Introduction to George Eliot and her novels

Mary Ann Evans, better known as George Eliot, was born in Warwickshire, in 1819 and spent the early years of her life with her father an estate agent, and her brother, Isaac. From childhood, she showed an unusual aptitude for study and was far ahead of her brother in academic achievements. At the age of twenty-two, she went with her father to Coventry, and soon began to free herself from the narrow religious outlook which bound her family. She later came into contact with thinkers like Francis Newman, Herbert Spencer and was deeply influenced by their philosophy. She then met George Henry Lewes, and defying Victorian convention, lived with him for the rest of her life. Poverty and misfortune dogged them for a while, but Lewes recognised her superior intellect and encouraged her with praise and devotion. Inspired by him, in 1857, she wrote Scenes from Clerical Life. Adam Bede appeared in 1859, and The Mill on the Floss, which is largely autobiographical, in 1860. Both the novels were very well acclaimed as also her Silas Marner (1861), Romola (1863), Felix Holt (1866), Middlemarch (1871-72), and Daniel Deronda (1873).

Of all the women novelists of the 19th century, George Eliot was the most learned and in her creative achievement, the most adult. She was a rationalist, and what interested her above all, were the human motives that she tried to explore and comprehend. She tried to analyse the thoughts of her characters, to probe their deepest desires, and while doing so, displays a deep compassion and understanding of human nature. Thus, George Eliot's novels contain numerous examples of subtle psychological study.
Summary of Middlemarch

Dorothea Brooke and her younger sister, Ceila were young women of good birth, who lived with their bachelor uncle at Tipton Grange near the town of Middlemarch. So serious was Dorothea's cast of mind that she was reluctant to keep jewelry she had inherited from her dead mother, and she gave all of it to her sister. Upon reconsideration, however, she did keep a ring and a bracelet. At a dinner party where Edward Casaubon, a middle-aged scholar, and Sir James Chettam both vied for her attention, she was much more attracted to the serious-minded Casaubon. Casaubon must have had an inkling that his chances with Dorothea were good, for the next morning he sought her out. Ceila, who did not like his complexion or his moles, disapproved of the matter. That afternoon Dorothea, contemplating the wisdom of the scholar, was walking and by chance encountered Sir James who was in love with her and mistook her silence for and supposed she might love him in return. When Casaubon made his proposal of marriage by letter, Dorothea accepted him at once. Mr. Brooke, her uncle, thought Sir James a much better match; Dorothea's acceptance merely confirmed his bachelor views that women were difficult to understand. He decided not to interfere in her plans, but Celia felt that the event would be more like a funeral than a marriage, and frankly said so.

Casaubon took Dorothea, Celia, and Mr. Brooke to see his home so that Dorothea might order any necessary changes. Dorothea, intending in all things to defer to Casaubon's tastes, said she would make no changes in the house. During the visit Dorothea met Will Ladislaw, Casaubon's second cousin, who seemed hardly in sympathy with his elderly cousin's marriage plans. While Dorothea and her new husband were travelling in Italy, Tertius Lydgate, an ambitious and poor young doctor, was meeting pretty Rosamond Vincy, to whom he was much attracted. Fred Vincy, Rosamond's brother, had indicated that he expected to come into a fine inheritance when his uncle, Mr. Featherstone, should die. Vincy, meanwhile, was pressed by a debt he was unable to pay.

Lydgate became involved in petty local politics. When the time came to choose a chaplain for the new hospital of which Lydgate was the head, the young doctor realised that it was to his best interest to vote in accordance with the wishes of Nicholas Bulstrode, an influential
banker and founder of the hospital. A clergyman man named Tyke received the office. In Rome, Ladislaw encountered Dorothea had begun to realise too late how pompous and incompatible she found Casaubon. Seeing her unhappiness, Ladislaw first pitted and then fell in love with his cousin’s wife. Unwilling to live any longer on Casaubon’s charity, Ladislaw announced his intention of returning to England and finding some kind of gainful occupation.

