Roman Holiday: Sympathy and Reform in Middlemarch, A Study of Provincial Life

Introduction - The Grey Ass

“The Reformation either meant something or it did not...” (18)

When Mr. Brooke, with his “scrappy slovenliness,” (17) asserts this theory to Mr. Casaubon during a dinner party, his niece Dorothea is mortified. Presumably he is referring to The Reformation in the 1530’s, 300 years before the novel takes place. Our narrator does not capitalize the article ‘the’ and we are left to consider which or what reformation his “rambling habit of mind” (8) is considering. As he promptly concludes “that Catholicism was a fact,” (18) he is invoking the recently passed Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829. Like that venerable piece of reforming legislation, Mr. Brooke sweeps away 300 years of religious turmoil between Catholics, Nonconformists and Protestants to place them on equal footing.

It also helps the reader to place the events of the novel in a social and political context. George Eliot’s novel begins with the passage of the Catholic Emancipation Act (April 1829) and continues through May 1832, a month prior to the passage of the Great Reform Act. Writing forty years later, after the passage of the Second Reform Act 1867, the many and various attempts at reform in the intervening years allow the narrator time and distance for reflection on the efficacy of legislation on the struggle for political and social progress. Within this historic setting, George Eliot intertwines the “unhistoric acts” (785) and the choices of her characters. This dynamic combination of individual choice and history determine whether “some slipped a little downward, some got higher footing.” (88) The narrator refers to this as a “subtle movement” (88) of society, suggesting that however much the “young hopefulness of immediate good” (782) believed in the power of legislative reform, the effect on the world at large would be a bit more glacially-paced.

While Britain was addressing the threat of revolution with parliamentary reform, German biblical scholarship was embarking on a reformation of their own. The ruling philosophy of the time, Hegelian Idealism, believed that reason and freedom had reached their limit in society. Progressive thinkers, such as Ludwig Feuerbach and David Strauss, based on what they considered to be an obvious lack of political and religious freedom, thought further evolution was necessary and inevitable. Additionally, they were beginning to profess skepticism for the existence of a divine supernatural being and the immortality of the soul - leading society towards a crisis of faith. Soon Strauss would

argue that Jesus was no longer divine in nature but a historical figure. Feuerbach would go even further, declaring God a projection of man himself - and also a projection of the most perfect aspects of human nature: the powers of sympathy and of love for other human beings.

The Catholic Emancipation Act, established by law, that religion could no longer serve as an authority for political legitimization in Britain - that church and state were separated. By beginning the novel with this most controversial piece of legislation, George Eliot plants the seeds of a society about to separate religion from all aspects of life: science, morality, education, history, art and culture. The most contentious question for Victorians was, in a world void of Christianity, what defense would we have against evil? Both Feuerbach and Eliot believed that sympathy, or our ability to imagine and understand another's state of mind, was the material of conscience. "...the therapeutic and liberating value of a double consciousness; ...it's moral and even 'sacred' function." [1] Individually, we can discern the effects of our actions on others through sympathy, thereby gaining the knowledge required to make the correct moral judgement. Communally, enlightened societies had the capacity for "infinite" [2] power.

George Eliot saw sympathy as essential in such a rapidly changing society: "My own experience and development deepen every day my conviction that our moral progress may be measured by the degree in which we sympathize with individual suffering and individual joy." [3]

True sympathy requires observation, compassion, reason, self-consciousness and above all love. For Feuerbach, "A loving heart is the heart of the species throbbing in the individual." [4] In love we share the suffering of others as our own.

Part I - The Struggle

While on the subject of throbbing hearts, let us join Dorothea in her boudoir on the third-worst honeymoon in 19c literature, where, like Ariadne, she is deserted and sobbing bitterly. [5]

Dorothea has spent her honeymoon in Rome sight-seeing, alone, and has been overwhelmed: "...this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual...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." (181) The succinct conclusion of Helena Michie is, "Ignorant of the histories that could make Rome legible, too intelligent and too sensitive to ignore what she does not understand." [6]

That Dorothea would experience disappointment on her honeymoon is not a surprise to the reader. An initially dispassionate narrator does not even regard “the fit of weeping” (181) as tragic. Until now, we have been led to mock her motive for marrying Casaubon, “It would be like marrying Pascal,” (27) but it is a gentle mocking irony as her motives are tempered with a noble purity, “I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by.” (27) While Dorothea is on her honeymoon, however, she is “exempt” [7] from irony.

During her subsequent self-examination, we find that she is not merely disappointed, she is disillusioned and in the throes of a spiritual crisis. She tries desperately to answer the “crushing questions,” (183) while the narrator solemnly tells us that it was “too early yet” (182) for understanding. To our almost infinite relief she arrives at a startling conclusion - it’s not me - it’s him, “...that the large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband’s mind were replaced by anterooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither.” (183) Dorothea’s faith in both her husband and his great work is severely shaken.

