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## UNIT 2 THEMES, CHARACTERS, TECHNIQUES

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### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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This section leads you through Books One and Two of *Middlemarch* with a view to establishing the themes which are worked out in the details of characters. George Eliot's own place in English literary tradition is also examined in the context of her statements on the art of the novel.

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### 2.1 THEMES IN *MIDDLEMARCH*

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In reading *Middlemarch*, one can be quite overwhelmed by its size, complexity and dense texture. My suggestion is that we simplify the problem by making notes about different themes in the novel although we must keep in mind the overlaps that are bound to occur between one concern and another. We must also be aware of the manner in which various characters are deployed to explore the themes but must guard against seeing the people as personifications of ideas. In other words, an initial spreadsheet of George Eliot's scheme here is an aid to learning, not a statement of a rigid order. We may quote Barbara Hardy in this context:

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. George Eliot has a simple and not very varied moral

scheme but her novels are never schematic or rigid in their generalizations about human beings. The human examples are always variations of the theme rather than examples which fit perfectly.

The following list is offered as a suggestion to help you to recognise the main concerns. W.J. Harvey's fine "Introduction" to the Penguin edition of *Middlemarch* gives a further explication of several of these categories.

- **The theme of vocation.** This is mainly illustrated by Dorothea Brooke and Tertius Lydgate but has vital connections to Casaubon's failed intellectualism, Bulstrode's fraudulent success, Farebrother's precarious ministry and Mary Garth's caregiving.
- **Marital compatibility** or the lack of it complicates the ideals of vocation for the principal characters. The author, however, critically reviews the processes by which the matrimonial alliances emerge. The complicity of men and women in their arrangements of interdependence is as much responsible for personal tragedy as the illusion of individual choice. Apart from Dorothea and Lydgate, Rosamond Vincy, Casaubon, Will Ladislaw are used to illustrate the gap between dreams and the realm of possibilities.
- **Money and pecuniary interests** are further determining factors. Unlike Henry James (and more akin to the French novelist Gustave Flaubert), George Eliot gives cold facts about the way in which wealth moderates personality. Featherstone's avarice parallels Bulstrode's feigned generosity. Lydgate's idealism flounders on Rosamond's enchantment with beautiful things, what the American writer Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* called the lure of "meretricious beauty." That indifference to wealth is a vague ideal is shown in Dorothea's disregard for Casaubon's money which, nonetheless, effects her moral conscience.

**Birth, rank and class** are according to W.J. Harvey, "strongly divisive" as factors "even in so small a society as Middlemarch." The Dorothea-Ladislaw union is forbidden by the violation of a code of propriety. Other subtle forms of social layering are seen in instances relating to the Garth and Vincy families. Fred, a lovable but irresponsible young man, has troubles enough because of his expensive habits for which he has no money. A tragic outcome is that he is almost forced into a religious vocation entirely unsuited to his temperament.

- **Politics**, in the obvious way of a resounding and disrupting "pistol shot in a theatre" in Stendhal's famous metaphor, features nowhere in *Middlemarch*. However, constant references to the Reform Bill bring the politics of social change directly into the novel. Briefly the reference is to the British Parliamentary Bills that became Acts in 1832, 1867 and 1884-85, and which expanded the electorate for the House of Commons and rationalised the representation of that body. Voting privileges were first transferred from small boroughs to thickly populated industrial areas. The later bills widened the voting base substantially by enfranchising less wealthy segments of society. In all, the upper levels of property holders, the nobility and gentry lost their hegemony to democratic forces. *Middlemarch* refers only to the first phase. Mr. Brooke, Sir James Chetham, Mrs. Cadwallader and several others debate the issues pertaining to imminent reforms.
- **Science.** Systems of knowledge, both old and new, are contested, specially, in the realm of scientific discoveries in medicine. Lydgate, who is the outsider and the cosmopolitan, is welcomed into the town for his skill acquired in Europe but he is later suspected of moral turpitude. Dr. Minchin and Dr. Vague, physicians of the old school, feel threatened by the apparent success

of new knowledge. The contentions are worked out through political affiliations. In the end, Lydgate's dubious fall is caused by several factors, one of which is the conservative resistance of provincial people to new medical discoveries.

