

# THE ELEMENTS OF REALISM IN GEORGE ELLIOT'S (MARIE ANNE EVANS) MIDDLEMARCH

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## **Abstract**

This research paper is going to elaborate Middlemarch, one of the greatest works of George Elliot (her real name was Marie Ann Evans). It is one of the major pieces of the thesaurus of British Victorian period. The novel is subtitled as 'A study of Provincial Life' which is set in the imaginary town of Middlemarch which is thought to be at the territory of today's city of Coventry, a little town not far from Oxford. The story takes place between the periods of 1930-1932. Elliot presents the stories of a number of denizens of a small English town on the eve of the Representation of the People Act Bill. This Reform Bill endorsed major changes in the parliament where the number of commoners increased. Middlemarch is her seventh novel, started to be written in 1869. The interruption of her writing was caused by the illness of Thornton Lewes, the son of her partner George Henry Lewes. Elliot's resumed works; fusing together several stories into coherent whole during 1871-1872, appeared in serial form. The Volume I Edition was published in 1874 and attracted a large publicity. The novel is composed of eight books; it contains also a prelude and a postscript or a finale describing the post-novel fates of the main characters. The narrator is an omniscient third-person singular that narrates the life of ordinary people isn't granting the echelon of heroic princes and kings. As a realistic novel Middlemarch contains multiple and different characteristics of realism such as; a slow-moving plot, emphasis on morality, casualty, foreshadowing of everyday events, emphasis on psychological optimistic tone, too much details, events are usually plausible. The research methods that have been helpful while conducting this research paper are; narrative and descriptive methods.

**Key words:** Middlemarch, echelon, religion, moral, love, intricacies, politics, etc.

## 1. Introduction

Victorian Literature was produced during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) or the Victorian dominion. It introduces a link and transition between the writers of the Romantic Period to the very different literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (Norton Vol. 2, 1680) The 19<sup>th</sup> century is often regarded as a high point in British literature as well as in other countries such as France, the United States and Russia. Books, and novels in particular, become ubiquitous, and the “Victorian novelists” created legacy of works with continuing appeal.

Novels were the most prevalent form of literature in the early Victorian Period. The major characteristics displayed as the major features of this genre are; morality values, social class divisions, marriage as a basic chapter of life, the character is more important than the plot, slow-moving plot and idealism. George Elliot is one of the major figures of Victorian novel. She did not write only *Middlemarch*, but she gained a special reputation for her masterpiece *Middlemarch* and her other works have been highly evaluated.

There are many more characteristics that actually highlight the realistic events that the Victorian period uses as its unique features. *Middlemarch* puts together very fruitful elements that have made it a very precious work of literature even in the post-modern critic reviews announce. Characteristics that enhance the everyday life are part of the Victorian Literature and they mirrored the life of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

It is also portrayed the difference of gender role and their “*gifted rights*”, women’s duty to save their body and dignity for the only man in their lives and in the contrary men were not umpired to have more than one sex partner. Women of the time were adjudicated to have less sexual desires than men. They were considered men’s property and were responsible for them. The author being female herself hidden after a male pen name tries to deliver a message to the society to convince women be less dependable on men and enhances the importance of education and emancipation in a woman’s life. (Norton Vol. 2; 1581)

Morality as a characteristic of *Middlemarch* - In order to understand Eliot’s moral view, it is essential to know her understanding of religion. Eliot has been deeply influenced by a number of philosophers such as Ludwig Andreas von Feuerbach, Auguste Comte, and Bernard Paris whose views differ from the conventional view of Christianity. “Feuerbach argues that God is the mirror of man because God may be understood as a projection or reflection of humanity’s ideals. Comte wanted to lead man to altruism and did not believe in individualism because he

focused on the order and progress of society.”(Pawar, 2012) Although she grew up in a religious family and attended church services in her childhood, after her mother’s death in 1836, she began to question the concept of religion. (Kadija & Mustafai, 2014)

Eliot did not reject the essence of Christian faith and always believed in a sense of belonging; an attachment to a kind of faith as means of coping with loneliness and frustration, of understanding and controlling the mysterious universe. Eliot thinks that man’s moral development depends on his relationship with his fellows, not with God. Man can achieve this as he has the potential of “goodness” known as a Godlike quality. Therefore, she believes in the exaltation of human beings. Eliot was deeply interested in the morality of human relationships and her view does not differ much from traditional Christianity in terms of the choice of the highest good.

Morality is based on religion and her points of view we may realize through this entire novel. “As a moralist, Eliot’s aim is to strengthen the determination of human beings. This is not inconsistent with her notion of determinism.” (Çetinkaja, 2003)

## **2. Society and Social class**

Eliot is very sharp and straightforward to the subject of the irresponsibility of some people that are of higher class who live better than others not by the merits of their own merited work. This issue is much more examined with controversial issues of the rising class as accepted and affordable of idiotic, selfish and harsh actions. The lower class has to labor for a meager living day by day with no hope of prosperity.

