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GEORGE ELIOT AND RELATIONSHIPS

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Family likeness has often a deep sadness in it. Nature, that great tragic dramatist, knits us together by bone and muscle, and divides us by the subtler web of our brains; blends yearning and repulsion; and ties us by our heartstrings to the beings that jar us at every movement.

(*Adam Bede*, chapter 4, 'Home and its Sorrows')

So writes the narrator of *Adam Bede*, a publishing sensation when it came out in February 1859 under the pseudonym 'George Eliot'. Press and public asked eagerly who this new unknown novelist might be. Charles Dickens and Thomas Carlyle's clever wife Jane were genuinely delighted to receive complimentary copies. Jane Carlyle wrote that reading the novel was '*as good as going to the country for one's health*' (20 February 1859). Elizabeth Gaskell was flattered to be asked if *she* was the author. Queen Victoria noted in her journal the 'deep impression' the book had made on her and Prince Albert, and recommended it to her uncle, King Leopold of the Belgians, as 'one of the finest [novels] written for a long time' (Queen Victoria's Journal, 29-30 October 1859; letter to King Leopold, 1 November 1859). She also commissioned paintings from Edward Henry Corbould of two scenes from *Adam Bede*.

Intelligent and probing as the narrator's remark about family likeness is, such generalised observations alone did not bring the novel its runaway success with critics and readers. Believable characterisation, and in particular believable and often sparkling dialogue - ranging from high seriousness to hilarity - played a considerable part. So too did the author's ability to 'embed' her characters in their family and social context and to observe the complexity of their emotions and actions at moments of conflict and difficulty. George Eliot also achieved with her first novel what Dickens had managed twenty-two years earlier with *his* first piece of fiction, *Pickwick Papers* (1837). Mr Pickwick's idiosyncratic servant Sam Weller was quoted in parliament, and now George Eliot's sharp-brained and sharp-tongued farmer's wife Mrs Poyser was accorded the same privilege. A flavour of her conversation can be gleaned from her exchange late in the novel with the local bachelor schoolmaster and misogynist, Bartle Massey. Here is her riposte to his denigration of womankind, which, according to him, 'thinks two and two'll come to make five, if she cries and bothers enough about it':

'Ay, ay!' said Mrs Poyser; 'one 'ud think an' hear some folks talk, as the men war 'cute enough to count the corns in a bag o' wheat wi' only smelling at it. They can see through a barn-door, *they* can. Perhaps that's the reason they can see so little o' this side on't.'

Bartle tries again with an attack on wives; if a man has 'a mind for hot meat', he says, 'his wife'll match it with cold bacon'. To which Mrs Poyser replies:

'Yes... I know what the men like - a poor soft, as 'ud simper at 'em like the pictur o' the sun, whether they did right or wrong, an' say thank you for a kick, an' pretend she didna know which end she stood uppermost, till her husband told her. That's what a man wants in a wife, mostly: he wants to make sure o' one fool as'll tell him he's wise. But there's some men can do wi'out that - they think so much o' themselves a'ready; an' that's how it is there's old bachelors.'

(*Adam Bede*, chapter 53, 'The Harvest Supper')



The answer to the question on everyone's lips was soon known: George Eliot was Marian Evans, a journalist and translator aged thirty-nine, who had both good reason to employ a pseudonym and personal experience to give the ring of truth to her presentation of the pleasures and pains of family and community life.

A brief sketch of George Eliot's ordinary-extraordinary life would run as follows:

On 22 November 1819 George Eliot was born Mary Anne Evans at South Farm on the Arbury estate in Warwickshire. She was the third child of the second marriage of Robert Evans, estate manager to the great Newdigate family. Being exceptionally clever and serious, she did well at English and French in her local school and was permitted to use the library of the great house of the Newdigates, Arbury Hall. Her father also allowed her to have a tutor to teach her German and Italian. After her mother died when Mary Anne was sixteen, she kept house for her father until his death in 1849, when she was twenty-nine. Having gone through a strongly evangelical phase in her teens, her reading of English and German books questioning the literal truth of the bible led her to renounce her religious faith in her early twenties. Her horrified father threatened to banish her from home. She contemplated with dread the life of a schoolteacher in Leamington Spa until her older brother Isaac intervened with their father, and domestic peace was restored.

