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GEORGE ELIOT, FEMALE ROLES AND EDUCATION:
An analysis of Middlemarch

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“Slow advancing, halting creeping,
Comes the Woman to the hour!-
She walketh veiled and sleeping,
For she knoweth not her power.”
(Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1911)

ABSTRACT

Roles and expectations have traditionally shaped the lives of women. For a long time, gender determined where one would socially stand and the places they could go to (COSTA, 2020), and access to proper and meaningful education was denied. This research aims to analyse the relationship between women, knowledge, and authorship, as displayed in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871), under a feminist approach to literature (COSTA, 2020; ROCHA, 2016; ARMSTRONG, 2006; WEIL, 2006), considering the Victorian context in which the book was written. For this purpose, this thesis focuses on Rosamond, Dorothea and Mary, and their relationship with knowledge and education. From Rosamond's traditional education and accomplishments to Dorothea's desire for knowledge and Mary's questioned authorship, it can be noticed that women's abilities and capacities are frequently questioned in the novel. Furthermore, Dorothea's desire to connect to a higher power through instructions is not fulfilled. The conclusion is that Eliot keeps her characters from achieving the enlightenment which she highly praises, advocating for better access whilst bound to the mindset which restrained girls from gaining complete independence and achieving remarkable things.

KEYWORDS: George Eliot. Feminism. Education. Victorian Age. *Middlemarch*.

RESUMO

Papéis e expectativas tradicionalmente moldaram as vidas das mulheres. Por muito tempo, gênero determinava onde um indivíduo se encaixava socialmente e os lugares que poderia ir (COSTA, 2020), e acesso a uma educação apropriada e significativa era negado. Essa pesquisa visa analisar a relação entre mulheres, conhecimento e autoria, conforme retratado em *Middlemarch* (1871), de George Eliot, através de uma abordagem literária feminista (COSTA, 2020; ROCHA, 2016; ARMSTRONG, 2006; WEIL, 2006), considerando o contexto Vitoriano no qual o livro foi escrito. Para este propósito, este trabalho foca em Rosamond, Dorothea e Mary, e a sua relação com conhecimento e educação. Da educação tradicional e dos talentos de Rosamond, para o desejo por conhecimento de Dorothea e a autoria questionada de Mary, pode ser notado que as habilidades e capacidades femininas são frequentemente questionadas no romance. Além disso, o desejo de Dorothea de conectar-se a uma força maior através da instrução não é alcançado. Conclui-se que Eliot impede suas personagens de alcançar o esclarecimento que ela altamente valoriza, defendendo uma melhor qualidade de acesso enquanto ligada à mentalidade que inviabilizava que meninas fossem completamente independentes e realizassem feitos notáveis.

Palavras-chave: George Eliot. Feminismo. Educação. Era Vitoriana. *Middlemarch*.

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1. ART, WOMEN AND FEMINISM

The written word is undeniably one of the most powerful ways of self-expression. The art of literature allows us, writers,¹ to share our ideas, feelings, perceptions of the world, and to position ourselves politically. Writing is a way of being (YAGELSKI, 2012). By creating works of fiction, we are not merely making the characters in our heads come to life. When we write, we are expressing the depths of our multiple identities and saying, sometimes screaming, what we need, demand, to be heard. Despite all its importance, this platform of positioning oneself in the world was denied to women for a very long time.

Considering the allegedly inferiority of the female intellect, women, when capable of writing, were perceived as able to produce only inferior work. The roles for women used to be marked more severely, and to write seriously was something out of these roles, which made society see the woman as immodest (ATWOOD, 2017). Female figures were not valued as artists, and women had to struggle to escape the shapes of the angel, the model of a perfect wife and mother, or the monster, the model not to be followed, portraying the woman courageous enough to voice her opinions as mad.

Fortunately, the situation has improved for the female sex, although there is still much to be conquered. What we cannot do, under any circumstance, is forget about the time when women used to have specific roles based on their gender, which determined where they would stand socially and the places they could go to (COSTA, 2020). As women, we were denied access to a complete education, our options used to be limited, and our paths were often chosen for us.

If publishing one's work today demands bravery, since writing is so frequently a very personal affair, it demanded even more spirit for the female writers of the past. "As writers today, we know that we owe a great debt to the lives and works of female authors of the past" (MIDORIKAWA; SWEENEY, 2017, p. xix), who paved the way and overcame countless adversities so the situation could be, if not easy, *easier* for us.

Besides, without some of the pioneers, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, George Eliot (the pen name of Mary Ann Evans), and the Brontë Sisters, just

¹ The author of this thesis writes different works of fiction, from novels to poems. Some are published online, under a (feminine) pseudonym.

to name a few, female writers would have had fewer chances of writing. After all, “masterpieces are not isolated products”, but rather the “result of collaborative thinking” (WOOLF, 1985, p. 87). If today women have the opportunity to pursue the literary world under their own names, and to pursue a degree and an academic life, it is important to look back at a time when having a serious literary career and education was far more complex, not to say prohibited.²

For the just stated reasons, in this thesis I look back at George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871) and analyse how she constructed some of her female characters, under a feminist approach to literature (COSTA, 2020; ROCHA, 2016; ARMSTRONG, 2006; WEIL, 2006). This research, thus, aims to analyse the relationship between women, knowledge, and authorship, considering the Victorian context in which the book was written. Extensive research has already been written regarding *Middlemarch*, approaching the subjects of marriage (YURTTAS, 2016; THOMPSON, 1996; WIJESINHA, 1979), feminism and the journey of the female characters (ZHANG; ZENG, 2017; THOMAS, 1987), and focusing solely on Dorothea’s journey (JONES, 2004), without giving the necessary attention to the subject of intellect and knowledge.

In this thesis, feminism is perceived “as a way of thinking, writing, and acting” (ROONEY, 2006, p. 73), through which women can make their own decisions and choices. Feminism starts from the conception that, since we are all born equal, “we should be treated as equals” (HUGHES, 2002, p. 33). Therefore, women, for feminists, ought to have the same rights as men, thus including the same access to education and the same power of decision.

Since “literary texts are directly political, their most fundamental operations historically determining as well as determined” (ROONEY, 2006, p. 89), it would not be prudent to analyse a text without considering the historical context in which it was produced, since “the literary text shaped and was shaped by the discourses circulating in the culture in which it was produced” (TYSON, 2006, p. 295). The analysis is thus made considering the Victorian context, such as presented in Wijesinha (1979), Santana; Senko (2016) and Bam (2015), taking into account what to be a woman implied during the mentioned age.

² It is important to remember that, even in contemporaneity, access to education is denied or made extremely difficult to young girls, as what happened with Malala Yousafzai a few years ago brought to global attention.

In *Middlemarch*, the book to be analysed in the following sections, we follow the lives of the town's citizens as they face money problems and deal with the consequences of poor choices. From the young Dorothea, her failed first marriage and her dreams of helping others to Rosamond and her care for social status, we watch the development of a handful of Middlemarchers as they try to overcome the many adversities of life. The novel was chosen as an object of analysis for several reasons. Firstly, because it is considered as George Eliot's masterpiece (THOMPSON, 1996). Secondly, because the novel, by carefully constructing a variety of complex characters, and by bringing manifestations of Eliot's intellect in situations that prove themselves to be relevant to the development of the story, as it is discussed further in this thesis, proves that women are skilful enough to write good and meaningful books.