To herald “the hour of heart-break is at hand,”[8] George Eliot masterfully creates an aesthetic catharsis to draw the reader into the present moment with Dorothea. In a passage pulsing with pain and regret, one of the “crushing questions” is intuitively answered, finding a remedy once sought, now unlooked-for:

“...if he would have held her hands between his and listened with the delight of tenderness and understanding to all the little histories which made up her experience, and would have given her the same sort of intimacy in return, so that the past life of each could be included in their mutual knowledge and affection...” (185)

As sensitive readers, through this direct appeal to our imagination, “this cry from soul to soul,” (272) we now feel a genuine sympathy with Dorothea and begin to experience her sorrow as our own. Our emotional involvement is such that if we could, we would reach through the pages and clasp her hands ourselves.

Like all cathartic moments, it is finite and must end. With a “change in...tone...to a major key,” (635) the narrator wrests the pathos from tragedy to comedy, using her old friend, ironic criticism. On this honeymoon, any sign of tenderness or even a “sign of acceptance” (186) has been rebuffed by Mr. Casubon, who does what any “irreproachable husband” (186) would do and “politely (reaches) a chair for her.” (186)

To lift us further out of our despair, the narrator trills, “...in Dorothea’s mind there was a current into which all thought and feeling were apt sooner or later to flow - the reaching forward of the whole consciousness towards the fullest truth, the least partial good.”

(190) In addition to "...the red drapery which was being hung for Christmas..." (181) in Rome, there is a great advent preparing for Dorothea.

Part II - Emancipation

This particular crisis was provoked by an argument with her husband earlier that day. However, Dorothea's anguished thoughts seem very well-formed, more polished than we would imagine for someone in such agony - as if she has been ruminating much longer, perhaps for five weeks. Later in the book, Casaubon wonders how his young bride so "quickly turned into the critical wife." (392)

Like Dorothea, we are bombarded with imagery and symbolism the moment we set foot in Rome: from Dante's Purgatory, to Ovid's Ariadne, to Will's champagne bet, to Christopher Marlowe. As W. J. Harvey said, "George Eliot's mind is like the National Gallery; for every canvas on display there are two stored away in the basement." [9] However tempting this "range of relevancies" (133) is, I am not so concerned with the imagery itself as I am with the effect it has on Dorothea.

As much as this barrage feels like we are "hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat," (182) we are fortunately limited in our powers of observation and comprehension in the moment. Both the reader and Dorothea depend on time to unfold itself for their appreciation and understanding. "...our earliest, strongest impressions, our most intimate convictions," George Eliot wrote, "are simply images added to more or less of sensation. These are the primitive instruments of thought." [10]

Unfortunately for Dorothea, time, "with the secret motion of a watch-hand," (182) cannot slow the profound change marriage has made on her. The new "wifely relation" (182) to Mr. Casaubon has added to her confusion, as she attempts to make sense of her "new real future" (182) and her role in it. That role, she imagined, would be entwined with and essential to his work, The Key to all Mythologies, an attempt to trace all pagan myths to the Bible. We are told Dorothea is "beholding Rome" (181) from a "Protestant" (181) or Christian perspective and from this, a categorical perspective as well, she "turned...her...knowledge into principles." (181) This deductive approach is the fundamental flaw in both Casaubon's great work and Dorothea's struggle for clarity.*****

While observing "ruins and basilicas, palaces and colossi, set in the midst of a sordid present" (181) without a guidebook, she is making "strange associations," (181) perhaps that this "funeral procession" (181) of art is the continual rejection of gods of a previous age, an "insubstantial pageant faded." (Tempest Act 4 Scene 1) By approaching Rome more inductively she is seeing the illusory nature of all religion and by extension, her husband's great work. The sensuality of Rome and art is having an "incalculably

diffusive" (785) affect on her by expanding her mind and begins to be an "interpreter of the world" (181) for her.

This subconscious skepticism is combined with Casaubon's alienation of affection and Dorothea is responding to this with "inward fits of anger and repulsion." (183) It would be easy to mock Mr. Casaubon: his thin legs, his moles, his manner of eating soup. But these are superficial observations. I think the reasons may lie deeper - at the very essence of Dorothea.

Now married, Dorothea's sense of self is entirely subordinated to her husband and his "chief interests." (189) She feels she is "repressing everything in herself except the desire to enter into some fellowship with her husband." (189) His inability to sympathize, to recognize her crisis, to give her a "sign of acceptance" (186) is also a denial of her self. When he angrily trivializes the role she will play in helping him, by "sifting" (186) through his notes, she feels excluded from both his great work and his great soul.