Mary Anne developed friendships with 'progressive' thinkers in nearby Coventry, through whom she was introduced to the radical London publisher John Chapman and some of his authors. Chapman commissioned her to complete a three-volume translation of the German work of biblical criticism, David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus*. The translation came out anonymously in 1846. After her father's death, she rejected the idea of remaining in the Midlands to be a useful aunt to the children of Isaac and their older sister Chrissey, and instead set out for London. She had been left £90 a year by her father, not enough to live on but enough to encourage her to try an independent life in London as a journalist and translator. Early in 1851 she moved into Chapman's interesting home at 142 Strand to work as the – unacknowledged – editor of the radical quarterly journal he had just bought, the *Westminster Review*. Here, now calling herself Marian Evans, she met all the young progressive authors of the day and became used to attending soirees and meetings held by Chapman at which she was the only woman.

Chapman's household consisted of himself, his wife Susanna, fourteen years his senior, their two children, and the family's live-in governess, Elisabeth Tilley, who was also Chapman's lover. In 1851 a comic drama – though not funny for Marian – was played out at 142 Strand, as Chapman made frequent visits to Miss Evans's room to learn German and hear her play the piano, and more. Soon the other two women in the household, wife and mistress, joined forces to insist on her removal. After a tactful retreat to stay with her Coventry friends, a return was negotiated on the understanding that Marian would restrict her relationship with Chapman to that of invaluable assistant on the *Westminster Review*.

There followed an extremely fruitful period of writing long, informed and often witty articles on English, French, and German literature, philosophy, history, and social science, as well as keeping touchy contributors happy with her firm but tactful comments on their contributions to the *Westminster*. Through Chapman she met Dickens, Darwin, Thomas Henry Huxley, and the American Ralph Waldo Emerson, who lodged with Chapman on his visits to London. Chapman also introduced her to George Henry Lewes, a brilliant journalist, translator, and miscellaneous writer on philosophy, science, and many European literatures. Once more she fell in love, and this time her love was returned. Unfortunately, Lewes had a wife, Agnes, from whom he was separated but whom he could not divorce since they had enjoyed an open marriage and he had accepted two children born to Agnes whose father was not Lewes, but his friend the journalist Thornton Hunt.

Marian and Lewes began their relationship in London in 1853, but they found it expedient to travel together to Germany in the summer of 1854. Lewes wanted to do research in Weimar and Berlin for the biography of Goethe he was writing, and Marian could continue sending her articles to Chapman for the *Review*, while helping Lewes by translating extracts from German for his book. Living in Weimar and consorting with the composer Franz Liszt and his married lover the Princess von Sayn-Wittgenstein, they escaped for a while the inevitable scandal



and disapproval back home in England (where Chapman, Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and many other respectable men shared their lives – either openly or in secret – with a wife and a mistress).

Marian did lose friends; Lewes was invited to dinner without her, and there was much gossip in literary and journalistic circles. Lewes's friend and mentor Thomas Carlyle used the censorious description 'strong-minded woman' on receiving a letter from Lewes explaining his situation. Charles Kingsley, writing to his fellow clergyman Frederick Denison Maurice, wrote uncharitably of 'Miss Evans, the infidel esprit fort, who is now G.H. Lewes's concubine' (letter of 1857, quoted in Robert Bernard Martin, *The Dust of Combat: A Life of Charles Kingsley*, 1959, p. 181). Worse, she suffered nastiness from reviewers when it was discovered, soon after the publication to great acclaim of *Adam Bede*, that the unknown new star in the literary firmament, 'George Eliot', was not only a 'strong-minded woman' in the sense of being independent and holding opinions, but also morally reprehensible. William Hepworth Dixon, writing in the popular literary journal, the *Athenaeum*, in July 1859, just *after* the secret of the authorship of *Adam Bede* became known, called her 'a clever woman with an observant eye and unschooled moral nature'. Her answer to this sort of disapproval was to publish novel after novel of undeniable genius and no tendency towards immorality – quite the contrary, in fact, since she gave serious analytical attention to the moral problems she created for her fictional characters. Ordinary readers – not to mention Queen Victoria and Prince Albert - seem to have seen nothing to object to in the works by this brilliant woman, whatever her personal circumstances were. Her novels enjoyed huge financial and critical success.

