

THE  
CONNELL GUIDE  
TO GEORGE ELIOT'S



# MIDDLEMARCH

“Any modern student bold enough to tackle  
George Eliot’s great *Middlemarch* would find  
this a useful companion.”

SEBASTIAN FAULKS

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ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE  
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

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*by Josie Billington*

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# Introduction

When F.R. Leavis, in *The Great Tradition* (1948), situated George Eliot among the “great” novelists of English Literature, and singled out *Middlemarch* as the highest example of its author’s “genius”, he was rescuing the novel from both scorn and neglect. For the generation of Modernist writers who came after the Victorian period in which George Eliot was writing, *Middlemarch* was one of the “large loose baggy monsters” (as Henry James called the 19th-century realist novel) which were disparaged for their informality and sprawling inclusiveness in a Modernist age concerned with formal unity and impersonal precision.

Yet when *Middlemarch* was first published in 1872, it was recognised as an unprecedented achievement and as marking a new era in the development of the novel. Edith Simcox, later a close friend and personal champion of George Eliot, wrote that *Middlemarch* “marks an epoch in the history of fiction in so far as its incidents are taken from the inner life”. One of her shrewdest early reviewers, R.H. Hutton, compared her work to that of her popular contemporary, Anthony Trollope, saying: “He scours a greater surface of modern life but rarely or never the emotions which lie concealed behind. His characters are carved out of the materials of ordinary society;

George Eliot’s include many which make ordinary society seem a sort of satire on the life behind.”

Today, for fans and detractors alike, *Middlemarch* is synonymous with what we mean by the terms “novel”, “realism” and “Victorian”, and its power to move modern audiences was demonstrated by the powerful appeal of the BBC dramatisation in 1994. So what makes this novel great even for those who feel cheated or saddened by it? Even such a sensitively enthusiastic reader as the Victorian reviewer Sidney Colvin concluded by wondering how finally “satisfying” such a work can be:

Is it that a literature, which confronts all the problems of life and the world, and recognises all the springs of action, and all that clogs the springs, and all that comes from their smooth or impeded working, and all the importance of one life for the mass, – is it that such a literature must be like life itself, to leave us sad and hungry?

Yet, for the novel’s passionate admirers, Henry James among them, “that supreme sense of the vastness and variety of human life... which it belongs only to the greatest novels to produce” offers its own rich consolations. Perhaps that sentiment is best summed up by the 20th-century novelist Stanley Middleton, who said, if we have no God, we do at least have *Middlemarch*.



## A summary of the plot

### Prelude:

Reflects on the life of St Theresa of Avila and on the lives of many women unrecorded by history, who have shared her potential for heroism without her opportunities for fulfilment.

### Book One: 'Miss Brooke'

We are introduced to the idealistic Dorothea Brooke, aged 19, and to her younger more down-to-earth sister Celia, who live with their uncle and guardian, Mr Brooke, at Tipton Grange. Dorothea, full of plans for local social reform, is attracted to Casaubon, more than 30 years her senior, as she believes with his dedication to learning and intellectual pursuits he represents "the higher inward life". Celia finds Mr Casaubon ugly and dull. Dorothea shocks her family and friends by accepting Casaubon's proposal of marriage and visits her new home, Lowick Manor, where she encounters Will Ladislaw, a younger cousin of Casaubon's, whom the latter supports financially. He is painting. As Dorothea and Casaubon marry, we are introduced to the new Middlemarch doctor, Tertius Lydgate, and learn of his attraction to the beautiful and winning Rosamond Vincy.

### Book Two: 'Old and Young'

We learn that Lydgate has ambitions beyond those of the average Middlemarch GP. He hopes conscientiously to practise medicine and to shine as an anatomical researcher. The network of relationships widens to include Mr Bulstrode, the puritanical banker, with whom Lydgate hopes to found a new fever hospital under his own medical supervision. Fred Vincy, Rosamond's amiably feckless brother, also depends on Bulstrode's recommendation to obtain funds to pay his gambling debts from wealthy and dying Mr Featherstone. Lydgate becomes friends with mild-mannered clergyman Mr Farebrother, who unselfishly warns Lydgate that voting for him for the new hospital chaplaincy will displease the powerful Bulstrode. Lydgate votes for Bulstrode's choice in the interests of his own career, but is frustrated by the conflicting pressures under which he labours. The close of the book returns to Dorothea, left unhappily alone on her honeymoon in Rome while her husband attends to his studies. She is visited by Will, who is increasingly keen for Dorothea's regard, yet whose presence clearly irks Casaubon. The couple have their first marital quarrel.

