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An Economy of Care: George Eliot's Middlemarch and Feminist Care Ethics

Madison V. Newman
University of Massachusetts Amherst

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An Economy of Care: George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Feminist Care Ethics

A Thesis Presented

by

MADISON VICTORIA NEWMAN

Submitted to the Graduate School of
the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Department of English

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MADISON VICTORIA NEWMAN

Approved for style and content by:

Suzanne Daly, Chair

Lise Sanders

Randall Knoper

Jane Degenhardt, Graduate Program Director
Department of English

DEDICATION

I would be remiss if I did not dedicate this thesis to all those who I have engaged in care relationships with, but particularly:

Mom and Dad, who model care ethics so well and who love me so profoundly;

Ben, who cares continually in big and small ways;

Donna, who cares deeply about my ethical and religious development; and

Alec, who shows me what it means to care.

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ABSTRACT

AN ECONOMY OF CARE: GEORGE ELIOT'S *MIDDLEMARCH AND FEMINIST CARE ETHICS*

MAY 2022

MADISON VICTORIA NEWMAN, B.A., SAINT MICHAEL'S COLLEGE

M.A., THE UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Suzanne Daly

This thesis assesses the centrality of care relationships in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and, by doing so, seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of individual and collective morality. Using the ethics of care as a methodological framework to acknowledge the importance of care acts and successful care relations – especially those complicated by the presence of dichotomized socioeconomic hierarchies – will allow readers to engage more fully with this text, its author, her relations, her characters, and the community of readers; reading Eliot's work from this lens will allow us to validate every interaction, every thread of connectedness, and every act of care to better understand Eliot's webs of relation. This thesis argues that it is the atypical or unexpected social figure that arises as the most effective care practitioner, regardless of social class. In order to arrive at this point, it will provide a foundational understanding of both care ethics – from the work of Nel Noddings to that of more contemporary theorists like Talia Schaffer and Sandra Laugier – and the economic theories circulating during Eliot's time – Smithian, Ruskinian, and Socialist. Through an assessment of Dorothea Brooke, Fred Vincy, Mary Garth, and others within the *Middlemarch* community, this thesis integrates varying notions of political economy, reciprocity, engrossment, and genuine care for both

compensated or uncompensated care acts. By doing so, it strives to privilege the success of authentic care, thereby triumphing the value of relationships over personal gain or ambition.

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INTRODUCTION

“WIDENING THE SKIRTS OF LIGHT”

George Eliot begins her well-known novel, *Middlemarch*, not with a portrait of its protagonist, but rather that of young St. Teresa of Ávila. She asks readers to consider whether or not they have imagined “the little girl walking forth one morning hand-in-hand with her smaller brother, to go and seek martyrdom in the country of the Moors.”¹ This striking image – two children, fearlessly marching to their deaths – is both distorted and romanticized. It seems entirely implausible and irrational: the quest might only occur in the adventurous imaginations of young children. Yet Eliot makes the pair hyper-real through fictionalization: “they toddled from rugged Avila, wide-eyed and helpless-looking as two wild fawns, but with human hearts, already beating to a national idea; until domestic reality met them in the shape of uncles, and turned them back from their resolve.”² St. Teresa is no longer a disconnected historical figure – she becomes alive through the vivid description within *Middlemarch*’s prelude. The most animated feature given of the two children is their emotionality, including their ‘wide-eyed’ and ‘helpless-looking’ expressions, and their beating ‘human hearts.’ We, as readers, feel an emotional gravitation to save St. Teresa and her brother – to act as their uncles did and make them return home without encountering the villainized Moors; to protect them, care for them, and nurture them; to show them the dangerous consequences of their actions. Without

¹ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003), 1.

² Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 1.

even being cognizant of it, readers are employing a care reading of this text from its very inception.

Dorothea Brooke, the protagonist of Eliot's work, is an embodiment of feminine goodness. She acts as one of the "many Theresas that have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action."³ As such, she is immediately equated with feminine hopefulness and idealism. Although Dorothea requires some moral development, which is ultimately accomplished through her friendship and romance with Will Ladislaw, she has a strong commitment to doing what is right – she longs to find meaning or greater purpose in her existence despite having few outlets to autonomously do so. She acknowledges her duty to mankind and longs to care for others by "desiring what is perfectly good," "widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower."⁴ The language, as such, is innately feminine, endowed with values of beauty, grace, expression, and goodness. That humanistic spirit and determination enable Dorothea to become the ethical center of the community and of the text itself.

Yet, what ethics govern Middlemarch, and how are they formulated, impacted, and amorphized? As an exemplar of western society, it privileges socioeconomic advancement, respect, and procedure; those who make fiscal gains receive further advantage, whereas those who do not, or who exist outside the bounds of the privileged class, are subject to belittlement and estrangement. Middlemarch becomes a community of binaries: men and women, the elite and the subservient, the laborers and the landowner, and, ultimately, the carer and cared-for. Even those in possession of some

³ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 1.

⁴ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 372.

privilege may not be truly authoritative – for example, the middle class but not the upper-middle class, a wealthy woman but not a wealthy man, the educated child who disappoints his parents. While there is interconnectedness between the classes, it is continually being influenced and shaped by respective social positions. To attempt to act outside this model or express being different – whether that be in demeanor, occupation, morality, or ideology – is to transgress the proceedings of an advanced society; it is to, metaphorically, color outside the lines in a community that prefers conformity.

Using the ethics of care as a methodological framework, this thesis will examine the relationships that make up the Middlemarch community, noting specifically the influence of gender and class. In order to do so, it will acknowledge the success of individual care relationships, as well as the success of the care community at large. Proper care is only conducted when both offered and received – it is a dynamic partnership between individuals or groups. The disingenuity of the caregiver, or the lack of reciprocity by the care recipient, will stifle the act. However, when the act is encouraged and fostered, mutual benefit ensues – whether physically, socially, economically, personally, or ethically. Engaging with this novel and its characters through a feminist lens will allow us to determine that traditionally-masculine ideals – upheld via the marriage system and other capitalist pursuits – are devoid of the care necessary for successful and fruitful relationships. Instead, traditionally-feminine ideals – those of compassion, interdependence, and support – become a plausible alternative that would promote communal wellbeing and social, emotional, and economic advancement. In a society that privileges the rational over the emotional, it is the patriarchal ethos that is accepted and valued. Regardless, that does not mean it qualifies as care-centric.

This paper is composed of five sections. In the first, predominant care and economic theorists – Nel Noddings, Talia Schaffer, Sandra Laugier, John Ruskin, and Adam Smith – and their corresponding philosophies are assessed, ultimately signifying the importance of contextualizing, contemporizing, and criticizing ideology before it's applied. In the second, the philanthropic aspirations of Dorothea are evaluated, illustrating the convoluted nature of care and how privilege may further complicate dichotomized relationships. In the third, the marriage myth and marriage economy are critically interpreted to convey the fallacy of both when considering the presence or lack thereof of care. In the fourth, the role of compensated care labor – as depicted through the characters of Fred Vincy and Mary Garth – further expands our understanding of the qualities needed in a care relationship. Lastly, in the fifth, concluding thoughts are offered as well as future directions for study in the realm of intersectionality and inclusion.

Ultimately, it is those who act (or merely exist) contradictory to social values, norms, and hierarchies that arise as the most capable and empathetic care-givers in the novel. In the community of Middlemarch, these care-givers are Dorothea, who refuses to fulfill the traditional expectations of a elite and eligible young woman, nor a respectable widow; Fred, who will not abide by his parents' wishes but instead chooses to forge his own path; and Mary, who acts righteously in all of her acts of care.⁵ Those who are atypical possess greater ethicality than those who behave according to predetermined

⁵ Other characters that might be considered, but are not within the scope of this paper, include: Farebrother and his family, the nurse looking after Raffles, and Mr. Brooke who, despite not being the most ethical figure, still acts as a care provider by taking in his two orphaned nieces.

social principles – particularly regarding class and gender – and are thus better able to contribute positively to the care community as a whole.

CHAPTER I

THE ETHICS OF CARE AND PERTINENT ECONOMIC THEORY

In order to properly conduct an ethics of care reading on Eliot's text, it is first essential to provide a foundation for such work. By acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses in both precedent and contemporary methodologies, this paper will argue that a move away from the universal towards a focus on the complexity of care relationships is essential. Ultimately, Nel Noddings' work, though now considered problematic for modern feminists, acts as a necessary premise and assessment of care ethics; therefore, belittling or disregarding the significance of her ideology would be detrimental to our study. Contemporary theorist Talia Schaffer invites care ethics into the world of literature; her work thus directly contributes to that of this paper. However, while Schaffer's theorizing may acknowledge the role of emotional labor in certain occupations, it does not focus on the economic dimension (the socioeconomic hierarchies, the economic exchanges between individuals, the dichotomy between genuine care and care performed for compensation) that further complicate relationships in the novel. By integrating the arguments of Adam Smith and John Ruskin, particularly with regard to their understanding of political economy, we will further enliven this ethical and economic reading of *Middlemarch*.

A. What the Ethics of Care and Care Theorists Can Teach Us

i. Nel Noddings

Philosopher Nel Noddings, finding the traditionally masculinized rhetoric of ethics to be inadequate, was one of the first to theorize a feminine care ethics.⁶ However, when read from the contemporary moment, her work appears outdated; it seems to universalize experiences as gendered according to a binary logic. Acts of care, though certainly significant, seem flattened through such gendered readings. For Noddings, though care can be performed by both genders, women arise as superior care givers; care ethics is naturally practiced through feminine language and ideology. While this paper argues against such relativizing and generalizing, it relies upon the foundational work that Noddings offers; she integrates care theory into the world of feminist thought. Thus, I will use Noddings' arguments on the significance and centrality of care relationships to further my own understanding of who arises as a successful caregiver in Eliot's novel: the atypical, often unexpected and underestimated figure.

Noddings prefaces her revolutionary work *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* by claiming that "ethics has been discussed largely in the language of the father: in principles and propositions, in terms of justification, fairness, and justice" while "the mother's voice has been silent."⁷ Ethics, when bound by this gendered language of morality, ignores an essential attribute: compassionate, ethical care

⁶ Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

⁷ Noddings, *Caring*, 1.

based in “psychic relatedness.”⁸ This type of ethics is “feminine in the deep classical sense – rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness” that addresses experiences first “with the moral attitude or longing for goodness and not with moral reasoning.”⁹ Feminine ethics, as such, privileges the intimate relationship between the self and the other over objective rules or formulations. It becomes a quasi-spiritual experience to connect and to care.

Influenced by philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Martin Buber, Noddings argues that caring is innate for humans.¹⁰ As such, humans continually operate in two primordial states: as the one-caring or as the cared-for.¹¹ Care, if it is to be genuinely ethical, must be reciprocated: it requires both providing care and receiving it.¹² The one-caring will ‘feel with’ the other through the intrinsically ethical ‘I must.’¹³ This experience of ‘feeling with’ is described as “engrossment,” as “I receive the other into myself, and I see and feel with the other.”¹⁴ Engrossment is an act of profound empathy and serves as a commitment to look beyond the self to share in an experience with the other; our natural response of compassion and care determines our ability to do

⁸ Noddings, *Caring*, 1-2. “Psychic relatedness” is a characterization of Eros, the feminine spirit that Noddings juxtaposes with masculinized Logos. However, she goes on to conclude that Eros is an inaccurate description for the type of feminine care she prioritizes as it “fails to capture the receptive rationality of caring that is characteristic of the feminine approach.”

⁹ Noddings, *Caring*, 1-2. It is also important to note that logic is still significant: if logic were to be entirely removed from our understanding, then it would convey the perception that women could not operate logically. Rather, care ethics simply does not center itself on logic over relationality.

¹⁰ Sandra Laugier, “The Ethics of Care as a Politics of the Ordinary,” *New Literary History* 46, no. 2 (2015): 217-240; Noddings, *Caring*, 78.

¹¹ Noddings, *Caring*, 3-4. Noddings determines this terminology so that the roles “will be free of equivocation” and supports this point with the terminology of Sartre, Heidegger, and Buber.

¹² Noddings, *Caring*, 64.

¹³ Noddings, *Caring*, 28. Noddings differentiates between the experience of “feeling with” another and empathizing with them: empathy is a too “rational, western, masculine way of looking at ‘feeling with.’” “Feeling with” requires the reception that is privileged within this methodology rather than the “projection” offered through empathy.

¹⁴ Noddings, *Caring*, 28.

so. Caring, according to Noddings, may be best summarized as “stepping out of one’s own personal frame of reference into the other’s”:

When we care, we consider the other’s point of view, his objective needs, and what he expects of us. Our attention, our mental engrossment is on the cared-for, not on ourselves. Our reasons for acting, then, have to do both with the other’s wants and desires and with those objective elements of his problematic situation... If our minds are on ourselves, however – if we have never really left our own a priori frame of reference – our reasons for acting points back at us and not outward to the cared-for. ¹⁵

The one-caring cannot strive to control the cared-for through their relationship. Rather, the one-caring must respect the autonomy of the other and, as such, the cared-for will be allowed “to be more fully himself in the caring relationship.”¹⁶ That respect will allow for the reception of the care as “this being himself, this willing and unselfconscious revealing of self, is his major contribution to the relation. That is his tribute to the one-caring, but it is not delivered as a tribute.”¹⁷ When the cared-for is treated with compassion, respect, and understanding, he is able to grow and act more authentically. As such, he will respond to the care and to the relationship “either in direct response to the one-caring or in personal delight or in happy growth before her eyes”; this experience is qualified as “genuine reciprocity.”¹⁸ Thus, to receive care, the cared-for may act consciously or unconsciously towards the one-caring. For Noddings, the reception of care is critical: it is what makes this ethics feminine.

Noddings’s philosophy has been adopted in several fields to explain the relation between the self and the other. Most notably, this methodology has been readily taken up in feminist scholarship. The reason for this adoption seems self-explanatory: Noddings

¹⁵ Noddings, *Caring*, 24.

¹⁶ Noddings, *Caring*, 69.

¹⁷ Noddings, *Caring*, 69.

¹⁸ Noddings, *Caring*, 70.

bases her theory in the feminine, continually reiterates that women are better at caring, and seeks to discredit the masculine Logos. It is important to note that her ideas on care and women can be read as archetypal and flat. She does preface her arguments by saying that they do not accurately describe all women and all men; nonetheless, it can be difficult to overlook the second-wave feminist ideals that accompany them. However, when examined from a socio-historical perspective, many of Noddings' overarching statements cannot be refuted: although both sexes engage in care relationships, it is women who have traditionally been placed in the role of the one-caring.¹⁹ They are the wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters who tend to their fathers, husbands, brothers, sons, and others in need. They have long been expected to behave in the emotional supportive role rather than in the detached rational role.

To some contemporary readers, Noddings' theory appears inconsistent, overly sentimental, and far too idealistic. While she articulates that men can exhibit the "feminine" attributes of a care-giver, she positions women as being innately more capable. It seems as if gender is the predetermining factor in one's ability to perform care acts. As such, there is less commentary on the moral stance of an individual and of their community; instead, it positions the individual in a history of gendered oppression and inequality, offering a blanket statement that is inaccurate. By attempting to offer a feminist reading, it instead reinforces an archetype: women's role as nurses, teachers, mothers, sisters, and daughters is solidified. By this association, it seems as if women are unable to break away from this characterization. This interpretation isn't to say that gender doesn't play a significant role in determining one's care capabilities: women,

¹⁹ Talia Schaffer, "Victorian Feminist Criticism: Recovery Work and the Care Community," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 1, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 63-64.

because they have long been forced into the role of care-provider, are often hegemonically instructed to fulfill it. However, the complexity of gendered roles cannot be written off so easily: just because women have been historically undermined and forced into performing care labor does not mean they are always better at such tasks.

Though Noddings' work comes about historically during the third-wave feminist movement of the 1990s, her ideas echo the language and themes of second-wave feminism. Indeed, one might sense the similarities between Noddings's work and that of the "recovery" feminism movement of the 1970s.²⁰ Recovery feminism insists that it is the duty of the readers and researchers to uncover and 'save' their feminist foremothers – to recuperate a work by a neglected female writer, to read it through a politically liberal, feminist lens, and to make broad brushstroke claims about the perception of the author. Yet, this effort is likely to "produce reductive readings... and (ironically) reinforce(s) a conventionally gendered narrative" when it "tacitly imagines a woman writer who was suppressed, and who is rescued by an ardent, energetic researcher bravely surmounting all obstacles."²¹ Noddings, likewise, employs overarching statements about gender relations to achieve her intended conclusion: a feminist reading of morality that positions feminine attributes as superseding their masculine counterpart. However, in the process, her meaning becomes oxymoronic and subject to criticism. Noddings can therefore be read as out of touch with the ethos of contemporary feminism.