When Fred Vincy’s note came due, he tried to sell a horse at a profit but the animal tried to be vicious. Caleb Garth, who had signed his note, now stood to lose a hundred and ten pounds because of Fred’s inability to raise the money. Fred fell ill, and Lydgate was summoned to attend him. Lydgate used his professional calls to further his suit with Rosamond. Dorothea and her husband returned from Rome in time to hear of Celia’s engagement to Sir James Chettam. Will Ladislaw included a note to Dorothea in a letter he wrote to Casaubon. This attention precipitated a quarrel which was followed by Casaubon’s serious illness. Lydgate, who attended him, urged him to give up his studies for the time being. To Dorothea, Lydgate confided that Casaubon had a weak heart and must be guarded from all excitement.

Meanwhile all the relatives of old Mr. Featherstone were waiting impatiently for his death, but he hoped to circumvent their desires by giving his fortune to Mary Garth, daughter of the man who had signed Fred Vincy’s note. When she refused it, he fell into a rage and died soon afterwards. When his will was read, it was learned he had left nothing to his relatives; most of his money was to go to a Joshua Riggs, who was to take the name of Featherstone and a part of his fortune was to endow the Featherstone Almshouses for old men. Plans were made for Rosamond’s marriage with Lydgate. Fred Vincy was ordered to prepare himself finally for the ministry, since he was to have no inheritance from his uncle. Mr. Brooke, having gone into politics, enlisted the help of Ladislaw in publishing a liberal paper. Mr. Casaubon had come to dislike Ladislaw intensely after his cousin had rejected further assistance, and he had forbidden Ladislaw to enter his house. Casaubon died suddenly.

A codicil to his will gave Dorothea all of his property as long as she did not marry Ladislaw. This strange provision caused Dorothea’s friends and relatives some concern because if publicly given out, it
would appear that Dorothea and Ladislaw had been indiscreet.

Mr. Brooke, on the advice of his Tory friends, gave up his liberal newspaper and thus cut off his connection with Ladislaw. The latter realised that Dorothea's family was in some way trying to separate him from Dorothea but he refused to be disconcerted about the matter. He resolved to stay on in Middlemarch until he was ready to leave. When he heard of the codicil to Casaubon's will, he was more than ever determined to remain so that he could eventually disprove the suspicions of the village concerning him and Dorothea. Meanwhile Lydgate and Rosamond had married, and the doctor had gone deeply in debt to furnish his house. When he found that his income did not meet his wife's spendthrift habits, he asked her to help him economize. He and his wife began to quarrel. His practice and popularity decreased.