This novel views the social class crisis. The society in Middlemarch is like a web of relationships, and it’s hard to distinguish one person or a group. The author is concentrated in showing the intricacies of upper class people. The title of the novel itself tells us that the novel is not about a single or two major characters but a whole society in general. The Garth family feels the supremacy over the others and mock the way the laborers on their farm talk and Mrs. Garth an autodidact, is concerned with the education of her children because she doesn’t want them to talk like the laborers.

The drama continues with Fred Vincy, the spoiled son of the major-clerk, who makes Caleb Garth cosign a debt and then blows almost all the money away in his activities and gives only a small sum of money for the debt. This charges Caleb Garth with a debt that he has to pay

with their scars savings. This brings us the message that people of high class feel of their right to do whatever they want to whoever they want. The author is concentrated in showing the intricacies of high class people.

### **3. The institution of marriage as an element of realism in Middlemarch**

Marriage is a theme as well as an element of realism, marriage and its pursuit are central concerns in Middlemarch, but different from all other novels marriage is not considered the final source of love and happiness but an order of morality values. Eliot considers the moral growth as an act of abandoning egoistic spiritual concerns and meeting a sympathetic response to the sufferings of the helpless. All the characters of the novel are concerned with marriage. They all tend to fall in love with someone and then get married. The main thing in the marriages of Middlemarch people is that they are all disappointed and disillusioned. Dorothea as the main character suffers from disillusion too. Her expectations about her marriage with Edward Casaubon are totally far behind the reality. The marriages of the secondary characters also tell us stories for example the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Bulstrode face a marital crisis. Another couple having difficulties uniting are Fred Vincy and Mary Garth, they have loved each other from long ago, but Mary's different points of view from Vincy and her decision that she won't marry him without having a stable profession, but never as a clerk. So they face a very great deal of hardship. And as we may think of it none of the marriages have the fairy happy ending. Middlemarch is one of the few novels that do not portray marriage as romantic and unproblematic relation. Middlemarch can be considered as a construction of liberalistic views opposing the values of Catholicism once married forever married. It supports treaties in favor of divorce.

### **4. The character is more important than the plot**

The fact that the characters are more important than the plot can be seen through the story. The novel is notable for its deep psychological insight and sophisticated character portraits. (Kadija&Mustafai, 2014) The whole novel comprises an extensive number of characters. Plot is less important in Middlemarch than in any nineteenth century novel; the character and the idea are at least equally balanced with the plot. The various themes the incompatibility of Dorothea and Casaubon, of Lydgate and Rosamond, the commercial and

social ambition of Bulstrode, and the romantic ambition of the unconvincing Ladislaw are devices to create the necessary tension against which George Elliot's ideas can be presented as realistic.

This is what makes the plot more dramatic and more complex; in contrary the characters are not complex they are simple that express feelings and opinions like ordinary people of real life. There is also represented Eliot's tendency on shifting the attention to a number plots. Elliot enhances this by creating not only one plot but multiple plots. None of the plots are more important than the others; every one of them has its sub plot.

Eliot's master craft can be highlighted throughout her major concentration on managing to show the importance not only of the major character but also the secondary characters such as Mrs. Cadwallader and Mr. Raphles that change the course of the events.

## **5. Slow-moving plot as an element of realism**

Slow-moving plot is a characteristic of realism enhanced in this work. We may realize this when we first see the whole voluminous book containing seven hundred pages. The fact that the book is divided into eight parts tells us that the plot moves very slowly and sometimes different plots are stopped and then later continued. The reason why the plot moves slowly is that there are too much detailed storied and descriptions made. Books are divided and each tells a story involved in a much bigger story. The plot is layered and every sentence has meaning. Except from having a slow-moving plot the book has also multiple plots with large cast of characters. The progress of the plot is slow because of the complex character. Here we have to do with a novel portraying reality whose main intention is to involve the reader in and make him feel his ordinary everyday life in a fictive town of Middlemarch. In such literary genres writers are obliged to include as much details as possible and the intercourse of details ensures the deed of having slow-moving plot. Anyway complex characters don't really let the reader think of it as slow as soon the first book and the prelude is finished. Therefore we can understand that slow-moving plot is inevitable.

## **6. Idealism**

It is another characteristic of Middlemarch. It is portrayed by Garth's character as a Victorian model (the idealized man that was perfect and made no mistakes) one that would never

work if there was treachery or something like that, he believes Raphles's words but he still is not sure without seeing him he doesn't promise Bulstrode not to talk but he says that he won't.

