UNIT 8: GEORGE ELIOT: *MIDDLEMARCH* I

UNIT STRUCTURE

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8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- gain an idea of the novelist George Eliot and her works
- discuss the context of the novel
- explain the summary of the text
- appreciate the text of the novel

8.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, you will get to know about the Victorian novelist, George Eliot (pseudonym of Mary Evans). Eliot is considered one of the most important novelists of her time. An important aspect in her writing is that her characters are well rounded and a gradual growth is seen in the characters throughout the novel. Unlike novelists such as Charles Dickens, she does not attempt to portray her characters as completely good or completely evil. She represents her characters from a psychological point of view, and is often regarded as one of the precursors of early modernist

writings. Further, Eliot is also known for having written about the contemporary developments in the society during her time. For example, in *Middlemarch*, she uses the context of contemporary historical developments such as the Reform Bill. Her work is infused not only with a moral vision but also with a deep sense of compassion.

8.3 GEORGE ELIOT: THE NOVELIST

Let us discuss the life and works of George Eliot in order to appreciate her novel *Middlemarch*.

8.3.1 Her Life

George Eliot (1819-1880) was the pen-name of the novelist Mary Evans who was the youngest child of Robert Evans, an estate agent from Warwickshire, England. She received education at girls' schools in Nuneaton and Coventry. During her early years, she showed an extraordinary aptitude for study and was far ahead of her brother in academic achievements. At the age of twenty-two, she went with her father to Coventry, and soon began to liberate herself from the narrow religious outlook which bound her family. She later came into contact with thinkers such as John Chapman, Francis Newman, Herbert Spencer and was deeply influenced by their philosophy. She also came across George Henry Lewes who was a married man but both became deeply attached to one another. In spite of being in a loveless marriage, Lewes could not separate from his wife as divorce was not feasible in Victorian England. But Eliot, defying Victorian convention, began to live with him as a partner and remained with Lewes until his death. Poverty and misfortune dogged them for a while, but Lewes recognised her superior intellect and encouraged her with praise and devotion.It was Lewes' encouragement that enabled her to commence her career in writing. Years later, after the demise of Lewes, she married her long time acquaintance John Walter Cross in 1880. Unfortunately, Eliot died seven months later in a hot air balloon accident.

8.3.2 Her Works

Eliot's first work was a translation of D.F. Strauss' *Life of Jesus* which was published without her name in 1846. Soon she became a regular contributor and the assistant editor of the *Westminster Review* during 1850-51. She is also known to have published a translation of Ludwig Feurbach's *Essence of Christianity* in 1854. Her career as a novelist was first initiated after she was encouraged by George Lewes. Her first work of fiction was *Scenes of Clerical Life* which appeared in the *Blackwood Magazine* in 1857. *Adam Bede* was published in 1859 and it was received with great enthusiasm which established her as a leading novelist. She wrote under the pseudonym, George Eliot, which led to much speculation about the true identity of the author. *Adam Bede* was followed by *Mill on the Floss* in 1860 and *Silas Marner* in 1861. Her novels were characterised by elements of English provincial life, domestic realism and pathos. In 1860, when she travelled to Florence, *Romola* was materialised and it was published in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1862-1863. Eliot also wrote some of her best known novels in the later part of her life. These include *Felix Holt* (1866), *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and *Daniel Deronda* (1874-76). Her last two novels are considered to be the longest and the greatest novels that she wrote. She is also known to have written numerous poems including the dramatic poem "The Spanish Gypsy"(1868) that was inspired by her travels in Spain during 1867.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What was the real name of George Eliot?

Q 2: What are the common characteristics of the novels written by George Eliot?

Q 3: What was the first novel written by Eliot?

8.4 CONTEXT OF THE NOVEL

Middlemarch was written during a time when George Eliot was undergoing a period of trauma following the death of Thornie Lewes, the young son of her partner George Lewes. Following the death, Eliot composed only poetry for about a year until a new story called “Miss Brooke” began to take shape in her imagination. By the March of 1871, Eliot made great progress on the multi-plot *Middlemarch*.

The plot is set in the English Midlands in a town called Middlemarch and the entire action of the novel occurs between the autumn of 1829 and the spring of 1832. The reference to the year 1832 in the novel is significant as it reflects the socio-political climate of England after the First Reform Bill was passed. This is exemplified in the change in mode of thinking, lifestyle and attitude of the people. For example, in the novel, Lydgate and the hospital suggest the reforms made in medicine. Similarly there is reference to the coming of the railways and the changes in transportation that was taking place. Dorothea’s plans and James’ implementation of them are reflective of the reforms seen in housing. All these examples in the text contribute to the sense that men and women in England at that time believe in the march of progress as suggested by the title.The uniqueness of the novel comes from placing the town rather than an individual character at the centre, and from the authority of the omniscient narrator.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What was the most significant development in England that has been reflected in the novel?