This thesis is organized in three main sections, plus the conclusion. The introduction is followed by a short historical background of the Victorian Age, a review of the literature about feminist literary criticism, and Eliot's life and relation to feminism. The analysis is divided into three sub-sections, each mainly addressing one of the three analysed characters. Finally, the central ideas are summarized, and the conclusion is stated.

2 WOMEN IN THE VICTORIAN AGE

We are influenced by the culture in which we are born (TYSON, 2006). Everything we write, the way we act, and even what we think is a product of our sociocultural context. Therefore, when analysing a literary work, it is also necessary to look back at the time in which it was produced. This section, therefore, describes the roles of women during the Victorian Age, their relation to marriage, education, and intellect, also addressing the author of the literary work to be analysed. Furthermore, it is important to consider that the three characters analysed in this thesis belong to the middle and upper classes. Even though some important changes were happening at the time regarding educational policies, it did not affect them and, therefore, are not meaningful for the construction of this thesis.

2.1 Women and marriage

During the period of Queen Victoria's rule, known as the Victorian Age, the social roles for men and women were heavily marked. Some authors argue that those roles were "more sharply defined than at any time in history" (HUGHES, 2014). Therefore, the expectations towards women used to be a very relevant topic in the nineteenth century. Because of those marked roles, the possibilities for selfhood were not as open as they are today. Women were expected to be good wives and loving mothers, obedient to their husbands and fathers.

It was an Age of purity and chastity. Sexual behaviour and desires were heavily controlled, mostly regarding women (SANTANA; SENKO, 2016). They were expected to remain chaste until their weddings, and the image surrounding women in the Victorian Times was that of a perfect lady.

The nineteenth century was not a time when women could choose from a variety of career paths. The only occupation opened for them was marriage (WIJESINHA, 1979). With laws restricting women's rights to economic independence, they were "raised in their families to want and search for marriage in order to be happy" (ROCHA, 2016, p. 16). Marriage was a heavy topic, bearing more than just expectations about a

happy life with a loved one. Sometimes love was not even in question. It was a contract, a means of receiving money and finding a way of occupying their time. Marriage could be considered a necessity, since women had only a few possibilities of receiving money of their own, having positions such as tutors, in which they would teach other girls how to play the piano and speak French. However, being remunerated for their own efforts, even in positions such as those, was not highly viewed and valued by society. In *Middlemarch*, we become familiar with this reality through the character of Mrs. Garth, a woman who used to teach topics such as grammar and was not held in a good light by her neighbours.

Even though England was ruled by a queen, Victorian women should rule the home and solely there (SANTANA; SENKO, 2016). Since the seventeenth century, women were supposed to follow the widely popular conduct books, prescriptive works telling them how they should behave and painting the picture of the ideal woman (COSTA, 2020). And, during the Victorian Age, the woman becomes the image of fragility, one who should be protected from the outside world. In this way, she becomes a symbol, representing the private as opposed to the public space, under masculine domain (SANTANA; SENKO, 2016). Women, then, were representatives of the home, supporting their husbands, fathers, and sons, who were taking over the public spaces. This notion of separate spheres was strongly followed by the Victorians (HUGHES, 2014). Exactly because men and women represented different things, different spaces were assigned to them. Women, allegedly weaker and morally superior, had the kingdom of her home to rule and keep in order, supervising the servants (HUGHES, 2014). Men, on the other hand, could move through a wider range of spheres. Masculine and feminine spheres would come together at breakfast and dinner, two different universes existing on their own and encountering one another twice a day.

Because of those beliefs, most of the literary works at that time portrayed women in only two ways: the angel and the monster. The angel would be the picture of the ideal Victorian woman, the one who was pure and would self-sacrifice to the benefit of her children (BAM, 2015). Many times, she was referred to as the angel in the house. The angel women were frequently unindividualized (BAM, 2015). It is not a coincidence that those texts were written by men, the ones who would benefit from the submissive behaviour sold as the model women should follow.

Monstrous women were the ones who acted the exact opposite from those parameters, written as the type of conduct not to be followed (ROCHA, 2016). Since

being the angel was synonymous with being a perfect wife and mother, taking care of the domestic sphere and everything concerning it, “women writers saw themselves as the monster they read about, because a woman was not expected to write. Writing was a man’s job” (ROCHA, 2016, p. 13). The interesting thing about the works of those women writers is that this notion of the angel in the house and the monster are not so closely defined. Female characters, when written by female writers, are more layered. We can see examples of this in *Middlemarch*. Dorothea cannot be seen as either the monster or the angel. She is a dutiful wife, no doubt. However, she is much more than simply a wife. She has her dreams and aspirations and is not completely submissive to the wants of the men in her life, as it is discussed further along.

Just as marriage was a defining theme for Victorian women, so was education, or the lack thereof, as discussed in the following subsection.

2.2 Women and education

Victorian women had to carry several expectations on their shoulders. Conduct books stating how they should behave, scarce options of what they could do with their lives, and with no support from a good formal education, there were few possibilities left. Not surprisingly, the most common life choice was marriage, as it was already previously discussed.

Since they were considered inferior, the sole reason why women received an education was to be better wives and mothers. During the nineteenth century, female education “was hardly worthwhile, since the vast majority of women were destined to marry, and for that educational development was not at all essential” (WIJESINHA, 1979, p. 2). Why educate them if they would spend their time at home, taking care of the children? Marriage, in the Victorian Age, was their full-time occupation. With few available options, Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One’s Own*, writes that women had “almost no classification” (WOOLF, 1985, p. 113). The education girls received did not teach them how to attract a husband through domestic abilities but coached them in what is known as *accomplishments* (HUGHES, 2014). It is possible to identify this term being used several times in literature. One famous case is the conversation in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), when Miss Bingley states that “a woman must have a knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing and the modern languages” (AUSTEN, 2019, p. 226). Austen’s character goes even further to say that a woman

also needs to walk, speak and act in a certain way. Even though Austen's piece was not written during the Victorian Era, it portrays well some of the expectations towards women and what was taught to girls: nothing which would help them to get a career and a position in the world. Even reading was not largely advised. In *Middlemarch*, Fred is reprehended by Mr. Featherstone when he brings books to Mary. The boy defends himself by saying she is fond of reading, to which Mr. Featherstone replies that she is "a little too fond" (ELIOT, 2017, p. 99). The old man proceeds to say that reading a newspaper is enough for one day when it comes to a girl. This example, just like the many more Eliot brings in the novel, displays the Victorian perceptions that knowledge was, by itself, a masculine affair.

There is a very good reason behind denying access to education. Education is power, and "intellect means domination" (WOOLF, 2019, p. 37). Considering that the Victorian society wished women to be powerless, denying them the access to a proper formal education was an effective way of making it much harder for them to find their voice, hence empowering themselves.

Also, investing in education for boys instead of in education for both sexes offered promises of payoff "in the form of high wages, while teaching girls to read withdraws their labour in the present" (PRICE, 2013). Women, then, had no choice. If belonging to the lower classes, they would have to work in the factories for low wages and with no education. If being more economically privileged, they would know the minimum of reading and writing, many times to support their role as exemplary wives, acting almost as their husband's secretaries, which is Dorothea's case in *Middlemarch*, as it is discussed in section 3.2 of this study.

