# UNIT 1 APPROACHING THE NOVEL

**Structure**



## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this unit is to introduce you to a) major critical approaches to *Middlemarch* and b) give you an insight into the link between George Eliot's life and some important issues in the novel. At first sight, the voluminous text of *Middlemarch* can be a little intimidating. Yet, read with systematic attention, the book gives pleasure and also instruction. The first Unit will help you develop familiarity with the methods adopted by Eliot throughout the book.

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION: HOW TO APPROACH *MIDDLEMARCH*

> "And what are you reading, Miss —?
> "Oh ! it is only a novel"
> Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, Ch.5.

Jane Austen's ironic dismissal of "only a novel" should alert us to the serious intention behind the statement. Speaking for a generation of readers, Austen, with wry humour, exaggerated the expectations that a novel was required to fulfil as "some work in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language" (*Northanger Abbey*, Ch.5). Whether a novel measures up to such demanding criteria or not is often a matter of individual response and ideological subject positions. George Eliot's *Middlemarch* from the time it was published in 1871 has attracted strong and controversial opinions from leading critics of English literature.

At the very outset, George Eliot's contemporary Henry James, a prolific writer and an astute theoretician of the novel, published a review grounded on measured statements:

> "*Middlemarch* is at once one of the strongest and one of the weakest of English novels....We can well remember how keenly we wondered, while its earlier chapters unfolded themselves, what turn in the way of form the story may take—that of an organised, moulded, balanced composition, gratifying the reader with a sense of design and construction, or a mere chain of episodes, broken into accidental lengths and unconscious of the influence of a plan. We expected the actual result, but for the sake of English imaginative

literature ... we hoped for the other.... But that pleasure has still to hover between prospect and retrospect....*Middlemarch* is a treasure house of detail, but it is an indifferent whole".

However, while moving his focus from form to content, James was enchanted with the social realism, of "people, solid and vivid in their varying degrees ...a deeply human little world." He was equally impressed by George Eliot's "broad reach of vision," the "brain, in a word, behind her observation." But in analysing the totality of the novel, Henry James, like many others after him, could not reconcile the diversities contained in the plenitude of *Middlemarch.* He concluded his review with a perplexed query, "If we write novels so, how shall we write History?" ( Henry James, *Galaxy*, March 1873)

A similar "doubleness" has marked the opinions of other famous critics, and you may have to decide upon your own preferences as you discover the ways in which the novel can be addressed by various methodological tools of analysis. There is no "right" or "wrong" assessment of a book such as *Middlemarch* but it must be based on informed and thoughtful understanding. Virginia Woolf, for instance, claimed for *Middlemarch* the status of "the magnificent book which with all its imperfections is one of the few English novels written for grown-up people" (*The Times Literary Supplement*, 20 Nov. 1919) but left it to others to work out the implications of her claim. We notice, however, that the emphasis on form and content has shifted to the subject of ethics in adult relationships.

Later critics tended to see form, content, ethics and morality as inextricably linked in George Eliot's art. Consequently, competing views about the novel debated how the "moral pattern" is to be worked out in a novel where the author keeps firm control not only indirectly as an omniscient narrator but directly through interventions addressing the readers. You will find Eliot telling the reader how to interpret a character, how to link an individual story to a "universal" design, in fact, she offers reasons for apportioning praise and blame. Several readers resent such controlling authority while others are quite comfortable with accepting George Eliot's professed views. Of the books which favour the "classic-realism" of the novel are W.J. Harvey's *The Art of George Eliot* ( 1961) and Barbara Hardy's *The Novels of George Eliot* (1959). Both speak of the exquisite interrelatedness of characters and episodes, which creates a level of verisimilitude and grants access to the fictional time of the novel. In Barbara Hardy's words, "In *Middlemarch*... we feel the pressure of an enormous number of human beings, similar and dissimilar, modifying the doctrines of the novelist as well as contributing to them." (p.143)