Dorothea considers their honeymoon a "catastrophe." (189) They have not made a union and she has lost "faith in their future." (183) But it is still too early for full comprehension. In the midst of her "self-absorbed discontent" (191) and "stifling depression," (183) Dorothea's thoughts and feelings have turned inward and therefore she does not yet possess the self-understanding or self-consciousness to know what action she should take. "She had not yet listened patiently to his heartbeats, but only felt that her own was beating violently." (187)

Part III - Reform

The first time Dorothea and Will meet alone is crucial for a number of reasons but most importantly it moves Dorothea physically and emotionally from isolation to communion with another. While the narrator informs us that Dorothea's movement towards self-consciousness is not dependent on Will's love, "it was clear that she required nothing of the sort," (207) it is true that in order for her to turn her thoughts outward, she does require at least one other human being. That this human being has a "sunny brightness" (196) and an "irresistible" (192) smile is a perk.

The recognition that Dorothea has been craving for the last five weeks begins with just one look. As we know, she had been sobbing with abandon and lest we worry that her nose is red, the narrator later tells us that Dorothea looked "unwearied as a freshly opened passion-flower" (514) after she cried. Will's interest is piqued when he observes "the signs of weeping." (191) Dorothea is obviously observing him too as she later remembers that he: "beamed on her with that full gaze which tells her on whom it falls

that she is too interesting for the slightest movement of her eyelid to pass unnoticed and uninterpreted." (258)

Before they can really converse, she strikes him mute. Without a word, she captures the essence of her honeymoon: desolation. His anger and amusement are aroused, "having first got this adorable young creature to marry him, and then passing his honeymoon away from her." (192) Amusement wins out and they smile at one another. His "good humor" and ability to listen "sympathetically to what (she) really feels," [11] allows Dorothea the freedom to speak as she used to - with energy and ardor. Her inward thoughts and depression are starting to ebb.

His admiration for her begins to grow in inverse proportion to his loathing for her husband. Peevishly, Will brings their lively discourse to a crashing halt by giving Mr. Casaubon's great work an "annihilating pinch," (195) declaring it "is a pity that it should be thrown away for want of knowing what is being done by the rest of the world...the Germans have taken the lead in historical inquiries." (194) He is referring to the embryo thoughts of philosophers such as Ludwig Feuerbach, who studied at Heidelberg a few years before Will. George Eliot knows, though, that a short acquaintance with Hegel and perhaps a few nights at a wine bar with some German biblical scholars does not leave you with a "deep" understanding, but that "very little achievement is required in order to pity another man's shortcomings." (194)

The thought "that the labor of her husband's life might be void" (194) has produced a strange affect on Dorothea and she sat "absorbed in the piteousness of that thought ." (195) Misunderstanding her reaction, Will believes she is offended, when, in fact, this news is gradually confirming her own suspicions. Unknowingly, Will has acted as a conductor for "the first stirring of a pitying tenderness fed by the realities of his lot and not by her own dreams." (196) Her egoism is receding but despite arriving at the conclusion "that he had an equivalent centre of self," (197) she also realizes "she had been under a wild illusion in expecting a response to her feeling from Mr. Casaubon." (197) As her husband has no powers of sympathy for other human beings and has thwarted all attempts at recognizing her, the only moral choice available to her now is pity. Sadly for Dorothea, this, too, will be traumatic as we learn that Casaubon "shrinks from pity, and fears most of all that it should be known." (262)

The remainder of their time in Rome is now spent in the company of Will. He escorts them to his friend Naumann's studio, where quite naturally, Mr. Casuabon is called upon to pose for a painting of Aquinas. While Naumann daubs, he and Will kindly educate Dorothea about art in a fast, free-flowing, mutual conversation - this is obviously to be contrasted with the "shiver" (184) Dorothea felt when asking her husband similar questions, with his "blank absence of interest or sympathy." (185)

When Will comes to say good-bye, their conversation resumes the same “quick and pliable” (196) nature. All shyness gone, no longer strangers, their dialogue is full of fellowship, understanding and intimacy: “Their young delight in speaking to each other, and saying what no one else would care to hear.” (514) We are clearly meant to be influenced by the epitaph:

“And listening intently as she poured out her heart,

Scarcely daring to think, I gave her mine;

Thus she carried off my life, and never even knew it.” (199)

The narrator speaks through Will, revealing to us his adoration, devotion and love. When they part, pathos again creeps in:

“There was a certain liquid brightness in her eyes, and Will was conscious that his own were obeying a law of nature and filling too. (Nothing) could have spoiled the subduing power, the sweet dignity, of her noble unsuspicious inexperience.” (209)

