

# *Middlemarch's* Tale of Sylvia Plath

by Julia Gordon-Bramer

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We know from Sylvia Plath's personal library that she read all of the novels by George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), and also books about Eliot. We can't be exactly sure when or how many times Plath read Eliot's greatest work, *Middlemarch*. Some of the Eliot novels, we know she read in 1952 at Smith College. There is one thing we can be sure of: from Plath's heavy annotations of *Middlemarch*, she either read the novel for the first time or revisited it, at the time her marriage was breaking up and she lived at Court Green.

From the time of adolescence, it is clear through Plath's book annotations that she had a natural understanding of what psychologist Carl Jung called *synchronicities*—those amazing and mystical correspondences between life, art, history, myth, and the cosmos. It is what Qabalah (Plath would have known it as "Kabbalah" from her book *The Painted Caravan: A Penetration Into the Secrets of the Tarot Cards* by Basil Ivan Rákóczi, as well as in other texts she read about Yeats' and Joyce's mysticism) considers to be mirrors or reflections of God's face. It is what many non-believers would call

unbelievable coincidences. Whatever your school of thought, Plath's life was full of these coincidences, most especially in literature, and *Middlemarch* was her life's story.

To start from the beginning, it is apparent that Plath reflected upon her own father as she read of the heroine Rosamond's plight. She underlined these words by Eliot:

*Even her father was unkind, and might have done more for them. In fact there was but one person in Rosamond's world whom she did not regard as blameworthy, and that was the graceful creature with blond plaits and with little hands crossed before her who had never expressed herself unbecomingly, and had always acted for the best—the best naturally being what she best liked" (Eliot, 487).*

It was a description of how Sylvia Plath had looked and behaved as a child. Feeling alone at eight years old, Sylvia already showed promise as a writer and had learned that to be pleasing was a

way to be loved—if not for herself, then for her words.

Plath's life similarities with this novel continue. When she was in high school, the image of the ideal American girl was curvy, blonde and beautiful. Throughout her journals and letters, we see Plath's attempts to gain weight. Womanly curves were important in this era, and Plath was tall and regarded herself as too thin. Her copy of *Middlemarch* shows her near-despair over her own thinness, underlining and marking the passage "feminine impassibility revealing itself in the sylph-like frame" (Eliot, 432). In one *Middlemarch* scene, a rich benefactor takes a charity school-educated girl under his wing, and from markings and underlinings, we can see that Plath compares this to her relationship with her own benefactor, Olive Higgins Prouty (Eliot, 450).

Aurelia Plath noted in Plath's copy of the book that Sylvia taught George Eliot's *Middlemarch* in 1958 at Smith College. Next to Eliot's line, "Teaching seems to me the most delightful work in the world," Plath had written, "Ha!" in the right-hand margin of her copy (Eliot, 293). She also underlined: "The fatal step of choosing the wrong profession" (Eliot, 296), and "Very well; stick to it. I've no more to say. You've thrown away your education, and gone down a step in life, when I had given you the means of rising, that's all" (Eliot, 414). Ouch. We knew that Plath didn't like teaching.

Now we know just how much she believed she had lowered herself.

By this time of teaching, of course, Plath had been married to Ted Hughes for two years. Hughes was teaching too, and America had not set well with him. They lived together cramped in a tiny apartment in Boston, and they both knew things could not go on as they were. In her copy of *Middlemarch*, Plath marked:

*It was evening when he got home. He was intensely miserable, this strong man of nine-and-twenty and of many gifts. He was not saying angrily within himself that he had made a profound mistake; but the mistake was at work in him like a recognised chronic disease (Eliot, 431);*

and

*Rosamond sat perfectly still. The thought in her mind was that if she had known how Lydgate would behave, she would never have married him" (Eliot, 435).*

Judging from her other writings, Plath seems to have understood her husband's nature long before she died. Reading her copy of *Middlemarch*, this is further confirmed when Plath marked and underlined this section:

*Lydgate's anger rose: he was prepared to be indulgent*

*towards feminine weakness, but not towards feminine dictation. The shallowness of a waternixie's soul may have a charm until she becomes didactic (Eliot, 475).*

Plath's marginalia defined "waternixie" as: "fairy tale 'Now I have you. Now you will have to work for me'." (The "waternixie" comes from the marginalia of Plath's own copy of *Middlemarch*, which is held at the Sylvia Plath Archives in the University of Indiana's Lily Library.)

The main female characters of Dorothea and Rosamond are complementary, dual identities. Both have their qualities and weaknesses, and both are in failing marriages. Dorothea is highly intelligent, but her husband does not take her seriously in her efforts to develop her mind. Rosamond is vain, beautiful, shallow and vindictive. Plath knew she was all of it. Beneath underlinings she made under passages about monks and asceticism, Plath marked this paragraph, perhaps deciding to model herself after her literary heroine, Dorothea:

*She wore her brown hair flatly braided and coiled behind so as to expose the outline of her head in a daring manner at a time when public feeling required the meagerness of nature to be dissimulated by tall barricades of frizzed curls and bows, never surpassed by any great race*

*except the Feejeean. This was a trait of Miss Brooke's asceticism (Eliot, 20).*

It seems that Plath had decided to emulate Miss Brooke in this way, and we can see her hair in this style in a photograph of a pregnant Plath, on board an ocean liner with Hughes, sailing back to Britain in an attempt at a happier life. We also know from photos that she wore her hair this way at Court Green.

*Middlemarch* continued to be weirdly synchronous with Plath's life, as the character Dorothea contemplated the breakdown of her marriage. The setting of *Middlemarch*, for Plath, was Devon. We know that Plath saw the uncanny correlations herself, as she marked and underlined lines such as: "But we married because we loved each other, I suppose"; "in her secret soul she was utterly aloof from him" (Eliot, 474) and, "important ties in the past which could connect your history with mine" (Eliot, 454).