²⁰ Schaffer, "Victorian Feminist Criticism."

²¹ Schaffer, "Victorian Feminist Criticism," 67-68

ii. Schaffer and Laugier – Contemporizing the Ethics of Care

The work of literary theorists such as Talia Schaffer, by offering more relevant and salient feminist care readings, provides an alternative to the limitations of Noddings' theory. This is not to say that there are no faults within her work: some of her pieces, too, can be read as universalizing. However, her emphasis on how care readings can be applied to literary texts is essential for this thesis: without it, and without her focus on community rather than individual relationships, this argument would be incomplete. However, I will expand from Schaffer's acknowledgement of emotional labor to integrate economic theory and fourth-wave feminist ideals, which focus upon the importance of vocalization.²²

For Schaffer, care is never performed simply on the individual level – it is continually being enacted at the communal level.²³ In Schaffer's readings of Victorian literary texts, care ethics are best examined through the interactions within a community: how a young mother cooks meals for her elderly neighbor; how a shop owner provides goods at a discounted rate to his less fortunate customer; how a small-town doctor offers

²² Fourth-wave feminism is defined by further expansion of feminist initiatives through greater vocalization and circulation – essentially, ideas that existed in earlier eras have centralized and intensified. Whereas second-wave and third-wave feminism mainly focused in on the needs and plights of white women, these movements largely ignored those of women of color, transwomen, poor women, and so forth. Thus, while intersectionality has always been important for marginalized groups, it was less of a priority for privileged, mainstream feminism. With fourth-wave feminism, the significance of intersectionality, eco-feminism and environmental justice, sexual harassment, assault, and abuse (and believing women), feminism in the workplace, and feminism in the technological sphere has come to the forefront of the movement. Facilitated through social media and trending hashtag activism (such as #Metoo), fourth-wave feminism depends upon the circulation of ideas and the collaboration of efforts from women globally, speaking to the commonalities of experiences of subjugation, belittlement, and disrespect. See Laura Bates, *Everyday Sexism: The Project that Inspired a Worldwide Movement* (New York: St. Thomas Press, 2014); Rebecca Solnit, *Men Explain Things to Me* (Haymarket Books, 2014); and Jessica Valenti, *Sex Object: A Memoir* (Harper Collins, 2017); Jia Tolentino, *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion* (Random House, 2019); Mikki Kendall, *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women That a Movement Forgot* (Viking, 2020); and Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

²³ Talia Schaffer, *Communities of Care* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2021) 12.

advice to a worried father regarding an ill child. Seemingly insignificant acts have incomparable and substantial effects.

Schaffer draws on Noddings' more palatable ideas to create a firm foundation in her reading of care ethics. As noted, Noddings introduces the idea of reciprocity by differentiating between the one-caring and the cared-for.²⁴ But rather than elaborating the possibilities of reciprocity, Noddings directs her attention to the notion of engrossment. Schaffer agrees: being engrossed in the care of another is significant. However, she offers a more complicated reading by introducing the idea of care communities; her argument expands to connect reciprocated care directly to the success (or failure) of a community. Schaffer contends that the "ethics of care argues that all social relations consist of care exchanges – care that is negotiated, refused, allowed, recalibrated, exchanged – and that [it] is crucial to see care as the connective tissue of social life."²⁵ This point will be particularly useful in this thesis's reading of *Middlemarch*.

For Schaffer, it is imperative that care be reciprocated. Without reciprocation, a society would be unable to function. However, Schaffer differs from Noddings in her reading of gender binaries. For Schaffer, the reciprocity of care between individuals is more significant than who operates in each role – as such, the quality of caregiving is not determined strictly by the gender of its practitioner. Whereas Noddings argues that women are more likely to be caregivers (and that they perform this role more successfully), Schaffer offers a less restrictive interpretation. It is important to note that Noddings does not explicitly limit caregiving to women, nor does she deny the centrality

²⁴ Noddings, *Caring*, 3-4.

²⁵ Schaffer, *Communities of Care*, 21.

of reciprocated care.²⁶ However, her continual reiteration that care is deeply feminine places limitations on contemporary readings. Questions arise for the theorist: what does “characteristically and essentially feminine”²⁷ even mean? Does care exist outside the bounds of a traditional masculine/feminine binary? Is the gendering language used to describe care acts effective, manipulative, or patronizing?

Noddings’ entire text focuses on the feminine care provider. Schaffer, however, explicitly argues that care communities are a “a group diverse in gender, class, age, and even species.”²⁸ She does not equate caregiving abilities with more traditionally feminine positions or attributes, and even specifies that “care communities in Victorian fiction often depict military men as better caregivers than mothers, showing that care communities can license a different way of imagining care beyond the ministering angel.”²⁹ Indeed, in Noddings’ work, caregiving risks being read as over-sentimentalized – in this view, women, whether acting as selfless nurses, kindhearted virgins, or devoted mothers, lose all sense of selfhood to transform into ‘the ministering angel.’ Schaffer rejects such stereotyping and, while doing so, illustrates the extent to which caregiving can extend beyond the language of masculine or feminine, male character or female character, and male author or female author:

Victorian care communities are not sentimental retreats but sophisticated adumbrations of the comfort to be found in relation with the outside world: the nonhuman, the dead, the disabled, the trees, the sky, the voices of the past, the feel of a book, the imagined reader, the future. Thus, while discussions of *care* need to address the history of care as a feminized, maternal practice, discussions of *communities of care* can take their warrant from the other experiences, other ways of being in the world. And those experiences offer hope: along with the many sustaining, supportive, diverse groups in Victorian experience, they

²⁶ Noddings, *Caring*, 8.

²⁷ Noddings, *Caring*, 8.

²⁸ Schaffer, *Communities of Care*, 15.

²⁹ Schaffer, *Communities of Care*, 15.

include queer extended families, grassroots movements, radical coalitions, and indigenous and disability self-care collectives.³⁰

Schaffer does not refute or diminish the historical significance of gender roles in care labor – instead, she simply offers readers less of a binary reading. Her approach to care ethics is inherently intersectional in its approach. As such, it takes the reader out of second-wave feminist ideals and instead encourages an embrace of third- and fourth-wave feminism.³¹ Ideas of third-wave feminism (which focused upon an alteration to traditional assumptions regarding womanhood) when coupled with those of fourth-wave feminism (which prioritizes amplifying women’s voices when speaking out against injustice via social media and other modalities) influence Schaffer, who looks to acknowledge the work of caregivers, expand our understanding of what such labor entails, and signify its impacts on society at large. By doing so, a slew of new possible readings arises. Furthermore, Noddings’ readings imply a gender-determined hierarchy in care – if women are the only effective caregivers, then feminine care must be less significant than masculine logic and morality.³² Schaffer’s reading contradicts this idea by widening the possibilities of caregiving.

³⁰ Schaffer, *Communities of Care*, 15.

³¹ For third-wave feminist ideologies, see: Jessica Valenti, *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Girl’s Guide to Why Feminism Matters* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007); Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2007); and Rebecca Walker, *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (Anchor, 1995) (Note: Walker termed the phrase “third-wave feminism” in an article in *Ms. Magazine* entitled “Becoming the Third-Wave”) For fourth-wave feminist ideologies, see: Laura Bates, *Everyday Sexism: The Project that Inspired a Worldwide Movement* (New York: St. Thomas Press, 2014); Rebecca Solnit, *Men Explain Things to Me* (Haymarket Books, 2014); and Jessica Valenti, *Sex Object: A Memoir* (Harper Collins, 2017); Jia Tolentino, *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion* (Random House, 2019); Mikki Kendall, *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women That a Movement Forgot* (Viking, 2020); and Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

³² Schaffer, *Communities of Care*, 31 and Noddings, *Caring*, 8.

For Schaffer, ethical behavior need not be limited by sex or social position. Indeed, her arguments on the ethics of care depend upon the absence of a gender binary. For Schaffer, care communities “have an inherent ethical component because they are relational structures that require respect for others and are driven by the ability to put someone else’s welfare above one’s own, even temporarily,” and they are accomplished through “attending to others, acknowledging others, respecting others.”³³ That relationality occurs between and across genders – men, women, and, in more contemporary works, transgender and non-binary individuals, engage in reciprocated acts of care. A man may intervene if he sees a transgender woman being antagonized by bigots for buying a dress; a teacher (male, female, transgender, or non-binary) may assist a non-binary student who suffers from insecurity and lack of self-confidence; a neighbor may help shovel out their elderly neighbor’s driveway or bring a warm meal to a community member fighting cancer. Sex and gender identification becomes arbitrary in such practices or readings of care acts. That being said, we cannot ignore the historical significance of sex and gender, which continue to impact more traditional forms of care labor (mothering, nursing, teaching, secretarial duties, and so forth). Schaffer is able to juggle the two rationalities of care ethics – one that depends upon a gender binary and one that does not – by reframing:

Care needs to be redefined as a practice we are all already enmeshed in, regardless of gender. But precisely because it has been historically practiced by women, treating care as significant is already feminist. Ethics of care is a lens that helps us see care everywhere, instead of viewing it as a form of traditional women’s work, a burden consigned to underpaid, exploited workers who are overwhelmingly people of color, or a sentimental idealization of a white, feminized “angel in the house.” Rather, care acts make social relations functional.³⁴

³³ Schaffer, *Communities of Care*, 20.

³⁴ Schaffer, *Communities of Care*, 21.

Care is a feminist act, but that does not mean it is performed predominantly by or solely by women. Care is much more complicated than that, both in history and in praxis.

Schaffer is not the only theorist to integrate third- and fourth-wave feminist ideals into care theory. While Schaffer seeks to modernize Noddings' principles by shifting away from a universalizing gender binary (accomplished through focusing on the act of care itself and the formation of communities), Sandra Laugier advocates for a more inclusive care language completely devoid of dichotomies or hierarchies, accomplished through the integration of ordinary language philosophy (OLP).³⁵ Both she and Schaffer share the same objective; however, their means of arriving there differ slightly. For Schaffer, care is defined as a continuous verb; through the exclusion of a subject, the roles of care-giver and care-recipient can be amorphous.³⁶ For Laugier, morality is entirely subjective and determined by cultural practices, thus leading to fluid conceptions of "ordinary."³⁷ Because care focuses on the ordinary, it should be defined and discussed using the language of such. Linking OLP with the ethics of care would enable readers, theorists, and philosophers to look with greater particularity to exchanges, internalized beliefs, motivators, and proceedings – it prompts readers to partake in a state of active reading within a context rather than making generalized statements or assumptions.³⁸ Schaffer's argument is certainly influenced contextually – however, it focuses on the care act rather than on the language of how the act is described, judged, or interpreted as

³⁵ Sandra Laugier, "The Ethics of Care as a Politics of the Ordinary," *New Literary History* 46, no. 2 (2015): 217.

³⁶ Talia Schaffer, "Care Communities: Ethics, Fictions, Temporalities," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 118, no. 3 (2019): 525.

³⁷ Laugier, "The Ethics of Care," 220-221.

³⁸ Laugier, "The Ethics of Care," 222.

Laugier's argument does. Nonetheless, Laugier shares Schaffer's ideology regarding the need to attend to the 'undervalued': "It is an ethic that gives voice and attention to humans who are undervalued precisely because they perform unnoticed, invisible tasks and take care of basic needs. And, more often than not, these humans are women, often nonwhite women."³⁹ As such, her notions are ingrained within and driven by feminist thought, much like Schaffer's.

Schaffer emphasizes the success of care readings when applied to literary works.⁴⁰ While care readings can be applied across the English discipline to include works from all periods and regions, Schaffer argues that they are particularly applicable to Victorian fiction.⁴¹ In this period, caring is deeply ingrained within the fabric of social and personal life; it is the topic of interest within the great Victorian novel, as the domestic pursuits of women, the exchanges amongst community members, and the marriages of young people are centralized. Within this context, individualism was not a hallmarked trait to which one should aspire. Rather than forge their own paths, individuals typically adhered to roles predetermined for them.⁴² Such will be explained further in the fourth chapter with a discussion of care labor in the nineteenth-century economy. However, beyond simply examining the relationships amongst community members in a piece – such as those living and working in *Middlemarch* – a care reading also integrates the author, her relations, and readers into the community of the text itself.⁴³ In literature, care ethics

³⁹ Laugier, "The Ethics of Care," 218.

⁴⁰ Schaffer, "Victorian Feminist Criticism" and Schaffer, *Communities of Care*. In these works, Schaffer applies care readings to a plethora of Victorian texts, including *The Heir of Redclyffe*, *Villette*, *Daniel Deronda*, and *The Wings of the Dove*.

⁴¹ Schaffer, "Victorian Feminist Criticism," 73.

⁴² Schaffer, *Communities of Care*, 1, 11-15.

⁴³ Schaffer, "Victorian Feminist Criticism," 72-75.

proposes that an author and her characters are continuously engaged in a network of meaningful care relationships.⁴⁴ It strives to assess those connections in an effort to better understand social hierarchies and communal morality. A reading oriented around the ethics of care in a text like *Middlemarch* might examine: Eliot's influences and relations; the interconnectedness of individual characters within the provincial webs; the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of certain care acts; and the socio-political nature of care.

B. Smith and Ruskin: Economic Thought

While Schaffer acknowledges the importance of emotional labor in certain occupations – nursing, teaching, being a governess and so forth – she does not examine how economic systems further complicate relationships. Her work predominantly focuses on whether or not the care labor required in certain occupations is truly genuine; she does not seek to answer how it is impacted by systems of transaction or socio-economic ideology. This thesis, through its analysis of capitalist and Ruskinian thought (as well as some socialist theory), will assess various understandings of political economy, systems of consumerism, and the role of social hierarchies in all exchanges and relationships (particularly that of employer and employee or consumer and producer/seller). By doing so, it will further solidify the innately compassionate and caring nature of those who exist, behave, and act contrary to the social grain of a community.

It is important to acknowledge the different application of economic thought and care ethics within this paper: while the ethics of care will provide a methodological

⁴⁴ Schaffer, "Victorian Feminist Criticism."

underpinning for the analysis of *Middlemarch*, the economic theories of Ruskin and Smith will serve as contextual or foundational information to be extrapolated from. Eliot would certainly have been conceptually aware of these figures and their works while writing this text; to employ an ethics of care framework would thus acknowledge their role in Eliot's care community. However, this argument will not adhere strictly to their varying notions of political economy, but will instead speak about the role of economy at large in care relationships and care communities.

Proper care is essential for the wellbeing of individuals and their societies and, as such, is always a political and social act. There are thus natural ties to economic exchanges, marriage systems, local politics, healthcare, and, more generally, to all interactions in a community. The work and engagements of female characters in Victorian texts – their labor as mothers, nurses, and teachers; their acts of cooking and cleaning; their engrossment in the lives of their children, neighbors, and societies at large – are often seen as mundane or insignificant by traditional masculine scholarship. These roles, when left unexamined, are also left unappreciated. Care ethics does not simply acknowledge this type of work but rather prioritizes it. It is those that are underappreciated (women) who would benefit most from this analytical validation.⁴⁵

Central to the work of Marxist feminists is both the conceptual and financial acknowledgement of women's unpaid labor.⁴⁶ Care ethics can operate as a means to substantiate the undervalued experiences of women. Going beyond this point, care ethics

⁴⁵ Noddings, *Caring*.

⁴⁶ See Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2020); and Holly Lewis, *The Politics of Everybody* (London: Zed Books, 2016).

will allow us to feminize the traditionally masculine understanding of economics, politics, and medicine.

i. Adam Smith

Adam Smith, in his work *The Wealth of Nations*, became the disseminating voice of market-driven economic principle.⁴⁷ He is acknowledged as “a premier philosopher of Western civilization” who “worked out many of the distinctive principles of a civilization coming into being” including the problem of order, or “the continuing resolution of freedom (or autonomy) and control, continuity and change, and hierarchy and equality.”⁴⁸ Through his understanding of spontaneous economic activity, private affairs, and systems of exchange, Smith formulates his notion of the political economy on a centralized free market, encapsulating capitalist ideology.⁴⁹ It is thought to be ruled by an invisible hand, in which supply and demand naturally arise through personal choice and self-interest. At the heart of his theorizing is “controlled freedom” where “freedom and behavior and choice exist only within the socially established norms of conduct,” thereby directly articulating the “natural socialization” of men, the means of function within a society, and the interconnectedness of individuals. Accordingly, we can begin to connect him more fully to Eliot.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Warren J. Samuels, “The Political Economy of Adam Smith,” *Nebraska Journal of Economics and Business* 15, no. 3 (Summer 1976): 3-24.