But one person refused resolutely to have contact with Marian Lewes, as she now called herself. Her brother Isaac, on being told in 1857 that she was living with Lewes but was not legally married to him, broke off relations immediately. Only in 1880 did he break his long silence, on the occasion of Marian's legal marriage to her friend John Cross, Lewes having died two years earlier.

The difficulties she encountered first with her father over her loss of faith, then with her brother and some of her former friends over the relationship with Lewes, caused her great pain, and she struggled with depression and bruised pride. Buoyed by Lewes's constancy, optimism, and encouragement, she turned personal trouble and disaster into literary triumph. The George Eliot who emerged into the light as she approached forty was a formidable product of past unhappiness and a strong sense of injustice, wonderfully distilled into novels full of humour, passion, pathos, tragedy, and a hard-won sympathy for others, even those whose flaws she criticised. The novels present utterly believable characters making mistakes, moral and intellectual. Her novels, though forensic in their analysis of psychology and motivation, recognise with sympathy the complex causes and circumstances according to which individuals speak and act.

A wide tolerance, a philosophical tendency to look at all sides of a problem and seek for understanding and forgiveness, are the hallmarks of George Eliot's writing. Though sometimes, especially in the early works, the narrator buttonholes the reader, demanding our consent to her remarks, the moral 'lesson' is delivered, not merely through assertion, but also through situation and dialogue, irony and humour, and well-wrought examples of the paradoxical and inconsistent nature of human beings.

Unlike her great contemporary Dickens, George Eliot underwent a lengthy apprenticeship before she emerged as a fine novelist with her first effort at a full-length novel (*Adam Bede* was preceded in 1858 by *Scenes of Clerical Life*, a collection of three promising, if uneven, stories about life in the Midlands in the early part of the century). *Adam Bede* not only put family and community relationships under the microscope, but also offered a kind of realist manifesto for the writing of fiction. In chapter 17, entitled 'In Which the Story Pauses a Little', the narrator stands back to counter an imagined reader's protest that the characters are ordinary and flawed, 'ugly, stupid, [and] inconsistent'. 'I aspire to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind', declares the narrator. Comparing her representations of characters to Dutch paintings showing 'old women scraping carrots', she claims both an aesthetic and a moral case for 'the faithful representing of commonplace things' and the desire to show that we all have – or should have – 'a fibre of sympathy connecting [us]' with our fellow human beings, however unattractive they may seem. Five years of reviewing literature for the *Westminster Review* lie behind these bold claims from a first-time author. For, before trying her hand at fiction,



Marian Evans had produced a number of brilliant essays which asked and answered the question ‘What makes for good literature?’

A short critique of Charles Kingsley’s *Westward Ho!* in July 1855 regrets Kingsley’s ‘dropping into homily’ at every turn, instead of being a teacher

...in the sense in which every great artist is a teacher – namely, by giving us his higher sensibility as a medium, a delicate acoustic or optical instrument, bringing home to our coarser senses what would otherwise be unperceived by us.

(*Westward Ho!* and *Constance Herbert*, *Westminster Review*, July 1855)

In a long article on the work of the German social historian Wilhelm Heinrich von Riehl she agrees with John Ruskin’s objection in his *Modern Painters* to ‘idyllic ploughmen’ and ‘opera peasants’ in art. Once more she sets out the requirements for the artist:

The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies... Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot. All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the People... We want to be taught to feel, not for the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant...

