“‘WOVEN AND INTERWOVEN’”: THREADING THE FEMALE WEB FROM GEORGE ELIOT TO DU BOIS

by

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(Under the Direction of Richard Menke)

ABSTRACT

Eliot’s *Middlemarch* explores interactions that weave the larger tale of human history using web and thread metaphors of connection. This web is specifically concerned with the domestic woman and should be read alongside W.E.B. Du Bois’s lesser known novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, where the web of female connectedness becomes racialized. While Eliot presents the connections between her women as strength despite their entrenchment in domesticity, Du Bois’s heroines get entangled in their web. Drawing upon Nancy Armstrong’s ideas of domesticity in the novel and Daniel Hack’s “African Americanization” of Victorian literature, my paper will assert that by reassessing the web metaphor of female connection in both novels, we can participate in a large-scale connective process to link the Victorian female identity to a later depiction of feminine blackness. This pairing represents the larger need for Victorian Studies to dialogue with conceptions of race and otherness.

INDEX WORDS: Victorian studies, African American literature, *Middlemarch*, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, Du Bois, Eliot, Domesticity, Web imagery

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

> I at least have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe. (132)
>
> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

What does it mean to be connected in society? Almost any character in *Middlemarch* could raise their hand to answer this— Eliot herself decided to write the book on it. Set in a fictional nineteenth-century English town, Eliot's novel explores the connections individuals make when they gossip, communicate, or simply live within the close scope of family and friends. She forms the notion of connection as something inescapable by creating a society where all members are connected in some way. The text of the novel largely consists of this "unravelling" of the "woven and interwoven" with special interest applied to "this particular web." To best understand Eliot's means for using a web and thread metaphor along with the particularity of her wishes, I propose that connection becomes a gendered idea. I argue that *Middlemarch*'s web is clearly concerned with the feminine, even more acutely, the domestic woman. This Introduction will argue that George Eliot's feminine web in *Middlemarch* should be read alongside W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, which exemplifies African

American transformations of Victorian metaphors. This Introduction cites the theoretical and critical frameworks which make this pairing most compelling. I will argue for the relevancy of these novels in relation to Victorian Studies' place within academia, where empire and race should no longer stay situated in the periphery.

In wanting to give appropriate contextualization for the gravity of domestic space in the nineteenth-century novel, I look to Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987). Armstrong expertly discusses how the domestic woman gained a type of secretive and underlying power through novels written by women, for women, and about women, in which "narratives which seemed to be concerned solely with matters of courtship and marriage in fact seized the authority to say what was female" (5). Eliot's *Middlemarch* fits within these parameters. In their varying levels of domesticity, she creates women characters who gain just the power which Armstrong verbalizes, a "form of political authority" (72). Armstrong argues that the novel lends this power furtively, oftentimes making it hard to recognize since it is so different from the sphere of masculinity. I take Armstong's claims and narrow them in upon Eliot's uses of the web which lend strength and power to her domestic women figures.

In Armstrong's monograph, she writes clearly and confidently that the domestic woman exemplifies a new political being. Interestingly, she uses metaphorical language of threading and weaving in her own writing about feminine domesticity:

> In demonstrating that the rise of the novel hinged upon a struggle to say what made a woman desirable, then, I will be arguing that much more was at stake. I will consider this redefinition of desire as a decisive step in producing the densely woven fabric of common sense and sentimentality that even today ensures the ubiquity of middle-class power. It is my contention that narratives which seemed to be concerned solely with matters of

> courtship and marriage in fact seized the authority to say what was female, and that they did so in order to contest the reigning notion of kinship relations that attached the most power and privilege to certain family lines… I am saying that the female was the figure, above all else, on whom depended the outcome of the struggle among competing ideologies. (5)

Armstrong's insistence on the female as "the figure, above all else" who determined and decided changing conceptions of ideas is striking and relevant to the thesis at hand. I will have to agree with Armstong in my analysis of two novels' worth of women characters, for emphatically it is the women figures who allow us to discover these "fantasies of political power" that were "played out within a domestic framework," while men were delineated to the outside, outwardly recognizable political world (29).

Armstrong specifically references Eliot's beginning and end of *Middlemarch* for how it wrestles with the domestic woman's place in history. She recalls how "George Eliot begins *Middlemarch* with a historical reference to a woman's self sacrifice" and argues, "Not only does she ask us to understand women's history as something outside and essentially different from that of men, but in concluding the novel, she also asks us to acknowledge the fact that human experience is profoundly affected by those whose work takes place in a domain outside the political sphere" (43). I will push her thoughts further in specific analysis and close reading of the domestic figures of Dorothea, Rosamond, and Mary Garth. Undoubtedly, Armstrong's theory clearly outlines that the domestic space enables women to have a new kind of power— a power that creates a history of its own and a legacy much different from that of men. Armstrong's idea that "the household appeared to detach itself from the political world" remains extremely fundamental to my discussion of women in *Middlemarch*.

Almost aristocratic Dorothea, upper middle-class Rosamond, and humble Mary Garth— as I will discuss at length in this thesis— live within Middlemarch's societal web of connections and ties. I demonstrate how Eliot presents the connections these women have as strength, where they can get what they want and create their own future. I will show how they become exemplary models and representations of Armstrong's theory on the power novels lend to the domestic space and its female inhabitants, or more accurately, female rulers.

But my thesis also seeks to move beyond fictional Middlemarch and our beloved George Eliot, in order to avoid "a situation in which Victorianists are our own and only interlocutors" (Manifesto). My rhetorical approach strives to emulate what Eliot's own metaphors of connection practice: to *connect* and weave new threads. With this in mind, this thesis will connect Eliot's Victorian women figures to another female identity— one very much inspired by Victorians like herself. I argue that Eliot's use of a thread and web metaphor to follow female connections should be read alongside W.E.B. Du Bois's lesser known novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) where the function of race is made more explicit within its connected female web. While Eliot's connected female characters draw on knowledge of the domestic sphere to allow them their own bounds of freedom and individuality, Du Bois's heroines suffer and become strangled in their societal web— where domesticity fetters, not empowers. A shift to this unlikely text will teach us more than the implications of the web metaphor. I argue that when Victorianists can trace authorial influence and connections between texts beyond what has been seen before, our field can thus dialogue with other identities, experiences, and more explicit analyses of race. This movement towards finding, seeking, and recognizing functions of race in previously white-washed or Eurocentric canonical texts might even offer a model for revitalizing other fields of literature and lenses of analyses, with Victorian Studies at the forefront.

Although my interest in the specific ramifications of the feminine web in both novels is unique, I am hardly the first to connect Victorian literature with the legacy of its African American counterparts, who encountered and responded to that literature in their own works. In *Reaping Something New: African American Transformations of Victorian Literature* (2019), Daniel Hack teaches readers to understand this complex interchange and serves as a helpful and integral introduction into this literary thread of connection. I will refer to him throughout this upcoming thesis, for although he does not explicitly draw the line between *Middlemarch* and *The Quest* as I do, he discusses other works by Eliot which grapple with racial identity and minority groups in their own ways, such as *The Spanish Gypsy* and *Daniel Deronda*. Hack tracks the "African American afterlives" of these works and debates the extent to which Eliot both knew of yet participated unknowingly in such a conversation (20). Hack's discussion stretches into the Victorian influences of several other African American writers as well, such as Charles Chestnutt, Pauline Hopkins, and Jessie Redmon Fauset. Most importantly, his chapters on Eliot and Du Bois prove the undeniable connection between African American and Victorian literature, where both abound with messages concerning colonized spaces and subjects.

In pairing *Middlemarch* with *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, I aim to participate in Hack's hopes to amplify the African Americanization of Victorian literature that has been largely rendered historically invisible. Hack fights to contextualize this work as regular and frequent despite the blind eye given to it in academia so far:

> No marginal or fringe practice, these transnational, cross-racial transpositions and repurposings were often the handiwork of major figures in the African American literary and intellectual tradition… including W.E.B. Du Bois. Yet almost all these deployments

> of and responses to Victorian literature remain little known; indeed, some of the most sustained and provocative instances have gone entirely unrecognized. (1)

Hack cites Du Bois as one of the African American intellectuals interested in the use and manipulation of Victorian literature, as he analyzes *The Souls of Black Folk* at length for its citational practices that constantly hearken back to Victorian poetics and verse. I want to push Hack's interest into Du Bois's novelistic efforts, which remain virtually undiscovered when compared to his other more commercially successful works.

Hack is careful to distinguish, as I want to be, that African American writers' "close engagement with Victorian literature represented no mere capitulation to existing constraints, but instead constituted a deliberate political strategy and means of artistic expression" (2). Du Bois and the other African American intellectuals and writers who worked with and beyond Victorian literature do not owe any of the genius of their work to Victorian literature itself. Rather, the Victorian literature they used existed as a framework and background to further write for an American audience and in a new context. Hack argues, and I echo, that these writers did so deliberately and expertly, hardly using the Victorians for simple emulation.