⁴⁸ Samuels, “The Political Economy,” 6.

⁴⁹ Samuels, “The Political Economy,” 6-7.

⁵⁰ Samuels, “The Political Economy,” 15.

Imraan Coovadia, writing on Eliot and Smith, connects the two through his understanding of realism.⁵¹ Eliot would have been aware of Smith's work because of her presence within intellectual circles, particularly *The Theory on Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*, in which he theorizes on political economy.⁵² Somewhat separate from (but also inherently interconnected with) Smith's economic writings is his work on moral philosophy: in Samuels' words, "the moral, market, and legal orders are distinguishable interacting subprocesses of a larger whole, and their interaction is an important, if not fundamental, part of their operation and explanation."⁵³ For Coovadia, Eliot's works codify the Smithian principle of "the emergence of [a society's] large-scale institutions from the day-to-day interactions of its citizens" and convey how "his insistence that a society is shaped from below turned out to be more than a principle of sociological analysis; it was, unexpectedly, a rule of thumb for constructing a realistic novel."⁵⁴ By constructing a sense of realism through "the recording of many lives intersecting in the medium of historical circumstance," Eliot's later works enable a more logical analysis of realism than what others have conducted.⁵⁵ Indeed, for Coovadia, Eliot relies less on Smith for economic notions as much as for "his sense of a spontaneously formed social structure":

Looking at George Eliot through the lens of Smith makes her realism seem sociologically sophisticated rather than epistemologically naïve. The dizzying sequence of perspectives found in *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*... is not motivated by the conviction that representation is necessarily arbitrary or self-undoing, but is

⁵¹ Imraan Coovadia, "George Eliot's Realism and Adam Smith," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 42, no. 4 (2002): 819-836.

⁵² Coovadia, "George Eliot's Realism," 819.

⁵³ Samuels, "The Political Economy," 6-7.

⁵⁴ Coovadia, "George Eliot's Realism," 819.

⁵⁵ Coovadia, "George Eliot's Realism," 820-821; Coovadia acknowledges how other critics have utilized "hostile interpretations" of Eliot's realism, citing the problematic nature of offering one universalizing perception of reality that fails to acknowledge the experience of others. She differs from them through applying Smithian thought when reading Eliot's later works.

part of a carefully worked out attempt to describe a decentralized society in which no single point of view can claim absolute authority.⁵⁶

In other words, rather than being one entity, society becomes broken down into individualized relationships. That acknowledgement of the interrelated quality of a community's members directly links Smithian thought to our care reading. It further elevates the complexity of the community and its abundance of interactions and engagements.

Ultimately, Smithian thought is integrated within *Middlemarch* (and other works by Eliot) through a sociological reading rather than an economic one. As Coovadia argues, "where Smith carefully excludes economic motivations from the sphere of private intercourse, George Eliot applies Smith's sociological insights to exactly these matters" and acknowledges that "Smith's desire to give equal weight to each perspective is shared by George Eliot, and for much the same reasons: to insist that there is no point external to society from which to judge it, and so that human actions and perceptions are inherently social."⁵⁷ Thus, Smith's focus on the individual is linked inextricably to Eliot's larger assessment of community. Connections or references to political economy – though a direct reference to Smith – become less significant than Smithian allusions. However, because Smith's economic principles are so ingrained within western thought, it is more likely for readers to acknowledge them than his sociological ones. Indeed, even those concepts that are intertwined with his notion of political economy – such as the invisible hand – become re-positioned as more sociological than economic:

Smith's "invisible hand" – undetectable by definition – is a shorthand for the dispersal of agency throughout the web of human relationships. It is a way of naming the aggregate effect of the interactions among society's members; it

⁵⁶ Coovadia, "George Eliot's Realism," 821.

⁵⁷ Coovadia, "George Eliot's Realism," 828, 831.

prevents us from trying in some other way to represent society as a whole... Figurative language is Smith's indispensable tool because he wishes to convert his readers to a system of perspectives that cannot so much be argued for as internalized. In this sense, Smith's writing is a kind of therapy for political illusion.⁵⁸

Rather than focus on the impact of the invisible hand on systems of supply and demand, Smith's conception of political economy instead helps us refocus on the community made up of individuals and their relations – Eliot's web.

ii. Ruskin

Perhaps even more significant for our reading – as well as for the socio-historical context of Eliot's literary masterpiece – is the work of John Ruskin. Ruskin, an art critic, philosopher, and writer, was a central figure within Victorian intellectual circles. Emily Coit argues that for Ruskin:

Economic consumption and the aesthetic are subjects inextricably connected, not just because the discourses of political economy and aesthetics have a shared origin in eighteenth-century moral philosophy, but also because the discourse of aesthetics has long served to legitimize select modes and acts of consumption. To discuss money and art in the same breath is perfectly natural from the Ruskinian perspective that sees society as an organic unity of interdependent parts, a system within which beauty, creative production, governance, and commercial exchange are not separate matters.⁵⁹

Coit links Ruskinian thought to Eliot's work through an assessment of consumerism as a means of sociopolitical engagement. Political consumerism, she concludes, directly connects the work of Ruskin and Eliot, as "Eliot's similar perception of society as an interconnected web allows her, like Ruskin, to see consumption as a mode of interacting with other human beings and thus a crucial site for moral thought and action" where one

⁵⁸ Coovadia, "George Eliot's Realism," 831.

⁵⁹ Emily Coit, "'This Immense Expense of Art': George Eliot and John Ruskin on Consumption and the Limits of Sympathy," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 65, no. 2 (2010): 215.

might examine “how are we to balance our own needs and desires with those of others?”⁶⁰ For Ruskin, the market acts (and is viewed) as “an arena in which one’s choices affect other humans and in which one is therefore, in effect, interacting with other humans, albeit at a distance”; as such, it is a relational experience to sell and buy a product and to engage within an economy.⁶¹ For Eliot, consumerism illustrates how she “conceives of economic behavior as social behavior.”⁶²

Ruskin, before writing on political economy, only claimed to have read Smith (though, it was later discovered, he also knew the work of J. S. Mill and David Ricardo), but as Christopher May contends, “this denial is best regarded as rhetorical distancing from a perceived economic/rational political economy that Ruskin saw dominating the depiction of society rather than as an accurate description of his reading habits.”⁶³ To differentiate himself from his predecessors, Ruskin bases his model of political economy on conceptions of excess and abundance rather than scarcity or limitation.⁶⁴ As a result, his model entails opportunities for individuals to engage within their communities through interconnected consumer relationships. In Ruskin’s view, the choices that underpin economic action should be ethical rather than selfish. Greatly influenced by his art background, Ruskin argues that capitalist principles, such as competition and scarcity, “undermine the just and good society, as they force workers to compete against each other, rather than focusing on the job to be done.”⁶⁵ By doing so, such ideologies “[put]

⁶⁰ Coit, “This Immense Expense of Art,” 215.

⁶¹ Coit, “This Immense Expense of Art,” 219.

⁶² Coit, “This Immense Expense of Art,” 219.

⁶³ Christopher May, “John Ruskin’s Political Economy: ‘There is No Wealth but Life,’” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 12, no.2 (March 1, 2010): 190-191,.

⁶⁴ May, “John Ruskin’s Political Economy,” 190-191 and Coit, “This Immense Expense of Art,” 216.

⁶⁵ May, “John Ruskin’s Political Economy,” 191.

great value on the artisan as exemplar of worthwhile human activity; crude and materialist incentives miss the centrality of human creativity and dignity in production, for the real reward of work is the dignity and creativity of human production for social benefit.”⁶⁶ Ruskin, thus, separates his understanding of political economy from that of Smith through his direct articulation of moral philosophy and his emphasis on human creativity and dignity. This dimension is central to our analysis of Dorothea in the sections to come.

The ethics of care are thus directly intertwined with economic thought – acts of consumerism hold the potential to be acts of care. Coit concludes that, for both Ruskin and Eliot, engagement in political consumerism and political economy conveys how individuals “view themselves as duty-bearing members of a community rather than individuals seeking gratification: they should place the needs of others before their own desires, and spend accordingly.”⁶⁷ That interrelatedness, moral responsibility, and sense of duty to our fellow man is enough to provide a more humanistic understanding of economic transactions. However, it should also be noted that equating consumerism with care can trivialize the experiences of workers – it ignores any semblance of socioeconomic hierarchy, mistreatment, and exploitation. Therefore, it must be examined as a possibility, but only if done so critically or cautiously. Through their means of “communicating to their readers the interconnectedness and interdependence of all persons in the whole that is society,” both Ruskin and Eliot acknowledge that “to spend money mindfully on a purchase, they insist, is to experience one’s unavoidable participation in the economic systems of circulation that manifest this

⁶⁶ May, “John Ruskin’s Political Economy,” 191.

⁶⁷ Coit, ““This Immense Expense of Art,”” 221-222.

interconnectedness.”⁶⁸ Perhaps, then, the dimension of “mindfully” spending should be expanded to engagements within acts of consumerism – to engage mindfully in relationships, especially those involving workers.

Indeed, this reading isn’t to say that Ruskinian ideology is entirely selfless or other-centered. To completely abandon the self for another is implausible, even for the most optimistic (or, read at times as naive) theorists and writers. Ruskin longs for the privileging of creativity for creativity’s sake – and for the liberation of workers from the constraints of a competitive system. Yet, despite his arguments for morality, altruism, and participation in communal relationships, Ruskin’s writing is still dependent upon the accepted social norm of class deviations – he does not completely seek to usurp nineteenth-century social classes. The complexity of social hierarchies and moral consciousness comes to the forefront of Eliot’s work: as Coit observes, “her novel represents both the display of cultural capital and the exercise of the aesthetic disposition as ways of maintaining social and economic hierarchies. She thus at once critiques and participates in the system within which the aesthetic functions to preserve social and political stasis.”⁶⁹ The dual perspectives are perhaps most identifiable in the analysis of Dorothea’s philanthropic ideology and attempt to ameliorate the situation of the cottages on her family’s estate. While Dorothea is deeply unsettled by her own wealth and simultaneous lack of independently-determined fiscal malleability (the ability to use her income to benefit the poor), she also relies upon such hierarchical associations to maintain her sense of the class structure. She does not necessarily want to subvert social

⁶⁸ Coit, “This Immense Expense of Art,” 220.

⁶⁹ Coit, “This Immense Expense of Art,” 216.

order as she claims to; likewise, Ruskin is satisfied with some social rigidity, as his theorizing “does not translate into egalitarianism.”⁷⁰

While the humanistic quality of Ruskinian thought can be directly linked to the principles of care ethics, there are some innate differences between the two. Ruskin emphasizes that individuals can enact positive social change through their particular moral actions.⁷¹ In a related manner, Noddings, Schaffer, and other care ethicists prioritize inter-relational acts of care: they view morality as being conducted at the communal level rather than ever focused upon individually. The ethical formation of any individual, according to the ethics of care, is anything but individualized – rather, it is a collaborative effort by community members, with known and unknown participants, that all individuals are brought up in. This concept is not something that Ruskin would necessarily dispute. However, his notion acknowledges the potential for individualism whereas Eliot’s does not.

C. On the Influence of Socialist Thought

Any discussion of Victorian economic theory would be remiss to omit a reference to the significance of Marxist or socialist ideology. While there is no direct proof that Eliot read Marx, or was familiar with his writings, it can be inferred that some of her contemporaries did. Moreover, philosophers Ludwig Feuerbach (significant for Ruskin) and Immanuel Kant (significant for Smith) served as great influences for both Eliot and Marx; both participated in the humanist movement; and both were personally interested

⁷⁰ Coit, ““This Immense Expense of Art,”” 217.

⁷¹ Kei Nijibayashi, “Dorothea Brooke’s Political Economy: Romanticism and the Influence of John Ruskin in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*,” *Journal of Language, Literature, and Culture* 62, no.1 (April 2015): 19-31.

in the plights of the working class (Eliot depicted some of her most ethical characters as laborers).⁷² Because a care reading argues that an author is continually influenced by others, and that those influences directly impact the formulation of a work (either consciously or unconsciously), it can thus be extrapolated that socialist and Marxist ideology exist somewhere within Eliot's own care community.⁷³ This assertion is not to claim that Eliot would have agreed with Marx, nor that her writing acts directly in accordance with his theories – indeed, Eliot was politically conservative, thus differing significantly from the revolutionary Marx, who sought to transform all semblance of traditional socioeconomic relations under capitalism. Instead, we may find correlation (not causation) between socialist thought and Eliot's writings, particularly through Dorothea's utopian vision and her engagement with the frustrated impoverished tenants at Tipton Grange, such as the Dagley family.⁷⁴

By connecting Marxist ideology to that of Ruskin and Smith, we might see further significance in its incorporation within this paper. While Marxian ideas contradict those of Smith, both find a footing in the individual as part of a collective. While Marx focuses on the bodies of workers, Smith focuses on the individual who makes choices within the confines of societal parameters. Nonetheless, both ideologies regarding the formulation of a community are significant. Ruskinian theory, much like Marxist ideology, focuses on

⁷² Bernard Paris, "Review: *The Otherness of George Eliot: A Biography* by Gordon S. Haight; *George Eliot's Early Novels: The Limits of Realism* by U.C. Knoepfelmacher; *The Structure of Values in George Eliot* by Ian Milner," *Journal of Modern Literature* 1, no.2 (1970-1971): 273, and Coovadia, "George Eliot's Realism," 822.

⁷³ Schaffer, "Victorian Feminist Criticism," 71-72, 79.

⁷⁴ The suffering experienced by poor farming tenants at Tipton estate – as illustrated by Mr. Dagley and his family – is outside the bounds of this thesis. However, a brief assessment is significant and necessary: Dagley's son poaches on Mr. Brooks' land, something he views as unethical. Yet, Dagley's refusal to punish his son conveys a sort of rebellion – his anger and disobedience (mostly resulting from his drunken state) is metonymic for a socialist uprising of the working class, although this example is conducted by a rural agricultural laborer rather than industrial ones.

the status of workers; he, however, bases his idealization in the realm of art, insisting that “*all* labor should be creative labor, and that in a healthy society art production is indistinct from production at large.”⁷⁵ Indeed, Ruskin serves as “a foundational thinker in what John Maynard Keynes called the ‘underworld’ of economic thought, or the tradition working in opposition to the capitalist mainstream.”⁷⁶ He, like Marx, sought a different socioeconomic reality – however, Ruskin does not deviate quite as far.

⁷⁵ Coit, “This Immense Expense of Art,” 217.

⁷⁶ Coit, “This Immense Expense of Art,” 218.

CHAPTER II
DOROTHEA'S COTTAGES, POLITICAL ECONOMY, AND UTOPIAN
IDEALIZATION

The debate over the cottages at Tipton Grange and Freshitt – whether or not to improve the living conditions of the poor tenants on such expansive and wealthy estates – arises as one of the most distinctive ethical quandaries in *Middlemarch*. Holding antithetical perspectives, Dorothea and Mr. Brooke both operate from their own understanding of morality and economics. Dorothea utilizes her wealth and moral goodness to engage in a variety of philanthropic pursuits through chastising the elite (“we deserve to be beaten out of our beautiful houses with a scourge of small cords – all of us who let tenants live in such sites as we see round us”); by striving to better the conditions of the poor, she acts as the feminine ethical force.⁷⁷ Despite his wealth and status, Mr. Brooke operates in an entirely different mentality than his niece. While “he would act with benevolent intentions,” Mr. Brooke “would spend as little money as possible in carrying them out.”⁷⁸ Unlike Dorothea, who responds to her uncle’s thriftiness with “impatience” and “long[s] all the more for the time when she would be of age and have some command of money for generous schemes,” Mr. Brooke is content with “his way of ‘letting things be’ on his estate.”⁷⁹ While Dorothea’s care is not perfectly executed, it is certainly performed more compassionately than her uncle’s.

Mr. Brooke’s economic reasoning is based on traditionally masculine capitalist ideals. After Dorothea expresses her perspective on the cottages, Mr. Brooke cautions Sir

⁷⁷ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 27.

⁷⁸ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 5.

⁷⁹ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 5.

