The Vast Wreck of Ambitious Ideals in *Middlemarch*

After the publication of *Felix Holt*, George Eliot finally completed and published *The Spanish Gypsy*, in May of 1868. By the end of 1868, she had made her decision to write *Middlemarch*, but its writing was delayed, first by a trip to Italy in the late winter and early spring of 1869, then by Thornie’s illness and return from Natal to the Priory in early May, and, finally, by his death on October 19. Both Eliot and Lewes suffered keenly from their loss. Eliot’s work proceeded slowly during 1870; by the end of December, about one hundred pages were written. By the summer of 1871, however, during their stay at a rented house in the country at Shottermill, “Marian wrote with less torment from diffidence and self-mistrust than she had felt in many years” (Haight, *Biography* 433).

Jerome Beaty’s manuscript study of Eliot’s writing process concludes that the novel as we know it combined two separate works, an English novel, “Middlemarch,” begun about July 1869, and a short story, “Miss Brooke,” begun in December 1870. Beaty believes that Eliot made her decision to combine the two into “one great novel of provincial life in the last years before the first Reform Bill” on December 31, 1870. In early 1871 her work involved “a vast amount of rethinking and replanning, some rewriting, and some new writing in order to make the two separate stories fuse smoothly”; by March 19, she had completed 236 pages of the new work (11). Additional evidence of Eliot’s writing process can be found in the notebooks that contain her reading notes before and during the writing of the novel. The *Quarry for Middlemarch* edited by Anna Theresa Kitchel contains Eliot’s detailed notes on medical and political information, as well as the time-schemes and character relationships in the novel. Two notebooks which record Eliot’s extensive
literary and historical research from the period 1868 to 1871 have been transcribed and edited by John Clark Pratt and Victor A. Neufeldt. Still another notebook that records Eliot’s notes on philology, mythology, and art that pertain to *Middlemarch* has been edited by Joseph Weisenthal.

Eliot’s editor John Blackwood, who was very enthusiastic about the early parts of the manuscript, accepted Lewes’s idea of publishing *Middlemarch* in eight parts, in order, as Lewes reasoned, “to furnish the town with talk for some time, and each part thus keep up and swell the general interest” (*Letters* 5:145–46). Book I was published in December 1871; the rest followed in 1872, with the last, Book VIII, published in December. The success of the novel surpassed even that of *Adam Bede*; the new work was “acclaimed a masterpiece” by critics (Haight, *Biography* 444). Blackwood had been unfailing in his encouragement throughout the publication process. Upon reading Book VI he wrote, “I cannot adequately express my admiration... Every book seems to go on becoming what one could not have thought possible—better than its predecessor” (*Letters* 5:293). After the complete novel was available to the public, Henry James, among the reviewers, wrote that the work is “a splendid performance. It sets a limit... to the development of the old-fashioned English novel” (qtd. in Haight, *Biography* 444). Other contemporaries mentioned the book in their letters. Emily Dickinson wrote to a cousin, “What do I think of *Middlemarch*? What do I think of glory?... The mysteries of human nature surpass the ‘mysteries of redemption’” (qtd. 445). Sigmund Freud, always a great reader, commented some years later that *Middlemarch* “appealed to him very much”; he found that it “illuminated important aspects of his relations with Martha [who became his wife]” (Jones 116). Eliot herself had written in her journal on January 1, 1873: “No former book of mine has been received with more enthusiasm—not even *Adam Bede*, and I have received many deeply affecting assurances of its influence for good on individual minds” (*Letters* 5:357).

The quantity, variety, and quality of the predominantly positive modern criticism of *Middlemarch* reflect its position as one of the great works of literature in the English language. At the same time, there have been criticisms of certain aspects of the novel, particularly, as W. J. Harvey explains (“Criticism” 143), of Eliot’s unconvincing characterization of Will Ladislaw, the second husband of her heroine, Dorothea.
Closely related to the issue of Ladislaw's characterization is the frequent criticism that Dorothea's marriage to him is an unsatisfactory ending to the novel. To feminists (and others) like Ellin Ringler, this ending seems to undercut "the implications of [the] novel" up to that point (59). Despite such objections, however, twentieth-century critics, like most of Eliot's contemporaries, have generally regarded the novel as a masterpiece.

The story of Middlemarch begins in 1829, in that "relatively narrow and cramped society of provincial England just before the Reform Bill of 1832," as Harvey expresses it in his "Introduction" to the novel (10). Through its portrayal of the web of connections among the characters in the midlands village of Middlemarch, the novel stresses the influence of society and historical setting on individual lives. The stories of the principal characters Dorothea and Lydgate, which Harvey calls "twin studies in defeated aspiration" (8), are interwoven with the stories of the other characters. Dorothea is an idealistic young woman, inclined toward self-denial, who aspires to do some great good in the world despite the inadequate education that was typical at the time, even for women of "good" families. Lydgate, educated to be a medical man, aspires to be more than a "common country doctor" (171). Interested in the reform of the medical practices of his day, he also dreams of himself as a "discoverer" (175): "Such was Lydgate's plan of his future: to do good small work for Middlemarch, and great work for the world" (178). My purpose in this chapter is to explain the characters' failure to achieve their aspirations by illuminating the psychological dilemma they share with each other, and with the interconnecting characters in the world of Middlemarch. In so doing, I want to show how the trauma of loss of love determines the human "fear of success." I also want to show how the "melancholy" vision of the society of Middlemarch, as many contemporary reviewers saw it (Haight, Biography 446), is an extension of the sense of loss that Eliot shared with loved ones.

Lydgate's vocational aspirations are accompanied by a weakness for women, in the form of a tendency toward a "fitful swerving of passion," along with a "chivalrous kindness which helped to make him morally lovable" (180). These traits are illustrated by the flashback to his encounter with Mme. Laure, a French actress whom he had met during his student days in Paris, before he came to Middlemarch. Laure had played
the part in a melodrama of a woman who accidentally kills her lover by “mistaking him for the evil-designing duke of the piece.” Lydgate came to the theater to watch the melodrama repeatedly, until finally it became his only relaxation from his scientific experiments. One evening, the drama became confused with reality when, “at the moment when the heroine was to act the stabbing of her lover . . . the wife veritably stabbed her husband, who [played the part of the lover]” (180).

Leaping onto the stage to rescue her from the “swooning” fall that followed the stabbing, Lydgate became involved in Laure’s real life. Although some of her admirers believed her guilty of murder, he continued to believe fervently in her innocence. After a legal investigation turned up no motive for a murder, Laure was released by the authorities, and soon left Paris for Avignon, where Lydgate found her, “acting with great success . . . under the same name, looking more majestic than ever as a forsaken wife carrying her child in her arms.” Following “the sudden impulse of a madman,” he proposed to her. By way of response, Laure explained to him the incident on the stage: “My foot really slipped,” she said. When Lydgate called it an accident, she explained, “I meant to do it.” Still trying to find excuses for her behavior, Lydgate was horrified to hear her reason: “He wearied me; he was too fond: he would live in Paris and not in my country; that was not agreeable to me.” Finally, in response to Lydgate’s further questions, Laure added, “I did not plan: it came to me in the play—I meant to do it” (182). His illusions dashed, Lydgate was thus forced to see his first-adored woman “amid the throng of stupid criminals.” Laure concluded their conversation by saying, “You are a good young man. . . . But I do not like husbands. I will never have another” (183).