Hack clearly delineates how the connection from Victorian to African American literature goes both ways: "Victorian literature's role as an important archive for the production of African American literature and print culture, I will also argue, makes African American literature and print culture an important archive for the study of Victorian literature" (2). Both are important archives to the other, with neither remaining indebted, as I have previously stated. I hope to contribute to the exploration of this relationship with my analysis of *Middlemarch* and *The Quest*. Hack outlines most explicitly that "African American writers' relationship to canonical literature is not one of indebtedness or imitation but rather subversive appropriation" (8). This

simply cannot be said enough. It is incredibly enriching and compelling that just as Armstong mentions Eliot in her theoretical approach on the domestic woman, Hack looks to both Eliot and Du Bois for the formulation of his theory on the African Americanization of Victorian literature. Obviously, these authorial connections are not new but have been overlooked. I intervene in these conversations with the specific goal of including Du Bois's rarely studied novel, an inclusion that develops and extends these preceding, important theories on both race and gender.

To further discover the value of including integrations of race into the typical Victorian canon, one needs to acknowledge essays such as "Undisciplining Victorian Studies" by Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong, as well as Mufti's "Hating Victorian Studies." The former proposes a challenge to the field that closely aligns with the hopes for my own project:

> We seek to challenge the multiple rigidities, cultural and conceptual, that have kept Victorian studies isolated from other fields. In particular, we want to ask why contemporary scholarship on a period and a geographical center that consolidated a modern idea of race—the nineteenth century in and beyond Britain—lacks a robust account of race and racialization. (370)

This foundational call for "breaking open" and "re-making" creates relevancy and urgency for the argument to read Du Bois's understudied novel for its connections to Victorian Literature. This quotation makes it clear that scholarship cannot be content to sit with works like *Middlemarch*, regardless of how much Victorianists value them for their power of prose and language, depiction of human nature, and other lauded novelistic strengths. Scholarship of the field has begun to reconceptualize why these works call to us in the first place and what they reinforce about race and racialization for every type of reader— a consideration perhaps lacking for many years. The latter essay by Mufti points us to Du Bois by describing him as one who

"loved Victorian culture by hating it as his own," one who was an "avid reader of Victorian literature, intellectual antecedent of critical race theory, and life-long hater of British and American imperialism" (395). Mufti highlights how Du Bois's engagement with the Victorian is not simply one of inspiration, convenience, or admiration— rather, it is a conscious turn to an age and a literature that once again showed a familiarity with the depiction (or lack thereof) of living as the other in an imperialized, white space.

Although this thesis is not centrally concerned with authorial biography, the lives of both Du Bois and Eliot do prove to connect them all the more to the themes looming large in their literature. Du Bois was a pioneer in many ways as the first African American to graduate from his high school, going on to earn several degrees from the newly integrated Harvard. He followed this with a later enrollment in Fisk University which more particularly introduced him to specifically Southern racism— ideas of prejudice that would go on to lastingly impact his works. In addition to achieving these high levels of education, Du Bois crossed many boundaries of intellectual knowledge, becoming best known for his sociological work while going on to make a significant if understudied body of literary endeavors, including *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* as his first novel. Preceding this publication was his most famous conglomerative work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), a landmark effort which cannot be underscored enough in its impact and lasting effects on both black and white readers. Blossoming from a few previously written essays but mostly newly composed, Du Bois's *Souls* was a labor of love that he shrugged off humbly at times. Herbert Aptheker describes how this work came at a turbulent time in American history:

> When the government of the United States had embarked upon a program of open expansionism and colonialism and has acquitted in the near-enslavement of its Black

> citizenry; when the dominant organs of public opinion, secular and theological, has agreed on the significantly and permanently and peculiarly 'inferior' nature of Black People; when a policy of mass murder, terror, fraud and corruption bulwarked the legalized and institutionalized third-class citizenship of the Black millions— with the blessings of the United States Supreme Court; and when the anointed and official 'spokesman' of these Black millions excused and justified all this — at that juncture in the events of Mankind, this brief collection of essays from a Black professor in Georgia resounded through the land as a rolling barrage of thunder and the shafts of lightning followed close behind. (49)

This quotation confirms the poignant need for an intellectual like Du Bois in the United States at this time and summarizes the depth of his impact through *Souls*. *Souls* cannot be ignored as the primary work which created and founded Du Bois's reputation. In the spirit of undisciplining, I find it more valuable and interesting to study his first novel— a work that many did not care for, never read, or cast off as insignificant in light of his other achievements.

Du Bois's interactions and involvement in various fields of academia did not slow down but rather intensified throughout his life as he involved himself with Pan-africanism, the American Communist Party, and more global efforts for peace and civil rights. His complex story ended in Ghanaian citizenship and project entitled "Encyclopedia Africana" (Holt). Most notably and in line with my thesis were Du Bois's recurring searches for identity and justice in a world that presupposed and perpetuated inequalities due to race and color, along with his supreme interest in colonized individuals and the effects of empire. His lasting term of "double-consciousness," or the "two-ness" of identity experienced by African Americans, can also be connected to the literary points of interest examined in this thesis, such as domesticity

practiced by both Victorian and black women. Deborah Kay Manson carefully points out the Victorian occurrences of double-consciousness as typified through Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*, to be discussed later within this Introduction. Even more generally within nineteenth-century discourse as a whole, double-consciousness featured prominently in medical and psychological accounts of men and women alike. Shirley Carlson explains how Du Bois's concept led to the creation of the Victorian American archetype, "Black Victoria," who was considered to be "the preeminent black woman" (61). This figure was described to be "like her white counterpart, committed to the domestic sphere, where she was a wife and mother" (Carlson 61). Du Bois's contributions to African American literature deserve to echo loudly into spheres such as Victorian literature, along with gender and race studies.

Similarly seen as an intellectual of her day, Eliot also inhabited a complicated role in terms of both imperialism and domesticity. Nancy Henry traces the former in *George Eliot and the British Empire,* exposing just how embedded Eliot was in British imperialism, as her stepsons ventured off on money-making journeys to South African colonies while her own books were marketed overseas. Henry aptly describes how "The export of English literature, money, and sons to the colonies formed a pervasive and diverse culture of empire in mid-nineteenth-century England" (2). Furthermore, Kathryn Hughes' illuminating biography *George Eliot: The Last Victorian* details her domestic leaning, in which even the writing of *Middlemarch* could not interfere with her responsibilities to the home, which may explain her affinity for representing domestic women figures in this work. Hughes calls Eliot a "woman intensely involved with the details of domestic life," someone refusing to "lose her grasp on the daily details of housekeeping" (401). Thus, Eliot becomes the perfect vehicle to study in this

thesis, as her own life worked both within large-scale imperialist ventures and small-scale domestic housekeeping.

Just as Du Bois wrote from the perspective of blackness, Eliot wrote with a woman's hand and a British point of view. Some scholars propose we should be careful not to condemn Eliot for her imperial involvements, including Henry, who warns that although "Eliot's daily, domestic contact with the empire is evident," it is safe to say that "there was no imperialist agenda behind either her actions or her writing" (414). Henry argues that labeling Eliot's works imperialist prematurely accounts for more fully formed theories and extensions of the term that had yet to be realized at her time. An excerpt from "Imperialism in World-System Perspective: Britain 1870-1914" outlines Britain's imperial progression that Eliot herself could hardly have predicted:

> As the first industrial nation, Victorian Britain shaped the world economy to her needs and, therefore, played a role in the world-system different from other core state economies… During the years from 1870 through 1914 the world economy was expanded and elaborated, driven by the spread of industrialization from Britain to Europe and North America and rapid increases in world trade. (McGowan, Kordan 49)

McGowan and Kordan distinguish the idea of New Imperialism from its previous forms, which developed during these crucial years of 1870-1914. Given that *Middlemarch* was initially published in 1871 through 1872, the imperialism they describe was not primarily the form Eliot would have known or participated in.

Nevertheless, it remains important to question the extent to which Eliot's work upheld the hierarchy of the British state and European values to participate in the processes of imperialism and othering, which is why it has remained a pressing topic for those who read and study Eliot.

Oliver Lovesey proposes that Eliot's implication in the imperial British empire is all the more reason to revisit her work, where academics may examine "her interventions in a broad range of discourses with postcolonial inflections: internal and regional colonialisms and imperialism in the ancient world… and the position of Eliot within international education and her influence on postcolonial literature" (3). I argue that we must be careful not to apply what Edward Said terms the "rhetoric of blame" upon those like Eliot, who remained knowingly "white, privileged, insensitive, complicit" (96). Rather, Said continues that we can still use writing from women like Eliot to "make connections," a contention very much in line with the trajectory of this thesis (96). Regardless of how we view Eliot's relationship to the British empire, it is easy to understand how a life like hers would speak to someone like Du Bois, who watched imperial systems perpetuate inequalities and harm in his own time.