For writers and activists, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, an active intellectual role for women would depend on a more effective education for girls, and the same applies to a more equitable society (COSTA, 2020). George Eliot was one of the names defending a better education for girls, as discussed in the next two sections.

2.3 Women authors and their intellect

For the ones who were literate, "writing was the most accessible art" (WOOLF, 2019, p. 56). Women would also attempt the pen, writing books "deeply influenced by the view [in which] they were bound to see the world" (WOOLF, 2019, p. 56). Perceiving the universe through a limited window and with restricted access to the

intellectual world, women would many times produce literary works not as complex and deep as their minds were capable of producing. This fact is criticized by Eliot in *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* (1856), published fifteen years prior to her masterpiece, *Middlemarch*. In her famous essay, George Eliot condemns the way those Lady Novelists portray their heroines.

Her eyes and her wit are both dazzling, her nose and her morals are alike free from any tendency to irregularity; she has a superb *contralto* and a superb intellect; she is perfectly well dressed and perfectly religious; she dances like a sylph, and reads the Bible in the original tongues (ELIOT, 2018, p. 248).

Eliot's problem with those so-called silly novels seems to be the lack of depth given to these female protagonists. These characters would be similar to what had been defined as the angel in the house, being written without flaws to make them human. The characteristics criticized by Eliot in the excerpt above are the ones which portray women with exaggerated idealisation, depicting women as the epitome of perfection. Not only are they witty and incredibly clever, female characters written by the silly novelists are also of a breath-taking beauty. Instead of making a stand regarding women, their reality and capacities, the novels criticized by Eliot seem to attempt at meeting the expectations towards women held both by men and women. Even bigger and clearer is her irritation with the way the female intellect is so poorly portrayed in those works.

If, as the world has long agreed, a very great amount of instruction will not make a wise man, still less will a very mediocre amount of instruction make a wise woman. And the most mischievous form of feminine silliness is the literary form, because it tends to confirm the popular prejudice against the more solid education of women (ELIOT, 2018, p. 260).

Mary Ann Evans was a well-read woman, known for her intellect. Therefore, she knew exactly how a cultured woman behaved, and quoting philosophers without context in an endeavour to sound and look smart (as the quotation below shows us) was certainly not a standard practice. By this silliness, Eliot states that the lady

novelists are not helping their own cause. Quite on the contrary. With this poor portrait of a well-educated woman, they are proving to those against a *more solid education of women* that their beloved angels will become hollow, futilely and pointlessly displaying their knowledge.

A really cultured woman, like a really cultured man, is all the simpler and the less obtrusive for her knowledge; it has made her see herself and her opinions in something like just proportions; she does not make it a pedestal from which she flatters herself that she commands a complete view of men and things, but makes it a point of observation from which to form a right estimate of herself. She neither spouts poetry nor quotes Cicero on slight provocation; not because she thinks that a sacrifice must be made to the prejudices of men, but because that mode of exhibiting her memory and Latinity does not present itself to her as edifying or graceful. She does not write books to confound philosophers, perhaps because she is able to write books that delight them. In conversations she is the least formidable of women, because she understands you, without wanting to make you aware that you *can't* understand her. She does not give you information, which is the raw material of culture -she gives you sympathy, which is its subtlest essence (ELIOT, 2018, p. 261, emphasis in original).

George Eliot makes a very relevant point in this excerpt by bringing the notion that knowledge should not be the object of bragging. When encountering someone with not as much understanding of things, who perhaps did not have the chance to be as learned, a well-educated woman would not reinforce this difference. Instead, she would show them sympathy. With this, it is possible to see another very important face of Eliot: the humanistic one, which is revealed many times throughout *Middlemarch* for instance, be it with Dorothea's worries regarding the cottagers or with the depiction of Mr. Bulstrode as he experiences his deserved faith after his past offenses.

At the end of her essay, it becomes clear that George Eliot was not criticizing women attempting the pen itself, but the way they were portraying their own sex. To Eliot, who used to defend a better education for women and girls, women writers were just as capable of writing genius work as men were.

Happily, we are not dependent on argument to prove that Fiction is a department of literature in which women can, after their kind, fully equal men. A cluster of great names, both living and dead, rush to our memories in evidence that women can produce novels not only fine, but among the very finest novels, too, that have a precious speciality, lying quite apart from masculine aptitudes and experience. No educational restrictions can shut

women out from the materials of fiction, and there is no species of art which is so free from rigid requirements (ELIOT, 2018, p. 266-267).

With this final part, we can see clearly where she stands: George Eliot knows how skilful and capable women are, and they should pursue writing more challenging, complex and realistic books. That is precisely what George Eliot does herself.

When writing about women novelists, Armstrong (2006) states that they “put their genius to work devising new and ingenious ways to express their outrage at the position in which their gender placed them” (ARMSTRONG, 2006, p. 101). What George Eliot did, and writes about in her quoted essay, was to write female characters who would look more realistic and less like a caricature. Her characters in *Middlemarch* are layered, not defined by one characteristic. Taking Rosamond as an example, she is more than the beautiful spoiled young woman. Eliot creates her in a way which provides the reader with enough information to understand that Rosamond acts in such an entitled manner because she was raised to believe she was worthy of the best treatment, the best house, and the best life.

Armstrong also writes that women, while producing their literary works, would still be “submitting to the masculine rules of the novel genre” (ARMSTRONG, 2006, p. 101). Not only are the so-mentioned rules considered masculine, but also is the language by which we write and express ourselves.

For feminists, this perspective reveals how we are also born into patriarchy since language is its primary tool of subjection, writing even our unconscious. While alienation is at the crux of Lacanian subjectivity, women would appear to be doubly alienated from the means of self-knowledge (WEIL, 2006, p. 158).

This issue appears in George Eliot’s works, pushing the author in a dilemma. Since she is inserted in a patriarchal culture, aspects of this culture’s ideology are still within her. At times, Eliot appears to comply with the notion that men are somehow superior to women. “A man’s mind – what there is of it – has always the advantage of being masculine” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 18). The controversy here is that the author stands for equality, while she states that wives should be submissive. It is a clear example of trying to free oneself from the ideas which they consider wrong, but not fully succeeding

since one is embedded in that culture and, subsequently, in its ideology, as it is discussed with more detail on section 2.4.

In their *Handbooks of Critical Approaches to Literature*, Guerin et. al. also discuss this subject of language.

Showalter's linguistic model asserts that women are speaking men's language as a foreign tongue; purging language of 'sexism' is not going far enough. Still, feminist critics see the very act of speaking -and of having a language -as a victory for women within a silencing patriarchal culture. Tillie Olsen demands to hear women's voices despite impediments to creativity encountered by women; in her 1978 work *Silences* she cites 'those mute inglorious Miltons: those whose working hours are all struggle for existence; the barely educated; the illiterate; women. Their silence is the silence of the centuries as to how life was, is, for most of humanity'. *Silences* arise from 'circumstances' of being born 'into the wrong class, race or sex, being denied education, becoming numbed by economic struggle, muzzled by censorship or distracted or impeded by the demands of nurturing'. But women's deployment of silence can also be 'resistance to the dominant discourse' (GUERIN et. al., 2005, p. 225).

Using language as a foreign tongue is a fine metaphor for the women who attempted the pen and even the women who succeeded in establishing themselves as writers. When we are learning a foreign language, mostly when we are still at the very first steps, we try to mimic everything a teacher or a native speaker does before we achieve some relative freedom and confidence in ourselves and our knowledge. This has a connection to the different phases Showalter has identified.

