UNIT 9: GEORGE ELIOT: *MIDDLEMARCH* II

UNIT STRUCTURE

9.1 Learning Objectives

9.2 Introduction

9.3 Reading the Novel

9.3.1 Major Themes

9.3.2 Major Characters

9.3.3 Narrative Style

9.4 Critical Reception

9.5 Let us Sum up

9.6 Further Reading

9.7 Answer to Check Your Progress

9.8 Model Questions

9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, you will be able to :

- explore the milieu in which George Eliot's novel was produced
- provide insight into the major thematic concerns
- discuss the character portrayal in the novel
- analyse the narrative style of the novel
- get an idea of the reception of the novel.

9.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, you have been introduced to the summary and analysis of Eliot's novel *Middlemarch*. All of her works situate her characters' lives in relation to the broader social conditions of their times. Similarly, we must understand her writing within the public context of nineteenth-century society and culture. George Eliot lived in a time that witnessed the Industrial Revolution and other social changes. The First Reform Bill was passed in 1832 and it brought about significant changes in the society, life and attitude

of the people. Her fiction,with the exception of *Daniel Deronda* and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, is set too early to incorporate or examine these new changes, but part of her careful historicising involved showing the impact of whatever was new at the time of her narratives' settings. For example, *Middlemarch* describes the first steps of surveying the land for the laying of a railway line into the town. In the face of opposition, questions arose on whether such life and land-altering technology was in fact "progress". In the following sections, therefore, we will get a better insight into the nature of the characters and the themes present in her novel.

9.3 READING THE NOVEL

Let us look at the following aspects of the novel.

9.3.1 Major Themes

Reforms : The major social movement with which her fiction is concerned is social and political reform. In the nineteenth century, the passion to reform institutions, laws, and even personal behaviour touched every aspect of society, from the abolition of slavery in the British colonies (1833) to the removal of disabilities (or prohibitions on civil rights such as the ability to hold office) for Dissenters (1828), Catholics (1829), and Jews (1858). The greatest change that the Reform Bill of 1832 achieved was in extending "the right to vote to all males owning property worth £10 or more in annual rent." In effect the voting public thereafter included the lower middle classes but not the working classes, who did not obtain the vote until 1867, when a second Reform Bill was passed, an event that preceded the publication of *Middlemarch*. The Reform Bill therefore broke up the monopoly of power that the conservative landowners had so long enjoyed and thus represents the beginning of a new age, in which middle-class economic interests gained importance. In the novel, it is seen that different characters have attempted to bring about changes in different areas. This is exemplified in Lydgate's approach towards medicine and the fever hospital, Dorothea's ideas regarding

housing and Chetam's implementation of them, Caleb and Fred's investment in farming and also the changes in transportation. These people essentially believed in the march of progress and it is significant that the title has been aptly chosen as "Middlemarch."

Treatment of Women : During her time, George Eliot also saw the advancement in women's rights and improvements in education, health and sanitation. This finds expression in *Middlemarch*. Characters like Dorothea, Mary and Mrs Garth display intelligence and resourcefulness which is set in direct contrast with the qualities of Rosamond and Celia. While the former group of characters believed in taking control of things for betterment, the latter essentially believed in the traditionalist notions of women's role being limited to maintaining elegance and domesticity.

Marriage : *Middlemarch* also deals with the theme of marriage.The narrative primarily focuses on how marriage affects the life and choices of the protagonists. The narrative gives a picture of the married life of three couples- Dorothea and Casaubon, Lydgate and Rosamond, and Celia and James Chettam. Both the protagonists, Dorothea and Lydgate, in spite of their intelligence, make wrong choices in the selection of their spouse. While Dorothea accepts Casaubon's proposal in quest for knowledge and companionship, Lydgate is swayed by the beauty and elegance of Rosamond. Both these characters fail to see the true nature of their spouses in the beginning. Although they somewhat emerge wiser than before by the end of the novel, Lydgate's married life essentially remains unfulfilling. Dorothea gets a second chance to marry but her aspirations ceased to exist after her marriage with Ladislaw. Celia, on the other hand, remains happily married to James Chettam and leads a blissful but uneventful and ordinary life.

9.3.2 Major Characters

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is a multi-plot novel in which separate stories of characters that live in the fictional town of

Middlemarch have been fused and connected together in the narrative. It is pertinent that the title of the novel has been named Middlemarch while the subtitle is 'A Study of Provincial Life'. The word Middlemarch itself seems to be a generic term meaning the middle borderland, a representative place but which is not a centre of civilisation. The novel has been much acclaimed because of the well defined characters and the subtle psychological probing done in the narrative.

