Of Texts and Tombstones: George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* in a Culture of Commemoration

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Although George Eliot titles her novel *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, the last sentence of the last page concludes, strikingly, with the words “unvisited tombs,” the novel’s final, resonant image being one of death (785). It is death, of course, that lurks naturally at the end of life, but, for Eliot, death marks more than a mere boundary or end of experience; instead, it signifies the beginning of remembrance, a period set aside for the contemplation of what makes a particular life meaningful. Thus the novel becomes as much a study of how a life should be ideally commemorated as it is a text exploring how a life should be ideally lived. This question carries a powerful sense of urgency for Eliot, and it is one that can be read not only in the novel itself, but also alongside of the unique culture of commemoration in Victorian society, reflected richly in both the era’s literature and in its burial customs; these cultural worries underpin a pressing concern for memorials to the deceased within Eliot’s personal life, at the same time as they permeate her novel. Informed and inspired by all of these sources, perhaps, *Middlemarch* conducts a probing study of the human act of memorialization, interrogating multiple forms of visual and written art to determine which might be able to provide more adequate monuments than tombstones, and ultimately settles on the narrative as the best alternative to the epitaph (while still acknowledging the inherent flaws of any form of representation).

Paul Vita proposes in his essay, “A Loss for Words: Resignation and the Victorian Cemetery,” that the rise of the middle class in Victorian culture contributed to the production of a kind of restrictive, normative epitaph (Vita 122). The more individualistic approach of previous ages was replaced by the new cemetery becoming yet another site of class conformity, imposed on by the tendency—an unspoken rule—towards what Vita refers to as Victorian “monumental
modesty” (122). The tombstone text itself was regulated by a number of other texts, such as, for instance, John Bowden’s *Epitaph Writer*, and such preset collections of inscriptions moderated specific and simplistic memorials to all classes except select members of the highest (123). In contrast, “….most Victorians did not write epitaphs, but selected them. “Personalising the tomb meant choosing from already composed standard texts…” (Vita 123). In the ever self-conscious Victorian culture of death, Vita states, “Elaborate epitaphic statements were associated with vulgarity and self-promotion, easily equated with transgressing class boundaries,” and thus were usually avoided for fear of judgment (124).

Although “monumental modesty” affected the cemetery as a whole, it became even more limiting towards women and their epitaphic memorials. A typical example of a normative epitaph for women can be read upon Frances Alice Pearce’s 1878 tombstone; Vita lists the praises used to describe her, which are generic and could stand in for any other woman’s epitaph, which are “dutiful daughter,” “fond sister,” “sincere and trusted wife,” and “loving mother” (126). He notes, that, “For women, at least, identity in the cemetery is defined through the domestic role” (126).

This is the kind of normative female epitaph that Eliot is working against in providing *Middlemarch* as a text commemorating Dorothea and “the new Theresas” (*Middlemarch* 785); she demonstrates that there is more to these kind of women than their epitaphs would suggest, as her novel does not focus on the domestic role as the quality which makes Dorothea worth remembering (the fact that she eventually has children does not even come about until the finale). It is not domestic love and efficiency, nor mere names and dates, but the “vague ideals” and “common yearning” of the New Theresas which are noted as their defining features, those qualities most worth remembrance (*Middlemarch* 3). Yet few Victorians recorded “ideals” and “yearnings” upon tombstones, and much less the tombstones of women, whose roles were not typically framed in regard to such abstractions.
Some critics would posit that it is the beginnings of life which stand as a thematic foundation of *Middlemarch*, not the endings of life; however, the focus on various kinds of beginnings in the novel is itself preceded by a controlling desire for the kind of immortality offered by the very honor present in determining answers of origin. Michael Peled Ginsburg is one such critic, who poses in his essay, “Pseudonym, Epigraphs, and Narrative Voice: Middlemarch and the Problem of Authorship,” that there is a certain obsession with original creation within Eliot’s novel. As Ginsburg points out, “Various critics have noted a similarity between Casaubon and Lydgate … both are interested in origin,”— as he further explains, for Lydgate it is answering the question “What was the primitive tissue,” while for Casaubon it entails finding the origin of all mythologies (544). While this is true, I propose that these explorations of origin serve a double purpose—they are both scientific inquiries about beginnings, and strivings toward a certain kind of ideal personal ending.