(‘The Natural History of German Life’, *Westminster Review*, July 1856)

What is important is to use art, including literature, to ‘awaken’ our ‘social sympathies’. If this seems to suggest that Marian Evans’s idea of literature was a purely moral one, her wittiest essay for the *Westminster Review* dispels this idea. Finished in September 1856, only eleven days before she embarked on her own fictional career with the first of the *Scenes of Clerical Life*, the essay shows that she valued literature which produces amusement, imaginative engagement, and aesthetic pleasure too. In ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’, she has fun at the expense of some very bad novels, including those utterly unrealistic ones in which

the heroine is usually an heiress, probably a peeress in her own right, with perhaps a vicious baronet, an amiable duke, and an irresistible younger son of a marquis as lovers in the foreground, a clergyman and a poet sighing for her in the middle distance, and a crowd of undefined adorers dimly indicated beyond. Her eyes and her wit are both dazzling; her nose and her morals are alike free from any tendency to irregularity; she has a superb *contralto* and a superb intellect; she is perfectly well-dressed and perfectly religious; she dances like a sylph, and reads the Bible in the original tongues.

(‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’, *Westminster Review*, October 1856)

Finally, the woman about to embark on the difficult career of novelist herself sums up the requirements of the genre:

Like crystalline masses, it may take any form, and yet be beautiful; we have only to pour in the right elements – genuine observation, humour, and passion.

(‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’)

‘George Eliot’ poured all these ingredients into her own fiction. From her painful youth she knew feelingly how hard family ties are, how they are the most important and yet the most difficult of relationships. The remark in *Adam Bede* about being connected by our heartstrings to the beings who jar us most is a summing up of the uncomfortable relationship between the upright but priggish and censorious young carpenter Adam and his loving but querulous mother. One of the main outcomes of the plot is that Adam comes to learn through mistakes and suffering to unbend somewhat, to accept weakness in others, and to recognise his own failings.

Marian Evans’s experience of rejection even in some quarters of metropolitan London on account of her unorthodox relationship with Lewes gave a further dimension to her representation in her fiction of individual relationships, social conditions, and cultural clashes. The second novel, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), brings the



subject of family ties *and* social exclusion close to the facts of Marian Evans's own life. It is the nearest thing to an autobiographical novel, George Eliot's equivalent to *David Copperfield*, though she chooses the distancing method of the third-person narrator, not the first, employed with such genius by Dickens. The novel explores further the melancholy observation from *Adam Bede* about Nature as tragic dramatist, taking in parents and children, husbands and wives, and - with special reference to her loving but painfully antagonistic relationship in her youth with the unbending Isaac Evans - brother and sister in the persons of Tom and Maggie Tulliver.

Rather remarkably, given Marian's unresolved sorrow and resentment at her estrangement from Isaac, humour is a hallmark of the novel's tone. The older generation are treated with irony, even broad satire in the case of the Dodson aunts whose visits vex Maggie with their criticisms of her boyishness and untidiness and their narrow, petty view of what makes a Dodson a Dodson and therefore superior to the rest of society. Their entrance into the story is signalled as comic by the very title of the chapter which introduces them, 'Enter the Aunts and Uncles' (Book 1, chapter 7). Mrs Glegg, the most formidable of the three sisters of Mrs Tulliver, is described in forensic detail:

Mrs Glegg chose to wear her bonnet in the house to-day – untied and tilted slightly, of course – a frequent practice of hers when she was on a visit and happened to be in a severe humour: she didn't know what drafts there might be in strange houses... One would need to be learned in the fashions of those times to know how far in the rear of them Mrs Glegg's slate-coloured silk gown must have been, but from certain small constellations of small yellow spots upon it, and a mouldy odour about it suggestive of a damp clothes-chest, it was probable that it belonged to a stratum of garments just old enough to have come recently into wear.

(*The Mill on the Floss*, Book 1, chapter 7, 'Enter the Aunts and Uncles')

Comic, too, is Mr Tulliver's opinion that his own side of the family is more intelligent and worldly-wise; he is proud to have chosen the least bright of the Dodson sisters, and is puzzled that his own daughter should have turned out to be cleverer than his son Tom:

It's the wonderful'st thing... as I picked the mother because she wasn't o-er cute – bein' a good-looking woman too, an' come of a rare family for managing – but I picked her from her sisters o' purpose 'cause she was a bit weak, like; for I wasn't a-goin' to be told the rights o' things by my own fireside. But, you see, when a man's got brains himself, there's no knowing where they'll run to; an' a pleasant sort o' soft woman may go on breeding you stupid lads and 'cute wenches, till it's like as if the world was turned topsy-turvy.