- **Religion.** George Eliot rebelled against orthodoxy in all institutions especially the Church. You will recall that as a young woman of twenty three she had declared to her father that she would no longer attend Church. Father and daughter came to an uneasy compromise but the rift in values was irrevocable. Four years after this episode, Mary Ann Evans published, anonymously, *The Life of Jesus Christ Critically Examined*. Given this background, it comes as a surprise that theology is not openly debated in *Middlemarch* although several characters are functionaries of the Church. A range of Anglicanism is presented from the "High and Dry" Tory leanings of Cadwallader to the Evangelicalism of Tyke. Religion and politics merge in the small world of Middlemarch as personal affiliations gain precedence and evoke fierce loyalties. While George Eliot posits her own intellectual enquiries in the novel, she does not insist on privileging one position over another. Irony and subversion serve better to show the limitations of provincial society.
- **Egotism** is an-uncomfortable word because tradition has linked it to an excess of pride and vanity. You would know this from your reading of the Bible and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. However, in terms of psychological vocabulary, the term "ego," as Freud and Jung have used it becomes an attribute of normal human behavior, it is the particularized "I" which distinguishes an individual. In modern psychology, therefore, the ego is a self-determining component in the individual will to succeed. Such a context allows us to place Rosamond, Lydgate and Dorothea to a test of honest enquiry into the factors motivating their actions. The characters are not conscious egotists, unlike Gilbert Osmond of Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*, for example. However, their clinging to a vision entirely their own to a point of obsessive dedication is a form of self-centredness which fails to see, at times, a dialectical relation between the individual and society.

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## 2.2 THE PRIME OF "MISS BROOKE"

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The story of Miss Brooke began, we remember, as an independent tale. In itself it remains remarkable as an insight into the tenuous, visionary speculations of a young woman on the threshold of marriage and/ or the choice of a vocation. Furthermore, with the integration of this tale into the larger span of Book One of *Middlemarch*, George Eliot made sure that all the important themes in the novel were invoked in one way or another.

Take for instance the question about societal conditions acting upon the lives of the St. Theresa figures; intelligent, farsighted women impelled by the desire to serve the poor and the needy. Book One of *Middlemarch* begins with an epigraph from a play by Beaumont and Fletcher called *The Maid's Tragedy*. The sentences seem to devalue women's lives:

Since I can do no good because a woman,  
Reach constantly at something that is near it.

As you read the chapter, please review such statements and check if you have any interventions to make in this apparent positioning of Dorothea on a low scale of expectation even as she is admired for an elevated sense of service to the community. What you are asked to perform is an act of "reader response" in the way that the American critic Stanley Fish suggests: "Meanings are not extracted but made and made not by encoded forms but by interpretive strategies that call forms into being."

Put another way, Fish is inviting the reader to challenge the code made obvious in the language of the text. The reader will bring a subjectivity born of her/his own placement in time and cultural belief and such a subjectivity will interact with the written text. Alternative readings emerge from transactions of this nature. Stanley Fish, however, says that we belong to an "interpretive community" of shared "values" and are conditioned by its parameters, therefore one is not entirely free and cannot be anarchic in rendering textual meaning.

The consequence of such engaged reading can be explained through an example. Consider the following lines:

Her mind was theoretic, and yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world which might frankly include the parish of Tipton and her own rule of conduct there; she was enamoured of intensity and greatness, and rash in embracing whatever seemed to her to have those aspects; likely to seek martyrdom, to make retractions, and then to incur martyrdom after all in a quarter where she had not sought it. ( 30)

George Eliot like other nineteenth century novelists, Jane Austen, William Thackeray, Charles Dickens and Henry James tends to direct the reader's imagination by presenting vivid descriptions of a character's outward demeanour and inner personality. It is a manner of establishing a contract between the author and the reader with the text as a factor of exchange. The modern day reader is not willing to remain a passive recipient of authorial control. In fact new critical theory privileges the alternate authority of the reader. Furthering the remarks of Stanley Fish, theoreticians such as Umberto Eco point out that between the intention of the author and the intention of the interpreter, there is a third possibility "there is an intention of the text." In other words, the material in print may generate a complex of meanings which reach beyond the interaction between the writer and the reader. By deciphering the subtext, or, to use another metaphor, by excavating the hidden wealth of meaning, you as reader will enjoy the process of making the text your own.

