

# *Disease Metaphors and Attempts at Healing in Middlemarch*

Jinyao Li

*Capital Normal University, Beijing, China*  
2621931435@qq.com

**Abstract.** *Middlemarch* is a representative work of George Eliot during the Victorian age. In this novel, the descriptions of diseases and medical treatments profoundly reveal the maladies of British society and the individual fates of its characters. This paper uses disease metaphor as its entry point, analyzing the symbolic significance of cholera, the deaths of Casaubon and Featherstone, and pointing out the power imbalances and social dysfunctions they had represented. It focuses on exploring the significance of Lydgate and Dorothea's medical practices through the lens of illness and treatment, delving into the development dilemmas faced by science and rationality within the conservative Victorian society. Furthermore, it discusses the awakening of female consciousness embodied in Dorothea's self-healing journey.

**Keywords:** *Middlemarch*, Victorian literature, disease metaphors, healing practices

## 1. Introduction

*Middlemarch* is a novel written by Victorian author George Eliot (1819–1880). Completed in 1872, the work comprises eight volumes and eighty-six chapters. It follows the intertwined threads of Dorothea and Lydgate's love and career, narrating the evolution of *Middlemarch* during the years of the agitation, immediately preceding the first Reform Bill. The Oxford Companion to English Literature notes that "George Eliot's reputation reached its height with *Middlemarch*" [1], while Virginia Woolf described it as "one of the few English novels written for grown-up people." Through its masterful narrative technique, vivid characters, and profound analysis of contemporary society, *Middlemarch* exerted a great impact on subsequent generations.

In *Middlemarch*, "disease" repeatedly appears as a metaphorical image. Almost every character in the story is more or less connected to disease—some die from disease, some have their life trajectories drastically altered by disease, and the book even uses disease as a metaphor for social or personality issues. At the physiological level, the concept of illness refers to the literal meaning of the word, defined by modern medicine as "a deviation from the normal form and function of the human body." When it comes to the extended meaning of this word, "disease" can also symbolize psychological, social, political, and other related issues. Thus, "disease" in this work goes beyond just the plot. It serves as a metaphor for social ills and the maladies of the age. The emergence of disease inevitably prompts acts of treatment and healing. Ranging from curing physical ailments to guiding the spirit and mind, the "attempts at healing" permeates the entire novel. The term "healing" is defined as "to treat and rescue from danger". On the level of individual development, the

"healing" represents a process of self-reconciliation and ideological renewal. On the level of social development, it presents as reform—not only the reform of social problems, but also the change of group values. Lydgate and Dorothea in *Middlemarch* are quintessential examples of those "attempts at healing".

## 2. Literature review

Most domestic scholars have analyzed *Middlemarch* through feminism, marriage perspectives, narratology, and intertextuality. Qiping Yin's article, "Intertexts and Ghosts: Dorothea's Choices — Revisiting *Middlemarch*", has further explored the intertextuality within the novel on the basis of J. Hillis Miller's study, *The Ghost Effect: Intertextuality in Realistic Fiction*. It offers a more comprehensive interpretation of the profound implications behind Dorothea's choices [2]. Taoxiang Zhu, in the article "George Eliot and Unique Awareness of Women's Problems in *Middlemarch*", has examined the distinctiveness of Dorothea's feminist consciousness from a feminist perspective [3]. Few studies have analyzed it from the perspective of disease. Therefore, this paper will focus on the attempts at healing and the disease metaphors in *Middlemarch*, analyzing the metaphorical implications of three kinds of diseases within the work and examining Lydgate and Dorothea's respective "path of healing".

## 3. Disease metaphors in *Middlemarch*

The metaphorical function of disease in literary works has been thoroughly analyzed in Susan Sontag's works *Illness as Metaphor* and "AIDS and Its Metaphors". Both of them examined how disease is progressively metaphorized. One disease metaphor can turn into another, transforming from merely a physical ailment into a moral judgment or political stance [4]. *Middlemarch* also contains numerous "disease" image, which reflects the societal ills that exist in Victorian age.