Both Casaubon and Lydgate hope to use what they discover about origin to “make a name” for themselves and be remembered as great men—essentially, to let their texts about origin serve simultaneously as forms of personal memorial; this is illustrated, for instance, by the line in *Middlemarch* stating that “[Casaubon] willingly imagined [Dorothea] toiling under the fetters of a promise to erect a tomb with his name upon it…” (463). Eliot also writes, in a tone of lightly mocking, finger-pointing amusement, of the great men who preceded Lydgate in the field of medicine: “Each of those Shining Ones had to walk on the earth among neighbours who perhaps thought much more of his gait and his garments than of anything which was to give him a title to everlasting fame…” (137). She takes on a tone of sardonic frustration, in response to the unfortunate reality that people seldom recognize those who may leave behind a great and meaningful legacy, something truly worth being remembered by, instead caring more for corporeal trivialities.
Eliot similarly attacks the funeral itself as a flawed medium for memorializing; she sees it as more of a performance act than a sincere memorial. Although *Middlemarch* devotes quite a number of pages to Casaubon’s grapples with his mortality, there is no scene depicting his actual funeral service, while Featherstone’s funeral is instead shown—the refusal of the text to refer even to that small act of memorial speaks to the idea that Casaubon has proven himself undeserving of any great monument. Yet, even though we see Featherstone’s funeral, in all of its ostentation (Featherstone plans to have a funeral “beyond his betters” and lays out very particular directions for the service) this act of commemoration is, like the epitaph, shown to be fundamentally lacking (303). What is supposed to be act of remembrance is overshadowed by the fact that the funeral attendants only wish to skip the service and get straight to the reading of Featherstone’s will. Eliot calls the procession “…the Christian Carnivora…most of them having their minds bent on a limited store which each would have liked to get the most of” (310).

This disconnect between the honor of those who are deceased, and the living who are meant to honor them, is also symbolized by the fact that, as it is happening, the funeral is simultaneously observed through a window by the Brookes and Mrs. Cadwallader (305). Celia, who doesn’t want to watch the procession, jokingly states, “I dare say Dodo likes it: she is fond of melancholy things and ugly people” (306). Dorothea replies, “I am fond of knowing something about the people I live among…It seems to me we know nothing of our neighbours…One is constantly wondering what sorts of lives other people lead, and how they take things” (306). Ironically, she is unaware that in this moment she is closer to knowing Featherstone and the funeral attendants than they are to each other. When she is told that everyone attending dislikes Featherstone and is glad that he has died, Dorothea laments, “I cannot bear to think that any one should die and leave no love behind” (307). Featherstone, unfortunately, is one of that number likely to dwell in an “unvisited tomb.”
As someone who is naturally in the position of examining people and their legacies, Eliot’s narrator enters into the novel calling herself a historian, but, as Ginsburg states, “By the end of the novel what was supposed to be a history is declared to be “unhistoric” because it is “incalculably diffusive” (546). This idea of the writer as a kind of historian would link Eliot to Casaubon. However, Ginsburg notes that it is “Only by allowing, like Will, for ‘diffusiveness’—for that which is incalculable and unhistoric, is [the narrator] saved from failure” (546). In other words, the narrator/Eliot is saved from the mistake made by Casaubon in his own work, which is also his hope for a kind of immortality. Casaubon, in refusing to read German works or acknowledge that they’ve already addressed his questions, has not allowed for diffusiveness in the subject he studies (Middlemarch 194). Thus he does not deserve a memorial in the sense that Dorothea does, even though she has not written a text herself. One of Middlemarch’s concerns is to show that some tributes are worthy memorials to a person, others are not. At the same time not everyone may earn their right to a memorial, while many—including all those unnamed and unknown “new Theresas”—deserve a memorial they never received, which Eliot tries to make up for, as she constructs Dorothea to stand in for a representation of these women as a collective type (785).