Mary Ann Evans represented female idealism (the idealized female of Victorian society was a woman placed at home, domesticity, motherhood and respectability were considered a sufficient emotional fulfillment) that is actually a failed idealism by one of the major characters such as Dorothea and followed by other secondary characters. An example of the idealism of the young being destroyed by the old is that of Dorothea. This can be seen by her continuing desire to "bear a larger part of the world's misery" or to learn Latin and Greek, both of which are continually thwarted by Casaubon, though this ends after his death, with her discovery of his selfish and suspicious nature, by way of the codicil. Dorothea, the heroine of the novel, is another example of frustrated idealism.

Throughout the novel, there are numerous references to her desire to help the poor, though this is more often than not frustrated by her surroundings. The first example is her designs for the cottages; they are dismissed by her sister as being a "fad", and by her uncle as being too expensive. It is only when Sir James Chettam attempts to woo her, and builds the cottages in an attempt to gain favor with her, that her designs are actually carried through. Her idealism is arguably destroyed through her association with Casaubon.

The character who has his ambitions and ideals brought most obviously low is Lydgate. The earliest example is when he has to make the choice between Fairbrother and Tyke. Both of these characters are rather poor examples of the clergy.

One needs only to look to Lydgate to see an example of idealism being destroyed by the environment in which he is found. At the start of the novel, we are introduced to the "young, poor and ambitious" and most of all idealistic Doctor Lydgate, who has great plans for the fever hospital in Middlemarch. Throughout the novel, however, we see his plans frustrated by the designs of others, though primarily the hypocritical desires of Nicholas Bulstrode.

Bulstrode is another example of a character that has had his idealism and destroyed, though not by Middlemarch. He was once a great and trusted minister, but the lure of money from the pawn shop, and the possibility of inheriting all of Ladislaw's mother's money proved too great for him.

So as we consider finding similarities between the periods we see the influence of the preceding Romantic Period and the upcoming period of Modernism shifting gently to each other.

It is fully witnessed the way these elements and characteristics of these periods have beautifully interrelated to create something great. So in this case beyond George Eliot a great consideration is to be paid to the Bronte sisters who definitely use many romantic features, but alongside with Elliot, Dickens, Carol and other author use these characteristics mentioned above in their works.

## **7. Conclusion**

The novel *Middlemarch* is composed of a prelude, eight books, eighty-six chapters and a finale. It is a very well-organized novel plotted with one hundred and fifty characters. There is a fluent arrangement of ideas and the cast are given their part from the beginning until the end. In the beginning of every book and also every chapter there is presented a quote that it is somehow related to the plot.

There is a finale that represents the fate of every main character of the novel. It is to be realized that the author wants the reader to get a quite simple message, that of being able to judge right and not by moment's passion and emotions. Dorothea, despite of all her rushing decision she brings, she still keeps herself together and trying to live a happy life in her way showing that money is not the most important key of life.

*Middlemarch* shows a remarkable insight into the social disturbance that resulted from major shifts in social movements of the 19th-century society related to industrial revolutions and economy in general. The book pursues a number of underlying themes, including the social status of women, the nature of marriage, idealism and self interests, education and emancipation, religion versus moral values and hypocrisy, society and political reforms.

Throughout the novel, different highly eminent author's quotes or verses are cited. Some of the characters of the novel are people that make mistakes driven by passion or by the desire for knowledge but anyway they never give up love and happiness even after a great deal of disappointment. Women are highly appreciated and evaluated due to the fact of the author being a woman herself makes this work more remarkable. The only controversial point is her male pen name. Generally saying, this novel mainly deals with women describing their weak and strong points of the gender itself. Another interesting point to be marked is the importance of the man as a key factor of the society related to their evilness, notorious ambitions and irony towards humanity. This novel is a kind of a novel that supports and encourages woman to be full of live, energetic, charismatic and leaders as the example of Dorothea.

## **Middlemarch Reviews**

The novel *Middlemarch* has been praised, evaluated from many eminent authors, magazines and critics.

Virginia Woolf gave the book unstinting praise describing it as “the magnificent book with all its imperfection as one of the few English novels written for grown-up people”.

Martin Amis and Julian Barnes have cited it as probably the greatest novel in the English language. The poet Emily Dickinson referred to the novel, she wrote in a letter: "What do I think of *Middlemarch*? What do I think of glory – except that in a few instances 'this mortal [George Eliot] has already put on immortality?" ( *the guardian*, Feb 2014)

The *Guardian* magazine has estimated *Middlemarch* to be one of the ten greatest novels of the history, giving it the 21 position. Also the *New York Times* magazine of this year has again evaluated *Middlemarch* as one of the ten greatest novel of all time. It is also considered as a pantheon of English written fiction.

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