### 3.1. The metaphor of "Cholera": material desires and moral corruption

In *Middlemarch*, the cholera epidemic that struck Britain in 1832 is the social background for the novel's latter half. Within the narrative, the exposure of Bulstrode's secret and the outbreak of cholera in *Middlemarch* almost unfolded in the same time. This coincidence makes readers to ponder the underlying metaphorical connection between the two events.

It was precisely when *Middlemarch* recorded its first cholera case, and the town council convened to discuss epidemic prevention, that Mr. Hawley exposed Bulstrode's scandal publicly. Moreover, earlier when Lydgate and Bulstrode discussed the cholera epidemic in the country, Bulstrode remarked that a constitution in the susceptible state in which he is at present is, would be especially liable to fall a victim to cholera [5]. This statement resonated with the subsequent exposure of his scandal, revealing that the cholera symbolizes not only the disease itself, but the immoral acts driven by greed for money. Bulstrode was precisely a victim of this greed. When his unethical behavior was exposed, he deeply immersed in illness. Meanwhile, when Mrs. Bulstrode inquired her neighbor and friend about Mr. Bulstrode's true situation, she said, "Let us hope that there will be no more cases of cholera to be buried in it. It is an awful visitation. But I always think *Middlemarch* a very healthy spot." This reinforces the metaphor of cholera. At this point, she still knew nothing about Mr. Bulstrode's scandal, thus naturally regarded *Middlemarch* as a "very healthy spot". Therefore, *Middlemarch* links the disease's social context of to the characters' fates, making cholera with dual significance and prompting readers to reflect on and contemplate social issues.

### 3.2. Casaubon's heart disease: the maladies of intellectual authority and patriarchy

Casaubon suffered from heart disease in his later years. His sudden collapse during an argument with Dorothea reveals his gradually weakening body. Given the medical conditions of the time, the death of a heart disease patient like Casaubon was inevitable. However, his death is not only the end of an individual life, but the collapse of the intellectual authority and patriarchal system he embodied. The intellectual authority refers to the social phenomenon that in an era of limited education, individuals possessing profound professional knowledge held higher status than those without formal education—especially women who cannot access to education. This granted knowledge holders greater influence and authority.

Casaubon's death from heart disease signified the collapse of individual's intellectual authority. He had devoted his life to academic research, expending huge effort to compile the *Key to All Mythologies*. Dorothea had been drawn to his "great soul" because of the illusion created by his hypocritical scholar mask. She regarded him as a mentor and placed him on an incomparable status. However, Casaubon's scholarship was rigid and superficial. His work relied on "which were to be the doubtful illustration of principles still more doubtful." His labors culminate in "a morbid consciousness that others did not give him the place which he had not demonstrably merited." Only when Casaubon told his writing thoughts to Dorothea on his death bed, she finally recognized the falsity of his intellectual authority. Thus, after Casaubon's death, Dorothy never touched his works again, and the edifice of Casaubon's intellectual authority had finally collapsed. It builds a strong contrast between Casaubon's hypocrisy and Lydgate's scientific spirit. British society at that time was undergoing a critical period of industrial transformation, marked by significant conflict between traditional intellectual authority and the emerging rationality of science. Thus, exposing the hypocrisy within traditional intellectual authority and respecting science became the direction for future social development.

Another metaphor for Casaubon's death is the collapse of the patriarchal system. His marriage with Dorothea was merely "a promise that the short hours remaining should yet be filled with that faithful love." Whenever conflicts arose between them, he always declares, "you are not here qualified to discriminate." Traditional patriarchal ideology was vividly embodied in Casaubon's marriage. From the moment Dorothea developed mindless adoration for him, their relationship was unequal. Under the guise of "great work," Casaubon "clung low and mist-like in very shady places." In the appendix of his will, he added the unreasonable demand that Dorothea would forfeit all inheritance if she married Ladislaw. This move aimed to trap Dorothea within the cage of patriarchal authority, ensuring that she would continuously submit to his intellectual authority. However, Casaubon's death had already begun to unravel his control. The appendix of Casaubon's will could not shackle Dorothea's soul. Behind Casaubon's death, it is not only the dissolution of his power, but the historical inevitability of patriarchy's collapse and the prevalence of rational and egalitarian ideas.