However, Eliot also criticizes those who are too much monumentalized while still living; this explains some of her criticism of Casaubon, who has been reduced to a monument while still alive, when what he should earn is the right to a monument after death (the kind only a book can provide). Mr. Brooke remarks, “Poor Casaubon was a little buried in books—he didn’t know the world” (455). In a very real sense, Casaubon is already dead before his death, literally buried by literature. There is a danger in this, and yet it is not an abandonment of the text as a memorial; only of a certain kind of text. A text must earn its right to stand as a memorial to a person, or perhaps that person must earn that kind of memorial, and as Dorothea and others see it, Casaubon’s work could never stand as such a tribute—precisely because it doesn’t arise from a real
relationship with the world. As Eliot writes, “…such capacity of thought and feeling as had ever been stimulated in him by the general life of mankind had long been shrunk to a sort of dried preparation, a lifeless embalmment of knowledge” (184). Dorothea’s maid, Tantripp, also alludes to this when she bluntly says to the butler, “I wish every book in that library was built into a catacomb for your master” (452). The irony in this is that these are not books Casaubon has written himself; while he stalls and lags through writing his own hopeless text and never finishes it; his fate is to be buried in texts that are not his own, that say nothing about him. This is a similar dilemma to the misleading epitaph, a script selected from a Victorian catalogue, which likewise fails to truly represent a person.

Critic John Rignall discusses the ways in which Eliot was herself “…[elevated] to something like a Victorian monument in her own drawing room,” by other writers (89). Rignall does not focus on literary tombstones, but on Eliot as being made into a literary monument, the type of icon who is likened to a godly statue at a temple, or frequently thought of as a “sibylline figure on a pedestal”; she became recognized as a person of monumental majesty and presence, if not stereotypical feminine beauty (89-90). In this treatment of her, Eliot’s visitors were unintentionally linking her to the very type of visual monument she often criticized in her writings (89). The problem is that, even though they were honoring Eliot because of the impact of her texts, these admirers transformed the author herself, her body and physical person, into a monument, as opposed to taking her texts themselves as what would eventually be Eliot’s true memorial—the best representation of her own spirit. In this sense, her admirers unwittingly “bury” her while still alive, by constructing a monument out of the not-yet deceased. This attraction to a person as a living, literary monument is the very thing that draws Dorothea to Casaubon initially, but when she realizes that he is frozen and lifeless already, nor could his work could never be anything otherwise, she refuses to build his textual memorial by finishing A Key to All Mythologies.
While it is only certain types of monuments that Eliot criticizes, such as the monument made out of a still-living person, and even more specifically, the visual monument, Rignall goes one step too far in assuming that this amounts to a criticism of all forms of monument-making. He writes in his essay, “George Eliot: Writer as Monument and Writing About Monuments,” that “The ending of Middlemarch…dispenses with monuments altogether, and indeed, takes a stand against the monumental attitude to history by affirming the value of unhistoric and unrecorded acts…” (97). Rignall does not, however, acknowledge the inherent contradiction in the fact that the novel exists and endures, which has the precise effect of making those previously “unrecorded acts” recorded. There is the inevitable fact that Eliot goes to such lengths to write—that is, to leave a lasting impression—about what she sees as the true value of these lives, and therefore to construct a new, textual monument to them (the very kind that the New Theresas and New Dorotheas could never have received in the Victorian cemetery).

The realist novel also provides a kind of “living memorial” in death, mimicking and replaying a life as an autobiography of a person would, making this form superior to the monuments constructed to the people who are perceived—or misperceived—by the general populace to be great. Another of Rignall’s oversights is that he is focusing on two essentially different kinds of monuments throughout his essay. He devotes the most pages to the flaws of monumental statuary, but then, only in the last paragraph, makes reference to tombstones as monuments. It is true that Eliot criticizes statuary and other visual memorials explicitly, but this is very different from a textual memorial. She is not only, as the title of Rignall’s essay would have one believe, a writer writing about monuments, but she is also a writer creating monuments of a sort diverging from the kind she labels as inefficient and unrepresentative.

