

Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

NCLC

183

Volume 183

Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

*Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Philosophers, and Other
Creative Writers Who Died between 1800
and 1899, from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations*



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Preface

Since its inception in 1981, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC) has been a valuable resource for students and librarians seeking critical commentary on writers of this transitional period in world history. Designated an “Outstanding Reference Source” by the American Library Association with the publication of its first volume, NCLC has since been purchased by over 6,000 school, public, and university libraries. The series has covered more than 500 authors representing 38 nationalities and over 28,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical reaction to nineteenth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as NCLC.

Scope of the Series

NCLC is designed to introduce students and advanced readers to the authors of the nineteenth century and to the most significant interpretations of these authors’ works. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of this period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. By organizing and reprinting commentary written on these authors, NCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in NCLC presents a comprehensive survey of an author’s career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of NCLC is devoted to literary topics that cannot be covered under the author approach used in the rest of the series. Such topics include literary movements, prominent themes in nineteenth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

NCLC continues the survey of criticism of world literature begun by Thomson Gale’s *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC) and *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC).

Organization of the Book

An NCLC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the list will focus primarily on twentieth-century translations, selecting those works most commonly considered the best by critics. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication. Lists of **Representative Works** by different authors appear with topic entries.

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
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Middlemarch

George Eliot

The following entry presents criticism of Eliot's novel *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1871-72). For information on Eliot's complete career, see *NCLC*, Volume 4. For additional discussion of *Middlemarch*, see *NCLC*, Volume 13; for discussion of the novel *Daniel Deronda*, see *NCLC*, Volume 23; for discussion of the novel *Silas Marner*, see *NCLC*, Volume 41; for discussion of the novel *The Mill on the Floss*, see *NCLC*, Volume 49; for discussion of the novel *Adam Bede*, see *NCLC*, Volume 89.

INTRODUCTION

George Eliot's *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* is regarded by some critics as the greatest novel ever written in English. An in-depth portrait of a town and its inhabitants, the work describes the intricate bonds that connect people's lives, exploring the relationship between individual action and the unwieldy, seemingly indeterminate forces that shape society. Eliot employs the metaphor of a web to describe the intertwining of individuals within a community, a network at once orderly and infinitely complex. The novel originated as two separate narratives—one revolving around the character of a doctor, Lydgate, and the other focusing on a female protagonist named Dorothea—which Eliot eventually wove together into a single novel. *Middlemarch* was first serialized in *Blackwood's Magazine*, appearing in eight installments between December 1871 and December 1872; a four-volume book edition was published in 1872.

Although the action of the novel is concentrated within the fictional town of Middlemarch, England, its themes are universal: the individual ambitions of the main characters, set against the complicated social labyrinth of the community, symbolize the struggle of peoples and nations to form societies based on principles of equality, justice, and compassion. At the heart of these struggles, in Eliot's worldview, we find human nature: fickle, vain, and selfish and yet also noble and creative. Eliot's exposure of the frailty of her characters, combined with her broad sympathy for human weakness, lends the work an underlying sense of hope; while people's best intentions are often thwarted by their own personal failings, the striving for improvement, both on

the individual level and within the larger community, endures. In its exhaustive, minutely detailed portrayals of its characters and in the ambition and profundity of its themes, *Middlemarch* stands with Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* as one of the great epic novels of the nineteenth century.

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

Middlemarch is primarily a novel about character and setting. The novel takes place in the early 1830s, a period of significant political and social change in England, and concerns the inhabitants of a small provincial town. Although no one character claims a central role in the novel, Dorothea Brooke, the niece of the opinionated, strong-willed Mr. Brooke, receives the author's closest attention. A religious, thoughtful young woman, Dorothea embodies, in many respects, the idealistic spirit of her age: she is driven by a powerful, albeit vague, desire to perform some great act for society's good, and she clearly has progressive ideas concerning a woman's ability to determine the course of her own life. At the same time, Dorothea's lofty intentions and large spirit lead to a fundamental detachment from everyday life, a rupture that has profound effects on the course of her future. Throughout the first half of the novel, she repeatedly makes poor choices, continually allowing her ideals to obscure reality.