### 3.3. Featherstone's chronic illness: the imbalance of familial and social power structures

Featherstone's prolonged illness and the end of death revealed that not only the division of the Featherstone family but also the imbalanced power structure in the society. In Featherstone's will, the distribution of his estate was dramatic—his unfulfilled wish to destroy his last will before death, relatives who flattered him for the inheritance at Stone Court, and the unexpected beneficiary, Joshua Rigg. This revealed that the Featherstone family's relationships depended entirely on money. However, Featherstone's second will which executed after his death, canceled all distributions in the

first. It bequeathed land, stocks, and furniture to Rigg, while the remainder was used to build the Featherstone's Relief Home. Every asset was distributed outside the family, shattering the order that had held the family together by money. Featherstone's substantial wealth granted him authority in the family during his lifetime, enabling him to establish a power system. However, his death destabilized this structure. The collapse and imbalance of the power led Featherstone's relatives' relationships no longer bound by money. Hence, they scattered after Featherstone pass away. The Featherstone family's power structure mirrored the Victorian society. Before the enactment of Reform Bills, wealth and power were the mastered by the aristocracy. Therefore, the entire society seemed to be coordinated and orderly with a clear labor division. But the truth is, the social structure became more and more rigid and inflexible, the wealth gap and inequality issues became increasingly prominent. It was not until the reform bill was enacted that the tradition of aristocracy monopolizing money and power was broken. The middle class stepped onto the political stage. The entire British society attempted to establish a new and more democratic order.

Fred Vincy's life underwent a profound transformation after Featherstone's death. While Featherstone was alive, Fred had lived idly, expecting to inherit his fortune. However, Featherstone's second will left Fred penniless. It forced Fred to complete his education and become self-reliant. Thus, the dissolution of power created space for individuals' development, although it made individuals lose their dependence. Through his own efforts, Fred followed Mr. Garth to study agriculture. Eventually, he took over the Stone Court. He became the master of its livestock and furniture, and an accomplished farmer. This reveals how a power structure sustained by money restricts individuals' growth and traps people within rigid hierarchies. Only when such structures disintegrate and grant individual greater freedom, their potential can be fully showed up. Furthermore, it fosters better development for both the individual and society.

## 4. The "path to healing" of Lydgate and Dorothea

### 4.1. The failure of Lydgate's "scientific healing" in reality

The act of "healing" embodies directly at doctor Lydgate. Driven by a passion for science, he studied in London, Edinburgh, and Paris. After returning home, he decided to practice as a physician in provincial town. "But he did not simply aim at a more genuine kind of practice than was common. He was ambitious of a wider effect: he was fired with the possibility that he might work out the proof of an anatomical conception and make a link in the chain of discovery." This greater ambition gave Lydgate's "healing" a dual significance. Beyond his duty of treating patients, he believed that "there was another attraction in this profession: it wanted reform, and gave a man an opportunity for some indignant resolve to reject its venal decorations and other humbug, and to be the possessor of genuine though undemanded qualifications." With these lofty aspirations, Lydgate stepped on his "path to healing" in Middlemarch.

Lydgate's "path to healing" is full of obstacles. Acting alone, he could scarcely drive change in Middlemarch, and his efforts ultimately ended in failure. When he first arrived in Middlemarch, Lydgate struck the townspeople as extraordinary. They believed that he "was something rather more uncommon than any general practitioner in Middlemarch" and "such an impression was significant of great things being expected from him." At this stage, he won people's admiration through his family's reputation, extensive study experiences, and charming demeanor. To implement his great work, Lydgate secured funding from the banker Bulstrode in order to establish a new hospital. In the election for the new hospital pastor, he cast a crucial vote for Pastor Tyke, who was supported by Mr. Bulstrode. However, the alliance of an outsider physician and a medical layman seeking reform

