

George eliot



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Heraclitus was a Greek philosopher who maintained that strife and change are natural conditions of the universe. I am interested in philosophy and when reading recently about Heraclitus it came to mind that his “ Logos,” theory reminded me very much of George Eliot’s writing style! It seems odd to parallel the teachings of a Greek philosopher to a Victorian novelist, but it may become clearer as I explain a bit more about this “ Logos,” that Heraclitus talked of, and tell you a little about George Eliot’s life before she began writing fiction. George Eliot was born Mary Ann (later Marian) Evans in 1819 near Nuneaton, England and died in 1880. She began writing fiction at the age of 38 and wrote a few novels, “ Middlemarch,” being her final one.

Until she began her fictional career she had worked as a rationalist journalist, and it was in this career that she reviewed learned books on religion and philosophy. She was a very learned woman and one who was the friend of many men even more learned than herself. The quotation below, taken from “ The English Novel,” by Walter Allen, perhaps links to her previous career in reviewing learned books; George Eliot lived in a much larger world of ideas, ideas which conditioned her views of fiction, the shape her novels took, and the very imagery of her prose. ” George Eliot’s learning helped shape her ideas about how society should act. Her Puritan background also helped shape her writing. As a young child she was brought up as a Puritan but at a relatively early age she rejected mainstream Puritan values and formed her own opinions of religion.

Even though we know she, in a sense, rejected the Puritan religion, we can see that there are still some Puritan values in her mind somewhere. Most people who have some sort of religious faith have morals based on this faith,

and moral values play a strong part in “ Middlemarch. ” After reading “ Middlemarch,” it would seem she intended to expose flaws in her characters in order to show the reader of their own weaknesses. In this sense “ Middlemarch,” can be described as a satirical novel.

George Eliot didn't simply set out to write a good novel. She set out with the task of writing a novel that would express her views on society, one that would help people see the faults of themselves and their neighbours, and I think that her intention was fulfilled. In writing “ Middlemarch,” she has written a novel that goes to great depths in relation to the study of characters, their analysis, plots, themes and ideas. The critic B. Ifor Evans in “ A short history of English Literature says;” “ In George Eliot's work, one is aware of her desire to enlarge the possibilities of the novel as a form of expression: she wishes to include new themes, to penetrate more deeply into character.

” To explain the “ Logos,” theory one simply has to say that Heraclitus thought the world was one in which the only possible harmony was a delicate tension of opposing stresses. It was not however a world of chaos, of strife and perpetual change in which there was no order, there was a living law called “ Logos,” which kept things in balance. In “ Middlemarch,” George Eliot has written a novel that incorporates many plots and themes and ties them together in such a fluid way that they all seem to interact seamlessly. We see through the course of the book how the actions of separate individuals can cause other individuals to change the course of their lives, there are many examples of this, and I will study some in greater detail later

in this assignment. It is in this way that "Middlemarch," reminds me of the "Logos," idea.

Every character and plot is equally and indivisibly linked, and the actions of one individual affect society as a whole. Society as a whole perpetually changes and interacts just as the natural world does, and the society in Victorian times was overshadowed by the moral and social expectations that people had of each other. The 'living law' in Victorian times for some people, for example Dorothea, was a moral law, she lived to do what was morally right in her eyes. Some others, like Rosamond, lived by the law of society. She aimed to do what would please her suitors and peers, she did things that would cause her character to seem flawless, going to a finishing school, playing pleasant songs on the piano, acting like a lady and so on. Before writing this assignment, I thought it would be worthwhile to research a little about George Eliot's other novels.

Although I haven't read them I wanted to see if I could find how George Eliot progressed through her works in terms of social and moral analysis. In terms of her literary history, "Middlemarch," was George Eliot's final novel. "Adam Bede," and "The Mill on the Floss," are some of her others. I found an appropriate article online, taken from "The Atlantic Monthly," which was originally published in June 1860. It reviews "The Mill on the Floss," and compares it to George Eliot's previous books. "It displays a far keener insight into human passion, a subtler analysis of motives and principles, and it suggests a mental and a moral philosophy nobler in themselves and truer to humanity and religion."