### Book Three: 'Waiting for Death'

Fred Vincy borrows money from honourable and hard-working Caleb Garth, obliging the family to

relinquish their savings and seriously damaging his romantic hopes in respect of his childhood sweetheart, Mary Garth. When Fred falls ill with typhoid fever, Lydgate becomes his doctor and the mutual attraction between Rosamond and Lydgate deepens as their meetings become frequent. Meanwhile, Dorothea returns from Rome, disillusioned with married life and with her limited prospects for doing active good at Lowick. Further tension arises between husband and wife when Will writes to propose a visit to Lowick and Casaubon signals his intention to decline. Casaubon is presently taken seriously ill. Lydgate treats Casaubon, and Mr Brooke replies to Will inviting him to Tipton Grange. The book ends, true to its title, with Mary Garth's vigil on the night of old Featherstone's death when he requests her to burn one of his two wills. She refuses.

#### Book Four: 'Three Love Problems'

Opens with Featherstone's funeral and news that the will which Mary refused to burn revokes the inheritance left to Fred in the first. Featherstone's estate goes to an unfamiliar mourner, Mr Rigg, whose stepfather, Raffles, now moves into the locality. Rosamond and Lydgate agree an early date for their wedding and Lydgate buys the house of Rosamond's choice though it is beyond his financial means. Meanwhile, Mr Brooke, now running for parliament, has taken over the local



*Rufus Sewell as Will Ladislaw in the BBC serialisation of Middlemarch (1994)*

newspaper, and installed Will Ladislaw as editor. The mutual dislike between Will and Casaubon grows. Will continues to see Dorothea alone and reveals that Casaubon has supported him in reparation for Will's mother's disinheritance by her family when she married against their wishes. Casaubon, increasingly suspicious of Will's intentions, secretly writes to Will insisting he leave the town. Will stays. Farebrother makes his feelings known to Mary Garth, who is moved, but remains loyal to Fred. The book ends with Casaubon learning from Lydgate that he may die at any time.

### Book Five: 'The Dead Hand'

Lydgate's new practice and plans for the new hospital meet with opposition, partly because of his association with Bulstrode. Lydgate gets into debt and tension occurs in his marriage as Rosamond fails to understand the importance he attaches to his work. Rosamond becomes pregnant; financial pressure increases. Dorothea feels more than ever her isolation from her husband while Will longs to see her, and is anxious for her good opinion after she finds Will and Rosamond alone together at the Lydgates' home. Casaubon, increasingly mistrusting his wife, asks Dorothea to promise to carry out his wishes should he die, referring, she assumes, to the completion of his work. She asks for time to consider. Next morning, intending to agree to her husband's request, Dorothea finds him dead. Later she discovers Casaubon has added a codicil to his will specifying that she lose all her inheritance should she marry Will. Mr Brooke is humiliated in his election campaign. He suggests Will leave the vicinity; Will refuses. Raffles arrives at Stone Court (old Featherstone's property, now owned by Bulstrode), with knowledge of Bulstrode's first marriage to Will's maternal grandmother. Bulstrode pays him to leave the neighbourhood.

### Book Six: 'The Widow and the Wife'

Following the failure of his political hopes, Will

visits Dorothea expressing his intention to depart for London. Strong feelings between the pair are felt, but not expressed. Dorothea mourns the loss of Will's companionship and resolves not to marry again. Fred, now apprentice to Caleb Garth (who has taken management of Lowick estate) jealously learns of Farebrother's feelings for Mary, but Farebrother unselfishly gives Fred and Mary an opportunity to renew their bond. Rosamond disobeys Lydgate's instructions not to go riding while pregnant, has an accident, and loses the baby. Lydgate is dismayed by her wilfulness in relation to their also worsening financial situation, where she resists his suggestions for economy.

As Raffles continues to blackmail Bulstrode, we learn of the banker's past association with a disreputable business which deprived Will's mother (daughter of Bulstrode's first wife) of her inheritance. Bulstrode reveals these facts to Will, offering him a substantial income by way of reparation. Will angrily refuses. Dorothea hears rumours regarding the relationship between Rosamond and Will which she dismisses, while Will learns from Rosamond the import of Casaubon's will. Proudly determined to leave Middlemarch rather than be regarded as an illegitimate fortune-hunter, Will sees Dorothea once more before leaving. At their parting conversation they begin to sense their mutual love.