provoked strong resentment among Middlemarch's conservative doctors. This negative sentiment spread through the uninformed people, and more and more people are turning against Bulstrode. Middlemarch's entire medical field "have set themselves tooth and nail against the Hospital, and not only refuse to co-operate themselves, but try to blacken the whole affair and hinder subscriptions." Yet the core of this opposition is not the hospital's treatment effect, but largely in envy of Lydgate and hostility toward the sect promoted by Bulstrode. Simultaneously, Lydgate's new policy of refusing to sell medicines aroused even greater resentment among the senior physicians and pharmacist-doctors. They accused him of using reform as a pretext for gaining reputation, and regarded him as "one of those hypocrites who try to discredit others by advertising their own honesty." Lydgate's series of "attempts at healing" and reforms became increasingly difficult to implement in the doctors' envy and the public's ignorance. The vivid contrast between Lydgate and the local physicians highlighted the backwardness and blockage of traditional British medicine in 19th-century. Lydgate's dream of "healing" represented science and rational, which are foreign, forward-thinking, and thought-provoking ideas in Middlemarch. Promoting such ideas required reform as a vehicle. However, the influx of new ideas inevitably disrupted traditional profit structures, provoking resentment among those who benefiting from the old order. Ultimately, this difficult "healing" attempt was ended in failure.

Until the secret of Bulstrode was exposed, the incident of Raffles' death pushed the conflict between Lydgate and the people of Middlemarch to its peak. The people of Middlemarch, represented by Mr. Hawley, drew a connection between Mr. Bulstrode's scandal and the rapidly cleared debts of Lydgate, concluding that Lydgate had accepted bribes to help cover up Mr. Bulstrode's scandal. This incident directly led to Lydgate's tragic fate, rendering him unable to maintain his status in Middlemarch. Simultaneously, Raffles' death marked the failure of Lydgate's "healing". This event reflects the underlying causes of that failure, which can be summarized in three points.

First, medical reform cannot proceed without the support of capital, which is the material foundation. In 19 centuries, any change or reform required financial support within British capitalist society. The plans isolated from capital were like castles in the air. Thus, after Bulstrode's secret was exposed, he departure from Middlemarch. Due to the lack of financial support, the merger of the new hospital with the old one prevented Lydgate to implement his reform plan. This demonstrates that even the new ideas are scientific and advanced, however, under the capitalist social system, propositions which are conducive to social progress are difficult to implement without conforming to bourgeois interests. It also reveals the drawbacks of capitalism and the dilemma of the development of scientific rational thought.

Second, the notion that moral principles take precedence over scientific facts reflects the conflict between science and traditional experience. This is a spiritual and most fundamental issue. Regarding Ravers' death, no one in Middlemarch cared about the true cause. People expelled Bulstrode and Lydgate based solely on ethical and moral principles. "Hence, in spite of the negative as to any direct sign of guilt, in relation to the death at Stone Court, Mr. Hawley's select party broke up with the sense that the affair had 'an ugly look'." This notion, devoid of any evidence, spread among Middlemarch's people, deepening the prejudice against Lydgate. In this context, Lydgate voiced his defiance against the fate: "And yet they will all feel warranted in making a wide space between me and them, as if I were a leper! My practice and my reputation are utterly damned – I can see that. Even if I could be cleared by valid evidence, it would make little difference to the blessed world here. I have been set down as tainted and should be cheapened to them all the same." Lydgate, who could cure all diseases and create miracles in Middlemarch, became disgraced and treated like a

"leper" simply because the "benevolent gentlemen" of Middlemarch deemed him "tainted and should be cheapened". Here, the author poses a question to the reader: Who is truly the "patient", and who requires genuine "healing"? It was precisely because of the powerful force that indifferent to science and facts and blindly pursuing moral norms, making Lydgate's "healing" become a "disease" threatening Middlemarch's people. It prevented Lydgate from curing this pathological mindset. Therefore, resolving the conflict between scientific thought and conservative notions which rooted in traditional experience is key to make reform success.