The novel opens with a "Prelude," in which Eliot recounts an anecdote relating to Saint Teresa of Avila. From this brief story Eliot moves into a description of the Brooke household, home of Dorothea, her uncle, and her younger sister, Celia. Two suitors come to visit the sisters: James Chettam, an amiable, well-educated young man, and Edward Casaubon, an older scholar who betrays little emotion. Although Chettam is clearly interested in Dorothea, she rebuffs him, thinking he will make a better match for her sister; indeed, Chettam and Celia eventually marry. Dorothea meanwhile begins to develop a fascination with Casaubon, in spite of his coldness and clumsy social skills. Intrigued by Casaubon's scholarly life—he is engrossed in the writing of an epic study titled "The Key to All Mythologies"—Dorothea imagines her role as his wife, assisting him in his research and enlightening herself in the process. When Casaubon proposes to her in a letter, she immediately decides to accept, ignoring the reservations of her uncle and sister.

As Dorothea and Casaubon search for a house, Eliot introduces the character of Will Ladislaw, Casaubon's younger cousin, whom he is supporting financially. Notwithstanding their family ties, Casaubon and Ladislaw strongly dislike each other. The contrast between the two men is immediately apparent: whereas Casaubon is cold and aloof, Ladislaw is gregarious and good-natured, a young, unemployed artist without specific goals. Ladislaw's initial impression of Dorothea is negative, in part because of her self-effacing manner but also because she is to marry Casaubon. Shortly after the encounter, Ladislaw leaves Middlemarch for a tour of Europe, while Dorothea and Casaubon continue to prepare for their wedding.

At this juncture a new doctor, Tertius Lydgate, moves to Middlemarch. An ambitious and talented physician, Lydgate aspires to become a famous innovator in the field of medicine. He brings several progressive ideas concerning new treatments to the town, which makes him suspect in the eyes of the predominantly provincial, conservative residents. At a dinner party Lydgate meets Rosamond Vincy, the beautiful but materialistic daughter of the mayor. Although their personalities are not compatible, they are attracted to each other: Lydgate admires Rosamond's beauty and charm, while Rosamond sees prestige in marrying a doctor. Though Lydgate remains focused on his career, Rosamond immediately begins to think about marriage.

As the narrative unfolds, Eliot introduces the work's minor characters. Among the most significant are Mr. Bulstrode, a banker and landowner who uses his wealth to manipulate people into doing his bidding; Fred Vincy, Rosamond's profligate brother; Mr. Featherstone, the mean-spirited owner of Stone Court, a large estate, and uncle to Fred and Rosamond; Mary Garth, the kind-hearted and earnest assistant to Mr. Featherstone; and Farebrother, the clergyman. All of the characters' lives are deeply intertwined in one way or another. Fred, plagued by debts, is financially dependent on his Uncle Featherstone, who exploits the situation in order to shame his nephew. Mary Garth develops a fondness for Fred and arranges for her family to lend him money, in spite of his irresponsible ways. Lydgate and Farebrother develop a close friendship, spending long hours talking about politics, science, and books. When Bulstrode and Lydgate become involved in discussions concerning the construction of a new hospital in Middlemarch, a debate arises over the question of the position of hospital chaplain. Most of the townspeople favor the likable, intelligent Farebrother, but Bulstrode intends to wield his influence to give the post to his own man, the sanctimonious, conservative Mr. Tyke. Farebrother urges Lydgate to side with Bulstrode on the issue of the chaplaincy, arguing that it is a political necessity if he hopes to play a role in running the hospital. Although Lydgate at first resolves to support Farebrother, he ultimately re-

alizes that crossing Bulstrode might prove disastrous for his career, and he decides to endorse Tyke.

Following their marriage, Dorothea and Casaubon honeymoon in Rome, where they run into Ladislaw. Casaubon spends his days researching his book, while Dorothea begins to realize the magnitude of her decision to marry. She soon develops a friendship with Ladislaw, who finds that he admires her intelligence and openness. As they become closer, Ladislaw speaks more directly to Dorothea, telling her bluntly that her marriage to Casaubon won't make her happy and that her piety is excessive. Meanwhile, Casaubon becomes jealous of their burgeoning friendship and contrives ways to keep them apart.

