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## UNIT 4 ELIOT'S PERSPECTIVES

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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This section begins with a discussion of "ideology" in *Middlemarch* based on an important critical statement made by Terry Eagleton. The author's position within the conflicting social structures of her time can inform several details of the text. This Unit encourages you to examine the debates on "corporate" and "individualist ideologies", George Eliot's own ambiguous relation to the "Woman Question", and Eliot's creative play with older literary forms such as the "gothic" even as she attempts a "social-realist" narrative. Although the main textual references are to Books 5 and 6, you will notice the numerous thematic connections with much that has happened earlier.

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### 4.1 CONFLICTS IN IDEOLOGY

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George Eliot's preference for "determinism" as an active philosophy for understanding developments in the cognitive world creates several difficulties in our reading of *Middlemarch*. One of them is with "ideology" which is a term liable to many definitions but which is best interpreted in the words of the French philosopher, Althusser: "Ideology represents the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence." Terry Eagleton, in a famous essay, "George Eliot: Ideology and Literary Form" draws attention to the contradictions inherent in the form of *Middlemarch*:

The ideological matrix of George Eliot's fiction is set in the increasingly corporate character of Victorian capitalism and its political apparatus. Eliot's work attempts to resolve a structural conflict between two forms of mid-Victorian ideology: between progressively muted Romantic individualism, concerned with the untrammelled evolution of the 'free spirit,' and certain 'higher,' corporate ideological modes. These higher modes (essentially Feuerbachian humanism and scientific rationalism) seek to identify the immutable social laws to which Romantic individualism, if it is to avoid both ethical anarchy and social disruption, must conform.

The conflict between corporate law and individual impetus can be illustrated with reference to the last contact Dorothea has with Casaubon. Please refer to Book Five. The title, "The Dead Hand," has ominous suggestions of eerie, disembodied guidance from a world beyond. Something powerful is determining earthly existence. Casaubon's death is reported in Chapter 48, the details are held out of sight, as Eliot had kept away from the reader other scenes of potential sentimentalisation, for instance, Dorothea's marriage and early days with her husband, Lydgate's words of proposal to Rosamond. But Eliot is marvelous, once again, in probing the psychological depths within a character.

Dorothea is struggling to resolve two questions just before she learns of Casaubon's death. One posed by her husband is asking for her unconditional, blind surrender to his will, whatever that may be. The other is a self questioning whether she can any longer, believe and trust in "The Key" and its author that she had considered her duty in marriage. (519) "She simply felt that she was going to say "Yes" to her own doom (522) but she never says it. Casaubon is found dead in the garden.

In principle, the romantic individualism of Dorothea tries to exercise a choice in preserving some independent space for herself, knowing as she does the harsh appropriating nature of Casaubon. The romantic is in conflictual relation with "the immutable social laws" (Eagleton's phrase) of mid-Victorian ideology. An over expression of free spirit will cause ethical imbalance and social disharmony — tear the fabric of society upon which the 'laws' of institutions such as marriage are grounded.

The institution gives authority to the husband. Casaubon's will contains a dreadful codicil that casts an ugly shadow upon Dorothea's friendship with Ladislav. A personal matter is subjected to open scrutiny, an individual joy and innocence turns into public humiliation. The conflict between 'duty' and freedom finds expression in one of the finest passages in *Middlemarch* in Chapter 50, beginning, "Her world was in a state of convulsive change...."

Terry Eagleton's criticism of George Eliot is that "a potentially tragic collision between 'corporate' and 'individualist' ideologies is consistently diffused and repressed by the forms of Eliot's fiction." By form, he means the classic realist and the historical, for which traditional critics had praised *Middlemarch*. Eagleton, in fact finds "an historical vacuum". What is offered instead, he says, is "an ambivalent, indeterminate era leading eventually to the 'growing good of the world'."

Examine for yourself if Eagleton's views are tenable by reading critically into the problematics of the text. Undoubtedly, there is a discrepancy between the professed ideology and the manifest expression of romantic individualism in several, key characters. Take Dorothea and Lydgate for examples. But is this gap to be seen as a 'fault' of the text? My own feeling is that Eliot has a firm intellectual grasp of the contradictions inherent in a society in transition. The realism of *Middlemarch* is not because it is a slice of history but because psychological realism, as depicted in the fictional world of *Middlemarch*, exists within and beyond time.