Now return to the cited passage. George Eliot seems to prophesy tragedy for a woman whose lofty ideas must collide with the limitations of a provincial town. She is likely then to turn self indulgent, a victim in a lost cause, a saint without a constituency. To some extent, the opening pages of *Middlemarch* prognosticate the ending thus robbing the tale of its mystery. If you accept Eliot's description of Dorothea uncritically, the progress of the story is coloured by the image of a defeat in a heroic battle.

What happens when you challenge the proposition and place the blame on society, not the woman? The limitations, then, are not in her idealistic constructions of a better world but in a faulty world out there which is neglectful of kind acts of social amelioration. When the idealising and theorising is done by a young woman, there is the further practical consideration about her class and her marital status. George Eliot's tone in the following passage is ironical, though not without a tinge of empathy:

And how should Dorothea not marry?—a girl so handsome and with such prospects? Nothing could hinder her but her love of extremes, and her insistence of regulating life according to notions which might cause a wary man to hesitate before he made her an offer, or even might lead her at last to refuse all offers....Dorothea with all her eagerness to know the truths of life, retained very childlike ideas about marriage....The really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it ( 31-32).

## 2.3 THE UNSUITABLE SUITOR

Almost on cue, Casaubon, an aged scholar almost twenty seven years older than Dorothea, appears on the scene. Surely the driest courtship in literary history is recorded for us in his attentions to Dorothea. Chapter 5 gives us Casaubon's letter of marriage proposal in which he declares in cold, controlled and measured language his attraction for her "elevation of thought and capability of devotedness" (66). Dorothea's theories about marriage as "a state of higher duties" (64) leave her vulnerable to a man such as Casaubon, and she gladly dreams of a life of usefulness as his amanuensis, his intellectual companion and devoted wife.

Notice, in the above context, that Casaubon and Dorothea consider themselves well suited to each other's needs. However, the language of the text has raised doubts in the mind of the reader about the success of this partnership. For one, we bring to bear our own critique about what constitutes compatibility in marriage and can see the potential for disaster if a woman imagines that the husband-wife relationship is pitched only on an intellectual plane. George Eliot had warned us about Dorothea's "childlike" notions and here we have an example in how Dorothea shies away from contemplating any "adult" aspects of marriage which must necessarily deal with sexuality, mothering, domestic arrangements, social commitments and so on. As another form of critique, we raise questions about the efficacy of Casaubon's intellectual project. His enthusiasm for writing the *Key to all Mythologies* is shared by no one else in the family or community. There is no external evidence of past success to build up an assurance of his so-called brilliance, diligence and dedication. In fact, Casaubon's inadequacies are dressed out as honours in the mind of Dorothea. But as readers we can see the dangers in the theoretic constructions of an ideal married life:

Into this soul hunger as yet all her youthful passion was poured; the union which attracted her was one that would deliver her from her girlish subjection to her own ignorance, and give her the freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest path ( 51).

Dorothea's "soul hunger" is contrasted by the vibrant materiality of her sister Celia who enjoys fine clothes, jewels, a good horse in bracing weather, a gracious day of friendly visits. She takes pleasure in being young and attractive and fun-loving. George Eliot is not critical of such a woman and it would appear that she places Celia's trivial concerns as a useful contrast to Dorothea's sobriety. In a remarkable passage the contrast is enacted in telling detail. Celia brings their mother's jewels so they can be divided between the sisters. Dorothea has, so far, always dismissed with indifference all such requests for a settlement. Once again the casket is opened. Notice Dorothea's vocabulary in the following passage:

'How very beautiful the gems are!' said Dorothea, under a new current of feeling, as sudden as the gleam. 'It is strange how deeply colours seem to penetrate one, like scent. I suppose that is the reason why gems are used as spiritual emblems in the Revelation of St. John. They look like fragments of heaven. I think that emerald is more beautiful than any of them.'