James that “young ladies don’t understand political economy.”⁸⁰ His understanding of political economy derives from the work of Adam Smith in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*.⁸¹ As noted in Chapter 1, Smith, who argues that the economy is best influenced by the “invisible hand” of individual pursuits, integrated moral philosophy into his writings, but from an individualizing and masculine perspective. Mr. Brooke’s ideas on political economy are bound to masculine language and to masculine ethics. Rather than operating with concern for the other, as Dorothea does, Mr. Brooke thinks and acts individualistically: he assures Sir James that “going into electrifying your land and that kind of thing, and making a parlor of your cow-house” would be “a great mistake.”⁸² Rather than striving to better the lives of tenants, he instructs, “see that your tenants don’t sell their straw, and that kind of thing; and give them draining-tiles, you know. But your fancy-farming will not do – the most expensive sort of whistle you can buy; you may as well keep a pack of hounds.”⁸³ For Mr. Brooke, exemplifying the masculine rationale, it would be more reasonable to spend money on dogs for pleasure than on the cottages. He does not believe the improvements made for the tenants would directly benefit him and, as such, are pointless and unprofitable.

However, political economy can be understood in more ethical, compassionate ways. In “Dorothea Brooke’s Political Economy: Romanticism and the Influence of John Ruskin in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*,” Kei Nijibayashi links Dorothea’s philanthropic ideals to the work of John Ruskin in *Unto This Last* and *Munera Pulveris*.⁸⁴ As

⁸⁰ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 13.

⁸¹ Samuels, “The Political Economy.”

⁸² Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 12.

⁸³ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 12.

⁸⁴ Nijibayashi, “Dorothea Brooke’s Political Economy.”

Nijibayashi argues, Ruskin “criticized Victorian society for its indifference to social problems and economic disparities, and emphasized the importance of social affection (or what Romantics call ‘sympathy’) as the essential force for social betterment.”⁸⁵ Mr. Brooke’s masculine rationale can thus be directly criticized from this Ruskinian perspective: he, like many Victorians, is entirely committed to the self rather than to the other. Rather than prioritize the invisible hand, “Ruskin’s theory on political economy is naively humane, especially in substituting mutual reliance and affection for supply and demand as motivation for economic exchange.”⁸⁶ Dorothea, perhaps more than any other character, recognizes the interdependence of individuals in a community. To refute her uncle’s comment on buying hounds over fixing houses, Dorothea asserts that “it is better to spend money in finding out how men can make the most of the land which supports them all, than in keeping dogs and horses only to gallop over it” while promising that “It is not a sin to make yourself poor in performing experiments for the good of all.”⁸⁷ Rebuilding the cottages is financially and socially reasonable to Dorothea; by doing so, they will be investing in their own property and resources. More importantly, however, helping the tenants is an ethical choice. By acting in their economic and moral best interest and wellbeing, the elite can contribute to the good of all. This notion of collectivism is emphasized through her repetition of “all”: she recognizes the significance and necessity of relationships in the operation of a community.

Ruskin’s philosophies still retain some of the individualism of Smith’s.

Dorothea’s thoughts on the cottages mirror this fact. While Ruskin “opposes the idea of

⁸⁵ Nijibayashi, “Dorothea Brooke’s Political Economy,” 20.

⁸⁶ Nijibayashi, “Dorothea Brooke’s Political Economy,” 26.

⁸⁷ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 12.

monopolizing wealth and proposes its distribution among the poor,” he also seeks to retain “class distinctions as indispensable for ideal human relationships based on feudal duty and gratitude.”⁸⁸ Ruskin was not as revolutionary as Marx: he found class-based society to be beneficial. Dorothea, at this point in her moral development, can be seen acting in a similar vein. When speaking later to Sir James about the cottages, she assures him that they are worth pursuing for the “human beings from whom we expect duties and affections.”⁸⁹ Dorothea, by arguing for the importance of improving the cottages, is not thinking of the tenants as entirely her equal. She acknowledges their humanity – which is more than Mr. Brooke or Casaubon do – but does not break with hegemony. She is a part of the ‘we’ that ‘expect duties and affections’ from the tenants; she acts philanthropically towards the other, which places her in a position of power. This stratification will not change once her cottages are built. Instead, their gratitude would simply be interpreted as more genuine. As such, Dorothea cannot yet be said to participate in entirely genuine care relationships with the tenants; there do seem to be some potentially unconscious expectations in return for her benevolence.

Dorothea’s philanthropic efforts, though noble, are complicated by her reasoning. Yes, the tenants will experience greater comfort from being Dorothea’s beneficiaries. However, regardless of whether or not their dwellings are improved, the property is ultimately not the tenants’ own: the land, the residences, the livestock, and the farming equipment belong to Mr. Brooke. Dorothea’s argument that everyone is supported by the land thus falls short in being purely ethical and socially conscious. That emphasis on “all” not only contributes to her quasi-egalitarian stance on humanity and basic human needs,

⁸⁸ Nijibayashi, “Dorothea Brooke’s Political Economy,” 26.

⁸⁹ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 27.

but also illuminates her own self-interest. Underpinning Dorothea's philanthropic efforts are the classist ideology and social structures that make them possible. While she is attempting to reduce the alienation of the poor, she is nonetheless operating from a prestigious, untouchable position. She is the enviable woman in the estate home, willingly choosing to not wear jewels and to dress plainly; they are the poor farmers, struggling with alcoholism, unable to provide for their children, and dwelling in squalor. Is Dorothea truly aware of this difference, or is her privilege so innate that her intent is undetermined?

Regardless of the answer to this question, it is important to examine whether this choice implies Dorothea's naivety; she can perhaps be further linked to Ruskin through this attribute as well. Will the well-intended, ethical actions of one group – the socio-economically elite – automatically equate with a receptive, appreciative response by another, less fortunate group; is providing better accommodations enough to guarantee an increase in productivity, contentment, or gratitude? Dorothea's assessment of the needs of the tenants may simply be a projection or an attempt at absolution. Modeled through her initial religiosity (such as her refusal to wear jewels, her choice to dress in a manner that can be seen as dowdy or simple, and her tendencies to begin praying fervently), Dorothea experiences guilt for her socio-economic privilege. Rather than behaving as her authentic self, Dorothea creates an image through such dressing or mannerism – wanting to engage in philanthropic pursuits can be similarly contrived. By serving the less fortunate, she may feel less ashamed and more worthy of being considered a good Christian and good community member. Indeed, her guilt translates into wanting to engage in some form of tangible care labor. However, while most of those who engage in

care labor operate from an inferior position by serving someone of a higher status, Dorothea attempts to invert the roles. Because of her financial security, she is able to care for the less fortunate; providing them with resources becomes her goal or the way in which she employs care acts.

Dorothea's own guilt and naivety translates to an assumption of what the wants and needs of the poor are – and, with that, an idealization of what a perfect society would look like. Rather than dreaming of marrying again, Dorothea hopes to create a more egalitarian community at Lowick: “I have delightful plans. I should like to take a great deal of land, and drain it, and make a little colony, where everybody should work, and all the work should be done well. I should know every one of the people and be their friend.”⁹⁰ Such a community would be different than Middlemarch, where class differences influence all relationships and actions. Instead, all would be engaged in labor, thereby ignoring any sense of social deviation, or inferiority/superiority complex. Knowing others, being their friend, and caring for them prioritizes the notion of relationality and care; Dorothea's vision requires a genuine concern for one's fellow man. While her thinking can seem silly and naive, it is important to articulate how Dorothea arrives at it. The social hierarchy of Middlemarch and its implications have failed her in a sense. She married ‘well’: as examined further in Chapter 3, despite the disapproval of others because of their age gap, Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon can be viewed as ‘favorable’ since he has such great wealth. However, their marriage causes great suffering; they are ill-matched in temperament and in expectations. Additionally, the burden of gaining even more wealth through marriage and death is something that

⁹⁰ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 522. This idealization captures pre-Marxian socialist thought.

Dorothea struggles with profoundly. Perhaps Dorothea feels abandoned by her community – she cannot relate to those who encourage her to marry again, who want her to be less religious, or who do not try to understand her. While her socialist utopian ideology is certainly naive, it also is understandable when considering the trauma Dorothea has endured – in a way, readers can employ a care reading by acknowledging the ironic rationality in her idealism. Nonetheless, as Schaffer reminds us, “care communities cannot be perfectly egalitarian, even in fiction.”⁹¹

Perhaps what Dorothea really craves is empathetic care, based in engrossment and in seeing from the other’s perception. That form of care isn’t where one blindly accepts the views of another. Rather, it can involve the challenging of one’s ideology. However, the action to do so becomes an act of care when it is meant to help the other, when it strives to contribute to their ethical development. All dimensions of naivety and hypocrisy are questioned and alleviated through her relationship with Will Ladislaw. In particular, Ladislaw teaches her about poverty, assisting in her formation of new ideas regarding it. When the pair are initially unable to maintain a relationship, Dorothea reiterates this thinking: “You are much the happier of us two, Mr. Ladislaw, to have nothing.”⁹² This admission is akin to what her philanthropic and socialist ideals present themselves as. However, Ladislaw is able to see the danger and ignorance in such a mentality: “I never felt it a misfortune to have nothing till now... but poverty may be as bad as leprosy, if it divides us from what we most care for.”⁹³ While Dorothea’s relationship with Ladislaw is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is essential to note this

⁹¹ Schaffer, “Care Communities,” 533.

⁹² Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 516.

⁹³ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 517.

challenge. Answering to her tone which “seemed like a dismissal,” Ladislav quickly becomes a model in care: his probing and confronting makes Dorothea reflect on her privilege and thinking – what is it that truly matters, and what does it mean to want something? Indeed, poverty may not bother those who it impacts until they know what they cannot have. Yet, for Dorothea, the discovery of something she cannot acquire is a privileged experience. For the truly destitute – those whom Dorothea wants to help – they are continually aware of what is out of reach. For that reason, they will not be satisfied by receiving the charity of an elite woman, nor will their participation in any sort of socialist utopia be plausible. Instead, greater social equality in the larger community would be necessary for a true reconstruction of class differences and relationality. Ladislav, ultimately, teaches her the rationality of valuable, authentic care.

CHAPTER III

THE MYTH AND THE MARRIAGE ECONOMY – FRUITFUL AND UNFRUITFUL TRANSACTIONS

In the nineteenth century and in the Victorian novel, an individual's economic prospects were greatly influential in their marital eligibility and desirability. Selecting a suitor with a sizable income was advantageous: rather than making an emotional connection, marriage was a chance to partake in a profitable economic exchange. Compatibility is determined through social position. This understanding of marriage – one based on the potential for economic and social advancement rather than for love, understanding, and support – utilizes masculine language and rationality rather than Noddings' understanding of more feminine language and empathy. The hegemonic acceptance of such principles by girls and women conveys how ingrained patriarchal thinking was in social consciousness. Ultimately, the system of marriage existed as a mythic emblem: it assured that, should one marry according to societal expectations, their happiness and prosperity would be guaranteed. However, this notion of being satisfied and fulfilled was directly correlated with either retaining one's position or with a rise in social class and wealth. Thus, contentment was dependent upon one's acceptance of their position or attempt to improve it. This chapter will examine the marriage economy – a system of transactional exchanges facilitated through the bonds of marriage. In the marriage myth, neither the ethical development of partners nor the reciprocal acts of care between them are considered; instead, value is placed in class, wealth, and social status.

Those operating within the upper social circles, such as the Brooke sisters, are seen as particularly appealing in this marriage economy. It is expected that Dorothea, as

the eldest, would marry Sir James Chettam – this union would be mutually beneficial for their positions as the socially and economically elite. However, determining compatibility by such prospects flattens individuals; it ignores their aspirations, beliefs, wants, and needs. This assumption leads to great upset when Dorothea breaks from tradition to select what others view as a socially (though not economically) inferior partner. Learning from her failed partnership with Casaubon, Dorothea is able to recognize the inaccuracy of the marriage myth and thus act against it entirely in her union with Will Ladislaw.

For those who strive to advance socially, marriage becomes opportunistic – it is the means by which they gain status and respect. However this assumption, which is also a component of the marriage myth, is inaccurate. Using the marriage of upper-middle-class Rosamond Vincy and the country doctor, Lydgate, as an example will solidify this assertion. Ultimately, their ill-fated partnership signifies the collapse of the marriage myth, especially when compared to the success of Mary and Fred’s marriage as examined in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

A. The Centrality of Wealth

Marriage prospects act as an enticement for those whose characters or reputations are viewed as less than ideal. Casaubon’s wealth can counteract some of his less desirable attributes and enable him to find a partner. Socially, he is viewed “as a man of profound learning, understood for many years to be engaged in great work concerning religious history” and “as a man of wealth enough to give lustre to his piety.”⁹⁴ His religiosity could be viewed as a deterrent; however, Casaubon’s income makes his position and his

⁹⁴ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 7.

views more digestible or, for some, even appealing. His greatest obstacles in finding a wife then become his age, appearance, and expectations. Prior to meeting Dorothea, Casaubon's satisfaction with bachelorhood speaks to his pride and displeasure with others. In his proposal letter to Dorothea, he professes, "I have discerned in you an elevation of thought and capability of devotedness, which I had hitherto not conceived to be compatible either with the early bloom of youth or with those graces of sex that may be said at once to win and to confer distinction when combined, as they notably are in you, with the mental qualities above indicated."⁹⁵ Casaubon is contented by Dorothea because of her feminine attributes of obedience and attentiveness. Without being worshiped like a God, as Dorothea originally does, he is uninterested. Without his income, his likelihood of finding a wife would be negligible. However, his wealth becomes a redeeming factor. Dorothea, unlike Casaubon, is young and attractive ("And how should Dorothea not marry – a girl so handsome and with such prospects?") and is thus more desirable.⁹⁶ However, Dorothea's religiosity becomes a similar deterrent ("Nothing could hinder [her marriageability] but her love of extremes, and her insistence on regulating life according to notions which might cause a wary man to hesitate before he made her an offer").⁹⁷ Like Casaubon, her wealth and status guarantee her a spouse. Dorothea's beliefs, had she been less wealthy, would have presumably deterred suitors.

Nonetheless, Dorothea's religiosity poses a direct threat to the masculine understanding of marriage-as-economic-transaction. Despite her beauty, wealth, and position, Dorothea is threatening as "a young lady of some birth and fortune, who knelt

⁹⁵ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 37-38.

⁹⁶ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 5.

⁹⁷ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 5.

suddenly down on a brick floor by the side of a sick laborer and prayed fervently as if she thought herself living in the time of the Apostles – who had strange whims of fasting like a Papist and of sitting up at night to read old theological books!”⁹⁸ It is not simply that her actions are unusual for young women: Dorothea and her actions seem entirely uncontrollable. If a man cannot retain authority in his household, Eliot reminds the reader, he will fear that “such a wife might awaken [him] some fine morning with a new scheme for the application of her income which would interfere with political economy and the keeping of saddle-horse” and thus “a man would naturally think twice before he risked himself in such fellowship.”⁹⁹ The woman, through utilizing ‘her income,’ would undermine the efforts of the husband; she would become involved with the operations of the household political economy. The potential risk of a woman acting autonomously and executing authority in the domestic and public spheres is enough to prevent an engagement. The emphasis on it being a woman’s own income is significant: it illustrates how the economic exchanges within a marriage are unequal. A man, as an individual, may benefit both socially and financially from marrying a wealthy woman; a woman, as an individual, may only benefit socially through an advantageous union (and, by extension, vicariously through her husband’s fortune rather than her own). At the time in which *Middlemarch* is set, married women cannot legally own their own property. Regardless of their familial income or status, being married further strips a woman of her self-determination and dignity. Her own money will be reallocated under her husband’s control. While she will use her husband’s money for domestic pursuits, such as furnishing the home, buying provisions, or shopping for clothing, it will require his

⁹⁸ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 5.

⁹⁹ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 5.

approval. It does not necessarily benefit her as an individual; rather, it only benefits her in her role as wife, mother, and member of the social elite.¹⁰⁰

Casaubon's income is the only reason that his marriage with Dorothea is approved. Mr. Brooke, when mentally assessing Casaubon's proposal, assures both himself and Dorothea that "his income is good – he has a handsome property independent of the Church – his income is good."¹⁰¹ Because of that, his only qualm can be that Casaubon "is not young... [and] his health is not over-strong."¹⁰² His income outweighs other concerns for the expected success of their marriage. However, Casaubon is a poor choice for young Dorothea: he is too old, too cerebral, and too socially incompetent. Eliot alludes to Casaubon's asexuality both prior to the marriage and afterwards, in which the bedroom because a site of tension, conflict, and concern. Yet, when strictly looking through a lens of prospects, there seems to be little to prevent their marriage from occurring; their union is seen as acceptable to the masculine rationale as it is economically profitable.

