UNIT 3 PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Structure

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This section helps you to critically examine the transitions made in the novel from the subject of youthful idealism to the disillusionment induced by experience. As personal relationships get mired in societal expectations, freedom seems an illusory, impossible dream. Controlling apparatus curbs the flights of the imagination. The philosophical base of George Eliot's novel is explained with reference to the thinkers who influenced her writing.

3.1 IN THE LENGTHENING SHADOW

"Waiting for Death" is a rather morbid pastime but in the important section with that title, several changes are recorded in the dynamics of social and personal attachments among the "old and young" people previously considered. Specifically, the concern is with Casaubon, Dorothea and Peter Featherstone. The subject of grave illness, poignant in itself, is enhanced by the motif of watching and waiting; a strenuous poise recording a variety of feelings. In the words of Barbara Hardy, " We observe frustration, fear, anxiety, understanding, insensitivity, love, sympathy, and professional detachment blended with that good humane curiosity informed by imagination."

Let us now take a closer look at Casaubon who had been dismissed as "a great bladder for dried peas to rattle in " (82) in the early chapters of *Middlemarch.* An aged, dedicated scholar, determined to write his magnum opus, a *Key to All Mythologies,* he spent a lifetime of labour in researching the material to be shaped into final form. In a way, this is yet another metaphor for control by which the human will attempts to give direction to life's inchoate forms. Dorothea was to be an agency for his self-expression but Casaubon had misjudged his compatibility with Dorothea just as she had. Even during their early association in Rome, he had developed an uncomfortable feeling of being spied upon and being suspected of pursuing a fruitless endeavour. He was irritated by her proximity yet jealous of her absence.

At Lowick, their home in Middlemarch, tensions surface yet again over the arrival of Will Ladislaw. So far in the novel, the reader's sympathy had been directed to Dorothea and her sweet, innocent dependence upon Will. Now, changing track, Eliot, surprisingly, springs the question whether a man such as Casaubon is not deserving of our pity.

> For my part I am very sorry for him. It is an uneasy lot at best, to be what we call highly taught and yet not to enjoy: to be present at this great spectacle of life and never to be liberated from a small hungry shivering self—never to be fully possessed by the glory we behold, never to have our consciousness rapturously transformed into the vividness of thought, the ardour of passion, the energy of an action, but always to be scholarly and uninspired, ambitious and timid, scrupulous and dim-sighted (314).

The psychological realism of such a passage goes a long way in our appreciation of George Eliot's integrity as a writer who is fairly impartial to her characters and who invites the reader to enter the emerging dynamics of altering relations in her story. Casaubon's trepidation about the efficacy of his "Key" fits well with the theme of vocation so important in *Middlemarch.* Like Lydgate and Dorothea dreaming of a better world inspired by their act of community service, Casaubon too dreams of the completion of a document which will stream brilliantly into the academic firmament. Eliot would have us notice one critical difference. The doctor and the social worker desire improvement in the lives of others, the egotistical scholar covets fame for himself.

3.1.1 Watching and Waiting

Following this section of *Middlemarch,* our sympathy is directed to Casaubon's failing health and a heart attack which occurs soon after an agitated scene with Dorothea. As Lydgate is called in to attend to the patient, the stories of Dorothea and Lydgate become seamlessly attached. Chapter 30, which Barbara Hardy examines in great detail, is a concentrated enquiry into the thoughts of Casaubon, Dorothea and Lydgate, such as would have satisfied the fastidious Henry James's demands for selection and concentration in a novel. Lydgate watches Dorothea watching her own feelings towards an old ailing husband. "Tell me what I can do ?"(323) she pleads with the doctor. It is a "cry from the soul," a "sob in voice" (324). Casaubon is to be guarded "against mental agitation"; she must try "to moderate and vary his occupations" (323), she is advised.

Thereafter follows another remarkable passage of self-reflection for Dorothea — memory, guilt, fear, repressed hostility, helplessness, resolve, and a multitude of related emotions battle for primacy in her review of her marriage with Casaubon. For a woman who had elevated "duty" above all feelings the choice is self-evident. In Barbara Hardy's words:

> Dorothea does not consciously weigh and choose, as on some occasions before and after, but here spontaneously chooses love. She has stopped

resenting, wanting, and criticising, and she thinks of herself in relation to Casaubon only as a possible and frail source of help. She has broken with the past Dorothea who has usually spoken and acted from a sense of her own trials, has stopped listening to her own heartbeats and thinks only of the feeble ones of her husband.