It is evident that Dorothea is drawn to the jewels but finding such covetousness inappropriate in herself, she quickly justifies her attraction by "merging them in her mystic religious joy" (36). In a passage such as the above, George Eliot is undercutting the image of Dorothea as an 'ardent, theoretic, and intellectually consequent' person (51).

At this point we should raise a further issue in the text. To what extent is Dorothea aware of the contradictions in herself? In Book One, I suggest that she is naïve about herself and the world of relationships though she honestly projects herself as a woman with a vast store of idealism. Both in the context of her sister and her

husband-to-be, she remains deluded about the gap between her intentions and her abilities. This is a tragic situation as experience will show. The women of a more common nature are able to see through Dorothea's moral blindness. In a colourful phrase Mrs Cadwallader describes Casaubon as a "a great bladder for dried peas to rattle in!" and Celia privately muses about the jewels and thinks "Dorothea is not always consistent"(37).

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## 2.4 THE WORLD BEYOND

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The individual stories are a component of larger happenings in *Middlemarch*. Chapter 10 in which Mr. Brooke throws a dinner party is a brilliant device used by George Eliot to integrate the two disparate tales of Dorothea and Lydgate. The section deserves close scrutiny. Notice how the occasion brings an eclectic collection of people from several walks of life, Mr. Bulstrode, Mr. Chichely, Lady Chettam, the Rector, Mr. Standish among others. The imminent marriage of Dorothea and Casaubon is discussed with civilized candour. Ladislav and Lydgate, who will play a major role in the story, are carefully introduced in the context but held away from the party. Using a range of *Middlemarch* residents to set the tone of the novel, Eliot creates a polyphony of voices representing local concerns and predilections in a small town engaged in social gossip, politics and current news. The author tells us this is the period when debates about the Reform Bills were arousing political consciousness. Mr. Brooke is an emerging leadership figure who is also the guardian of the sisters, Dorothea and Celia. Therefore he functions appropriately as a reference for both the private and public domains. The free flowing conversation at the party, helped considerably by fine wine and victuals, provides wonderful insights into a community and alerts us to the individuals located within it. In some measure, you may be reminded here of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* where the fictional device of a host entertaining pilgrims gives us a wealth of information about various strata in medieval English society.

George Eliot as the omniscient narrator holds similar control over the figures introduced into Mr. Brooke's dinner party. You could pay attention to the opinions expressed by some of the guests about qualities desirable in women and see the standards by which *Middlemarch* wishes to organize domestic priorities. Dorothea is described as an "uncommonly fine woman" but another person says "there should be a little filigree about a woman" and yet another person would like to see "a little devil in a woman"(115). It is obvious that Dorothea is admired and respected at a distance, but people are a trifle wary of her grave demeanour. The author endorses this further in the words: "Sometimes when Dorothea was in company, there seemed to be as complete an air of repose about her as if she had been a picture of Santa Barbara looking out from her tower into the clear air" (114). This is the point at which Eliot interlocks the two stories: the saintly figure gazes beyond the horizon while the mundane concerns of life are discussed at a party.

### 2.4.1 The Outsider

Of the young people delineated in *Middlemarch*, the man of modern medicine, Tertius Lydgate, is a remarkable creation. The metaphor of the novel's structure – "woven and interwoven," a "web" (Chapter 15, opening paragraph), is brilliantly linked to Lydgate's involvement with the constituents of the human body. As a medical student he has learned that "human bodies, fundamentally considered, are not associations of organs which can be understood by studying them first apart, and then as it were federally; but must be regarded as consisting of certain primary webs and tissues, out of which the various organs—brain, heart, lungs, and so on — are compacted" (177). In the metaphoric "web," of George Eliot, the physiological body and the sociological body politic are fused, individuals and social organisms are interdependent.

