

YORK NOTES ADVANCED

Middlemarch

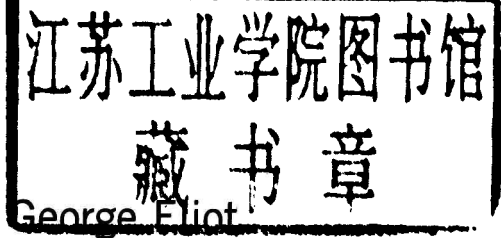
George Eliot

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YORK NOTES

Middlemarch



Note by Dr Julian Cowley



Longman



York Press

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YORK PRESS

322 Old Brompton Road, London SW5 9JH

PEARSON EDUCATION LIMITED

Edinburgh Gate, Harlow,

Essex CM20 2JE, United Kingdom

Associated companies, branches and representatives throughout the world

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First published 2000

Fourth impression 2003

ISBN 0-582-42450-X

Designed by Vicki Pacey

Phototypeset by Gem Graphics, Trenance, Mawgan Porth, Cornwall

Colour reproduction and film output by Spectrum Colour

Produced by Pearson Education Asia Limited, Hong Kong

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I NTRODUCTION

H OW TO STUDY A NOVEL

Studying a novel on your own requires self-discipline and a carefully thought-out work plan in order to be effective.

- You will need to read the novel more than once. Start by reading it quickly for pleasure, then read it slowly and thoroughly.
- On your second reading make detailed notes on the plot, characters and themes of the novel. Further readings will generate new ideas and help you to memorise the details of the story.
- Some of the characters will develop as the plot unfolds. How do your responses towards them change during the course of the novel?
- Think about how the novel is narrated. From whose point of view are events described?
- A novel may or may not present events chronologically: the time-scheme may be a key to its structure and organisation.
- What part do the settings play in the novel?
- Are words, images or incidents repeated so as to give the work a pattern? Do such patterns help you to understand the novel's themes?
- Identify what styles of language are used in the novel.
- What is the effect of the novel's ending? Is the action completed and closed, or left incomplete and open?
- Does the novel present a moral and just world?
- Cite exact sources for all quotations, whether from the text itself or from critical commentaries. Wherever possible find your own examples from the novel to back up your opinions.
- Always express your ideas in your own words.

This York Note offers an introduction to *Middlemarch* and cannot substitute for close reading of the text and the study of secondary sources.

The writer Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) called *Middlemarch* ‘one of the few English novels written for grown-up people’. Many other readers have agreed that George Eliot’s greatest novel ranks with the highest achievements in all literature. It is subtitled ‘A Study of Provincial Life’, but that simple description is deceptive. Within its pages there is vivid depiction of English life in the early 1830s, but the scope of *Middlemarch* is far wider. It is a study of selfishness and self-sacrifice, a story of human aspiration and frustration, of hope and compromise.

George Eliot made a major contribution to our sense that novels are not only a form of entertainment, but can also be works of art. *Middlemarch* is challenging and fulfilling in equal measure. It is a large novel, but is always skilfully controlled. It was composed with great care, and its elaborately patterned structure enriches the experience of reading. It offers a panoramic view of a society in transition, touching on those large historical forces which produce social change. Embedded in this broad picture are intimate love stories, developed with evident sympathy and portrayed with psychological subtlety.

Middlemarch is also a novel about the quest for knowledge and the limits of human understanding. It is about the various forms of power that individuals exercise over one another. It looks at how the past shapes the present, and investigates the capacity of an individual to contribute to the improvement of the world as a place in which to live.

These are grand concerns, outlined here in abstract terms. But entering the world of *Middlemarch* you encounter the beautiful and passionately idealistic Dorothea Brooke, the intense young doctor Tertius Lydgate, and the dashing dilettante Will Ladislaw. You follow the entanglement of their lives with the scholarly Edward Casaubon, the graceful yet shallow Rosamond Vincy, and the hypocritical banker Nicholas Bulstrode. Many other characters are met along the way. They lodge in the mind to make *Middlemarch* a truly memorable work of literary art.

SUMMARIES & COMMENTARIES

Middlemarch was originally planned as two separate stories, one concerning Lydgate, the other entitled 'Miss Brooke'. The first 18 chapters fuse these two strands. *Middlemarch* appeared initially between December 1871 and December 1872 in eight half-volume instalments, issued at two-monthly intervals with the final three instalments appearing monthly. It was subsequently compiled into four volumes. Novels throughout the nineteenth century were usually issued in three-volume editions. A cheaper edition, the 'Guinea Edition' was published in March 1873.