A more feminine understanding of partnership and marriage is needed as an alternative to the masculine ideal. The relations formed through this masculinized ideology are ineffective and unsuccessful. Indeed, the great unhappiness suffered by Dorothea exemplifies what happens when relationships are stripped of emotion, a quality long associated with the feminine. The language of care ethics must be introduced to assess the potential success of marital unions. Reciprocity and reception are essential: is care being mutually executed and received in the pair? Is each individual able to

¹⁰⁰ David Riesman and Staughton Lynd, "The Relevance of Thorstein Veblen," *The American Scholar* 29, no. 4 (Autumn 1960): 543-551.

¹⁰¹ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 35.

¹⁰² Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 35.

experience the freedom to grow and improve? Are they supported in their aspirations? Is there engrossment expressed through the feelings of love, compassion, and concern?

B. Unsuccessful Care Relationships and Potential Partnerships

The incompatibility between Dorothea and Sir James or Casaubon is immediately recognized through assessing their attempts (or lack thereof) to care for her. Noddings confirms that “to behave ethically in the potential caring relation, the cared-for must turn freely towards his own projects, pursue them vigorously, and share his accounts of them spontaneously.”¹⁰³ If the cared-for is treated with respect, engrossment, and compassion, they will respond by prospering in their pursuits. The one-caring must not expect anything in return; the care can be reciprocated simply through the cared-for’s growth and success. A successful relationship – whether romantic or platonic – requires genuine care. Properly caring for Dorothea would involve an acceptance of who she is and a commitment to helping her grow into a more ethical woman; it would require support of her pursuits without the interference of self-interest. However, neither Sir James nor Casaubon are able to do so. Instead, their perspectives on the cottages and Dorothea’s work are selfish. Rather than wanting what is best for Dorothea (determined through listening to and respecting her), they want what is best for themselves. Their inability to care appropriately signifies their incompatibility as partners.

Sir James, despite supporting Dorothea’s plans for the cottages, does not execute care appropriately and is thus unable to engage in a genuine care relationship with her. While attempting to court Dorothea, Sir James listens attentively to her ideas, shares

¹⁰³ Noddings, *Caring*, 71.

them with others, and commits himself to investing the necessary resources into completing the project. He insists that he “should be so glad to carry out that plan of [hers]” despite it being “sinking money” because “laborers can never pay rent to make it answer”; nonetheless, he assures her that “it is worth doing.”¹⁰⁴ In his profession, Sir James’s masculine rationale is exposed: he acknowledges that ‘others’ would not invest the money and agrees that it will never be profitable. His understanding of profit and reasoning differs from Dorothea’s. She believes it is ‘worth doing’ to improve the lives of the tenants; he believes it is ‘worth doing’ to convince Dorothea to marry him. It is unclear whether his personal understanding of political economy aligns with that of Mr. Brooke or not. However, it can be assumed that Sir James’s conception is at least influenced by that of Mr. Brooke. As he sets about to accomplish her goal, Sir James feels that “he was making great progress in Miss Brooke’s good opinion.”¹⁰⁵ Contrarily, Dorothea can only think about her objectives with “Sir James, as brother-in-law, building model cottages on his estate, and then, perhaps, others being built at Lowick, and more and more elsewhere in imitation.”¹⁰⁶ Immediately, their social and ethical pursuits differ.

Because Sir James expects a specific response from Dorothea, his care becomes disingenuous and ineffective. As examined earlier in this paper, for care to be successfully implemented, the cared-for must be allowed the freedom to either directly respond to the one-caring or to pursue his own independent efforts. Sir James only performs care acts to court Dorothea; as such, he is not genuinely committed to her betterment or to her autonomy. Moreover, he hopes that, through marrying her, that

¹⁰⁴ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 26.

¹⁰⁵ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 27.

¹⁰⁶ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 27.

Dorothea will change: “as to the excessive religiousness alleged against Miss Brooke, he had a very indefinite notion of what it consisted in, and thought that it would die out with marriage.”¹⁰⁷ Through this expectation, Dorothea’s genuine self would be suppressed; she cannot be said to be “free to be more fully [herself] in the caring relationship.”¹⁰⁸ The eradication of her selfhood would illustrate that disingenuous care is not only unsuccessful but also dangerous. As such, Sir James and Dorothea are unable to emotionally connect and become engrossed in each other’s care. A union between the pair, therefore, would not be fruitful.

Casaubon’s lack of interest in Dorothea’s pursuits emphasizes his inability to care properly and thus foreshadows their unsuccessful marriage. Unlike Sir James, Casaubon does not even attempt to care about the cottages. After speaking with him at dinner, she reflects that “on one – only one – of her favorite themes she was disappointed” as “Mr. Casaubon apparently did not care about building cottages, and diverted the talk to the extremely narrow accommodation which was to be had in the dwellings of the ancient Egyptians, as if to check a too high standard.”¹⁰⁹ More than simply ignoring what she has to say, Casaubon also belittles the plight of the tenants. He does not care for the suffering of the poor because they don’t suffer as much as others despite being in different historical and social contexts. While attempting to show his intellect, Casaubon actually appears silly, selfish, and unsympathetic. He can likewise be said not to care for Dorothea; he is too focused on his own thinking rather than on hers.

¹⁰⁷ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 17.

¹⁰⁸ Noddings, *Caring*, 69.

¹⁰⁹ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 29.

Dorothea's response to Casaubon highlights the danger to the self that arises when proper care is denied. Her initial "agitation on this indifference of his" is soon replaced by "further reflection [that] told her that she was presumptuous in demanding his attention to such a subject; he would not disapprove of her occupying herself with it in leisure moments, as other women expected to occupy themselves with their dress and embroidery – would not forbid it."¹¹⁰ Much like Sir James had hoped to quell her undesirable religiosity through marriage, Dorothea begins to self-censor; she believes she can change Casaubon once they marry. She becomes "rather ashamed" in her initial displeasure.¹¹¹ Dorothea, who is fiercely passionate about the cottages, reduces the gravity of her philanthropy to domestic pursuits. This point is not to say that interests in dress and embroidery are not significant – to do so would be counterintuitive to the objectives of a feminine ethical framework which validates the undervalued labor and pursuits of all women. However, Dorothea's objectives are different from those conducted in 'leisure time'; they are her purpose and means to bring greater good into the world. Casaubon's treatment of Dorothea creates some doubt in the validity of her work and her character; it threatens who she is as an activist and as an individual.

Contrastingly, while Dorothea's partnership with Will Ladislav is neither socially nor financially advantageous, the reciprocal nature of that care relationship contributes directly to its success. While aligning herself with Ladislav, a supposedly rakish and unmotivated young man, Dorothea is assumed to be making another poor decision; this union would be even more detrimental because of its economic dimension. Whereas Dorothea gained greater wealth in her partnership with Casaubon, she loses it, along with

¹¹⁰ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 29.

¹¹¹ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 29.

prestige, power, and property, in her connection to Ladislav. However, because the pair understands each other, cares mutually, and possesses a shared morality, their partnership is actually more successful than that based on the more socially-accepted values of the period.

Socially, the couple is viewed as ill-matched; any marriage that is not beneficial in regard to social hierarchy is assumed to be problematic. A consideration of Ladislav's family history may serve as a starting point for the contextual understanding as to why he and Dorothea are supposedly incompatible. Dorothea, though also an orphan like Ladislav, comes from prestige, wealth, respect, and honor; her uncle is active in his guardianship and takes pride in his relation to both Dorothea and her sister, Celia. Ultimately, she is treated like the beloved first-born daughter in an upper-class family. Ladislav's familial line is muddled and convoluted, involving a series of what would be considered detrimental marriages – that of his grandmother, who runs away to marry for love rather than for money, and of his mother, who runs away to avoid the unethical wealth her family has accumulated. Thus, his family line is endowed with the virtues of proper care relationships – love, respect, authenticity, morality and so forth – but also connected to the negative social signifiers of shame, disobedience, and destitution. Thus, their social backgrounds foreground the community's disapproval of their relationship – more would be expected out of Dorothea, and Ladislav would be viewed as opportunistic, selfish, and exploitative.

Being financially provided for by Mr. Casaubon – a relationship that cannot be said to be based in the ethics of care – conveys the problematic social structuring that leads to Ladislav's misfortunate status. Casaubon is ashamed of being associated with

his young cousin, repeating obsessively that he is “a young relative of mine, a second cousin”¹¹² rather than a nephew or even first cousin; he is able to retain a sense of superiority through giving an allowance to Ladislav. Much like what was discussed in the previous chapter regarding the inferiority/superiority complex between employer/employee, elite figure/socioeconomically disadvantaged figure, and care-provider/care-recipient, Casaubon is able to appear righteous and noble for giving to his orphaned relative. However, because Casaubon’s own fortune is soiled through familial estrangements (caused by refusing to follow social protocol for marriage), his status is further sullied. He does not truly care for Ladislav, and would rather him feel obliged, subservient, and insignificant. Ladislav, though he may depend on the income in part to fund his pursuits as an artist, does not truly receive the act of care (though it cannot even fully be considered as such). He acknowledges Casaubon’s moral inferiority and thus refuses to act in accordance with communal hierarchy and its corresponding values. Despite his greater knowledge of morality, Ladislav’s actions and mere existence as an artist are contrary to that which is socially accepted; he is viewed as inferior to Dorothea, who exists within the bounds of a very specific social position. A marriage between the two would thus be further censured, much like those of Ladislav’s grandmother and mother.

Indeed, because Ladislav threatens Dorothea’s estate, their union becomes further socially and financially problematic. The clause of Casaubon’s will, specifying that Dorothea loses her income should she marry Ladislav, is metaphoric for larger societal constraints. Communally, some within Middlemarch would like to prevent their

¹¹² Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 72.

partnership – figures such as Mrs. Cadwallader and Sir James Chettam, who values traditions, are outright opposed to it. The actions of these socially elite figures, in addition to Casaubon’s, become emblematic of patriarchal limitations placed on women, seeking to restrain any semblance of autonomy, self-determination, or self-choice that Dorothea may possess. Indeed, that limitation threatens the “fuller sort of companionship that poor Dorothea was hungering for.”¹¹³ Rather than acknowledging the mutual care that exists within the relationship (as illustrated by their ethical development), the only things of value (to those viewing it externally) are their socioeconomic differences. While the pair is more compatible than other relationships within this text, their interests and wants are tempered by the connections between the marriage economy and class.

In order to control those deemed potentially non-conforming, acts of social banishment, embarrassment, or belittlement are thus deemed appropriate. Casaubon’s will, specifying that “the property was all to go away” from Dorothea should she marry “Mr. Ladislaw, not anybody else”¹¹⁴ privileges wealth over morality: it attempts to force Dorothea into acting in accordance to what is socioeconomically valued over what she may find more personally meaningful (that being, marrying someone who can provide the reciprocated care that she craves). However, because Dorothea is an ethically superior character when compared to someone like Casaubon (who favors wealth and status over righteousness), that choice is instead moralized: rather than a choice between economic gain and loss, it becomes a choice between accepting the status quo and deviating from it for one’s own happiness and growth. Dorothea risks social exclusion through her decision to marry Ladislaw; however, she gains a caring partnership. The fact that Sir

¹¹³ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 466.

¹¹⁴ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 466.

James encourages Mr. Brooks to send young Ladislav away so that he might not tempt young, naive Dorothea is also an example of attempted social banishment. The will's clause seeks to embarrass both Dorothea and Ladislav. Celia, speaking with Dorothea shortly after the death, specifies that "it is as if Mr. Casaubon wanted to make people believe that [Dorothea] would wish to marry Mr. Ladislav – which is ridiculous."¹¹⁵ For Dorothea, this detail is meant to provoke shame; it relies upon the rigid social structuring of Middlemarch where a marriage between Dorothea and Ladislav would be implausible and, for lack of a better phrase, social suicide. For Ladislav, this inclusion incites a sense of further belittlement and embarrassment, intensifying that which Casaubon propagated his entire life in regard to his cousin. When social elites view the clause, they immediately begin to assess this facet: "James says it was to hinder Mr. Ladislav from wanting to marry you for your money – just as if he ever would think of making [her] an offer. Mrs. Cadwallader said [she] might as well marry an Italian with white mice!"¹¹⁶ It is based on the assumption that Ladislav's only intent with Dorothea is to gain control of her wealth; he becomes depicted as a leech. Indeed, it also supposes that Ladislav is in no way good enough for Dorothea – it appears to mock him for entertaining such a thought.

C. The Lydgates' Unfruitful Partnership

Tertius Lydgate and Rosamond Vincy's relationship further illustrates the problematic nature of the marriage economy and fallacy of the marriage myth. Because of their incompatible expectations and desires, the pair, once enamored with each other,

¹¹⁵ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 466.

¹¹⁶ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 466.

quickly become disillusioned and disappointed. At the root of their discord is economic strife – it is present when the pair are first considering each other as suitors, when they plan their wedding, when they fall into worsening financial conditions within the first era of their marriage, and continues until Lydgate’s early death and Rosy’s second nuptials. For Rosy, marriage is the means to an elevated status; for Lydgate, it is an answer to all of his domestic cravings and idealism. However, both are wrong in their presumptions. Thus, decisions of marriage based on social and financial expectations, in accordance with notions of political economy and community values, are presented as ill-fated.

Rosamond’s internalizing of sociocultural assumptions and standards regarding marriage directly correlates to her own unhappiness; as such, the myth of marriage itself and the marriage economy is further disproven. Rosy aspires to climb the social ladder – not just in Middlemarch society, but rather society at large. Despite coming from a financially secure and well-respected family, she is dissatisfied: she believes “it always makes a difference, though, to be of good family” and “felt that she might have been happier if she had not been the daughter of a Middlemarch manufacturer. She disliked anything which reminded her that her mother’s father’s father had been an innkeeper.”¹¹⁷ Rosy equates satisfaction and happiness with class, wealth, and respectable lineage. As such, she refuses to marry within her community, asserting firmly and pompously: “I shall not marry any Middlemarch young men.”¹¹⁸ Marriage, as promised through the myth, is an opportunity for advancement; Rosy assumes she can move away from her family’s ties to manufacturing and innkeeping should she choose a more elite partner. That idealization of the perfect suitor, a man of the right type of position and place of

¹¹⁷ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 94.

¹¹⁸ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 92.

origin, is what draws Rosamond to Lydgate: he is connected geographically to cities, is rumored to come from money, and is employed in a generally ambiguous field – despite not understanding his work fully, Rosy assumes that it is noble and lucrative. Lydgate, as such, is exoticized; he becomes the savior of the marriage myth, coming to rescue Rosy from the poor relations she finds in Middlemarch. Through their partnership, she assumes that social advancement is guaranteed by transitioning from the daughter of a local manufacturer to the wife of a London-, Edinburgh-, and Paris-educated doctor.

Lydgate, though expressing disinterest in marrying until he is more firmly established, also falls prey to the marriage myth. For men, marriage offered several advantages: they would be cared for within the home, satisfied sexually and romantically, and viewed as a well-established member of society through possessing a wife and family. Lydgate lusts after Rosy and is tempted by her virginal beauty and elegance. Her meekness and social demeanor make her appear all that a woman should be. Because Rosy internalizes what is valued in women she is able to act out that role properly. Though Lydgate recognizes he is not yet prepared socioeconomically for marriage, he succumbs to the promised imagery of the myth: that he will be happy, successful, and prosperous with the perfect wife and family. Much as Rosy seeks to bolster her pride through an advantageous marriage, Lydgate does likewise: he might gain prestige through marrying the most desirable girl in Middlemarch – the blond angelic figure, the prized student of Mrs. Lemon's school.

However, because of their different expectations and subsequent disappointments, the pair illustrates the failure of the myth. For the Lydgates, this lack of mutual understanding or care is determined by misunderstandings surrounding wealth. Rosy

enters the marriage attempting to gain socioeconomically through Lydgate – she brings with her an expectation of their future lifestyle, as illustrated through her expensive wedding plans and home decoration choices. Lydgate enters their marriage wanting to improve socially, believing that would eventually contribute to his success in Middlemarch and thereby financial gain. He possesses a more rational understanding of his wealth, yet chooses foolishly to extend himself to satisfy his new bride. When both face dissatisfaction (for Rosy, being told she cannot have something or must sacrifice things; for Lydgate, having to make the difficult decisions and instruct his frequently disobedient wife), their partnership is weakened.