ACTIVITY 8.1

1. Try to find out the effects of the Reform Bill by consulting any book on the social history of England.

8.5 SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

The novel *Middlemarch* centres on the residents of a fictional town of Middlemarch in the Midlands, England during the 1890s.The novel begins with a description of the Brooke family that comprised the two sisters, Dorothy and Celia, and their old, Puritan uncle, Mr Brooke. The sisters became the wards of their uncle after the demise of their father who was Mr Brooke's elder brother. Both the young women were brought up in the manner befitting the ladies of their age with traditional outlook, good social behaviour and connections.They grew up as ladies in the estate of Tipton that belonged to their uncle. However, out of the two, Dorothea, like her uncle, was religious by nature and drawn more towards questions relating to intellect and religion. She was a pious, resourceful, young woman whose hobbies include renovating buildings belonging to old tenants in the vicinity. Celia, on the other, desired everyday comfort, warmth and friendliness over academic inclinations. The latter, even with her ordinary aspirations, had more sense and is more practical than her elder sister. Dorothea was of such serious disposition that in spite of being a young girl, she refutes wearing any kind of jewellery, even the ones that she inherited from her dead mother and so hands over the ornaments to her younger sister. However, on Celia's persistence, she finally agreed to keep a bracelet and a ring.

At a dinner party organised by Mr Brooke, a middle-aged scholar called Edward Casaubon and a young gentleman Sir James Chettam were invited. Both men competed for Dorothea's attention but she was attracted to the serious-minded Casaubon. Celia, however, who was more practical than her elder sister disapproved the latter's choice asserting that Casaubon was unsuitable for a young beautiful woman like her sister. That very afternoon Dorothea, contemplating the wisdom of the scholar, was walking and encountered Chettam. As he was in love with her, he mistook her silence and assumed that she might love him in return. When Casaubon made his proposal of marriage by letter, Dorothea accepted him at once. Her uncle, like Celia, thought that Chettam was a much better match. Mr Brooke

decided not to interfere in her plans, but Celia felt that the event would be more like a funeral than a marriage, and frankly asserted her thoughts.

Soon after, Casaubon invited Dorothea, Celia, and Mr. Brooke to see his home so that Dorothea might order any necessary changes. Dorothea, intending in all things to defer to Casaubon's tastes, said she would make no changes in the house. During this visit Dorothea also came across Will Ladislaw, Casaubon's second cousin, who seemed to be hardly in sympathy with his elderly cousin's marriage plans. After their marriage, Dorothea and her new husband were travelling in Italy. The narrative soon introduces us to a new group of characters.Tertius Lydgate, an ambitious and poor young doctor, met the pretty Rosamond Vincy, to whom he was much attracted. Rosamond's brother, Fred Vincy, had indicated that he expected to come into a fine inheritance when his uncle, Mr. Featherstone, would die. Vincy, meanwhile, was burdened by a debt he was unable to pay while Lydgate became involved in petty local politics. When the time came to choose a chaplain for the new hospital of which Lydgate was the head, the young doctor realised that it was to his best interest to vote in accordance with the wishes of Nicholas Bulstrode, an influential banker and founder of the hospital. A clergyman man named Tyke received the office. In Rome, Ladislaw once again encountered Dorothea,who, by then began to see the arrogance and incompatible nature of Casaubon. Seeing her disappointment, Ladislaw initially felt pity for her but later he fell in love with his cousin's wife. Unwilling to live any longer on Casaubon's charity, Ladislaw announced his intention of returning to England and finding some kind of lucrative occupation.

When Fred Vincy's document came due, he tried to sell a horse at a profit but the animal became vicious and he failed to do so. Caleb Garth, who had signed his document, now, was about to lose a hundred and ten pounds because of Fred's inability to raise the money. Soon Fred Vincy fell ill, and Lydgate was summoned to attend him. Lydgate used these visits to further his relationship with Rosamond. Meanwhile Dorothea and her husband returned from Rome and came to know about Celia's engagement to James Chettam. Will Ladislaw included another note to Dorothea in a

letter he wrote to Casaubon. This attention resulted in a quarrel between the two and it was followed by Casaubon's serious illness. Lydgate, who attended him, urged him to give up his studies for the time being. To Dorothea, Lydgate confided that Casaubon had a weak heart and must be guarded from any kind of anxiety.

All the relatives of old Mr. Featherstone too waited impatiently for his death, but he hoped to thwart their wishes by handing away his fortune to Mary Garth, the daughter of the man who had signed Fred Vincy's note. When she refused it, he fell into a rage and died soon afterwards. When his will was read, it was learned he had left nothing to his relatives; most of his money was to go to a Joshua Riggs, who was to take the name of Featherstone and a part of his fortune was to endow the Featherstone Alms houses for old men. Plans were made for Rosamond's marriage with Lydgate. Fred Vincy was ordered to prepare himself finally for the ministry, since he was to have no inheritance from his uncle. And Mr. Brooke, having gone into politics, enlisted the help of Ladislaw in publishing a liberal paper. During that time, Casaubon had come to loathe Ladislaw intensely after his cousin had rejected further assistance from him, and he had forbidden Ladislaw to enter his house. He soon passed away and it was discovered that he had made some conditions before giving Dorothea any right to his property. It was stated in a codicil to his will that Dorothea will be given his property as long as she did not marry Ladislaw. This strange provision caused Dorothea's friends and relatives some concern because if publicly given out, it would appear that Dorothea and Ladislaw were not discrete or prudent in their relationship.