While a majority of the critics in the 1950's and 60's condoned the traditions of a third person narrative wherein the many didactic, speculative and summarizing passages found appropriate place, new critical theory of the last two decades has tended to dismantle the authorial "authority" of George Eliot and other nineteenth century novelists. Influential essays by Terry Eagleton and J. Hillis Miller have argued that *Middlemarch* is fraught with discontinuities and disjunctions which George Eliot is strenuously forcing into an artificial balance. Some of these tensions can be attributed to Eliot's problematic relation with the Church and the consequent debates in her mind about secular values versus religious values and the conflict of social obligation with individual fulfillment. Furthermore arose the question of "humanism" deriving from the intellectual influence of Feuerbach and other "positivist" thinkers who gave enormous significance to the play of destiny and scientific rationalism. More details about these philosophical movements will come to you later in the lessons. Meanwhile it is important to note that new interpretations of *Middlemarch* deconstruct the text by challenging its obvious surface meanings by keeping in view that the author too is constructed by a series of personal and intellectual experiences.

Terry Eagleton's sophisticated reading finds George Eliot attempting to recast "historical contradictions into ideologically resolvable form." Commenting on the contradiction, he says that " The Religion of Humanity protects Romantic values against aggressive rationalism; but by rooting those values in the human collective, it defends them equally against an unbridled individualism." Eagleton further alleges "a discrepancy between what the novel claims and what it shows." J. Hillis Miller's brilliant deconstructive arguments would also have us believe that there is an irreconcilable gap in the novel's language and thinking, an example of which is that the metaphors of connectedness—the web and the stream—are undermined by a number of optical images of refraction and illusion.

Dazzling as these arguments are in their sharpness of enquiry, they too can be refuted by an equal exercise of deconstructive reasoning. This is demonstrated in David Lodge's recent essay on *Middlemarch* which sees strength, not weakness, in the ambiguities: "It is precisely because the narrator's discourse is never entirely unambiguous, predictable, and in total interpretive control of the other discourses in *Middlemarch* that the novel survives, to be read and re-read, without ever being closed or exhausted."

A different direction for approaching the novel is suggested by feminists who offer another range of interpretations. Chronologically, the earlier critics were likely to see feminism as a "muted" presence in *Middlemarch* wherein patriarchal structures controlled the choices available to women. According to this view, George Eliot was sympathetic to the plight of aspiring women who could fulfill their ambitions only through the agency of men but she prepared no ground for radical shifts in gender or societal relations. Also a troubling contrast was noted between the acceptances enacted by her heroines and George Eliot's own defiance of traditional, restrictive forces. Zelda Austen's essay "Why Feminist Critics are Angry with George Eliot" (1976) sums up the arguments upto a point. Thereafter feminist readings of *Middlemarch* have often investigated the text from a socio-psychological base to discover Eliot's questioning of dominant structures where women are denied active and constructive roles in society. Such a text, while apparently presenting the ideals of social accord, draws attention to the underpinnings of gender inequity. Showing "harmony" as a precariously balanced condition resting upon a woman's deference to social form, the text subverts institutions such as marriage and family on which conventions are grounded. Seen in such a way, the author, far from being complicit and complacent, is a troubled being assigning her own signature to a cunning tale of feminist consciousness raising.

*Middlemarch* is, undoubtedly, a richly textured novel which has also gathered a staggering variety of critical opinions over time. Fortunately, it is an eminently readable novel, as you will discover, filled as it is with lively characters, events and dialogues. While the author directs the novel through a careful and immaculate structuring, she also leaves sufficient room for the readers to exercise their interpretive choices. Perhaps the following broad questions need to be addressed. **First**, why does the novel attract so much admiration as well as criticism? **Second**, to what extent does *Middlemarch* belong to history and still escape the constraints of time? **Third**, how effectively is the woman's question delineated in the exploration of gender relations presented in the novel? **And finally**, how does the structure contribute to the complexity of the issues, themes and ideologies debated in the novel?