Some of the most valuable and integral parts of Eliot's identity were her positionality and perspective as a woman writer. In the Preface to their First Edition *Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar describe their literary project of examining nineteenth-century women writers through the repetition of certain themes and motifs of their literature:

> Images of enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles functioned as asocial surrogates for docile selves, metaphors of physical discomfort manifested in frozen landscapes and fiery exteriors— such patterns recurred throughout this tradition, along with obsessive depictions of diseases. (xi)

The literary tradition that Gilbert and Gubar seek to define and concretize relates to George Eliot's literature and her own metaphors of connectedness between women. Gilbert and Gubar's later chapter on Eliot delves into her concepts of captivity and consciousness, along with her special fascination with the metaphor of the veil in her novella aptly entitled "The Lifted Veil."

To Eliot, the veil represented a unique image: "an image of confinement different from yet related to the imagery of enclosure that constantly threatens to stifle the heroines of women's fiction, the veil resembles a wall, but even when it is opaque it is highly impermanent, while transparency transforms it into a possible entrance or exit" (468). This short novel in particular hearkens back to Manson's suggestion of the Victorians' interest in double-consciousness, where both men and women were often diagnosed with mental issues using such a term. Manson also points out the irony of Eliot's own double-consciousness: "she was both Mary Ann Evans, the woman, and George Eliot, the author" (61). Eliot's interest in the image of the veil indicates her interest in figuring the female experience within her literary language. Noticeable too is her textile, material choice of the veil to represent women's shifting experience, often determined and judged by those who are less confined by the bounds of their own existence.

Gilbert and Gubar point more explicitly towards the aim of this thesis when they write that "The veil especially fascinated Eliot. She transforms it into a multitude of webs, nets, snares, bandages, shawls, masks and curtains in her fiction" (469). Although Gilbert and Gubar mention *Middlemarch* in passing in their chapter on Eliot and "The Lifted Veil," they do not follow the web imagery into *Middlemarch*, leaving a noticeable gap that I hope to fill. Their analysis of Eliot's veil imagery will inform my own tracings of web and thread language and materiality in *Middlemarch*.

Another theoretical framework with which I will engage is materiality and material things in *Middlemarch* and Du Bois's other text of interest. Elaine Freedgood's *The Ideas in Things* (2006) details the nineteenth-century novel's interest in things— things abound everywhere for the Victorian novel, representing the burgeoning material economy and enterprises of the day, including furniture, clothing, utensils, or other instruments of daily life. However, Freedgood's

intervention is specifically concerned not only with the presence of material things but their *importance*, a distinction helpful and relevant to my own discussion of a metaphorical and material web spanning across the two novels. While Freedgood intervenes in Victorian scholarship to stress the importance of material things as ideas powerfully embedded both within and beyond metaphor, I transform her argument as an extension of my analysis of the web(s) of female connection. Both the textile woven web of Middlemarch's English society and the growing cotton draperies of Du Bois's American South weave tangible and metaphorical continuities best understood through Freedgood's emphasis and interest on the material thing.

Freedgood's Introduction to her monograph, entitled "Reading Things," argues that although the Victorian novel abounds with material things, novel reading as a practice has long pressured focus and attention towards subjects over the thing. Freedgood labels this practice commodification of the object, wherein we lose what she reads to be a valuable critical cultural archive:

> One of the great paradoxes of the mid-Victorian novel is the extent to which it offers us a welter of commodities in its content but cannot regularly cope with commodifying those objects at the level of form; the novel "'lets'" us, in other words, read them as *things*. (5)

Freedgood sets out to "begin with objects rather than with subjects and plots and stay within them a bit longer than novelistic interpretation generally allows" (4). The precedence of the object over the subject allows space for my interpretation of the web metaphor as a very real concrete thing in both texts as well as a powerful metaphorical entity. Freedgood accounts for this double meaning of the thing when she claims that "the 'literal is, in most contexts, metaphorical,' so that the idea that things might be taken literally suggests a longing or an aspiration rather than a method" (12). This interplay where the literal can be and does become

the metaphorical allows us to weave Freedgood's words into the material and metaphorical web and thread holding us to *Middlemarch* and *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*.

Freedgood's interest in *Middlemarch* is through Eliot's role in narration, where she seems to restrict and assign specific meanings to material objects more than previous Victorian writers. Freedgood focuses on Eliot's depiction of Dorothea's material dress, as it is mused upon and written upon quite lengthily for simply being a material object and thing that others have previously dismissed in favor of the character who wears them. Freedgood argues that George Eliot becomes a "self-conscious producer of the novel as a particularly literary genre" wherein she "begins to restrict and assign meaning to fictional objects" (6). She describes how "Dorothea's plain dress, mentioned in the first paragraph of the novel, is explicated exhaustively by the narrator for several pages, ensuring that readers attach exactly the right historical, sectarian, and economic associations to this type of clothing" (6). Freedgood's argument on Eliot's purposeful narration indeed makes Eliot the Victorian author who evidently did pay attention to the material, the object, and the ideas in things, at least according to Freedgood. Freedgood's contention that Eliot understood and was aware of the power of the ideas in *things* can be supported by looking into Eliot's extensive research during the writing of her novels, an effort that she called her own "quarry" and Freedgood describes as "bricolage of material and literary culture, an intense commingling of the literal and the figurative" (112). One other important distinction by Freedgood that seems of interest and relevance to my project is her careful distinction that modern times and criticisms have affected the way we view Victorian thing culture: — "the combined forces of which have policed the meaning of things such that much of the archive of thing culture and thing culture itself have become nearly invisible" (8).

This specification warns us of the dangers of seeing Victorian thing culture through a twenty-first century lens.

Freedgood stresses that the novel conditions us to pay more attention to the human or the realm of characters, where things are simply commodified and thus lessened in their importance. This imbalance created an irony for the Victorians, for while their literature abounds with historical material, objects, and information, literary analysis has yet to prioritize or read this vastness with anything like the attention it gives to the people and characters found within the very same pages. She ends her Introduction with an appropriately paradoxical statement and call to action considering the analysis of the literal and the literary, describing how "things that are at once material and figural, fetishized and fugitive, here and gone" constitute a very new way of reading and forming connections. I will revisit Freedgood's chapter on *Middlemarch* in my own section on Eliot's text, which argues that the web of female connection is best understood as a metaphor for connection and strength, but also an entity of material proportions— an understudied *thing* of the Victorian novelscape.

Having established the critical and conceptual frameworks which I draw from, I will now reiterate what I do in the following two thesis chapters. I am concerned with both Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* for their interpretation and use of the web metaphor for women-specific connections. I draw upon Armstrong, Hack, Freedgood, and essays on "undisciplining" Victorian Studies to propose that Eliot's connected female web must be adapted and reconfigured by readers in order to account for Du Bois's portrayal of black women. Although it is not novel to connect Victorian literature to its African American legacy, my thesis argues more specifically that this connection is distinctly female and found within the domestic. I hope to shed light on the discrepancy between what Victorian women can do in the

web and what the web does to its black heroines. Chapter Two will provide my close reading of three *Middlemarch* women figures and delve into their web as written through the textile Middlemarch English society. Chapter Three will analyze *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, where the web of female connectedness travels to the Deep South, a land white with cotton produced through black labor. Finally I will bring both texts together in conversation, where it will be shown that Du Bois racializes and updates the experience of female connectedness, allowing twenty-first century readers of Victorian literature to participate in a large-scale connective process of linking Victorian female identity to the depiction of feminine blackness.

Having made the case for how this thesis could improve and deepen the field of Victorian Studies, it is imperative to push these developments beyond the scope of Victorianists themselves. If my thesis only speaks to those in my field, I will have appropriated African American literature only in order to uplift the voice of George Eliot and her European ideals of female gendering. I would thus be repeating the mistakes of Victorian imperialists of the past, cultivating distinction through the lives and works of others and most often, *the* Other. Rather, in order to avoid this misstep, I argue that in linking the Victorian female identity to post-Reconstruction feminine blackness, we provide a richer understanding of just how intertwined colonialism can be with representations of domesticity— however much later and more geographically displaced. Mufti's *Victorian Studies and Decolonization* makes this relationship clear, as well as proves its necessity for further exploration:

> From the perspective of W. E. B. Du Bois, B. R. Ambedkar, and C. L. R James, "decolonizing" the Victorian canon would be absurd, as it is this very canon – formed with and alongside colonization – that they loved *and relied on* to theorize the project of decolonization. (406)

In this thesis, I will explore specifically how African American literature teaches us through its singular ability to write both with and against the European novel, its marriage plot, and its gendered, imperialist perspective. We can learn to study Du Bois's novel as an example for how Victorian Studies can expand itself into our current moment, where we may read even our most beloved and familiarized texts with a critical eye. I hope to spin new threads of connection well beyond the Victorian, for our studies are hardly dying— but very much alive.