However, this conflict was still unresolved in Middlemarch. Whether treating Fred's typhoid or diagnosing Casaubon's disease, Lydgate's methods were undoubtedly scientific. But the doctors of Middlemarch operated differently. They "depending on a sense of likelihood, situated perhaps in the pit of the stomach or in the pineal gland, and differing in its verdicts, but not the less valuable as a guide in the total deficit of evidence." They treated patients just depending on experience and intuition. Thus, an ironic scene emerged in the incident of Raffles' death. The fact is Raffles' death resulted from taking an excessive amount of opium and brandy, however, "all stood undisturbedly on the old paths in relation to this disease, declared that they could see nothing in these particulars which could be transformed into a positive ground of suspicion". They only engaged in criticism from a moral perspective. Lydgate's perspective stood in stark contrast. He opposed distorting pathological uncertainty into moral issues, asserting that "science is properly more scrupulous than dogma. Dogma gives a charter to mistake, but the very breath of science is a contest with mistake, and must keep the conscience alive." Thus, the contradiction between advanced science and traditional experience is an important cause in the failure of Lydgate's "path to healing".

Third, the constraints of marriage and family. This was Lydgate's private issue in the reforms progress. Rosamond and Lydgate's married life was so extravagant that Lydgate had to prioritize repaying debts above all else. Rosamond cared little whether her husband's medical ideals would come true. She solely immersed in the pleasures of life while Lydgate bore the responsibility for the family. Hence, after Dorothea proposed the idea of funding Lydgate to continue running the hospital, he chose his family over his career. Ultimately, he had to move to London due to his livelihood. Although he earned substantial income yet "he always regarded himself as a failure." Thus, the failure of his "path to healing" stemmed not only from social factors but also from Lydgate's own character and family circumstances.

Simultaneously, the failure of Lydgate's "healing" reflected that medicine subordinate to power and moral standards in that age. Despite he had excellent medical skills, he was a young and newcomer doctor who had committed an act deemed "tainted and should be cheapened". So, he was unacceptable to Middlemarch. Lydgate's reform aimed to disrupt the power structure within the small town, separating science from religion and traditional morality, and freeing medicine from the power system. This was a challenging endeavor in the society of his time.

#### 4.2. Dorothea's practice of "spiritual healing" and "self-healing"

In Gordon S. Haight's Selections from George Eliot's Letters, [6] it is written that "In November 1870 she began a story called 'Miss Brooke', a subject recorded among her possible themes ever since she first wrote fiction, and in December decided to combine it with what she had written of Middlemarch". The integration of the two stories enabled Middlemarch to reflect social realities more effectively. At the same time, it provides a reasonable basis for exploring the parallels between Dorothea and Lydgate. This is to say "healing" stands as one of the shared themes in both Lydgate's and Dorothea's life journeys.

Though Dorothea was not a physician, she continuously engaged in her own form of "healing." Her work mainly involved moral and spiritual healing. The most classic example of this spiritual healing was that after Bulstrode's secret was exposed, Dorothea helped Lydgate get out of the dilemma of family, society, and debt. Simultaneously, Dorothea explained Lydgate's innocence to Rosamond, resolving their family crisis. When the entire Middlemarch community followed unhealthy prejudice and misunderstanding, Dorothea insisted on her trust in Lydgate and also explained the truth to the Reverend Farebrother and others. This action reflected Dorothea's desire to heal Lydgate's "heart trouble" and cure the community's unhealthy mindset. She challenged traditional and recognized "truths", insisting on respect the individual itself and practicing humanistic ideals.

However, this attempt at healing people's spirits ultimately proved unsuccessful on a broader scale. Such change could only bring limited healing within a limited scope. As for achieving ideological transformation in the entire Middlemarch or even the entire society, there were still a lot of obstacles. The root cause of this failure shared common ground with the failure of Lydgate—the solidification of social power structures prevents the implement of reforms advocated by individuals. The voices of a few awakened people cannot rouse the closed and stubborn minds of Middlemarch's public. Moreover, in the rigid discourse system of Middlemarch, neither the female character Dorothea nor the outsider physician Lydgate possesses the sufficient discourse power to spark reform. That is the shared cause of Dorothea and Lydgate's failure. The author clearly addresses this issue in the novel's prelude: "For these later-born Therasas were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul. Their ardour alternated between a vague ideal and the common yearning of womanhood; so that the one was disapproved as extravagance, and the other condemned as a lapse." Dorothea's plan to build houses for villagers in Lowick was deemed as "extravagance" by Mr. Casaubon. Her marriage with Ladislav was seen as a "lapse" by the Middlemarch community. Dorothea was indeed a "later-born Teresas" whose grand ideals remained unattainable due to the prejudice and the closed-mindedness of the world around her.

