



# Middlemarch

By George Eliot

First published in 1874

## Genre & subject

Young women - fiction

England - social life and customs - fiction

Classical fiction

## Synopsis

Dorothea is bright, beautiful and rebellious and has married the wrong man. Lydgate is the ambitious new doctor in town and has married the wrong woman. Both of them long to make a positive difference in the world.

## Author biography

Mary Anne (alternatively Mary Ann or Marian) Evans (22 November 1819 – 22 December 1880), better known by her pen name George Eliot, was an English novelist, journalist and translator, and one of the leading writers of the Victorian era. She is the author of seven novels, including *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner* (1861), *Middlemarch* (1871–72), and *Daniel Deronda* (1876), most of them set in provincial England and known for their realism and psychological insight.

She used a male pen name, she said, to ensure her works would be taken seriously. Female authors were published under their own names during Eliot's life, but she wanted to escape the stereotype of women only writing light-hearted romances. An additional factor in her use of a pen name may have been a desire to shield her private life from public scrutiny and to prevent scandals attending her relationship with the married George Henry Lewes, with whom she lived for over 20 years.

The philosopher and critic George Henry Lewes (1817 – 1878) met Evans in 1851, and by 1854 they had decided to live together. Lewes was married to Agnes Jervis. They had agreed to have an open marriage, and in addition to the three children they had together, Agnes had also had four children by Thornton Leigh Hunt. Since Lewes was named on the birth certificates as the father of these children despite knowing this to be false, and was therefore considered complicit in adultery, he was not able to divorce Agnes.

## Discussion starters

- Marriage is a central concern in the novel. Does it portray marriage as a source of happiness in life? Or does it suggest that personal happiness comes from some other source?
- Compare the various couplings with one another: Dorothea's failed marriage with that of her sister. Or the Lydgate and the Garth marriages. In what way do they suggest differing approaches to marriage? Does Eliot offer a model union?
- Dorothea at one point says of marriage...

*I mean, marriage drinks up all of our power of giving or getting any blessedness in that sort of love. I know it may be very dear—but it murders our marriage—and then the marriage stays with us like a murder—and everything else is gone.*

What is she suggesting about romantic love and marriage? Is there any truth in her remark, or is this simply the rambling of a distraught woman?

- How does the novel portray Dorothea Brooke and Tertius Lydgate as the heroes in this work? In what ways do they differ from the others in the cultural milieu of Middlemarch? What drives each of them? Are they similar?
- Others in the novel also serve as models for virtue: members of the Garth family and Camden Farebrother, for instance? In what way can they be seen as secondary heroes of Middlemarch? Any others?
- Does Rosamond elicit sympathy from you? She is vain, of course, but might her upbringing be somewhat responsible for her faults? In what way does she represent the prevalent societal norms?
- The narrator is a very funny and wry satirist. Dorothea, for example, is passionate about horseback riding yet eager to renounce it, because in sacrificing her pleasure, she will prove her devotion to Christianity. What or who else do you find humorous in the novel? And what is she satirising?
- What do you think of Camden Farebrother, especially his gambling? Is it wrong? What makes him successful at gambling, as compared to Fred Vincy?
- What about Mary Garth's refusal to burn the second will after Featherstone's death. What would you have done?
- Talk about how social conventions, based on money and class, affect the behavior and relationships in this novel. In what way does this novel challenge those conventions? What does the novel champion...and what does it condemn?
- What symbolic (as well as literal) role does the portrait of Ladislaw's grandmother play in the novel? Why does Dorothea offer it to Ladislaw as a parting gift...why does he refuse the offer...and what does his refusal suggest?
- What do the main characters learn by the novel's end? Do either Dorothea or Lydgate get the life they deserve?
- What roles do Raffles and Nicholas Bulstrode play? Look at Raffles as representing the past...as well as chance or coincidence.
- Middlemarch, the town, is almost a character in itself. In what sense does Eliot use the idea of community? Does she portray it as antithetical to human freedom—in that it judges, restricts, or interferes in its inhabitants lives? Or is it presented as a positive force—in that it offers moral guidance, friendship, and solace?
- View clips of the excellent 1994 BBC miniseries and compare to the book.

### If you liked this book, you may also like...

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