



George Eliot

(1819-1880)

Life and works

Mary Ann Evans, who later adopted the pen name of 'George Eliot', was born at Arbury, in Warwickshire, in 1819. She received an ordinary education and an evangelical upbringing.

When her mother died, she took charge of the house and **her father decided to move to the city of Coventry**. There she came into contact with **intellectual circles** and became a **friend of the Brays, a family of radical views** who campaigned for causes such as state education, voting rights and trade unions.

In this period she broke with formal religion but maintained **the belief that people can have moral standards independently from Christianity**. She read widely and studied Italian and German; she also published her first work, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1846), a translation of a book by Strauss.

After her father's death she travelled around Europe and, once back in England, **decided to settle in London and work as a freelance writer**. She rented rooms with the Chapman family who owned 'The Westminster Review'. She contributed to this literary journal with articles and essays, and finally became assistant editor.

In London she met many of the leading political, literary and radical figures of the day, including the important journalist **George Henry Lewes**. Their friendship gradually developed into love. Though he was married with four children, in 1854

they decided to live together in defiance of social convention, which condemned openly admitted adultery. **Lewes encouraged Mary Ann to write fiction**, which she did under the male pseudonym of George Eliot. She chose George because it was Lewes's name and Eliot because it was easy to pronounce.

Her first work, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, appeared in book form in 1858, followed in 1859 by *Adam Bede*, which was a worldwide success. Over the following years she published a series of successful novels: *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner* (1861), *Romola* (1862-63), *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and *Daniel Deronda* (1874-76).

In 1878 Lewes died and, after two years, Mary Ann **married the banker John Cross**. She died the same year, in September 1880. After a period of unpopularity at the beginning of the 20th century, George Eliot has now been reinstated **among the great English novelists**. All her novels are rooted in the English tradition; from Jane Austen she took her sense of social comedy which combines with the ability to make morality genuinely interesting; from Walter Scott she inherited the skill to deal with a historical setting and changing cultures; from Fielding and Thackeray she learned the method of presenting characters through explanation or comment. **The innovative psychological and analytical quality of her works** had an enormous influence on the development of the modern introspective novel of the 20th century.

Middlemarch

(1871-1872)

PLOT

Middlemarch is a **very long novel** consisting of **eight books**, which deal with eight different stories. **The two main stories develop around the character of Dorothea Brooke**, a rich young country lady, who lives with her uncle in Middlemarch, a town in the Midlands. Dorothea is beautiful, religious and idealistic; she wants to do something useful in her life. Driven by her intellectual ambitions, **she decides to marry** an old, pedantic scholar, **Reverend Casaubon**, though everyone else in society is aware that he has no value. During their honeymoon in Rome she begins to realise she has made a mistake, but resolves not to leave him. She meets Casaubon's cousin, **Will Ladislav** and, after her husband's death, she gets involved with him. However, only they declare their love and get married at the end. Then they move to London where Will becomes a successful politician. The other main story unfolds around **Doctor Lydgate** who comes to Middlemarch to do **medical research** but has to give up his ambitions after marrying an attractive and

superficial young woman, Rosamond. At the end of the story they go to London where he becomes a successful doctor.

SETTING

As its subtitle clearly states, *Middlemarch* is 'A Study of Provincial Life'. The setting of the novel is the **small provincial town** of Middlemarch and the country estates around it during **the years preceding the Reform Act of 1832**. This background was deliberately chosen by Eliot to deal with **a society in transformation** and to study **the response of the individual to the social, political, religious and material changes** happening around them. The society she portrays includes members from all social classes, described not only in appearance, but also through deep psychological insights, to explore their moral worth and motivations. According to D.H. Lawrence, she was the first who started 'putting all the action inside', that is to say, in the character's mind, rather than just in the working of the plot.

THEMES
AND CHARACTERS

The main theme of the novel is **the relationship between the character and the environment he or she lives in**. This does not mean that the environment determines the character: Eliot's main figures bear the responsibility of their moral choices. Everything they do has consequences and also affects other people's lives. Her characters determine their own destiny and often **search for their true vocation** emphasising the value of **self-sacrifice**, like Dorothea who, instead of abandoning her husband, lovingly takes care of him. This view in the author is not based on any religious dogma; after rejecting Christianity, Eliot evolved a **religion of humanity** based on the concepts of love and duty to others, rather than to God.