Despite his resolution to maintain a scientific attitude toward women after his experience with Laure, Lydgate repeats his Paris mistake in Middlemarch, where he has settled in the hope of having time to pursue his research while practicing medicine. Although he has planned to remain unmarried for several years, he soon falls prey to Rosamund Vincy’s “melodic charm” (121). While Rosamund appears to be the opposite of Laure—blond instead of dark, slim instead of matronly—she plays the role of Laure in their married life. By thwarting his ambitions, for no apparent motive other than her desire to have her own way, she does “in essence if not in fact, [slowly] murder Lydgate,” as Suzanne C. Ferguson puts it (513).
The story of Lydgate and Laure in Paris thus contains what turns out to be Lydgate’s lifelong psychological situation. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Lydgate becomes obsessed with the actress because the murder scene in the melodrama symbolizes a traumatic scene in his life which he finds it necessary to repeat; each time he watches the scene, he sees his own unconscious fantasy on the stage. Laure’s actual murder of her husband precipitates Lydgate’s attempt to participate in the scene; he becomes involved with his heroine’s real life—a mistake which soon results in the shattering of his illusions about her. After such an experience, Lydgate determines not to marry before he is well established as a medical practitioner—until he meets Rosamond in Middlemarch and begins to repeat the scene in the melodrama again. His marriage to Rosamond inevitably results in the shattering of his illusions about her, along with the loss, as well, of his vocational aspirations. His self-induced melodrama finally ends with his own untimely death at age fifty.

The narrative provides clues as to the underlying cause of Lydgate’s psychological situation. Earlier in the chapter we learn that “he had been left an orphan when he was fresh from a public school. His father, a military man, had made but little provision for three children, and when the boy Tertius asked to have a medical education, it seemed easier to his guardians to grant his request by apprenticing him to a country practitioner than to make any objections on the score of family dignity” (172). We are also told that Lydgate had been a “quick” child who loved to read, and had decided on his vocation early, at about age ten, upon discovering an anatomy book in his home library (173). His father’s death, occurring just at the time when he needed help in getting launched with his medical education, thus involved not only the loss of a parent, but a devastating change in his prospects for the future. Furthermore, although his mother is never mentioned, the implication is that she had died earlier; thus the loss of the father was added to that of the mother.

The narrative suggests, then, that the death of Lydgate’s father at a critical turning point in his life resulted in his unacknowledged sense of doom about his future. His idealizations of women help to defend against his sense of loss, which the narrative intimates includes the shame of a lower social position than he had imagined before his father’s death. The scene in the melodrama is a disguised enactment of the oedipal fantasy; thus the scene suggests the oedipal guilt that is the adolescent
son’s reaction to the father’s death. Yet in the disguised oedipal scene of
the melodrama, it is the idealized matronly figure, not the son, who
wishes to kill the father, or authority figure. The anger felt by the son
(Lydgate) in response to the combined losses of his parents is projected
onto the “evil-designing duke” and the murdering woman of the scene.
That the lover is killed instead of the authority figure satisfies the ob-
server’s need for punishment for murderous impulses toward the father.
Lydgate’s obsession with the scene suggests that his devastating losses
have kept him, in his imagination, at the scene of his father’s death—a
scene which he must experience repeatedly until he masters the trauma
of loss by resolving his emotional reactions, including the anger and guilt
that are projected onto the stage. However, when his idealized heroine
acts out her impulse to kill her real-life husband, Lydgate loses control
of his own impulses, and begins to act out the son’s role as rescuer in his
oedipal drama. His later discovery of the actress in Avignon, on stage
again as the forsaken wife with a child in her arms, prompts him further
to act out his desire to become the mother’s husband; but he is rejected
by the actress. His heroine’s rejection repeats his original loss of his
mother and only intensifies his accumulating sense of loss. Thus Lydgate
finds it necessary to repeat the scene again with another woman, who is
chosen for her murderous potential. His thwarted ambitions and his
untimely death are his self-punishment for the fulfillment of his murder-
os wishes in the oedipal scene of his father’s death.

One critic, Simon During, suggests that Eliot’s story of Laure in Paris
constitutes an allusion to the real-life story of Henriette Cornier, in 1825
a twenty-seven-year-old servant living in Paris, who severed the head of
a nineteen-month-old child. Her bizarre crime provoked extensive de-
bates among psychiatric and legal experts as to its nature and cause.
Widely publicized, the crime also resulted in an epidemic of imitative
crimes committed by others shortly afterward. During believes that the
story of Laure in Middlemarch is meant to be a fictional version of one
of the crimes imitative of Henriette’s action, and that the story thus adds
to the novel’s verisimilitude. Laure’s words of explanation to Lydgate
echo Henriette’s to her investigators. During writes that “questioned
soon after and covered with blood, Henriette answered apathetically,
first, [in French], ‘The idea came to me!,’ and then, ‘I intended to kill
her’” (86).
Psychoanalysts in the twentieth century can explain a sudden, irresistible impulse to kill as a manifestation of the repetition-compulsion, and as such, a reenactment of one or more traumatic events in the murderer's earlier life (e.g., the "Texas Killer," in Rose 55-58). However, the nineteenth-century psychiatrists who examined Cornier could discern no motive for her killing. Etienne Esquirol, later the author of the leading textbook (in Western Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century) on mental disorders, diagnosed Cornier as suffering from "monomania," which he defined as "a chronic cerebral affection . . . characterized by a partial lesion of the intelligence, affections or will" (320). In the section of his text on "homicidal monomania," he explains that people suffering from the disorder often slay loved ones; he writes: "We can understand this phenomenon, only by admitting the suspension, temporarily, of all understanding; all moral sensibility and volition" (365).

Although Rosamond, like Laure, and like the real-life Cornier, has no apparent motive for her "murder," the narrative suggests possible reasons for her brutality toward her husband. Descriptions of Rosamond, which repeatedly emphasize her "nymph-like figure" and her "infantile blondness" (123, 188, 470), suggest failed development, which in Eliot's portrayal seems to be the result of parental overindulgence. Both Rosamond's parents are shown to be powerless in the face of her charms. "I never give up anything that I choose to do," she says to Lydgate in defiance of her father's plan to interfere with their marriage. Her finishing-school education has only added to her sense of superiority over the people in her hometown, including her parents. Although as "the flower of Mrs. Lemon's school," she is "accomplished" by the standards for women in her day, "even to extras, such as the getting in and out of a carriage" (123), her prospects for a vocation are limited to the ornamental role played by married women in her society. The attitude of the villagers toward women's education is reflected in the words of Mrs. Plymdale, the mother of one of Rosamond's suitors, who secretly thinks 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?" (196-97).