The Lydgate marriage is devoid of reciprocated care and, for that reason, is doomed, particularly when complicated by financial challenges. Rosy, who paints herself as demure and obedient, becomes anything but: she frequently goes against the wishes of her husband, tests him, and seeks to prove herself superior. Lydgate, feeling his position challenged, might come across as harsh or unconcerned to his wife. Even when Lydgate attempts to perform acts of care – such as reducing their cost of living or attempting to advise a pregnant Rosy against horseback riding – Rosy does not acknowledge or accept them. Rosy, instead, believes she is acting with care, even if her ideas are self-righteous and selfish, such as her choice to write to Lydgate’s uncle. Thus, both attempts at care become ineffective.

Ultimately, Rosy might be compared to Dorothea, as both experience the shortcomings of the marriage system. Dorothea is socially expected to be interested in a wealthy figure like Sir James, or at least content with an established man such as Casaubon, rather than with the rogue and socio-economically inferior Ladislaw; however,

she finds reciprocated care and satisfaction within that partnership, even if it was devoid of prestige and great income. Rosy, who acts in accordance with social values more than Dorothea does, is an example of how the marriage economy is unsatisfactory: her beliefs about wealth, status, and marriage are quickly destroyed because she and Lydgate cannot engage in an authentic care relationship. As such, she feels dissatisfaction similarly to Dorothea, who has the courage and wisdom to go against social standards.

CHAPTER IV

THE NECESSITY OF CARE LABOR IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ECONOMY AND IN MUTUAL ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT: AN ASSESSMENT OF FRED VINCY AND MARY GARTH

Within a care community, it is essential for all members to engage in care labor in some capacity. For many, this task exists predominantly within the scope of marriage and parenthood, extending somewhat into civilianship¹¹⁹ through a respect for one's neighbors and fellowmen. Care labor, as such, is an ethical requirement to partake in a moral society. However, some types of employment require care labor more directly – at their core they entail, as Schaffer refers to it, emotional labor.¹²⁰ Certain individuals receive financial compensation for providing care to others, whether or not they are treated fairly or have their care reciprocated. This chapter will examine the necessary role of care laborers within the socioeconomic public sphere in provincial communities during the nineteenth century through an examination of Fred Vincy and Mary Garth. An important designation to note: while care labor is a general term used to describe acts of care, this chapter will differentiate general care labor from that done for compensation with references to care laborers instead of caregivers or care providers as they are frequently referred to in the rest of this thesis.

While care work is required for a society to function, its laborers are not guaranteed to receive the proper compensation. Care labor is traditionally fulfilled by

¹¹⁹ Civilianship might be best understood as the participation in one's society through engagement with others and with its systems. It might include acts of political maneuvering (such as Lydgate voting on who should be hospital chaplain), commercial exchange (interacting with others at the market, in retail shops, or elsewhere), and in communal interactions at large (following social etiquette when meeting new people, respecting social hierarchy, acting virtuously towards women, and so forth).

¹²⁰ Schaffer, *Communities of Care*, 11-12.

women – the doting nurses, the dedicated governesses, the concerned teachers, the attentive wives, the compassionate mothers, the dutiful daughters.¹²¹ Contemporary Marxist feminism¹²² would argue that, because occupations were gendered, the respect and financial compensation for such care-giving was negligible. Women who occupy such positions of maid or companion typically derive from lower socioeconomic statuses; women of the middle class and higher would not typically be obligated to work. However, if a middle class family was unable to support a single daughter in adulthood, she would likely become a governess. This employment was considered respectable for a woman in such a position.¹²³ Any other role would be viewed as beneath her. Schaffer's understanding of emotional care labor is important for this analysis:

Work as a companion, a governess, a nurse, or a servant... was a different kind of economic model from factory work. It required a performance of emotional affect, a public effort to demonstrate complaisance, affection, or respect that did not need to match the person's authentic emotion and would not have been necessary amid the roar of industrial machinery. If industrial labor featured the kind of physical struggle Woloch describes, service work depended on a private dynamic of feelings. Such caregiving did not usually eventuate in a battle for mastery but was more likely to produce an internal struggle, a desperation to sustain an authentic sense of self when the job made that self disappear... caregiver minor characters in Victorian fiction [are] not struggling for primacy with the protagonist, but trying, like other companions, governesses, servants, and nurses, to survive in an economic regime of emotional labor.¹²⁴

¹²¹ See Florence Nightingale, *Notes on Nursing* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1860); Sarah Ellis, *The Daughters of England: their position in society, character, and responsibility* (New York: D. Appleton, 1842); Sarah Ellis, *The Mothers of England: their influence & responsibility* (London: Fisher, 1843); and Sarah Ellis, *The Wives of England: their relative duties, domestic influence, & social obligations* (London: Fisher, 1843).

¹²² See Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2020); and Holly Lewis, *The Politics of Everybody* (London: Zed Books, 2016).

¹²³ See Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

¹²⁴ Schaffer, *Communities of Care*, 11-12.

Women whose work directly involves emotional or care labor exist within a complicated social structure – their position involves engaging within the home from an inferior position. Yet, that position is not simply contained within the household – it also extends to their position in society as a whole.

The marriage economy was directly influenced by class and social standing, as reviewed in Chapter III. It was considered that working women were less desirable for men outside of their class. Eligible bachelors coming from the middle class and upward would be dissuaded from marrying less fortunate girls; instead, they would be encouraged to marry within the bounds of their class or strive to elevate their own position through marriage. Young women who were not financially obligated to work were more likely to be seen as marriageable: they were more ladylike and able to replicate proper community values within their own family. If a middle- to upper- class woman remained unmarried, she often joined other siblings in their marital homes, or perhaps lived on her own if she possessed enough of a fortune. If she was widowed, she would retain a greater level of autonomy and respect. The family structure thus remained intact; social order functioned appropriately and reproduced with each generation through marriage.¹²⁵ Girls from the middle and lower classes complicated this system. Working girls have always engaged in labor – whether that be in positions of unpaid or paid domestic servitude, in agricultural work, or in factories or mills. If unmarried, they risked being seen as burdens to their families. In order to help provide, they found work as governesses, companions, or school teachers. In this role, they fulfilled essential needs

¹²⁵ See Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and women of the English middle class, 1780-1850* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) and Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The ideological work of gender in mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

within the community. Being married did not necessarily absolve women's need to work. Rather, their obligations were simply increased to include keeping a house (whether they owned property or were tenants), serving their husbands, and bearing and rearing children. They often had little opportunity to marry outside of their class and, if they did so, were looked down upon by their husband's family. Working girls were viewed as soiled by those in elevated positions, thereby patronized and dismissed.¹²⁶

Moving beyond our specific consideration of female subjugation, all positions were under greater scrutiny and limitations more generally. Schaffer explains that, within the socio-historical context of the nineteenth-century, the concept of individualism differed from that maintained today, particularly in regards to class deviations and social roles.¹²⁷ Rather than adhere to the ideals of autonomy and self-determination, Victorian subjects were placed within the confines that their gender, age, and class determined. This assessment extends beyond merely whom they could marry; instead, it encapsulates all of their relationships and act of care:

Caregivers – and other nineteenth-century subjects – were not necessarily struggling to express unique selfhood. If anyone could do so, it would have been white, middle-class, male, liberal individuals, but even so, they often had to follow a cultural script to take the jobs their families secured them and to exercise the values of duty, earnestness, piety, prudence, and self-discipline. Nineteenth-century exhortations commonly insist on people learning to accept their roles so as to become content with the station in which God had seen fit to place them. If people did not want to be wives, mothers, soldiers, or servants, or to work in the inherited farm or business, that was their problem, and it was their duty to learn to conform and be grateful. Such acquiescence in one's own categorization needs to be taken into account when reading character. Minor characters might not be struggling to reach the top, but rather to come to terms

¹²⁶ See Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and women of the English middle class, 1780-1850* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) and Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The ideological work of gender in mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

¹²⁷ Schaffer, *Communities of Care*, 11.

with the type of their own minorness.¹²⁸

If an individual or character within a text felt dissatisfied with their social position, there were varying amounts of remedy. While members of the upper middle class had the potential to marry into more elite circles, such ability was determined by their looks, character, and social significance. However, other class subjects faced greater obstacles. This reading is particularly apt when considering their forms of labor.

A. Fred Vincy: Ethical Development through Social and Familial Ostracization

Even members of the most privileged groups in Victorian society – white, middle-class men – faced limitations, as familial expectations often overruled any sense of individual desire or ambition.¹²⁹ By pursuing a relationship with Mary Garth and refusing to become a clergyman, Fred Vincy transgresses the bounds of his socioeconomic status and, as a result, distances himself from his family and social group; however, doing so also enables him to be a more effective caregiver.

Fred's initial moral ambiguity – expressed when he is closely identified with his own family – accentuates his inability to act as a proper caregiver under such circumstances and social restraints. Within the Vincy household, Fred is the recipient of much favor, both consciously and unconsciously. However, such cushioning does not truly benefit his ethical development. Under the assumption that he will become a clergyman, he is sent to college by his parents. Though this act of care is certainly well-intended, it is not reciprocated appropriately by Fred – he attempts to drop out because he lacks interest, and ultimately sees little-to-no value in formal education when a large

¹²⁸ Schaffer, *Communities of Care*, 11.

¹²⁹ Schaffer, *Communities of Care*, 11.

financial gain is expected, as is the case for Fred after Featherstone's death. Ultimately, lacking the awareness of intent, Fred does not acknowledge Mr. Vincy's act of care in attempting to secure him a comfortable income and career – he is blinded by his own disinterest and dissatisfaction. The absence of reciprocity thereby diminishes Fred's ability to mature emotionally and ethically under the care of others.

It should be noted that, to some extent, the choice to send Fred to college is a moral quandary. The Vincys invest in Fred's education as the means to secure him in a respectable, financially and socially secure position. While this interest conveys a sense of love and concern for the well-being of their son, it prioritizes the wishes of the caregiver over that of the care recipient: Fred has no interest in being a clergyman as his parents want. In the same breath, one must also acknowledge how such thinking is in accordance with Victorian social ethics, as articulated by Schaffer.¹³⁰ To read from a contemporary perception, endowed with the values of individualism and self-determination, would be anachronistic. We might read Fred's initial withdrawal from school prior to the death of Featherstone as his rejection of the care act and, as such, a starting point for Fred's moral development as care recipient and caregiver.

Furthermore, his mother's outright favoritism towards her son is not advantageous for Fred's moral development. Indeed, there is no sort of pressure to improve by Mrs. Vincy, who makes excuses for Fred's laziness and attempts to persuade Rosy that she "must allow for young men. Be thankful if they have good hearts. A woman must learn to put up with little things."¹³¹ Rather than acknowledging his privilege, she belittles its

¹³⁰ Schaffer, *Communities of Care*, 11.

¹³¹ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 91; further the gendered reading we can apply to this text, it can be seen that "you will be married someday"

significance and presence: “Few young men have less against them, although he couldn’t take his degree – I’m sure I can’t understand why, for he seems to me most clever. And you know yourself he was thought equal to the best society at college.”¹³² Mrs. Vincy glazes over her son’s shortcomings and faults. It cannot be said that Mrs. Vincy isn’t right in her favoritism, as Rosy is not as compassionate towards her mother as Fred is. However, that spoiling and doting isn’t as beneficial as she might hope.

Rather than ‘exercising the values of duty, earnestness, piety, prudence, and self-discipline’ through behaving appropriately, abiding by his family’s wishes and becoming a clergyman, Fred’s early actions are completely contrary to such moral principles.¹³³ Fred spends his time loafing: he is described as having little concern for the imposition he makes upon others (“the table often remained covered with the relics of the family breakfast... it awaited the family laggard, who found any sort of inconvenience (to others) less disagreeable than getting up when he was called”) and only focusing upon his own self-interest (such as, when asked about his ability to get up at 6am to go hunting instead of for breakfast, he replies: “I can get up to go hunting because I like it”).¹³⁴ Fred, through his gambling habits and connection to Mr. Bambridge, a local horse dealer, is associated with “young men understood to be ‘addicted to pleasure.’”¹³⁵ Gossip is spread throughout Middlemarch about his behavior (“it’s the talk up and down in Middlemarch how unsteady young Vincy is, and has been forever gambling at billiards since home he came...it’s openly said that young Vincy has raised money on his expectations [of

¹³² Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 91.

¹³³ Schaffer, *Communities of Care*, 11.

¹³⁴ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 90, 93.

¹³⁵ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 217.

gaining substantial wealth when Featherstone dies].”)¹³⁶ Fred not only fails to fulfill the social obligation of filial duty by his economic ventures, but also by his lack of morality. He shares with others that he expects to receive Featherstone’s estate, flirts with Mary who chastises his lack of seriousness, and fraternizes with unrespectable men. While he has some redeeming qualities, like his love for his mother and concern for Mary, overall he is immature, selfish, and boyish. By lacking the moral necessities to be a proper caregiver, Fred is unable to fulfill such a role properly at this point.

Fred’s lack of desire to be a clergyman is multi-faceted. He expresses the lack of countenance to do so successfully. More substantially, he lacks the desire to put in the necessary labor. Fred, under the presumption that he will inherit Stone Court, finds no need to receive a college degree. Instead, he prefers to spend his time drinking and gambling. Because of his expected inheritance, Fred doesn’t possess the same drive that Mary does – she, contrastingly, must labor tirelessly because of the economic constraints she faces. As such, Fred’s own gender- and class-based precedence actually disenables him from proper caregiving. Fred’s inability to adhere to his family’s wishes illustrates his initial deviation. While the career would facilitate a comfortable living for him and his future family, it would make him deeply unhappy. Even when he is provoked by desperation for financial security to become a clergyman his relationship with Mary prevents him from doing so.

The Vincys’ own socioeconomic status and manner of living may illuminate the differences in work ethic between Fred and Mary. When considering Fred’s family, their hindrance on his moral growth becomes all the more apparent. It is traditionally assumed

¹³⁶ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 98-99.

to be a mother and father's responsibility to pass on good values: they are to model genuine love, care, kindness, gratitude, patience, and commitment to community, and pass on economic, familial, and societal knowledge. However, Mr. and Mrs. Vincy's own shortcomings prevent them from doing so and, as such they are unable to be effective caregivers; additionally, their choices with money disable them from passing on financial savviness to their children. Fred cannot view either as models in caring behavior or in financial sensibility. While the pair obviously love their children, their own sense of superiority blinds them. Mrs. Vincy is noted to be "spoiling her children so,"¹³⁷ and thereby preventing them from gaining any sort of rationality. Mr. Vincy, despite appearing to gain wealth in manufacturing, is said to have "expensive Middlemarch habits – spent money on coursing, on his cellar, and on dinner-giving, while mamma had those running accounts with tradespeople, which give a cheerful sense of getting everything one wants without any question of payment" and, simultaneously, to have "been losing money for years, though nobody would think so, to see him go coursing and keeping open house as they do."¹³⁸ For Mr. and Mrs. Vincy, comfort and social status are of greater importance than that privileged in care ethics. How, then, are they to be proper teachers of care?

Indeed, Fred and Rosy's understanding of money, commerce, and the economy is quite limited despite their own family wealth:

Of what might be the capacity of his father's pocket, Fred had only a vague notion: was not trade elastic? And would not the deficiencies of one year be made up for by the surplus of another? The Vincys lived in an easy profuse way, not with any new ostentation, but according to the family habits and traditions, so that

¹³⁷ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 99.

¹³⁸ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 99, 218.

the children had no standard of economy, and the elder ones retained some of their infantine notion that their father might pay for anything if he would.¹³⁹

This lack of “standard of economy” is dangerous and potentially detrimental. While they long for success for their children, that very ‘success’ is narrowly defined: for Fred, it is to take orders after receiving his degree; for Rosy, it is to marry well. Because neither child fulfills this expectation, they are ostracized from their family. Both need others to illustrate genuine care and sensibility (morally and financially) – for Fred, it is Mary, her family, and Farebrother; for Rosy, it is Dorothea. However, because Fred’s care relationship with the Garths and Farebrother is ongoing, it is more fruitful.