STYLE

A character is presented through others' opinions of him/her. Then the **omniscient narrator** organises these social opinions to present a unified vision both of the individual and of social interaction. Eliot's omniscient narrator openly **intrudes making remarks** on the characters, **directly addressing the reader** through rhetorical questions or general observations, using the technique of irony or the present tense introduced by 'I'. In this way the reader shares the author's point of view, her sympathetic, unconventional, deeply moral outlook.

The style of the novel is **realistic** in its precise presentation and reflects the influence of the positivistic theories accounting for the smallest detail, in the clear analytical language suited to the author's aim, which, unlike most Victorian writers, was to examine moral problems and human psychology rather than please and entertain the reader.

*Key idea***The role of women**

The novel also gives a picture of the position of women in Victorian society, where they were regarded as inferior and often forced into marriage as the only outlet for their energies and talent. In fact, George Eliot has

been described as having 'the highest faith in the potential of women and the deepest distrust of the likelihood of its realization', which is implied in the quotation at the beginning of the novel (→ Text Bank 64).

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION**1 READ** the texts and answer the following questions.

- 1 When did George Eliot decide to work as a writer?
- 2 What was her reputation?
- 3 What is the structure of *Middlemarch*?
- 4 When and where is the novel set?
- 5 Why did Eliot choose such setting?
- 6 What kind of society did she portray?
- 7 What is the main theme of the novel?
- 8 Was Eliot religious?
- 9 What is the style of the novel?
- 10 What was Eliot's attitude towards women in society?



Dorothea Brooke

This passage comes from the opening pages of the novel. It introduces the protagonist, Dorothea, and her sister Celia, providing an interesting insight into the position of women during the Victorian Age.

Since I can do no good because a woman,
Reach¹ constantly at something that is near it.
Beaumont and Fletcher², *The Maid's Tragedy*

George Eliot
Middlemarch
(1871-1872)

Chapter 1

Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief³ by poor
5 dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less
bare of style⁴ than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters; and
her profile as well as her stature and bearing seemed to gain the more dignity from her
plain garments, which by the side of⁵ provincial fashion gave her the impressiveness
10 of a fine quotation from the Bible, – or from one of our elder poets, – in a paragraph
of to-day's newspaper. She was usually spoken of as being remarkably clever, but with
the addition that her sister Celia had more common-sense. Nevertheless, Celia wore
scarcely more trimmings⁶; and it was only to close observers that her dress differed
15 from her sister's, and had a shade of coquetry⁷ in its arrangements; for Miss Brooke's
plain dressing was due to mixed conditions, in most of which her sister shared. The
pride of being ladies had something to do with it: the Brooke connections, though
not exactly aristocratic, were unquestionably 'good': if you inquired backward⁸
for a generation or two, you would not find any yard-measuring or parcel-tying
20 forefathers⁹ – anything lower than an admiral or a clergyman; and there was even
an ancestor discernible¹⁰ as a Puritan gentleman who served under Cromwell, but
afterwards conformed, and managed to come out of all political troubles as the
proprietor of a respectable family estate. Young women of such birth, living in a quiet
country-house, and attending a village church hardly larger than a parlour, naturally
25 regarded frippery¹¹ as the ambition of a huckster's¹² daughter. Then there was well-
bred economy¹³, which in those days made show in dress the first item to be deducted
from¹⁴, when any margin was required for expenses more distinctive of rank. Such
reasons would have been enough to account for¹⁵ plain dress, quite apart from religious
feeling; but in Miss Brooke's case, religion alone would have determined it; and Celia
30 mildly acquiesced in¹⁶ all her sister's sentiments, only infusing them with that common-
sense which is able to accept momentous¹⁷ doctrines without any eccentric agitation.
Dorothea knew many passages of Pascal's *Pensées*¹⁸ and of Jeremy Taylor¹⁹ by heart; and
to her the destinies of mankind, seen by the light of Christianity, made the solicitudes
of feminine fashion appear an occupation for Bedlam²⁰. She could not reconcile the
anxieties of a spiritual life involving eternal consequences, with a keen interest in
guimp²¹ and artificial protrusions of drapery²². Her mind was theoretic, and yearned²³
35 by its nature after some lofty²⁴ conception of the world which might frankly include the
parish of Tipton and her own rule of conduct there; she was enamoured of intensity
and greatness, and rash²⁵ in embracing whatever seemed to her to have those aspects;
likely to seek martyrdom, to make retractations, and then to incur martyrdom²⁶ after all
in a quarter where she had not sought it. Certainly such elements in the character of a
40 marriageable girl tended to interfere with her lot²⁷, and hinder²⁸ it from being decided
according to custom, by good looks, vanity, and merely canine affection. With all this,
she, the elder of the sisters, was not yet twenty, and they had both been educated,
since they were about twelve years old and had lost their parents, on plans at once
narrow and promiscuous, first in an English family and afterwards in a Swiss family
45 at Lausanne, their bachelor uncle and guardian²⁹ trying in this way to remedy the
disadvantages of their orphaned condition.

