

The Readers Group

We have begun to study **Middlemarch** by George Eliot and it promises to be our most interesting and exciting study yet. We have looked at various commentaries on the book and we have considered the historical background: George Eliot set her novel almost 40 years into her past and the story connects local events in the imagined town of Middlemarch with real national history. It is complicated but the plot is the framework for the way the author has developed characters that we may recognise as aspects of ourselves.

In the first chapter Dorothea, who wears 'poor dress' and is regarded as religious, and pretty Celia discuss sharing their late mother's jewels. Dorothea wants to renounce most of them in favour of Celia. When the girls are perfectly happy with each other they are Dodo and Kitty and when they are not they use their formal names. We learn about them partly from what they say to each other and partly from what we seem to

overhear them thinking. We find that Celia may be 'a yoked creature' but that she has 'private opinions'. There is an unobtrusive commentary by the author, as well: for instance she gives us family story back to the seventeenth century.

In our first meeting we managed only two pages but by the end of the second session we had discussed the first three chapters and found some more important characters: Mr Brooke, the girls foolish uncle; Sir James Chettam, an 'excellent baronet' who thinks it would be a good idea to marry Dorothea, partly because the Brooke estate runs alongside his and she is the heir, partly because 'he thought it probable that Miss Brooke liked him' and partly because he sees she is beautiful; and Mr Edward Casaubon, the rector of Lowick, a few miles away. Dorothea thinks Mr Casaubon is 'a great soul' but Celia thinks he is 'very ugly' and has 'two white moles with hair on them'.

Sir James has not given up on Dorothea but he finds that 'the second Miss Brooke was certainly very agreeable as well as pretty'.

Mr Casaubon treats Dorothea seriously, while Mr Brooke says 'Young ladies are too flighty' and 'Young ladies don't understand political economy, you know'.

We feel concerned for Dorothea because we are sure that apart from being religious she is both naïve and bookish and out of her depth. She 'looked deep into the ungauged reservoir of Mr Casaubon's mind' and said to herself 'He thinks like me'. But when George Eliot says, in general, 'interpretations are illimitable' and uses the expression 'girls of sweet, ardent nature' we think that she must be on Dorothea's side against the world.

There is a joke built into chapter 3: Mr Brooke, who cannot even decide which pigeonhole his 'documents' should go in,

is the '*custos rotulorum*' of the Middlemarch district. It took the notes at the back of the book to discover that the title was that of local archivist, in those days before parliamentary reform, a theme of the book, not a professional job but one handed out to one of the local great and good, a landowner and magistrate.

Mr Casaubon drives home and Dorothea goes for a walk with her St Bernard, Monk; she refuses a puppy from Sir James; Mr Casaubon visits again and takes 'the pains to talk to her... with an appeal to her understanding'. She thinks 'What delightful companionship... her life was just now full of hope and action' but she has 'conscientious questionings'.

In the next chapter, to be discussed on 11 September, we are going to learn about Mr Casaubon's proposal. That is something to look forward to.