Although marriage is Rosamond's goal, the narrative intimates that she dislikes men. In an early scene, when her mother observes that she is "hard on [her] brothers," Rosamond responds, "Brothers are so unpleasant" (125). Certainly she is unable to feel concern for her brother Fred.
during his illness; she can think only of the opportunity it will provide her to be near his doctor, Lydgate (297). Her assumption that every man she meets, including Lydgate, will fall in love with her reveals not only her capacity for self-reference, but also her need to “make conquests and enslave men” (474)—a need which perhaps reflects her rage over her own dim prospects as a female. Even after her marriage, the need persists; she is willing to risk her reputation in her attempt to gain Will Ladislaw's devotion. Rosamond's inflated sense of herself and her need for control suggest the pathological narcissism of Kernberg's theory, although the portrayal of her is not so detailed as that of Tito in Romola, or of Gwendolen in Daniel Deronda.

Rebuffing the suitors in her hometown, Rosamond wants to marry a stranger who will carry her off to a life of higher society. She tells her mother that she will “not marry any Middlemarch young man” (125). Soon Lydgate becomes her ideal, in part because he is “altogether foreign to Middlemarch” (145). She believes his “good birth” distinguishes him from his Middlemarch rivals, “and presented marriage as a prospect of rising in rank and getting a little nearer to that celestial condition on earth in which she would have nothing to do with vulgar people” (195). It becomes clear as they get to know one another that “Rosamond was occupied with Lydgate not exactly as he was in himself, but with his relation to her” (196)—and for the exciting life she imagines he will be able to provide her.

In their relationship with one another, Rosamond and Lydgate, like Hetty and Arthur, serve as extensions of one another's fantasies. Lydgate's need to rescue the “weak and suffering” prompts his proposal to Rosamond just at the time when he had resolved to spend less time with her, because he sees “a certain helpless quivering [in reaction to his long absence] which touched him quite newly” (335). He enjoys his initial feeling of superiority over her, “confess[ing] to himself that he was descending a little in relation to Rosamond’s family” (384), yet feeling it “delightful to be listened to by a creature who would bring him . . . affection—beauty—repose—such help as our thoughts get from the summer sky and the flower-fringed meadows.” Failing to take seriously Rosamond’s own need to dominate, Lydgate assumes the “innate submissiveness of the goose as beautifully corresponding to the strength of the gander” (391).

Rosamond’s capacity for murder without apparent motive is sug-
gested by the incident of her self-induced miscarriage, which occurs after
she goes horseback riding against her husband’s medical advice, because
“the gratification of riding on a fine horse, with Capt. Lydgate, Sir
Godwin’s son, on another fine horse by her side, and of being met in
this position by anyone but her husband, was something as good as her
dreams before marriage” (630). When Lydgate learns what has happened,
he “secretly wondered over the terrible tenacity of this mild creature,”
and he feels “gathering within him an amazed sense of his powerlessness
over Rosamond” (631). Soon after, consciously connecting Rosamond
with Laure, he wonders, “Would she kill me because I wearied her?”
(638). Her “murder” of him takes the form of a ruthless obstinacy that
 crushes his hopes. Her lack of empathy for his aspirations (“I often wish
you were not a medical man,” she says [497]), and her refusal to help
economize while he is getting started in his career, leave him feeling “the
biting presence of a petty degrading care, such as casts the blight of irony
over all higher effort” (633). Rosamond wants to leave Middlemarch
in the hope of his making a better living elsewhere; Lydgate tries to con-
vince her of the reality that they have no means to go anywhere else.
Their burden of debt adds to Lydgate’s “degrading preoccupation which
was the reverse of all his former purposes” (697). The two become
increasingly unable to communicate. When Lydgate reluctantly decides
that they have no alternative but to sell their expensive house and auction
the furnishings, Rosamond cancels the plans without telling him (700–
708). When Rosamond suggests asking his uncle, Sir Godwin, for a loan,
Lydgate refuses; yet when he receives a letter of refusal from Sir Godwin
soon after, he realizes that Rosamond has asked for the loan herself, just
at the time when he had begun to consider visiting his uncle in person to
ask for help. After their argument about the incident, Lydgate acknowl-
edges to himself that “she had mastered him” (719). Despite Rosamond’s
change for the better after Dorothea, seeing that their marriage is dete-
rating, intervenes on Lydgate’s behalf, he comes to accept “his narrowed
lot with sad resignation. He had chosen this fragile creature, and had
taken the burthen of her life upon his arms. He must walk as he could,
carrying that burthen pitifully” (858). In the “Finale” we learn that
Rosamond had won the battle over Lydgate’s career: before his prema-
ture death of diphtheria, he had established a successful medical practice,
alternating between London and “a continental bathing-place,” and had
written a treatise on gout, “a disease which has a good deal of wealth on
its side”; but he had always thought of himself as a failure: “He had not done what he once meant to do” (893).

In keeping with Kohut’s theory, Eliot’s portrayal of Rosamond suggests that her need to dominate Lydgate is the result of her own incomplete self-development. Prepared by her upbringing and education to expect self-completion through marriage, Rosamond’s unrealistic expectations cause her to feel humiliated by her husband’s financial difficulties and his less than glorious social position. The narcissistic rage that follows from her own sense of inadequacy, then, is at the root of her brutality toward Lydgate.

Whereas Rosamond is not shown to be conscious of any murderous wishes toward her husband, the portrayal of Bulstrode’s conscious conflict between the “desire” to murder his old acquaintance, Raffles, and the “intention” not to do so (758) shows Eliot’s awareness of the way in which the unconscious mind can help turn a murderous wish into a murderous act.

Bulstrode is a respectable banker and philanthropist who combines the rigorous practice of his evangelical version of Christianity with harsh judgments of others. He is known to be “a man who half starves himself, and goes the length of family prayers,” but who also likes “to be master” (159); he is “evidently a ruler” in Middlemarch (184). When Raffles comes to town and threatens to destroy his reputation by telling the truth about his past, it becomes apparent that one reason for Bulstrode’s ardent practice of religion is a guilty conscience over the origins of his wealth. We learn that as a young banker’s clerk, he had been a member of a Calvinistic dissenting church, “having had striking experience in conviction of sin and sense of pardon.” “Brother Bulstrode,” as he was called, was “distinguished” among those in the small sect, with the result that he came to believe that “God intended him for special instrumental-ity.” He was thinking of the ministry as a possible vocation, and “inclined toward missionary labour.” As “an orphan educated at a commercial charity-school,” however, he was susceptible, the narrative intimates, to the influence of “the richest man in the congregation” who befriended him and offered him the opportunity to join his pawnbroker’s business. Soon after he began his new job, Bulstrode became aware that the firm dealt with stolen goods; but he rationalized that making profits out of “lost souls” might be “God’s way of saving his chosen.” Thus the
practice of his religion became bound up with his dishonest dealings. Over the years since that time when he had "found himself carrying on two distinct lives, . . . his soul had become saturated with the belief that he did everything for God's sake, being indifferent to it for his own" (663-65).

