

Feminism in Middlemarch by George Eliot

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Middlemarch, A Study of Provincial Life is a novel by the English author Mary Anne Evans, who wrote as the penname George Eliot. It is now seen worldwide as her best work and one of the great English novels of all time. The novel's themes are – the status of women, the nature of marriage, idealism, religion, political reform and education etc.. The fictional town of Middlemarch is presented as a silk ribbon manufacturing town. Unconventionally, Eliot refused to end the work with the inevitable happy ending as women writers of that time were expected to do so. The story explains the realities of marriage.

Writer Virginia Woolf called the novel “one of the few English novels written for grown up people.” The novel is highly unusual. Although it is mainly a Victorian novel, it has many qualities typical to modern novels. Middlemarch isn't meant to be merely entertainment and it deals with the realities of life and complexities of ordinary human life. Feminist George Eliot challenged the male domination prevailing in the society. She supported and stressed on the importance of women education. If given equal opportunities, women can achieve as much as man can do in this world.

The struggle between realism and idealism can be found in Dorothea's character. Dorothea is very different from other women of her time as a true representative of the struggle for women empowerment. During the 18th century, there were limited opportunities of education for women. But Dorothea seems to break the convention that knowledge was thought to be unsuitable for women. She is often criticized by the male dominated society. She struggles and contributes for the development and betterment of society.

Eliot challenged the notion of English society by presenting such an independent female character like Dorothea. Dorothea chooses her first husband by her own will just because of her love and thirst for knowledge. Her marriage doesn't prove to be successful. Middlemarch is a feminist novel that supports the desires and the decisions of women. Like Eliot, Dorothea also breaks the convention of marriage.

All the people in the world should think about their duties as well as their rights. George Eliot laid a great emphasis on living a life of virtue, good and righteousness. Moral laws are extremely crucial. Their disobedience can bring complete ruin to the person concerned. According to Eliot, man is the maker of his own destiny. She believes in the principle of free will, thinking right and doing right. The key to live a happy life is to be good, moral and virtuous. George Eliot was against orthodoxy in religions especially the church.

According to Henry James: “Middlemarch is at once one of the strongest and one of the weakest of English novels... We can well remember how keenly we wondered, while its earlier chapters unfolded themselves, what turn in the way of form the story may take- that of an organized, moulded, balanced composition, gratifying the reader with a sense of design and construction, or a mere chain of episodes, broken into accidental lengths and unconscious of the influence of a plan. We expected the actual result, but for the sake of English imaginative literature. We hoped for the other... But that pleasure has still to hover between prospect and retrospect.... Middlemarch is a treasure house of detail, but it is an indifferent whole.”

Mr A.W. Ward said- “George Eliot's novels speak to us of her comprehensive wisdom, nurtured by assiduously acquired learning her penetrating and luminous wit, furnished with its material by a power of observation to which all the pathetic and all the humorous aspects of human character lay open and of her profound religious conviction of the significance of life and its changes as helping to better the human soul, brave and unselfish enough not to sink before them.”

About George Eliot's characterization, Daiches said- “In all her fiction, George Eliot was concerned with moral problems of character, but she never abstracted her characters from their environment in order to illustrate their moral dilemmas. She was familiar with and responsive to the varied social contexts in which nineteenth century men and women could live. She knew England, both town and country, metropolitan and provincial, agricultural, commercial, industrial and professional, and she used her knowledge to make her characters move naturally in their daily occupations- something which Dickens was unable to do, for Dickens didn't take the ordinary daily work of man seriously. Dickens could never think of man's business or professional labours as a significant daily activity taking place normally in some particular environment, and having importance both for the character concerned and for the society of which that character was a part. Indeed, what English novelist before George Eliot took men's daily occupations seriously? From the Canterbury Tales onward, the English tradition was to show people on holding and to refer to their traders and professions merely as background. But George Eliot's Dr Lydgate is a doctor with real medical problems and she reports her discussion of them accurately: we are told precisely the subject of Mr Casaubon's research (in Middlemarch) and precisely wherein it is lacking, the agricultural activity of the Poyers in Adam Bede is presented fully and convincingly and so throughout all the novels. In the Mill on the Floss the moral problems of character and another, those relations in turn growing naturally out of the daily life and work of different members of a community.”

George Eliot mixed humour and pathos. W.L. Cross observes- “Another result of the flexibility of George Eliot's imagination in the dramatic quality of her pathos and humour. She was profoundly convinced of the difficulty of the human lot, and that conviction is what makes her novel so pathetic in their conclusion. But her pathos doesn't appear to come from herself, it rises from the situations she chooses, and is thus apparently of life itself. She saw the humorous side of the doings of vicars and persons, housewives and loiterers at the Red Lyons and at the Rainboes. But we aren't to suppose that the racy and proverbial sayings of these people are from shreds of conversation remembered from childhood. Not at all, they are of George Eliot's own mintage, receiving only their stamp from the lone of the Midlands. They are intimately associated with her character. George Eliot completed the work of Wordsworth: in the spirit of a measureless humanity, dealt with the pathos of the pastoral life she mingled its pathos and humour.” Virginia Woolf writes- “It isn't that her power diminishes, for to our thinking, it is at its highest in the mature Middlemarch, the magnificent book which, with all its imperfections, is one of the few English novels written for grown up people.”

A critic says about Middlemarch,” It contains nothing so beautiful as the childhood of Tom and Maggie Tulliver, nothing so passionate as the love of Adam Bede, no rapture like the religious favour of Dinnah Morries. But it is impressive from beginning to end, weighty yet not heavy, often speedily eloquent, the only book which does equal justice to the two sides of George Eliot, the artistic and the philosophic. There are single characters in some of the other novels greater than any in Middlemarch, but no novel she ever wrote contains so many that dwell in the memory. Hence, if it were necessary to judge of her from one book, that which would give the best conception of her powers would be Middlemarch.”

According to W.C.Brownwell, “One may speak of George Eliot’s style as of the snakes in Ireland. She has no style. . . . Her Puritan predilections should have suggested simplicity to her, but simplicity is the supreme quality which she not only wholly lacks but never ever strives for. . . .”

Middlemarch is set in England in the 1830s. It is a complex structure of five stories. It is neither a story about Dorothea nor Lydgate as the main character. The novel raises an important question about the limitations placed upon women by society. In her fictional town women play a significant role in society.

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