Lydgate has the trappings of the attractive unknown. As an orphan he has no immediate family by which he can be defined. Aged twenty seven upon his arrival in *Middlemarch*, he has had the benefits of education in the glamorous and fashionable world of Paris which fires the imagination of the people who meet him in a provincial town. The emerging scientific and rational basis of new medicine has given him a sense of challenge and he is eager to practice what he has learned. Lydgate's vision of the betterment of health and his desire to see "reform" in medical systems give him the necessary resolve; a small town offers him an opportunity. That his idealism in thought may not be matched by an idealism in conduct is a caution sounded in the chapter in a famous passage:

Lydgate's spots of commonness lay in the complexion of his prejudices, which in spite of noble intentions and sympathy, were half of them such as are found in ordinary men of the world: that distinction of mind which belonged to his intellectual ardour, did not penetrate his feeling and judgement about furniture, or women, or the desirability of its being known (without his telling) that he was better born than other country surgeons (179).

"Spots of commonness" is a difficult phrase to interpret. Perhaps Eliot is mentioning the fact that Lydgate is vulnerable to emotional claims even if he thinks he is devoted to scientific quest. The material conditions of living are not his everyday occupation but he may fall prey to their attractions. Such a well intentioned person, who also suffers a spot of blindness about himself, can be exploited by manipulative tactics. How this happens to Lydgate is illustrated in a later part of the story.

#### 2.4.2 The Angel of Light

Another of the young figures is Will Ladislaw, painter aesthete, a much disliked cousin of Casaubon, whom Dorothea innocently befriends during her wedding journey in Rome. Chapters 19-21 makes us privy to the growing and dangerous intimacy as Dorothea innocently builds comparisons between her old, scholarly husband and the charming young bohemian: "The first impression on seeing Will was one of sunny brightness, which added to the uncertainty of his changing expression.....Mr. Casaubon, on the contrary, stood rayless" (241). These views are an articulation of Dorothea's incoherent thoughts. Nevertheless they presage a bonding between a young, neglected wife on her wedding journey and an animated companion who educates her in European art. Justified in Dorothea's mind as a sanctioned friendship with a "cousin," it shows her reliance on intellectual reasoning and her sad neglect of a living knowledge of jealousy, sexuality and such other vital emotions.

Ladislaw has generally been considered by critics as an insubstantial, unconvincing figure, a flaw in a novel of social realism. Contrived situations keep him in the plot. In Book II, he happens to be in Rome when Dorothea and Casaubon are taking their wedding journey. He chances upon Dorothea, musing over her loneliness while wandering in an art gallery. Later in the novel, he is tenuously connected to Mr. Brooke's political ambitions, Rosamond's flirtations, and Bulstrode's secret past. He hangs in there, so to speak, till the time is appropriate for Dorothea's acknowledgement of his love. F.R. Leavis sees Ladislaw as an aspect of Dorothea's immature tendencies, Arnold Kettle calls him "a romantic dream figure — a failure". An endearing man of many nebulous talents, he paints, writes, sings, reads, travels though he lacks any intellectual or moral depths that can match Dorothea's ardour for the upliftment of the poor community. Ladislaw's seductive charm relies substantially on his ability to play with words as is illustrated in this dialogue in Chapter 22:

"I wonder what your vocation will turn out to be: perhaps you will be a poet?"  
[ Dorothea ] "That depends. To be a poet is to have a soul so quick to discern,

that no shade of quality escapes it, and so quick to feel, that discernment is but a hand playing with finely ordered variety on the chords of emotion—a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge. One may have that condition in fits only." [Ladislaw] (255-256).

This nebulous philosophy of a high plane of consciousness may have little ground truth but becomes immensely exciting for a young, idealistic woman waiting to discuss her own ideas constructed upon a fine vision. Denied conversation at home, she falls into an easy companionship with a relative stranger who along with word-making has a gift for laughter at the absurd dimensions of human behaviour.

