Cohen argues that “among the men Ladislav is preferable because his sensibility has been trained by a universal feminine experience of dependency” (101). Throughout the novel, “Ladislav moves from dependence on Casaubon to dependence on Mr. Brooke, uneasily remains there a while, and then finds himself more or less unwillingly a free agent” until he marries Dorothea and becomes mostly economically dependent on his new wife (Cohen 102). While this history of dependence does not make Will effeminate, “In the [Victorian] middle-class construction of gender, which included economic independence for the male and dependence for the female, Ladislav was feminine” (Cohen 103). Will is uneasy with this distinction and continuously states that being with Dorothea is impossible because of their disparity. Will does envision leaving *Middlemarch* to pursue “political writing, political speaking that will gain “him such distinction that he would not seem to be asking Dorothea to step down to him so as not to appear as a needy adventurer trying to win the favour of a rich woman. Will, however, is no Heathcliff” and he remains in *Middlemarch* as Mr. Brooke’s secretary so he can be near to Dorothea” (Paris 48).

Will’s emotional nature (he is an artist and a poet, after all) and his propensity for “irresoluteness and flexibility that make him...impressionable” and therefore able to take the pressure of other people’s thought also give him feminine characteristics” (Blake 67). This quality causes him to be “pliable” and thus Dorothea states that, because he expresses a desire to never do or say anything that she disapproves of, she “shall have a little kingdom then, where [she] shall give laws” (Eliot 210, 367). Will therefore takes on the submissive role that was expected of women, not men. Because

Dorothea “needs to make a mark somewhere, Will becomes the right partner for her and she is therefore able to help make him “an ardent public man” (Eliot 836). Flint supports this gender theory reading because, as she states, it is “undeniable” that Eliot maintained a “continual interest in the formation of gender characteristics by community, by expectations, and by ideological pressures. She is alive to the shifting connections of gender and power, as they manifest themselves in both familial and broader contexts; and making her readers think about the connections between power, authority, and gender relations is an inseparable part of her literary and critical enterprise” (163).

The emphasis on the social construction of gender and the alteration of this construct in Dorothea and Will’s relationship furthers the case for Dorothea’s empowerment through the implementation of modern ideals in her second marriage.

As companionate marriages were on the rise in the nineteenth century, women still could not separate the economic and emotional realities of marriage. A woman who wanted to marry “did not have to be reminded that her material well-being would depend on the financial situation of her husband” (Yalom 180). This condition presented a conflict in the consciousness of women, though, and the question of love without money or money without love arose. Yalom notes that because a marriage that ultimately provided both was the ideal, “novelists like Jane Austen usually skirted the issue by arranging for their female characters to find love and financial security in the same man” (179). Eliot, though, ever wary of the dangers of idealistic expectations, would not provide such a result for Dorothea.

Although Will is Casaubon’s second cousin, they are not on equal social ground. Will’s grandmother, Casaubon’s aunt, was disinherited “because she made what they called a *mésalliance*, though there was nothing to be said against her

husband except that he was a Polish refugee who gave lessons for his bread” (365). This scandalous heritage makes Will suspect in *Middlemarch* society. The “murkiness of his background and social position make him an object of scorn. Social mobility became a real option with the industrialization of England, but this caused “an anxiety of imitation” – the fear that “the external difference that gives one shape to a gentleman and another to a clerk” would cease to exist” (Trotter 53).

Without such distinctions, the long-established hierarchy of English society would be compromised. Will represents one of these new “imitators”, he comes from a disgraced heritage, yet maintains a connection with his cousin Casaubon and is therefore able to engage (to a degree) with “proper” society. Will’s marriage to Dorothea “upsets the conventional economy of marriage and the distribution of property in *Middlemarch*” (Miller 147). Casaubon's codicil adds to these complications by threatening to embroil Dorothea in scandal if news of its existence becomes widely known. Sir James expresses the fear that “„the world will suppose that she gave [Casaubon] some reason” to legally keep Dorothea from Will, and that is what makes it so abominable – coupling her name with this young fellows” (484). Dorothea's brother-in-law rages “that there never was a meaner, more ungentlemanly action than this” (484) than to cast doubt on her honor. Mr. Brooke ironically insists that “Ladislaw is a gentleman,” to which Sir James replies, “I am sure Casaubon was not” (485). This contrast between the genteel clergyman and the (reformed) wayward dilettante underscores the futility of the social hierarchy that attempts to place a chasm between Dorothea and Will. She, of course, has no reservations about defying both the codicil and society by marrying Will. Dorothea emphatically renounces her inheritance as she and Will declare their love for each other: “I don’t mind about poverty—I hate my wealth... We could live quite well on my own fortune—it is too

much—seven hundred-a-year—I want so little—no new clothes—and I will learn what everything costs” (812-3).