Elaine Showalter has identified three phases of modern women's literary development: the feminine phase (1840-80), during which women writers imitated the dominant male traditions; the feminist phase (1880-1920), when women advocated for their rights; and the female phase (1920-present), when dependency upon opposition – that is, on uncovering misogyny in male texts – is replaced by the rediscovery of women's texts and women (GUERIN et. al., 2005, p. 224-225).

Because they still did not have a tradition of their own, therefore were not confident in their own knowledge of the language, if we connect to the foreign tongue metaphor, female writers mimicked what had been already done by established and successful male writers. This period, identified as the feminine phase, is the picture of

the first steps towards a female tradition. And George Eliot was one of the representatives of the feminine phase. Accordingly, the concept Eliot brings in her work of submissiveness can be seen as a mimic, both of what was written about women and what was expected from the sociocultural context in which she was writing. That, however, is a topic for section 2.4.

What can be concluded from the three different notions just presented is that women had countless adversities, from the language itself to the lack of a proper education. Still, they wrote. Many times, they did not allow themselves to be silent, and produced novels which would declare their world views and beliefs, leaving a mark, a footprint proving their existence, their voice, and communicating their capacities and intellect.

Therefore, women had to break a number of rules by the mere act of writing. And, since geniality is considered to be connected to rule-breaking, the female situation would have an advantage. Still, genius women would be submitting to many risks, the complete social exile being one of them (COSTA, 2020). If a female had any certain features in excess of her social position, whichever its form, be it an inclination for adventure or intellectual precocity, she would automatically be violating the principle that women are naturally subordinate to men (ARMSTRONG, 2006). The fear of becoming a social pariah, then, was one of the reasons why women chose to publish under a masculine pen name or under no name at all, as in Jane Austen's case. As already problematized by feminist critics, the "no one" was usually a woman (COSTA, 2020). Writing was also a chance of making "some money of their own", and, "unlike other means of earning a livelihood", it "was something they could do at home" (ATWOOD, 2017, p. x). Women had other factors influencing their decisions. They had children to look after, and working women, mostly the ones belonging to the middle and upper classes, were seen as troublesome, once their social sphere had been established as the home.

Women had many reasons for not publishing under their own names. Selling their work anonymously or under a male pseudonym was easier (ATWOOD, 2017). Keeping their anonymity many times also meant keeping their reputation, since it is claimed that the main reason behind this feminine anonymousness was what was left from the sense of chastity (WOOLF, 1985). Virginia Woolf, in one of her many essays, claims that it was this internal conflict that took writers like George Eliot and Currer Bell to hide behind their male alias (WOOLF, 1985). If we consider Eliot's essay on Lady

Novelists as an example of how the general public regarded most works published by women, we can observe another reason for keeping their writings anonymously: they did not wish to be read as silly. If they wished the product of their minds to be received as high-quality work, it would be best, unfortunately, to hide their identities.

Besides lack of a proper education, another problem affecting women writers was what Woolf called “freedom of experience” (WOOLF, 2019, p. 50). Writing is deeply connected to the writer’s experiences. Since we write fiction based on what we have encountered in real life and take inspiration from what we have seen and read from other renown artists, freedom of experience and freedom to have access to such means are vital to literary and overall artistic production. As Virginia Woolf also argues, it is important for women to express those opinions which are different from a male perspective (WOOLF, 2019), without the fear of not being validated. George Eliot is one of the writers lucky enough to have access to high culture, as it is discussed in the following section.

2.4 George Eliot as a feminist in the making

Mary Ann Evans was the woman behind George Eliot’s name. Born in 1819, she lived a life filled with scandals, including her union with George Henry Lewes, a married man, to whom she dedicated *Middlemarch*. Working with literature as a translator and critic before publishing her own novels and having an unconventional union with Lewes, Eliot’s life was far from what was expected from a Victorian woman. Still, could she be called a feminist? In fact, this is a subject frequently discussed by critics. Like many things in the literary world, defining George Eliot as a feminist depends on one’s point of view. For authors such as Thomas (1987), her credentials as a feminist are strong. For authors such as Zhang and Zeng (2017), Eliot was more concerned with *feminine* issues than with *feminist* issues. Additionally, there are critics such as Maitzen (2013), who say that she both was and was not a feminist. Even the *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory* (2009) calls Eliot a “paradoxical figure for feminist literary criticism” (WALLACE, 2009, p. 189). The author explains that “Eliot has been both criticized for assuming masculine superiority and celebrated for her achievements and vision” (WALLACE, 2009, p. 190). To label George Eliot as a feminist is, as those different views prove, a tricky question. What can be said for sure is that she was not an antifeminist.

From Mary Ann Evans' choice of pen name to some of her decisions within novels, such as Dorothea's final choice in *Middlemarch*, some sort of indecisiveness can be detected in the author, as though she were noticing the issues surrounding women like a true feminist, but was still tied to the male tradition, as was briefly argued in section 2.3 of this work. Feminists "concluded that Eliot was subject to the ideological limitation in the Victorian Era" (ZHANG, ZENG, 2017, p. 540). Eliot was aware of the social circumstances restraining women at the period. Zhang and Zeng (2017) call her "an outstanding writer with realist spirit" (ZHANG, ZENG, 2017, p. 540). Exactly because Eliot had conscience of what would happen to women if they simply disregarded marriage and tradition, her characters always display great feminine qualities.

George Eliot didn't strongly advise women to pursue social values at the cost of love, marriage and family life, for she was aware that no one should encourage women to slap the door behind and applaud for their courage and volition of running away from women's identity without providing the feasible suggestions for them to live in the current male-dominated society (ZHANG, ZENG, 2017, p. 540).

For this reason, her characters are still bound to end up married at the closure of the story. Bearing this in mind, it would be naive to suppose that Dorothea would have any other ending than a happy marriage with children.

What George Eliot did was to encourage a better education for women. Since she greatly valued learning, supporting a more equal education was her way of attempting at giving what the quoted authors called "feasible suggestions". It is open to imagination if Eliot would suggest something different for her female readers if a better education was available.

When writing about Mary Ann's decision of writing under a masculine name, Woolf (2019) argues that a possibility was that Eliot was trying to free her own consciousness of the expectations toward women. Eliot writes about many themes in her novels. In *Middlemarch*, besides writing about the different lives of the characters, each storyline with a problematics of its own, she addresses such issues as politics and theology. Unlike the heavily criticized characters in *Silly Novels*, who quoted Cicero out of the blue, Eliot brings these issues into her work through characters such

as Mr. Brooke, Mr. Casaubon and Dorothea herself. The former got involved in politics during the time of the Reform Bill; Casaubon was a scholar, and Dorothea was his dutiful secretary, meaning that the issues only were directly addressed when it was meaningful for the storyline. This way, George Eliot was using her extensive reading to build her stories and not to brag about her knowledge, breaking, also, the common agreement that women should not be as learned as men, an issue Eliot mentions herself in *Middlemarch* and which was previously quoted in this study.