## 1.2 THE CREATION OF *MIDDLEMARCH*

On 1 January 1869, George Eliot set herself numerous tasks, among them was the writing of "a novel called *Middlemarch*" ( Eliot's *Journal*). The composition developed slowly, painstakingly, as a cluster of events formed around Lydgate, a doctor in a provincial town. Eliot may have been attempting to recapitulate her own encounters in such a community as she "meditated characters and conditions" (Eliot's

*Journal*, 1 September, 1869). A brief account of her life will help to understand the context in which Eliot was writing.

Born Mary Ann Evans in 1819, George Eliot asserted her intellectual acumen in her translations, her journalistic writing and her extraordinary novels composed during her long and unusual life. Mary Ann began her scholar's life as a pious young woman in boarding school but she soon had to return home upon her mother's death to keep house for her father in Coventry. In the years of sudden responsibility and consequent maturing, she read extensively into the relationship between the Bible and Science and learned to question traditional piety. She broke with her father because she refused to attend Church. Among the people who influenced Mary Ann's rebellion against orthodoxy were the freethinker Charles Bray, the writer Charles Hennell and the publisher John Chapman. However their friendship with the unusually gifted young woman was often misinterpreted by society.

Later, Mary Evans met the famous journalist George Henry Lewes who guided her readings in philosophy, religion and history and invited her to express her views on several controversial subjects. By 1854, Evans decided to defy convention and live openly with Lewes, himself caught in a difficult marriage which he could not annul. There was a good deal of gossip by which Evans was isolated from her family in Warwickshire. That she was convinced about her decision is evident in her letter to a friend, " Women who are content with light and easily broken ties do *not* act as I have done." In all but the legal sense it was a "marriage" and the partnership continued happily until the death of Lewes in 1878. They shared learning and scholarship, read each others works and gained by their intellectual and emotional bond. Using the philosophic debates of the time to transform the aesthetics of narrative fiction, Mary Evans, calling herself "George Eliot," launched her new professional and personal identity as the author of *Scenes from Clerical Life* ( 1858). Eliot's major novels appeared with industrious regularity, *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866), *Middlemarch* ( 1871-72) and *Daniel Deronda* ( 1876). Tragedy struck in the sudden death of Lewes in 1878. George Eliot devoted herself to completing his manuscripts but it was obvious that she was dispirited and lonely. Two years later, rather surprisingly, she married John Walter Cross, a financial adviser who was twenty one years younger than her. George Eliot passed away in the same year in December.

Eliot's novels, though holding to a common theme of exploring the limits of provincial society, are wonderfully diverse in the treatment of the subject. Each book was a challenge on how to depict the interplay between environment and moral choice. As the *Journals* show, the writing of *Middlemarch* was not easy. On New Year's Day in 1869, the fledgling novel stood still; George Eliot was paralysed by a writer's block that she could hardly comprehend. On 11 September, in the same year, she noted in her *Journal*, "I do not feel very confident that I can make anything satisfactory of *Middlemarch*". Another year went by. She began a story tentatively titled "Miss Brooke" and wrote a hundred "good printed pages" in about two months. Working deeply into the psychological compulsions of an idealistic young woman, George Eliot's creative energies seem to have found liberation and a rallying point. Much later, the astute critic F.R. Leavis was to say, "George Eliot tends to identify herself with Dorothea, though Dorothea is far from being the whole of George Eliot." ( *The Great Tradition*, 1948)

By the spring of 1871, George Eliot had worked out a sketch for combining the two stories. The ardent woman in whom Eliot saw the likeness of St. Theresa had this in common with Lydgate of *Middlemarch* — they were both visionaries, gifted with a sense of vocation and service. She had realism enough to perceive that society did not always grant such people the opportunity to exercise their chosen roles. In her art, however, George Eliot found the commonality of purpose a useful linking device in the stories of Lydgate and Dorothea Brooke. The manner in which she dovetailed the narratives in Chapter 10 is sheer genius. Miss Brooke's dreams of social

amelioration are articulated within an "old provincial society" that is passing through rapid change and people discuss the achievements of a talented doctor, an outsider to *Middlemarch*, who is seen as a harbinger of modern science. The action is set for the meeting of Lydgate, the new young surgeon who is "wonderfully clever," (Ch.10, p.117) and "the fine girl — but a little too earnest" (Ch.10, p.119).