When his boss died, Bulstrode succeeded in marrying his widow "without reservation of property," by concealing from her the whereabouts of her daughter (to whom she had hoped to leave her money), and by paying off Raffles for keeping his secret. Even after her death, Bulstrode continued to lead his double life. Instead of putting an end to the family business, he kept it going for thirteen more years, until it finally collapsed. Not deliberately hypocritical, he was "simply a man whose desires had been stronger than his theoretic beliefs," and who had "gradually explained the gratification of his desires into satisfactory agreement with those beliefs" (667).

Raffles's threat to reveal his past provokes Bulstrode to offer Will Ladislaw, who he has learned is the daughter's son (and thus the rightful heir to his fortune), a settlement. Ladislaw, however, knowing that his mother had run away to avoid having anything to do with her father's business, refuses (672). Bulstrode is further humiliated when Caleb Garth, having heard the story of his past from Raffles (who by now is very ill), refuses to work for him at Stone Court. Shortly after this incident, he feels "the intense desire . . . that the will of God might be the death of that hated man [Raffles]" (750).

When Lydgate diagnoses alcohol poisoning, Bulstrode offers to take care of Raffles. He tries to follow Lydgate's medical orders at the same time he struggles with his murderous wish: "Should Providence in this case award death, there was no sin in contemplating death as the desirable issue—if he kept his hands from hastening it—if he scrupulously did what was prescribed" (757). Making a distinction between intention and desire, he reasons that "intention was everything in the question of right and wrong," and he "set himself to keep his intention separate from his desire. He inwardly declared that he intended to obey orders" (758). When Lydgate returns to check Raffles, he prescribes small doses of opium, emphasizing the point at which the doses should cease. He also orders that no alcohol be given. Before Lydgate leaves, Bulstrode, not fully aware of his own "diseased motive," offers him the loan he needs, and Lydgate, unsuspecting, accepts (761).
Bulstrode begins to administer the opium according to Lydgate’s directions. He soon feels so tired that he calls the housekeeper, Mrs. Abel, to relieve him, and explains to her how to administer the opium. An hour and a half later he realizes that he had forgotten to tell her “when the doses of opium must cease” (762). Bulstrode’s forgetting to tell Mrs. Abel of Lydgate’s complete instructions is an example of one of Freud’s “parapraxes” (or, “Freudian slips”), which he describes in his Introductory Lectures as “psychical acts [that] arise from mutual interference between two intentions” (16:60). Freud explains that “a conflict between two purposes and a forcing-back of one of them . . . takes its revenge by producing a parapraxis” (16:71).

Bulstrode is still deliberating what to do, when Mrs. Abel knocks on his door and asks for brandy for Raffles. Pausing while she persists in urging him, he finally gives her the key to the wine cooler. The next morning, seeing Raffles on the verge of death, he hides the opium phial and puts the brandy back in the wine cooler himself. When he returns to watch Raffles die, “he felt more at rest than he had done for many months. His conscience was soothed by the enfolding wing of secrecy, which seemed just then like an angel sent down for his relief” (764).

When Bulstrode falls into disgrace as a result of the villagers’ suspicions of his crimes, his wife’s reaction contrasts sharply with Rosamond’s response to her husband’s (less disgraceful) troubles. “After an instant of scorching shame in which she felt only the eyes of the world . . . she was at his side in mournful but unreproaching fellowship with shame and isolation” (806). Her “loyal spirit” enables her to “say of his guilt, I will mourn and not reproach. But she needed time to gather up her strength; she needed to sob out her farewell to all the gladness and pride of her life. . . . she had begun a new life in which she embraced humiliation. She took off all her ornaments and put on a plain black gown, and instead of wearing her much-adorned cap and large bows of hair, she brushed her hair down and put on a plain bonnet-cap, which made her look suddenly like an early Methodist” (807).

Dorothea Brooke’s plain dressing and habitual self-denial suggest that, like Mrs. Bulstrode after her husband’s disgrace, she lives in a state of mourning. Indeed, she and her sister Celia, like so many of Eliot’s characters, are orphans. They had been educated, “since they were about twelve years old and had lost their parents, on plans at once narrow and
promiscuous, first in an English family and afterwards in a Swiss family at Lausanne, their bachelor uncle and guardian [Mr. Brooke] trying in this way to remedy the disadvantages of their orphaned condition” (30). Dorothea’s situation mirrors Lydgate’s: the education that had followed from her orphaned status has not adequately prepared her for the great work that she aspires to do. Also like Lydgate, Dorothea’s ongoing need for her lost parents, who had apparently died early in her life, helps to explain her lifelong psychological situation.

Just as the word “infantine” (or “infantile”) is used repeatedly to describe Rosamond’s physical appearance, so the word “childlike” is used repeatedly to describe Dorothea. It is her “childlike ideas about marriage,” in fact, that cause her to want a husband to be “a sort of father” (32). Wishing to participate in the work of a great man, she idealizes the middle-aged scholarly clergyman Mr. Casaubon, who has spent his life researching what others vaguely understood to be “a great work concerning religious history” (33). Dorothea’s choice of Casaubon also suggests her avoidance of her own adult sexuality. Her lack of interest in accepting her share of her mother’s jewels (33–36) is perhaps symbolic of her delayed sexual development. When she learns that Sir James Chettam, who in the eyes of others is a far more appealing match than Casaubon, is in love with her, “The revulsion was so strong and painful in Dorothea’s mind that the tears welled up and flowed abundantly. All her dear plans were embittered, and she thought with disgust of Sir James’s conceiving that she recognized him as her lover” (59).

Dorothea’s distaste for anything associated with sensuality is also suggested by her incapacity to appreciate works of art. During her wedding trip to Rome, she is unable to enjoy “the gigantic broken revelations of that Imperial and Papal city” (225). When she meets Will Ladislaw, an aspiring artist, in an art museum there, she tells him: “There are comparatively few paintings that I can really enjoy. At first when I enter a room where the walls are covered with frescoes, or with rare pictures, I feel a kind of awe—like a child present at great ceremonies where there are grand robes and processions; I feel myself in the presence of some higher life than my own. But when I begin to examine the pictures one by one, the life goes out of them, or else is something violent and strange to me” (238).