Her perspective, as argued by Thomas (1987), who defends her feminist credentials, is conservative. Despite the signs Eliot provides the reader that she is still somewhat tied to tradition and the need of a wife to be submissive towards her husband (Mr. Casaubon observes with pleasure Dorothea's "ardent submissive affection" in chapter 7), she is still committed to a fuller life for women (THOMAS, 1987). Eliot was a conservative caring about feminine issues. It can be said that she was a feminist in the making. She was not yet free of notions such as the submissive role of wives and free of others, mostly the ones regarding education and learning. George Eliot was in the place in between, peeking through an open window. The following section of this study analyses how Eliot's position influenced her writing, considering the topics discussed so far.

3 MIDDLEMARCH, EDUCATION, AND WOMEN

In this chapter, the journeys of the three main female characters are analysed. From education as accomplishment to education as a connection to a higher power, the way Rosamond, Dorothea and Mary relate to instruction and knowledge are addressed.

3.1 Expected foolishness and the ornamental woman

Middlemarch is an extensive novel, telling the lives of a wide range of characters as they experience and overcome different sorts of trouble. Before examining issues such as authorship and the failed pursuit of extensive learning, the result of traditional education is first considered in this section.

It was already discussed in section 2.2 that women in the Victorian Age did not have access to a serious education³. The schooling girls used to receive can be best described as ornamental. They were taught how to play the piano and embroider beautiful things; in other words, to be and to make what would solely please the eye. Wollstonecraft, in 1792, complained about such a shallow upbringing, stating that it turned women into “convenient slaves” (WOLLSTONECRAFT, 2020, p. 3). She was thus meaning that women were not supposed to have much understanding of the world and their surroundings, or even to know how to articulate their opinions about subjects deeper than fashion and arabesque. Although far from conveying the image of the so-called convenient slave, Rosamond Vincy is a good example of the result of such education:

(...) Miss Vincy, who had just the kind of intelligence one would desire in a woman – polished, refined, docile, tending itself to finish in all the delicacies of life and enshrined in a body which expressed this with a force of demonstration that excluded the need for other evidence (ELIOT, 2017, p. 142).

³ A serious education would encompass areas such as the sciences, aiming at developing critical thinking.

The education she received turned Rosamond into the exterior of a perfect upper-class lady. She spends her time at leisure, singing and playing the piano, without much knowledge of the world. Similarly to what was discussed by Wijesinha (1979) and Yurttas (2016), she is used to being the object of affection, since the search of a partner based on her features was the only option presented to her. As foolish and superficial as Rosamond might appear to the reader, it is important to remember that it was all a result of her upbringing. When financial trouble falls over her and Lydgate, two young people who had not yet been struck by reality, Rosamond proves herself incapable of dealing with the situation. The education she had received only prepared her to be an ornamental wife, whose task is to entertain guests and occupy herself by decorating her house. As it was common with girls from her social class, Rosamond does not even know how to manage her spending.

Her so called accomplishments (a topic briefly discussed in section 2.2) are a means of charming society, and exhibiting her talents is also a way to display the Vincy's social status for the better part of the novel. In one of the gatherings which happen throughout the story, Rosamond is set to play the piano and fascinate the guests, which causes her family to be filled with pride. "Her father looked round at the company, delighting in their admiration" (ELIOT, 2017, p. 140). The goal of an accomplished woman was precisely that at the time: entertain and ornament. Education for girls did not mean to turn them into thinkers and philosophers, which was usually the case with boys, but to make them pretty and desirable. Such upbringing also caused Rosamond to become spoiled and overindulged. The narrator goes on to describe her as such: "[s]he was not a fiery young lady and had no sharp answers, but she meant to live as she pleased" (ELIOT, 2017, p. 257). In a way, it is a good illustration of a girl whose family had the monetary means to have her educated: she would know not how to act in the world, but would exceed at being the main attraction at parties.

It is relevant to see, however, that even such a shallow schooling was criticized. "But Mrs. Plymdale thought that Rosamond had been educated to a ridiculous pitch, for what was the use of accomplishments which would be all laid aside as soon as she was married?" (ELIOT, 2017, p. 145). As the quotation exemplifies, even an education such as Rosamond's was perceived as too much. Even the education which focused on turning women into the desired art to be exhibited was considered a waste. As Wijesinha (1979) writes, female education was not considered valuable. Mrs.

Plymdale's thoughts exemplify how little women were expected to be educated. After all, the main and final role women were all destined to play was the one of the wife, a role which not required much to be performed.

Such line of thinking aligns with the notion that knowledge could be divided into a masculine and a feminine sphere, an issue which is also presented multiple times throughout Eliot's novel. One of such striking moments is a speech given by Lydgate, who would eventually become Rosamond's husband.

An accomplished woman almost always knows more than we men, though her knowledge is of a different sort. I am sure you could teach me a thousand things – as an exquisite bird could teach a bear if there were any common language between them. Happily there is a common language between women and men, and so the bears can get taught (ELIOT, 2017, p. 139).

The character is comparing these two so-called different versions of knowledge, as though knowledge was not something universal, but rather a matter that could be divided between feminine and masculine. Unsurprisingly, the feminine side of knowledge would represent the feeble and fragile, a small bird compared to the strong bear meant to represent masculine knowledge in Lydgate's metaphor. Additionally, the images provided by the two chosen animals carry a lot of meaning. A bird is something obviously beautiful, pleasing to see, a small creature which sings cheerful melodies and frequently works as a means to embellish and soothe a scenario. Such interpretation may also relate to Rosamond's appearances and the role she plays following Lydgate's statement, playing the piano to entertain the guests. Moreover, Lydgate's metaphor also portrays the man (and, consequently, all things connected to what is perceived as masculine) as the strongest, who needs the bird to learn civility.

In conclusion, Rosamond's actions, although frankly questionable, are the sad result of her upbringing and education, nonetheless. Since no pursuit of bigger ideas was incentivized, which was common for the age, Rosamond unsurprisingly turns out to appreciate frivolousness and to enjoy the reassuring feeling of the spotlight. Of course, at least till trouble finds her. Then, she is as helpless as what was expected from a girl born into wealth and taught to expect to be the object of love and adoration.

3.2 Dorothea as the Foundress of Nothing

Middlemarch provides its readers with different examples of troubles related to education. This sub-section shall turn to the yearning of a richer knowledge and the implications of finding this door locked.

Dorothea, who, although the novel has multiple protagonists, can be called the main character, is easily the best example of a young woman desirous of learning who received a shallow education. Unlike Rosamond, Dorothea begins the story longing for achieving something great, displaying the sort of ambition which is also beneficial to others and does not aim at personal gain. This dichotomy, among other things, places the two characters under the lights of monster and angel, respectively, for most of the novel, till Dorothea and Rosamond have a heartfelt conversation that significantly and positively impacts Rosamond.

After the passing of both parents, Dorothea and her sister Celia are left under the care of an uncle, Mr. Brooke. Sent to a girls' school abroad, she opposes the education available to her. The most noticeable part is when a spark of interest ignites towards Mr. Casaubon, at the very beginning of the story.

Dorothea was altogether captivated by the wide embrace of this conception. Here was something beyond the shallows of ladies' school literature: here was a living Bossuet, whose work would reconcile complete knowledge with devoted piety; here was a modern Augustine who united the glories of doctor and saint (ELIOT, 2017, p. 21).