Back in Middlemarch, Fred's situation worsens after he rashly decides to use his loan to buy a racehorse that turns out to be lame. As Fred's relations with Mary Garth and her family deteriorate, he suddenly contracts scarlet fever. Fred's parents become angry with the family doctor, Mr. Wrench, for failing to detect the illness and turn to Lydgate for Fred's care. The tension between the two doctors becomes a topic of widespread gossip, sparking debates over the value of new medicine and the importance of loyalty and tradition.

In January, Dorothea and Casaubon return to Middlemarch, where they settle into a loveless married life. As the rift between them widens, Casaubon becomes ill. Dorothea asks her uncle to write to Ladislaw to tell him not to come back to Middlemarch, fearing his presence will exacerbate Casaubon's condition. Mr. Brooke has developed a liking for Ladislaw, however, and instead he invites the young man to write for his new newspaper. During this period Celia becomes engaged to Chettam, while Lydgate and Rosamond move closer to marriage, in spite of Lydgate's resistance. Their imminent union becomes a subject of discussion throughout the town, a factor that further compromises Lydgate's will, and he eventually proposes. The marriage proves disastrous, especially for Lydgate, who soon finds himself forced to take on enormous debt in order to provide Rosamond with the bourgeois comforts she demands, at fatal cost to his own career.

At around this time, Mr. Featherstone dies, inciting speculation about his will. His various descendents in the town expect to inherit substantial wealth; most desperate among them is Fred, who views the large sum he expects to receive as the solution to all his problems. They are shocked when they find out that the will gives everything to Featherstone's illegitimate son, the mysterious Mr. Rigg. Rigg settles into Stone Court with his alcoholic stepfather, Mr. Raffles, and immediately begins to involve himself in town affairs. It emerges that Rigg has had shady business dealings with Bulstrode in the past, a fact he intends to use to blackmail Bulstrode.

At the same time, Casaubon's health deteriorates further. Intensely jealous, he secretly revises his will to stipulate that Dorothea will inherit his assets only if she agrees not to marry Will Ladislaw.

As the novel progresses, themes of disappointment and failure push to the foreground. Lydgate finds increasing resistance among the townspeople to his new hospital, largely because of deep-seated resentment against Bulstrode; Lydgate fails to raise the money he needs to operate the hospital properly, further straining a financial situation already burdened by Rosamond's demands for luxury. Ladislaw encourages Mr. Brooke to run for Parliament, but Brooke's political activism agitates the citizens of Middlemarch, in part because his outspokenness seems inappropriate in a man of his stature but also because his views run contrary to the more conservative leanings of the town, which is predominantly Tory. Ladislaw eventually becomes disillusioned with Brooke's arrogance, and the young man begins to question his involvement with the newspaper. Though Ladislaw and Dorothea find their affection for each other deepening, it is impossible to express themselves openly, as Dorothea's pained relationship with Casaubon weighs on her. When Casaubon dies, Dorothea goes to live with her sister and Chettam, where she discovers the truth about her husband's will. Dorothea is deeply hurt by his stipulation on her inheritance, and the last strand of her emotional bond to him breaks. As she ponders life as a widow, she begins to contemplate her relationship with Ladislaw; they are not able to express their feelings clearly, however, and their struggles to understand each other continue.

Toward the story's conclusion, Eliot begins to reveal the ultimate consequences of her characters' actions. Lydgate, increasingly alienated from the townspeople and overwhelmed by his debts, finds his name linked with Bulstrode's in a scandal involving the death of Rigg's father, Mr. Raffles; although Lydgate is innocent, his reputation as a doctor is ruined. In the midst of her husband's struggles, an unsympathetic Rosamond becomes disenchanted and begins to make overtures toward Ladislaw. Although Ladislaw is clearly not interested, Dorothea discovers them together, deepening her mistrust of Will. Bulstrode, weary of the disdain of his neighbors, decides to leave Middlemarch for good. In the novel's final chapters, the transformation of Dorothea's character becomes apparent: having suffered disappointment in both her marriage and her career ideals, she has gained a clear knowledge of her own weaknesses, as well as of her strengths. At the same time, her empathy for others, particularly Lydgate, Ladislaw, and Rosamond, has given her insight into human nature, further bolstering her resolve to determine the course of her own life. At the end of the novel, Dor-

othea and Will marry, and Dorothea discovers happiness in exerting a small, but positive, impact on the lives of the townspeople.