The clash between visual art as a memorial and the text as a memorial is won by the fact that writing is closer to life itself, while painting or sculpture—subjects of profuse contemplation in
Middlemarch—provide only frozen moments, therefore not allowing for “diffusiveness,” which is exactly what Ginsburg says is so important in the philosophies of both art and history as raised by Middlemarch (546). Will espouses such a frustration when Dorothea offers him his grandmother’s portrait, deeming it a “family memorial”; he responds, indignantly, “Why should I have that, when I have nothing else? A man with only a portmanteau for his stowage must keep his memorials in his head” (Middlemarch 512). This vehement refusal also comes across as a denial of popular Victorian death custom, very focused on the visual element, in which, as historian Judith Flanders writes, “…it was considered especially tasteful to set the initials of the deceased in pearls in lockets, or to wear a cameo or portrait of the deceased. Jewelry made of the deceased’s hair was also popular” (382). What privileges the memorial in Will’s head, however, is that it involves motion in a sense that such a visual memorial cannot, containing tokens of remembered actions and character. That kind of memorial tells a story; this is the same quality that privileges the text over the painting, at least the text that takes the form of a narrative, allowing it to escape the status of mere “portmanteau.” Oscar Wilde, in his essay “The Critic as Artist” alludes to this same shortcoming of visual art, stating that, “The image stained upon the canvas possesses no spiritual element of growth or change. If they know nothing of death, it is because they know little of life, for the secrets of life and death belong to those and those only, whom the sequence of time affects…” (Norton 1691). He illuminates Middlemarch’s own objective when he speculates that, “Movement, that problem of the visual arts, can be truly realized by Literature alone” (1691).

However, not all texts are to be regarded as equal in this capacity of either owning or evading “the secrets of life and death”—thus, we return to the problem of the epitaph. While it is a text, the epitaph cannot be understood as the kind of text that Wilde refers to. Bram Stoker’s Dracula offers a parallel discourse on the nature of the misleading epitaph prominent in Victorian England. As Swales and Mina peruse the tombstones throughout a hilltop cemetery, Mina fails to
understand what the old sailor finds so lacking and darkly humorous, as she reads on one grave, “This tomb is erected by his sorrowing mother to her dearly beloved son. He was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow” (Stoker 67). Swales explains that, “…ye don’t gawm the sorrowin’ mother was a hell-cat that hated him because he was acrewk’d—a regular limiter he was—an’ he hated her so that he committed suicide in order that she mightn’t get an insurance she put on his life” (67). The problem with epitaphs, as Swales sees it, is that they do not tell a story, and sometimes go so far as to even present a set of facts that deliberately evades depicting a life story as it actually happened.

The same trouble is encountered by Tennyson’s heroine in the poem “The Lady of Shalott” (<i>Norton</i> 1114-1118). The Lady effectively writes her own epitaph when, “round about the prow she wrote / The Lady of Shalott” (<i>Norton</i> 125-26). Like Wilde and Will, the Lady of Shalott recognizes the need for a transition from visual art to written inscription, as she moves from her magical loom, which forces her to see the world only through a mirror in which “Shadows of the world appear,” to an act of writing which aligns with her departure into the “real world,” and establishes both her identity and her own tombstone (48). The words “The Lady of Shalott” appear at the end of every stanza, but only twice are they actually directly her words, not the narrator’s words about her—this occurs in the act of writing itself, before embarking downstream on her fatal journey, and the second time is upon the reading of her name by the courtiers of Camelot (126, 162). In these two cases, her name is italicized, differentiating the act of writing her name from the narrator’s act of speaking it, and establishing her inscription as a legitimate text, having a voice distinct from the narrator’s.