Reading this quotation, without knowing which of her books they were talking about, we could easily interpret it to have been about “*Middlemarch*,” for in “*Middlemarch*” George Eliot analyses the motives and principles of characters in great depth, possibly even more so than she did in “*The Mill on the Floss*. ” From reading through other critical evaluations of her previous novels I can see that George Eliot was extremely interested in social and moral analysis, and I think that in “*Middlemarch*,” this is clear. Through the course of “*Middlemarch*” we analyse the actions of individual characters, and the opinions of society as a whole, without even realising it. It was only after reading the quotes that form the basis of my question that I realised how much discrimination is involved in reading the book. What I mean by discrimination is that when reading “*Middlemarch*” George Eliot helps us to make fine distinctions between right and wrong, we have to discern what we think from what the writer thinks, and from what the characters in the story think.

I personally think that in challenging the reader to do this, without them even realising it, she has achieved something remarkable. In chapter twenty-five, we hear Fred Vincy telling Mary Garth, the object of his affections, that he has borrowed money from her parents. Fred Vincy says; “ I am so miserable, Mary - if you knew how miserable I am, you would be sorry for me. ” In response she tells him that; “ There are other things to be more sorry for than that.

But selfish people always think their own discomfort of more importance than anything else in the world: I see enough of that every day. ” In the dialogue between them George Eliot has presented the reader with Mary’s

view on Fred's actions. At the same time, there is an underlying challenge to us, the reader. Do we agree with the opinion of Mary, or do we sympathise with Fred? When reading it, we make a moral judgement on the two characters without even realising it, just as the character (Mary in this case) has made a judgement on the other.

The plots in the novel are intertwined and the actions of one family reflects on another, just as they do in society, an example of this is how the plight of Mary Garth's family runs parallel to the decisions Fred Vincy makes in his life. His decisions affect her family, and cause things to happen in her family that otherwise would not have happened. When one character does something that affects another in a negative way George Eliot, through the character, shows us their opinion while at the same time challenges us to form our own opinions of that action. Do we think the character in question, let's say Fred Vincy, was right to ask Mary Garth's parents to lend him one hundred and sixty pounds, when he knew that they didn't have money to spare? It is in this way that we discriminate indirectly throughout the book.

The author presents us with actions and we judge the characters on the basis of these actions. There are many different examples of intertwined plots in the book and another good example is Rosamond and Lydgate. Lydgate's life in some ways took a turn for the worse when he married Rosamond and in the following paragraphs I will show how I think she corrupted him with her power. I will also discuss how society acted in relation to him as a newcomer. Dr.

Tertius Lydgate was a good doctor, one who was ambitious and was striving to do the best he could in his field of work. We are told that from the hour he decided he wanted to be a doctor, “ he felt the growth of an intellectual passion. ” Lydgate studied in Paris with the determination that; “ when he came home again he would settle in some provincial town as a general practitioner, and resist the irrational severance between medical and surgical knowledge in the interest of his own scientific pursuits, as well as of the general advance: he would keep away from the range of London intrigues, jealousies and social truckling, and win celebrity, however slowly, as Jenner had done, by the independent value of his work. We can see by this that he ultimately was a good man, one who was interested in medical reform and he believed that he could help people. He wanted to do more than just earn money, he had great ambitions and the reader can admire him for this.

George Eliot, in chapter sixteen, talks about Lydgate in some detail, telling us about his background and what he aims to do in the provincial town of Middlemarch. As always, when talking about a character she gives us all the points that help us make a judgement on them. Instead of telling us only of Lydgate’s great ambitions, she also says of him; The man was still in the making, as much as the Middlemarch doctor and immortal discoverer, and there were both virtues and faults capable of shrinking or expanding. The faults will not, I hope, be a reason for the withdrawal of your interest in him.

” Later in the chapter she goes on to tell us of his faults, and by doing this she allows us to see the character as a whole person and understand why he acts as he does. The quotation above is not just a good example of how

George Eliot tells us everything we need to know about the character in order to make a judgement, it also shows us the way in which she writes in the book. She takes herself out of the action and speaks as an observer, a third person in a sense and by doing this she is able to analyse the character through her own eyes. If she had only portrayed Lydgate as he was seen through the eyes of others we would not fully be able to understand her opinion of him. I think the reason why she uses this technique is very straightforward. It's a technique called authorial intrusion and is used throughout the course of the book to allow the reader to see the author's personal point of view.