A number of pivotal information is held within this quotation. Not only is Dorothea stating her dissatisfaction with the works studied in "ladies' school", therefore sharing her desire of swimming deeper into the depths of human knowledge, but she also alludes to works which she considers to be relevant. As we see at the beginning of the novel, it is exactly this wish to learn, experience, and know more than what she had been formally allowed to which leads Dorothea into marrying Mr. Casaubon, a scholar much older than her, who is described as someone who "expressed himself nearly as he would have done to a fellow student" (ELIOT, 2017, p. 21). He is, in many ways, the personification of some of her wishes; he emanates the knowledge she desires to possess.

Another thing which is important to mark about the first quotation is that Dorothea wishes to go beyond the rows of books in a shelf. She wishes to do something with the acquired knowledge. For this reason, Dorothea is a dreamer with no sufficient means of turning her hopes into reality (at least where the story starts), so she imagines the answer to her prayers to lie in the most learned man she is able to find.

Her notion of a pleasant marriage reflects this first choice: “The really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 8). It is her desire for knowledge which leads her to a husband who would be more of a tutor and less of a companion. In truth, her hopes are of finding a teacher: “I should wish to have a husband who was above me in judgement and in all knowledge” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 35).

When we recall how hard it was for a woman to become knowledgeable, and how marriage was imposed upon women, Dorothea’s plan does not sound as senseless as it might have in a different context. Mr. Casaubon is her hope of finding the instruction she desires.

However, the hopes both parties have for the union are very different. Following the mindset of the time, Mr. Casaubon was looking for a submissive wife, one who would do what he desired. Eliot writes: “[n]evertheless, he observed with pleasure that Miss Brooke showed an ardent submissive affection which promised to fulfil his most agreeable previsions of marriage” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 55). Although he expects and desires submissive behaviour, Casaubon sees in Dorothea’s “childish” eagerness to learn an opportunity to fulfil his need of a secretary. He says, “Certainly it might be a great advantage if you were able to copy the Greek character, and to that end it were well to begin with a little reading” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 56). To that extent, their marriage is a contract, which would, in theory, benefit both. For Dorothea, it would provide her with the keys to unlock the doors leading to a land of knowledge, learning and intellectual satisfaction.

Dorothea’s desire for learning the old languages does not appear solely because it meant being of service to her future husband. It was among her ambitions before.

She would not have asked Mr. Casaubon at once to teach her the languages, dreading of all things to be tiresome instead of helpful; but it was not entirely out of devotion to her future husband that she wished to know Latin and Greek. Those provinces of masculine knowledge seemed to her a standing-ground from which all truth could be seen more truly (ELIOT, 2017, p. 56).

An important aspect of the quotation, besides Dorothea's fancy for the languages, is the notion of masculine and feminine knowledge, noticeably quite recurrent throughout the novel. As seen in the previous part of this section, knowledge was considered something that could be divided into two different spheres, each one with its own set of abilities and areas. The languages, as exemplified in the excerpt, were a part of the side ruled by men. This division grows, of course, from what was taught in schools: institutions for girls would focus on the so-called accomplishments, and institutions for boys would explore and grasp what had been produced, discovered and comprehended before them. It connects, again, to Hughes (2014), and the two distinct kingdoms which men and women should rule. Women would govern the house, and men would rule over the public sphere, which included not only politics and public affairs, but also the sciences.

Mr. Brooke believes this division to be true. Dorothea's uncle expresses his concerns about his niece's wish, based on the notion that the feminine mind was lighter and less prompt to learning than the masculine. Mr. Brooke says that "such deep studies, Classics, mathematics, that kind of thing, are too taxing for a woman" (ELIOT, 2017, p. 57), and goes further to claim that:

Ah, well, without understanding, you know – that may not be so bad. But there is a lightness about the feminine mind – a touch and go – music, the fine arts, that kind of thing – they should study those up to a certain point, women should – but in a light way, you know. A woman should be able to sit down and play or sing you a good old English tune (ELIOT, 2017, p. 57).

Mr. Brooke's statement is deeply rooted in the perception that women should be a quiet source of entertainment, a recurrent subject throughout the novel and, consequently, throughout this text. He is, in fact, the most misogynist character in Eliot's story, uttering several demeaning statements about women. One of the most striking cases is when he says to Mrs. Cadwallader that "your sex are not thinkers, you

know” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 47). On that occasion, he is not only minimizing women’s ability to learn, but also their ability to have opinions about such matters as politics and the great questions of human life.

Considering that such views came from someone very close to her, the fact that Dorothea sets all her hopes in a marriage to a scholar considerably older than her is not as strange as it would have been had the reader not known the context in which her decision was made. Her deepest desire is for fulfilment, and, in her perception, knowledge is similar to a light which would brighten her path and guide her toward a higher power and enlightenment.

But something she yearned for by which her life might be filled with action at once rational and ardent, and since the time was gone by for guiding visions and spiritual directors, since prayed heightened yearning but not instruction, what lamp was there but knowledge? (ELIOT, 2017, p. 76).

Feeling that time is passing her by, Dorothea sees in instruction her only hope for achieving something greater, in the mold of St. Teresa. However, as it is made fairly clear in the Prelude, the heroine is not going to found anything significant: “Here and there is born a St Teresa, foundress of nothing, whose loving heartbeats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centring in some long-recognizable deed” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 4). Eliot is already anticipating the end of Dorothea’s path before the story can properly start. The reader accompanies her struggles as she attempts to rise closer to a higher power, connecting instruction to her religious desires. “That more complete teaching would come - Mr. Casaubon would tell her all that: she was looking forward to higher initiation in ideas, as she was looking forward to marriage, and blending her dim conceptions of both” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 76). This quote contains Dorothea’s ambitions and motivations. A “more complete teaching” refers to the shallowness of ladies’ school. Most importantly, Dorothea desires an “initiation in ideas”, meaning that she wishes to express her thoughts and discover the full potential of her intellectual abilities, something which, considering the context that strongly divided men and women, labelling the former as capable and strong and the latter as weak, has been denied to her. The father figure

present in her life, Mr. Brooke, carries on that same outrageous notion, leaving her, then, with no propitious environment for growing.

What Dorothea was looking for at first was instruction and a favourable place for her to share her ideas and views, gaining the notions she dreamed of. Her ambitions were the magnets leading her to Casaubon, and her first marriage would be an easily avoidable tragedy, had she received better education.

Dorothea desires knowledge and compatibility of not only ideas but aspirations as well. She did not find anyone willing to share ideas with her, and the husband she initially thought would welcome and help nourish this side of her does not match her expectations, but treats her with condescendence.

Poor Dorothea before her marriage had never found much room in other minds for what she cared most to say, and she had not, as we know, enjoyed her husband's superior instruction so much as she had expected. If she spoke with any keenness of interest to Mr. Casaubon, he heard her with an air of patience as if she had given a quotation from the *Delectus* familiar to him from his tender years, and sometimes mentioned curtly what ancient sects or personages had held similar ideas, as if there were too much of that sort in stock already; at other times he would inform her that she was mistaken and reassert what her remark had questioned (ELIOT, 2017, p. 311, 312).

It is the craving for knowledge that leads her to the union with Casaubon, and what she finds is not a helpful teacher, but another person to treat her like a child. The striking first sentence of the quote refers to the feeling of voicelessness possible to spot occasionally throughout the novel. This comes from having her dreams and ideas dismissed, diminished, and labelled as *childish*. Her hopes of achieving something meaningful and fighting for a cause greater than herself are placed on the possibility of constructing knowledge. However, as her marriage shows, it is a harder mission than she could have had anticipated. The perception she has from that experience is, naturally, not a positive one, feeling that nature has "intended greatness for men" (ELIOT, 2017, p. 336). Facing discouragement, Dorothea's decision to abandon and change her ambitions is the end of her journey, not as a character, but as an aspiring St. Teresa.

