
UNIT 5 THE FINALE

Structure

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

The emphasis in this Unit is upon the exquisite structure of *Middlemarch* in which Eliot takes care to relate every part to the whole. Linking motifs are several. You begin by identifying two of them, reforms, and Money. Keeping the historical developments in view, George Eliot delineates several problems of a society in rapid transition as opportunities in business and politics shake the foundations of traditional value systems. Another device for creating a cohesive structure is the use of metaphor. While many critics have examined the figurality of the "web" as a central metaphor in the text and shown how it may be rendered also as labyrinth, organic tissue, or woven fabric, J. Hillis Miller's influential essay on "Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*" is examined in some detail. The concluding chapters of the novel once again remind us of the position of Dorothea struggling to understand her complex psycho-social self in the context of community and history.

5.1 REFORMS

Towards the end of the novel, several disparate strains are brought into conjunction. One principal link is the idea of "Reform." Let us see how this is effected.

- Reform in the political governance of England was hotly debated in George Eliot's time. The first Reform Bill is the immediate reference in several sections of *Middlemarch* pertaining to Mr. Brooke and Will Ladislaw.

Historically the Bill was necessitated chiefly by glaring inequalities in representation between traditionally enfranchised rural areas and the rapidly growing cities of newly industrial England. For example, such large industrial centres as Birmingham and Manchester were unrepresented, while Parliamentary members continued to be returned from numerous so-called "rotten boroughs," which were virtually uninhabited rural districts, and from "pocket boroughs," where a single powerful landowner or peer could almost completely control the voting. The first Reform Bill was introduced into the House of Commons in March 1831. The Bill became law in

1832. The First Reform Act reformed the antiquated electoral system in Britain by redistributing seats and changing the conditions of franchise....Although the bill left the working class and a large section of the lower middle class without a vote, it gave the new middle classes a share in responsible government and thus quieted the political agitation that might have led to revolution. (*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, 1997).

Reform in medicine was an important development in Europe. In the novel, George Eliot localises the issues by showing debates about the proposed Fever Hospital in *Middlemarch*. Lydgate has brought in ideas for systematising medical practice but he is opposed by the traditional doctors and their patients who have become accustomed to a simple, direct relationship. In Chapter 45 we are told:

The Hospital was to be reserved for fever in all its forms; Lydgate was to be the chief medical superintendent, that he might have free authority to pursue all comparative investigations which his studies, particularly in Paris, had shown him the importance of, the other medical visitors having a consultative influence, but having no power to contravene Lydgate's ultimate decisions; and the general management to be lodged exclusively in the hands of five directors associated with Mr. Bulstrode (493).

Reform for Dorothea is linked to the betterment of the lives of the poor. It was a vision of social welfare more associated with religious fervour than secular planning. Initially, the St. Theresa image had been invoked, at the end of the novel, Dorothea is compared to Virgin Mary (826). However, Dorothea's plans for executing reform (refer to the last section of *Middlemarch*) are formulated with strict adherence to the realm of possibility. She relies on the solidity of the drawing board and a bank account:

I wished to raise money and pay it off gradually out of my income which I don't want, to buy land with and found a village which should be a school of industry; but Sir James and my uncle have convinced me that the risk would be too great. So you see that what I should most rejoice at would be to have something good to do with my money: I should like to make other people's lives better to them. It makes me very uneasy—coming all to me who don't want it. (822)

Another linking device is the motif of Money.

Lydgate and Bulstrode have a common cause in working towards the new Hospital. However the unpopularity of the idea of streamlined medical services that will establish professionalism beyond personal contacts puts Lydgate's career in jeopardy. The old doctors in Middlemarch get their usual, rich, patients; Lydgate's clients are the poor and the needy. Meanwhile Rosamond's refined education and her consequent expectations of an elaborate household have placed Lydgate in debt. As these details of expenditure mount and Lydgate succumbs to his wife's whims over and over again, we are reminded of the early description of Lydgate's "spots of commonness." Hoping to retrieve his economic condition, however partially, he approaches Bulstrode for a loan but is brusquely turned down. Lydgate speaks openly, as to a benefactor. "I have slipped into money difficulties which I can see no way out of, unless someone who trusts me and my future will advance me a sum without security"(736).

Soon, matters take another turn because Raffles appears on the scene. The past of Bulstrode gets connected with the Lydgate-Rosamond story because Lydgate finds his medical career fatally linked to the deception of Bulstrode. Unable to persuade Ladislav to be bribed into silence, Bulstrode turns his attention to Raffles. In rapid, dramatic developments, Raffles sinks into a coma. Bulstrode summons Lydgate to attend to the patient. As Bulstrode is apparently supervising the care of the patient, the ministration of the drugs is under his instruction. Raffles dies and with him the

gory details of Bulstrode's past are stifled. But the doctor is surprised about the unexpected end of Raffles.