A disreputable man named Raffles appeared in Middlemarch. Raffles knew that Ladislaw's grandfather had amassed a fortune as a receiver of stolen goods and that Nicholas Bulstrode, the highly respected banker, had once been the confidential clerk of Ladislaw's ancestor. More than that, Bulstrode's first wife had been his employer's widow. Upon money inherited from her, money which should have gone to Ladislaw's mother, Bulstrode had built his own fortune. Already blackened by Raffles, Bulstrode reasoned that the scoundrel would tell Ladislaw the whole story. To forestall trouble, he sent for Ladislaw and offered him an annuity of five hundred pounds and liberal provision in his will. Ladislaw, feeling that his relatives had already tainted his honour, refused, unwilling to be associated in any way with the unsavory business. Deciding to leave Middlemarch, Ladislaw went to London without assurance that Dorothea loved him. Lydgate drifted deeper into debt. When he wished to sell what he could and take cheaper lodgings, Rosamond managed to make him hold on, to keep up the pretense of prosperity a little longer. At the same time Bulstrode gave up his interest in the new hospital and withdrew his financial support. Faced at last with the seizure of his goods, Lydgate went to Bulstrode and asked for a loan. The banker advised him to seek aid from Dorothea and abruptly ended the conversation. But when Raffles, in the last stages of alcoholism, returned to Middlemarch and Lydgate was called in to attend him, Bulstrode, afraid the doctor would learn the banker's secret from Raffles'
drunken ravings, changed his mind and gave Lydgate a cheque for a thousand pounds. The loan came in time to save Lydgate’s goods and reputation. When Raffles died, Bulstrode felt at peace at last. But it soon became common gossip that Bulstrode had given money to Lydgate and that Lydgate had attended Raffles in his final illness. Bulstrode and Lydgate were publicly accused of malpractice in Raffles’ death. Only Dorothea took up Lydgate’s defense. The rest of the town was busy with gossip over the affair. Rosamond was anxious to leave Middlemarch to avoid public disgrace. Bulstrode also was anxious to leave the town after his secret, which Raffles had told while drunk in a neighbouring village, became known. But he became ill and his doctors would not permit him to leave his bed. Dorothea, sympathetic with Lydgate, determined to give her support to the hospital and to try to convince Rosamond that the only way Lydgate could recover his honour was by remaining in Middlemarch. Unfortunately, she came upon Will Ladislaw, to whom poor Rosamond was pouring out her grief. Afraid Rosamond was involved with Ladislaw, Dorothea left abruptly. Angered at the false position Rosamond had put him in, Ladislaw explained that he had always loved Dorothea, but from a distance. When Dorothea forced herself to return to Lydgate’s house on the following morning, Rosamond told her of Ladislaw’s declaration. Dorothea realised she was willing to give up Casaubon’s fortune for Ladislaw’s affection.

Inspite of the protests of her family and friends, they were married several weeks later and went to live in London. Lydgate and Rosamond lived together with better understanding and prospects of a happier future. Fred Vincy became engaged to Mary Garth, with whom he had long been in love. For a long time Dorothea’s family disregarded her, but they were finally reconciled after Dorothea’s son was born and Ladislaw was elected to Parliament.
5.0 Objectives

Friends, a study of this chapter will enable you to:

a) Analyze the characters in Middlemarch
b) Analyze the structure of Middlemarch
c) Discuss it as a study of provincial life in 18th century England
d) Discuss some prominent themes in Middlemarch

5.1 Introduction

George Eliot is also a novelist who wrote in the 18th century in England. But unlike Dickens, her characters are more rounded and develop and grow throughout the novel. She presents them from a psychological point of view, and is often regarded as among the earliest modern novelists. Also, in Middlemarch she not only mentions but also writes in the context of contemporary historical developments like the Reform Bill. She is also unique in the fact that her novel is infused not only with a moral vision but also with a deep sense of compassion.
5.2 The Social Background of The Novel

Middlemarch is concerned with the time period of about two and a half decades, beginning with the 1920s. The period covered is one in which there were many political reforms the most significant of which was the Reform Bill of 1832. Other factors like the increase in the number of factories and the coming of the railways suggest that it was a society undergoing rapid change. Though the landed gentry still commanded the most respect, other professions were gaining prominence, e.g. doctors (apothecaries, physicians, surgeons), lawyers, traders, etc. It was a very class-conscious society, in which those of noble birth were still the highest on the social ladder, and where there was a gulf between the town and the country. Man had to function and interact among institutions like the church, marriage, money, politics, and labour. All these had a strong moral thread running through them, and George Eliot has interwoven it with the stories and characters to bring about the best possible effect.

Women occupied an inferior position in society. They were expected to remain in the background and fulfil their domestic duties, and did not have any say in legal or property matters. They were not expected to be intelligent or assertive, but ornamental as well as useful. All these factors give the reader the impression that individual lives were influenced by their personal choices, but also the socio-economic factors prevalent during the time.