Dorothea expresses her feelings regarding this outcome, or the lack thereof, as the deepest sorrow she has experienced: "There is no sorrow I have thought more

about than that – to love what is great, and try to reach it, and yet to fail” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 657). Dorothea’s deepest desires are intrinsic to her belief in a higher power and the relation she traces between it and knowledge. Since achieving her dreams imply helping people in need, having her hopes destroyed is a blow that demands a long time to heal.

Dorothea addressed failure previously in *Middlemarch*, stating that “failure after long perseverance is much grander than never to have a striving good enough to be called a failure” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 194). If this first statement is recalled at the end of the book, however, questions are raised. Was Dorothea’s striving good enough to be called a failure? After all, in the end she is in possession of monetary means more than enough to make her plans come to life. She can, then, pursue the education she has so ardently dreamt about. Her final failure, it appears, could have been avoided.

In the end, Dorothea herself recognizes that her path might have been different had she made other choices: “Dorothea herself had no dreams of being praised above other women, feeling that there was always something better which she might have done, if she had only been better and known better” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 718). The last part of this quotation can be interpreted in two different ways. Known better can be seen as knowing the world and people a little more than she does, hence avoiding some of her poor decisions, or it can be seen as knowing more, being better educated. In fact, she could achieve more, but instead she gives voice to her feelings, giving up her fortune in favour of Will. This particular issue of broken dreams and expectations is addressed by Zhang; Zeng (2017), Thomas (1987), marking Eliot’s humanist facet and her concern with issues affecting a larger portion of humankind.

This side of Eliot is also revealed, at times, through Dorothea: “Nothing good could have seemed more irrelevant to Dorothea than insistence on her youth and sex when she was moved to show her human fellowship” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 654). Zhang and Zeng (2017) argue that George Eliot was more worried about portraying human issues than feminist issues; women’s troubles being treated with similar care and in similar extent than those of men, instead of being developed further, with more details and layers.

Eliot’s concern with humanist issues instead of feminist ones might have been at fault for Dorothea’s final choice. After all, Eliot defended the supremacy of intellectual life, writing that it is “the life which has a seed off ennobling thought and purpose within it” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 633). The author praises knowledge, stating that it can be

rewarding. Still, she keeps her female characters from diving in too deep in the ocean of ideas and finding a second, perhaps more meaningful, life in the world of knowledge.

What Eliot does, instead, is create some sort of balance between independence and expectations toward women, by making Dorothea go against what is advised by Sir James and Mr. Brooke, the men in her life who try to guide and conduct her choices, and marry Will, the one person who she was prohibited of getting remarried to. In the end, Dorothea does choose what she considers to be the best for her. The reason why she chooses marriage over a possible career of her own is not necessarily a matter of Eliot having a conservative perspective, as argued by Thomas (1987), or not. After facing discouragement from her first husband, her uncle, and most of those around her, having resources to pursue instruction was not enough. Eliot writes “what lamp was there but knowledge?” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 76), but the light within Dorothea, avid for understanding, has already been dimmed. The significance of this is that money was not the only thing keeping women from being formally and thoroughly instructed. Encouragement and support were also lacking, and those are two factors imperative to the undertaking of every journey. Without them, nothing profound could be found, and the Foundress of Nothing could have built the path leading her to a higher power through education, had she had a welcoming environment for her ideas to grow and develop.

3.3 The unlikely author and two separate spheres

Dorothea is not the only character to find obstacles along her journey to acquire knowledge. Mary Garth is also criticized, disincentivized, and has her intellect minimized. She is the daughter of the most educated woman in Eliot’s novel, who is described as “being more accurately instructed than most matrons in Middlemarch” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 209), and who is also the target of some sort of prejudice by fellow townsmen and women.

Mary is a smart and witty young woman who serves as a companion to old Mr. Featherstone, reading aloud to him and doing some of his wishes during the time before his passing. It is reading, precisely, which becomes an issue to him, who claims that Mary is “a little too fond” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 99) of reading. In one particular situation, when Fred, who is Mary’s love interest in the story, brings her books, Mr. Featherstone criticizes him for encouraging such habit:

She was for reading when she sat with me. But I put a stop to that. She's got the newspaper to read out loud. That's enough for one day, I should think. I can't abide to see her reading to herself. You mind and not bring her any more books, do you hear? (ELIOT, 2017, p. 99).

Here, Mr. Featherstone is following the typical thought of the time regarding female education (HUGHES, 2014; WIJESINHA, 1979), as briefly discussed in section 2.2. The notion that the female mind was inferior and more fragile than the masculine brain was a recurrent one for a very long time. Lydgate exemplified such thinking with his metaphor of the bird and the bear in section 3.1, and Mr. Featherstone voices the same in the quotation, as though reading were a possibly dangerous affair. In a way, it indeed was. As Eliot herself points out in *Middlemarch*, "women were expected to have weak opinions" (ELIOT, 2017, p. 7), and reading has always been an activity capable of filling one's head with ideas, which was not something desired to happen to a young lady.

Perhaps because of her educated mother, Mary has a set notion of knowledge and female abilities that strongly differs from those of Rosamond. Miss Garth has a clear idea of how a woman should be perceived, and she expresses her annoyance and discomfort in relation to some expectations and preconceptions throughout the novel. First, it is the presence of romantic implications in interactions and relationships between a man and a woman. She says, "And to me it is one of the most odious things in a girl's life that there must always be some supposition of falling in love coming between her and any man who is kind to her and to whom she is grateful" (ELIOT, 2017, p. 119). When her statement is considered in light of the theories already discussed in this text, such behaviour does not come as a surprise. Wijesinha (1979), Thompson (1996) and Yurttas (2016) argue that a woman's only occupation and expectation was marriage during the Victorian Age. So, there was a hope of some of those interactions leading up to marriage. It is important to remember, once more, that marriage was a business affair, with a woman's economic situation commonly depending on it. Since *Middlemarch* reflects the thoughts of the time in which it was written, this problem can also be spotted, exemplified by the reference to a

townswoman called Clara Harfager, “whose friends don’t know what do with her” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 540), since she is unmarried and childless.

Therefore, it is understandable why women were expected to fall in love and marry, since the opposite meant their dependence upon friends and family and the fate of being a burden. Naturally, this is all very problematic, mostly when read from a twenty-first-century context. A woman should be allowed independence and not be tied to the imperative of marrying a man in order not to be a liability for those close to her. In a sense, this is what Mary is trying to express, wishing that women could simply interact with and express gratitude towards a man without feeling the weight of all those expectations and implications.

The second aspect that sparks Mary’s annoyance is the preconception that women were only capable of knowing less than men: “I am not angry, except with the ways of the world. I do like to be spoken to as if I had common sense. I really often feel as if I could understand a little more than I ever hear from young gentlemen who have been to college” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 119). Here, again, the reader is presented with the perception that women only know little and should be addressed as such. This outrageous notion, unsurprisingly, is a cause of anger for Mary. She is aware of how knowledgeable she is, and her intelligence is proven throughout the novel as well. Yet, she is patronized and treated with demeaning in many situations in the course of the story. When she writes a book, no one believes her to be the author of it.