Perhaps Dorothea’s most surprising trait, in light of her idealism and
her tendency toward renunciation, is her quick anger. When she finally agrees to accept only a ring and bracelet from her mother’s jewels, she explodes at Celia’s innocent question about whether she intends to wear them in public (36). She shows her “temper” again when Celia is critical of Casaubon after they first meet him (42). Soon after, when Celia, not knowing that Dorothea has become engaged to him, criticizes Casaubon again, “Dorothea’s feelings had gathered to an avalanche” (72). Her anger soon becomes directed toward Casaubon himself. Even before their marriage, she grates at his statement that he “should feel more at liberty” to pursue his research if she would take along a companion on their wedding trip (113). After their marriage, she quickly becomes disillusioned about the value of his research, which never seems to result in any written conclusions. During their weeks in Rome she becomes “more and more aware, with a certain terror, that her mind was continually sliding into inward fits of anger or repulsion, or else into forlorn weariness” as she begins to perceive their marriage as an “enclosed basin” (228). Their first argument follows from Casaubon’s sensitivity to Dorothea’s urging him to “make up your mind what part of [your notes] you will use, and begin to write the book which will make your vast knowledge useful to the world.” After their angry exchange, they are not able to speak further, and Dorothea, struggling with her feelings, yearns to get beyond her “anger and despondency” (235).

Upon their return to their home in England, the conflicts between Dorothea and her husband become focused on Ladislaw, who is Casaubon’s cousin, the grandson of his mother’s sister. When Ladislaw sends a letter, Casaubon tries to fend off a visit by telling Dorothea, “I trust I may be excused for desiring an interval of complete freedom from such distractions as have been hitherto inevitable, and especially from guests whose desultory vivacity makes their presence a fatigue” (316). The heated discussion that follows precipitates Casaubon’s first “attack” (317), and afterward, as he is recovering, Dorothea naturally feels penitent (319). Lydgate tells her after he sees Casaubon that “anxiety of any kind would be precisely the most unfavourable condition for Casaubon” (323). After Casaubon himself finally asks Lydgate about his health, Dorothea, although not a party to the conversation, senses how he must feel, and approaches him in the garden. When she attempts to “[pass] her hand through his arm” (462), Casaubon rebuffs her advance. Her reaction is to feel “a rebellious anger stronger than any she had felt since her
Having learned the realities of the status of his health from Lydgate, and realizing that he will more than likely die before his “Key to All Mythologies” is complete, Casaubon attempts to persuade Dorothea to promise to finish it for him. Understanding that such a project would be a waste of time, she manages to postpone a reply until the next day, and then spends the night in a state of intense conflict (519-21). She finally decides that “she could not smite the stricken soul that entreated hers” (523)—yet he dies before she has time to assent to his request.

Carol Christ’s observation that “Eliot repeatedly uses the device of providential death to avoid and prohibit aggression” in her characters (136) applies to the timing of Casaubon’s death, which allows Dorothea to escape her impossible dilemma. Other critics have also addressed the issue of Dorothea’s inhibited aggression. Kristin O. Lauer sees Dorothea as absorbing her rage toward Casaubon, who cannot possibly live up to her unrealistic expectations, in “ever more self-effacing suffering and martyrish, uncomplaining submission” (338). Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar also observe that Dorothea’s outward compliance masks her indignation and scorn, and that she is terrified of the murderous potential of her anger (511). David Parker sees in the statement, “she could not smite the stricken soul that entreated hers,” Dorothea’s “fantasized violence towards Casaubon and fearful stifling of it” (73). Simon During, connecting the story of Laure’s murder of her husband to Dorothea’s submerged murderous thoughts toward Casaubon, asserts, “With [the psychiatric category of] monomania . . . murder is no longer a matter of conscious motives” (93); he suggests that Dorothea, no less than Rosamond, “murders” her husband.

Dorothea’s “English and Swiss Puritanical” upbringing has not prepared her for the “deep impressions” that the Roman “ruins and basilicas, palaces and colossi, set in the midst of a sordid present” make upon her during her wedding trip: “All this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual, mixed confusedly with the signs of breathing
forgetfulness and degradation, at first jarred her as with an electric shock, and then urged themselves on her with that ache belonging to a glut of confused ideas which check the flow of emotion. Forms both pale and glowing took possession of her young sense, and fixed themselves in her memory even when she was not thinking of them, preparing strange associations which remained through her after-years" (225). Dorothea’s impressions, as Emery observes (155), suggest the oedipal child’s reactions to the primal scene—the image of parental intercourse that Otto Fenichel describes as a “primal fantasy”—that is, a fantasy that will be produced in the mind whether or not the scene is actually witnessed (92). In his discussion of the Oedipus complex, Fenichel explains the effect of the loss of parents on a young child’s development. He describes “a frequent and intense unconscious connection between the ideas of sexuality and death, the two being connected by the conception of ‘secrets of the adults’; this may create an intense sexual fear, due to the idea that sexual fulfillment may bring death” (94).

In a conversation with Ladislaw on one of his visits in Rome, Dorothea speaks again of her incapacity to enjoy art: “The painting and sculpture may be wonderful, but the feeling is often low and brutal, and sometimes even ridiculous.” She says that even when she sees something “noble,” it only makes her feel “it the greater pity that there is so little of the best kind among all that mass of things over which men have toiled so.” Then she says: “I see it must be very difficult to do anything good. I have often felt since I have been in Rome that most of our lives would look much uglier and more bungling than the pictures, if they could be put on the wall” (252). Ladislaw responds energetically: “You talk as if you had never known any youth. It is monstrous—as if you had had a vision of Hades in your childhood, like the boy in the legend. You have been brought up in some of those horrible notions that choose the sweetest women to devour—like Minotaurs” (253). Dorothea’s “vision of Hades” that has destroyed her hope is her orphaned child’s “unconscious connection between the ideas of sexuality and death” (because the parents who would normally be part of her oedipal drama are dead). Her reaction to the sights in Rome is a reexperiencing of her feelings of loss (of her parents) after her own wedding. The sexual inhibition that has caused her to choose an equally sexually inhibited husband (who secretly believed that “the poets had much exaggerated the force of masculine passion” [87]) is her self-punishment for her
oedipal guilt; her marriage to Casaubon serves to repeat and reinforce her sense of loss.

Dorothea’s association of sexuality with death also creates in her a sense of social isolation. At the funeral for old Mr. Featherstone (Rosamond and Fred’s uncle), Dorothea associates the village scene with her experience in Rome: “Aloof as it seemed to be from the tenor of her life, [the funeral] always afterwards came back to her at the touch of certain sensitive points in memory, just as the vision of St. Peter’s at Rome was inwoven with moods of despondency.” As one of the “country gentry” Dorothea feels, like the oedipal child at the primal scene, isolated from the participants, in this case, the villagers at the funeral, and she is “not at ease in the perspective and chilliness of that height.” The “dream-like association of something alien and ill-understood [the scenes at Rome, and the funeral scene in Middlemarch] with the deepest secrets of her experience seemed to mirror that sense of loneliness which was due to the very ardour of Dorothea’s nature” (360).