Thus, the Lady’s own memorial is constituted in two ways, by two different texts—one is her own self-created epitaph; the other is the poem, which tells her story. The form of the narrative memorial and inscriptive memorial are juxtaposed. However, although the Lady hopes
her epitaph will achieve some kind of significance in making her known, the existence of the poem itself seems to attest to the epitaph’s insufficiency—or at least its inability to stand alone—as an adequate memorial. The end of the poem speaks to this concern, as the name alone can signify little to the lords and ladies of the world that our heroine has constantly yearned to be a part of. Lancelot refers not to the Lady’s text, but to her body, as he “[muses] a little space,” and notes, “She has a lovely face; / God in his mercy lend her grace, / The Lady of Shalott” (168-171). If the knight did not know her name, he would still be able to express this same sentiment. Like George Eliot’s own admirers, Lancelot has committed the fallacy of taking the body as visual monument. It is a story—which only the poem can provide—that gives the reader, if not Lancelot, an understanding of character, something to truly mourn the Lady of Shalott by. The text of the poem becomes a more fitting monument than that written by the Lady herself, at the same time as its subject speaks to her intense desire to be known and remembered.

As it turns out, it was also common for Victorian men and women to write “memorials of the dying as a ‘spiritual accounting to God’,” as Judith Flanders records in Inside The Victorian Home, such as an account written by one Philip Gosse, called A Memorial of the Last Days on Earth of Emily Gosse, a title which speaks explicitly to the Victorian belief that a text can function as—just that—a memorial (349). Questions of commemoration to the deceased were, in the Victorian era, “wrapped up” in texts of other forms as well. Flanders explains that “At the end of the service, [mourners] were given memorial cards, which had the deceased’s name, age, and date of death, when and where he was buried (including the location of the grave in the cemetery), and a verse of scripture…” (376). This is what one might call a “portable memorial,” at the same time as a map to the deceased. The question then arises…how do such explicitly self-titled textual memorials relate to the form of the fiction novel?
In the case of *Middlemarch*, the text does not depict only the last days of a life, but instead depicts a kind of ideal, or an almost-could-have-been ideal life (if it weren’t for the restrictive state of Victorian society towards women), covering a long sweep of years. The fact that it seems to commemorate a purely fictional character is less important than the fact that, as stated previously, Dorothea is meant to be representative of a collective of “real” women, the new Theresas that society does not allow for. However, for Eliot—unlike Gosse—the textual memorial is not necessarily a “spiritual accounting to God.” It is a kind of “artistic afterlife,” so to speak, which is weighted above questions of resurrection in heaven. This sense of the written legacy on earth as superior to a doubtful rebirth in heaven is experienced by Casaubon: “…even his religious faith wavered with his wavering trust in his own authorship, and the consolations of the Christian hope in immortality seemed to lean on the immortality of the still unwritten Key to All Mythologies” (*Middlemarch* 263).

This idea of both commemorating and immortalizing a person through text has an interesting parallel in Will, who wishes not to selfishly immortalize himself through text, but to praise and remember Dorothea, as he wishes to write her name in “immortal syllables” through poetry: “…he might have boasted after the example of Old Drayton, that— “Queens hereafter might be glad to live / Upon the alms of her superfluous praise”” (441). In Will’s adoring mind, Dorothea deserves a grand textual immortalizing as much as any queen does. In contrast, Casaubon’s hope for immortality never meanders its way to completion—and, some would argue, deservedly so. Ironically, we find that the text he leaves behind as truly indicative of his character is his will, rather than the great study of mythological origin he had hoped would be his legacy. This is due to Dorothea’s refusal to be consumed with Casaubon’s memorial, as she does not value the work. She writes a text to Casaubon, though he is beyond the grave, in reply to his “Synoptical
Tabulation” note, stating “I could not use it. Do you not see now that I could not submit my soul to yours, by working hopelessly at what I have no belief in?—Dorothea” (507).