MAJOR THEMES

Middlemarch examines the struggle between the individual and the larger social forces that drive modern society. Throughout the work, Eliot elucidates a number of essential dichotomies entrenched in community life: between ideal and reality, ambition and ability, love and pragmatism. The novel's historical context bolsters these themes; set amidst the intense debates surrounding the emerging reform movement of the 1830s, the novel illustrates the minute workings of political and social change by focusing on the day-to-day life of average English citizens. In the provincial town of Middlemarch, backwardness manifests itself in people's reactions against progress, whether scientific, social, or political: many inhabitants of Middlemarch view Lydgate's medical talent with suspicion, in spite of his success treating difficult cases; Mr. Brooke's involvement with the reform movement provokes the ire of a number of his acquaintances. Indeed, the process of reform, increasingly prominent throughout England during the 1830s, threatens the status quo in Middlemarch, rousing the residents' instincts to preserve their traditional ways.

Middlemarchers' attitudes are further shaped by personal biases and long-standing feuds, and emotional factors shape their decisions more than rationality. The town's citizens refuse to donate money to Lydgate's new hospital because of his association with Bulstrode, even though his skill as a doctor is unparalleled. These attitudes continually complicate the efforts of Lydgate, Mr. Brooke, and Bulstrode to implement positive change in the community. Conversely, the egotism of characters like Lydgate and Casaubon also proves an obstacle to their ambition. Although Lydgate possesses a prodigious medical mind, his overinflated sense of his own importance to the field ultimately becomes a distraction, effectively hampering his efforts to attain positive results. In this sense, Eliot suggests, ideals of truth and goodness, though pure in the abstract, are inevitably tainted by human weakness.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Middlemarch was widely reviewed upon its original publication. Most early critiques of the novel focused on the authenticity and intelligence of Eliot's portrayal of English country life. One prominent early reviewer was Henry James. Reflecting on the centrality of ideas in Eliot's narrative, as well as on the book's loose structure and vague plot, James questioned whether *Mid-*

dlemarch could even be classified as a novel; while he had high praise for the work's details and observations, he described it as an "indifferent whole" and "too copious a dose of pure fiction." Few commentators have agreed with James's assessment, and for more than a century *Middlemarch* has held a preeminent position in scholarship devoted to the novel form. Writing in the 1880s, Mathilde Blind compared Eliot's unconventional plot to a "panorama" that offered a full view of the rich landscape of English life. A number of critics have devoted studies to analyzing Dorothea's character. Valerie Wainwright examined Dorothea's moral stature in the novel, while John Kucich argued that Dorothea's selflessness is in fact a manifestation of sexual repression. Questions of Eliot's narrative approach have played a central role in *Middlemarch* criticism. While some scholars, notably George Steiner in 1955, argued that the work fails on a technical level, later commentators identified an intricate, and highly original, method behind the novel's apparent lack of structure. John L. Tucker has noted a tension inherent in Eliot's style between traditional novelistic techniques and the analytical, historical approach she takes to her major themes. Tucker views this tension as an expression of Eliot's ambivalence toward the novel form in general while arguing that it represents a significant innovation in fictional prose. Since the 1970s a number of feminist readings of the novel have emerged, examining issues of female identity as they are manifest in Dorothea's character, as well as in Eliot's role as a woman novelist.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined [translator; as Marian Evans] (essay) 1846

The Essence of Christianity [translator; as Marian Evans] (essay) 1854

**Scenes of Clerical Life*. 2 vols. (novel) 1858

Adam Bede (novel) 1859

The Mill on the Floss (novel) 1860

Silas Marner, the Weaver of Raveloe (novel) 1861

Romola (novel) 1863

Felix Holt, the Radical (novel) 1866

The Spanish Gypsy: A Poem (poetry) 1868

Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life (novel) 1871-72

The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems (poetry) 1874

Daniel Deronda (novel) 1876

The Works of George Eliot. 24 vols. (essays, novels, poetry, criticism, and prose) 1878-85

Impressions of Theophrastus Such (essays) 1879

The George Eliot Letters. 9 vols. (letters) 1954-78

Essays of George Eliot (essays) 1963

*This and all of Eliot's other novels were originally published serially in magazines.