It is worth noticing Mary’s mention to men who have received a formal and longer instruction. Fred Vincy is one of the characters who had the luxury of receiving a college education. While Dorothea, Mary and even Mrs. Garth had a deeper connection to knowledge, Fred feels afloat from it, stating that his “education was a mistake” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 482). There is a contrast between those who wish for learning and cannot have it and those who do not desire it and have it. While the women are discouraged from perceiving the vast fount of knowledge, Fred Vincy is forced by his father to finish college. While the men meet with incentive, women are received with criticism, and have to hear declarations such as “we must not have you getting too learned for a woman” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 335), stated by Dorothea’s uncle, Mr. Brooke.

This problematic of access is also addressed by Eliot. The author describes this disparity as something from a “dark period” and writes that venerable colleges “used great efforts to secure purity of knowledge by making it scarce” (ELIOT, 2017,

p. 127). “Scarce” here means not only available to men and denied to women, but also means that it was only available under a large monetary investment, and only a few privileged people had enough resources to enter higher education.

Mr. Brooke’s previous declaration signals again the conception of masculine and feminine knowledge as two separate spheres, as though there was a line that women should not cross diving the two. This becomes very striking when Fred and Mary write books, and the authorship of both works is questioned.

Fred’s writing is about agriculture, and the people in Middlemarch are “inclined to believe that the merit of Fred’s authorship was due to his wife, since they had never expected Fred Vincy to write on turnips and mangel-wurzel” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 715). And, when Mary’s book about important figures is published, “everyone in the town was willing to give the credit of this work to Fred, observing that he had been to the University, ‘where the ancients were studied’, and might have been a clergyman if he had chosen” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 715). This statement wonderfully exemplifies how society viewed knowledge. Women were capable of writing about plants, but if their work was too intellectual and connected to complicated ideas, it ought to have been written by a man, since it was outside their sphere of capacities. Women’s work was questioned, and their authorship was tested.

Finally, Eliot writes about authorship and ownership: “There was no need to praise anybody for writing a book, since it was always done by somebody else” (ELIOT, 2017, p. 716). Society would contest the veracity of authorship of whoever’s name was displayed in the cover a book. Fred’s book could not possibly have been written by him, whereas Mary’s story ought to have been told by another person. The weight of expectations was such that any production outside the realm of possibilities of what a certain type of person could create was questioned. Fixed notions were ruling people’s minds, making it nearly impossible for them to perceive a woman as capable of writing a book which demanded research and knowledge about a specific subject outside the domains of the home. Also, it is possible to interpret the lack of need of praising which Eliot talks about as one of the reasons why some writers would choose to stay hidden instead of having their authorship questioned. As Costa (2020) writes, the anonymous writer was frequently a woman. Mary’s story is published under her name, but she is not considered good enough to produce her own work.

Furthermore, this issue of Mary either writing the work published under her name or not relates to what Virginia Woolf (2019) writes in her essays about freedom

of experience and world views influencing what kind of writing would be produced. The reason why people in Middlemarch were sceptical of Mary's authorship was because they could not expect her to visualize the world through a broader lens than the ones around her. Writing is connected to the writer's experiences, so, for the Middlemarchers, it would be simpler to assume that Fred's work had been written by Mary because women were the ones to take care of the garden, for instance, and to assume Mary's work as a product of Fred's intellect because he had attended university. It was inconceivable for the townspeople to think that a woman, who had received such limited instruction in comparison to her husband, could craft a work that required academic knowledge. Mary's example is great to see how production and dissemination of knowledge were mainly considered masculine affairs.

4 CONCLUSION

The Victorian Age was a very interesting time, with significant changes regarding women's rights starting to arrive. Victorian feminists paved the way to movements across the world defending equality of access to education and the vote (MANIOUDAKI, 2021). Still, purity and chastity were highly valued, and this duality makes the Age even more interesting. Since we are formed by the culture surrounding us (TYSON, 2006), it is possible to spot the same duality within George Eliot's text. What many times becomes apparent is that Eliot is having an inner fight. While she was brought up in a traditional society, with strong views about women and where they should stand in the world, Eliot advocated for equal access to education and the freedom to choose. Sometimes it seems that the author is struggling, her own views of women's rights standing against what she was conditioned to believe by the traditional Victorian society. George Eliot sheds light over a very important issue, which is female access to education, without daring to be revolutionary about it. For that reason, at least in *Middlemarch*, Eliot paints herself as a feminist in the making.

In *Middlemarch*, education was treated in three different ways. Through Rosamond, Eliot writes about education as accomplishment, telling how it had no real use and did not prepare girls for life. Through Dorothea, it is the search for education as a means of connecting to a higher power that is portrayed, whereas Mary embodies the quiet, clever woman Eliot defended in her essay *Silly Novels*. The young women have their abilities frequently questioned, and the type of education they receive is also criticized by others. The factor uniting them is the judgment regarding their education, be it the criticism about Rosamond's accomplishments or about Mary's reading. Since it is an extensive novel, there are other aspects and characters not yet covered, like Mrs. Cadwallader or even Mrs. Garth, and each of them has their own relationship to education and the position of women in society.

Being a complex story about broken expectations and the acceptance of ordinary life, greatness is not accomplished by the ones who yearn for it. Rosamond needs to accept a married life that will not give her luxury, and, the most remarkable case, Dorothea leaves her dream of helping a large group of people and finding instruction to marry for a second time. This, which may be considered a display of empowerment, since the ones around her were strongly advising against it, is the end

of her path as a possible new St. Teresa. The departure of the Foundress of Nothing from the land of high hopes is a result of the lack of support she had to endure. What can be concluded from the ending Eliot gives to Dorothea is that money is not necessarily the answer to someone's problems. Naturally, this is rooted in the humanistic side of hers which Zhang and Zeng (2017) write about. Also, the pursuit of knowledge and instruction was not something someone could accomplish on their own. Assistance was needed, be it through the form of a tutor, the mentor Dorothea had hoped to find in Casaubon, or through incentive and moral support, which was not something she received from her family.

Furthermore, when *Silly novels by lady novelists* is taken into account, it becomes clear that Dorothea and Mary are portrayed in the way Eliot wanted knowledgeable women to be written. They do not display what they know as a way of self-praise, which is what she criticized in the so-called silly novels. Instead, they have airs of humbleness. Even when Mary's authorship is questioned, because the townspeople do not consider her as having enough experience to write her book, she chooses not to go further in proving them wrong.

It is important to stress the way knowledge was divided in the novel, with a wall of opinions and traditions keeping women from crossing to the other side. Languages, finances, history and politics were masculine affairs for the Middlemarchers. Women, then, were still not capable of being the authors of their own stories. The novel proposes a reflection about those issues, and it is still relevant today. The level of authorship over a woman's own life is far bigger today, but some of the issues regarding the spheres of knowledge and what is considered masculine and feminine persist. Even though Eliot's notions about marriage are outdated, her opinions about access and the two spheres of knowledge are still valid, although in contemporaneity the divisive wall is more blurred than it was in her time.

In conclusion, *Middlemarch* presents the issue of female education very subtly, reinforcing the need for knowledge and worthy instruction while emphasizing traditional values, such as family and marriage. Eliot's duality is noticed in roughly every major aspect of the novel related to women. Nevertheless, she defended women's access to the ocean of knowledge, even if it meant only swimming in the shallow.

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