Valuable as this insight is from Hardy, consider for yourself whether this reading is the only possible one. For instance, where Hardy claims that Dorothea chooses love, I would say she chooses duty. Also, Dorothea may quell her criticism of Casaubon's wasteful intellectual effort but she cannot be blind to the futility of his work. The difference is in the expressiveness of her attitudes about which Hardy is correct. But I would add the corollary that Dorothea represses her negative sentiments about Casaubon so that she may attend to his illness but her agitation is ample evidence that the resentments may surface later.

Casaubon too must wait and watch, his frail body now an alibi for the failure of his literary production. "To Casaubon now, it was as if he suddenly found himself on the dark river-brink and heard the plash of the oncoming oar, not discerning the forms, but expecting the summons" (462). At this point, George Eliot withdraws our sympathy from Casaubon by showing him unyielding and mean towards his devoted wife. Psychologists today would call the behaviour a "withdrawal" for it rejects all offers of help. Dorothea's desire to give primacy to her husband's needs is met with a cold, mean reticence on Casaubon's part. Her timid advances are returned by his chill, her solicitations negated by his silence. The deterioration in the relationship is given in Chapter 42. The anxious query that Dorothea had made to Lydgate earlier about what she could *do*, has now turned to a helpless bewilderment spoken to herself, "What have I done — what am I — that he should treat me so?" (463)

Her innocence which does not permit her to see Ladislaw's attentions is a strong cause of Casaubon's rudeness. The contrast is highlighted once again. The men are so different — old and young, gloomy and cheerful, wealthy and genteel poor, scholar and dilettante, reserved and effervescent, static and itinerant, staid and bohemian. As egotism is another important theme in the novel, we see Casaubon living by it whereas Will has no sense of it. Most irksome to Casaubon is his own suspicion of his intellectual prowess, a dreadful secret which he can hardly admit even to himself. Its a haunting possibility of failure which he would not want anyone to pry into. Dorothea's proximity to him and his work make her the one likely betrayer of his dreams, the destroyer of the foundation of his posture as serious scholar. He seems to guess at the extent of her knowledge of such a secret and to wonder about her loyalty to him.

3.1.2 A Hidden Subject

A further subject is hinted at but not mentioned explicitly. The Victorian taboo on discussing sexuality keeps the subject in abeyance. But astute readers would be alert to the nuances of the unhappy wedding journey and the ensuing irritability between husband and wife. Also the attraction between Will and Dorothea has a sexual aspect though not admitted in the surface text of the novel. The dry intellection of Casaubon and his distaste for any kind of bodily touch is mentioned in the book. Will, on the other hand speaks of body, colour, taste, sound, albeit in the context of art, but such depersonalisation of implicit sexuality is within the permissible sphere of Victorian writing. Feminist critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in the ground-breaking study, *Madwoman in the Attic*, demonstrated that women writers had to resort to indirection to speak of unmentionable subjects such as female sexuality, and that madness, for instance, was a meta-language for unfulfilled desire in women. Dorothea's dismay at Casaubon's coldness does not result in madness of course. She is one of the sanest heroines in British fiction. Yet, when you recall that Virginia Woolf said *Middlemarch* was a novel for "grown-up people," you will understand that

she was alluding to a latent sexuality playing upon the contentious positions given to Casaubon, Dorothea and Ladislaw.

3.1.3 A Rattle in the Throat

The other figure of death is Peter Featherstone, whose avariciousness is a form of control. It parallels Casaubon's invocations of "duty." The deathbed scene in Chapter 33, which has Mary Garth attending upon the dying and imperious Featherstone, is remarkable as a study in contrasted character. The angry, helpless, immobilised Featherstone rattles his keys and tries to bribe Mary into altering his will. Mary refuses. She will not sell her conscience for money even though she is poor and her act of compliance would have helped Fred Vincy whom she loves.

3.2 THE SPRINGS OF LOVE

The situation *Three Love Problems*, is created by the deaths of Casaubon and Featherstone, both controlling men who reach beyond death through the legal injunctions laid down in their wills. Eliot shows, on one hand, the importance of money and, on the other, the capability of some noble minds to transcend the lure of material gains. Also, Eliot's metaphor for the novel's structure — web, node, tissue — give credence to a belief in organicism. Individuals are said to be inextricably connected by their community based transactions and further linked to a larger universe of Nature and its incomprehensible "grand design." In the particular instance of this section in *Middlemarch* there may be no apparent contact between Casaubon and Peter Featherstone, but the terms of their will link them thematically. Similarly the theme of "love," variously interpreted and enacted, links three disparate stories in Book Four of *Middlemarch*.