CHAPTER 2

MIDDLEMARCH'S "THREADS OF CONNECTION"

> Young love-making— that gossamer web! Even the points it clings to— are scarcely perceptible… The web itself is made of spontaneous beliefs and indefinable joys, yearnings of one life towards another, visions of completeness, indefinite trust. (325)
>
> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

Our first venture into web imagery will be Eliot's *Middlemarch*, the great English novel of the realist tradition— difficult to write something new about, but more difficult still to ignore in a discourse on Victorian literature. I will show through an analysis of three female characters how the web metaphor provides strength and a way of living both through and beyond the domestic spaces of the novel. But before we delve into each female character, we must underscore the complexity of the web metaphor itself that runs throughout this famed Victorian text. How do we read the web as both a metaphor and a thing more than that? Why does this very metaphor work so well for the women themselves in this particular town? For in Eliot's novel she warns that "we all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them" (79). Certainly a woman who wrote such a line would take caution with the extension and application of any metaphor she employed.

To answer these inquiries, we may remember that Eliot's middle England town is one where textile industry and material merchandise is a way of life. The web metaphor perfectly

mirrors the textile materiality that many of the characters are involved in some way or another. The Vincy family manufactures to make their money. The Brooke family is wealthier yet opts for simple material dress. As readers, we imagine through Eliot's narration that the entire town hums with a background of ribbon-making, silk-dyeing, and trading in textiles. This idea of the web matching the textile materiality of the town itself is nicely summarized by Eliot: "Municipal town and rural parish gradually made fresh threads of connextion— gradually, as the old stocking gave way to the savings-bank, and the worship of the solar guinea became extinct; while squires and baronets, and even lords who had once lived blamelessly afar from the civic mind, gathered the faultiness of closer acquaintanceship" (88). The web metaphor and its "fresh threads of connextion" in this line are shown to move well beyond the women in the novel, although that is the prime interest of this thesis, as a mode to explain the coming yet gradual industrialization of the town and the progressing of its society more generally, where people have become more, not less, connected. Eliot's narration seems to warn against what this connection could mean exactly, describing it as "faultiness."

Eliot's textile language threads virtually everywhere throughout the novel, obviously apparent when one starts to look for it. The medical man Lydgate gets described in such terms, when he "for the first time was feeling the hampering threadlike pressure of small social conditions, and their frustrating complexity" (Eliot 169). Even side characters such as a one Mrs. Taft are bestowed with such descriptive language, where she becomes a woman "who was always counting stitches and gathered her information in misleading fragments caught between the rows of her knitting" (Eliot 247). Let us also not forget the social function of gossip in the text, which also becomes described in web-like, material terms, as where "suspicion and jealousy of Will Ladislaw's intentions, suspicion and jealousy of Dorothea's impressions, were constantly

at their weaving work" (Eliot 393). This distinct emphasis on materiality and textiles gives way to Eliot's recurring web metaphor, which we will trace as seen specifically through the town's women, charmingly, those who would be most adorned with the textile products of the town's materiality. Eliot's textile town explicitly helps produce the web imagery between women as a type of tangible, material strength made through the domestic space, clothing, and manipulations of the two by the women themselves.

The characters of Dorothea, Rosamond, and Mary Garth exhibit Eliot's use of web imagery in *Middlemarch* during the crucial moment of marital commitment. Although each of these women represents different roles in domesticity and societal levels, each of their cases nonetheless contributes to Eliot's theme of strength through web-like connection. Scholars such as Yagmur Demir and Emily Klering have argued that social class and education respectively are the most important factors affecting Middlemarch women; however, I will show that the strength of the web overcomes all of these. Dorothea, Rosamond, and Mary Garth ultimately can and do manipulate the threads of society throughout their development in the novel.

Dorothea, the novel's main heroine, maintains enviable connections to the upper class while also building pure and honest relations with every person she encounters, independent of wealth or status. From the first page of the first chapter, readers hear of "the Brooke connexions," as they are "not exactly aristocratic" but "unquestionably good" (Eliot 7). For readers, it is easy to miss the power that Dorothea has within her own web. The novel tries to trick us with its repetitive "Poor Dorothea" or "Why always Dorothea?" to tempt us into labeling her as a powerless agent stuck in the domestic (Eliot 261). However, I believe Eliot's web positions her as anything but— for Dorothea is the one who ultimately creates her own choices and subsequent destiny. As a young unmarried girl, Dorothea has a religious, self-sacrificing

spirit, and she unexpectedly chooses the stuffy scholar Casaubon as the man of her dreams. It is Dorothea's voice that tells her uncle and guardian figure that she knows the type of person she is to marry. Even Dorothea's body becomes characterized as commanding and capable of moving beyond the domestic, with her "powerful, feminine, maternal hands… holding them up in propitiation for her passionate desire to know and think" (Eliot 36). Everything about Dorothea— her eager mind, her ardent spirit, her hands itching to perform goodwill— allows her to extend her will powerfully within her own web and beyond the domestic.

Dorothea maintains agency throughout the novel even when her status changes from maiden to wife. Although Eliot paints her with a religious zeal to serve Casaubon and attend to his desires early on in the marriage, she also makes it clear that Dorothea recognizes her own disillusionment with married life and the man of her choosing, pitifully lamenting the "fault of her own spiritual poverty" in the first days of her honeymoon (180). As Eliot's web here becomes the iconic "red drapery which was being hung for Christmas spreading itself everywhere like a disease in the retina," it is one that follows Dorothea like a sickness in a time of life that should have been meant for celebration (182). It is at this point that Dorothea could have been made to falter and fall away at the mercy of her conditions and wifely placement. However, she becomes strengthened even more as a constricted wife figure. Dorothea begins to question Casaubon's attitude towards her and explores her own interests, especially those that lead her to the younger and brighter Will Ladislaw. While her marital connections may now tie her to an old and stiff scholar, Eliot shows us that she becomes quite capable of weaving her own threads towards others. Within this new web of wifely expectation, Dorothea reverts to exercising her own power as she did in the earlier, unmarried stage of her domestic and family life.

Dorothea's position as a powerful woman well capable of creating her own destiny is also exhibited in how others view or even worship her, as Eliot cheekily describes Will Ladislaw's perspective of her, quite flooding with zealous desire:

> The remote worship of a woman throned out of their reach plays a great part in men's lives, but in most cases the worshipper longs for some queenly recognition, some approving sign by which his soul's sovereign may cheer him without descending from her high place… It was beautiful to see how Dorothea's eyes turned with wifely anxiety and beseeching to Mr. Casaubon: she would have lost some of her halo if she had been without that duteous preoccupation. (204)

This passage clearly "enthrones" Dorothea as queen, where her seemingly selfless role of the servant wife makes her even more desirable to Will. The idea that "without that duteous preoccupation" she might have "lost some of her halo" comically enacts Armstrong's earlier contentions that desirability in women can be engineered without the men's noticing, for it is achieved quietly and subversively through wifely duties, roles and actions. These actions seem congruous to the men's perception of normalized reality, Armstrong would argue, where their political power is never overtly threatened.

One of Dorothea's most prominent moments in the novel occurs in a clash between the political and the domestic world, and appropriately so. Dorothea approaches Rosamond to assure her that Lydgate is not corrupt, although she mistakenly fears that Will has fallen in love with this very woman she seeks to protect. Dorothea's inner monologue details her turmoil concerning such an action, but also reveals her insistence that it should be done:

> And what sort of crisis might not this be in three lives whose contact with hers laid an obligation on her as if they had been suppliants bearing the sacred branch? The objects of

> her rescue were not to be sought out by her fancy: they were chosen for her. She yearned towards the perfect Right, that it might make a throne within her, and rule her errant will. 'What should I do—how should I act now, this very day, if I could clutch my own pain, and compel it to silence, and think of those three?' (741)

Dorothea does compel herself to visit Rosamond as one of the "objects of her rescue," and it is in this scene where readers truly learn the tenets she lives by. She believes wholeheartedly that female self-sacrifice is ultimate female self-fulfillment, a contention seen through her earlier marriage to Casaubon as well as the one of her future. Dorothea's intervention between the political and the domestic, achieved through her communications with another woman, is rewarded by the new domestic union she achieves with Will by the novel's end. Dorothea's character truly manifests itself in this scene, where she crosses societal boundaries in order to protect what is right, in fact "the perfect Right" for another woman, before looking to the wishes of her own heart.

Dorothea's outcome in the novel has been widely contested for its seemingly disappointing notions of feminine strength and independence. In her "feminist perspective" on *Middlemarch*, Ellin Ringler questions, "why, when Eliot herself was able to defy social tradition and achieve her own epic life, did she relentlessly consign Dorothea to the unmitigated mediocrity of a conventional marriage to Will Ladislaw" (2)? This cry echoes many feminist readers of *Middlemarch* who have been frustrated by Dorothea's resolution, in which she settles down to marry Will and provide him with the appropriate "wifely help" in the final pages of the novel (Eliot 783). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar echo this interpretation in their reading of fiction by Eliot, which they claim depicts heroines "confined within uncomfortable selves as well as within uncomfortable spaces," where they "cannot escape the displaced or disguised

representatives of their own feared impulses" (443). However, my reading with the web metaphor and the idea of strengthened women through connections works against these lamentations about an anti-feminist George Eliot. Dorothea's marital end seems appropriate and even empowering once the force of the web is truly recognized. She was always a fulfiller of roles that lent themselves to Armstrong's "secretive" power: when she was young and unmarried, she demanded her own choices of marriage. When she became a wife to Casaubon, she was dutiful yet learned to find her own joys and passions. And finally, in her union with Will, she embodies a woman who understands the power of being both well and ill-equipped for the roles she has come to have. Through all of these stages, Dorothea was able to take her place in the domestic powerfully and utilize her past and present connections to her advantage— even if at the time she was ignorantly unaware of doing so. Dorothea remains often blind to her own strength— so blind, in fact, that some readers will be dissatisfied with her ending role as a wife because they fail to see how she placed herself there.