5.3 George Eliot's Treatment of Her Characters

5.3.1 The men Characters

Casaubon is a cold and remote figure, at pains to give an impression of dignity and learning. Celia sees through his pretentiousness and finds him ugly and pompous, but poor deluded Dorothea is taken in by his reserve into thinking that this vain, dry clergyman is an intellectual, a man of letters. He imagines that in Dorothea he has found a suitable wife as she will admire him, and be a wife, hostess and secretary. He cannot understand her ardour and enthusiasm because he is unemotional and self-occupied. Her intelligence and perception that he himself distrusts his ability to complete his work makes him conscious of his failure. His resentment at this realisation makes him retire deeper into his shell and he is a
very lonely man. Casaubon's jealousy towards Ladislaw arises out of his feelings of inadequacy - Ladislaw is everything he is not, viz. young, enthusiastic, and above all unafraid. His will is another example of his jealousy and possessiveness, because he dimly foresees the possibility of Dorothea marrying Ladislaw, and wishes to prevent it even after his death.

Unlike Casaubon, Lydgate's intelligence and learning are genuine. Like Dorothea, he is a person who holds great promise but has to rest content with very ordinary achievements. As a surgeon with excellent training, who hopes to combine medical work with research in physiology, he is undoubtedly above ordinary people in intelligence and work. But he is very conscious of this and it is this consciousness as well as his materialistic tendencies make him a lesser individual. Lydgate's affair with the French actress, and his marriage to Rosamond indicate that he seems to have a weakness for vain, beautiful women. But his good nature is genuine as is seen in his relationship with his patients and colleagues. Success, recognition, prestige, are very important to him, but he is not aggressive, hard, or tough. In fact, he is swayed by sentiments and also suffers from pangs of conscience e.g. when he accepts money from Bulstrode. When he falls in love with Rosamond, he does not see through her wiles, and it is only after their marriage that he realises that under her beauty He selfishness and a terrible obstinacy. He forgives Rosamond for her petty scheming and becomes resigned to her egoism and her determination to have her own way. When Lydgate fails to achieve his ambition of being an affluent, renowned surgeon, he is bitterly disillusioned and resorts to dishonesty and the fear of exposure haunts him. It is particularly important for him to present the image of a respectable man of medicine, since a good reputation will help him to further his career by establishing a good practice in elite society.

Will Ladislaw is the representative of the world outside Middlemarch, and the anti-thesis of Casaubon, being unlike him in all possible ways. He is the grandson of a woman who rebelled against the Casaubon values of class and money. His father was a musician, mother an actress, while he is a dilettante and a Radical. He rejects the superficial liberalism of Mr. Brooke and has not yet found his vocation. He sympathizes with Dorothea and regards her marriage to Mr. Casaubon as a horrible sacrifice, and later falls in love with her himself.
5.3.2 The women Characters

George Eliot’s Middlemarch is well-acclaimed for her compassionate delineation of character and subtlety of psychological analysis. Dorothea Brooke is a fine instance of this. Little information is given about the environment in which she grows up. She is deprived of the security of a happy family as her parents are dead, and Mr. Brooke, the only substitute for parents, is a tolerant uncle who lets everyone have their way because opposition causes him too much trouble. Dorothea is an idealist, and her idealism is misplaced because she wants to do good and great things in a world of which she is ignorant. She is a misfit in the narrow provincial society where women were expected to be submissive and accept the role assigned to them without aspiring for more. She has visions of being the partner in the accomplishment of a great work and her misguided notions lead her into committing the grave mistake of marrying Casaubon. Her childlike ideas about marriage (that a husband could be “a sort of father”), and her inability to see the obvious (Casaubon, who is ugly to Celia, seems to be one of the most distinguished-looking men to Dorothea) bring about disillusionment and unhappiness to her. She wants to be needed and appreciated by Casaubon, because he is the only person she looks up to - she feels that other people are ordinary and mediocre. This wish remains unfulfilled because Casaubon is always aloof and unapproachable, and Dorothea is doomed to a life of loneliness and misery. With the death of Casaubon comes the final blow, the codicil to the will, which is the ultimate insult she has to bear. Her marriage to the quite ordinary Will Ladislaw and willingness to give up Casaubon’s property, is clearly an attempt to come out of her loneliness and establish a close relationship with another human being. Giving up her noble ideals of doing good and great things, she settles down to a life of humdrum domesticity.

