Rosamond Vincy and the Real Sphere

> *"An unmistakable delight shone from [her] eyes….Ideal happiness, (of the kind known in the Arabian Nigihts, in which you are invited to step form the labour and discourd of the street into a paradise where everything is given to you and nothing is claimed) seemed to be an affair of a few weeks waiting." (294)*

In the societal realm in which Middlemarch resides, the demarcation between women and men are starkly defined. Notions of male and female character are, especially to a modern perspective, skewed—and it is clear from a modern reading that the effects of this social conditioning cause detriment in the individual characters and their relationships to others in the novel. Perhaps the most resonant of the ill-effects of social conditioning is the character Rosamond, a woman who is guided by the principles of supposed womanhood that have been, since childhood, ingrained into her psyche. She was painstakingly taught, by means of formal instruction, the supposed qualities of womanhood, and because of this, the reader is shown, she exists as Eliot's hyper-socialized female character. She wishes to be treated as a delicate being incapable of invoking harm—she manipulates and obtains her desires by emphasizing the female stereotype—forgoing passion and at times veritable emotion for the obtaining of worldly prospects. These prospects are greatly concerned with social mobility and she is, like many characters in Eliot's novel blinded by these desires, a fact that brings about her inability to separate the reality of her circumstance, from her conceptions of ideal scenario that are, much like that from *Arabian Nights,* characterized by the absence of responsibility (mental and physical, it seems), and the presence of prestige Her rather grandiose ideas of life as it should be, and her ignoring of life as it is, results in Rosamond's strained relationship with Lydgate—spurred by her devotion to being completely absolved from fault, and her blind attachment to the superficial notions of high-society that her lineage and marriage don't give her the capacity to obtain. It seems Eliot designed Rosamond's conflict of the real and ideal, while contrasting it with that of Dorothea's whose conflict is only further indication of her admirable humanity, to show and emphasize the effects of women operating under an imposing sphere that purports loss-of-self as the only road to success.

It could be said that Rosamond's affinity to Lydgate was borne by the fact that his actual past was much of a mystery. This allowed Rosamond to impose her ideas of the ideal mate onto him, and as the ideas she imposed were essentially stunning, in a sense she became the instigator of her own courtship, converting flirtation to love, when the reader knows otherwise. The narrator states, "Rosamond thought that no one could be more in love than she was," (Elliot, 295) and the insertion of "thought" into the equation emphasizes her illusion of genuine feeling. This is one of example of the instances throughout the novel Elliot gives subtle clues to the fact that Rosamond's emotions and truths are not real: she more than once "imagines knowledge," and rather than being right, the narrator maintains she is "convinced" that she is. The disparity between Rosamond's fixation on her marriage to Lydgate, and the fact that he is initially apathetic to it, brings about a conflict that is telling to Eliot's sentiment in terms of Rosamond, and women in a broad sense. First, it is clue into the genuine motive of Rosamond, that being to *devise* a life for herself rather than relying on providence. Lydgate was a mere character in the story she wishes to create, a fantasy in which she exists as an ephemeral *entity* to be sought after, ultimately achieved and lifted to great, eminent heights. She is, one might say, acting as a woman of the time should—with a sense of helplessness, and a faith that her male savior will present himself.

What the reader sees, however, is that Lydgate is too operating in his sphere of manhood, as he is far from invested in Rosamond, but rather enchanted by her beauty and girlish affectations. He regards Rosamond imposing of the ideal onto him as a mere tendency of the female mind: "[Lydgate] held it one of the prettiest attitudes of the feminine mind to adore a man's pre-eminence without too precise a knowledge of what it consisted in." (Elliot, 234) This inclination of Lydgate suggests that his ideas of the feminine mind, are associated with naïve delusion and weakness, characteristics that Lydgate is drawn to, although more for his own desire to assuage than for an affinity to the afflicted. In this initial interplay between Lydgate and Rosamond, Rosamond's conflicted "real" and "ideal" tangles their ideas of one another, based on the roles they play as male and female. On one end, Rosamond's placing of pre-eminence on Lydgate reinforces notions of male-capacity (not to mention her deeming of him as refined based on surface-level qualities, such as his knowledge of the French language) and as Lydgate is flattered by her assumption, he reinforces her role as one whose mental capacity is lacking and whose mind is dull, but "pretty" still. To him, she is weak—a fact that he relishes.