It was hardly a year since they had come to live at Tipton Grange with their uncle, a

- 1 Reach. Miro, tendo.
- 2 Beaumont and Fletcher. Francis Beaumont (1585-1616) e John Fletcher (1579-1625) furono contemporanei di Shakespeare e scrissero in collaborazione per il teatro.
- 3 thrown into relief. Messa in rilievo.
- 4 sleeves ... style. Maniche non meno prive di stile.
- 5 by the side of. Paragonati a.
- 6 trimmings. Fronzoli, ornamenti.
- 7 a shade of coquetry. Una sfumatura di civetteria.
- 8 you inquired backward. Si indagava nel passato.
- 9 any ... forefathers. Nessun antenato che fosse stato mercante di stoffe o negoziante.
- 10 discernible. Riconoscibile.
- 11 frippery. Fronzoli.
- 12 huckster's. Di un rigattiere.
- 13 well-bred economy. Economia dei ceti raffinati.
- 14 made ... from. Faceva dell'abbigliamento lussuoso la prima voce da ridurre.
- 15 to account for. Per giustificare, spiegare.
- 16 mildly acquiesced in. Si adeguava docilmente a.
- 17 momentous. Importante.
- 18 Pascal's *Pensées*. Una difesa del Cristianesimo scritta dal filosofo francese Blaise Pascal (1623-1662).
- 19 Jeremy Taylor. Teologo e predicatore anglicano (1613-1667).
- 20 Bedlam. Bethlem Royal Hospital, famoso manicomio londinese.
- 21 guimp. Trine, ornamenti.
- 22 protrusions of drapery. Ostentazioni di drappaggi.
- 23 yearned. Desiderava.
- 24 lofty. Elevata.
- 25 rash. Avventata.
- 26 incur martyrdom. Incorrere nel martirio.
- 27 lot. Destino.
- 28 hinder. Impedire.
- 29 guardian. Tutore.



man nearly sixty, of **acquiescent** temper, miscellaneous opinions, and uncertain vote³⁰. He had travelled in his younger years, and was held³¹ in this part of the county to have contracted a too rambling³² habit of mind. Mr Brooke's conclusions were as difficult to predict as the weather: it was only safe to say that he would act with benevolent intentions, and that he would spend as little money as possible in carrying them out. For the most glutinously³³ indefinite minds enclose some hard grains³⁴ of habit; and a man has been seen lax³⁵ about all his own interests except the retention of his snuff-box³⁶, concerning which he was watchful, suspicious, and greedy of clutch³⁷.

In Mr Brooke the hereditary **strain** of Puritan energy was clearly in abeyance³⁸; but in his niece Dorothea it glowed alike through faults and virtues, turning sometimes into impatience of her uncle's talk or his way of 'letting things be' on his estate, and making her long all the more³⁹ for the time when she would be of age and have some command of money for generous schemes. She was regarded as an heiress; for not only had the sisters seven hundred a-year each from their parents, but if Dorothea married and had a son, that son would inherit Mr Brooke's estate, presumably worth about three thousand a-year – a rental⁴⁰ which seemed wealth to provincial families, still discussing Mr Peel's late conduct on the Catholic question, innocent of future gold-fields, and of that gorgeous⁴¹ plutocracy which has so nobly exalted the necessities of **genteel** life.