CRITICISM

Quarterly Review (review date January and April 1873)

SOURCE: Review of *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, by George Eliot. *Quarterly Review* 134, no. 268 (January and April 1873): 336-69.

[In the following excerpts, the reviewer critiques what he sees as dogmatism and "despondency" in the novel, suggesting that Eliot's emphasis on serious moral themes detracts from the book's value as entertainment.]

George Eliot is clearly very susceptible to the leadings of philosophical and physical speculations; and she, under the promptings of her scientific interests, once did very nearly lose her artistic perception and her whole capacity for unbiassed observation and statement. *Felix Holt* was a failure. Its perusal led many to fear that its author had passed the zenith of her fame. One could scarcely avoid overlooking its frequent beauties to remember particularly its faults. . . .

Middlemarch rehabilitates George Eliot. 'L'esprit,' it was happily said, 'a sa pudeur comme la beauté,' and our author has quickly discerned and repaired her error. Not that there is in *Middlemarch* any repudiation of principles, which, we need not say, we should have been very glad to see her shake off altogether, but there is no unfair or inartistic prominence given to them; she has her accustomed and conscientious moderation, if, indeed, there does not appear now and again something like the implied acknowledgment that, after all, the system remains for her undiscovered which can furnish any useful key to the riddles of the universe. Nevertheless, we may look upon *Middlemarch* as the most remarkable work of the ablest of living novelists, and, considered as a study of character, as unique, without being blind to the existence in it of evident and even glaring defects.

First among these defects, and more conspicuous, we think, in *Middlemarch* than in any of her previous novels, is a certain want of enthusiasm in the writer, which tells very seriously upon the reader, on behalf of the narrative she has to relate. She does not write, like the great names among her predecessors, for the sake of the story, she feels none of the zest with which, in some degree Dickens and Thackeray, in greater degree Fielding and Goldsmith, above all, Scott, lose themselves in the current on which toss the chances of their heroes, and into which the strained attention of their readers is absorbed. George Eliot comes to novel-writing from strange schooling for a writer of novels. It is always the motive of action which interests her more than the effect, it is only her love for her characters which induces her to follow them through the weariness of their lives.

She wants altogether Scott's elasticity, expansiveness, and exuberance. He is going to fascinate, to transport his reader; it shall be a tale of real life, which shall at the same time cast an ideal and brightening ray upon the lives of those who read it; the exact costume of the period, the exact copy of the landscape shall be caught, but so shall the airy legendary charm which first lured the novelist to the theme; there shall be some freak of fortune, there shall be some fear of fate; he is happy in the prospects, he revels in the progress of the plot, his impatience equals that of the most impulsive among his audience to arrive at and to enjoy the last chapter. And those old-fashioned and simple novels were more perfect and complete as works of art. They gratified and invigorated; one went from them as from the contemplation of some classic example of Greek statuary, or of some well-preserved painting by a serene Venetian master with a delightful sensation of improved taste and satisfied fancy. But George Eliot has none of Walter Scott's passion for, to use his own phrase, his 'occupation as a romancer.' *Middlemarch* will leave all of us, in greater or less measure, restless and distressed. There has been no hero, there has been no romance, there has been no last chapter; the 'finale' repeats the sad note of the 'prelude.'