Just as Lydgate’s obsession with the actress in the murder scene reveals his psychological state, so Dorothea’s preoccupation with the “degradation” in Roman art reveals hers; just as Lydgate watches his melodrama repeatedly, so Dorothea repeatedly returns to the scene of her own oedipal drama. The narrative begins to build toward another symbolic primal scene when Dorothea first sees Ladislaw with Rosamond at her house during Lydgate’s absence—although, preoccupied with her thoughts of her husband, she soon dismisses her own “confusedly unhappy reaction” (472). Much later, after Casaubon’s death, Dorothea finds them together again, this time in a suggestive attitude: “Close by [Ladislaw] 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” (832). Although Dorothea reacts with “jealous indignation and disgust,” she is finally able, upon later reliving the scene in her mind, and “forcing herself to dwell on every detail and its possible meaning,” to resolve her painful feelings. Then she looks out her window at the landscape, which includes “a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby” and, in contrast to her sense of alienation at Featherstone’s funeral, feels “a part of that involuntary, palpitating life” (845–46).
In Emery's view, Dorothea's confrontation of primal-scene emotions after she sees Ladislaw and Rosamond together “becomes a means of release from the defensive pattern established to deal with them” (178)—a release which then enables her to be “finally overcome by her passion for a man” (182). My own view, however, is that the presentation of Dorothea’s resolution of her feelings is undercut by her return to the primal-scene situation again in the final love scene with Ladislaw.

During the scene with Ladislaw a storm gathers. The description of the storm suggests another symbolic primal scene, this time projected onto the natural world: “The evergreens . . . were being tossed, and were showing the pale underside of their leaves against the blackening sky” (867). At one point during the conversation between Dorothea and Ladislaw, “there came a vivid flash of lightning which lit each of them up for the other—and the light seemed to be the terror of a hopeless love. . . . and so they stood, with their hands clasped, like two children, looking out on the storm, while the thunder gave a tremendous crack and roll above them, and the rain began to pour down” (868). Rather than a portrayal of a passionate love scene between two adults, then, the scene conveys a picture of two innocent children joined together to watch the passionate storm at a safe distance.

Many critics have expressed dissatisfaction with the portrayal of the Dorothea-Ladislaw relationship. Barbara Hardy sees the portrayal as “incomplete,” because of the author’s denial of sexuality in their relationship (“Implication” 31). Others, as I suggested earlier, see Dorothea’s marriage to Ladislaw as an inappropriate ending to the novel. Laurence Lerner questions whether Dorothea’s “active conscience and great mental need” would really be satisfied in marriage, even happy marriage (“Dorothea” 244-45); John Kucich asserts that Dorothea’s marriage to Ladislaw “abolishes her desires for an epic life” (57). The marriage allows her to continue her lifelong pattern of self-denial, as she gives up both her inheritance from Casaubon and her own vocational aspirations to become “absorbed into the life of another [who himself became an ‘ardent public man,’ eventually elected to Parliament], and . . . only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother” (894).

Brian Swann compares the structure of Middlemarch to the structure of a dream. He observes that “in the novel’s multiform connective tissue
... each character possesses something of each of the others. They are 'various small mirrors' reflecting each other, and 'one life'" ("Realism" 302). I would add that Dorothea, Lydgate, Bulstrode, and Ladislaw, all orphans, are linked throughout the novel by their interconnecting enactments of the oedipal drama. Bulstrode acts out the oedipal wish by marrying his boss's widow, a much older woman, and gaining her inheritance by hiding the whereabouts of her daughter. Ladislaw enacts the oedipal son's hatred for the father and idealization of the mother by transferring his childish wishes onto Casaubon and Dorothea. Although Casaubon serves as a father figure for Ladislaw, both Casaubon and Ladislaw attempt to deny the father-son dynamic by repeatedly emphasizing to acquaintances that they are only second cousins, not uncle and nephew, as others typically assume. Will’s decision to be independent of Casaubon, who had taken care of him and his mother after his father’s death, only intensifies their hatred for each other (395). Ladislaw idealizes Dorothea with the same intensity that characterizes his hatred of Casaubon. Although he dislikes her at their first meeting at Lowick before her marriage because of her association with Casaubon, and because he thinks she is critical of his painting, his attitude changes when he sees her in Rome on her wedding trip. Suddenly her voice is “divine” to him. Once again, not wanting to acknowledge the father-son dynamic with Casaubon, he bristles when his friend Naumann calls her his “aunt,” just as he had earlier bristled upon hearing Casaubon called his “uncle.” Contemptuous of Casaubon for luring such a young woman into a marriage, Ladislaw sees her as “an angel beguiled” (241); hating Casaubon for this “virgin sacrifice,” he himself wants to be her “slave” (396). In contrast to Rosamond, whom he sees simply as “altogether worth calling upon,” Dorothea is the “perfect woman,” of whom he is the “devout worshipper” (473–74).

Despite his hatred for Casaubon and his ardor for Dorothea, Ladislaw does not entertain “the ordinary vulgar vision... that Dorothea might become a widow” (509)—not only because he is “unwilling to entertain thoughts which could be accused of baseness,” but also because he “could not bear the thought of any flaw appearing in his crystal:... there was something exquisite in thinking of her just as she was.” In other words, part of Dorothea’s appeal is that she is unattainable. Thinking of Dorothea as “forever enthroned in his soul,” he determines to stay in Middlemarch to protect her from “whatever fire-breathing dragons
might hiss around her” (510–11). Soon after, however, when he goes to church to get a glimpse of Dorothea with Casaubon, and then regrets causing her embarrassment, he realizes with pain just how inaccessible she is (513).

Although Ladislaw has no conscious wishes for Casaubon’s death, his actions suggest that, like the oedipal child, he does everything he can to put a strain on the couple’s marriage. When he calls on Dorothea in Rome, he wastes no time in letting her know that he thinks Casaubon’s research is long out of date. Soon after, in their conversation about Dorothea’s incapacity to enjoy art, he expresses his anger that she “will go and be shut up in that stone prison at Lowick” (253). He also explains in more detail, in answer to her question, his opinion of Casaubon’s research. “It is no use now to be crawling a little way after men of the last century,” he says almost brutally (255). Later, back in Lowick, again expressing his opinion that Dorothea should not be shut up in a gloomy house helping Casaubon with his research, he cannot refrain from verbalizing his opinion that Casaubon does not like anyone “to overlook his work” because he has so little self-confidence. He also asserts that Casaubon “dislikes me because I disagree with him” (400).