Many telling annotations reveal that Plath cast herself as both the heroine Dorothea and the more difficult and ambitious Rosamond. She underlined: "St. Botolph's," the patron saint of Boston and namesake of the literary magazine that had first brought her and Hughes together (Eliot, 121). Also underlined was the protagonist's name, "Dorothea Brooke," sounding very close to the name of Plath's

favorite professor and confidante at Cambridge, Dr. Dorothea Krook (Eliot, 139). Plath emphasized the lines: "the loss of her baby" (Eliot, 427); and "his suit of black" (Eliot, 444). The character of Rosamond had a terrible marriage as well, also to an Edward, like Hughes. Additionally sounding like Hughes, the fictional Edward obsessed with his unfinished occult book, *The Key To All Mythologies*.

How must Plath have felt, turning the pages of *Middlemarch* to see that Rosamond's husband Lydgate, like her husband, had a rich uncle from whom he borrowed money? Plath made an exclamation point next to this scene (Eliot, 485). There are also many passages underlined about the Lydgate selfishly going into debt buying things he could have done without (Eliot, 428-9).

Sometimes, Plath's annotations alone are heartbreaking: She underlined and starred this passage: "It is painful to be told that anything is very fine and not be able to feel that it is fine. Something like being blind, while people talk of the sky" (Eliot, 153).

How alone did she feel in this marriage, and for how long? Plath underlined many passages on mysticism, the soul, spiritual emptiness, and death, and her marital anxiety shows continuously in underlines of lines such as: "What have I done—what am I—that he should treat me so? He never knows what is in my mind—he never cares. What is the use of anything

I do? He wishes he had never married me" (Eliot, 312) and "It is his fault, not mine" (Eliot, 312). Might Plath have underlined these passages when they lived in Boston, and she suspected Hughes of an affair with a student? Or when they had moved to Devon and Hughes was flirting with a pretty teenage neighbor? Or when Plath knew with certainty that Hughes was having an affair with Assia Wevill in the summer of 1962? In her copy of *Middlemarch*, she had marked: "It will be impossible to endure life with you, if you will always be acting secretly—acting in opposition to me and hiding your actions" (Eliot, 486) as well as "the idea of some guilt in her husband"; "maimed consciousness, her poor lopped life"; "she could not judge him leniently"; and "odious deceit" (Eliot, 549).

We know that Aurelia Plath was visiting the family in Devon during the terrible weeks that the marriage blew apart. Plath's mother felt helpless and wanted to help. Plath could not stand the love, which at that time felt suffocating and not the kind of love she needed. She underlined and starred this passage:

*Looking at her mother, you might hope that the daughter would become like her, which is a prospective advantage equal to a dowry—the mother too often standing behind the daughter like a malignant prophecy —*

*'Such as I am, she will shortly be.'*  
(Eliot, 180)

additionally, she underlined, "That mother became my wife" (Eliot, 455).

Sylvia Plath's marital collapse had reawakened all the unexpressed, unresolved bereavement and anguish of losing her father more two decades earlier, of being exploited as a woman, as well as a cloud of distrust. Were men ever to be trusted? Or mothers, or friends? Was anyone? We know that Plath identified with the character Rosamond's suicidal ideation as she had underlined: "and wondered what she had that was worth living for" (Eliot, 551).

Another marking and underlining in *Middlemarch* had Plath identifying with the text: "His marriage would be a mere piece of bitter irony if they could not go on loving each other. He had long ago made up his mind to what he thought was her negative character—her want of sensibility," and "In marriage, the certainty, 'She will never love me much,' is easier to bear than the fear, 'I shall love her no more'" (Eliot, 477).

All the way through the novel, *Middlemarch* accurately sums up Plath's life, her relationship with Hughes, and the hypocrisy of his spiritual path in contrast to his actions. Plath double-marked this passage in the book: "Some gentlemen have made an amazing figure in literature by general discontent with the universe as a trap of

dullness into which their great souls have fallen by mistake" (Eliot, 473).

*Middlemarch's* Book Five is entitled "The Dead Hand," hinting at where Plath might have gotten the line, "Dead hands, dead stringencies" in her poem written that October 1962, "Ariel." Plath had also starred the words, "Key to All Mythologies," the great work that Dorothea's husband forever worked upon (Eliot, 206). In content and theme, "The Key to All Mythologies" does not sound too far off from Hughes' and Plath's beloved Robert Graves' book, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*.

Hughes' affair with Assia Wevill was more than Plath's façade of perfection could take before cracking. In fainter pencil markings than Plath's other *Middlemarch* notations, perhaps because she still fought accepting the truth, she had underlined: "to love what is great, and try to reach it, and yet to fail" (Eliot, 560) and, "her little world was in ruins" (Eliot, 571).

Devon had indeed become *Middlemarch* for Plath. She had marked and underlined this passage from the book:

*I must not count on anything else than getting away from Middlemarch as soon as I can manage it. I should not be able for a long while, at the very best, to get an income here, and—and it is easier to make necessary*

*changes in a new place. I must do as other men do, and think what will please the world and bring in money; look for a little opening in the London crowd, and push myself; set up in a watering-place, or go to some southern town where there are plenty of idle English, and get myself puffed, —that is the sort of shell I must creep into and try to keep my soul alive in. (Eliot, 563)*

Plath's underlining of the word "alive" here clearly reveals that it had great importance to her. And that, of course, is what Plath did: she took the children and moved to London.

We do not know when, but on page 352 of her copy of *Middlemarch*, Plath had underlined the words: "Yes' to her own doom."

### **Works cited**

Excerpts from this article are taken from  
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