This authorial intrusion helps us think about key ideas of the novel, such as human judgement. By saying, "The faults will not, I hope, be a reason for the withdrawal of your interest in him," she lets us know that she believes a person should be judged as whole person and that we in our own lives should not be blind to people's good points. Sometimes we look at people and see them in a negative light because we realise they have some bad points. In "Middlemarch," George Eliot looks at human judgement and at this point especially she is telling us to look at people morally, to not let little faults that don't really matter get in the way of knowing the real person.

George Eliot recognised that the nature of society is to look at people and judge them, sometimes unfairly, yet throughout "Middlemarch," she looks at individuals and analyses them, breaking down their characters and challenging us to judge them, but she does it fairly. I think that she does this as a challenge to the reader, she wants us to morally discriminate and work out for ourselves the best way to look at life and our relationships with other

people. Lydgate is a good character to discuss when trying to explain how George Eliot showed us what she thought the nature of society was like. She talks about how Middlemarch is receiving Lydgate by saying; " Middlemarch, in fact, counted on swallowing Lydgate and assimilating him very comfortably. " The town of Middlemarch though was filled with different sorts of people, all of whom received Lydgate in different ways. There was Farebrother who immediately welcomed him but there were also the other doctors who treated him with an air of caution.

I think that instead of looking at him as a valuable asset, in relation to the progression of medicine they felt threatened and resented his arrival. Some people in the town treated him in a suspicious way because they were wary of his practices. They wondered why he didn't dispense medicines as readily as the other doctors and thought badly of him because of it. Lydgate was acting in the most honest manner in doing this. Instead of prescribing unnecessary medication in order to get money for it he only prescribed when it was needed.

Some people in Middlemarch feared change, they did not realise that the ways of the majority were always the right ways. This is still the nature of society today. Some people will always fear change and progress and at the time that George Eliot wrote " Middlemarch," times were indeed changing. I think that there was a portion of the society at that time that really did fear progress or change of any sort.

Others in the town were not bothered by progress at all, and let it pass them by. There were also those who liked to stir progress, the politicians for

example who were eager for change. And finally, there was Lydgate himself, one who aimed to progress in the field he worked in. I think that in the end he found that it was exactly as described by George Orwell, (1903-1950); “ Progress is not an illusion, it happens, but it is slow and invariably disappointing.

” Not all the people in the town of Middlemarch were suspicious of him, some like the Vincy family were welcoming. Mr. Vincy was a man who had made his money by working hard and the Vincy family was fond of holding parties to entertain their neighbours and friends. Dr. Lydgate was invited to one such party and it was here he met Rosamond Vincy, a young lady whose garments seemed; to be made out of the faintest blue sky, herself so immaculately blond, as if the petals of some gigantic flower had just opened and disclosed her; and yet with this infantile blondness showing so much ready, self-possessed grace. ” Her beauty, grace, style and talents for singing and playing music impressed Dr Lydgate.

He was impressed by her and later when he went home thought about her but soon was absorbed in his work again. On the other hand, Rosamond saw Lydgate as a man suited to her because he was from outside the town and was of distinguished birth having a “ titled uncle. She saw him as a suitable partner and one who would help her climb in the social hierarchy of the town. Lydgate also thought of her as a suitable partner, one who was to his taste, but had no intention of marrying her anytime soon.

In the chapters that followed their meeting we see how Lydgate eventually proposes to her, out of pity as opposed to love. He seems to view her as a

sort of helpless creature and I think that it is only when he is married to her and sees how selfish she is that he realises what she's really like. The British scientist and author Jacob Bronowski (1908 -74) once said; " No science is immune to the infection of politics and the corruption of power. " I think this is a relevant quote as in " Middlemarch," we see how his ambition to make his mark in the field of medicine and make breakthroughs in his field was hampered by his wife and the power she has over him. In terms of politics, I think that the social attitude in Middlemarch at that time affected Lydgate's work also, but in general it was Rosamond who had a major effect on his career.