(*The Mill on the Floss*, book 1, chapter 3, 'Mr Riley Gives His Advice Concerning a School for Tom')

Critics noticed the frequency with which George Eliot uses terminology from natural history when describing the motivation and behaviour of her characters. Since her novel was published in 1860, it is sometimes assumed that she was influenced by the appearance of Darwin's *Origin of Species* the previous year, but we should note that Darwin's work, the full title of which is *On the Origin of Species by Natural Selection; or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, was published in November 1859, by which time George Eliot was writing the last section of *The Mill on the Floss*. She was not indebted specifically to Darwin for her use of the language of struggle and selection in the context of the Tulliver family.

As with many famous moments in scientific progress, Darwin's book represented a striking and climactic formulation of theories and ideas already aired by naturalists and geologists (Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Charles Lyell, Alfred Russel Wallace, for example). George Eliot was widely read in history and science and was living with Lewes, who in 1859 was busy experimenting and writing on animal behaviour and physiology. His *Sea-Side Studies* came out in 1858 and *Studies in Animal Life* in 1862. Both Lewes and George Eliot were already evolutionists when Darwin's great work came out. They recognised that it was Darwin who answered the question about *how* species developed. The mechanism for development, he argued in his book, was to be found in the idea of natural selection to explain adaptation and variation of species.



George Eliot was fully aware that in dealing with human, not animal, life mechanistic explanations were inadequate. On reading *Origin of Species* when it was first published, she commented in a letter:

The Development theory and all explanations of processes by which things came to be, produce a feeble impression compared with the mystery that lies under the processes.
(letter to Barbara Bodichon, 5 December 1859)

In *The Mill on the Floss* she employs the language of familial similarity and difference, as Darwin does, and she appears deterministic in her view of the seemingly inevitable mutual thwarting of Tulliver family members, but – importantly – she also allows for turns, for surprises. One example is the reaction late in the novel to Maggie's apparent elopement with her cousin's fiancé. Maggie is disgraced in the eyes of the community, and Tom turns his back on her. The surprise is the response of feeble Mrs Tulliver. Though her favourite child is the unimaginative and unforgiving Tom, she defies her son and offers Maggie unexpected support in her moment of need. Another mystery which George Eliot raises, refusing to resolve it, is why Maggie and Stephen Guest, both half-engaged to other people, should fall in love against their own wills, as they do. The difficulties of human relationships and family ties are laid bare in all their contradictoriness. It is natural, and right, that we should scrutinise and analyse human actions and try to determine their motivation, but, as the narrator says of the Maggie-Stephen relationship, 'We have no master key that will fit all cases' (Book 7, chapter 2).

The comedy of small family disagreements outlined in the early chapters of *The Mill on the Floss* turns to tragedy. Mr Tulliver's stubbornness and quarrelsomeness, exacerbated rather than neutralised by Mrs Tulliver's infuriating attempts to help, lead to his bankruptcy, shame, and loss of livelihood. George Eliot compares Mr Tulliver to Oedipus, who also unwittingly brought about his own downfall, and she insists on winning our sympathy not only for the children whose life choices are drastically limited by their father's actions, but also for the obstinate miller himself. Here in practice is the realism she had demanded in her essays and in chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, her preference for dealing with old women scraping carrots rather than opera peasants or heroines with perfect looks and perfect intellects. Like two of the authors she most admired, Wordsworth for his valuing of the lives and feelings of ordinary people of no special talent, and Thomas Carlyle with his remark that in every peasant's hut there may be the fifth act of a tragedy going on, George Eliot comments:

The pride and obstinacy of millers and other insignificant people, whom you pass unnoticingly on the road every day, have their tragedy too, but it is of that unwept, hidden sort, that goes on from generation to generation and leaves no record – such tragedy, perhaps, as lies in the conflicts of young souls, hungry for joy, under a lot made suddenly hard to them, under the dreariness of a home where the morning brings no promise with it, and where the unexpectant discord of worn and disappointed parents weighs on the children like a damp, thick air in which all the functions of life are depressed; or such tragedy as lies in the slow or sudden death that follows on a bruised passion, though it may be a death that finds only a parish funeral.