The next female character who melds the domestic with the powerful is Eliot's Rosamond. Quite different from the oblivious Dorothea who utilizes her domesticity and connections without knowing it, Rosamond is an expert at connecting herself and making others see her in a certain light. Although the novel seems to trivialize Rosamond and poke fun at her for her calculated moves, she becomes a great example of the power women in this novel have despite their place in domestic space. Rosamond comes from the Vincy family but more importantly from Mrs. Lemon's Finishing School, and she is continually pictured throughout the novel as the desirable end product of femininity. Unlike Dorothea, she knows what a man wants and her irregularities have been carefully ironed out in her schooling. For this very reason, Rosamond knows her desirability and her power, as she pledges continually to marry someone

"who was not a Middlemarcher, and who had no connexions at all like her own" (Eliot 109). Rosamond's plans in which she has "woven a little future" indicate her ability to exist within the web of Middlemarch society while gracefully manipulating her means to move beyond it (Eliot 109).

Descriptions of Rosamond in conversation blatantly expose her performative nature to readers, while this remains a trait that men seem comically unable or unwilling to see: "Rosamond could say the right thing, for she was clever with that sort of cleverness which catches every tone except the humorous. Happily she never attempted to joke, and this perhaps was the most decisive mark of her cleverness… Rosamond knew better" (Eliot 148-149). What becomes disguised as coy flirtation or conversational "cleverness" by Eliot and the novel really comprises Rosamond's political moves and premeditated targets, those ensuring present and future connections even of the matrimonial kind. Eliot even satirically supposes that godly action intervenes in the happenings of Rosamond's love life, where a "Providence of her own" made things happen just so (248). While men admired her piano playing, blond hair, and rosy complexion, Rosamond was admiring the supposed class status and connections of a one Mr. Lydgate, who readers comically recognize cannot give her what she desires.

Furthermore, Rosamond uses her connection to Mrs. Lemon's School to market herself as a finished product— yet charmingly so, under the guise of feminine helplessness with an "executant's instinct" (Eliot 150). Although secretly envious of the higher connections of Dorothea and Celia, she learns to use the domestic space she is given through a series of everyday encounters. For example, while she and her friend Mary must be banished to another room when the men at Stone Court start a conversation, she learns that it is actually all the better for her to talk of her mercenary marriage hopes to another woman, as they "liked very well to

talk in private" (Eliot 101). Eliot playfully describes this scene where men discuss serious matters made vague to the domestic women, while it is actually Rosamond and Mary who "had been talking faster than their male friends" (104). If readers read between the lines of Eliot's coy description here, they will see evidence of domestic and womanly power. In a hidden space away from the men, talking to other domestic women, it is the women who get more done and make more substantive decisions than their male equivalents. In fact, and quite unnoticeably, they make decisions that significantly impact the men and their world on a daily basis.

Rosamond's secretive work to gain agency and an ideal husband is outlined quite clearly in Eliot's description of her within domestic space:

> As for Rosamond, she was in the water-lily's expanding wonderment at its own fuller life, and she too was spinning industriously at the mutual web. All this went on in the corner of the drawing room where the piano stood, and subtle as it was, the light made it a sort of rainbow visible to many observers besides Mr. Farebrother. The certainty that Miss Vincy and Mr. Lydgate were engaged became general in Middlemarch without the aid of formal announcement. (325)

Rosamond's industrious spinning specifically takes place "in the corner of the drawing room where the piano stood," a spatial distinction pointing to the very space where she woos Lydgate with her feminine polished performances at the piano. This performance becomes connected to the "mutual web" that she threads from her to Lydgate in their marriage connection that spreads to all of Middlemarch society without needing "aid of formal announcement." Such are Rosamond's powers in domestic space and spinning her own domestic patterns within the web. She is enacting something through her own industry quite unrecognizable to the men she preys

on. Eliot shows that Rosamond is most unwilling to allow patriarchal society to determine her fate.

Rosamond's careful manipulation of Middlemarch's web ends up taking a darker turn in the novel when she becomes pregnant and then miscarries. Eliot's language maintains material and metaphorical emphasis on the different threads that encumber her now:

> She had not yet had any anxiety about ways and means, although her domestic life had been expensive as well as eventful. Her baby had been born prematurely, and all the embroidered robes and caps had to be laid by in darkness. This misfortune was attributed entirely to her having persisted in going out on horseback one day when her husband had desired her not to do so; but it must not be supposed that she had shown temper on the occasion, or rudely told him that she would do as she liked. (545)

Eliot narrates how Rosamond's child's embroidery now falls into tragic disuse because of Rosamond's own determination to continually do whatever she wants as a married, and then pregnant, woman. Rosamond's hardheadedness ultimately results in death; however, we receive no regret or emotionality from Rosamond's perspective about the issue at all. Some have speculated this point to go so far as to constitute a concealed abortion plot in the novel, where we may read "the degree of control that Rosamond assumes over her reproductive system at a time when that control was supposed to be her husband's prerogative" (Thierauf 480). At present, we can see it as a dangerous enactment and furtherment of Rosamond's desire to obtain independence, no matter the cost. Although claims to Rosamond's domesticity were upgraded from wife to mother in a matter of pages, Rosamond's break from the confines of the domestic web in the form of her baby's miscarriage truly represents her determination, and the ability given to her by Eliot, to resist such claims on her autonomy. Such a reading of Rosamond's

self-terminated pregnancy certainly proves my contention that she was an exploiter of domesticity rather than a victim.

To delve into Eliot's third domestic figure of Mary Garth is to see even more fully the equation of the domestic to the powerful in the context of Mary's own marriage possibilities. While Rosamond is beautiful and Dorothea is both beautiful and rich, Mary is neither— but Eliot still endows her with a romantic story of her own and an inspiring interiority. From the beginning of the novel, Mary is described as a powerful woman who can find joy independent of her circumstances and on her own: "Yet she liked her thoughts: a vigorous young mind not overbalanced by passion, finds a good in making acquaintance with life, and watches its own powers with interest. Mary had plenty of merriment within" (295). In a later scene, more specific to the realm of domestic space, Eliot outlines how her independence does not waver even in the presence of a potential male suitor. Situating her in "her usual place by the fire" with "her usual air of self-command," Eliot characterizes her powerfully because she is within the domestic space— a space where she is in charge while her male suitor is out of place and uncomfortable (127). As the conversation progresses, Mary's domestic power becomes quite literally involved with the web and thread metaphor, as Eliot writes that "Mary was sewing swiftly, and seemed provokingly mistress of the situation" (129). It is through this humble domestic activity that Mary literally is pulling the threads of marriage and love. Far from having this domestic space hold her back or make her succumb to male wishes, Mary is stitching her own future and threading her own desires. Her work does not make her meek and modest, but rather, Mary's sewing needle gives her just what she needs to jab Fred with the sharp point of her powerful words.

In another flourish of Mary's domestic power just a few pages later, Eliot ends with Mary walking to the door and commanding Fred to "never speak to me in that way again" (131). This powerful statement made at the physical doorway from home to the outside world shows Eliot's clear delineation of the domestic space as the only possible space where this statement could happen. Mary is a poor girl working for her family's wages, while Fred comes from the wealthier, well-to-do Vincy family where he has learned to flit away his life's choices and look for pleasure and fun. Mary's assertion of dominance can only occur within the domestic sphere, which Eliot explicitly and spatially outlines here.

Mary's participation in the material implications of the novel's web gives her an interesting connection to Rosamond, quite appropriately related to the ever important topic of marriage. In response to her brother's jests, Mary "pricked his hand lightly with her needle" as she chides, "'I must get this sewing done. It is for Rosamond Vincy: she is to be married next week, and she can't be married without this handkerchief'" (374). In this quotation, we learn more than Mary's laughing judgment that Rosamond needs certain material accommodations to be happily married. What may be disguised as playful, friendly jokes concerning Rosamond is a clear, materially threaded connection from Mary to her friend. Mary's humble sewing allows her to be connected to the more self-important Rosamond, her self-instituted marriage, and the idea of woman-powered decisions as well. If Mary provides her with the right materials, Rosamond can fall comfortably into the marital position she has carefully orchestrated up to this moment, if and when the stitches are sewed properly into place.