However, Dorothea's early friendship with Ladislaw in Rome has another aspect too. The wedding journey is a confusing experience for the young bride who struggles with her feelings of passion, desire, devotion, anger, repulsion, weariness while the elderly groom immerses himself in composing research notes on an abstruse subject. As Barbara Hardy has argued, a woman's sexual disappointment could only be alluded to indirectly in Victorian fiction. Chaste, well-bred, heroines could hardly bring themselves to an articulation of their troubles. They could barely understand the symptoms of marital incompatibility. In a spirit of incomprehension, Dorothea sobs uncontrollably (Chapter 21), experiences alternating moods of self-accusation and timid complaint against Casaubon and occasionally seeks distraction in the aesthetic stimulus of art galleries. Her incipient attraction for Will, an obvious contrast to Casaubon, are justifiable in the circumstances. Critics have been unusually harsh upon Ladislaw marking him a "failure" in the scheme of the book, but to Dorothea, he appears in a halo of light. Consider the possibility that George Eliot deliberately creates the gap between the reader's expectations from a high-minded Dorothea and Dorothea's own choices in men and diminished action.

### 2.4.3 A Matter of Money

Of the old people, the banker Mr. Bulstrode, is introduced in some detail in Chapter 16.

Mr. Bulstrode's power was not due simply to his being a country banker, who knew the financial secrets of most traders in the town and could touch the springs of their credit; it was fortified by a beneficence that was at once ready and severe—ready to confer obligations, and severe in watching the result .... It was a principle with Mr. Bulstrode to gain as much power as possible, that he might use it for the glory of God. He went through a great deal of spiritual conflict and inward argument in order to adjust his motives, and to make clear to himself what God's glory required (184-185).

In reviewing such a summary description of a character, it is time to consider the broader issue of how a character in fiction is presented through at least three kinds of perception — what the person says about the self, what others, individually or collectively, advance as their assessment, and how the author intervenes from a vantage point. These are not mutually exclusive categories, as they often slide into one another, but they are useful analytic tools. About Bulstrode, in the quoted passage, the apparent summary is by George Eliot because no one within the purview of the book can, at this early stage, know of "a principle" of conduct decided upon by Bulstrode. However, the phrase "make clear to himself" reveals Bulstrode self-conscious activity and hints at his dubiousness in the words "adjust his motives." Immediately afterwards (consult your text book) the Middlemarch view of Bulstrode gives another reading that the banker's abstemious habits and worried demeanour are interpreted as genuine concern for the economic well-being of the community. You notice, therefore, that Eliot's writing has a wonderful compressed quality in being able to present differing views even as a character is introduced. Later episodes in the novel, with reference to Bulstrode, are founded upon these early hints of mystery.



guilt and power hunger. Such attributes are in contrast to Dorothea's openness and "soul hunger." See if you can work out contrasts with other characters too.

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## 2.5 THE AUTHOR IN THE TEXT

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The image of a dichotomous world, which is nevertheless linked in unforeseen ways, is strengthened by the next two chapters of Book One. See the long passage which elaborates upon the idea of indeterminacy :

Old provincial society had its share of this subtle movement: had not only its striking downfalls, its brilliant young professional dandies who ended by living up an entry with a drab and six children for their establishment, but also those less marked vicissitudes which are constantly shifting the boundaries of social intercourse, and begetting new consciousness of interdependence ( 122).

According to the critic V.S. Pritchett, "*Middlemarch* is one of the 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 differentiation is not casual, it is planned and has its own inner hierarchy."

The first time reader of *Middlemarch* may in fact be distressed by such a shift from a tale of love to a sociological track. Upto Chapter 10, this novel had much in common with Jane Austen's *Emma* and Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* in being a woman-centred tale on the subject of matrimony. Now instead of developing the romantic elements, the author leaves the heroine to contemplate her wedding journey. (We are never to be shown the wedding, and might feel "cheated" by the author.) Meanwhile, we are transported to a location where we overhear opinion on local trade and politics from Brooke's guests. Arnold Kettle in fact called it a "clumsy passage" awkwardly bridging two segments of a narrative. Personally I do not agree with this adverse criticism. The transition is smooth and worked out in the context of preliminaries to Dorothea's wedding. Appropriately, Dorothea meets the guests and leaves. The others fall into social small talk which refers to Lydgate, new medicine, new politics and sundry other matters. While the stories are brought into conjunction, the characters are not. But Eliot's philosophical speculation alerts us to the possibility that Dorothea and Lydgate though now socially segregated, may, in the future become inadvertently connected.