(*The Mill on the Floss*, Book 3, chapter 1, What Had Happened at Home')

In 1829, the year in which the opening of the novel is set, Tom is thirteen and Maggie ten, the same ages as Isaac and Mary Anne Evans were in that year. Whatever Maggie does, she ends up somehow in the wrong with her censorious brother. Her creator is almost always on her side against Tom's righteous injustice to her, as in the famous early scene of the jam puffs. Mrs Tulliver is baking in preparation for the visit of the aunts, and the children are given three jam puffs to share. They eat one each, and Tom proceeds to divide the third with his pocket-knife. One piece ends up bigger than the other, and Tom gets Maggie to close her eyes and choose 'right hand or left?' Maggie gets the bigger half:

'You've got it', said Tom, in rather a bitter tone.

'What, the bit with the jam run out?'

'No: here, take it', said Tom firmly, handing decidedly the best piece to Maggie.

'O, please, Tom, have it: I don't mind – I like the other: please take this.'



'No, I shan't', said Tom almost crossly, beginning on his own inferior piece.

Maggie, thinking it was no use to contend further, began too, and ate up her half-puff with considerable relish as well as rapidity...

'O, you greedy thing!' said Tom, when she had swallowed the last morsel. He was conscious of having acted very fairly, and thought she ought to have considered this and made up to him for it. He would have refused a bit of hers beforehand, but one is naturally at a different point of view before and after one's own share of puff is swallowed.

(*The Mill on the Floss*, Book 1, chapter 6, "The Aunts and Uncles Are Coming")

Tom is the chief object of the narrator's irony, but readers are to recognise that there is a truth for all of us here.

As the children grow into young adults, the dynamic between them remains the same, with Maggie annoyingly impulsive and Tom insensitive to her needs and always ready to punish her with his disapproval and prohibitions. The novel's ending, the tragic death in a flood of Tom and Maggie, reconciled as they sink beneath the swollen river Floss, unexpectedly risks melodrama. George Eliot's avowed belief that fiction should be realistic, presenting life's disappointments honestly and accepting imperfect solutions rather than embracing improbable romance, usually leads her to offer quiet and thoughtful conclusions, not Wagnerian ones. (She and Lewes had heard Wagner's operas being performed under Liszt's direction at Weimar, and later met Wagner in London. Her admiration for his music was tempered by a dislike of what she compared to 'the whistling of the wind through the keyholes of a cathedral' when describing her response to *Lobengrin* in an article on 'Liszt, Weimar, and Wagner', *Fraser's Magazine*, July 1855).

Inasmuch as Maggie represents Marian Evans's own strong contradictory feelings for her brother, we can see George Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss* metaphorically turning the tables on him, breaking off through dramatic fiction the relationship which Isaac had broken off with her in life. But she sacrifices Maggie too, and emphasises the loving embrace between the siblings as they meet their deaths: 'Brother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted'. It is unusual for George Eliot, and we may suppose that she was expressing deeply held personal hurts. In the circumstances it is a triumph that *The Mill on the Floss* contains as much everyday ordinariness, 'felt life', pathos juxtaposed with comedy, as it does, not to mention its striking authorial benevolence. For despite being so close emotionally to the fraught material of her novel, George Eliot manages to tell her sad story of family life with empathy for all its members, from the stubborn Mr Tulliver and the foolish Mrs Tulliver to the self-righteous Tom and the impulsive Maggie.

The novels which followed extend George Eliot's range in terms of the observation, passion, and humour she puts into them and the complexity of human relationships she creates and analyses. The next after *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*, published in 1861, once more dwells on ordinary rural life in the early years of the nineteenth century. It tells the moving story of a lonely weaver, an outcast and reluctant miser, who finds himself bringing up an abandoned orphan, the golden-haired Eppie. Through her he is brought into contact with the local community and has his faith in humanity restored.