Eliot's women utilize the knowledge of their own connections even as they exist in the domestic space, exhibiting such strength through the critical moment of choosing a husband or responding to offers of marriage. I argue that Eliot wants us to focus on the early choices her

women make— the choices of marriage and courtship— because they stand for a large part of Victorian women's culture, along with the underlying politics for women in the domestic novel. Although their webs connect them to families and husbands in a way that keeps them within the traditional bounds of home, hearth and boudoir, they each create and maintain their own power and strength in Eliot's web. With Armstrong's earlier contentions in mind, we may remember that the many scenes of *Middlemarch* which seem to attach meaning to chattering and gossiping conversations on marriage certainly comprise more depth and politics than we might have previously thought. The implications of Eliot's web and thread language certainly do not stop us here, but rather, extend into other novels and literature. The following chapter will trace where marriage and the domestic woman only become more entangled in imperial and colonial projects.

CHAPTER 3

THE QUEST OF THE SILVER FLEECE: "GROPING FOR THE THREADS OF LIFE"

> One thing alone lay in her wild fancy like a great and wonderful fact dragging the dream to earth and anchoring it there. That was the Silver Fleece. (215)
>
> — W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*

When we follow the web from Eliot's English society to Du Bois's depiction of the Deep South, we find ourselves in a world of fiercely drawn boundaries between Black and white, rich and poor, and Southern and Northern, just to name a few. Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* not only shows how the web metaphor continues on but also exposes the more explicit function of race in the experience of female connectedness for black heroines. *The Quest* is set in a post-Reconstruction Era South, different in many ways from Eliot's middle England town, but perhaps drawing on many of the same social strictures, or as it has been labeled it, the infamous "particular web" (Eliot 132). I will show how Du Bois's black heroines, Zora and Caroline Wynn, cannot enjoy the same powerful domestic role as Victorian women and that their web mainly entangles and strangles them.

Du Bois weaves his web by using the titular "Silver Fleece," another name for the prized cotton crop that Zora comes to cultivate in the hopes of gaining her own wages and subsequent freedom. Du Bois never separates the language of the web from the commodity of cotton, and

therefore inextricably links his web to black labor and identity: "A sudden cloud of workers swarmed between the Cotton and the Naked, spinning and weaving and sewing and carrying the Fleece and mining and minting and bringing the Silver till the Song of Service filled the world and the poetry of Toil was in the souls of the laborers" (54). The cotton web is also depicted as an entity that extends into the wild swamp where Zora resides for most of her adolescent years, where she becomes "imprisoned" by "its clinging slimy draperies" which are "twined about the bones of its victims" to have "chilled their hearts" (Du Bois 153). Despite her steps to enter proper society and place herself in what she supposes to be a safer space, Zora becomes increasingly overwhelmed by this entangled cotton web: "The net and web of endless things had been crawling and creeping around her; she had struggled in dumb, speechless terror against some mighty grasping that strove for her life, with gnarled and creeping fingers" (Du Bois 155-156). This web is undoubtedly cotton, cotton so alive in its workings that it preys on Zora throughout the novel, latching on to her from the wilderness of the swamp to the domestic home. Both socially and spatially, Zora is denied her place in the domestic realm— for although she can be exploited for a white audience and do the work they would never do themself, she has neither an acquaintance nor a space unto herself to feel at all accomplished. Zora has nothing like Dorothea's boudoir, Rosamond's piano, or Mary Garth's fireside, for her connection to the domestic does not guarantee her a powerful space or place.

The historical context for the writing of *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* remains enlightening in many respects. Du Bois had had great success with his earlier publication, *The Souls of Black Folk*, a collection of linked essays that includes fiction-like sections, so it came of no surprise that publishers came clamoring to him for a novel. In addition, overtly racist novels were coming into circulation at this time such as *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White*

Man's Burden (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905), both by Thomas Dixon, Jr., a fact that no doubt spurred Du Bois into the sphere of novel writing as well. And finally, the success of his two close friends at their novel writing, Charles Waddell Chestnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar, encouraged Du Bois to take up his pen in hopes of doing the same (Aptheker 109-111). The reception of Du Bois's novel in his day, along with the critical reputation it still has now, however, constitute a complicated and separate issue itself.

The Quest of the Silver Fleece has gained little attention in contemporary scholarship—and the attention that it does receive remains largely negative. In Peter Schmidt's *Sitting in Darkness: New South Fiction, Education, and the Rise of Jim Crow Colonialism 1865-1920* (2008), he thoroughly condemns Du Bois's *Quest* on many different accounts. The novel as a whole he calls "a bale mixing together weevil-damaged and good cotton," in which "the text constantly moves the melodramatic plot forward with dialogue that is not merely wooden, but petrified" (Schmidt 193). He further laments Zora's character with claims that her depiction is both "schizophrenic" and "two-dimensional" (Schmidt 193). Although Schmidt writes such a scathing critique, he does find value in the text for the way in which it articulates Du Bois's vision of the sharecroppers and landowners in the South as individuals involved in an anti-colonial struggle. Such a negative review of Du Bois's *Quest* was quite common, with many taking issue in the way he seems to confuse or struggle with the genre of the novel. However, I want to highlight those in literary scholarship who have defended Du Bois as a novelist, for their accounts serve a more intriguing purpose for this thesis.

In "Du Bois the Novelist: White Influence, Black Spirit, and *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*," Maurice Lee defends Du Bois's unconventional generic blend as evidence for his skillful invocation of double-consciousness:

> Du Bois and *The Silver Fleece* display a powerful twoness. As a reformer with political burdens, Du Bois does not disregard the material world of the novel. But he also imagines a higher calling… This is, as I take it, the fundamental tension in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, manifested in its turning between romance and realism and in the borderland twoness of the swamp, manifested in Du Bois's simultaneous urge to shun and adopt novelistic convention. Moreover, this form of double consciousness extends the dialectic of *The Souls of Black Folk* into the forum of genre, and, just as with that remarkable text, it shows that contradiction need not be weakness— that political imperatives will sometimes engender formal, allusive, ideological striving. (29)

This defense of Du Bois and *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* allows us to incorporate his famous paradigm of double consciousness once again, where we can see the supposed fractured nature of his novel perhaps not as a weakness but a strength. Claire Marie Class suggests that Du Bois's sociological background only strengthens his first novel and allows him a new vocabulary to represent gender and race, employing what she terms his "trembling motif" (51). Others find value in the novel's symbolic structure of the swampland versus the plantation, where racial mixture exists in both and is not grossly oversimplified or binary (Elder 358). Some argue that *The Quest* is important to "embody the author's woman-identified vision of black liberation" (Lemons 186). From these accounts, scarce and varied as they may be, it is clear that *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* deserves more than the past liminal attention it has gained. Although Du Bois may not be remembered most as a novelist, I argue that his novels should be read and reconsidered for anyone interested in the movement to undiscipline. Indeed, my analysis will suggest that perhaps the poor reception and small readership of Du Bois's novel is what makes it so enriching and important to read in our current moment.

Du Bois's main heroine, Zora, begins as a wild and wayward girl character born into a swampland home. The majority of people in the surrounding town of Tooms County, Alabama fear and even fictionalize Zora's birthplace, a shady brothel of generally unappealing visitors and behaviors. Instead of existing in a domestic setting from the beginning like Eliot's heroines, Zora enters into the domestic carefully and consciously. She chooses to enter herself into circles of whiteness in the hopes of gaining love and purity by becoming a maidservant to rich, upper class, and white Mrs. Vanderpool. However, even when Zora is praised for being the "perfect maid," someone "deft and quick and quiet and thoughtful" in the most domestic of roles, she becomes increasingly mocked, ostracized, and seen as the racial other by the women she interacts with (Du Bois 248). Rather than gaining power through the domestic sphere, Zora only becomes more entrenched in her lower status where she represents a monolithic black identity to the other southerners. Zora strikes up a girlhood romance with the idealistic, faithful Bles— a man she can finally trust and confide in— however she suffers heartbreak and rejection when Bles learns of her past sexual experience and deems her impure. Zora's broken relationship with Bles only leads her more into the domestic sphere, where she longs to better herself and reach the purity she so desires.

An example of Zora's intensified objectification in her domestic role exists in a moment between Mrs. Vanderpool and her white friends as they discuss her in a laughing manner. The rich woman tells her friends, "I believe I could mould her into a lady if she were not black" and continues, "In that black net gown of mine Zora was simply magnificent… My jewels found a resting place at last" (Du Bois 248). The women's laughter echoes their underlying discomfort during the scene, for even though Zora is a poor Black woman from the swamp, she has also become tall, regal-looking, and striking to them. The novel's depiction of Zora in this context of

a masquerading, exotic thing to be laughed at by the rich women also helps us realize the options which Zora cannot enjoy. Even when she is bejeweled, she is labeled as the other and the inferior. Du Bois makes us question our own assumptions about where riches fall, are meant to belong, and what they confirm about the unspoken presumptions of race and color. Zora cannot put the jewels on herself, nor deny what they represent, but only lie at the mercy of the web that ties her to Mrs. Vanderpool and her domestic role. Du Bois's depiction of Zora as a servant to Mrs. Vanderpool also helps him to modify and expand upon the significance of the term "domestic," since a "domestic" is also a person paid to do lowly labor in someone else's home. This double meaning would have been readily in the minds of Du Bois's readership and certainly meaningful to the expression and development of Zora's domesticity.