Rosamond is a self-centered product of a ladies academy, the spoilt daughter of the complacent Vincy family. She is discontented with the narrow dull life of Middlemarch and treats her eager suitors with contempt because her heart is set on getting away to London. In her hauteur and disdain, she deliberately remains aloof from the people around her, whom she regards as commonplace and unrefined. In this she is somewhat similar to Dorothea who also regards herself as superior to others, but whereas Dorothea is a victim...
of deluded and impractical ideas, Rosamond is deliberately selfish and calculating. The arrival of Lydgate arouses her interest because she hears of his connection with an aristocratic family. Marriage to him is her means of escaping from an environment unsuited to her supposedly superior accomplishments to a life of social importance. She is determined to marry him and sets out to charm him by showing off her petty talents. Rosamond's obstinacy, which George Eliot at first only hints at, is seen clearly once she is engaged to Lydgate. She is soon disillusioned with Lydgate when she sees that their marital life is troubled by financial problems. Later, she flirts with Ladislaw because it diverts her mind from her displeasure with Lydgate. Though she is not unfaithful to her husband, she wants to keep other men to herself as her admirers. Lydgate's resentment and jealousy are seen by her as a tribute to her womanhood and personal charm. As their marriage deteriorates further, Lydgate sees her obstinacy, her inability to accept reality, her extravagance, and her air of martyrdom and disdain if she does not get her own way. As Lydgate's troubles increase, so does Rosamond's lack of concern for them. Rosamond almost destroys the relationship between Dorothea and Ladislaw, but later behaves unlike her usual self by telling Dorothea about the nature of Ladislaw's visit to her, thereby clearing the way for their love. This is one rare instance when she moves out of her selfishness to help a fellow-woman in trouble. But soon she goes back to her usual stand of selfishness and obstinacy, and this is why Lydgate calls her his "basil plant".

5.3 Check Your Progress.
Choose the correct alternative :-
1. Casaubon is :
   a) humble  b) honest  c) pretentious  d) social
2. Lydgate is :
   a) materialistic  b) aggressive  c) tough  d) successful

5.4 The structure of Middlemarch
Middlemarch is often praised for its sense of unity despite its vast canvas, numerous characters and their individual stories. George Eliot is said to have started on a story with Lydgate as the central character
and concerned with the fictional town which gave it its title. She then started on a separate work called "Miss Brooke", which grew in complexity. She must have recognised the many similarities of theme and setting and by 1871 the two stories were fused into a single panoramic novel. At the heart of the novel we have these two stories of Dorothea and Lydgate, twin studies in defeated aspiration. Dorothea, the misguided idealist, anxious to do great good in a world that is too narrow for her, is trapped in a marriage to the pedantic Casaubon. Lydgate, who aspires to achieve glorious heights in medical research, also fails to fulfil his dreams, and has an unhappy marriage with the self-centered Rosamond. Interwoven into these main stories, are those of Bulstrode, banker and religious hypocrite, whose dishonest past betrays him; of Fred Vincy, good-natured but lazy, who is saved by his love for Mary Garth, and the example of her father, Caleb; of Featherstone's disposition of his property; and several minor characters who give range and depth to the novel. One or more of the characters in each story plays an important part in each of the other stories, thus making the novel an integrated whole.

5.4 Check your progress:

Answer in one sentence:-

Which two stories were fused to form Middlemarch?