Female Characters :

George Eliot has represented an interesting range of female characters in *Middlemarch*. In the beginning of the novel, Dorothea has been projected as the central character. The narrative, however, provides very little about the early life of this character and the environment in which she grew up with her younger sister Celia. She is described as young woman who has been deprived of the security and affection provided by a family as her parents were dead. Her only consolation was the presence of her uncle, Mr Brooke, who in spite of his traditional outlook maintains peace in the household by letting everyone have their way. Dorothea is a resourceful woman but too much of an idealist. Her idealism seems misplaced because she wishes to do great things for a world about which she does not have much knowledge. Dorothea, even with her good upbringing, does not seem to fit in the provincial English society because it expects women to be submissive and accept the role assigned to them without much aspiration for more. It is her idealism and dream to supplement in accomplishing a great work and because of this blunder; she commits the blunder of marrying the scholarly but much older Casaubon. After marriage, Casuabon remains aloof in his own private world and Dorothea becomes lonely and disillusioned by the marriage as she does not get the appreciation and respect she expected from her husband. On the contrary, she discovers that he is an egoist and self-centred person. Even after her husband's death, her reputation is threatened by the codicil that

was added by him in his will. Towards the end of the novel, Dorothea accepts Ladislaw's proposal for marriage giving up her right as Casaubon's heir and begin her life afresh in London. With Ladislaw elected to the Parliament, the narrative ends on a happy note for Dorothea as we are told she accepted her domestic responsibilities but she helped the people by actively engaging in good deeds for the society. Thus, Eliot concludes the novel by asserting "for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric events." We see a psychological growth in Dorothea throughout the novel.

Unlike Dorothea, her younger sister, Celia is described as a young lady who did not believe in doing extraordinary deeds for the good of the world. She is a woman of the world who loves her sister and opposes Dorothea's decisions that she knows would affect her destiny in a poor way. She is a traditional young woman suited to the English provincial life and does not have high aspirations of her own. It was Celia who convinced Dorothea to accept some of their mother's ornaments and she was also vehemently opposed to Dorothea marrying Casaubon as she believed the marriage would only bring unhappiness to her sister. Celia makes a sensible decision to marry the kind and sensitive Sir James Chettam who was earlier rejected by Dorothea.

The third female character is Rosamond Vincy, a vain and rather empty headed young woman. She is the pampered and spoilt child of the Vincy family who has received education in a ladies academy. Although her social manners and elegance is impeccable, she considers herself to be much superior to the society in Middlemarch. She is somewhat similar to Dorothea in the nature of her aspirations. But while Dorothea aspires to work for serving humanity, Rosamond is driven by her selfish desires. Her reason for accepting Lydgate was merely because she heard that he was connected to some old, aristocratic family. For her, marriage was means to escape from the provincial life to a more accomplished society. Even after her marriage, she enjoys the attention of other men around her much to the chagrin of Lydgate.

Her spendthrift nature adds to the burden of Lydgate who begins to see the true nature of his wife.

Other minor female characters include Mrs.Garth and Mary Garth. Mrs Garth is represented as an honest and hard working woman. She gives lessons to her own children and village children as well, making extra money from this. She respects the qualities of responsibility, education, and honesty, and ensures that all her children have these traits. She is a harder judge than her husband, but they are still a good match. Her eldest daughter, Mary, is an intelligent girl who knows a good bit of literature, and she also has good experience with human nature. Mary is very affable, practical, and independent. She also helps Fred to improve himself immeasurably.

Male Characters :

Eliot has brought about diversity in the representation of the male characters as much as the female characters. Edward Casaubon is a cold and reserved man who goes to extraordinary lengths to display dignity and learning. Dorothea and her uncle are readily fascinated by his learning but it is Celia who correctly points out that beneath the air of knowledge lies vanity and a sense of pretension. He imagines that Dorothea would be a perfect wife as she can also serve as his hostess and secretary. But he is unable to cope with her optimism and enthusiasm towards life. He spent his time working on a project called “The Key to All Mythologies” a work that is supposed to integrate his life’s learning. However, Casaubon really has no intention of writing or finishing it, and has lost his ability to live and his will to achieve in the musty pages of books. He realises about his own inadequacy as he notices Dorothea’s intelligence and perception. Casaubon’s insecurity is further increased with the coming of Ladislaw and his friendliness towards Dorothea because he senses the same traits in his cousin as his wife. He turns envious thinking about the possibility that his cousin might marry his wife after his death. It is for this very reason that he includes a codicil to the will.

Another character who has been represented as a learned, dignified man is Tertius Lydgate, a 30 year old gentleman and a doctor by profession. Unlike Casaubon, Lydgate's learning and intelligence is genuine and is based on experience. As a surgeon, he holds great promise. This is best reflected in his decision to bring about changes in the area of his expertise. However, his weakness for Rosamond brings about misfortune for him. When Lydgate fails to achieve his ambition of being an affluent, renowned surgeon, he is disillusioned and resorts to unscrupulous means in fear of being exposed. It is particularly important for him to present the image of a respectable man of medicine, since a good reputation will help him to further his career by establishing a good practice in the elite society.