The reader sees this interplay again, more intensely, during the scene of Rosamond and Lydgate's engagement, of sorts. And thus, Rosamond's conflict between the real and ideal engendered the outcome she so desired—but the foreshadowing of future dismay is all too apparent.

Describing the character of Rosamond, the narrator states, on page 289, "Rosamond was particularly forcible by means of that mild persistence which, as we know, enables a white soft living substance to make its way in spite of opposing rock." Rosamond, perhaps the epitome of female delicacy, so strongly adheres to her ideal world, that she is exasperatingly ardent her manipulation. This idea is manifested most blatantly in her marriage that is strained by Lydgate's desire to have a wife that is secondary to his career, and Rosamond's desire to have a husband that unrelentingly places her first. She defies his will even when he has her best interest in mind—forgoing his advice to refrain from horseback riding for the sake of posturing with Captain Lydgate.

At the onset of their financial woes, Rosamond acts as if Lydgate wishes to spite her, placing the blame on him, when in actuality all he had done was fail to live up to her grandiose expectations. She mistakes his exasperation with her and their marriage as mere moodiness, and dismisses his ill-dispositions to ensure that she is not affected by them. The narrator states, "the thought in her mind was that if she had known Lydgate, she would have never married him" (Elliot, 471), and what the reader sees, that Rosamond does not, is that Lydgate feels much of the same. Rosamond is unaware of this because she regards herself as the ideal, the embodiment of the perfect female specimen, the woman who "no woman could behave more irreproachably" than (472), completely free from culpability, a victim of her husband who "had a way of taking things which made them a great deal worse for her." The reality of it, however, is that she is childish and artificial, a woman of "polite impassibility" (609), perhaps the only character who remains throughout *Middlemarch*, as morally stupid and one-dimensional as she began.

Through the fashioning of Rosamond's character, it seems Elliot adhered to a strict notion of femininity—one that was perhaps the pervasive notion at the time. The strain in Rosamond's marriage reaches a head, at the point when Lydgate is "prone to outbursts of indignation," and his enchantment with his coy mistress has changed to subtle resentment. He realizes, he didn't marry a virtuous woman, but rather his own idealized view of what this woman was based on socially accepted (surface level) ideas. Moreover, he realizes that although

he has "spent month after month sacrafising without impatience" (464) Rosamond's thirst for wealth and eminence and all the things she thinks will give merit to her womanhood is impossible to quench. "It is the way with all woman," he says. However, "[his] power of generalizing all women…was thwarted by [his] memory of wondering impressions from the behavior of another woman." (468) That woman, of course, being Dorothea.

There are two salient interplays between Dorothea and Rosamond in relation to the conflict between the real and ideal. The first being the nature of the two characters' own conflicts. Rosamond's conflict is purely of worldly affairs—she wishes to *become* something that represents something else. She negates her inner vitality and becomes a mechanical being, whose desires are to be adorned and to be scorned through jealously. Dorothea's conflict, conversely is her unrelenting attachment to the good of others. One of the final scene of Middlemarch, in which she meets Rosamond, she assumes, wrongly, that Rosamond's actions are pure. Dorothea's conflict is spurred by the fact that she herself is a pure human being—Rosamond's is spurred by her diluted consciousness.

The second interplay moves away from the novel and into its context. Could Elliot have, in her two main female character presented her ideas of the real and ideal? It is perhaps a cynical view from the author (whose attitudes towards woman were rather cynical) because it seems Dorothea represents the ideal, while Rosamond in all of her outward grace but inner spoil, represents the real. And as Dorothea's aspirations are never realized, the real story of women Elliot may be suggesting, is that of Rosamond, who stayed "in her place" and had her dreams (of marrying rich) ultimately fulfilled.