Ladislaw’s story of his parents, too, is a disguised oedipal enactment; as he tells it, Dorothea listens “with serious intentness, like a child watching a drama for the first time” (402). The story also constitutes an internal allusion to the story of Laure, the actress who runs away after she murders her husband and is later found playing the role of a mother with a child in her arms. Ladislaw tells Dorothea that he remembers little about his father except “one day . . . when he was lying ill, and I was very hungry.” His father had “made himself known to Mr. Casaubon, and that was my last hungry day. My father died soon after, and my mother and I were well taken care of.” He goes on to say: “It is curious that my mother, too [like his grandmother], [had run] away from her family . . . to get on the stage. . . . She was a dark-eyed creature with crisp ringlets, and never seemed to be getting old” (401–2). Ladislaw’s story, like Laure’s drama, contains the oedipal fantasy that after the father dies, the child keeps the mother, forever enshrined as a young actress on his stage, to himself. As Dorothea listens to the story, she sees Ladislaw as Lydgate sees Laure (and later Rosamond): as an actor in her own oedipal drama—that is, as an extension of her own fantasies. Ladislaw is the child in Laure’s drama, and Dorothea, like Lydgate, identifies
with him. Thus after Casaubon’s death she chooses to marry someone in her own situation: a psychological twin, who shares both her oedipal guilt and her longing for her lost mother.

If Dorothea “murders” Casaubon, then so does Ladislaw. A psychoanalytic reading of their story suggests that they are (symbolically) siblings who murder their father and who, lacking a mother, marry each other.

Esquirol defines monomania as a break in the unity of the psyche; During adds the explanation that “in monomania, will [is] separated from emotion, reason from will, emotion from reason” (88). As I indicated in the chapter on *Silas Marner*, the human mind may protect itself from the effects of trauma by isolating affect from event: a traumatic event may be remembered at the same time that feelings about it are repressed. Ladislaw’s story of his father’s death is an example: in his strictly factual account, there is no hint of grief or guilt, despite his association of his own better life with the loss of his father. The sequence of events in his story comes close to suggesting that his own good fortune followed from his father’s death, yet he seems to feel no guilt. That he feels himself to be “a sort of gypsy . . . belonging to no class” (502), however, suggests the sense of alienation, albeit romanticized, that follows from loss. That his anger is frequent and explosive suggests the underlying rage that follows from narcissistic injury. His worship of Dorothea juxtaposed with his contempt for Casaubon, and later with his harsh judgment of Rosamond, suggests a split in the psyche that, according to During, also characterizes the “monomaniac.” In Dorothea, there is a similar split between her anger and her idealism; in Bulstrode, who is aware that he has led “two distinct lives,” between theory and action; in Lydgate, the scientist, between reason and emotion: he cannot apply his capacity for rational thought to his relationships with women.

Rose explains that “among the chief effects of trauma, the phenomena of psychic splitting stand out; and at the heart of mastery lies the matter of reintegration” (ix). He goes on to say that for the creative writer, “fictional characters, like doubles, also represent aspects of the self, split off and displaced to the outside world” (21). For the author of *Middlemarch*, who, like Ladislaw, idealizes Dorothea and judges Rosamond, and who assigns murders to Laure, Rosamond, and Bulstrode while absolving Dorothea and Ladislaw of even the thought of murder,
creating a world in which all the characters’ lives are closely interconnected is an attempt at reintegrating unacceptable impulses with idealized self and object images. It is also an attempt to fathom the source of the frightening impulses within herself—an attempt to discover her own “Key to All Mythologies.” Fenichel writes of the oedipal fantasy of the child who has suffered parental loss: “If the parent of the same sex has died, this is felt as a fulfillment of the Oedipus wish, and that creates intense feelings of guilt. If the parent of the opposite sex has died, the frustrated Oedipus love most often creates a fantastic idealization of the deceased” (94). I would add that in the case of a female who loses a mother, the oedipal guilt is also accompanied by an (unconscious) “fantastic idealization” (representing longing) of her. The author’s own oedipal fantasy, revived by her losses at later stages of her life, is not only displaced onto her male character, Lydgate, but is divided among the other characters. The author’s fear of acting on the impulses that follow from her sense of loss is reflected in the way she portrays her characters acting on theirs. Laure, with no apparent motive, acts on her sudden impulse to murder her husband; her action is one of the crimes imitative of Cornier’s impulsive murder of the child. Lydgate’s acting out of his oedipal drama in his relationships with women is precipitated by Laure’s murder of her husband; when his wish to kill his father seems to be fulfilled, he punishes himself by seeking out the murdering woman. Rosamond unconsciously “murders” Lydgate, with no apparent motive. Bulstrode, who has a motive for murder but intends not to, acts out his murderous wish by means of a Freudian slip. Only Dorothea, the idealized heroine (with her psychological twin Ladislaw), who represents both the idealized self and mother of the author’s oedipal fantasy, is prohibited from acting on hers. The author’s insistence on Dorothea’s innocence reflects her fear of the possibility (as seen in the portrayals of the other characters) of acting on her own dangerous impulses.

The tone of Middlemarch, which ends Dorothea’s story with her feeling that “there was always something better which she might have done, if she had only been better and known better,” is “melancholy,” as many critics, both Victorian and modern, have expressed it (Haight, Biography 446; Emery 142). I would argue that there is a connection between the sense of shared loss among the characters in the novel, and the sense of shared loss between Eliot and Lewes before and during the writing of
Middlemarch, which helps to explain the “melancholy” tone of the novel.

In January 1869, close to the time when Eliot was ready to start working on Middlemarch, she and Lewes heard from their twenty-five-year-old son Thornie, who had gone to Natal to make his living as a farmer, that he was suffering from severe and persistent pains in his back. Because of unexpected losses incurred on a recent hunting trip, he needed money to come home for medical treatment (Ashton, GHL 247-48). Lewes sent him the money right away, but despaired of the length of time it would take Thornie to receive his letter and make the trip back to England. At the end of January, Lewes’s eighty-two-year-old mother, Mrs. Willim, became ill; Lewes visited her almost every day, until the end of February, when she seemed well enough for him and Eliot to leave England for a trip to the Continent. Their trip to Italy in March and April was cut short, however, largely because of Lewes’s anxiety over his mother, but also because of bad weather, their own illnesses, and Lewes’s increasing impatience with the annoyances of travel in Italy (Haight, Biography 415). They returned to England on May 5, and three days later, Thornie arrived, six weeks earlier than expected. Shocked at the severity of his illness, they called upon James Paget, Serjeant-surgeon-extraordinary to Queen Victoria, for help, but neither he nor J. R. Reynolds, an authority on disease of the nervous system, was able to diagnose the tuberculosis of the spine that was causing his trouble. For the six months until his death on October 19, as his condition slowly worsened, the best that could be done was to administer morphia for his pain (416-18). Their letters during the period reflect their ongoing concern over Thornie’s suffering (Letters 5:34-60). During that time, Eliot, too distracted to do much work on Middlemarch, turned to writing poetry, “Brother and Sister,” and “The Legend of Jubal,” while sitting at Thornie’s bedside; she was with him when he died (Haight, Biography 420-21). As she wrote in a letter dated December 10, “Death had never come near to me through the twenty years since I lost my Father, and this parting has entered very deeply into me” (Letters 5:71). She also wrote on November 25 that “I have a deep sense of change within, and of a permanently closer companionship with death” (5:70).