Armstrong's view of the domestic sphere is another idea which complicates Du Bois's representations of the role that women have within the home. Armstrong's formulation of domestic women as political beings must be readapted for Du Bois's portrayal of black women in the novel. The idea that women in the novel hold "a new type of political authority" resonates much differently with representations of black women, for black domesticity has always been inherently political (Armstrong 72). Armstrong's ideas that a woman *could* become powerful within the domestic doesn't really apply for Du Bois's heroines, for all the decisions they make— even the decision not to do something— constitute a struggle in racialized and gendered dynamics found in their very identity. Sex, sexuality, consent; motherhood and children; husbands and households— all of these domestic realities for black women have always been and will continue to be layered in implications beyond the personal since the time of slavery. Amy Kaplan articulates this complication of domesticity when she writes:

> Du Bois represents the labor of black women as the inequitable foundation of domesticity, at the same time that their race excludes them from the privileges and fetters of domesticity, from the ideology of true womanhood. This double exclusion, according to Du Bois, gives the black woman a representational vantage— and advantage. Her labor challenges the boundaries between home and workplace. The necessity of her working outside the home gives her access to the modern economic system and facilitates a revolutionary stance. (205-206)

We will revisit the ending of Du Bois's novel shortly, where we may understand how Armstrong's paradigm becomes reworked using Zora's controversial end. I argue that she enacts just the "revolutionary stance" which Kaplan describes, for she resolves to change the economic world of the novel when her domestic role forsakes her.

Zora's entanglement in a material cotton web turns her into the novel's prey, so that "like a hunted thing the girl turned and twisted in thought and faced everywhere the blank Impossible" (215). This entanglement image becomes more exacerbated in the novel's further plot, where Zora is forced to use her preciously cultivated cotton to make a wedding dress for the rich white landowner's festivities, an unfair appropriation of black labor by the white patriarch. Du Bois explicitly invokes the language of Eliot's metaphorical and material web as he describes Zora's fascination with the bridal gown:

> She trembled at its beauty and felt a vague inner yearning, as if some subtle magic of the woven web were trying to tell her its story. She worked over it faithfully and lovingly in every spare hour and in long nights of dreaming. Wilfully she departed from the set pattern and sewed it into the cloth something of the beauty in her heart. In new and

> intricate ways, with soft shadowings and coverings, she wove in that white veil her own strange soul. (227)

Here, the cotton dress is “magic of the woven web” along with “something of the beauty in her heart,” woven through her “own strange soul.” This serves as an irrefutable connection that Zora’s feelings towards the cotton are a formation of a feminine web, as it is literally woven and overlapping with the marriage of a more fortunate woman’s fate. Zora cannot escape her situation within domestic confines because it is another woman who gets to wear the woven web rather than stay entrapped in it, noticeably a white woman who does not experience the same racialized entanglement. For Zora, it is only a “vague inner yearning” that can be reached upon viewing this bridal gown and veil, as she stays sharply cognizant that her fate is one of dreaming, not obtaining, just as her domesticity is one of vicariousness, not autonomy.

Du Bois returns to Zora’s preoccupation with the cotton wedding gown later in the novel, taking it even further:

> Zora was dreaming again. Somehow, the old dream-life, with its glorious fantasies, had come silently back, richer and sweeter than ever. There was no tangible reason why, and yet today she had shut herself in her den. Searching down in the depths of her trunk, she drew forth that filmy cloud of white- silk-bordered and half-finished to a gown. Why were her eyes wet today and her mind on the Silver Fleece? …She half slipped on, half wound about her, the white cloud of cloth, standing with parted lips, looking into the long mirror and gleaming in the fading day like midnight gowned in mists and stars. (430)

In this passage, Zora has stolen the wedding dress for herself, out of the possession of the rich woman who is supposed to wear it on her wedding day. The material of the Silver Fleece is an obvious symbol of the blissful marriage ending that Zora will not have, and only has through a

stealthy moment of taking the dress for herself. Importantly, the dress is “half-finished to a gown” as well, in order to represent Zora’s inability to reach full wifely status as a black woman privately parading in the clothes of someone who can manipulate the Silver Fleece in a way in which she cannot. Even more than the passages on Zora’s domestic entrenchment as personal servant, these passages clearly invoke the dreams of what she will never achieve, where it is constantly the material and metaphorical Silver Fleece, the cotton web that enwraps her.

Du Bois’s cotton web not only entangles Zora, but it creeps into the world created by the novel, intertwining the surroundings far beyond the US South:

> The cry of the naked was sweeping the world. From the peasant toiling in Russia, the lady lolling in London, the chieftain burning in Africa, and the Esquimaux freezing in Alaska; from long lines of hungry men, from patient sad-eyed women, from old folk and creeping children went up the cry, “clothes, clothes!” Far away the wide black land that belts the South, where Miss Smith worked and Miss Taylor drudged and Bles and Zora dreamed, the dense black land sensed the cry and heard the bound of answering life within the vast dark breast. All that dark earth heaved in mighty travail with the bursting bolls of the cotton while black attendant earth spirits swarmed above, sweating and crooning to its birth pains. (54)

In writing the “bursting bolls of cotton” as an entity connected to Russia, London, Africa and beyond, we must notice Du Bois’s extravagant and dramatic emphasis on material cotton, as well as the international context in which he constructs it. Readers are reminded that while the cotton produced in the south may travel to foreign lands, its transport is simultaneous with Zora’s dreaming and yearning for female independence. Mrs. Vanderpool does talk to Zora about traveling around the world, promising her,“I will see that you are taught… in England — in

France," however this promise is empty for Zora (Du Bois 297). She does not wish to achieve freedom outside of the bounds of the US, but rather, to obtain her own self-fulfillment in the South. Zora's rejection of this offer to travel with Mrs. Vanderpool leads her to return to the Cresswells and the place where she once cultivated the Silver Fleece.

After refusing Mrs. Vanderpool's offer to travel the world, Zora returns to the South in the hopes to claim justice for the overworked black community— as her experience with the Silver Fleece has shown her the unjustness of the Southern landowners' compensations. "Cruelty, poverty, and crime she had looked in the face that morning," Du Bois writes, and further describes how returning to the plantation and swampland incites "roaring in her ears" (358). In a pivotal scene, Zora learns another facet of her identity, that she herself is related to the domineering Cresswell family. Learning this new information only spurs Zora on to seek justice for all those who have been wronged and continue to work in horrible, inequitable conditions, along with the black children whose school is in grave danger. As the novel concludes, Zora and the other black laborers unite their savings and end up buying land large enough to create their own compound unattached to white ownership. Furthermore, Zora becomes reunited with her love interest Bles in an emotional, striking scene where she proposes to him after he has professed his own unworthiness.

This utopian ending has been steadily criticized since the novel's publication, for it seems to solidify and even endorse the idea that Zora and the other black individuals would never truly achieve freedom if the novel were configured in more realist terms. However, the novel's closure becomes more complicated when we consider the Victorian influences on Du Bois's writings. Hack argues:

> The use of the marriage plot to achieve closure—at the expense of a more sustained representation of the community Zora establishes—reinforces this sense of incremental expansion rather than a radical formal break. Indeed, the establishment of this community itself arguably has the same effect, since— despite its departure from Victorian norms and its Utopian potential—it does nonetheless constitute a retreat in scale from the national political and economic maneuvering the novel details. However, the novel's ending is in tension with the Victorian means by which Du Bois engineers it. The plot devices he relies upon not only underwrite his conclusion but also threaten to undermine it, because—in Victorian fashion—they depend upon members and mechanisms of the established order. In doing so, they suggest that that order is not as corrupt and irredeemable as the novel has previously indicated. Worse, they compromise the self-determination and independence Zora's community is intended to model. (763)

Hack's analysis confirms that the perfectly packaged ending of *The Quest* undermines the satisfaction readers can ultimately have in it, if they are looking for an end that could actually take place. Zora would never realistically escape the entangled web of black domesticity or be seen as a business equal in the eyes of the white landowners. Although she seemingly exerts herself and finds agency in the end of the novel, it is done with a utopian flourish and an unrealistic sheen. Readers feel that to disentangle these black heroines from the web of the Silver Fleece is similarly unrealistic. However, the value in Hack's comment is that it allows us to resist simple condemnation or critique of this ending like that done by scholarship in the past. By viewing this end with an acknowledgement that perhaps its abrupt and unrealistic closure purposefully writes back and against Victorian means, our engagement with the web and its Victorian implications allows us to deepen and complicate our reading of the novel's end.