3.2.1 Youth and Maid

The critic Henry James liked the episodes concerning Fred Vincy and Mary Garth the least:

> The love problem as the author calls it, of Mary Garth, is placed on a higher level than the reader willingly grants it. To the end we care less about Fred Vincy than appears to be expected of us. In so far as the author's design has been to reproduce the total sum of life in an English village forty years ago, this commonplace young gentleman, with his somewhat meagre tribulations and his rather neutral egotism, has his proper place in the picture; but the author narrates his fortunes with a fullness of detail which the reader often finds irritating.

I am not averse to such an opinion though it may seem prudish to castigate a rakish young man for his excesses in clothing and riding. Mary Garth deserved better but love, as they say, is blind. Finally she accepts the truth about Fred and responds to the affections of a far better, more sober man, Mr. Farebrother.

The Garth family suggests a kind of referential "moral centre" (David Daiches's term) in a novel about transitions. Domestic scenes such as the one in which Mrs. Garth cooks while testing her children in grammar and history speaks of a family holding together in shared values of interdependence. Self-centredness has no room here as we observe in the details about Mary's integrity at the cost of her personal happiness. She could have used tools of manipulation to win Fred through playing upon the sentiments of Peter Featherstone but she remains honest to her high ideals of conduct. As Mary belongs to the lower rungs of society George Eliot is telling us that integrity and idealism can be personal attributes separate from class. This is an important aspect of the novel because it challenges hierarchies of a stratified social

structure in which the elite are often given the privilege of moral authority. Mary and Dorothea have much in common as you might notice.

3.2.2 A sudden proposal

Lydgate's romantic attachment is initiated and controlled by Rosamond who had set her sights upon him fairly early in the narrative. A close look at Chapter 31 reveals a sample of the brilliant visual and dramatic details that are so much a part of George Eliot's art. In reading the passage for the fine nuances of emotion, recall that Lydgate has hurried into the room and hopes to leave a message with Rosamond for her father. Rosamond, engrossed in the womanly pastime of fine embroidery, is deeply hurt by his abrupt manner. Either by accident or design, we are never sure which, she drops her needlework and both Lydgate and Rosamond stoop to pick it up.

> When he rose , he was very near to a lovely little face set on a fair long neck which he had been used to see turning about under the most perfect management of self-contented grace. But as he raised his eyebrows now he saw a certain helplessness quivering which touched him quite newly, and made him look at Rosamond with a questioning flash. At this moment she was as natural as she had ever been when she was five years old: she felt that her tears had risen, and it was no use to try to do anything else than let them stay like water on a blue flower or let them fall over her cheeks, even as they would. That moment of naturalness was the crystallizing feather-touch: it shook flirtation into love (335).

George Eliot leaves in doubt the meaning of "naturalness" in this episode for Rosamond may well be, paradoxically, practicing being "natural" with the intuitive sense that such behaviour will appeal to a candid man such as Lydgate. Whether deliberate or as an aspect of Rosamond's usual posturing, this appearance of innocent helplessness wins the doctor's heart. The tears and agitation foreshorten a friendship into a betrothal.

Feminist criticism might see this as an example of male gaze upon the female subject. The proposal scene is a recurrent trope in nineteenth century fiction and it is enacted in various forms. Remember Lord Warburton in *The Portrait of a Lady* gazing upon Isabel in the picture gallery, "herself a portrait.," before he ardently expresses his matrimonial intention. The woman in such a framework picturises a vulnerability which evokes strong desires in the male to protect the weak. The origins of such a relation are in the chivalric code which, in English literature, Chaucer set out in *The Knight's Tale*. Considering that social relations are best examined in their historical context, the ideal of man as the protector of a woman "victim" is transposed through time. In the nineteenth century novel there are examples of how this formula is turned around by guileful women who will play-act to suit the patriarchal "model." You could think of Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair* or Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind* as examples. Feminist critics would say that the male gaze is an act of appropriation. Undoubtedly, the beautiful Rosamond is closely observed by Lydgate. But this is to Rosamond's advantage as by a coy pretence of helplessness, she precipitates a situation favourable to herself.

In contrast to the moral stability of the Garth family, the Vincys are shown to be people who will ride upon opportunities to improve their material and social standing. The appearance of wealth and class is more important than intrinsic worth. George Eliot's criticism of such social climbers is implicit but we notice that the satire is gentle. She takes into account the historical processes wherein "new money" has been generated by the policies of reform. Ambitious women and men from this class have to negotiate social prejudice in order to carve a respectable place for themselves. For the women, the "right" marriage was the only way to an acquisition of status.