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He was uneasy about this case. He had not expected it to terminate as it had done. Yet he hardly knew how to put a question on the subject to Bulstrode without appearing to insult him; or if he examined the housekeeper—why the man was dead. There seemed no use in implying that somebody's ignorance or imprudence had killed him. And after all he himself might be wrong (765).

Despite Raffle's death, Bulstrode's past keeps raising its ugly head. The scandal concerning the banker and the doctor is fed by gossip, fanned by rumours. George Eliot, in the details, shows the conservative preferences of small town people who easily cast aspersions on the strangers who came to settle in Middlemarch. The public indictment of Bulstrode is a marvellous scene of rhetoric and drama. Please refer to Chapter 71. Says Mr. Hawley representing the voice of the community, "It is our united sentiment that Mr. Bulstrode should be called upon—and I do now call upon him—to resign public positions which he holds not simply as a tax-payer, but as a gentleman among gentlemen. There are practices and there are acts which, owing to circumstances, the law cannot visit, though they may be worse than many things that are legally punishable" (780).

Along with Bulstrode, Lydgate loses his reputation and social standing. Dorothea, who recognises the professional excellence and the basic goodness of Lydgate sets herself the task of clearing his damaged reputation. Thereby another link is established between the Lydgate-Rosamond plot and Dorothea's story. Will Ladislav becomes a further inadvertent factor because of his flirtations with Rosamond. From your familiarity with the plot of *Middlemarch*, you would have learnt of the several ways in which the doctor and Dorothea get into sporadic connections. He is as much an essential part of her story as she is of his. He is often an agent in those parts of the action of the novel that concern her ideals of "duty." Initially, the reason is his medical attendance during Casaubon's illness and his sympathetic understanding of Dorothea's helplessness and dismay at her husband's poor state of health. At the end of the story, we witness her courageous faith in Lydgate when almost everybody else is against him.

This segment is a corrective to the overriding emphasis placed on money in many of the intervening episodes. Dorothea becomes an agent of moral transformation in Lydgate, Rosamond and Will Ladislav. This is almost a conscious act as she disciplines her mind, "She tried to master herself with the thought that this might be the turning point in three lives... which were touching hers with the solemn neighbourhood of danger and distress" (854). She acts out her thoughts systematically and with a quiet grace:

- Dorothea encourages Lydgate to pursue his scientific goals even as she places monetary resources within his means. To some extent, she cures him of his spots of commonness, as though their roles were reversed and she had turned healer and he, the patient.
- She visits Rosamond with the intention of showing her the worth of her husband, helping her to understand the vicissitudes of marriage, and making her realise the joint responsibility that devolves upon a couple to protect their relationship. In a highly charged scene where Rosamond's posturing is abandoned and she becomes truly "natural," the women establish a bond that breaks through the customary barriers of rank and class. (854-858)

An unexpected consequence of the visit to Rosamond is the clearing of Dorothea's misapprehensions about Will Ladislav. The proprieties that he seemed to have neglected are now said to be no more than accidents of circumstance. Far from Ladislav playing suit to Rosamond, he had come to tell Rosamond of his deep

affection and admiration for Dorothea. The intensity of the scene had caused Dorothea to misunderstand the relationship. Dorothea came to declare Lydgate's integrity, but she finds to her own joy that Rosamond clears Will of any guilty association.

Money is discussed in poignant terms when Will and Dorothea take courage to declare their love for one another. They may be socially ostracised, she will lose her inheritance from Casaubon, but they have discovered the mutuality of their affection. "I don't mind about poverty—I hate my wealth," she says with "young passion" (870). As in her meticulous planning for the rural poor, she quickly works her way through the reality of her resources. She said in a sobbing childlike way, "We could live quite well on my fortune—it is too much—seven hundred a year—I want so little—no new clothes—and I will learn what everything costs." (870)

It would be wrong to imagine that George Eliot was endorsing Dorothea's naïve disregard for the material basis of life. This shows in the selectivity of her words "young" and "childlike." On the other hand, Dorothea's moral standards are upheld whereby money should not become the dominant argument of life.