Dorothea defies all of *Middlemarch* society in choosing to marry Will. Mr. Cadwallader summarizes this perspective: “Mrs. Casaubon may be acting imprudently: she is giving up a fortune for the sake of a man, and we men have so poor an opinion of each other that we can hardly call a woman wise who does that” (817). Ultimately, her decision is so shocking because “Dorothea’s commitment to Will is a true decision and not the preprogrammed following of a...rule” (Miller 140). Dorothea does not just disregard Will’s “questionable” heritage; she seems to revel in it. She is fascinated by the portrait of his grandmother that hangs in her boudoir at Lowick and continually seeks comfort in the memory of his ancestor. Will credits Dorothea for her kind and singular treatment of his family history: “I did not believe that you would let any circumstance of my birth create a prejudice in you against me, though it was sure to do so in others” (808). By choosing to marry Will, Dorothea acts on her genuine feeling rather than social pressure. When Celia questions how Dorothea came to such a decision, Dorothea responds, “No, dear, you would have to feel with me, else you would never know” (822). This simple statement provides the motivation for Dorothea’s marriage to Will. She is not swept up in any romantic illusions as she was with Casaubon. As the narrator states in the Finale, “[t]hey were bound to each other by a love stronger than any impulses which could have marred it” (835). Because class and wealth have no bearing whatsoever on their marriage, Dorothea and Will negate the predominant social reason for choosing a spouse in favor of a more modern, equitable, companionate union.

Trotter bases this analysis on the theory of sexual selection as explained by Darwin in *The Origin of the Species*:

The struggle that shapes sexual selection...is not for existence in relation to other organic beings or to external conditions but, rather between the individuals of one sex, generally the males, for the possession of the other sex. Victory, here, depends less on „general vigour than on the development (by the male of the species) of an array of special weapons; while for the unsuccessful competitor, the outcome is not death but few or no offspring. (Trotter 41)

Therefore, Trotter concludes, “Mr. Casaubon’s lack of difference ought to rule him out as a mate for the strongly differentiated Dorothea” (42). It is important to note here that Dorothea’s marriage to Casaubon does remain childless, while her later marriage to Will produces a son.

Dorothea’s desire for Will also increases during her marriage to Casaubon, but she is unaware of it until long after his death. She longs to see him when not in his company—she imagines his face in that of his grandmother’s portrait that hangs in her boudoir and her mood is instantly elevated, and she insists that he remain in *Middlemarch* when he is offered an opportunity by Mr. Brooke to do so and acknowledges that she gave her response, „without thinking of anything else than my own feeling” (368). Her husband, however, has some idea that his young cousin is a potential challenge to his marriage. Casaubon’s sexual jealousy causes him to go so far as to ban Will from Lowick so that he may not see Dorothea. This expulsion “arouses in Will a new display: an impatient arising” (Trotter 59). Casaubon also, in a mean gesture of attempted posthumous control, includes a codicil in his will that states Dorothea will forfeit her inheritance if she marries Will after Casaubon’s death. What he fails to realize, however, is that “it would sully [Will’s] image of both

Dorothea and himself if there were any sexual component in their relationship or any disloyalty to Casaubon” (Paris 46).