3.2.3 A Love That Has No Name

The third love problem concerns Ladislaw, who is described by Middlemarchers in colourful epithets: "loose fish" (392) "a kind of Shelley" (394) "a Byronic hero — an amorous conspirator " (415). Chapter 37 lets us overhear an intimate conversation between Dorothea and Will in which he reveals his complicated parentage — Polish and English — and the "rebellious blood" that he has inherited. Casaubon's financial settlement for Will is said to be no more than the mandate of family obligation. Will's impetuous language and behaviour (an expression of his rebellious blood) is countered by Dorothea's sobriety as she explains the reasons for Casaubon's dislike — she prefers to use the euphemism, "painful feelings" — of Ladislaw.

Their attachment is forbidden explicitly by Casaubon and implicitly by society because Dorothea is a married woman. However, her status in social hierarchy and her intellectual ability to participate in the emerging political debates provide space for her to entertain Ladislaw at a quasi-personal level. He is, for instance, being considered for an editorial job to monitor Mr. Brooke's political pamphlets. That Ladislaw's acceptance of the offer depends upon Dorothea's encouragement is evident in their conversation. The pair in this scene offer a contrast to Lydgate and Rosamond for here the articulation of their mutual interest can only be denoted in silence. Yet a few words hint at a depth of feelings. A pact is made, the strength of which is unknown to both the signatories. See this passage:

> "I should like you to stay very much," said Dorothea, at once, as simply and readily as she had spoken in Rome. There was not the shadow of a reason in her mind at the moment why she should not say so.
>
> "Then I *will* stay," said Ladislaw, shaking his head backward, rising and going towards the window, as if to see whether the rain had ceased.(403)

Will and Dorothea's blossoming relationship thrives upon the soil of reformist doctrine provided by Mr. Brooke. The forbidden dimensions are never expressed but Will feels an electric shock, "a tingling at his finger ends," on Dorothea's arrival. She confides in him her greatest desires and dreams "for the improvement of the people" (424).

A woman with reformist zeal, Dorothea's idealism is still strong but we witness her helplessness as she lacks the means to effect change directly and must depend upon the advocacy of the men in her life, so far Mr. Brooke, Mr. Chattam and Mr. Casaubon, and now Mr. Ladislaw. Will has little political agency—he stays for the sake of Dorothea — but he has eloquent rhetoric which has a seductive appeal for Dorothea's theoretic mind. In a famous passage, she speaks of her "belief ":

> "That by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don't quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil—widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower." (427)

In answer to Dorothea's query about his own "religion," Will says, "To love what is good and beautiful when I see it...." (427) Consider for yourself whether "reform" can be built upon such nebulous principles? Is George Eliot indulging the abstractions of her heroine or asking us to critique such notions?

Casaubon's awareness of his wife's attachment for Ladislaw causes more than just jealousy. His summary of her tendency is fairly accurate: "She is ready prey to any man who knows how to play adroitly either on her affectionate ardour or her Quixotic enthusiasm"(458). Are women subjected to dependency under the terms of patriarchy? How are we to distinguish between Casaubon's gestures of protection

and his gestures of control? Is Will Ladislaw an opportunist seeking Dorothea's affection for a more dubious purpose? You are urged to contemplate these issues.

3.4 THE AUTHOR AND HER READERS

We are now beyond the middle of George Eliot's text and should be aware that she strives to present balances, do "justice" to her characters by entering the motivations that energize their actions. But she has her partialities too, and often, the story pauses a little while Eliot places solemn philosophical propositions for our consideration. The individual author implicates the reader in a common assumption that the "we" in the text constitutes a shared viewpoint. Thereby strands of belief that are contrary to the authors get negated, or at least, obscured.

Note the following examples:

- Perhaps that was a more cheerful time for observers and theorizers than the present: we are apt to think it the finest era of the world when America was beginning to be discovered.... (176).

- We are all imaginative in some form or other, for images are the brood of desire: and poor old Featherstone, who laughed much at the way in which others cajoled themselves, did not escape the fellowship of illusion (358).

- If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity (226).

George Eliot has often enough been called a "moralist," which to my mind, is an extreme statement. In the passages cited above, and in several others that are interspersed in the narrative, she wishes to engage the reader in a discussion on the general condition of humankind based upon the vicissitudes of her particular, imaginary people. The pronouncements are often philosophical projections.

3.5 PHILOSOPHICAL INFLUENCES

One must note here that George Eliot was deeply influenced by intellectual theories of her time, specially those connected with "determinism." Briefly explained here are the basic assumptions:

- The affairs of the world are "determined" therefore not much scope exists for human responsibility

- Despite the overall determinism, equations of cause and effect operate in matters of human choice. To some extent, therefore an individual is "free" and responsible for action.