Fred’s relationship with Mary Garth, because of their family relations and class differences, provides another instance of Fred acting individualistically. The Vincys and the Garths are tangentially connected through Mr. Featherstone – his first wife was Caleb Garth’s sister, and his second was Mrs. Vincy’s sister. It is specified that:

The Vincys were on condescending terms with [the Garths], for there were nice distinctions of rank in Middlemarch; and though old manufacturers could not any more than dukes be connected with none but equals, they were conscious of an inherent social superiority which was defined with great nicety in practice, though hardly expressible theoretically.¹⁴⁰

Middlemarch, despite being small and provincial, is a class-based community. While certain members are more keen on adhering to a rigid social structuring – namely, those in more lucrative positions such as Mr. and Mrs. Vincy, Mr. Casaubon, and Mr. Bulstrode – others engage in relationships more fluidly. The ill-relations only intensify when the Garths lose their financial security and Mary becomes Mr. Featherstone’s caretaker and companion. Because neither of Featherstone’s marriages resulted in

¹³⁹ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 218,

¹⁴⁰ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 219-220.

children, both families stand to inherit through his will – as such, the Vincys were anxiously anticipating that the Garths would engage in unethical behavior to gain a greater sum, thereby robbing Fred of his fortune. While Mr. and Mrs. Vincy exhibit some semblance of genuine care of others – that being, Mrs. Vincy for her son, and their desire for both children’s success and establishment – they are unable to see beyond their own self-superiority and rigid ideals. As discussed in Chapter 3, Rosamond’s own sense of haughty and supercilious mannerism and beliefs disenable her from engaging in a reciprocated care relationship with her husband. As such, if Fred is to become a proper carer, he must break apart from such a family.

It is said by the omniscient narrator that “a man marries his wife’s relations, and the Garths are so poor, and live in such a small way.”¹⁴¹ The Vincys, because of their own sense of self-superiority, are against the partnership of Fred and Mary – their mere friendship is subject to frowned-upon speculation. Thus, lusting after Mary is contrary to the wishes of his family. That ostracization is only intensified by Fred’s refusal to become a clergyman. The decision, supported and, in part, prompted by Mary, is both a moment of growth away from his parents and growth towards the Garths – it is when Fred begins to perform care labor not simply within his relationships, but also for economic security. Being an estate agent is socially inferior to being a clergyman, particularly because Fred is educated. Yet, that socially demoted position actually enables him to perform care more successfully.

However, by being ostracized by his own family – illustrated through their general disapproval and his father’s refusal to help him pay off his debts or provide for

¹⁴¹ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 95.

him any longer – Fred must grow closer to the Garths; as such, his transformation from typical to atypical thereby enables him to become a proper caregiver. He truly does ‘marry’ his wife’s relations, even before the pair are officially wed.

Fred’s ventures in agriculture enable him to perform acts of care for both economic gain and ethical development. After an attempted attack launched by Lowick tenants, Fred assists Mr. Garth: “They went to work, and Fred helped vigorously. His spirits had risen, and he heartily enjoyed a good slip in the moist earth under the hedgerow, which soiled his perfect summer trousers. Was it his successful onset which had elated him, or the satisfaction of helping Mary’s father?”¹⁴² For Fred, working with the land – feeling the soil, being marked by the landscape – creates a new sensation, something akin to joy. It allows him to feel a sense of pride, much like what Mary feels when doing her work.¹⁴³ That emotional connection to the work was previously missing for Fred – he cared little for taking orders and had no sense of investment. From the moment that Fred begins with Mr. Garth, he begins to think of the future; he begins to see himself happier and more fulfilled by engaging in such work.

Indeed, acts of care are ingrained within the tradition of farming: knowledge is shared through teaching between the generations. Mr. Garth acknowledges this fact when Fred asks if he could learn the skills necessary: “My business is of many sorts... A good deal of what I know can only come from experience: you can’t learn it off as you learn things out of a book.”¹⁴⁴ Fred’s ability to learn and perform the work (and simultaneous acts of care) well is determined by his self-perception, as Mr. Garth explains:

¹⁴² Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 532.

¹⁴³ Eliot, *Middlemarch*; A discussion on Mary’s pride and her acts of care labor is provided on pages 67-68.

¹⁴⁴ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 532.

You must be sure of two things: you must love your work, and not be always looking over the edge of it, wanting your play to begin, And the other is, you must not be ashamed of your work, and think it would be more honorable to you to be doing something else. You must have pride in your own work and in learning to do it well, and not be always saying, There's this and there's that – if I had this or that to do, I might make something of it. No matter what a man is – I wouldn't give twopence for him.... Whether he was the prime minister or the rick-thatcher, if he didn't do well what he undertook.¹⁴⁵

A person's ability to engage successfully in agricultural labor – indeed, in any type of labor – is directly influenced by their work ethic and commitment; they will never do well in their chosen field if they do not take pride in it. Instead, they will be trapped mentally in a sense of ongoing comparison. Fred, had he chosen to be a clergyman as his father expected, would never have been satisfied. Working in agriculture and business, however, provides him with a chance to pursue something for himself; it can be the line of work that suits him best. Mr. Garth, by offering guidance to Fred, models care ethics; Fred, if he follows Mr. Garth's lead, will be able to go on to pursue further acts of care on his own.¹⁴⁶

By having proper care modeled by Mr. Garth, Fred is able to engage in care labor in both his occupation and in his relationships. Farming, land management, and any other sort of work within the agriculture domain requires direct contact with others: it, like the work Mary does as a companion, may place individuals within an inferior social position. Some, such as Mr. Garth or Fred, do not own the land that they care for, but rather answer to the landowners (gentry or upper-middle class figures). Despite being socially undervalued, they possess knowledge and skills that the landowners do not. Thus, such laborers must navigate the complicated social relations – Mr. Garth might serve as a

¹⁴⁵ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 533.

¹⁴⁶ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 533.

perfect example. Though he possesses far greater wisdom than an unethical character such as Mr. Bulstrode, he must show respect while under his employment; when working for Dorothea, he is encouraged to care not only for the land, but also for the young widow in her philanthropic pursuits; even when offered self-advancement, he thinks of others, as illustrated by his intended plans for Fred (“What if Bulstrode would agree to his placing Fred Vincy there on the understanding that he, Caleb Garth, should be responsible for the management? It would be an excellent schooling for Fred; he might make a modest income there, and still have time left to get knowledge by helping in other business”).¹⁴⁷ Although Mr. Garth is deemed as a failure by many in the community, particularly the Vincys, because of his financial hardships, he is, in fact, one of the most ethical, wise, and caring figures in the community. Because he never fails to take pride in his work, he can continually engage in successful acts of care. Fred, by learning from Mr. Garth, can be expected to do likewise.

Being properly educated in agricultural labor will enable Fred to care more successfully, thereby expanding our reading of care ethics and the roles of care-givers and care-recipients. Though care ethics predominantly focuses on human relationships or, at most liberal, relationships between individuals and animals, there is certainly room for expansion. While beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to acknowledge how environmental feminism and new materialist feminism may provide areas for future studies in the field. A consideration of how caring for the land directly affects an individual’s moral development would be entirely plausible; because Schaffer’s understanding of care ethics is centered on principles of intersectionality and fourth-wave

¹⁴⁷ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 657.

feminist thought, it would become almost natural for agricultural labor to be included within this discussion.¹⁴⁸ Indeed, Schaffer’s understanding of care “as meeting another’s need” where “anyone or anything can be doing the work of meeting a need” thereby allows readers “to imagine the carer’s identit(ies) in the broadest possible way.”¹⁴⁹ Schaffer does not articulate the standards or qualities a carer or care recipient must have – as such; “caregiving is agnostic as to the animate status of its members.”¹⁵⁰ While a care relationship can look like that between a mother and her child, tucking him into bed, reading him a story, and kissing him goodnight, “it could also be something like Jane Eyre taking comfort from the warm rough grasses on the moor.” Thus, the natural world becomes a possible caregiver and care recipient – we, like Jane, could feel loved by the earth and acknowledge how “care imposes a certain responsibility on us to maintain them. It involves an ethics of ecological sustenance, or animal rights, or historical preservation.”¹⁵¹ A brief consideration of the ecological concerns of agricultural work might expand our understanding of Fred’s success as a care laborer.

An agricultural occupation would require emotional commitment – both involving other humans and with the land; thus, it would be considered a form of care labor like being a nurse, teacher, or companion. Fred, as he tends to the property’s grounds, manages estates, and acts as a surveyor, forms a relationship with the land itself. That direct connectedness can be seen when he is literally transformed while working with Mr.

¹⁴⁸ See: Nadine Levy. “Towards a New Environmental Ethic in Contemporary Feminist Theory.” *Hecate* 38, no. 1-2 (May 1, 2012): 9-23, and Teresa Lloro-Bidart and Keri Semenko, “Toward a Feminist Ethics of Self-Care for Environmental Educators,” *Journal of Environmental Education* 48, no. 1 (January 2017): 18-25. As noted in Chapter I, fourth-wave feminism includes the necessity of environmental justice, as well as the ways in which women, the poor, and other marginalized groups are negatively impacted to a greater extent by environmental degradation.

¹⁴⁹ Schaffer, “Care Communities,” 525.

¹⁵⁰ Schaffer, “Care Communities,” 525-526.

¹⁵¹ Schaffer, “Care Communities,” 525-526

Garth: he feels revived as the soil touches his skin and finds joy in being marked by the land. The care is thus reciprocal: his work improves the quality of the earth, and the earth heals him, making him more ethical.

B. Mary: Gender and Class at the Intersection of Care Labor

Prospects are more challenging to deviate from for Mary Garth than for Fred Vincy. Because of her class and familial need for additional income, she must engage in care labor. Mary, unlike Fred, does not have the privilege of considering her wants or her capabilities, as her responsibility is not up for debate. Fred may argue that his temperament would be ill-suited for the position of a clergyman, but he also lacks the motivation to do the work until he is ostracized from his family for growing closer to the Garths. It is therefore desperation that drives his engagement in financially-beneficial and socially-necessary care labor. Mary, on the other hand, is not driven to desperation by circumstances of her own making; rather, her position is determined by circumstances outside of her control, namely that of her gender and class.

The cultural role of education was influenced greatly during the Victorian period by sex and socioeconomic status – its primary objectives differed across the binaries of male/female and economically secure/insecure. For middle to upper-middle class families and beyond, female children were primarily educated by governesses.¹⁵² Young ladies, if they were fortunate enough to continue their education outside of the home, did not focus heavily on academic thought, but rather social development. While male education focused on career-building skills and development in thought, female education centered

¹⁵² Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London: Routledge, 2013).

around the development of lady-like virtues. For the Vincys, Fred's education, because of his gender and social status, is prioritized over Rosy's: because of the assumption that Fred will carry the family legacy and name, he is invested in, whereas Rosamond is less important, simply because of the assumption that she will be married and thus join another family.¹⁵³ Education for more privileged girls, like what Rosy experienced at Mrs. Lemon's school, is quite different than that for boys, as it prioritized "all that was demanded in the accomplished female – even to extras, such as the getting in and out of a carriage"¹⁵⁴ It cannot be said that Rosamond is a supremely ethical character – she is selfish, greedy, and ambitious to leave behind her community. However, it is important to note that Fred's education is never said to have any focus on moral development; rather, it was assumed that boys would mature into strong, confident, successful family men simply by being invested in. Particularly since he was to be a clergyman, this gap in ethical teaching is concerning. If he was unable to acquire such knowledge in his home or in his education, it is understandable why he must pursue it elsewhere through communal figures.

Education is not something that Mary has the luxury to refuse. Her mother, as a former school teacher, possesses the capabilities to instruct her children well. However, the dimension of social development through peer relationships would have, presumably, been lacking. Whereas Rosy and Fred are both surrounded by other members of their community in their educational spheres, Mary is not. Her world, as such, is all the more limited. Perhaps this limitation can also be seen as advantageous – Rosy finds faults in

¹⁵³ Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁵⁴ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 89.

those she goes to school with and Fred does not succeed in college regardless of the influence of others. Instead, Mary is granted an objective perspective – she is the moral voice that has learned the importance of ethical behavior and care.

Mary's occupation illustrates the role that care labor plays in our communities both socially and economically. Care labor is necessary for the functioning of a society. Whether it be children, the elderly, or more prestigious households, there is a direct need for such work. When individuals, such as Featherstone, get older, someone must be there to care for them. Mary acts as a nurse and companion for Featherstone – she is paid to tend to him, serve him beverages and fetch medicine when his coughing fits commence, and provide basic assistance. In contemporary culture, her work is the equivalent to that of a home health aid for elderly clients. While a companion, nurse, or caretaker figure would normally be a member outside of the family, it is important to note that Mary is Featherstone's niece. This complicates our reading, as it draws into question the convoluted nature of socioeconomic status within a disjointed family structure. Her own financial insecurity when compared to Featherstone's other nieces and nephews is stark, thereby illustrating the socioeconomic differences that can occur within interrelated groups in which genuine care is lacking amongst them. Her employment further complicates familial relationships between the Garths and Vincys.

It is essential to recognize how care labor, when performed for more hegemonically insignificant individuals (like the elderly, the poor, the ostracized), is automatically equated with opportunities for either compensation or philanthropic efforts – it is never assumed to be done simply out of concern for our fellowman. As discussed in Chapter 2, philanthropy is often influenced by one's own class position: an elite figure,

like Dorothea, will perform acts of care for the less fortunate. However, those acts of care are not entirely pure, but rather involve, to some extent, self-interest. The same is true when considering acts of care directed towards Featherstone. As an elderly, sickly man whose movement is limited, Featherstone depends upon the care offered by others; he is the cared-for regardless of how he receives the care act or how he treats the caregiver. Featherstone is in no way an ethical model, nor someone that characters enjoy spending time around. The only attribute valued in him is his wealth – those who engage with him are concerned simply with ways they can economically benefit. As such, acts of care performed for him, apart from Mary’s, can only be justified as pining for a reward. Even Featherstone is cognizant of this motive: when his sister volunteers her daughters to assist him, he quickly recognizes that “They’d need have some money. Eh?”¹⁵⁵ Mrs. Vincy, hoping to lure Rosy into visiting her uncle, chastises her: “It is a thousand pities you haven’t patience to go and see your uncle more, so knowing what he might have done for you as well as for Fred. God knows, I’m fond of having you at home with me, but I can part with my children for their good.”¹⁵⁶ In Mrs. Vincy’s mind, caring for Featherstone by visiting him, showing concern for him, and forming a relationship with him is rewarded through economic gain. While Mrs. Waule’s provocation is more delicately implied than Mrs. Vincy’s, both women strive towards the same goal: they want their children to monetarily benefit from any act of service or care towards their dying uncle. Care acts are thereby monetized and commodified.

Why, then, is Mary so heavily criticized for doing what both Mrs. Waule and Mrs. Vincy propose that their daughters do? The hypocritical thoughts and opinions of both

¹⁵⁵ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 101.

¹⁵⁶ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 95.

women derive from a class bias. Namely, Mary must perform the care labor for a wage, not for the expectation of a large sum at the time of Featherstone's death. Rosy and Mrs. Waule's daughters can only go up in class stature through such a gain; however, their security isn't jeopardized without it. Mary, on the other hand, acts as a caretaker to help support her family. This necessity – that desperation for wages – is viewed critically: Mrs. Waule, who is said to possess a sizable quantity of wealth ("Featherstones have always had some money, and the Waules too. Waule had money too"),¹⁵⁷ and Mrs. Vincy both speak of Mary in a patronizing way. They speculate that her care labor will be unjustifiably gratified through receiving additional funds after Featherstone dies – they assume she will get more than simply the wages she already (unfairly, in their opinion) receives. Thus, their criticism of her care acts derives from a scarcity mentality: if she receives economic compensation, they believe that there will be less for their own children. Their philosophy is exactly what Ruskin advises against, as he assumes models of abundance are more productive and ethical. Mary's commitment to Featherstone is irrelevant; instead, the only thing that matters is that she, by being his care provider, is challenging the financial gain of already socially-elevated groups.

Indeed, a hierarchy of employment options for women is solidified – however, its accuracy and significance are influenced by the condescending bias against a character like Mary. Both Mrs. Vincy and Rosy debate where exactly Mary fits best within their community. Rosy believes that she works for Featherstone because all other options seem less satisfactory while simultaneously diminishing the importance of the care labor that Mary performs: "Mary Garth can bear being at Stone Court, because she liked that better

¹⁵⁷ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 101.

than being a governess... I would rather not have anything left to me if I must earn it by enduring much of my uncle's cough and his ugly relations."¹⁵⁸ Her mother, disregarding Rosy's insensitivity, worsens the condemnation: "I think Mary Garth a dreadful plain girl – more fit for a governess."¹⁵⁹ Her appearance, as such, is tied to being suited to a specific labor. Is this association, perhaps, because a governess would be around children rather than wealthy relations? Does it refer to the hiding of Mary within the home, where she is entirely kept separate from visitors, as opposed to her position with Featherstone, where she must be seen? Socially, a governess position would be more respectable than that of a caretaker or nurse. Mrs. Vincy and Rosy, however, seem less concerned for what is best for Mary as opposed to their own self-interest – for Rosy, she must put down Mary and belittle her position to avoid comparison and arise as socially superior; for Mrs. Vincy, she must criticize the girl whose employment could impact her children's future endowment. They do not diminish her acts of care labor as insignificant – doing such would be impossible. However, they also do not acknowledge the genuine importance of such work, thus conveying their own inability to care or empathize properly. Their elevation of a governess position – that which is also perpetuated socially – is arbitrary; ultimately, creating a sort of hierarchy or scale on the value of care labor completely diminishes its actual socio-economic significance.