This Note uses the Penguin Classics *Middlemarch*, 1994, edited by Rosemary Ashton. It is based on the second edition, which appeared in May 1874, the last one thoroughly corrected by George Eliot.

In 1994, an adaptation of the novel for BBC Television generated such interest that *Middlemarch* reached the top of the paperback bestseller list.

All the textual variants arising from the author's revisions can be found in the Clarendon Edition, edited by David Carroll (1986). *George Eliot's Middlemarch Notebooks* (University of California Press) is a transcription by John Clark Pratt and Victor E. Neufeldt of the notebooks which trace George Eliot's composition of the novel.

SYNOPSIS

It is 1829. Dorothea and Celia Brooke are sisters who live with their uncle Arthur Brooke at Tipton Grange, near the town of Middlemarch. Sir James Chettam, a baronet who owns a neighbouring estate, wishes to marry Dorothea. Dorothea, however, is an immensely serious young woman, and she chooses instead to marry the scholarly rector of Lowick, Edward Casaubon, who is about thirty years her senior.

On a preliminary visit to her new home, Lowick Manor, Dorothea meets Casaubon's young cousin, Will Ladislaw. The acquaintance is

renewed in Rome, where Mr and Mrs Casaubon are spending their honeymoon. Casaubon shows more interest in pursuit of his studies than in his new wife, and although she remains loyal to her husband Dorothea is drawn to Ladislaw. The young man has relied upon financial support from his cousin. Appalled at the incongruity of the marriage, Ladislaw determines that on his return to England he will seek to live independently. He unsettles Dorothea by casting doubt on the value of her husband's work.

Meanwhile, a young doctor called Tertius Lydgate has joined the Middlemarch community. He is struck by the beauty of Rosamond Vincy, daughter of the town's mayor. Her brother, Fred Vincy, is troubled by debt, but he anticipates an inheritance from his elderly uncle, Peter Featherstone. Fred hopes to marry Mary Garth, who is looking after the old man.

Nicholas Bulstrode, a banker, allocates Lydgate supervision of the new hospital. The doctor pleases Bulstrode by securing the hospital chaplaincy for Walter Tyke, the banker's favoured candidate. In doing so, Lydgate frustrates the aspirations of his own friend, Mr Farebrother.

Fred's inability to settle his debt places the financial burden upon Caleb Garth, Mary's father, who has acted as security for the amount owed. Trying unsuccessfully to resolve his dilemma, Fred falls ill. During the time that Lydgate is treating Fred's illness, his relationship with Rosamond develops.

On their return home, Dorothea and Casaubon learn that Celia has become engaged to Chettam. Soon afterwards, Casaubon suffers a heart attack, and as a consequence his activities are circumscribed. Lydgate becomes engaged to Rosamond Vincy.

As Featherstone is dying he asks Mary Garth to destroy the most recent will he has made. She refuses. After his death, his relatives are dismayed to learn that his estate has been left to a stranger, Joshua Rigg, the old man's secret son.

Casaubon is alarmed at the growing friendship between his wife and Ladislaw. Mr Brooke, who has political ambitions as a reformer, becomes proprietor of a newspaper and asks Ladislaw to edit it. Casaubon tells his cousin that if he takes the post he will no longer be welcome at Lowick Manor. Ladislaw is defiant.

Caleb Garth's straitened financial situation is alleviated when he is invited to manage estates for both Chettam and Brooke. Fred Vincy passes his degree, but Garth suggests he might assist him rather than becoming a clergyman.

Casaubon asks Dorothea to continue his work in the event of his death. She initially refuses to make that commitment. On reflection she feels she must, but before she can discuss the matter further she finds her husband dead. A codicil added to his will stipulates that if Dorothea marries Ladislav she will forfeit the Lowick estate. Immersing herself in practical matters, Dorothea offers support for the hospital, and on Lydgate's recommendation, appoints Farebrother as rector of Lowick.

Brooke retires from politics after an inept attempt to campaign. He dismisses Ladislav. Ladislav has no knowledge of Casaubon's stipulation, but he feels it would be improper for him to be seen as a potential suitor for his late cousin's wife, and he keeps his distance.