As to resolutions that are artificially juxtaposed to the so called "real" base, a case has often been made against Will Ladislav. When the codicil is made public, there is a general embarrassment. Neither Celia nor Sir James, not even Dorothea herself imagines that the forbidden marriage will take place. But it does. And Ladislav, we may recall, is a romantic individualist who does *not* subscribe to the "higher corporate ideological modes" of Victorian society. Can we not grant that George Eliot is critiquing society by bringing a highly refined analysis to the obvious dichotomy of self and society? She is not trapped in any ideological confusion herself although several anomalies of the time are presented in the text.

Such an argument is developed further in D.A. Miller's essay, "George Eliot: The Wisdom of Balancing Claims." His thesis is given below:

The main force of the pluralism in *Middlemarch*, however, is to make us aware of perspective itself. What traditional form shows us is no longer exhibited in a spirit of naïve realism, as simply what is there to be seen. Instead it must now be taken as a function of a perceiving system with its own desire, disguises, deletions, and disinterests, *which might have been organised otherwise.*

Critical perspectives can read the same text differently as you notice. For Miller, the balances that George Eliot strives for are a mark of her authorial maturity and wisdom. Attitudes demonstrated by main characters in the novel are subjected to an internal review through other, community-based observations. One may even be reminded of Bakhtin's theory of polyphony wherein a multiplicity of voices is said to undercut any dominant discourse. There is much in a novel which is beyond the purview of direct narration. Through obliquity, that which is left unsaid or unseen, intersects the events of the dramatic plot. According to Miller, the voice of the community constructs its own narrative balancing the excesses of individual imagination. However, according to Terry Eagleton, there is no such balancing of competing viewpoints, only unresolved ideological tensions.

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## 4.2 THE COMMUNITY AS MORAL VOICE

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There is considerable credit in listening to the many voices in *Middlemarch* although the author's remains dominant and her continuous emphasis is Dorothea. Miller speaks of a "narrative" of the community. Indeed there is a chorus of characters populating the scene around the central events — all interrelated by fine ramifications of the plot. Even an early critic, V.S. Pritchett, had described the complex chart:

*Middlemarch* is the first of many novels about groups of people in provincial towns. They are differentiated from each other not by class or fortune only, but by their moral history, and this moral history is not casual, it is planned and has its own inner hierarchy. Look at the groups. Dorothea, Casaubon and Ladislaw seek to enter the highest spiritual fields.... The pharisaical Bulstrode, the banker, expects to rise both spiritually and financially at once.... The Garths, being country people and outside this urban world, believe simply in the virtue of work as a natural law... We may not accept George Eliot's standards, but we can see that they are not conventional, and that they do not make her one-sided. She is most intimately sympathetic to human beings and is never sloppy about them.

The comparisons and contrasts are numerous but let us here reflect upon the Fred-Mary Garth-Farebrother triangle as a parallel to Casaubon-Dorothea-Ladislaw. True that Fred prefers "irresponsible style" to responsible decision making; and to an extent the blame is placed on the new wealth and social aspirations of the trading community. But Eliot in the persons of Farebrother, Mary's silent suitor, and Caleb Garth, her father, gives marvellous portraits of work ethics honoured at the time as a mark of sobriety. Caleb Garth tells Fred most lucidly: "You must be sure of two things: you must love your work, and not always look over the edge of it, wanting your play to begin. And the other is that you must not be ashamed of your work, and think it would be more honourable to do something else" (606). Mary has been brought up on these principles and seeing her affection for Fred, Caleb tries to correct certain attitudes in the profligate young man.

Mary is attracted to Fred whereas Farebrother is far better suited to her temperament. A well-intentioned, well-bred man, Farebrother tends to be rather conventional but

has a lucky chance in his vocation when he gets an appointment at Lowick after the death of Casaubon. Duty is foremost in his mind. We are told:

The gladness in his face was that of an active kind which seems to have energy enough not only to flash outwardly, but to light up busy vision within. One seemed to see thoughts, as well as delight, in the glances(553).

Decency and uprightness is the hallmark of this gentleman. Suppressing his own attraction for Mary, he promises to advocate Fred's case with her (539). The conversation with Mary at the end of Chapter 52 is modulated to show that restraint, decorum, and ethics are not exclusive to people defined by their class, education or material condition. Honesty marks the words of both with reference to their feelings towards Fred ( 560-561).

Examine the following statement by Farebrother noting the balances in thought and sentiment.