During the winter that followed, Eliot could do little writing; it took even longer for Lewes to recover his capacity to work on his Problems of
Life and Mind. In March they went again to the Continent, returning home on May 6. During the summer, spent in various places near the sea, Eliot wrote "Armgart," a poem that, according to Haight, reflects her "depression and 'almost total despair of future work'" (Biography 429). To add to her sense of despair, the Franco-Prussian War broke out in July 1870. She wrote on September 12: "We think of hardly anything but the War, and spend a great portion of our day in reading about it" (Letters 5:114), and on September 26: "I am getting more and more gloomy about the war" (8:488). The year ended with the death of Lewes's mother on December 10 (Haight, Biography 431). Although neither the Leweses nor their biographers dwell on this last event, it is hard to imagine, given Lewes's fondness for his mother and his still fresh grief for Thornie, that it would not have contributed substantially to their load of grief. Although Eliot wrote a friend that "this death has had none of the bitterness that belonged to the parting with Thornie" (Letters 5:131), the effect of their accumulated losses is evident in a statement written shortly thereafter, that "physically I feel old, and Death seems to me very near. The idea of dying has no melancholy for me, except in the parting and leaving behind which Love makes so hard to contemplate" (135).

That Eliot shared Lewes's grief over his losses of son and mother is also suggested by the self-described "Siamese-twin condition" of their relationship (3:27), which I believe had its basis from the beginning in their shared sense of loss. There are noticeable parallels in their backgrounds: Lewes's father had vanished to Bermuda shortly after his birth (Ashton, GHL 9); his two older brothers had died relatively young; he was very close to his mother (viii). Eliot's mother had virtually disappeared from her life after the deaths of twin siblings when she was a toddler; in her childhood, she had been very close to her father and brother. Lewes was estranged from his wife, and saw his children infrequently (although he continued to support them all); Eliot was estranged from her remaining siblings. The death of Thornie followed closely upon the twentieth anniversary of her father's death, and the tenth anniversary of her sister Chrissey's death. The intensity of Eliot's pain at the time of Thornie's death was more than likely, given the timing, associated with revived feelings about her own earlier losses; indeed, the oedipal enactments that pervade Middlemarch argue strongly that the loss of Thornie occurred in the context of revived feelings associated with the losses of
other family members, particularly her father, whom she had also nursed for a long time while he was dying.

When Lewes and Eliot were in Rome during the spring of 1869, the year of Thornie’s death, they met John Walter Cross (whom Eliot married after Lewes’s death), “a tall, handsome fellow, twenty-nine years old,” with his mother in Rome (Haight, *Biography* 415). The story in *Middlemarch* of Dorothea’s meeting of Ladislaw in Rome suggests the possibility that as part of her anniversary reaction to her father’s death, in keeping with the pattern she followed after 1849, Eliot once again found herself in an (imagined) oedipal triangle, this time attracted to the young John Cross. Richard Ellman, believing that Ladislaw has traits of both George Eliot and George Lewes, also believes that he has characteristics of John Walter Cross, “[who] must have delighted her” at the time of their meeting. “The contrast of Ladislaw’s youth and Casaubon’s age, of the passionate unscholarliness of the first and the uneasy ferreting of the second, would then be an idealized registration of the effect on George Eliot of her meeting with Cross . . . . Momentarily, even the beloved Lewes must have appeared to disadvantage beside this taller, handsomer, sharper-sighted, younger banker” (762). It could be argued that Dorothea’s story, among other things, dramatizes the author’s (unconscious) wish to be rid of the old husband and marry the young one—a fantasy that would repeat the oedipal enactment of taking the husband (her psychological twin) from the mother (Agnes) in her initial relationship with Lewes. Interestingly, as the real-life story evolved after Lewes’s death in 1878, Ellman reports that “since Cross’s mother and one of his sisters had died soon after Lewes, he and George Eliot could share each other’s grief” (762). Thus her marriage to Cross in 1880, like her relationship with Lewes, seems to have had its basis in their shared sense of loss.

Dorothea and Lydgate, Eliot’s “twin studies in defeated aspiration,” punish themselves for their oedipal fantasies by choosing marriage partners who will put an end to their high ambitions. Their poor choices are a reflection of their psychological immaturity. Moreover, their psychological immaturity, judging from the work of psychoanalysts like Joyce McDougall and George H. Pollock, who stress the connection between mourning and development, is the result of their failure to complete the necessary process of mourning for their deceased parents. The interconnecting characters in the novel are in similar predicaments. Bulstrode,
The orphan who aspires to be a missionary, gives up his vocation when he is offered the opportunity to join his rich friend’s business; Ladislaw, the “gypsy” who aspires to be an artist, becomes instead “an ardent public man” after his marriage to Dorothea. Although the portrayal of the characters in *Middlemarch* reveals something of the author’s own psychological dilemma, the quality and lasting success of her masterpiece also suggest that, despite her own melancholy over past and recent losses, both her fiction writing and her partnership with Lewes provided her with the means to fulfill her aspirations. Lydgate may have “always regarded himself as a failure,” and Dorothea may have felt that “there was always something better which she might have done, if she had only been better and known better,” but Eliot was able to say of her own accomplishment: “I have finished my book and am thoroughly at peace about it—not because I am convinced of its perfection, but because I have lived to give out what it was in me to give and have not been hindered by illness or death from making my work a whole, such as it is” *(Letters* 5:324).

Eliot seems to intend to portray her characters’ growth into their acceptance of the realities of their lot, as they find their places in society. Dorothea, we learn in the “Finale,” “never repented that she had given up position and fortune to marry Will Ladislaw” (894). The value of her life is seen in the “incalculably diffusive” effect of “her being on those around her.” The author adds the final statement that “the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs” (896).

Yet the vision of society in Eliot’s “one great novel of provincial life” is darker than the final assertion of “the growing good of the world” would suggest. The provincial society in the world of *Middlemarch* is actually portrayed as a tightly knit group of individuals, bound together by their shared sense of loss, and doomed to mediocrity. The group is seen as conspiring to inhibit the growth of any individuals, like Lydgate, who might have the potential to become extraordinary. When he enters the Middlemarch community, his attempts at reform are regarded with suspicion. One villager declares that “the most ungentlemanly trick a man can be guilty of is to come among the members of his profession
with innovations which are a libel on their time-honoured procedure” (487), and another describes the new young doctor as “want[ing] to make a noise by pretending to go deeper than other people” (494). To judge from Eliot’s portrayal of provincial society, the only way to achieve individual aspirations is to leave the group behind, as Eliot had left behind her own family and society. Moreover, the author’s melancholy vision of society extends beyond the realm of the midlands village of Middlemarch. Seen through the eyes of Dorothea on her wedding trip to Rome, and portrayed in the limited lives and lost dreams of the characters in the symbolic world of Middlemarch, human life is too often “ugly” and “bungling,” and human history, when it is done, leaves behind only a “vast wreck of ambitious ideals” set “in the midst of a sordid present.”