And how should Dorothea not marry? – a girl so handsome and with such prospects? Nothing could hinder it but her love of extremes, and her insistence on regulating life according to notions which might cause a wary⁴² man to hesitate before he made her an offer, or even might lead her at last to refuse all offers. A young lady of some birth and fortune, who knelt suddenly down on a brick floor by the side of a sick labourer and prayed fervidly as if she thought herself living in the time of the Apostles – who had strange whims of fasting⁴³ like a Papist, and of sitting up at night to read old theological books! Such a wife might awaken you some fine morning with a new scheme for the application of her income which would interfere with political economy and the keeping of saddle-horses: a man would naturally think twice before he risked himself in such **fellowship**. Women were expected to have weak opinions; but the great safeguard of society and of domestic life was that opinions were not acted on⁴⁴. Sane people did what their neighbours did, so that if any lunatics⁴⁵ were at large⁴⁶, one might know and avoid them.

The rural opinion about the new young ladies, even among the cottagers, was generally in favour of Celia, as being so amiable and innocent-looking, while Miss Brooke's large eyes seemed, like her religion, too unusual and striking. Poor Dorothea! compared with her, the innocent-looking Celia was knowing and worldly-wise⁴⁷; so much **subtler** is a human mind than the outside tissues⁴⁸ which make a sort of blazonry or clock-face⁴⁹ for it.

Yet those who approached Dorothea, though prejudiced against her by this alarming hearsay⁵⁰, found that she had a charm unaccountably reconcilable with it. Most men thought her bewitching⁵¹ when she was on horseback. She loved the fresh air and the various aspects of the country, and when her eyes and cheeks **glowed** with mingled pleasure she looked very little like a devotee. Riding was an indulgence⁵² which she allowed herself in spite of conscientious qualms⁵³; she felt that she enjoyed it in a pagan sensuous way, and always looked forward to renouncing it.

She was open, ardent, and not in the least self-admiring⁵⁴; indeed, it was pretty to see how her imagination adorned her sister Celia with attractions altogether superior to her own, and if any gentleman appeared to come to the Grange from⁵⁵ some other motive than that of seeing Mr Brooke, she concluded that he must be in love with Celia: Sir James Chettam, for example, whom she constantly considered from Celia's point of view, inwardly debating whether it would be good for Celia to accept him. That he should be regarded as a suitor⁵⁶ to herself would have seemed to her a ridiculous irrelevance⁵⁷. Dorothea, with all her eagerness⁵⁸ to know the truths of life, retained very child-like ideas about marriage. She felt sure that she would have accepted the judicious

- 30 **uncertain vote**. Incerta appartenenza politica.
- 31 **held**. Considerato.
- 32 **rambling**. Disordinata.
- 33 **glutinously**. Viscidamente.
- 34 **hard grains**. Granelli duri.
- 35 **lax**. Pigno.
- 36 **snuff-box**. Tabacchiera.
- 37 **greedy of clutch**. Impaziente di afferrarla.
- 38 **in abeyance**. Sopito.
- 39 **long all the more**. Desiderare tanto più.
- 40 **a rental**. Una rendita.
- 41 **gorgeous**. Opulenta.
- 42 **wary**. Cauto, prudente.
- 43 **whims of fasting**. Improvviso desiderio di digiunare.
- 44 **were not acted on**. Non venissero messe in atto.
- 45 **lunatics**. Pazzi.
- 46 **at large**. In libertà.
- 47 **knowing and worldly-wise**. Navigata ed esperta.
- 48 **outside tissues**. Fibre esterne.
- 49 **blazonry or clock-face**. Blasone o facciata.
- 50 **hearsay**. Pettegolezzi.
- 51 **bewitching**. Affascinante.
- 52 **indulgence**. Svago.
- 53 **qualms**. Scrupoli.
- 54 **self-admiring**. Narcisista.
- 55 **from**. Per.
- 56 **suitor**. Corteggiatore.
- 57 **irrelevance**. Assurdità.
- 58 **eagerness**. Entusiasmo.



Hooker⁵⁹, if she had been born in time to save him from that **wretched** mistake he made in matrimony; of John Milton when his blindness had come on; or any of the other great men whose odd habits it would have been glorious piety to endure⁶⁰; but an
 105 amiable handsome baronet, who said 'Exactly' to her remarks even when she expressed uncertainty – how could he affect her as a lover? The really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew⁶¹, if you wished it.

