

## George Eliot and Middlemarch – recommended by Chris Weir

I am an ex-catholic and ex-born-again Christian. I started to lose my faith in 2017 and realised I have always been a humanist last year. That is because I started doing some research into a famous person and their philosophy – but that is another story to discuss at another time.

As a retired librarian and an English Literature graduate, I have a real love of books. So, I decided to do some research into some of my favourite authors and was amazed that so many of them either are or were humanists. Also, that so many of them from way back in the past have so much humanist philosophy in their writing.

One of my favourite C19th novelists is George Eliot, pen name for Mary Ann Evans. I loved studying *Middlemarch*. In fact, it is also the favourite book of my English Lit tutor, Liz – whom I am still very much in touch with. She decided to only date men who had read *Middlemarch*. And through this she met and married her husband, Peter. I had a brief discussion with her about the fact that I had discovered George Eliot was a humanist – I told her how delighted I was – and she said the four things she found fascinating was how she writes about three main things: God, Immortality and Duty. God is inconceivable, immortality – unbelievable, but Duty is absolute and has its own moral nature. Also, how she uses art to enlarge human sympathies.

On the Humanist Heritage website, it says that she was one of the most celebrated Victorian novelists. And that she was a convinced humanist, whose capacity for sensitive observation and central belief in the power of human connection animated her life and fiction. She was a freethinker in philosophy, remains an inspiration to many today and stands as a powerful example of the humanist values lived by Victorians than is often assumed.

So, when our group suggested a few of us should talk about a humanist book we would recommend, I thought it would be good to quickly discuss the greatness of *Middlemarch* and George Eliot and to also recommend “Adam Bede” as your first George Eliot book, if you haven’t read anything by her.

And amazingly. I found this very interesting book that I had forgotten I had on my bookshelf only last week:

“*The Road to Middlemarch*” by Rebecca Mead. It is a celebration of George Eliot’s life, work, and greatest novel. It discusses how *Middlemarch* answers fundamental questions about life and love. Mead states that books give us a way to shape ourselves, to form thoughts and to signal to each other who we are and who we wanted to be. It can also be where one finds oneself. There are books that grow with the reader as the reader grows.

George Eliot was a great 19th century humanist. She had a devoutly Christian upbringing in the Midlands but had growing religious doubts. She found her way out of her religiosity through study, enquiry, thought and patience. Her loss of faith was the start of a lifelong intellectual process of separating morality from religion. And determining how to be a good person in the absence of a Christian God. Also, the Humanist project of working out how best to understand one’s fellow creatures and how to behave towards them in the light of understanding.

When she decided to stop attending church, her dad was furious with her. Eliot described her conflict with her father to Emily Davies, the founder of Girton College in Cambridge.

### **So, what is so humanist about her books?**

Eliot believed in goodness in a godless universe. She lost her faith in her early twenties and later took up humanism. All her novels are rich with empathy, and concerned with life as it was lived and experienced by the full spectrum of humanity.

She wrote seven novels. Adam Bede was her first full length novel and her last was Daniel Deronda.

Adam Bede was published the same year that Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* which transformed biology and our sense of ourselves as animals, 1859 – amazingly exactly 100 years before I was born.

As we know, Charles Darwin is known for his profound influence of the study of evolution. Darwin concluded that the physical world had been and still was continuous change through the action of natural forces, and that man is the product of these forces. George Eliot gave most importance to human relations regarding the ideas presented in *The Origin of Species*. Publication of her novels brought new light to Victorian novels. She not only moved into human thought by analysing human behaviour but also added modern theories to her writing. Her novels were written not to entertain but to raise uncertainty in the reader. The reader was to be presented with moral and religious inquiries and no certain answers.

*Middlemarch* is regarded by some as an exemplification of the ideas of social Darwinism. The main themes in the novel all bear traces of influence of Darwin's work, most prominently the question of origin.

In her novels, Eliot portrays the complicated creatures that human beings are, born animals, and then throughout our lives we are making a character all the time, we're developing. We develop through relationships with others but also because of our experiences. Everyone is different. And she just observes that beautifully. Her characters are so well drawn.

So many writers were inspired by George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Virginia Woolf – another great humanist writer – thought "the magnificent book is one of the few English novels written for grown-up people". Zadie Smith writes about how Eliot's humanism tends to inspire awe in her readers. "She seems to care for people, indiscriminately and in their entirety, as it was once said God did. This idea of being good for the sake of other people – rather than heavenly rewards – goes some way to explain why *Middlemarch* has a status as a secular Bible.

*Middlemarch*, more than perhaps any other classic work of fiction, acts as a kind of literary conscience. It's a book that people feel they (and others) should reckon with at different intervals of their life and during periods of social and political change. And part of the fun of roaming round Eliot's world is wondering which character you most identify with and which one you would fancy. *Middlemarch* has been described by Martin Amis and Julian Barnes as the greatest novel in the English language. Dickens, Thackeray and Queen Victoria were fans. She received passionate queries from strangers seeking advice on how to live better lives.

In *Middlemarch* there is also a wider “web” that is Eliot’s overriding concern - the universe and everything that inhabits it. It is her aim to expand the horizons of her readers and their knowledge of emotions, an aim that drives her provisional focus on a particular web of human lots. She puts the human front and centre without demeaning the non-human.

Eliot uses her great writing strengths in *Middlemarch* to examine different kinds of reform and progress: political, scientific, technology and social. It is set in the period leading up to the 1832 Reform Act. It is very much a psychological novel. It is also an historical novel, deliberately re-creating the life of some forty years before the date of its publication. Eliot inspires readers to develop a sympathetic feeling for several characters and to learn to move patiently from one to another, listening, watching, and remembering as all their stories unfold.

### **Here is a summary of the construction of *Middlemarch*.**

She began writing the story in 1869, having Lydgate as its central character and concerned entirely with the fictional town, which gives the novel its title. In 1870 she started a separate book, originally to be called Miss Brooke. By the spring of 1871 the two stories had been fused. The novel was published in eight instalments in 1871 and 1872, and in 1874 appeared in a single volume whose phenomenal success made Eliot rich.

*Middlemarch* is subtitled “A Study of Provincial Life”, and it captures the goings on of a large cast of characters over the period of a couple of years in the 1830s. It touches on many of these issues: political reform, doctrinal religious differences, advancement in medical knowledge, the obligation of landowners to their tenants, education, and the role of women in society.

It has four main plots. Plot one is the life of Dorothea Brooke an orphaned young woman. Plot two is the career of Tertius Lydgate, the newly arrived doctor in Middlemarch. Plot three is the courtship of Mary Garth by Fred Vincy, the brother of Rosamond. Plot four is the disgrace of Nicholas Bulstrode – banker and religious hypocrite who opens the new hospital - whose dishonest past betrays him. Each plot occurs concurrently, although Bulstrode's is centred on the later chapters. One of the pleasures of the novel is the way that the characters’ lives become intertwined over the course of the story. *Middlemarch* is not a tiny village; many of the characters know or know of each other, but sometimes only in passing. The paths of many of the pivotal characters do cross, however, sooner or later. One of the characters who ties the others together is Mr. Bulstrode.

“Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending”. The opening sentence to the final chapter. The book ends with Dorothea – she has made her own progress, having been inspired to do good for others.

Out of interest, **City Lit have a four-week course on Middlemarch next June.**

“Considered by many to be the greatest nineteenth century novel, we explore its narrative methods and characterisation, its rich engagement with the ideas and concerns of its age, and above all, its deep humanity that still resonates today.”