5.5 Middlemarch as a study of provincial life in 18th century England

The main concern of Middlemarch is with the society of provincial England just before the Reform Bill of 1832, which was a rather cramped and narrow society. The political climate brought together, though only temporarily, people of different classes, viz., doctor, banker, businessman, cleric, baronet, etc. This is a society in which birth, rank and class are central. Rosamond does not have the same social status as the Miss Brookes, and though Chettam and Mr. Brooke recognize Mr. Vincy as a mayor, they cannot recognize his family. Chettam disapproves of Dorothea's marriage to Ladislaw, does his
best to hinder it and is only reconciled when Celia pressurizes him after Dorothea has a baby. At the same time, the Vincys look down on the Garths because Fred is a university man, while Mary is a governess and teacher. In this society, money rules, whether it is inherited or acquired, as is seen by the position enjoyed by Mr. Brooke, Bulstrode and Featherstone. Lydgate represents the new professional man having ideals and an enlightened attitude that threatens the position of the traditional practitioners who want to continue with their traditional methods as well as their malpractices. George Eliot comments on the narrowness of provincial society by depicting the amount of gossip generated from the criticism of Casaubon by Mrs. Cadwallader to the people's condemnation of Lydgate and Bulstrode without proof.

5.5 Check Your Progress.

Fill in the blanks :-

Three things important in the 18th century provincial society in England were ------ , ------ , and ------ .

5.6 Some prominent themes in Middlemarch

While reading the novel, some themes appear to be prominent. Foremost among these is the theme of defeated aspirations, of which Dorothea and Lydgate are the best examples. Both want to do great things in life but their movements are cramped in the narrow provincial society of Middlemarch. George Eliot makes use of such parallels as well as of contrasts to highlight the themes. The theme of love and marriage is also an important one in the novel. The Dorothea-Casaubon marriage and the Rosamond-Lydgate marriage are examples of failed marriages, as the Celia-Chettam marriage, the Dorothea-Ladislaw marriage and the Fred-Mary marriage are examples of successful ones. The search for one's true vocation and the ways in which this may be frustrated is seen in the stories of Dorothea and Lydgate, and also in the examples of Casaubon, Farebrother and Fred.

The moral theme dominates the novel, as can be seen in the various stories. Thus Mr. Brooke lives in leisure and fails to reform his own
estates while preaching to others, but is confronted by angry tenants like Dagley. Bulstrode can buy his way on to committees or Stone Court, but cannot buy Caleb Garth or even Raffles. Featherstone can buy sycophancy and subservience but not integrity. Fred resists temptation to follow the work ethics of the Garths. Lydgate is caught in the money trap and has to pay the price for falling into it. Casaubon’s forgiveness of Dorothea is cold and distant and far from Christian charity. Farebrother has the honesty to admit to Lydgate that he doubts whether the ministry is his true vocation. Farebrother and Mary Garth clearly have the author’s approval and are the type of characters who set the standard for the others in the novel.

5.7 Conclusion

Throughout the novel, the voice of the narrator is very obvious because besides being omniscient, it makes moral judgements on all events and people. George Eliot is impartial in analyzing Dorothea and Lydgate as well as Bulstrode and Casaubon, and her comments are ironic as well as compassionate. Her characters make a psychological journey from delusion to self-realization, and it is to her credit that she makes it a very realistic one for the reader. Joseph Conrad, the novelist we will study in the next chapter, also continues with this realism by creating characters who are true to life, though his technique is a very different one.

5.8 Summary

After some information regarding George Eliot and her literary career, we read a synopsis of Middlemarch. A brief survey of the social background of the age enabled us to get an idea of the canvas on which George Eliot draws her narrative. Her treatment of the men characters as well as the women characters shows her insight into human nature as well as her feeling of compassion towards all. The analysis of the structure of Middlemarch shows that though the novel appears to be rather unwieldy, it is carefully constructed with the two main stories of Dorothea and Lydgate being closely woven with the various sub-plots. Then we saw how the novel is a study of provincial life in 18th century England through the distinctions in social class and
rank in society as reflected in the story. George Eliot touches upon several themes in the novel eg., those of defeated aspirations, love, marriage, etc.

**Check Your Progress - Answers**

5.3

1. pretentious  2. materialistic

5.4

The two stories that were fused together to form Middlemarch were the stories of Dorothea and Lydgate.

5.5

Three things important in the 18th century provincial society in England are birth, rank, and class

---

**Field Work**:

Read the novel The Mill on the Floss written by George Eliot.

☐ ☐ ☐