Intriguingly, this contrasts with George Eliot’s own actions in response to her lover George Henry Lewes’ death, who likewise left behind his incomplete scientific explorations (Ashton 366). Biographer Rosemary Ashton notes that “Unlike Dorothea who refused to finish the worthless work of her husband, George Eliot willingly took on the task of revising and preparing for press the last two volumes of Problems of Life and Mind. Not only did she feel it a loving duty to her un-Casaubonlike husband, but it gave her a reason to go on living from day to day” (366). Like Casaubon, Lewes approached questions of origin, delving into the human mind—though, for his medical and psychological bent, he may have been more like Lydgate. In Lewes’ case, as well, questions of science and origin are deeply tied to death and commemoration; it is publishing her would-be husband’s texts which becomes Eliot’s most important tribute to the man she loves.

In an early essay entitled “The Antigone and its Moral,” George Eliot praises the dramatic heroine of Sophocles’ classical play, whose greatest act consists in risking her own death to bury her dead brother, who has been condemned to remain unburied and uncommemorated by order of King Creon. In her critique of the play’s moral, she writes,

> It is true that we no longer believe that a brother, if left unburied, is condemned to wander a hundred years without repose on the banks of the Styx; we no longer believe that to neglect funeral rites is to violate the claims of the infernal deities…The turning point of the tragedy is not, as it is stated to be in the argument prefixed to this edition, ‘reverence for the dead and the importance of the sacred rites of burial’, but the conflict between these and obedience to the State.” (Pinney 262-263)
Here Eliot seems to be dismissing acts of commemorating the dead as having little inherent meaning other than the purpose they could hypothetically serve within a context of social rebellion. However, she consistently contradicts this statement of separation in her own personal life, for even when commemoration is not, as it was for Antigone, in any way tied to defying orders of the state, she places significance on textual memorials, such as the act of publishing Lewes’ writings after death. If the funeral and burial process itself means little to her, she nevertheless weights acts of commemoration extremely highly in their own right. Eliot, with her deviance from religion, may not accept that those she loves will be cursed in an afterlife without a decent burial, but she still expresses a developed concern for the tombstone and the epitaph as unfitting memorials to the character of the dead, and is perpetually dissatisfied with the idea of a person’s name and true achievements going unremembered.

It is worth noting that, in addition to publishing Lewes’ texts after his death, George Eliot took other liberties, in an attempt to ensure that her lover’s name would be remembered. She established a Cambridge studentship in Lewes’ name, designed for aspiring scientists (Ashton 366-7). Eliot also changed her own surname to Lewes only after George’s death (368). Thus it is in an epitaphic way that Eliot employs her husband’s name as an assurance of his remembrance—in the studentship named for him, in her own altered surname, in the name on his published books, and also, of course, on his tombstone. However, the multiple means that Eliot employs to ensure that her lover’s name will live on suggests that the tombstone itself is not sufficient. The name must be inscribed upon other places, most significantly the locations of artistic and scientific achievements, as well as literally, upon Eliot’s own name and identity—previously Marian Evans (368).

Even after remarrying, Eliot complained about what she perceived to be the inadequacy of Lewes’ gravestone as a form of commemoration, writing to Lewes’ son Charles on only the second anniversary of his death that she feared his tomb would be “lost among the new ones round it,”
(Eliot qtd in Ashton 378). According to Ashton, Eliot also inquired as to whether “…a higher railing could be erected round it to stop it disappearing from view” (379). She worries that her lover will lie, like Dorothea and Featherstone, in an “unvisited tomb,” and falls back on his texts as the primary hope for remembrance. These worries demonstrate, in Eliot’s own life as well as in Middlemarch, a striving very similar to Antigone’s—the quest for what she perceives to be an extremely important form of commemoration.