I understand that you resist any attempt to fetter you, but either your feeling for Fred Vincy excludes your entertaining another attachment, or it does not: either he may count on you remaining single until he shall have earned your hand, or he may in any case be disappointed." (561)

Mr. Farebrother is the product of a simple code in education, yet, gifted with insight into difficult human emotions of possessiveness, insecurity, jealousy. In the above passage, Farebrother speaks for Fred but, indirectly, presents his own feelings towards Mary. In a way his is a prohibited love because Mary seems betrothed to Fred. How does Farebrother's language compare with that of Dorothea's public speeches where, if you remember, she always presents a balance of ideas. Even in private she withholds any excessive display of emotion. Also, you may note that Dorothea's affection for Ladislaw is forbidden any expression, yet she conveys her need for his presence without upsetting the decorum of society—that is, until the codicil puts an evil complexion upon their innocent attachment.

The point of the exercise is to show you parallel structures in the groups who are socially separated. While George Eliot is realistic enough to accept the hierarchies in society, her subversive authorship makes moral standards more important than social placement.

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### 4.3 GEORGE ELIOT AND THE "WOMAN QUESTION"

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Dorothea's inner growth, from innocence to experience, is reflected in several chapters of the section called "The Widow and The Wife." In a poignant review of her high idealism which has met with severe impediments, she says:

I used to despise women a little for not shaping their lives more, and doing better things. I was very fond of doing as I liked, but I have almost given up (589).

Dorothea's many disappointments have left her feeling powerless, ineffectual. Does this condition relate *Middlemarch* to the "woman question" and its early history in the nineteenth century?

Katé Millett, the author of *Sexual Politics* (1970) came up with the charge that George Eliot had lived the feminist revolution but had not written about it. In 1976, an article by Zelda Austen, "Why feminist critics are angry with George Eliot," traced the hostility of critics such as Millett to the novelist's "failure to allow her heroines any happy fulfillment other than marriage." The freedom and fame that Eliot had achieved in life was not, apparently, transmitted to the fictional world.

Examine such criticism with care by paying attention to the historical setting in the novel. Remember that there are "the unwritten years in *Middlemarch*" as Gillian Beer calls them, "the years between the setting and the composition." which we can date as 1830 to 1870. Two interesting processes were happening at the time (i) the feminist awareness (ii) The passage of the Reform Bill. It is true that Eliot lived through the feminist revolution but the episodes in the novel predate many of the significant events. So one should grant that she was writing with the confident knowledge of the positive directions that the women's movement was to take but, she could not, in fairness, attribute the "achievements" to a prior time-frame. It is also true that she had taken the bold and "irregular" step in her own life to live openly with Mr. George Lewes but one should concede that she saw this as an *individual* decision and no part of the potential agenda to be addressed by the "Woman Question."

The negotiation with history that we have here may remind you of Nathaniel Hawthorne's artistry in framing the novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. Hester Prynne's story is set among the Puritans in Boston in the mid-seventeenth century. Hawthorne as an heir and critic of the Puritans, writes the novel two hundred years later when several women have successfully challenged the traditions of society. *The Scarlet Letter* constantly plays with time. On one hand, it is the portrayal of Hester's "submission" to the law of the land, on the other hand, is her vision of a better future for women. The novelist is aware that Hester's vision will be substantially endorsed but in the novel, Hester functions within the constraints of immediate history.

Time in *Middlemarch* is collapsed to a much lesser degree. But the years were critical in the development of the women's movement. The general sequence is given below:

- According to Gillian Beer, "In the 1840s the emphasis in England was on realising fully the special moral influence of woman." The home is given considerable importance as the value systems of society are expected to be introduced, nurtured and strengthened by the wife, the mother, the "lady of the house." The dichotomy between the home and the world, private and public, breaks down since the prevalence of individual virtue or vice effects both segments.
- The main event in the 1850s was The Married Women's Property Bill. George Eliot signed a petition in favour of it. The point emphasised was "that in entering the state of marriage, they no longer pass from freedom into the condition of a slave". *The English Women's Journal* discussed issues relating to the Bill by looking further into the problems of divorce, child custody, inheritance and other aspects of family law.
- The 1860s saw an emphasis on the education of women. Though theoretically educational programmes for women were designed to introduce them to "the world of ideas," in practice women received "superficial instruction." (*The Alexander Magazine*, March, 1865. Quoted by Gillian Beer). In the early pages of *Middlemarch*, reference is made to the unsatisfactory "girlish instruction" given to the serious and purposeful Dorothea. Rosamond's years of instruction in the womanly pursuits of singing, embroidery, dressing well, social deportment, lead to another kind of inadequacy. A contemporary tract by Maria Grey alleged that the curriculum was such that women "are not educated to be wives, but to get husbands" (*The Education of Women*, 1871).