5.2 FIGURALITY

The linguistic texture of *Middlemarch* is permeated with figurality. It is present both as poetic, metaphoric imagery as also through the vocabulary and technicality of science. Let us consider some of the prominent examples:

The web as metaphor for social organisation has been seen by critics to be a dominant image. The web is a network and allows us to relate its structure to a spider's web or to woven cloth or to a labyrinth. A web, as you can imagine, consists of fragile nodal points delicately connected to one another. A tug or disturbance at one place will certainly cause reciprocal disturbances elsewhere. Excessive violence would destroy the structure of the web but a gentle pull will cause a temporary shift which will, later, return to the original position. These details must be kept in mind to reflect on the operative aspects of the metaphor.

The groups of characters presented separately and in unison are like the node of a web. Yet one cannot be sure where the node extends into the thread. Similarly, one story flows into the other through plot connectedness. But there are thematic connections too. As J. Hillis Miller points out in an excellent essay on *Middlemarch*, called "Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*" says, "Another important use of the metaphor of a web is made in the description of Lydgate's scientific researches. Lydgate's attempt to find the 'primitive tissue' is based on the assumption that the metaphor of the woven cloth applies in the organic as well as the social realm. His use of the figure brings into open the parallelism between Eliot's aim as a sociologist of provincial life and the aims of contemporary biologists."

For textual reference you could locate the web-imagery when we are told that Lydgate gets caught in the hampering thread-like pressure of Middlemarch life. Rosamond is shown spinning a web of romance, weaving 'a little future' with Lydgate at its centre (Chapter 12). In Dorothea's case the web comes to have associations with the labyrinth. As a young girl she finds herself "hemmed in by a social labyrinth which seemed nothing but a labyrinth of petty courses -- a walled-in maze of small paths that led no whither" (129).

J. Hillis Miller astutely points out that the dominant metaphors are often contradicted by suggestions of an opposite kind. The web or the labyrinth, images of entrapment or imprisonment are used often regarding Dorothea's plight. At the same time optical imagery as of light in windows (a means of looking out from one's prison) is given

special significance. The reconciliation with Will happens near a light from a window and the last book of *Middlemarch* has the title, "Sunset and Sunrise." Dorothea has another "prison" too, her special kind of blindness which leads to errors of judgement. Because imprisonment and blindness both have to do with the lack of light, the "metaphor of vision" (J. Hillis Miller) in the novel denotes enlightenment and also the crumbling of prison walls. One of Ladislav's functions in the novel is to replace with light the darkness which Dorothea experienced with Casaubon.

The use of scientific vocabulary and imagery applies also to the changing relationship between Lydgate and Rosamond as their incompatibility and disagreements make them like creatures from different species. Rosamond's predatory power, her eventual survival as the 'fitter' of the two, is described in a novel by way of images from biology and zoology. Thus Lydgate's circumstances at a late stage in the novel are said to be as noxious as an inlet of mud to a creature used to breathing and surviving in the clearest of waters. At another place we are told that Lydgate lay blind and unconcerned as a "jelly-fish which gets melted without knowing it." (271). By contrast, Rosamond is seen as a "torpedo" whose numbing contact paralyzes Lydgate.

We should also note the use of water imagery, often given as a stream flowing haltingly, or alternatively, as a swift current. Water gives a suggestion of connectedness similar to a web but it is an element traditionally associated with the "flow" of human destiny. In his essay "Fiction and the Matrix of Analogy" Mark Schorer finds in *Middlemarch* many metaphors of unification, representing yearnings, and quite a few metaphors of anti-thesis, representing a recognition of fact. Schorer's view is that everyone and everything in the novel is in a state of flux, moving along a "way".

Let us look at a prominent example of metaphor in Chapter 36:

Young love-making—that gossamer web! Even the points it clings to—the things whence its subtle interlacings are swung—are scarcely perceptible; momentary touches of fingertips, meetings of rays from blue and dark orbs, unfinished phrases, lightest changes of cheek and lip, faintest tremors. The web itself is made of spontaneous beliefs....

In the above passage, the web, the woven cloth, the light, become linked analogies. The sense of bonding has the illusion of permanence. The author's imagery calls up a host of cultural and literary associations by which the reader understands the nature of the illusion even if the characters within the book do not.

J. Hillis Miller makes another vital point about the imagery which, he says, helps George Eliot to create a totalising image of society: "The special mode of totalisation in *Middlemarch* is this combination of specificity, on the one hand, and on the other hand, generalising interpretation on the basis of specificity."

5.3 MINOR CHARACTERS

The generalising can be seen in the quick pen portraits of the minor characters. Mrs. Cadwallader, Mr. Brooke, Sir James Chettam, Celia Brooke, Caleb Garth and Mrs. Bulstrode can be taken as representing character traits that constitute the diverse forces in a society. They do not unfold an inner life in a complex and sustained way but are given dramatic moments that capture an essence of thought or feeling. We shall take a quick look at some of their distinctive qualities.