The third significant male character is Will Ladislaw. He represents the world outside Middlemarch. He is very different from his much older cousin Casaubon and is seen sympathising with Dorothea for her plight. He feels bad for her as he believes that the marriage was clearly incompatible due to different personalities of both Casaubon and Dorothea. His father was a musician, mother an actress, while he is a dilettante and a Radical. He rejects the superficial liberalism of Mr. Brooke.

The other male characters include Mr Brook, the uncle and sole guardian of Dorothea and Celia. He owns an estate called Tipton where he and his nieces lived. He is a strong-willed man, with definite, though outdated, ideas about what women should and should not do. He means well for everyone. Another character is Fred Vincy, the only son of the Vincy family. Just like his sister, Rosamond, he is a spendthrift and a very irresponsible young man, though by the end of the novel, he becomes humble and more responsible. He is in love with Mary Garth, though she is below him in social standing. However, Mary is much more sensible than he is, and gets him to work hard and prosper.

9.3.3 Narrative Style

The novel's uniqueness comes from placing the town rather than an individual character at the centre of the narrative and from the authority of the omniscient narrator. The narrator, whose gender and age are unspecified, occupies a position between the past and future of the characters and speaks as though suspended over the years 1829–32, poised to tell us exactly why it is that the older characters like Casaubon and Bulstrode makes a mistake and fail in their ambitions and also why the young characters such as Dorothea and Lydgate are in the process of making the mistakes that will lead them to failure. The narrator has a constant awareness of himself or herself, sometimes as a scientist making "A Study of Provincial Life" (the novel's subtitle), and sometimes as a historian with the knowledge of how the story ends.

The narrator has knowledge both of the present event being narrated and of one that will occur in the future, both of course having already occurred in the past. It is as if the narrator had first read the novel before beginning to narrate it, for despite the fiction that the events in the novel are real, the narrator's ability to point out ironies and contradictions like this one in Brooke's politics, remind us of the textual, literary nature of this reality. Furthermore, rather than pretending to be a historian, the narrator is a commentator on the rhetorical practices of historians.

Eliot uses the narrator's hindsight, foresight and insight to examine the mixture of external circumstances and personal choice that determines the success or failure of lives that are always solitary yet also always connected. One of the most notable failed lives in the novel is that of Mr Edward Casaubon, whose intellectual incapacity to complete the great task of his life, the "Key to All Mythologies," and the psychological consequences of his suppressed knowledge of his incapacity, are examined in painful detail. The narrator makes overt attempts to generate sympathy for

the prematurely withered scholar, but Casaubon's insensitivity to Dorothea, his jealousy and the ungenerous codicil to his will make his overall impression an unpleasant, even despicable one.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: The most important theme that *Middlemarch* explores is_____

Q 2: Casaubon was writing a book called_____

Q 3: Write a note on the female characters in the novel.

9.4 CRITICAL RECEPTION

The novel *Middlemarch* was written and published in 1871 and is considered to be one of Eliot's greatest novels along with *Daniel Deronda*. In the initial years of its publication, it was received with mixed criticism. Literary magazines such as *The Spectator* and *Athenium* pointed out that it had a melancholic quality and its serialisation made the work tedious. However, in the later years, writers such as Henry James appreciated it as one of the strongest English novels. The work was particularly well received by the later day women writers such as Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf. One of the important feminist voices of the twentieth century, Kate Millett asserted that the novel displays how the dreams and aspirations of an intelligent and resourceful woman like Dorothea become subordinated to those of Ladislaw. F.R.Leavis, in his seminal work *The Great Tradition*, placed *Middlemarch* as one of the most significant works of the nineteenth century as no other novel has been as successful as it in showing the society with its mechanisms and the way people of different classes lived.



9.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit enabled us to acquire an idea of the social background of the age based on which Eliot wrote her narrative. Her treatment of the male and female characters shows her insight into human nature as well as her

feeling of compassion towards all. The analysis of the structure of *Middlemarch* shows that though the novel appears to be rather unwieldy, it is carefully constructed with the two main stories of Dorothea and Lydgate being closely woven with the various sub-plots. George Eliot touches upon several themes in the novel such as social progress, politics, treatment of women, social aspiration, etc.



9.6 FURTHER READING

1) Eliot, George. (1998). *Middlemarch*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

2) Henry, Nancy. (2008). *The Cambridge Introduction to George Eliot.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

3) Leavis, F.R. (1948). *The Great Tradition*. New York: George W. Stewart.

4) Levine, George(Ed). (2001). *A Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



9.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Reforms.

Ans to Q No 2: *The Key to All Mythologies*.

Ans to Q No 3: Refer to section 9.3.2



9.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1: Write an essay on the characterisation in *Middlemarch*

Q 2: Give a detailed explanation of the themes in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*.

Q 3: Discuss the narrative style in the novel *Middlemarch.*

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