The narrative possibilities were substantively enhanced by this linkage. No longer focused upon just individuals, the novel envisaged the small town itself as the subject of enquiry. The complex dynamics of class and gender entailed a fullness of treatment that George Eliot and Mr. Lewes decided could best be expressed in bi-monthly instalments spread over approximately two years. George Eliot began writing with energy and confidence, holding firmly to her "design" as she called it, " to show the gradual action of ordinary causes rather than exceptional, and to show this in some directions which have not been from time immemorial the beaten path.... But the best intentions are good for nothing until execution has justified them". ( George Eliot's letter to John Blackwood, 24 July, 1871). Though occasionally beset by a nervous fear and a bout of unspecified " illness," Eliot met her remarkable schedule of completing the installments in time.

Reviews of *Middlemarch* were largely favourable though Mr. Lewes is said to have monitored how much the author was to see. He kept away all but the "occasional quotation" from George Eliot. She, nonetheless, expressed her curiosity in rather oblique terms, saying, "Though *Middlemarch* seems to have made a deep impression in our own country, and though the critics were as polite and benevolent as possible to me, there has not, I believe, been one really able review of the book in our newspapers and periodicals." ( George Eliot's letter to Charles Ritter, 11 February 1873). The truth is that extensive, and perceptive reviews had appeared in leading papers such as the *Spectator*, *Athenaeum*, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and *The Academy*. Henry James's famous double-edged review in *Galaxy* was to appear a month after George Eliot's observation.

It is worth noting that from 1872 until now, *Middlemarch* has received continuous literary attention. While its value in " the great tradition" has been debated, its canonised status in the mainstream of English writing has never been questioned.

## 1.3 THE PRELUDE TO *MIDDLEMARCH* : SAINT THERESA AND MISS BROOK

Who that cares much to know the history of man, and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time, has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the life of Saint Theresa (25).

The novel opens with a statement of connection between a sixteenth century Carmelite nun, Saint Theresa of Avila, and Dorothea Brooke, the central figure in the story of *Middlemarch*. George Eliot directs the reader's attention to exceptional women, their state of "spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity" (25) a circumstance that presages tragedy. At the same time she avows her support of such "passionate ideal nature." The problematics of Eliot's authorial voice are at once released for consideration. Will Dorothea develop a novelistic reality of her own which can be freely interpreted by the reader of *Middlemarch* or will Eliot exercise authorial power to insist upon an indulgence towards Dorothea's acts of commission and omission?

To begin a discussion, we first need an explanation of the reference. St.Theresa, whose original name was Teresa De Cepeda Y Ahumada, was born in 1515 in Avila and spent her life in Spain practicing and preaching a doctrine of austere, contemplative life. She is remembered as one of the great mystics of the Roman Catholic Church, a woman leader and also the author of several spiritual classics. As

the initiator of the Carmelite Order, she sought to restore and emphasise the original observances of poverty and abstinence as the nuns dedicated themselves to the service of the community. She staunchly insisted upon subsistence only through public alms thus ensuring active contact between the workers and society.

You will notice that the Prelude to *Middlemarch* picturises a scene of a "little girl walking forth one morning hand in hand with her still smaller brother.....wide-eyed and helpless-looking as two fawns, but with human hearts, already beating to a national idea"(25). Historical sources do not endorse this completely. Teresa was fourteen years old when she lost her mother, and despite her father's opposition, she entered a convent when she was probably twenty. Recent books such as Alison Weber's *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (1990) present her as actively protesting the familial and religious controls rather than yielding passively to domestic sanctions.