Bulstrode purchases Stone Court, formerly Featherstone's home, from Joshua Rigg. Rigg's stepfather, John Raffles, arrives and starts to extort money from the banker. It is revealed that Bulstrode's money derived from marriage to Mrs Dunkirk, a wealthy older woman, who owned a pawnbroking business, apparently receiving stolen goods. Prior to the marriage, Bulstrode concealed the fact that Mrs Dunkirk's runaway daughter had been traced. This concealment meant that the substantial inheritance would be his.

Lydgate has incurred heavy debts, and his marriage grows increasingly strained. Rosamond suffers a miscarriage. Ladislav visits the Lydgates, and learns of the codicil in his cousin's will. Raffles encounters Ladislav and reveals that Mrs Dunkirk's daughter was the young man's mother and that Bulstrode has deprived him of his rightful inheritance. Ladislav is appalled to discover that his family history has involved dishonourable business activities. Bulstrode offers an annual allowance to Ladislav, who rejects the offer as an insult.

Lydgate seeks financial assistance from the troubled banker. Bulstrode refuses to help him, and reveals that he is withdrawing support from the hospital. The same day, Garth visits Bulstrode to tell him that he has found Raffles by the roadside, clearly very ill, and has taken him to Stone Court. An arrangement had been made that Fred Vincy should

manage that property, under Garth's supervision. Raffles has told Garth of the banker's past, and as a matter of honour he now severs the business connection between them. Later, Mrs Bulstrode persuades Garth to restore the arrangement, which enables Fred to marry Mary, and to become a successful farmer.

Bulstrode summons Lydgate to attend to Raffles. In order to win the doctor's allegiance, he writes a cheque to clear his considerable debts. Lydgate gives specific instructions for the care of Raffles, whom he believes should survive this bout of illness. Bulstrode fails to convey these instructions to his housekeeper, and as a consequence of the opium and brandy she administers the man dies.

Lydgate feels uneasy. Bulstrode is relieved that the extortion has come to an end. But Raffles had disclosed the banker's hidden past to Bambridge, the horse-dealer, and it soon becomes the focus for Middlemarch gossip. Bulstrode's reputation is destroyed, and Lydgate is implicated in the allegations.

Dorothea has faith in Lydgate and seeks to clear his name. She writes a cheque, allowing him to clear his debt to Bulstrode. Lydgate and Rosamond move to London, where he becomes a successful practitioner, and they have children. After his death, at fifty, Rosamond marries a wealthy older doctor.

Ladislaw returns to Middlemarch. He and Dorothea acknowledge their love for one another. She gives up Lowick Manor and they marry, to the dismay of her friends and relatives. The couple move to London, and have children. Ladislaw becomes a reforming politician. In time, they are welcomed back to Middlemarch, and Dorothea's son eventually inherits Tipton Grange.

PRELUDE

The novel begins with reference to Saint Theresa of Avila, whose 'passionate, ideal nature demanded an epic life' (p. 3). Many women have aspired to transcend the limitations imposed upon their lives, but few have achieved that goal.

The novel is subtitled 'A Study of Provincial Life', but the 'Prelude' takes us far from provincial England, to sixteenth-century Spain and the ecstatic visions of Saint Theresa. Theresa stands as a **type** for women who have aspired to transcend the limits of their circumstances, and to make a positive contribution to the world. Dorothea Brooke is just such a woman. Eliot uses the word **epic** to denote a life conducted in heroic style, engaged with grand issues.

Throughout *Middlemarch*, Eliot directs our attention to both the particular and the general, to specific cases and to types of character or behaviour. That process is established here. We are now prepared to understand Dorothea in the light of Saint Theresa. Saint Theresa benefited from the 'coherent social faith and order' (p. 3) of an ardently Christian society. Eliot's contemporaries were haunted by the sense that such simple faith was no longer tenable. She shared a view, widespread amongst intellectuals, that Christianity no longer provided an overarching framework for understanding life (see Historical Background: Loss of Faith).

Middlemarch is a novel which contains social criticism. The 'Prelude' alludes to a repressive uniformity in women's fashions and tastes which stifles development of individual personality.