Mrs. Cadwallader is shrewd and talkative and is full of 'worldly' wisdom. Her pitiless remarks spare only a few. She is appropriately introduced through her dialogue with

Mrs. Fitchett, the lodge-keeper at Tipton. Mr. Brooke is well-meaning in a sweeping sort of way but mostly ineffective. His is a "too rambling habit of mind." A man of acquiescent temper and miscellaneous opinions, the local political issues rendered though his interpretation are happily caught in a profusion of ideas. Celia Brooke is a conventional young woman seeking the time-honoured comforts of a husband and the domestic hearth. She finds the right match in the traditionally minded Sir James Chettam whose "amiable vanity" make him "a blooming Englishman of the red-whiskered type." Caleb Garth, whose simplicity and goodness offers a foil to a number of others, remains emblematic of the positive value of work. Mrs. Bulstrode receives little attention until very late in the novel but in Chapter 74, she suddenly comes to be the centre of attention. In her husband's disgrace she is shown as behaving bravely and admirably and this gives her story threads of associative connection with the suffering of other women as wives controlled by the decisions of their men.

The minor characters help to reinforce the organicist dimension of the novel. As Sally Shuttleworth says in an essay "*Middlemarch: An Experiment in Time*", George Eliot was influenced not only by Darwin but also, more immediately, by Lewes's studies on the subject. "The purpose behind her labour also corresponds to that of scientific practice for the aim of science, Lewes suggests is to link together, through imaginative construction, the fragments of the phenomenal world so as to reveal an underlying order".

The same principle of organic interdependence applies to physiological life, language, social relations, and historical developments. The structure of *Middlemarch* reflects this principle.

5.4 THE FINALE

The ending of *Middlemarch* takes the story into projections of the future. Dorothea is "absorbed into the life of another." The author rhetorically asks what else was it in her power to do.

The Finale is complementary to the Prelude about St. Theresa, the "foundress of nothing." After reading *Middlemarch* with care, would you subscribe to this view?

One should be aware by now of the dynamic quality of George Eliot's writing. Critics of the older viewpoint have mentioned her universalising tendencies, her transcendence of history, her humanism and moral priorities. Recent critics have preferred to see energetic conflict of ideas, contrapuntal forces, divergences, tensions and subversions in the text.

However one factor remains indisputable, that Eliot was a self-conscious artist carefully crafting her text and that she wished to engage active participation from her readers in the full understanding of her story set in the Reform era in England. Though readers today are removed from her in time and history, and social forces have other directions, the reader is still intrigued by the openness that *Middlemarch* has as it invites mediation. As David Lodge says, "*Middlemarch* has achieved a unique status as both paradigm and paragon in discussion of the novel as a literary form."

5.5 LET US SUM UP

The historical timeframe of the novel determines several aspects of the story. You may wish to recapitulate the particulars relating to the passage of the first Reform Bill which changed the voting patterns and power structures in England. The echoes of altered political system were felt in other arenas of community existence. *Middlemarch* is created with fine attention to the details of interconnected structures

of politics, family, domesticity, community, business enterprise, scientific innovations. By a brilliant use of metaphor of the web, George Eliot is able to suggest that civic society is based on organic, yet tenuous and shifting principles. J. Hillis Miller not only reiterates the traditional praise granted to Eliot for the super structuring of this novel, but also builds a further argument for metaphors of light that counterbalance the "web".

Consequently, though there is a "finale" to Dorothea's story in her marriage to Will Ladislaw, an intricate link is established with Lydgate's research on "primitive tissue" and Bulstrode's inability to escape the past.

5.6 QUESTIONS

1. Consider how the subject of "reform" is related to various segments of society in *Middlemarch*.
2. How do conflicting attitudes to money determine the relationship of Lydgate and Rosamund?
3. Discuss the metaphor of the web in the context of events and people relating to Bulstrode.

5.7 SUGGESTED READING

J. Hillis Miller, "Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*", published in John Peck, ed., *Middlemarch* (New Casebooks, 1992).

George R. Creeger, *George Eliot: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice Hall, 1970.

Gordon S. Haight, ed., *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965.

What follows is a "Selected Bibliography". These books are very useful and you may like to refer to them. They are not compulsory but reading some of them will help you to understand *Middlemarch* and George Eliot better.

Hardy, Barbara, ed. "*Middlemarch*": *Critical Approaches to the Novel*. London: University of London, The Athlone Press, 1967.

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