Middlemarch, published in 1871-2, is agreed by most readers to be her greatest novel. Critics have marvelled at it, beginning with Henry James when the novel first came out, and proceeding via Virginia Woolf, who celebrated the centenary of George Eliot's birth in 1919 with her famous remark that *Middlemarch* is a 'magnificent book', 'one of the few English novels written for grown-up people'. In the present day, declarations of admiration have come from novelists including A.S. Byatt, Alan Hollinghurst, Zadie Smith, and Thomas Keneally, the last of whom told the *Sunday Times* in 2013 that *Middlemarch* is a 'template' for all novels about relationships. According to Keneally, the novel 'has never been out-thought' or 'out-written' in its representation of relationships.

The world which George Eliot creates in this novel - whose subtitle is 'a Study of Provincial Life' - is that of a 'middling' Midlands town in the late 1820s, when industrialisation was moving at pace, with railways beginning to arrive, and political reform was in the air through agitation inside and outside parliament. The resulting abolition of rotten boroughs and extension of the franchise came about with the first great Reform Act of 1832. At the same time there were calls for radical improvement in medical training, for social improvements such as education



for all, and for the production of inexpensive books and newspapers. The town of Middlemarch represents middling society at this time of rapid change, when, as the narrator says in chapter 11, ‘municipal town and rural parish gradually made fresh threads of connection’ and one could observe ‘the stealthy convergence of human lots’:

Some slipped a little downward, some got higher footing; people[,] denied aspirates, gained wealth, and fastidious gentlemen stood for boroughs; some were caught in political currents, some in ecclesiastical, and perhaps found themselves surprisingly grouped in consequence...

(*Middlemarch*, chapter 11)

The narrator’s job is to locate young and old, male and female, long-established citizen and incomer, in this shifting historical context, ‘unravelling’, as she says in chapter 15, ‘certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven’ in ‘this particular web’ of the author’s weaving.

There are two main protagonists, or ‘centres of consciousness’, in *Middlemarch*. Both are young idealists who finally have to accept compromise when caught up in the ‘hampering threadlike pressure of small social conditions’ (chapter 18). One, the heiress Dorothea Brooke, hurries into marriage at nineteen with a much older man, the dried-up pedant the Rev. Edward Casaubon. Her idea is that such a knowledgeable and intelligent man will educate her and encourage her plans to do good among the neighbouring poor. ‘The really delightful marriage’, she thinks, ‘must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it’ (chapter 1). As for Mr Casaubon, having reached his mid-forties without a companion, he hopes that marriage to this blooming and enthusiastic young girl will help him to finish his life’s work, a great volume on the ‘Key to All Mythologies’, not by offering an opinion (which Dorothea is to find herself doing to his irritation), but by showing ‘devotedness’, the ability to ‘cast a charm over vacant hours’ and ‘to lighten [his] solitariness’, as he puts it in his letter of proposal. George Eliot combines humour at the illusions of both Dorothea and Casaubon with understanding sympathy of their predicaments – Dorothea’s narrow education and lack of parental advice and Casaubon’s lonely egotism. Their marriage is predictably miserable.

The second idealist is the incomer Tertius Lydgate, a young doctor schooled in the latest medical advances, such as the use of the stethoscope, and an advocate of post mortems as an aid to medical knowledge. These enthusiasms are viewed with suspicion not only by the ordinary citizens of Middlemarch but also by the existing physicians and surgeons with their traditional preferred methods and liberal prescription of medicines which Lydgate scorns as unnecessary. Rivalries and gossip ensue, and Lydgate’s plans to open a Fever Hospital in the town are thwarted. To compound his disappointments, he too marries in a hurry and ill-advisedly, partly because his idea of the perfect wife is as selfish in its way as Mr Casaubon’s is. When Lydgate meets Dorothea he thinks her ‘a little too earnest’:

The society of such women was about as relaxing as going from your work to teach the second form, instead of reclining in a paradise with sweet laughs for bird-notes, and blue eyes for a heaven.

(*Middlemarch*, chapter 11)

Much more to his taste is the beautiful, blue-eyed Rosamond Vincy, who, he soon discovers, combines a mild manner with a will of iron.