Although Dorothea's ideal of "healing" ultimately remained unfulfilled, she successfully achieved her own healing through this process of "healing". It embodies the value of the process itself in pursuing ideals. Casaubon's death marked an important turning point in Dorothea's life. In his final days, he asked her to organize his notes for the Key to All Mythologies. It was then that Dorothea realized this work which is the culmination of Casaubon's lifelong passion and ambition, was actually nothing more than "which were to be the doubtful illustration of principles still more doubtful." After she realized the hypocrisy of Casaubon's academic research, Casaubon still demanded Dorothea to obey his judgments and wishes. This is equivalent to asking her to choose between being loyal to her marriage and being true to herself. According to the traditional moral norms of the time, being loyal to marriage was the "correct" choice for a woman. However, Dorothea chose the latter, taking a crucial step toward her path to "self-healing". After Casaubon's death, she said: "Only, thinking about it was so dreadful – it has made me ill. Not very ill. I shall soon be better." This illness referred not only to Dorothea's physical illness but also to the mental illness after the collapse of marriage and intellectual authority. Yet she believed "Not very ill. I shall soon be better", revealing that Dorothea would not immerse in the disappointment of the collapse but would strive for self-transformation and move toward "health". Then the absurd appendix to Casaubon's will further strengthen Dorothea's choice and led her to focus on undertakings beneficial to society. When she decided to visit Rosamond for a second time, a servant asked if she had stayed up all that night. She replied, "I have slept. I am not ill." She shed the black mourning veil for

Casaubon, and changed fresh clothes and a new hat. Then she used her own strength to help the Lydgate family who stay in trouble. Through the process she "healing" others, Dorothea achieved her own healing. Ultimately, regardless of Casaubon's will and the opposition of the local people, she finally married her true love Ladislaw, successfully completing her "self-healing".

Dorothea's "self-healing" occurred unconsciously. When Rosamond revealed the truth about her and Ladislaw, Dorothea "felt a great outgoing of her heart towards Rosamond for the generous effort which had redeemed her from suffering, not counting that the effort was a reflex of her own energy." The author thus portrays this salvation as driven by Dorothea's own inner strength, emphasizing the agency of human being. When this unconscious "self-healing" manifests in Dorothea's unique feminine character, it symbolizes women's awakening and self-redemption. Women don't need to depend on external "salvation". The act of salvation itself already involved an imbalance in the strength of the rescuer and the person being rescued. To achieve gender equality, women must rely on their own redemption and healing. Here, the author affirms Dorothea's inherent strength and the possibility of women achieving "self-healing".

## 5. Conclusion

"Disease" and "healing" are two profound themes in *Middlemarch*. The act of "healing" not only serves as a crucial thread in the life journey of Dorothea and Lydgate. Beyond the successes and failures of "healing", it also reveals social issues while championing individual worth. Delving deeper into the act of "healing" allows readers to examine the metaphors of illness within the work. These metaphors similarly reflect social realities such as patriarchy and the authority of knowledge, prompting readers to reflect on the current social reality.

## References

- [1] Drabble, Margaret. (2000) *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Oxford University Press.
- [2] Qiping Yin. (2004) *Intertexts and Ghosts: Dorothea's Choices - Revisiting Middlemarch*. *Foreign Literature Review*, 01.
- [3] Taoxiang Zhu. (2002) *George Eliot and Unique Awareness of Women's Problems in Middlemarch*. *Jinan Journal (Philosophy & Social Science Edition)*, 06.
- [4] Susan Sontag. *Illness as Metaphor*. Shanghai Translation Publishing House.
- [5] George Eliot. (2012) *Middlemarch*. Penguin Classics.
- [6] Gordon S. Haight. (1985) *Selections from George Eliot's Letters*, New Haven: Yale University Press