Saint Theresa Saint Teresa of Avila (1515–82), Spanish visionary, who established a religious order

epos epic poem

BOOK ONE: 'MISS BROOKE'

CHAPTER 1 The Brooke sisters and their uncle Arthur are introduced

Dorothea and Celia Brooke, teenage sisters, have lived for a year with their uncle, Arthur Brooke, at Tipton Grange, near the town of

Middlemarch. Their parents died when they were 'about twelve years old' (p. 8). They subsequently lived with an English and then a Swiss family. Dorothea is physically attractive and clever, but Celia is generally recognised to have more common sense. Dorothea is a pious Christian. Her moral seriousness is evident from her concern to improve living conditions for local labourers. She is fascinated by greatness, and especially by intellectual achievement. Her intensity is seen as a potential obstacle to marriage, and Mr Brooke is blamed by acquaintances for not introducing into his household 'some middle-aged lady as a guide and companion to his nieces' (p. 10).

At Celia's request, the sisters look at jewellery left to them by their mother. Dorothea says her sister can have it all, but then decides to keep an emerald ring and matching bracelet.

Each chapter begins with a quotation. Here George Eliot quotes from a sixteenth-century play. Sometimes these **epigrams** are invented. In all cases, they indicate a major thematic concern of the chapter. Here the concern is evidently with restriction of opportunities for women to perform benevolent acts of real social importance.

Middlemarch was set forty years in the past at the time of composition. This allowed George Eliot to make even her first readers aware of processes of social change. In this chapter we are presented with a society that is clearly stratified in terms of social class. A major concern of the novel is the advancement of the middle class, the class of business and the professions, which was growing increasingly wealthy, and was securing more and more social power. The novel's title may perhaps be taken as a **punning** allusion to the march of the middle.

Eliot uses contrast to develop characterisation. Dorothea and Celia are delineated in part through their differences. Celia appears lightweight beside her earnest sister, but she is more popular and is considered to have more common sense.

Clothing is a conventional means of signalling gender roles. Dorothea's lack of interest in fashion indicates that she is not content with conventional femininity. She has no wish to be merely

an ornament, a pretty addition to a man's possessions. Accordingly, she dresses as simply as possible.

Dorothea is fascinated by greatness of the kind which changes the course of history or leaves an indelible mark on the world. George Eliot's novel is critical of the customary belief that such greatness is the province of men, and can be achieved by women only if they are prepared, like Saint Theresa, to become martyrs.

Pascal's *Pensées* defence of Christian beliefs by French philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), published posthumously in 1670

Jeremy Taylor (1613–1670), preacher and advocate of religious toleration

Mr Peel's late conduct on the Catholic Question Robert Peel (1788–1850), Home Secretary, who initially opposed Catholic Emancipation, then supported it

Hooker Richard Hooker (1554–1600), Anglican theologian

John Milton (1608–1674), poet, best known for the epic, *Paradise Lost*

Henrietta Maria (1605–69), wife of Charles I

CHAPTER 2 **A dinner party. Sir James Chettam shows interest in Dorothea, but she is fascinated by the scholarly Mr Casaubon**

At a dinner party hosted by Brooke, Sir James Chettam seeks to court Dorothea, but she is fascinated by the older Mr Casaubon. Casaubon wants someone to read to him in the evenings, as his scholarly work is causing his eyesight to fade. Dorothea is keen to assist. Chettam remarks to Celia that her sister is given to 'self-mortification'. Celia agrees that Dorothea 'likes giving up' (p. 18). Brooke argues that 'young ladies are too flighty' to be entrusted with weighty documents (p. 20).

After dinner, Celia remarks upon Casaubon's ugliness. Dorothea vehemently asserts that he is a distinguished man. Celia knows that Chettam is enamoured of her sister, but suspects that Dorothea's intellectual aspirations would make her an unsuitable match for the baronet.

The **epigram** from Miguel de Cervantes (1547–1616), which is concerned with distorted perception, prepares us for Dorothea's idealised view of Casaubon. It suggests that, like Don Quixote,

she is deluding herself, while Celia is contrastingly direct and down-to-earth.

Brooke likes to display his learning, but it inevitably sounds rambling and confused. George Eliot contrasts his misguided displays of erudition with the taciturn presence of Casaubon, who is reputedly a formidable scholar. The characterisation of both is advanced by this contrast.

Similarly, characterisation of Dorothea is developed by placing her between two diametrically opposed suitors: Casaubon with his taste for cloistered seclusion, and Chettam with his energetic enjoyment of outdoor pursuits.

Although Brooke initially appears an amiable buffoon, his avuncular kindness is cut through with assumptions of the inferior capabilities of women. As the consequences of such assumptions become increasingly serious for Dorothea, Brooke's foolishness appears less harmless.