In "Making worlds from literature: W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* and *Dark Princess*," Verena Adamik makes a useful argument about Zora's fate in the novel:

> She therefore exceeds the expectations for a Victorian heroine who would, following convention, either end up dead or snugly situated in bourgeois propriety. Furthermore, throughout the novel, Zora's Blackness as well as her beauty are emphasized, merging Victorian and Black aesthetics. With canonical conventions of British novels thus transferred into the Black Belt of the United States and appropriated, the novel appears optimistic that there is something to be salvaged from these texts and that the problematic canon can be migrated and transformed in favor of the Black population of the USA. (110)

This analysis allows us to view Zora's utopian union with the black laborers and self-instituted marriage as an intentional manipulation of the British novel for this new American audience. Zora's fate is unlikely for the Victorian heroine, but Adamik proposes that as a black woman, she surpasses these models of femininity and reaches new ideals of both beauty and aesthetics. Whatever we may make of Zora and the novel's ending, it is easy to see how both were questioned on the grounds of Du Bois's novelistic merit. In light of the African American relationship to Victorian literature mentioned earlier by Hack, I argue for the richer and more compelling view that Du Bois was purposefully and consciously interested in utilizing yet transforming Victorian conventions— in this case, the fate of his main heroine.

Du Bois uses the cotton web to depict another heroine in the novel by the name of Caroline Wynn, or Miss Wynn. This woman lives and works in Washington as a high school teacher, where she is plugged into high society circles of politicians and up-and-comers. Although she exhibits many traits quite different from Zora, Du Bois is careful to employ the

same use of the web's constriction in order to give yet another example of black women becoming entangled in the novel, tying them to domesticity and subjugation even when they do not wish to be.

One of Miss Wynn's defining characteristics is her light skin tone and her ability to come off as "whiter" and therefore supposedly more womanly. Her first appearance in the novel exaggerates this fact, as Bles Alwyn—fresh from Alabama—actually mistakes her for a white woman upon first glance:

> It was the lady next to him… she was colored! Not extremely colored, but undoubtedly colored, with waving black hair, light brown skin, and the fuller facial curving of the darker world. And yet Bles was surprised, for everything else about her— her voice, her bearing, the set of her gown, her gloves and shoes, and the whole impression was… well, "white." (Du Bois 235)

This initial glance by the novel pushes readers to see Miss Wynn as a lady, for her blackness appears to be hidden well enough by a façade of wealth and class. Furthermore, Miss Wynn almost immediately identifies herself as a schoolteacher, which helps readers place her outside of the domestic world and within a more professional but still highly feminized role. This first scene sneakily hides Du Bois's web of constricting blackness, for at first readers might believe Miss Wynn to represent a black heroine unencumbered by the Silver Fleece. She is Northern-bred, light-skinned, well-off, and working outside the home-— basically inhabiting the space that Zora cannot. Of course, Caroline and Zora can also be read as parallel characters for how they are both connected to Bles as a potential romantic partner.

However, this optimistic and opportunistic beginning for Miss Wynn is soon defeated by Du Bois, as the novel proves the constricting web to be truly inescapable. He begins to describe

her in a language closely aligned with the threading tissue of the Silver Fleece web, where it becomes disguised as "the colorline that was hemming her in" (Du Bois 254). Despite her "marks and insignia of good breeding" that have been cultivated through the wearing of fine gowns and clothing that a white lady might wear, Du Bois writes that her skin tone "invited a different assumption" (253). Although the initial scene may have identified Miss Wynn as a white woman, Du Bois shows how her blackness, no matter how marginal or vestigial, continues to speak for her beyond any measure of her own actions. The first impression was a mistake, as she will forever be labeled as inferior and different because of her blackness.

Even though she works as a teacher and socializes among the ambitious Black men and women of the capital, Miss Wynn's connection to the web also ties her to the domestic, where she cannot escape the framing of her value. When the protagonist Bles travels to DC and meets Miss Wynn, he thinks about her desirability in terms of a future home:

> He glanced at Miss Wynn beside him there in the dimly lighted parlor: she looked so aloof and unapproachable, so handsome and so elegant. He thought how she would complete a house—such a home as his prospective four or six thousand dollars a year could easily purchase. She saw him surveying her, and she smiled at him. (Du Bois 279)

Through this domestic framing of Miss Wynn, Du Bois gives us yet another example of how the web of domesticity constricts and connects black women in his novel. Their success in professional occupations— Miss Wynn's school teaching or Zora's success as a maidservant— is not enough to escape being looked upon as an ornament to the home. With the language of how she would "complete a house," she becomes almost like any inanimate object that would fill a space rather than make up a person. Just as a light fixture or new table would aestheticize a

house and make it seem "complete," Miss Wynn's presence in the domestic would supposedly have the same effect.

Unlike Zora's utopian ending in *The Quest*, Du Bois's fulfillment of Miss Wynn's narrative plays off of the stark reality of her inescapable identity, one where she becomes hardened and aloof because of all the ways that the world has prelabeled and judged her. Rather than marrying the soft-hearted Bles who teaches her to view the world with child-like hope for racial equality, Miss Wynn marries Mr. Stillings, a man who is able to rise in Northern society through cunning and ambition. In depicting her choice to marry up socially rather than try to develop true feelings of love, Du Bois shows the complicated and long-standing effects of what living in racial inequality has done to her. Her story ends with her maid saying, "She used to teach school but she don't do nothing now. She's just married" (Du Bois 348). This comment points to how Miss Wynn has fallen into the domestic frame that was foreshadowed earlier in the novel by the preceding passage. She has become the figure to "complete the house," where "just married" is now the only professional label she exhibits, indicating doubly the recent nature of her marriage as well as the fact that it is her sole distinction. The web has won in tying her to the domestic and taking away the vague extent and claim to agency that she once had in her introduction to the novel.

My close readings of *Middlemarch* and *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* have demonstrated that the web metaphor functions in both novels with very different outcomes for its heroines. Innocent Dorothea uses her wealthy ties to allow her liberty in the selection of a husband, tugging on the strands of Middlemarch society and female domesticity to grow her own power and voice her own objectives. Clever Rosamond boasts her ties to finishing school and polished self-making in order to move beyond the web of Middlemarch suitors and marry the stranger of

her daydreams. Mary Garth goes so far as to make conditions and demands to her potential match for marriage, all the while sitting in the bounds of the doorway to the domestic, fiddling with her needle and thread. All of these Victorian women are entrenched in the domestic. Dorothea lives her life to serve other men, seeking to read as an elderly man's eyes and later to support the career of a second husband of her own age. Similarly, Rosamond lives for the male gaze, often thinking of herself as a female actress playing the part of desirability. And Mary Garth quite literally works to serve, where she is scolded for reading too much and not doing enough. They all reside in the home and hearth, serving their families and eventual spouses; however, they all retain strength and individuality thanks to their manipulation of the societal web. These Victorian domestic women retain power within the web, however much the novel disguises it from us.

On the other hand, the black heroines from *The Quest* cannot work through their societal web in a similar fashion. Their web is not made through aristocratic connections or lofty dreams of marrying well— it is one made of cotton and toils— one that keeps them in the domestic as an ornament within white-controlled society and southern hierarchy. From her wild swamp beginnings, Zora's entrance into the domestic cannot yield the same opportunities and power as the Victorian women. She suffers in her domestic web and gets entangled in a domestic role, where she cannot rise up, be heard, or gain control of her future except through unlikely and utopian means. Miss Wynn demonstrates similar entanglement as the Silver Fleece web travels to Washington and wraps around the light-skinned professional woman, showing how even traces of blackness result in the same societal constriction.

The continuation of the web metaphor in both novels allows us to connect Victorian women figures to the women found in Du Bois's twentieth century novel on blackness in the

South, a connection which points us to the future of Victorian Studies as a field and discipline. I have been arguing that we must widen and undiscipline our perspective if we want to continue valuing canonical literature such as *Middlemarch*. Hack demonstrates the ways in which African American literature is laden with interest and inspiration from the Victorians, just as Armstrong highlights women's domesticity in the novel as politically-motivated maneuver and performance. Freedgood warns that we may not forget to pay attention to the material and the tangible in the novel, just as we bestow attention towards the human subject. In these chapters I have tried to demonstrate that *Middlemarch*'s iconic textile imagery represents not only Victorian women's powerful connections, but the much more politically-charged and radical connections made by Du Bois's black women, where domesticity and femininity have always been inherently involved in highly contested claims on female autonomy.

To reiterate my main goal in linking *Middlemarch* to *The Quest*, I must restate that this example is only one of many entrances into this conversation. Victorian Studies should and *must* connect with explicit analyses of race that have previously been rejected or overlooked. It is not just about the web metaphor that connects these two novels in this thesis but the lesson that lies entangled within. The web metaphor teaches us to move beyond the written boundaries and distinctions of what Victorianists consider to be Victorian— discarding geographic, temporal, and racial lines. Du Bois's novel is just one example of how these connections can help us understand women, the experiences of the domestic, and the underlying power that novels can give to the people in that space. This shift in reading will then allow us to recognize the larger structures at play— the connections to imperial England and the United States, subjugated subjects and spaces, and internalized domestic empires at home. To hearken back to Eliot's beginning quotation, I must place "all the light I can command" upon "this particular web"—

one that I have continually characterized as domestic and feminine. Although either of these novels may lead us to "that tempting range of relevancies called the universe," we must read both *Middlemarch* and *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* with eyes on the women's web, for threading new connections means reading women's daily encounters as part of the larger projects academia remains most invested in.

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