Earlier in the book Lydgate says about women in general; " But he had more reason than ever for trusting his judgement, now that it was so experienced; and henceforth he would take a strictly scientific view of women, entertaining no expectations, but such as were justified beforehand. " I thought this was very ironic indeed, as with Rosamond he seems to have lots of expectations of her, and doesn't really get to know her at all before he marries her. He is taken by her beauty but doesn't realise how selfish she is. Rosamond, after she marries him wants to have the best furniture for their house and Lydgate is naive in giving it to her. They both have an unthinking attitude and don't really work out their financial situation, and even before they are married they spend more than they can afford. Later when they are married, we see how much Rosamond cares for money and social status and as a reader it is easy to despise her scheming ways.

Some may say I am being harsh when I describe Rosamond as scheming but I don't think so at all. When Lydgate is in debt and wants to lease their house

to Ned Plymdale he asks Trumbull to help him do so. Rosamond goes behind his back intentionally and tells Trumbull that Lydgate has changed his mind. During these times of financial strain Lydgate feels that Rosamond is remaining “ utterly aloof from him.

” Instead of being a supportive partner in the relationship Rosamond is a very selfish and deceptive woman. She wants only for things that will benefit herself and cares too much about what other people think of her, and her position in society is more important to her than her husband’s wishes. She has no respect for Lydgate’s wishes at all and I find that despicable. George Eliot has presented the reader with such an accurate representation of Rosamond’s character that we find it easy to morally discriminate in relation to her, and in this case against her. This brings me to talk about characterization in “ Middlemarch.

” Characterization in this novel takes on a few different forms, and I will use Rosamond as an example to illustrate this. Some presentation of character is carried out through the use of physical descriptions, but most is not. At some points authorial intrusion is used to give us George Eliot’s point of view and help us form our own opinions in relation to hers but overall the true nature of the character is presented by actions. Instead of saying outright that Rosamond is wrong in what she does George Eliot presents us with actions that show us she is. The other way that George Eliot presents the characters is a way which has a lot of personal input, albeit indirectly.

In reading this sentence; “ She was admitted to be the flower of Mrs. Lemon’s school, the chief school in the county, where the teaching included

all that was demanded in the accomplished female – even to extras, such as the getting in and out of a carriage,” the reader can tell that George Eliot does not approve. It is easy to realise that George Eliot does not in fact think that the sort of teaching Rosamond received at Mrs. Lemon’s school was the sort that showed a girl to be an “ accomplished female. ” The level of indirect personal opinion we get through characterization from the author is refreshing.

We can see her point of view without it being overpowering. She uses tone and language to help get her point across and sometimes her point of view makes you smile. “ Middlemarch,” is by no means a book that often makes you laugh out loud, but at certain points George Eliot allows you to see her view of the characters in such a way that it makes you want to laugh at them, and their warped view of life, and it is in this way that she helps the reader to morally discriminate. The critic David Cecil talks about the authors characterization in his book “ Early Victorian Novelists” saying, Her portraits are all primarily portraits of the inner man. ” I agree with this statement because it is clear to the reader of “ Middlemarch,” that in every one of the different ways George Eliot presents her characters, there is a common aim and that is to give us an insight into the personality of the character in order to allow us to make a moral judgement. There are different ways in which George Eliot presents her characters in the book, and the ways in which she does this help to shape our views on them, and contribute to the novel as a whole.

The sheer number of characters in the novel makes it impossible to go through each and every one in great detail, analysing how she presents

them, so I have chosen to study in particular the moral development of Dorothea Brooke in some detail. I'll begin with a quote again from the critic B. Ifor Evans; " In ' Middlemarch,' there is no central figure of any kind, the main interest is divided between four separate groups of characters, and none of these except Dorothea Brooke approaches the conventional ' heroic' type. " I agree with this statement, as I feel that George Eliot has presented Dorothea in that way. The writer presents her as being a caring woman, someone who is concerned about others and especially caring about those less fortunate than she is.