George Eliot was, of course, using aspects of the St. Theresa legend as it suited her purpose, and here, in the Prelude, she wished to foreground the circumscribed conditions within which exceptional women must function. She is therefore modifying historical details which, in the case of religious leaders, are often mystified by tradition.

Examine, for example, the details in the following off-quoted passage:

> Here and there a cygnet is reared uneasily among the ducklings in the brown pond, and never finds the living stream in fellowship with its own oary-footed kind. Here and there is born a Saint Theresa, a foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centering in some long-recognizable deed. ( 26)

"Foundress of nothing" is not quite correct. St.Theresa established and nurtured more than sixteen convents in Spain and inspired St. John of the Cross to initiate Carmelite Reform for men. Though she had her detractors, some powerful enough to curtail her reformist activities for a time, she had influential supporters too in King Philip II of Spain and Pope Gregory XIII. George Eliot could not see into the future, but it is interesting for us to note that in 1970, Pope Paul VI honoured St.Theresa as the first woman to be elevated as a doctor of the Church. St. Theresa did not pass into the kind of oblivion suggested in the Prelude. George Eliot's point however remains acceptable that such women struggle against external circumstances.

We can further consider if there is a biographical reason for Eliot's attraction to women who exemplify a "soul hunger." F.R. Leavis in *The Great Tradition* offers a categorical statement:

> The weakness of the book, as already intimated, is in Dorothea. We have the danger signal in the very outset, in the brief 'Prelude'....In the description of the 'soul-hunger' that leads Dorothea to see Casaubon so fantastically as a 'winged messenger' we miss the poise that had characterized the presentment of her at her introduction.... Aren't we here, we wonder, in sight of an unqualified self-identification? Isn't there something dangerous in the way the irony seems to be reserved for the provincial background and circumstances, leaving the heroine immune? Dorothea, to put it another way, is a product of George Eliot's own 'soul-hunger'—another day-dream ideal self. This persistence, in the midst of so much that is so other, of an unreduced enclave of the old immaturity is disconcerting in the extreme.

F.R.Leavis is placing emphasis upon his own preferences in fiction insofar that he values "maturity" as a transcendence of an adolescent day-dreaming condition. The argument is a familiar one in nineteenth century fiction where themes are often worked by means of a chronological trajectory denoting a transition from innocence to experience, ignorance to knowledge, or even romance to realism.

Laurence Lerner in *The Truthtellers* challenges assumptions about what constitutes emotional maturity. (You will remember that Virginia Woolf called *Middlemarch* a novel for "grown-up people"). According to Lerner:

> The disagreement between Leavis and George Eliot is in fact an ethical one. The heart of Leavis's criticism does not concern falsity in the author's vision, but in the value of the Theresa-complex....I want to shift the emphasis not towards stressing the irony with which Dorothea is portrayed, but defending Saint Theresa against the concept (a central one in Leavis's criticism) of maturity. The presence of a noble nature, generous in its wishes, ardent in its charity, *does* change the lights for us; loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness ought to have a more complex fate, as the adolescent matures, than simply to be outgrown; and maturity is a virtue within the range of some very dreary people, and beyond the range of some very fine ones. Leavis, in short, has made not an artistic criticism but an ethical criticism.

The shift one notices is the application of everyday ethics to the novel. In such a situation the novel is seen more as a reflection of the real world than as an art form. One should remember, however, that the "verisimilitude" or adherence to "realism" belongs to an imaginatively created realm of fiction. While there are aesthetic considerations and an internal logic of form, the world of the novel cannot be subjected to absolutist statements on morality and ethics that belong to the discourse of social interaction in a given historical time.