George Eliot's connection with the "woman question" remained equivocal. Though she showed support for The Married Women's Property Bill and was a good friend to several activists of the time, she never joined the women's movement directly. At one level, Eliot's preferences were academic. Louis Martin's book *The Civilisation of*

*The Human Race by Woman* (1842) met with lavish praise from Eliot. She was never a mother and does not seem to have regretted such a fate, yet she wrote enthusiastically to the American author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, saying, "You have had longer experience than I as a writer, and fuller experience as a woman, since you have borne children and know the mother's history from the beginning." Eliot's sympathy for women, limited by their circumstances, is evident in much of her personal correspondence and her *Journals*. At the same time she will not compromise professional standards by making concessions for women writers. The ironic piece called "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" debunks the myth of a happy marriage being the "desirable consummation" of all ambition (*Westminster Review*, 66,1856).

The frame of the women's question can be placed around the novel *Middlemarch* to bring focus to an understanding of freedom and "choice." At least three issues were found to be determining factors: education, inheritance, attitude to domesticity.

However, there is a further aspect. As you review Books Three and Four of *Middlemarch*, you will find men characters revealing their thoughts in relation to their activities and ambitions. By focusing on the following passages, review the attitudinal difference caused by the difference in gender.

- Caleb Garth speaking to Fred Vincy says, "A good deal of what I know can only come from experience: you can't learn it off as you learn things out of a book"(606).
- Lydgate wonders about "sacrificing" time given to his scientific experiments in attending to Rosamond's "little claims": "To Lydgate it seemed that he had been spending month after month in sacrificing more than half of his best intent and best power to his tenderness to Rosamond" (632).
- Bulstrode recalls his early years of cleverness and cunning. "The terror of being judged sharpens the memory: it sends an inevitable glare over that long unvisited past which has been habitually recalled only in general phrases" (663).
- Will Ladislaw, a man without a vocation or profession, can freely indulge in poetic notions. He tells Dorothea, "I shall go on living as a man might do who had seen heaven in a trance"(681).

Contrast the separate, designated roles by which men and women arrange their lives. You will participate in the debates on the "woman question" in George Eliot's time if you see how priorities are decided by societal expectations. Can women be agents of reform in such a context?

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#### 4.4 USING THE GOTHIC

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*Middlemarch*, is firmly grounded in contemporary debates between 'individual' and 'corporate' ideals as Terry Eagleton points out. The "woman question" was an aspect of this debate since change in the position of women would have visible and immediate effect on family structures which formed the core of society. However the classic realism of the principal plot of *Middlemarch* is offset by Eliot's use of Gothic elements in the story of Bulstrode and Raffles. Will Ladislaw is to gain prominence as the story proceeds to its denouement. By means of a far-fetched connection with Will's ancestry and Bulstrode's criminal past, the sinister Raffles enters the scene. The gothic is traditionally associated with heightened emotions expressed through exaggerated characters set in a place where the supernatural elements have a free play. The extraordinary happenings are later explained by natural causes. One can expect a fair amount of drama, mystery, violence, coincidences. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) are good examples of the genre.

Read the section describing the meeting of Ladislav and Raffles in Chapter 59. Ladislav is suddenly accosted by a scruffy looking man who speaks in crude language and occasionally winks to make a point. He hints at knowledge about mysterious events in the past relating to Will's unknown origins. He says just enough to establish credibility but not enough to satisfy curiosity. He would also like to cadge a drink, perhaps try blackmailing. The person being mentioned is Will's mother, therefore the young man is understandably perturbed. Raffles came from nowhere, and just as suddenly, he moves out of the plot. But he has been a useful device for creating a sufficient disturbance in the plot. Raffles turns out to be the link between Bulstrode and Will Ladislav and the major plot moves towards a resolution.

By the use of a gothic figure, George Eliot triggers off further developments in the classic-realist plot. Bulstrode's psychological reactions to the threat of his past being revealed are presented in fine language:

Night and Day, while the resurgent threatening past was making a conscience within him, he was thinking by what means he could recover peace and trust—by what sacrifice he could stay the rod. His belief in these moments was, that if he spontaneously did something right, God would save him from the consequence of wrong-doing. For religion can only change when the emotions that fill it are changed; and the religion of personal fear remains nearly at the level of the savage (668-669).