Again, the authoress is much too eager, in and out of season, to point her moral and to enforce upon her readers certain particular views concerning the great problems of life. Archbishop Whately observed, in one of the earlier numbers of this *Review*, 'Any direct attempt at moral teaching, and any attempt whatever to give scientific information will, we fear, unless managed with the utmost discretion, interfere with what, after all, is the immediate and peculiar object of the novelist, as of the poet, *to please*.' The inclinations he well and wisely censured are far too apparent in *Middlemarch*. We could have accepted Lydgate's scientific education and professional aims on trust. The long explanations of his desire to follow out the discoveries of M. Bichat, and to ascertain 'what was the primitive tissue,' and the disquisitions and meditations upon true and false methods of medical treatment, are tedious in the extreme. It is in a scientific essay, not in a novel, that such a passage as the following should have been placed:—

That great Frenchman (Bichat) first carried out the conception that living bodies, fundamentally considered, are not associations of organs which can be understood by studying them first apart, and then, as it were, federally; but must be regarded as consisting of certain primary webs or tissues, out of which the various organs—brain, heart, lungs, and so on—are compacted, as the various accommodations of a house are built up in various proportions of wood, iron, stone, brick, zinc, and the rest, each material having its peculiar composition and proportions. No man, one sees, can understand and estimate the entire structure or its parts—what are its frailties and what its repairs, without knowing the nature of the materials. And the conception wrought

out by Bichat, with his detailed study of the different tissues, acted necessarily on medical questions as the turning of gas-light would on a dim oil-lit street, showing new connections and hitherto hidden facts of structure which must be taken into account in considering the symptoms of maladies and the actions of medications.

—ii. pp. 263, 264

Here is a sentence, which could scarcely be more obscure; we have vainly sought its veiled meaning:—

These kinds of inspiration Lydgate regarded as rather vulgar and vinous compared with the imagination that reveals subtle actions inaccessible by any sort of lens, but tracked in that outer darkness through long pathways of necessary sequence by the inward light which is the last refinement of energy, capable of bathing even the ethereal atoms in its ideally illuminated space.

—ii. p. 295

And the ordinary narrative, in its struggle after conciseness, gets sometimes to look like an inexplicable verbal puzzle:—

What could two men, so different from each other, see in this "brown patch," as Mary called herself? It was certainly not her plainness that attracted them (and let all plain young ladies be warned against the dangerous encouragement given them by society to confide in their want of beauty). A human being, in this aged nation of ours is a very wonderful whole, the slow creation of long interchanging influences; and charm is the result of two such wholes, the one loving and the one loved.

—iv. p. 341

Also we must mention a far more serious blemish, the repetitions of which, if we were to cite them, would fill and, we regret to have to add, would sully many a page. There is an acerbity about her satire with a studied flippancy about her diction, when she chooses to misrepresent amiable weakness and even religious faith, which will have startled and shocked many gentle and candid souls, and which is altogether indefensible in a writer of fiction, who makes personages in order to malign them, and has the whole domain of thought and language to ransack for characters and for expressions.

Further, the humour of *Middlemarch* strikes us as both less independent and less natural than was the case in the earlier books. Not only in the general management of her humorous personages in this work, but even in the verbal construction and in the cadence of continuous bits of description, there is noticeable a resemblance to what we may, we hope without irreverence, term the tricks and mannerisms of the greatest of our recent humourists.

In the large wainscoted parlour, too, there were constantly pairs of eyes on the watch and own relatives eager to be "sitters up." Many came, lunched and de-

parted, but Brother Solomon, and the lady who had been Jane Featherstone for twenty-five years before she was Mrs. Waule, found it good to be there every day for hours, without other calculable occupation than that of observing the cunning Mary Garth (who was so deep that she could be found out in nothing) and giving occasional dry wrinkly indications of crying—as if capable of torrents in a wetter season—at the thought that they were not allowed to go into Mr. Featherstone's room.