Arnold Kettle is yet another critic drawn into the discussions of the St.Theresa metaphor for Dorothea. The author's biography creeps into this analysis too:

> The day dream aspect of Dorothea which Dr. Leavis has emphasised is a very basic limitation. But this quality, this sense we have of idealization, of something completely realised, is due, I suggest, not so much to any subjective cause, some emotional immaturity in George Eliot herself...as to the limitations of her philosophy, her social understanding. Dorothea represents that element in human experience for which in the deterministic universe of mechanist materialism there is no place — the need of man to change the world he inherits.

Kettle, as you see, has a tendency to universalize the subject. Therefore, Dorothea's particular instance becomes expanded to a vast dimension that encompasses a hypothetical fundamental need, "the need of man to change the world." I am uncomfortable with such a broad-basing of a literary argument. The subject position of a character is best reviewed in the context of the immediate story. While the text is finite, the reading of the contents will undergo change as readers impose their own interventions born of their own experience of a changing world. This, to some extent explains the diversity of opinion that is advanced towards all major novels. However, with the new critical, theoretical tools available to us now, we should grant autonomy to the text and work our way through the interplay of historical and trans-historical interpretations. While paying attention to obvious linkages between text and author, we should also leave room for challenging or subverting the obvious surface constructions of the text.

For instance, a feminist approach to the initial paragraphs of *Middlemarch* will make us notice how far we are expected to move from George Eliot's professed focus on the woman question of which Dorothea is an illustrative example. The Prelude, by speaking of "the history of man," sees this as a frame for the unrecorded heroism of women. Delving further into psychological terrain Eliot astutely remarks that the "common yearning of womanhood" is often a vague ideal. The subtext that we read through feminism helps us comprehend that the vagueness, or lack of formulation, is caused by woman's subservient position in the hierarchical structures, be they secular or religious. In conjoining the tales of the historically positioned St. Theresa and the imaginatively constructed Dorothea on a common plane of gendered oppression, Eliot makes the story not "universal" but pertinent to a key aspect of the woman question. Sally Shuttleworth plays with the title *Middlemarch* to say:

> The Prelude poses the question of how originality can survive within an environment whose essence, as the title suggests, is its middlingness. The question is not, however, an innocent one. The form in which the problem is expressed also defines the terms of its ideal resolution....The passage is not simply a lament for a departed era; it simultaneously defines the values that will structure the narrative and the model of social and individual development to which George Eliot adheres.

From the above discussion, you would notice that the brief Prelude is dense in structure, its many echoes of history preparing us for the lengthy narrative ahead. A fascinating complex of relationships is worked out against an intellectual understanding of forces determining individual and social form. *Middlemarch* rewards the reader at every page by involving and respecting an engagement with the flow of the story.

## 1.4 LET US SUM UP

*Middlemarch* has fascinated several generations of readers, both men and women. In the earliest interpretations, it was read as a classic-realist text, as a consequence of which critics judged the plot and the characters by their adherence to the "truth" of life. Sometimes the life experiences of George Eliot were used to understand the main theme of the novel as it speaks about idealistic, impassioned women like St. Theresa who hoped to bring about social change. Later critics have drawn attention to the internal conflicts in *Middlemarch* and suggested that George Eliot was using the artifice of the novel to raise an important question about the limitations placed upon women by customary and institutional controls. The story of St. Theresa links Dorothea to a particular instance in history.

## 1.5 QUESTIONS

1. What are the arguments justifying the criticism of *Middlemarch* made by Henry James, F.R. Leavis and Arnold Kettle? Discuss.

2. What were the artistic problems facing George Eliot as she began composing *Middlemarch?*

3. Give a brief sketch about the life of St. Theresa. What is her connection with Dorothea?

## 1.6 SUGGESTED READING

Henry James, Review of *Middlemarch.*
F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* 1948,1962.
Arnold Kettle , *An Introduction to the English Novel,* 2 vol., 1951, 1967.

Barbara Hardy ed., *Critical Essays on George Eliot,* 1970.
Kenneth Newton, ed., *George Eliot,* 1990.