Sir Humphry Davy (1778–1829), eminent scientist

Locke John Locke (1632–1704), philosopher

Adam Smith (1723–90), influential economist and champion of free trade

Southey Robert Southey (1774–1843), poet and historian

the Waldenses French religious sect persecuted as heretics

Wilberforce William Wilberforce (1759–1833), politician and philanthropist who campaigned against slavery

cochon de lait (French) suckling pig

pilulous resembling a small pill

Mawworm sanctimonious hypocrite, protagonist of Isaac Bickerstaffe's play *The Hypocrite* (1769)

CHAPTER 3 **Dorothea talks at length with Casaubon, and envisages marriage to him. Chettam presents her with a lapdog, which she rejects, but he pleases her with his proposal to build cottages for local labourers**

On the following day, Casaubon discusses with Dorothea his work on comparative mythology. He speaks of his need for companionship. Then he returns to his home at Lowick, five miles away.

Dorothea walks in the woods with Monk, her Great St Bernard dog, and contemplates marriage to Casaubon, suspecting a proposal is imminent. She encounters Chettam, who is riding. He offers her a puppy, which she haughtily rejects, suggesting it might be an appropriate gift for Celia.

He offers to realise Dorothea's pet project by building cottages for poor labourers on his estate. Regarding him as potential brother-in-law, she welcomes his beneficence and shows him plans she has prepared.

Further conversations with Casaubon deepen Dorothea's admiration. She reveres his seriousness, although she is disappointed by his lack of interest in her building projects. Chettam visits more often, and while Dorothea receives him with greater warmth, she is preoccupied with improving her mind in preparation for Casaubon's company.

Middlemarch is a work of literary **realism**, but it nonetheless relies upon the author's contrivance. Realism is the product of controlled artifice, even though it may seem to offer a transparent window through which to watch the world. An example of George Eliot's craft is evident in the contrast between the lapdog which Dorothea rejects, and the Great St Bernard she willingly takes for a walk. The Maltese puppy may be seen to correspond to the view that women are mere embellishments, superficially adorning a world run by men. The Great St Bernard, on the other hand, is well known as a working dog, effective in rescue operations. Its presence reflects Dorothea's desire to be useful, even to save others through her actions.

The narrator refers to Dorothea's 'soul-hunger' (p. 29), which motivates her to eschew the trivial and aspire to great deeds. She believes that marriage to Casaubon will elevate her, and she sees him as St Augustine. Later in the novel he is **ironically** cast by the painter Naumann as another important saint, Thomas Aquinas. By that point it has become very clear that Casaubon does not merit such comparisons. But remember that we have been invited to see Dorothea in the light of St Theresa. Is it possible for her life to justify that comparison?

CHAPTER 3 continued

Bossuet Jacques Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704), French bishop who advocated reconciliation of the Catholic and Protestant churches

Augustine St Augustine (354–430), important figure in the history of Christianity

Rhamnus coastal town near Athens with ancient ruins

custos rutulorum (Latin) keeper of the public records

vide supra (Latin) see above

Chloe ... Strephon conventional names for young lovers in pastoral poetry

Female Scripture Characters book by Frances Elizabeth King, published in 1813

Loudon's book John Claudius Loudon (1783–1843) was a respected writer on gardens and farming

Oberlin Johann Friedrich Oberlin (1740–1826), French Protestant reformer

CHAPTER 4 The sisters discuss Chettam's marital intentions. Brooke tells Dorothea that Casaubon hopes to marry her. She replies that she would accept such a proposal

Chettam has started the building project at Freshitt. The sisters have visited the site. On the way home, they discuss the Baronet's character. Celia insists that Sir James intends to marry Dorothea, not to become her brother-in-law. Dorothea cries in response to this revelation, and grows angry at the suggestion that she has shown fondness for him.

On their return home, Brooke announces that he has been to Lowick Manor. Dorothea is excited by pamphlets, sent by Casaubon, concerning the history of the early Church. Alone with Dorothea in the library, Brooke reveals Casaubon's intention to propose marriage. Dorothea declares she will accept such an offer. Her uncle mentions that Chettam would make a good match, but she states emphatically her preference for a husband who is 'above me in judgment and in all knowledge' (p. 40). He then hands her a letter from Casaubon.

The **epigram** which heads this chapter is unattributed because George Eliot has invented it. It serves the same function as an actual quotation, focusing our attention on a major thematic concern.

Dorothea cries for the first time here. She sheds many more tears in the course of the novel. This is a measure of her intense,