Dorothea is perhaps not so “unsuspicious” as we think. Near the end of the book, when in the throes of another catharsis, she remembers this time in Rome as, “Here, with the nearness of an answering smile, here within the vibrating bond of mutual speech, was the bright creature whom she had trusted - who had come to her like the spirit of morning visiting the dim vault where she sat as the bride of a worn-out life.” (739)

She has connected the comfort and relief he provided during her crisis in Rome along with all his other “little, nameless, unremembered, acts | Of kindness and of love” [12] that have subconsciously sustained her and healed her all the while: the love “which she had planted and kept alive from a very little seed since the days in Rome.” (739)

While the thoughts of “jealous indignation and disgust” (740) almost dissuade her, these memories of connection, mutual understanding and love along with reason lead Dorothea to self-consciousness and able to make the correct moral choice. George Eliot bookends these two cathartic moments with the word “pearly.” While Dorothea is sobbing in Rome, the narrator stresses that she is yet prepared to understand the change occurring within her, “you cannot find the pearly dawn at noonday.” (183) Now, after she has achieved true Feuerbachian sympathy during her long night of the soul, she stares at the “pearly light” of dawn and finds herself “a part of that involuntary, palpitating life,” (741) realizing that we can lead meaningful lives by contributing to the happiness of others and by relieving their suffering.

Conclusion - Days of May

Our novel ends in May of 1832, when the House of Lords rejected the Reform Bill for a third time, signaling its demise. Rejoicing at the news, our landed gentry have gathered on a lawn in comfort and contentment.** From their “luxurious shelter,” (741) life and rank would now go on as it had done forever. Into this tranquil scene, Mr. Brooke arrives with news on a direct collision course with their complacency - Dorothea was engaged to Will Ladislaw. The group erupts in chaos: Sir James wishes he’d shot him, Mr. Brooke threatens to cut her from his will and all see the necessity of her removal away from Middlemarch.

In London, Parliament was also erupting in chaos.The subsequent resignation of Lord Grey was met with violence and threats of armed insurrection from millions. The ‘Days of May’ were an ultimately successful attempt to hold the Bill together and it received Royal Assent around the same time Dorothea marries Will.***

All reform, whether individual or communal is grudging and gradual. The Great Reform Bill of 1832 broadened the franchise only slightly and working men still could not vote. Naturally, some thought the bill went too far, others not far enough. Macaulay commented at the time that, “They have done all that was necessary for the removing of a great practical evil, and no more than was necessary.” [13]

For Dorothea and Will, their mutual desire to “be in the thick of a struggle against (wrongs),” (782) takes them to London and eventually Parliament. “Absorbed” (782) in her husband and children, Dorothea’s destiny is now confined to a diminished sphere of small, private acts.

Before we can think this novel ends in tragedy, or at the very least ennui, the narrator reminds us of what we have been witness to throughout the novel: that these “unhistoric acts” (785) of sympathy provide us with a “clearer conception and a more active admiration of those vital elements which bind man together and give a higher worthiness to their existence.” [14]

As to whether parliamentary or Dorothea’s reform meant something or it did not, we turn again to our local sybil, Mr. Brooke,

“This Reform will touch everybody by-and-by...We’re all one family, you know.” (470)

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** Jerome Beaty, '*History by Indirection: The Era of Reform in "Middlemarch*' (1957) for the final tableau on the lawn

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Notes

1. *George Eliot’s Conception of Sympathy*, Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Jun., 1985), University of California Press
2. EC, p.83
3. GEL, p.403
4. EC, p.268
5. According to Prof Helena Michie, the second-worst honeymoon in literature.
1. Lecture: Helena Michie (Rice University), “Privacies” Dicken’s Universe Graduate Conference 2017 | UC Santa Cruz.
2. In her opinion, ‘*Frankenstein*’ was the worst. I have expanded this theory to include ‘*The Bride of Lammermoor*’.
6. *Victorian Honeymoons, Journeys to the Conjugal*, Helena Michie Cambridge University Press
7. *The Novels of George Eliot,* Barbara Hardy The Athlone Press 1959
8. The Atlantic Monthly, June 1860; ‘*The Mill on the Floss’* by George Eliot; Volume 5, No. 32; pages 756-757.
9. *Middlemarch Critical Approaches to the Novel*, W. J. Harvey ‘*Casuabon and Lydgate*’ | University of London, The Athlone Press 1967
10. GEE, p. 445
11. EC, p.122
12. ‘*Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798’* William Wordsworth
13. Hansard | Parliamentary Debate of 2 March 1831
14. GEL, IV:472

*** Once she is married to Will, she forfeits any right to Casuabon’s fortune, as per his “insult(ing)” (454) codicil. Similarly, a very important amendment (codicil) to the Reform Bill of 1832 was the formal exclusion of women from voting in Parliamentary elections.