Money problems, Lydgate’s unpopularity with his fellow medical men, his failing attempts to educate his patients, and Rosamond’s lack of sympathy for either his profession or his determination to improve it add up to a marriage as miserable as the Casaubon one. The narrator talks of ‘that total missing of each other’s mental track, which is too evidently possible even between persons who are continually thinking of each other’ (chapter 58). The sexual chemistry between them is clear, but, like Adam Bede and his complaining mother or Tom and Maggie Tulliver, this pair irritate each other at every turn. Henry James noted that ‘the most perfectly successful passages in the book’ are ‘those painful fireside scenes’ between Lydgate and Rosamond. ‘There is nothing more powerfully real than these scenes in all English fiction’, he declared in a review of *Middlemarch*, ‘and nothing certainly more *intelligent*’ (*Galaxy*, March 1873).



One of the most painful of these conversations occurs in chapter 58. Lydgate has to tell Rosamond that he is in debt and they must sell some of their furniture. He asks her, rather forcefully, to help him decide how to save money:

‘We must think together about it, and you must help me.’

‘What can *I* do, Tertius?’ said Rosamond, turning her eyes on him again. That little speech of four words... is capable by varied vocal inflexions of expressing all states of mind from helpless dimness to exhaustive argumentative perception, from the completest self-devoting fellowship to the most neutral aloofness. Rosamond’s thin utterance threw into the words ‘What can *I* do!’ as much neutrality as they could hold. They fell like a mortal chill on Lydgate’s roused tenderness...

Meanwhile Rosamond quietly went out of the room, leaving Lydgate helpless and wondering. Was she not coming back? It seemed that she had no more identified herself with him than if they had been creatures of different species and opposing interests.

(*Middlemarch*, chapter 58)

Though Virginia Woolf does not elaborate on her reasons for saying that *Middlemarch* is distinctive in appealing to grown-ups, we may surmise that she, like James, has in mind moments like this, of which there are many in the novel. As Keneally says, the novel is distinctive in the sustained attention given to the complexities of relationships, especially but by no means exclusively those between Lydgate and Rosamond and Dorothea and Casaubon. In short, *Middlemarch* is a finely woven tapestry of interconnecting threads, whether personal, professional, or social. It presents a fictional community in all its fullness and variety, in a narrative held together by the wit, intelligence, and sympathy of its creator.

The Finale looks ahead to the years after the main narrative, summing up the ‘mixed’ fortunes of the main characters. Lydgate feels himself a failure, with his dashed hopes of becoming an important medical reformer and his painful recognition of the limitations of his wife’s sympathy with his aspirations. Dorothea, after the death of Mr Casaubon, finds happiness in her second marriage to Will Ladislav, but she too falls short of her ideal of being more than just a wife and mother. Yet George Eliot is determined to end on a note which is neither definitively pessimistic nor unrealistically optimistic. Philosophically she occupies a middle position. In 1868, a few months before she began writing *Middlemarch*, she told an acquaintance, a young doctor who confided in her about his professional and personal problems, that the ‘inspiring principle’ of her fiction was to help her readers to acquire ‘a clearer conception and a more active admiration of those vital elements which bind men together’. She outlined the balancing view of life, known as ‘meliorism’, which informed her work:

Never to beat and bruise one’s wings against the inevitable but to throw the whole force of one’s soul towards the achievement of some possible better, is the brief heading that need never be changed, however often the chapter of more special rules may have to be re-written.

(letter to Clifford Allbutt, 30 December 1868)

The final paragraph of *Middlemarch*, summarising the pros and cons of Dorothea’s life and relationships, illustrates this view. The language is carefully poised. A series of doubtful or negating words is channelled into an ultimately hopeful, though by no means idealised, resolution. Here at work is George Eliot’s particular idea of the importance of realism in art. From contemplating Dorothea’s most important relationships – with Casaubon, with Will Ladislav, and crucially with Lydgate, to whom she reaches out in his time of greatest trouble - the narrator moves subtly into the wider realm of human relationships in general:

Her finely-touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature... spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.

(*Middlemarch*, Finale)



‘Art is the nearest thing to life’, she had written in her essay ‘The Natural History of German Life’. *Middlemarch* is the proof, and its final words the expression, of this.

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