—iii. 150, 1

This, for instance, is a passage, admirable in its way, but clearly, as it seems to us, in the manner of Charles Dickens. And throughout *Middlemarch* George Eliot's wit shows itself rather in the quaint working out of detail than in those spicy, epigrammatic sayings, which gave so much pungency and spirit to her former writings. Thus Mr. Brooke, who at first promised so well, degenerates sadly. He might have been rendered equal to one of Thackeray's charming old gentlemen, but he sinks into a vexatious and infelicitous bore, drawn from Dickens's models, and not first-rate after his kind, for we doubt if even Dickens would have made him reiterate himself so often and labour so hard to become, through the simple absence of originality, an original. We had been informed, quite at the beginning of the first volume (i. p. 58), that Mr. Brooke speaks not 'with any intention;' but 'from his usual tendency to say what he had said before;' we have been much surprised, that the authoress should have thought it necessary to publish, as we vaguely surmise, the bulk of his conversations during several years. We are sorry—and Mr. Brooke shall help us to a phrase—'that she couldn't put the thing better, couldn't put it better, *beforehand*, you know.' (i. p. 63)

We have already praised the structure of the book, and, as a framework to character, we could not well overpraise it, and yet we confess to a suspicion that there has been a change of plot in the course of composition; that the story, as originally conceived, was to have concluded with more startling and exciting incidents (cf. i. 164), but that the author found a less painful narrative sufficient for the analysis of the moral and intellectual characteristics of Lydgate and Dorothea, and dispensed, accordingly, with the more terrible trial, involving more visible and widespread disaster, which had been designed for them.

That inconsequence and incompleteness in *Middlemarch* and its personages, to which we have already made reference, baffles and, we might say, defies criticism. What is the lesson of this book, what its conclusion, not that verbal one on the last page, but the logical inference, when reading is done, and judgment would settle itself? Why must Dorothea marry Casaubon, endow Farebrother, restore Lydgate, on her way to provide and embellish a home for—Ladislaw? Why

should Lydgate and Dorothea be no wiser and better, why should author and reader be no wiser and better, at the end of the story than at the beginning? And can we have more hope for Lydgate's (and Rosamund's) sons than for him—for Dorothea's (and Ladislav's) daughters than for her? Are we soberly and seriously told to see the whole rich round of private and public life through the spectacles of the malicious gossip, who points to the ill-assorted marriage-column as index, compendium, and supplement of all the rest? There is a pent-up outcry against society throughout the book, which should, anyhow, have made itself articulate. What is George Eliot's new Providence, what her ideal training for scientific men and emotional women? Towards what in earth and heaven does she beckon us on?

We must sum up. Assuredly, unless we have misread this book altogether, it, at all events, is not written as by a person with a mission, who desires converts, plans a Utopia, preaches new dogmas. About none of her other writings was there such a profound despondency. Truly it would be the most melancholy and forlorn historical situation (if actual and historical it were), that in which a reflective reader, rising from a study of George Eliot, might be inclined to place modern society, though, all the while, he would hardly be able to make out to himself how far his hopeless mood had grown directly out of the words of his author or out of his own musings.

We repeat, and lay all possible stress upon, our protest. It is not the moral nor is it the artistic purpose of a work of fiction, (or indeed of sound literature at all) to produce this state of mind and to invite such afterthoughts.

Note

1. See *Quarterly Review*, vol. xxiv. [October 1820/January 1821] p. 358.

London Times (review date 7 March 1873)

SOURCE: Review of *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, by George Eliot. *London Times* (7 March 1873): 3-4.

[In the following review, the critic examines the novel's characterizations, prose style, and major themes. The author expresses high praise for Eliot's insights into English provincial life, observing that the everyday concerns and habits of her characters are "profoundly identical with the issues and mysteries of human life."]

For a year and more the reading world was kept in suspense while *Middlemarch* appeared in monthly or bi-monthly numbers. According to custom on such high

occasions, it was served out a few chapters at a time, and readers were expected to accept with thankfulness the portion vouchsafed to them, to read it, and to go about their business with the equanimity of the Sultan in the *Arabian Nights*, who, instead of threatening to cut off Scheherazade's head if she did not immediately finish her story, was content to wait till the time came round when the watchful sister, whom we may interpret to mean the publisher, suggested that it should be continued. We confess that our patience was not quite so Oriental; but, now that we have the whole book in our hands, we forgive Messrs. Blackwood for tantalizing us, and we feel that the splendid novel which was able to keep us interested for so many months is at least as great a treat in the second reading as in the first. Knowing the story as a whole, we can now begin to study it in every part. There is a new delight in the close observation of its admirable art, in the full understanding of its weighty sentences. It is a luxury to pause upon each passage of fine, well-woven English, never a mere web of words. We do not now look towards the end, wondering whether this or that will happen, but we search the pages for riches we have missed. There are few novels in the language which will repay reading over again so well as *Middlemarch*.

