

An overview of George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch*

Marian (or Mary Ann) Evans, who was born in 1809 and died in 1880, concealed her own name for her publications and was known as George Eliot. *Middlemarch* was published in instalments in 1871-2. It is widely regarded as one of the greatest English novels, for the penetration of its critical but sympathetic descriptions of a wide range of memorable characters, and for its insight into the harm done by the inadequate education commonly given to girls or women at that time.

The two main characters are Dorothea Brooke, who is nineteen when the story begins, and Dr Lydgate: he is twenty-seven. Each enters upon a marriage, Dorothea with Mr Casaubon and Lydgate with Rosamond Vincy, which becomes a very unhappy one. Dorothea is ardently Christian, cares deeply about the poor in the Middlemarch region, and longs for a purpose in her life to which she can devote herself. She rapidly comes to believe she will find it by gladly accepting as her husband Casaubon, a clergyman nearing fifty who is in fact preoccupied with his longstanding and ultimately unfruitful attempt to find a key to the world's myths. The beautiful but shallow Rosamond's expensive style of life leads Lydgate into debt and hence the abandonment of the attempt he has commenced in Middlemarch to run a model hospital, employing scientific methods and conducting fundamental research.

Other prominent characters include Mr Brooke, a good-humoured but indecisive and complacent man who is the uncle and guardian of Dorothea and her sister Celia, who thinks Dorothea (Dodo) an uncomfortable person to be with; Mr Bulstrode, a banker, narrow-minded in his version of Christianity, who finances the new hospital; Sir James Chettam, a young landowner who had hoped that Dorothea would agree to marry him; Mr Farebrother, a friendly but undisciplined young clergyman who becomes a close friend of Lydgate; Mr Featherstone, an old man largely confined to his bed, his scapegrace nephew Fred Vincy (Rosamond's brother), and Mary Garth, who will not hold out hopes of marriage to Fred until he shows himself a better man; and a cousin of Casaubon's, but much younger, Will Ladislaw, who likes to travel and has not yet found his line of work, and whom, at the end of the book, Dorothea marries about a year after the death of Casaubon.

The novel is a very long one, 838 pages in the Penguin Classics edition of 1994. It has there a good introduction and a set of notes by Rosemary Ashton. The first instalment of the television series *Middlemarch* produced by the BBC (the instalment to be shown at Learningguild's Saturday Meeting in Melbourne on April the 18th 2015) corresponds to the first nineteen of the eighty-six chapters.

In the first of two editions, Eliot had at the end of the novel attributed the unhappy marriage of Dorothea and Casaubon, as indeed she would also have attributed that of Lydgate and Rosamond, in part to "modes of education which make a woman's knowledge another name for motley ignorance". On such utterly unsatisfactory education, see John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (written in 1861, published in 1869). I have written about that work, in relation to his *Liberty* Ch. 3, in an article "Mill on Women and Human Development" (in "Women and Philosophy", a supplement to the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, June 1986).

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April 2015