Yet another passage of authorial control is closely debated by readers of *Middlemarch*. Examine the following line from Chapter 11 and judge for yourself whether the author's intervention disrupts the text usefully or not: "Destiny stands sarcastic with our *dramatis personae* folded in her hand" (122). According to Arnold Kettle, "it is a pretentious, unhelpful sentence, calling up a significance it does not satisfy. Who, one is tempted to ask, is this Destiny, a character previously unmentioned by the author? And, as a matter of fact, the figure of a sarcastic fate does not preside over *Middlemarch*." To W. J. Harvey, on the other hand, the sentence is a key to understanding the philosophic base of George Eliot. Says he, "She is not invoking a crudely deterministic notion of Fate or Nemesis. Rather she is simply summing up what the novel as a whole evokes: the infinitely complicated shape and motion of the world as we know it to be."

Your own reading could lean towards either of these critical opinions on this important matter of artistic control but you should formulate your individual response and justify it in terms of the text. Notice that each critic here appropriates the mind of the reader by drawing her/him into the assessment. You might be a "resistant reader" and not wish to collude in either opinion.

### 2.5.1 Many Voices

Towards the end of Book One, the polyphony of voices is resumed as a mode of explication of provincial life. We are introduced to the Vincy family, the Garths, Bulstrode, Lydgate and Peter Featherstone. The class barrier would interfere with their access to the gentry unless the circumstances are special. In developing the romance interest of Rosamond and Lydgate, Eliot creates a social pattern that is an alternative to the life of the elite. Money and status are recurrent themes in nineteenth century British fiction. Here too George Eliot uses the same tools of reference. If wealth is an advantage granted to Dorothea whereby she is left free to pursue her dreams, the shortage of money severely restricts Rosamond's longing for beautiful objects and refined pleasures. She can change the conditions of her birth only through a planned, strategic search for a potentially wealthy partner. Speaking for her thoughts, Eliot says, "A stranger was absolutely necessary for Rosamond's social romance, which had always turned on a lover and bridegroom who was not a Middlemarcher, and who had no connections at all like her own" (145). The net is cast for ensnaring Lydgate, the brilliant outsider who is reputed to have aristocratic relatives. He is the best that Rosamond can find in the vicinity.

### 2.5.2 A Nod At The Literary Tradition

Book Two is called "Old and Young," the title drawing attention away from individuals to focus anew on a contrasted group. Constituted of many episodes relating to major and minor characters, the chapters offer fine examples of the careful crafting of the novel.

The opening paragraph of Chapter 15 should be carefully examined to demonstrate how Eliot understands her role as a novelist in the literary traditions of English. She pays tribute to "a great historian," Henry Fielding, whose Preface to *Tom Jones* enunciated a theory of "comic epic in prose." As you have studied that novel, you will recall that the picaresque form is adopted for telling Tom's story and his journey along the road is a paradigm for freedom. George Eliot is astute enough to realise that such freewheeling, whether real or narratorial, is available primarily to male characters and male authors. Her own position, among "belated historians" must concentrate on "unravelling certain human lots," a "particular web," and not aim at the "universe."

The feminist critic Elaine Showalter recovers and comments upon a series of British women writers in her book, *A Literature of Their Own*, where the argument is that a female tradition in writing passes from one woman writer to another as a parallel to the male tradition that constitutes the canonical texts in English literature. You may recall that Jane Austen had described her art as a fine painting on "two inches of ivory" implying that she works details into the limited world she depicts in her novels. In the passage in Chapter 15 George Eliot does not mention gender, specifically, as a distinguishing factor but she mentions time. I think gender is implied when she speaks of "the light I can command," for it is a relevant reference to the limited arena of her experience. In another of George Eliot's novels, *Adam Bede*, published in 1859, attention is drawn to a chapter in which "The story pauses a little." The intention is to discuss the nature of her craft wherein she invites a comparison with the Flemish school of painters. She too aims at fidelity to the pictures of ordinary life, she too hopes to draw with sensitivity every fold on the dress and every wrinkle on the face as did Rembrandt and others.