Regardless of the social idealization of governess work for lower middle class or unmarried young ladies, Mary's refusal to partake in such work signifies her ethical superiority and ability to succeed as a caregiver (both for economic gain and in her personal life). Mary feels similarly to Fred: she doesn't believe she is well-suited for a

¹⁵⁸ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 95.

¹⁵⁹ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 95.

governess position. When Fred expresses sympathy about her poor treatment by Featherstone, she replies: “Oh, I have an easy life – by comparison. I have tried being a teacher, and I am not fit for that: my mind is too fond of wandering on its own.”¹⁶⁰ As strictly a teacher, or as a governess (who is also employed in the education of children), Mary doesn’t feel as if she has the concentration or ability to enforce rules and lessons. As she does work for Featherstone, whether that be mixing medicines or serving him, she is able to be reflective; she can engage in introspection and meditate on other issues. Thus, this form of labors allows Mary to operate and care most effectively.

However, unlike Fred, Mary’s understanding of pride prevents her from working in a position that she cannot do well or purely; as such, her commitment to care labor is innately tied to her own morality. Regardless of what she endures as a companion – from the pessimism and sexism of Featherstone to the demoralizing opinions of his relations – she concludes that “any hardship is better than pretending to do what one is paid for, and never really doing it” because “everything here [she] can do as well as any one else could; perhaps better than some – Rosy for example. Though she is just the sort of beautiful creature that is imprisoned with ogres in fairy tales.”¹⁶¹ Mary recognizes her own capabilities and limitations. That insight highlights her self-awareness: she is able to be a better care laborer by knowing where her energies will serve people best, and where she will feel emotionally secure. Despite being treated poorly, she is able to retain self-respect because she is acting authentically; her care is genuine. If she were to find employment as a governess, she may be treated better by the family and respected more socially. However, it would compromise her own morality. That loss is too significant for

¹⁶⁰ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 131.

¹⁶¹ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 131.

Mary, signifying her ethical superiority. A comparison between her and Rosy once again arises – however, she is able to recognize the power behind her caring abilities without entirely patronizing Rosy. She is, instead, quite complimentary: she acknowledges her beauty while also saying that she may not be as well-suited for the labor required in this position. Rosy wouldn't want to be seen as an effective care companion, since it would entail a social diminishment.

That same morality prevents Mary from agreeing to marry Fred before he becomes more ethically and fiscally mature. Mary is able to recognize that Fred wouldn't be a dedicated clergyman – he doesn't want to be one, and wouldn't be able to care appropriately for his parishioners. He would be acting inauthentically. Her encouragement for him to finish his examinations shows how she cares for his well-being: doing so will give him opportunity and make the cost of attending college worthwhile for his family. Mary is engrossed in the other by probing Fred to find motivation and objectives: when asked what she thinks he should do, she responds: “That is not the question – what I want you to do. You have a conscience of your own, I suppose.”¹⁶² Rather than think of her self-interest, which would be benefitted by marrying a clergyman, or Fred's social elevation, Mary thinks of Fred's ethical development. Her harsh approach may seem unnatural for a care act – however, it instead speaks to her determination in caring appropriately for another. It illustrates her entire devotion to another's growth rather than integrate any sort of self-determined influence.

There is also an economic component in her decision to initially refuse Fred. Marriage, as discussed in Chapter III, is an economic transaction that can either elevate

¹⁶² Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 133.

one's position or diminish it. Mary, because of her class position, must be especially careful when selecting a partner – marrying poorly would result in her becoming destitute as opposed to simply disadvantaged. Rosy becomes an exemplum of the ill-consequences (both socially and financially) of an unequal partnership – both she and Lydgate suffer, not only by their mutual fiscally-influenced qualms with the other, but also the lack of genuine care in their partnership. Mary recognizes her precarious position and acknowledges how marriage could further jeopardize that. When her father attempts to warn her, she responds: “Fred has always been very good to me; he is kind-hearted and affectionate, and not false, I think, with all his self-indulgence. But I will never engage myself to one who has no manly independence, and who goes on loitering away his time on the chance that others will provide for him. You and my mother have taught me too much pride for that.”¹⁶³ Although securing a position as a clergyman would help Fred gain an income, it will not change his ethical position: he is still more interested in receiving endowments from others without doing much work. While being a clergyman would be a socio-economically wise decision, it would disable Fred from caring appropriately. Thus, for Mary, authentic care labor becomes more valuable than acquiring a higher wage.

Mary's prioritization of relationships over money illustrates her importance as both a caregiver and care laborer. That pride that makes her work as a companion is the same that would prevent her from marrying Fred if he chose to be a clergyman or continue to accrue debts. When her father asks for her to contribute her earnings to help the family and Fred after he has lost in horse betting, she already has the money prepared

¹⁶³ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 245.

to do so. She expresses no ill feelings for having to do so: “‘Father,’ said Mary, in her deepest tone of remonstrance. ‘Take pocketfuls of love besides to them all at home.’”¹⁶⁴ Such an assertion shows that Mary is conscious of the importance of care, showing love in any way she can, including through contributing financially when her family is in need. Even under the pressure and patronization of Featherstone, she remains strong in her ethics: when he mocks “‘I suppose your father wanted your earnings... He makes but a tight fit, I reckon. You’re of age now; you ought to be saving for yourself,’” she responds, “‘I consider my father and mother the best part of myself, sir.’”¹⁶⁵ She is entirely engrossed in the other, to the point of which her entire being is wrapped up in them – she views her own goodness as theirs. After Featherstone’s death, she is willing to become a governess to support the family, despite it compromising her own values. She truly places the other’s needs and wants above her own. Thus, Mary arises as a supremely ethical character – her concern for what is right triumphs over the actions, opinions, and morals of others. While Mary’s abilities are capitalized on, they are also essential within the community.

C. Future Generations of Care Work and Care Laborers

The ‘Finale’ of *Middlemarch* illustrates the centrality of care work and care relationships in the future prospering of the community and its members. Because of the ethical development of Fred, whose success is directly linked to the influence of Mary and her family, the pair is able to marry. Not only does this enable mutual happiness, but also conveys their work’s larger impact on the community as a whole.

¹⁶⁴ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 245.

¹⁶⁵ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 245-246.

When, in the ‘finale,’ the omniscient narrator looks back on the lives of Eliot’s characters, she determines that:

All who have cared for Fred Vincy and Mary Garth will like to know that these two made no such failure, but achieved a solid mutual happiness. Fred surprised his neighbors in various ways. He became rather distinguished in his side of the country as a theoretic and practical farmer, and produced a work on the *Cultivation of Green Crops and the Economy of Cattle-feeding*, which won him high congratulations at agricultural meetings.¹⁶⁶

Fred gains notoriety through his acts of environmental care labor – his dedication to his work results in profound germination, both literally and figuratively. His education is finally utilized in a manner that feels more authentic than teaching on religious doctrine in the deployment of a theoretical understanding of farming and in the writing of *Cultivation of Green Crops and the Economy of Cattle-feeding*. In that way, the act of care that his parents provide in sending him to college (and that Mary further encourages by wanting him to finish his degree) is finally received fully; its benefits are ultimately reaped. His presentation of his work in a book format, as well as participating in agricultural meetings, illustrates that Fred performs further care acts by distributing his knowledge to help others and the land at large. Furthermore, the selling of books would contribute to his family’s economic gain, much like the success of his farming. Thus, the care labor provides not only ethical rewards (through solidifying stronger bonds with fellow community members and farmers) but also economic ones; Fred and Mary are made more financially secure through their work.

Mary, established as one of the most central care providers in the text, goes on to further her care labor as a wife and mother. Though an acknowledgement of this role is certainly more traditionalist (more akin to that of Noddings than Schaffer), it is

¹⁶⁶ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 788.

nonetheless significant. Mary, because of her rational, authentic, and loving nature, arises as an ideal maternal figure; a strong model in care, namely, her mother, teaches Mary the importance of devotion to family. She is able to go on to be a more successful caregiver to her children than Mrs. Vincy, Mrs. Waule, or any other figure that judges her. The continual comparison between Rosy and Mary, offered both throughout the text and in this thesis, further solidifies the success of Mary's mothering. Whereas Rosy engages in selfish behaviors (such as disobeying her husband, thus leading to her miscarriage) and is unable to love or care for those who disappoint her, Mary loves Fred throughout his struggles. Thus, she is able to reap the rewards of her care and go on to love even more deeply: "Mary, in her matronly days, became as solid in figure as her mother."¹⁶⁷ She is equally content with her children as she is with Fred: "There were three boys: Mary was not discontented that she brought forth men-children only... they had liked nothing so well as being with their mother."¹⁶⁸ The pair is able to go on to teach care ethics to their children, therefore affecting future generations of carers – both in their financially-driven acts and in everyday interactions.

Therefore, the care labor of Mary and Fred – both in their employment and in their relationships – illustrates the importance of such over socio-economic superiority. Indeed, social ascension is never achieved as it might have had Fred taken orders ("Fred never became rich – his hopefulness had not led him to expect that; but he gradually saved enough to become owner of the stock and furniture at Stone Court, and the work that Mr. Garth put into his hands carried him in plenty through those 'bad times' which

¹⁶⁷ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 790. While "solid in figure" sounds as if Eliot is referring to Mary's body, it can also be read as a claim to her steadiness and reliability as a maternal figure.

¹⁶⁸ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 789-790.

are always present with farmers”),¹⁶⁹ or married better. Mary, likewise, doesn’t advance socially as she would by marrying Farebrother, who, as Fred notes, “was ten times worthier of [Mary] than [him].”¹⁷⁰ Despite this apparent misfortune in the eyes of the community, greater happiness and superior ethics are achieved. Their mutual dependence is a key component of this. To Fred’s claim about his unworthiness, Mary confirms that: “To be sure [Farebrother] was... and for that reason he could do better without me. But you – I shudder to think what you would have been – a curate in debt for horse-hire and cambric pocket-handkerchiefs!”¹⁷¹ Fred needs her, and she needs Fred, who appreciates her fully and encourages her to be more ethical daily. Their stewardship over Stone Court is ultimately the greatest takeaway on care labor’s influence: the care laborers are rewarded with exactly what will make them personally content, not what is valued socially like wealth and prestige.

¹⁶⁹ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 790.

¹⁷⁰ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 790.

¹⁷¹ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 790.

CHAPTER V

GOING FORTH AS BETTER CAREGIVERS AND CARE-RECIPIENTS

It is important to note how the reader is integrated more fully into the community through an ethics of care methodology. Prior to the narrator's explanation of Mary and Fred's future accomplishments, she prefaces: "All who have cared for Fred Vincy and Mary Garth will like to know that these two made no such failure, but achieved a solid mutual happiness."¹⁷² Because the ethics of care prioritizes the expansiveness of a text's care community – including, but not limited to, the relationships between reader and their relations, the author and his/her relations, the reader and the characters, the authors and the characters, characters and their fellow fictionalized community members – it is essential to acknowledge the lines of connectedness. This moment is pivotal for our reading: the narrator breaks the fourth wall to incorporate the reader directly into the story line. The narrator, though it is never said to be Eliot herself (despite taking on her voice quite frequently), becomes either Eliot or Eliot-inspired. Eliot writes the "finale" as the answer to all of her reader's questions: what happens next for the characters? Are they happy? Are the problematic characters punished or redeemed? What does the future community of Middlemarch look like and how do its inhabitants behave?

That acknowledgement of the readers and their concern for characters illustrates further the complexity of care readings. Rather than flattening a text by simply analyzing how archetypal figures (the virtuous mother and wife, the attentive nurse, and compassionate teacher) care for others, this inclusion shows the connection between

¹⁷² Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 788.

author, her audience, and the text. The author cares about her reader and what they think of her text and her characters; she employs an act of care by including this ending.

Further enrichments to care readings are provided by Schaffer and Laugier who, by incorporating elements of fourth-wave feminism and intersectionality into their work, signify directions for future studies in care theory – both applied directly to literature and external to it. Schaffer’s work speaks to the importance of further engagements cultural studies; namely, she incorporates disability studies, queer studies, and race studies when acknowledging that “care communities is a process, rather than a preset care structure, and that fluidity allows us to interrogate the conditions under which care can develop and the dynamics of extended care.”¹⁷³ Schaffer therefore hopes “that the ‘care community’ can do more than normalize disability; it can remind us all of our crucial, fragile, relational ties, vital no matter the state of our bodies or minds.”¹⁷⁴ To do so, readers must stop attempting to diagnose a character – rather, employing a care reading enables them to simply assess the exchange of care, regardless of what determines a need: “Disability might be exemplary, but in a care reading, it need not be essentializing. It is, rather, simply a point on a spectrum of need, evoking a response just like any other need... care ethics focuses on the relation, not the rationale.”¹⁷⁵ Extending beyond disability, Schaffer notes the importance of care ethics for those who exist outside of the “white Western nuclear family norm,” especially considering that is “the exception”: traditions of care communities have existed and perpetuated as:

Strategies developed by people of color to survive enslavement and economic oppression; the long-standing practices of communal inclusivity practiced by indigenous people; the extended familial care expected in Asian and African

¹⁷³ Schaffer, “Care Communities,” 521.

¹⁷⁴ Schaffer, “Care Communities,” 522.

¹⁷⁵ Schaffer, “Care Communities,” 532-533.

cultures; the collectives of disabled advocates giving mutual aid; and the robust, joyful network of queer families of choice.¹⁷⁶

Because the effects of oppression (historically, socially, politically, economically, ideologically, and so forth) are still present today, the impact, importance, and presence of those care communities are as well. Not only will examining care communities enable us to come to a greater understanding of the past, but it will also inform future courses of action for social justice, equity, and humanization of the oppressed. Laugier argues that integrating OLP within the ethics of care will enable a better examination of the oppressed – namely, women of color. Focusing on the voicelessness of such individuals is a key component of her argument (and at large within the intersectional fourth-wave feminist movements).¹⁷⁷ Therefore, Schaffer and Laugier argue for the elevation of socially ignored groups who have been treated inequitably, and believe the means to do so might come about through a care-based philosophy. Additionally, while Schaffer confirms her argument that care readings are particularly apt for the Victorian novel (because such works continuously incorporate relationships centered around the care of the sick¹⁷⁸ as well as care at large), both she and Laugier convey how it might likewise be applied across time periods, contemporaneously, and in future studies.

Care ethics is truly an amorphous field; however, profoundly more significant than its postulation in theory and analysis is its tactile application to real-life circumstances, interactions, and relations. It is not enough to simply discuss issues of racism, sexism, classism, bigotry, and discrimination, nor is it satisfactory to reflect on systems of oppression without acting to combat them. Care theory offers us the tangible

¹⁷⁶ Schaffer, *Communities of Care*, 16.

¹⁷⁷ Laugier, “The Ethics of Care”, 217.

¹⁷⁸ Schaffer, “Care Communities”, 527.

means of working towards healing – individually and collectively. Perhaps possessing this ideology is a bit naively optimistic, as Dorothea is about the cottages. However, care ethics teaches us that such thinking is a reflection of not only our privilege but also of our commitment to goodness – there is an element of buoyancy in that mentality. Rather than be bogged down in all that is immoral or seemingly unfixable, care is defined as verbed; it is active, engaged, and dynamic. Moreover, it is something we do continuously, often without acknowledgement. I care for Eliot by offering this analysis; you, as the reader, care for me by formulating your assessment of my work and offering feedback. I care for the person serving me in a restaurant by thanking them. You care for your partner by bringing them a fresh cup of coffee in the morning. Nurses care for the new mother, baby, and the visiting families in the maternity ward. The woman cares for the elderly man by giving up her seat on the bus for him. The dog cares for its owner by keeping them company when they seem distressed. I care for the earth as I, like Jane Eyre, walk barefoot through the grasses; I care for the birds as I leave out seed. St. Teresa cares for her community by attempting to defend them from the villainized Moors, regardless of her age, gender, and unpreparedness. We, too, try to protect, love, empathize, and care for those animate and inanimate beings we value, just as we are cared for by others, both animate and inanimate. If this is naively optimistic then it is in the most profoundly beautiful way. I wouldn't want it to be any different – it is an active choice to reflect on care and to pursue it, to be cognizant of the chance for goodness and seek it out. It is a meaningful commitment to the wellbeing of self, other, community, and nature at large.

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