Nor did Eliot’s concerns about memorialization come about only upon Lewes’s death. In the Introduction to “Poetry and Prose, From the Notebook of an Eccentric,” essays comprising her first published writing, Eliot begins with an introduction in which she is reflecting upon the grave of her friend Macarthy (Pinney 13). She speaks of the inadequacy of the cemetery in which her friend is buried, stating that,

> It is a thoroughfare for a materialized population, too entirely preoccupied with the needs of the living, to retain an Old Mortality’s affectionate care for tomb-stones and epitaphs …not one of this plodding generation will long remember Macarthy, ‘the sick gentleman who lodged at Widow Crowe’s’ and when the grass is green and long upon his grave, it will seem to say of him as truly as of others—‘I cover the forgotten.’ (14)

One might trade this description for Swales’s, whose complaints resonate on a familiar frequency, when he mutters, “… “Here lies the body” or “Sacred to the memory” wrote on all of them, an’ yet in nigh half of them there bean’t no bodies at all; an’ the memories of them bean’t cared a pinch of snuff about, much less sacred” (Stoker 65). Eliot, like Stoker’s colorful old sailor, notes that truth can only be contained in a memory, that is, in a kind of story, musing, “But it is not so,
Macarthy. With me thou wilt still live…” (Pinney 14). She spends the next few pages offering an illustration of the man’s character as she remembers it to be, in highly lyrical and poetic prose. She also mentions that Macarthy’s last request to her related to his texts, which he gave her upon his death. Eliot recalls their conversation: “…he pointed to a large trunk filled with manuscripts. ‘When I am dead,’ he said, ‘take these as the only memorial I have to give, and use them as you will’” (17). She states, as if in opposition to Macarthy’s epitaph, that these papers “contained the best history and image of his mind.” (17). Eliot realizes, however, that Macarthy’s unorganized papers would not be desired by any publisher, as they would not appeal to the general public (thus she states that they will “probably be their own tomb”) and so, she decides to work them subtly into her own writing, promising to quote snippets from them in journal articles and anywhere she can find readers (17).

In the finale of Middlemarch, Eliot refers not only to a “new Theresa,” but also to a “new Antigone,” stating that, “A new Theresa will hardly have the opportunity of reforming a conventual life any more than a new Antigone will spend her heroic piety in daring all for the sake of her brother’s burial…” (785). She places Antigone’s sacrifice, an act concerned with providing a deserved form of commemoration to the deceased, on the same level as Theresa’s achievements. Although Eliot once stated that the moral of Antigone had little to do with any actual honor due to the deceased, ironically, there is more to this very perspective than she recognizes that she embraces within her own life, and will promote through her writing. Eliot muses on the misfortune that “[Dorothea’s] full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth” (785). Yet it is Eliot’s narrative which now gives name to those channels; throughout the course of the text, we discover some of them, those “channels” being the specific characters Dorothea has inspired and supported in their own ideals and yearnings—most significantly, Lydgate and Will. This final paragraph comes across as a kind
of eulogy to Dorothea, and it also places Eliot in the position of a new Antigone, for in writing the novel, she provides the species of memorial long overdue to Dorotheas everywhere (785).
Works Cited


The book examines the role of education in the lives of the characters and how such education and study has affected the characters. Rosamond Vincy's finishing school education is a foil to Dorothea Brooke's religiously-motivated quest for knowledge. Rosamond initially admires Lydgate for his exotic education, and his intellect. A similar dynamic is present in Dorothea and Casaubon's relationship, with Dorothea revering her new husband's intellect and eloquence. In both cases, however, the young wives' expectations of their husbands' intellects are not reflected in reality. Despite extreme erudition, Mr. Casaubon is afraid to publish because he believes that he must write a work that is utterly above criticism.

Middlemarch, novel by George Eliot, first published in eight parts in 1871–72. It is considered to be Eliot's masterpiece. The realist work is a study of every class of society in the town of Middlemarch, but the focus is on the thwarted idealism of Dorothea Brooke and Tertius Lydgate, both of whom marry disastrously. Vybarr Cregan-Reid is a contributor to 1001 Books You Must Read Before You Die (2012) and the author of the “Classic Fiction” section of 501 Must-Read Books (2014). See Article History. Alternative Title: Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life, published in eight parts in 1871–72 and also published in four volumes in 1872.