We should however remember that Jane Austen and George Eliot have remained within the mainstream of British writing. Critics ask us to review the standards by which writers gain position in the canon. Here we discover that the token acceptance of two women in the realist tradition condoned by nineteenth century commentators should not obfuscate the fact that several other women writers were relegated to the condemned categories of sentimental or sensational fiction. While privilege was

granted to realism, excess emotion or romanticism were seen as faults in writing. Hence the works of the Bronte sisters and the novelists of the gothic did not get the status they deserved until another kind of literary interpretation saw credibility in the psychological portraits drawn by these writers.

George Eliot's adopting a male pseudonym is to be linked to the expectations of the critics of the time. When *Middlemarch* was published her identity was well known. But she strove to achieve the range considered appropriate in a realist novel in giving details of scientific development, political processes and industrial progress since these were subjects women were not supposed to know about. To that extent, the opening paragraph referring to the origins of the British novel in Fielding's work is a gesture of subversion. She wants us to note that with the passage of time the subject matter of novels has undergone change. Also, I believe she wants us to note that women writers can overcome the limits on "knowledge" that society has placed upon them.

### 2.5.3 Recalling Plato

So far in our analysis of *Middlemarch* we have placed an emphasis upon co-relations of plot, character, authorial control, which are aspects of traditional literary criticism. Modifying tradition to an extent, David Lodge adapts Plato's terms *mimesis* and *diegesis* to the novel. In Lodge's summary, "Mimesis, then, is narrating by imitating another's speech. Diegesis is narrating in one's own voice." Strictly speaking only drama would be diegetic. A novel which combines direct speech and also reportage or authorial commentary, uses mimesis as well as diegesis. About issues relating to *Middlemarch*, Lodge says:

There is no *necessary* connection between mimesis and realism: some novels that consist largely of dialogue ... are highly artificial; and some of the most realistic (i.e. convincing, lifelike, compelling), passages in *Middlemarch* are diegetic (for example the account of Lydgate's unpremeditated declaration to Rosamond in Chapter 31). But it is true that mimesis is inherently better adapted to realistic effect than diegesis, simply because it uses words to imitate words. The classic realist novel of the nineteenth century maintained a fairly even balance between mimesis and diegesis, showing and telling, scene and summary, and it did so at the expense of some degree of realistic illusion, in the interests of ethical control of the story and the reader's response.

*Middlemarch* uses dialogue and description in order to build up the story. Sometimes there is the author's account of an interior monologue revealing thoughts unknown to the dramatis personae. Likewise, modes of description can further the content of dramatic dialogue or contradict it. Lodge makes a good point about the intersection of two important methods of explication. But there are other intermediate ones too, as you might discover.

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## 2.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this Unit you have been introduced to the main characters in the novel and gained a close look at the literary devices used by George Eliot to bring coherence and connectedness to her plot. You will also have realised that Eliot is working with a larger canvas of reference than any woman writer before her in England. She is acutely conscious of her responsibility as a historian of society, a society in which women play a significant role, and she tries, often enough, to draw the reader's attention to the verisimilitude with which life in a provincial town has been presented.

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## 2.7 QUESTIONS

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1. Describe the reasons for Dorothea's attraction to Casaubon.
2. How does George Eliot perceive her role as a historian of society?
3. What are the main issues being discussed in the town of *Middlemarch*?

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## 2.8 SUGGESTED READING

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Miriam Allott, *Novelists on the Novel*, 1959.

W. J. Harvey, "Introduction" to *Middlemarch*, 1966

Laurence Lerner, *The Truth-tellers: Jane Austen, George Eliot and D.H. Lawrence*, 1967.

David Lodge, "Middlemarch and the Idea of the Classic Realist Text," in Arnold Kettle ed., *The Nineteenth Century Novel: Critical Essays and Documents*, 1981.