Its name is taken from the town in and about which its scenes are laid. It is "a study of provincial life," and the local colouring, the flavour of the soil of a midland county, is imparted to places and people, to life and manners, with strange felicity and fidelity. Yet these four volumes, as we need hardly say, though provincial in the outward form of their story, have depths and meanings "of the widest" interest. Under George Eliot's pen a few square miles of fields and villages become the world. The game we watch may be played upon the checkers of a small board, but we are conscious all the while that its problems are profoundly identical with the issues and mysteries of human life. The nominal stakes are the fortunes of a few country people, but the pieces stand proxy for the destinies of humanity. With the exception of a short digression, which takes us to Rome for a few chapters, the story never stirs from the isolated life of a provincial neighbourhood about the time of the passing of the first Reform Bill, before railways had broken down the barriers and disturbed the traditions of rural existence. The social formation of Middlemarch, a town of some trade and manufacture, is laid bare in a complete section cut clean from summit to base of its ancient stratifications. From Viney, the hearty, hospitable mayor, with his warehouse, well-spread table, bluff manner, and coursing tastes; Bulstrode, the evangelical banker, worldly and money-getting, but tormented into charity and philanthropy as with a scourge of small cords by religious nervousness and by the memories of a questionable past; Lydgate, the young doctor, enamoured of science and full of a fine enthusiasm for research and discovery, whose wings

are gradually weighted to the ground by the cost of supporting a wife—from these we are gradually conducted down through layers of lawyers, auctioneers, horse-dealers, and the like, even to good Mrs. Dollop, landlady of the Tankard in Slaughter-lane, who, in racily characteristic phrase, throws her weight into the opposition to Lydgate and his new hospital, in which people were to be allowed to die, if not, indeed, to be actually poisoned, for the sake of cutting them up, without saying with your leave or by your leave—"a poor tale for a doctor, who, if he was good for anything, should know what was the matter with you before you died, and not want to pry into your inside after you were gone." But it is in the country, even more than in the town, that George Eliot finds the chief persons of her story. Mr. Brooke, the altogether original and inimitable squire of Tipton Grange, is a man "of miscellaneous opinions," who all his life had been in the habit "of taking too much in the form of ideas," who had tried everything in turn, had, as he says of himself, "taken in all the new ideas at one time, human perfectibility now," but had seen "that it would not do," and had "pulled up" before he had got too far on any of the fifty different roads on which he had started at full gallop. Cadwallader, his neighbour, "the large-lipped, easy rector" of Freshitt, well says of him that "Brooke is a very good fellow, but pulpy; he will run into any mould, but he won't keep shape." His portrait is perfectly and thoroughly painted, and, though less elaborately finished, that of his friend Sir James Chettam, the prim and honourable country baronet, ordering his conduct by a narrow but upright code of social requirements and family honour, is scarcely less admirable and life-like. With all their crotchets these two are thorough gentlemen, as well as marvellously clear pictures of human nature. Casaubon, the rich rector of Lowick, is another masterly painting. All his life he had been busy among his books, collecting notes for a Key to all Mythologies, "chewing a end of erudite mistake about Cush and Mizraim," till, when he began to be about 50 years of age, it occurred to him to take a wife, just "to adorn the remaining quadrant of his course, and be a little moon that would cause hardly a calculable perturbation." This wife is the woman upon whom the interest of the story centres. However out of place as the Rev. Edward Casaubon's satellite, she is well entitled to be the heroine of the book, for a female character more nobly conceived, and executed with art at once more thorough and more exalted, is not to be found even in the whole gallery of George Eliot's novels. She and her sister Celia, who is more of a young lady, and cannot understand Dorothea's enthusiasm, thinking her motives and scruples "like spilt needles, making one afraid of treading, sitting down, or even eating," are nieces to Mr. Brooke, and live with their uncle and guardian at Tipton Grange. Celia's life and love affairs settle themselves easily, for on Sir James failing to win Dorothea