An example of this attitude is when she talks about improving the cottages of the people living on estates. Sir James Chettham approaches the idea with her and the dialogue that follows shows her enthusiasm for this, which is in stark contrast to the actions of other characters such as Rosamond who seems interested only in finding a suitable man for her to marry. Sir James Chettham says to Dorothea, in relation to the building of the cottages; Do you know, that is one of the things I wish to do - I mean, on my own estate? I should be so glad to carry out that plan of yours, if you would let me see it. Of course, it is sinking money; that is why people object to it. Labourers can never pay rent to make it answer. But, after all, it is worth doing.

" " Worth doing! Yes, indeed," said Dorothea energetically. " I think we deserve to be beaten out of our beautiful houses with a scourge of small cords - all of us who let tenants live in such sties as we see round us. Life in cottages might be happier than ours, if they were real houses fit for human beings from whom we expect duties and affections. " In the chapters that Dorothea is involved in her moral development is of paramount importance.

At the beginning of the book we see how she falls for Casaubon, not through love but because she thought he would lead her to the intellectual heights to which she aspires. Mr. Casaubon was a scholar and a man who had spent many years buried in his own library studying learned books. He wanted to marry Dorothea not because he loved her but for female companionship in his life.

George Eliot describes his want for “ female tendance for his declining years. ” This paints a rather depressing picture and we wonder how Dorothea cannot see that she is wrong in marrying a man like this for her reasons. She is not seeing the reality of the situation and George Eliot clearly shows us that this is all an illusion to her. The author’s comments on the situation are, “ it is a narrow mind which cannot look at subjects from various points of view.

” She means that we should not condemn Dorothea as she believes that what she’s doing is right. Dorothea’s sister is presented in contrast to Dorothea. Celia sees Mr. Casaubon for what he really is and the way she physically describes him is simply, “ very ugly. ” Dorothea however thinks that Mr.

Casaubon is, “ one of the most distinguished-looking men” she has ever seen. At this early stage in the book we cannot judge Dorothea to be wrong, her attitudes are there with the best of intentions and we can sympathise with her. She seems to be so caught up in trying to do what is right that she cannot see the mistake she is making in marrying Casaubon. In chapter four we are told of how Dorothea believes that marrying Casaubon will allow her

to get away from “ her own sad liability to tread in the wrong places on her way to the New Jerusalem.

” This struck me as one of the most ironic things in the book because Dorothea’s ‘ escape’ from Tipton and Freshitt is not an escape at all – it is a step into a life where she will feel more trapped than she has ever felt before. The reader can see this and again we sympathise with her. In chapter five we read the letter from Mr. Casaubon that proposes Dorothea marry him.

It is a letter that shows how socially under-developed he is. He proposes that they marry and yet in the letter he dwells on his self-pity and is shockingly self-centred. There are perhaps two compliments to Dorothea in the letter, which would be that he had discerned in her an “ elevation of thought,” and a “ capability of devotedness. ” Not once does he express that he loves her, and there is only one expression of emotion, that would be that he, “ awaits the expression of (her) sentiments with an anxiety.

” The compliments of the letter are buried in the verbiage and the reader feels such pity for Dorothea when we read of her reaction to the letter. I would think that any rational person reading such a letter that proposes marriage would either laugh or cry in the shame that such a person would like them, yet Dorothea cries with joy when she reads it, and it is at this point that I really pity her. Dorothea’s reply to Mr. Casaubon’s letters is such a contrast to his that it serves only to highlight the differences between them and it is here that you can see just how absurdly incompatible they are.

She says; “ My dear Mr. Casaubon, - I am very grateful to you for loving me, and thinking me worthy to be your wife. In these words you can see her honestly, idealism and devotedness and as she goes on the reader really feels for her and you want her to see the mistake she is making before it's too late, but she doesn't. Dorothea fails to see that Mr.

Casaubon doesn't love her, whereas we know that he sees her as a convenience more than anything else. One thing that is noticeable here is that George Eliot does not condemn her for this. The author says; “ How could it occur to her to examine the letter, to look at it critically as a profession of love? “ George Eliot does not exactly justify her seeming blindness to what Casaubon really feels, she just does not condemn her for it. She recognises that it's just a flaw in Dorothea's character and I think that in some ways she is indirectly challenging the reader to look at the relationships in their own lives and see what they would think of them if they looked at them as an independent observer.