Attempting to enact his thoughts which are verging on good intentions, he seeks an interview with Will Ladislav. The dramatic confrontation between the old banker and the young, freewheeling artist has a taut quality of tension. Refer to Chapter 61. The jigsaw puzzle of the past gradually becomes a clear picture. Here one looks for a juxtaposition of the real and the gothic.

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#### 4.5 A CRITICAL CHANGE

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What is there in that past? As a young man, Bulstrode had married an older woman, Mrs. Dunkirk, the wealthy widow of a man with whom he had worked in an unscrupulous, pawnbroker's business. Before marrying him Mrs. Dunkirk had wanted to find her runaway daughter and her son. With an eye on the Dunkirk fortune, Bulstrode had bribed Raffles—the only other person to know Sarah's whereabouts—to keep silent. When Mrs. Dunkirk died, Bulstrode as her husband inherited all her money. Moving to the provincial town of *Middlemarch* he had married Harriet Vincy and become a wealthy and apparently respectable banker.

Bulstrode tells much of this story to Will Ladislav. Raffles' whispered query, "Excuse me, Mr. Ladislav—was your mother's name Sarah Dunkirk?" (657) suddenly has a new and disconcerting meaning for Ladislav. The confrontation between the old and the young Will remind you of other such contrasted pairs earlier in the novel. Here the hierarchy does not determine power relations though Bulstrode imagines that his age and his wealth will grant superiority. Will angrily rejects his offer of money to amend the wrongdoings of the past: "My unblemished honour is important to me. It is important to me to have no stain on my birth and connections.... You shall keep your ill-begotten money." (672).

The legitimizing of Will Ladislav marks an important transition in the plot. For one, he becomes worthy of "respect" in a society which insists upon a knowledge of family connections and distrusts strangers. Moreover, his suit to Dorothea now becomes a possibility in his own eyes. But let us examine a larger issue of ideology in the novel emerging from a conflict between the individual and society. Ladislav undergoes a more critical change, circumstantially and personally, than any other character in the novel. He embodies the change visible in Eliot's time caused by the

clash of many interests. The legitimizing curbs Will's bohemian tendency but he does not become a conservative. His radicalism finds a useful political meaning in the Reform era. Also, in rejecting the old banker's offer of money, Ladislaw strikes a blow at hierarchical structures, both personal and institutional. George Eliot, one can surmise, was progressive in her ideology but in favour of ameliorative processes that were gentle, not abrupt.

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#### 4.6 LET US SUM UP

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Terry Eagleton's important essay, "George Eliot : Ideology and Literary form", alleges that the author diffuses and represses the "potential tragic collision between 'corporate' and 'individualist' ideologies". You have examined the criticism in terms of the text. It has been suggested to you that Eliot is aware of the conflict and therefore in control of the narrative. The unresolved confusion of "values" adds to the richness of the novel. Further, you have been given information on contemporary debates relating to the "Woman Question". Engaged though she was with the live issues of her time, George Eliot weighed her responses very carefully. Through the destiny of Dorothea, key concepts about education and inheritance enter the novel, *Middlemarch*. In addition, a clever juxtaposition of polyphonous voices in the community create an alternative set of arguments. As the novel moves towards a donouement—not a "resolution"—George Eliot uses some structural devices such as the 'gothic' to bring about a connectedness in the details of the plot.

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#### 4.7 QUESTIONS

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1. Sum up the main argument in Terry Eagleton's criticism of George Eliot and give your own assessment of his views.

Critically examine George Eliot's response to the issues raised by the "Woman Question". How does this reflect in the text of *Middlemarch* with reference to Dorothea's widowed condition?

2. Write a short note on Raffles, mentioning the gothic elements in this part of the story.

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#### 4.8 SUGGESTED READING

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John Peck, ed., George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New Casebooks). Macmillan 1992.  
Contains the extract by Terry Eagleton, "George Eliot : Ideology and Literary Form", from Eagleton's book, *Criticism and Ideology*. Verso, 1976.  
Dorothea Barrett, *Vocation and Desire : George Eliot's Heroines*. London : Routledge, 1989.  
Christina Crosby, *The Ends of History : Victorians and "The Woman Question"*. London : Routledge, 1990