The relationship between Dorothea and Will does gain an overtone of sexuality after Casaubon’s death. When Mrs. Cadwallader tells Dorothea that Will, is making a sad dark-blue scandal by warbling continually with your Mr. Lydgate’s wife, who they tell me is as pretty as pretty can be. It seems nobody ever goes into the house without finding this young gentleman lying on the rug or warbling at the piano” (628-9), she arouses a sense of jealousy unseen before in the saintly Dorothea. Her dark mood overcomes her, and as Dorothea drives away in her carriage, “[t]he tears came and rolled down her cheeks, but she did not know it. The world, it seemed, was turning ugly and hateful, and there was no place for her trustfulness” (629). Her anger and frustration toward Casaubon never reached such heights, mainly because she turned to thoughts of Will to comfort her, but the idea of losing him to another woman is entirely too much for her to bear. Her feelings alternate “between anger with Will and the passionate defence of him” (630). Later, Dorothea pays a visit to Rosamond and finds her alone with Will in what appears to be a compromising position: “...close by him and turned towards him with a flushed tearfulness which gave a new brilliancy to her face sat Rosamond, her bonnet hanging back, while Will leaning towards her clasped both her upraised hands in his and spoke with low-toned fervour” (775). The scene is, of course, an innocent one, but Dorothea’s jealousy again overwhelms her. She had dismissed Mrs. Cadwallader’s information as mere gossip, but this scene seems to confirm her story. Dorothea now feels that she has a sexual rival in Rosamond, and, as the scene she witnessed suggests, Dorothea is losing.

This event does, however, precipitate the culmination of Dorothea and Will’s relationship. Rosamond, in her most unselfish action of the book, reveals Will’s true

feelings to Dorothea: “He said yesterday that no other woman existed for him besides you” (798).

Dorothea is relieved and joyous, yet overwhelmed by her own reaction to this revelation. With the threat of her sexual competitor removed, Will’s next call on her is markedly different from any of his other visits. When his arrival is announced, Dorothea’s reaction is described in sexual terms: “There was nothing that she longed for at the moment except to see Will: the possibility of seeing him had thrust itself insistently between her and every other object; and yet she had a throbbing excitement like an alarm upon her—a sense that she was doing something daringly defiant for his sake” (807). Their feeble attempts at proclaiming their love for one another prove too difficult for them, so their declaration is instead represented by the sexual act of a kiss.

The description begins with trembling lips, and “there is embarrassed coyness in the narrator’s tone when they first kiss” (Flint 164-5). In a novel abundant with detail, this moment is simply described: “It was never known which lips were the first to move towards the other lips; but they kissed tremblingly, and then they moved apart” (810). The repetition of “trembling” emphasizes this moment of Dorothea’s sexual awareness. As previously stated, Dorothea and Will’s marriage produces a son. This is proof that, unlike her marriage to Casaubon, her union with Will is consummated. As her husband, Will does what Casaubon would not, or could not, do: he recognizes her sexuality, then allows her to recognize it for herself.

### III. Social Mobility through Marriage

While *Middlemarch* does not indulge in romantic declarations, it is no less evident that companionate marriages based on love are triumphant in the end. As a writer, “George Eliot was deeply mistrustful of creating idealistic exceptions” (Flint 161); therefore, because Dorothea and Will’s marriage lacks the idealistic, romantic coyness of Rosamond and Lydgate’s courtship and the intellectual idealism of Dorothea’s attraction to Casaubon, it is ultimately a solid, equal, and appropriate union. The marriage of Mary Garth and Fred Vincy likewise falls into this latter category and is described as “a solid mutual happiness” (Eliot 832); a statement that could also be applied to Dorothea and Will’s marriage.

As to criticism regarding the suitability of Ladislaw as a husband for Dorothea, their marriage proves that Eliot refused to provide an orthodox romantic closure in *Middlemarch*.

Throughout her career, Eliot fought against the idea that women could only produce frivolous writing, and because she firmly believed that the truth of reason and feeling should ultimately triumph over the social standards for acceptable behavior in women, Dorothea and Will’s union thus exemplifies her revision of marital values.

Questioning conventionality of marriage in Eliot's *Middlemarch*, brings critical appraisal in critics and readers. Modern marriage involves the personal choices of the characters that become the pivotal to make it modern. The process of the marriage as presented in *Middlemarch* is innovative and modern.

George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* is a reflection of England’s changing values regarding social status, medicine, politics, education, philanthropy, and male-female relationships. Eliot in *Middlemarch* transcends the demure Victorian conventions and

anticipates the revision of social attitudes towards marriage that is likely to carry England into the Modern Age.

On the whole the marriage system that prevails in the Victorian age is in the contrast with that of the modern approach and time. The present study draws a picture of different marriage institution that respects common freedom of both bride and grooms. The sense of the conventional marriage is thus dismantled by putting the text, Eliot's *Middlemarch* in the new historical frame.

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