Mr. Brooke, on the advice of his Tory friends, gave up his liberal newspaper and thus cut off his connection with Ladislaw. The latter realised that Dorothea's family was in some way trying to separate him from Dorothea but he refused to be disconcerted about the matter. He resolved to stay on in Middlemarch until he was ready to leave. When he heard of the codicil to Casaubon's will, he was more than ever determined to remain so that he could eventually disprove the suspicions of the village concerning him and Dorothea. Meanwhile Lydgate and Rosamond married, and the doctor had

gone deeply in debt to furnish his house. When he found that his income did not meet his wife's spendthrift habits, he asked her to help him economise resulting in frequent quarrels between the two. This resulted in deterioration of both his popularity and his practice as a doctor.

Around that time, Raffles, a man of ill reputation, appeared in Middlemarch.He was familiar about the past of Ladislaw's family. In the past, Ladislaw's grandfather had amassed a fortune as a receiver of stolen goods and Nicholas Bulstrode, the highly respected banker of Middlemarch, had once been the confidential clerk of Ladislaw's ancestor. More than that, Bulstrode's first wife had been his employer's widow. Upon money inherited from her, money which should have gone to Ladislaw's mother, Bulstrode had built his own fortune. Already threatened to be tarnished by Raffles, Bulstrode reasoned that the rogue would tell Ladislaw the whole story. To forestall trouble, he sent for Ladislaw and offered him an annuity of five hundred pounds and liberal provision in his will. Ladislaw, feeling that his relatives had already tainted his honour, refused, unwilling to be associated in any way with the objectionable situation. Ladislaw makes a decision to leave Middlemarch and goes to London without assurance that Dorothea loved him.On the other hand, Lydgate drifted deeper into debt. When he wished to sell what he could and take cheaper lodgings, Rosamond managed to make him hold on,to keep up the pretence of prosperity a little longer. At the same time Bulstrode gave up his interest in the new hospital and withdrew his financial support. Faced at last with the seizure of his goods, Lydgate goes to Bulstrode and asked for a loan. The banker advised him to seek aid from Dorothea and abruptly ended the conversation. But when Raffles, in the last stages of alcoholism, returned to Middlemarch and Lydgate was called in to attend him, Bulstrode,was terrified that the doctor would learn the banker's secret during one of Raffles' delirious outbursts. So he changed his mind and gave Lydgate a cheque for a thousand pounds. The loan came in time to save Lydgate's goods and reputation. When Raffles died, Bulstrode felt at peace at last. But the rumour soon spread that Bulstrode had given money to Lydgate and that Lydgate had attended Raffles in his final illness.

Both Bulstrode and Lydgate were publicly accused of malpractice in Raffles'death. Only Dorothea spoke in favour of Lydgate while the rest of the town was busy with gossip over the affair. Rosamond was anxious to leave Middlemarch to avoid further public disgrace. Bulstrode also was anxious to leave the town after his secret, which Raffles had told while drunk in a neighbouring village, became known. However, he fell ill and his doctors would not permit him to leave his bed. Dorothea,sympathetic with Lydgate, becomes determined to give her support to the hospital and to try to convince Rosamond that the only way Lydgate could recover his honour was by remaining in Middlemarch. Unfortunately, she came upon Will Ladislaw, to whom poor Rosamond was pouring out her grief. Afraid Rosamond was involved with Ladislaw, Dorothea left abruptly. Angered at the false position Rosamond had put him in, Ladislaw explained that he had always loved Dorothea, but from a distance. When Dorothea forced herself to return to Lydgate's house on the following morning, Rosamond told her of Ladislaw's declaration. Dorothea realised she was willing to give up Casaubon's fortune for Ladislaw's affection. In spite of the protests of her family and friends, they were married several weeks later and went to live in London. Lydgate and Rosamond lived together with better understanding and prospects of a happier future. Fred Vincy became engaged to Mary Garth, with whom he had long been in love. For a long time Dorothea's family disregarded her, but they were finally reconciled after Dorothea's son was born and Ladislaw was elected to Parliament.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: In the novel, what is the profession of Lydgate?

Q 6: What condition did Casaubon add in his will?



8.6 LET US SUM UP

The unit provides the learner with an insight on the life and works of George Eliot. A brief study of the background and context of the age enlightened us about the society and contemporary developments that influenced her writings. The summary of the novel essentially shows that the novel is centred on the stories of Dorothea and Lydgate with various sub-plots that add to the length of the narrative. Thus, *Middlemarch* is essentially a depiction of nineteenth century provincial England with its changes, hopes and aspirations.



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



8.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Mary Evans.

Ans to Q No 2: English provincial life, domestic realism and pathos.

Ans to Q No 3: *Scenes of Clerical Life.*

Ans to Q No 4: The socio-political changes seen in England with the passing of the First Reforms Bill.

Ans to Q No 5: Doctor.

Ans to Q No 6: That Dorothea should never marry Will Ladislaw.