Chapter five ends with the feeling that Dorothea is at the height of her illusion. It seems that from now on in the book she is on the path to self-realisation. This journey, and the realisation that her marriage was a mistake, is almost cathartic in a sense, for it is only after she is widowed and has had time to think about her mistake that she seems to develop a sense of peace and regain her proper judgement. At this stage I think that it's appropriate to say that I agree fully with one of the statements that forms the basis of my question. Barbara Dennis says in “ The Victorian Novel;” “ Social and moral analysis are constantly required of the reader of any Victorian novel, and those writing on .

.. George Eliot ...

ill find that the response looked for is regularly one of moral discrimination. ”

I agree fully with this statement. When reading “ Middlemarch,” the reader constantly analyses the characters in relation to their morals and to their social relationships and I do think that George Eliot challenged us to do this in order to morally discriminate for the benefit of ourselves. The other statement from Barbara Dennis in “ The Victorian Novel,” is also one that I find it easy to agree with; “ All her novels .

.. invited her readers to think about the nature of society itself as well as about the histories of the individuals that make it up. After spending time analysing closely passages from the book I have found that the author does indeed invite her readers to think about the nature of society.

By analysing the human relationships between characters and identifying how the actions of one character results in another character being affected she has invited the reader to think about the nature of society as a whole unit that interacts together. I think that the nature of society is one in which people interact and form relationships with each other. The nature of society is also one in which the histories of the individual help shape their actions in relation to other people. I think that George Eliot has shown the diversity in human characters very well in this book. By indirectly asking the reader to analyse the actions of characters she has challenged the reader to think about the nature of society and about the character as a human being who is not flawless.

I have come to the conclusion that in "Middlemarch," George Eliot invites her readers to think about the nature of society, to constantly carry out social and moral analysis of characters and regularly morally discriminate. George Eliot doesn't do any one of the three any more than the next and there is a fine balance between them all. The reader, without realising, reads "Middlemarch," and constantly carries out all three things. It is only when you are faced with quotations that make you ask yourself have you done those things that you are faced with the realisation that throughout the book you have constantly analysed in depth what you thought of the characters and of society.

There is a delicate balance between all three things, the moral discrimination, the thinking of the nature of society and the social and moral analysis. We could perhaps even call this balance a delicate tension of stresses where we have discussed the good and bad points of a character and come to a judgement. The balance is equal and indivisible and when reading the book you are often unable to distinguish whether George Eliot is looking for you to discriminate socially or morally or just to think about the nature of society. However, one thing is for sure, she definitely is challenging you to do one, two or perhaps all three. There were many novels written at the same time as George Eliot, and many of them gained wider critical acclaim than Middlemarch did.

I'm unable to say confidently that "Middlemarch," deserves higher praise than the rest because I haven't studied the others in as much detail as I have studied this book, but I feel that it is a book that has in a way changed how I look at my life and the people in it. I feel that to write a novel that affects a

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reader directly in this way is quite an achievement. Taking Dickens as an example, he was writing in the same era that George Eliot wrote in, and having read "Great Expectations," I found that although it was a book that was easy to relate to and made me think of many different issues in different ways, it wasn't as affecting as "Middlemarch," was. I think that George Eliot is different from some other Victorian writers in how she moralises, and it is because of this that I value it so highly. David Cecil says that George Eliot's effort is not characteristically Victorian because; That intellectual interest which is the mainspring of her inspiration alters the angle from which she approaches every aspect of her subject-matter: she cannot look at anything without analysing and diagnosing.

"Some people may think that this criticism is a negative one. I agree with David Cecil's point of view as I think he admires her intellectual mind and the fact that she studies people so closely. The ideas of David Cecil can be paralleled to those of Marcus Aurelius (121-80). Marcus Aurelius was a Roman emperor and philosopher and he thought that; To understand the true quality of people, you must look into their minds, and examine their pursuits and aversions.

"This is exactly what George Eliot did in "Middlemarch." I found that it was refreshing to read a book where I constantly had so many things to think about, and where the actions of a fictitious character written so many years ago still seemed relative to me today. I can understand that if the book was written in a slightly different way, one in which there was no humour, irony or moral discrimination