These peculiarities of Dorothea's character caused Mr Brooke to be all the more
 110 blamed⁶² in neighbouring families for not securing some middle-aged lady as guide and companion to his nieces. But he himself dreaded so much the sort of superior woman likely to be available for such a position, that he allowed himself to be dissuaded by Dorothea's objections, and was in this case brave enough to defy the world – that is to say, Mrs Cadwallader, the Rector's wife, and the small group of gentry
 115 with whom he visited in the north-east corner of Loamshire. So Miss Brooke presided in her uncle's household, and did not at all dislike her new authority, with the homage that belonged to it.

59 **judicious Hooker.** Giudizioso Hooker. Si riferisce a Richard Hooker (1554-1600), vescovo di Exeter, che si diceva avesse avuto un matrimonio sfortunato.

60 **to endure.** Da sopportare.

61 **Hebrew.** Lebraico.

62 **blamed.** Criticato.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

VOCABULARY

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 withdrawals of opinions | 7 belonging to polite society |
| 2 trait from an ancestor | 8 unfortunate |
| 3 company | 9 unmarried |
| 4 room for receiving visitors | 10 more acute |
| 5 shone | 11 submitted |
| 6 clothes | |

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ the text again and match the characters on the left with their descriptions on the right to make complete sentences. Add linking words where necessary.

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| Dorothea and Celia | often went to the Grange to see the sisters |
| | attended the village church |
| Mr Brooke | lived at Tipton Grange, a country house |
| | were considered remarkably clever and sensible |
| | ran her uncle's household |
| | was their guardian |
| | were heiresses |
| Dorothea | had good connections |
| | was almost twenty |
| Sir James Chettam | had received their education in England and Switzerland |
| | were orphans |
| | was about sixty |
| | wore plain dresses |

COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

3 DECIDE

- from whose point of view the situation is introduced;
- the kind of narrator.



- 4 MARK** the parts where the narrator is reporting the views of people who know Dorothea and where she allows herself privileged access to Dorothea's thoughts. Then underline some examples in which the author openly intrudes in the story with remarks.

- 5 FOCUS** on the description of Dorothea's appearance and complete the table below.

Physical appearance	Clothes

- 6 LIST** the words and phrases that emphasise the contrast between Dorothea's and Celia's personalities.

Dorothea:

Celia:

- 7 DESCRIBE** the figure of Dorothea. What are the elements in her character that the narrator suggests might make it difficult for her to marry?

- 8 CONSIDER** the way the character has been presented. Tick as appropriate.

- ☐ Through her words.
☐ Through her thoughts.
☐ Through her actions.
☐ Through public opinion.
☐ Through the omniscient narrator.

- 9 FIND** the words and phrases which describe Mr Brooke. Then answer the question below.

- Age:
- Character:
- Ideas:
- Interests:

What is the narrator's attitude towards him?

- 10 RECOGNISE** the kind of structures through which Dorothea's character is mainly introduced. Tick as appropriate, then answer the question below.

- ☐ Compound sentences.
☐ Relative clauses.
☐ Comparisons.
☐ Passive sentences.
☐ Consecutive clauses.
☐ Contrast clauses.
☐ If-clauses.

Why do you think the author achieves such complexity?

- A To provide a complete description of the character's appearance and inner world.
B To explore the character's motives and connections.
C To entertain her public with wealth of details.



11 UNDERLINE the sentences in the text relevant to the main theme of the novel, that is, the relationship between the individual and the environment. What kind of society do Dorothea and Celia live in? How would you define the author's tone? Tick as appropriate.

- ☐ Humorous.
- ☐ Ironical.
- ☐ Sharply critical.
- ☐ Sympathetic.

12 CONSIDER Dorothea's view of marriage and briefly summarise it. What is the author's opinion?

➤ **COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS WITH THE CONTEXT OF THE AGE**

13 DISCUSS. What aspects of Victorianism can you find in the passage? Would you define Dorothea as a typical Victorian woman?

➤ **COMPETENCE: CONTRASTING AUTHORS**

14 DISCUSS. Compare and contrast George Eliot with the other women writers you have studied (Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and Emily Brontë) as regards the following:

- aim;
- themes;
- narrator;
- style.