- Determinism, though a philosophic theory, is manifest in the daily routines and "destinies" of people.

- Human will is a potent force that informs conduct. While it cannot alter a deterministic universe, it directs moral behaviour relating to duty, obligation, responsibility.

- Since individual will is related to the "determined" path of mankind, a complex "web" reacts to exercises of power/action at any point. The structure of society is organic where every part is necessary for the action of the whole.

- Egotism isolates individuals, while relatedness to society brings spiritual upliftment.

- The universe is governed by principles of fundamental equality. Differences are culturally or locally precipitated. Ordinary and heroic lives are a matter of "perception" not a "given" condition of a deterministic universe. Therefore, changes in status are very likely.

- Flux and fluidity compose ordinary lives within a rigid, fixed universe. Historical processes are dynamic.

The main tenets of determination are given above to help you understand why George Eliot often "explains" her text to the hypothetical reader. She prophecies, warns, justifies, rationalises the thoughts and actions of several people as though taking the reader in confidence.

3.5.1 Three Gentlemen Thinkers And A Lady

George Eliot's ideas derived from three major thinkers about whom you should know:

- **Auguste Comte** (1798-1857) was a French philosopher and moralist who, in 1838, first used the term "sociology." Known as the founder of Positivism, he conceived a method of study based on observation and restricted to the observable. Comte's main contribution was the idea that a time had come when it was possible to live fully in the world of science. He claimed that the goal of science is prediction, to be accomplished using laws of succession. Explanation insofar as attainable has the same structure as prediction. Historical processes were dynamic and progressive. Society was to be visualised scientifically as organic where every part is necessary to the healthy action of the whole.

- **Charles Darwin** (1809-1882) is the author of the controversial book, *The Origin of Species* (1859) which challenged many suppositions of the Bible. It argued that species change and adapt according to the environment. Entire species may become extinct if the environment alters enough to make them ill equipped for survival. A species constantly evolves in favour of the fittest members. The evolutionary world was predatory and potentially violent in its struggle for survival. Along with environment, heredity was an important factor in the theory of evolution. The organisms that happen to possess the characteristics necessary to survive and reproduce, proliferate. Darwin's theories, based on scientific observation, indirectly questioned the notion of a benevolent and arbitrary God.

- **Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach** (1804-1872) was a German materialist philosopher and critic of religion. His seminal work, *The Essence of Christianity* (1854) was translated by George Eliot and she was deeply influenced by its questioning of dogma. Feuerbach sought to demystify both faith and reason in favour of the concrete and situated existence of human consciousness. He stated that religion was a human construction and there was need to take back what had been believed to be divine directives. Since religion itself proves to be merely a "dream of the human mind," metaphysics, theology, and religion can be reduced to "anthropology," the study of concrete embodied human consciousness and its cultural products.

In terms of the application of these theories to *Middlemarch*, you will notice that many of the ideas permeate the text. The driving emphasis is on verifiability of human experience grounded on cognitive, scientifically observed data. For George Eliot, the religion of humanity mattered more that any other form of devoutness. Hence her partiality towards Dorothea. At the same time she understands the world as violent and predatory in Darwinian terms. Hence her understanding of Rosamond

who must adapt to her environment in order to survive. Will Ladislaw is conditioned, in many ways, by his inherited "blood" and Bulstrode must work out his fate as the consequence of his earlier misdeeds. There is a causality to be emphasised even as "destiny" stands sarcastically aside.

See if you find other examples in the text.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

In reading this Unit you should have paid attention to the philosophical premises on which George Eliot based her story of a provincial town. Determinism gave significance to human endeavour even as it believed that people were conditioned by the circumstances particular to them. The argument is worked into major developments in the story pertaining to the love motif, which now has acquired a sombre tone.

3.7 QUESTIONS

1. In reviewing Casaubon's behaviour towards Dorothea, do you regard him with sympathy or anger? Give reasons for your answer.

2. Write a note on the main tenets of Determinism and show how the philosophy explains the personality of Lydgate or Rosamond.

3. How do you account for the contradiction in Mary Garth, that she should be so mature in her dealings with Peter Featherstone yet so impetuous in her love for Fred who least deserves her?

3.8 SUGGESTED READING

David Daiches, "*Middlemarch.*" An Introduction to the novel in the "Studies in English Literature" series, 1963
Mary Jacobus, *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, 1979
Jerome H. Buckley ed., *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, 1975
T.R. Wright, *Middlemarch*, 1990