

Middlemarch

In English literature, the term “Victorian,” refers to the reign of Britain’s queen Victoria (1837-1901). In social and literary terms, “Victorian” refers to the conventional conduct of the “respectable classes” and religion marked by prudery, bigotry, and hypocrisy. It was also a time of widespread social reform.

The Reform Bill of 1832 gave the British middle class the power it needed to consolidate and retain its economic position at the height of the Industrial Revolution, when industry, commerce and colonialism were burgeoning. It was also a time when British society was growing more vocal against the prudery, bigotry and hypocrisy of the church, and its main support, the respectable and leisure classes.

This was the time of **George Eliot** (1819-1880), born as Mary Anne (later “Marian”) Evans, one of the greatest authors of English literature. She adopted the pseudonym “George Eliot,” so that she could write and publish her works in an era that treated women as subservient to men and should stick to “womanly” roles and chores.

The Buddha’s time had interesting parallels with Victorian times, as it was one of economic growth and social change, and the nascent Indian empire. The agricultural class (the kshatriya) was gaining more political and economic power to displace the once socially dominant priestly (brahmin) class. It was also a time when women were increasingly accepted into the religious order as wanderers or renunciants on par with their male counterparts. The Buddha was perhaps the most vocal and engaged of the critics of the old order who also presented its viable spiritual alternative.

George Eliot’s greatest work, *Middlemarch* (subtitled “a study in provincial life”)¹ (1871-1872) is also regarded as one of the two greatest works in English literature:² the other being Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*.³ Virginia Woolf generously praised *Middlemarch* as “the magnificent book that, with all its imperfections, is one of the few English novels written for grown-up people.”⁴

George Eliot not only wrote but also lived against the social currents of her times. The respectable classes drove her and her older companion, G H Lewes, philosopher and critic, out of England for a time. She responded with a rich series of books, of which *Middlemarch* is the most dramatic, tearing away at the fabric of cruel Victorian small-mindedness for all to see.

Not many saw any of it, however. The respectable and leisure classes, as in England and everywhere else, and in our own society, have a remarkable penchant for blindsidedness, an inability not see what is right before their eyes.⁵ They read George Eliot’s novels, perhaps even enjoyed them, but without any understanding.

Middlemarch is a long and challenging book, with over 20 key characters, and 4 plots interwoven by parallels and contrasts.⁶ Two characters of outstanding humanity are Dorothea Brooke and Caleb Garth, sharing between them the best qualities that the novel inspires.

¹ The original work was published as a serial (1871-1872), with the first single volume edition published in 1874. The 2008 imprint by Oxford Univ Press, USA, has 904 pages.

² Camilla Long, “Martin Amis and the sex war,” *The Times*, 24 Jan 2010:4; Shusha Guppy, “Julian Barnes, The Art of Fiction No 165,” *The Paris Review*, winter 2000:157.

³ See Reflection, “Chasing the white whale,” R351 2014: [link](#).

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*, 1925:175.

⁵ See Reflection, “An elephant in the room,” R307, 2013: [link](#).

⁶ The main plot is that of Dorothea Brooke/Casaubon/Lydgate. The other 3 are the Garth/Vincy/-Featherstone plot; the Vincy/Lydgate plot; and the Bulstrode/Raffles plot.

Middlemarch by Piya Tan

Dorothea is an intelligent and wealthy young woman who aspires to do good on a grand scale. Spurning any show of wealth in the form of jewels or fancy clothes, she works on projects such as redesigning cottages for the tenants of her miserly, neglectful and soft-headed uncle. She is unable to find anyone to take her ideas seriously.

She admires the dour Reverend Edward Casaubon, many decades her senior, who dreams to publish a great project, *The Key to All Mythologies*, as a monument to Christian syncretism. Dorothea marries him to help him complete his magnum opus. The marriage almost at once turns out to be a loveless mistake, as Casaubon does not take her seriously and resents her youth and enthusiasm. Moreover, he spends his time merely researching than actually getting down to start writing.

Dorothea's enthusiastic requests to assist him only exacerbates his efforts to conceal the fact that his lacklustre research is years out of date. Even during their honeymoon in Rome, Dorothea is shunned by Casabaun. As it turns out, she finds a soulmate in Casabaun's first cousin once removed, Will Ladislav, and the two become friends.

Suspicious of their friendship, Casaubon cruelly hopes to thwart their love even after his death. His will specifically states that Dorothea inherits his estate, but loses everything if she marries Ladislav. Dorothea eventually renounces her newfound wealth and marries Ladislav. However, this marriage fails, too.

Although both her marriages fail, Dorothea, instead of being embittered by them, sees this as her own liberation, so that she is now able to do what she has only dreamed about. One of her charitable acts is to significantly contribute to Dr Lydgate (another key tragic character with a failed marriage) and his hospital so that he is free of his debt to the domineering and sanctimonious Bulstrode (who symbolises religious arrogance). Dorothea is perhaps best remembered for her profound words, "**What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult to each other**" (ch 72) and above all, "**I should like to make life beautiful – I mean everybody's life.**" (ch 22)

Caleb Garth is honest, discreet, and hard working, and expects everyone around him to act the same way. He has a lot of faith in people, which means that he's often disappointed. But things end up all right for Caleb: he gets his old job back, and has a lot of new work. The chief part of his own happiness is "**To do a good day's work and do it well.**" (Ch 56)

Although *Middlemarch* is filled with parsons, rectors, curates, religious thinkers and sanctimonious hypocrites, we see none of the daily tasks they normally do. Yet, the deepest religiosity is intimately expressed in the lives of its characters, each in their own way.

Caleb's attitude to work might be said to be a deeply religious one. He says to young Fred Vincy: "You must be sure of two things: **you must love your work**, and not be always looking over the edge of it, wanting your play to begin. And the other is, **you must not be ashamed of your work**, and think it would be more honorable to you to be doing something else." (Ch 56).

Although Caleb is a diligent worker, he does not always make the money commensurate to his labour. To Caleb, work ethic reflects our character, especially a husband's with regard to his family. He sees work as preparation for marital responsibilities. A lazy man makes a bad husband.

Although diligent, Caleb does not always have a lot of money, such that at one point, his own wife protests that he must stop working for free. Caleb does not believe in receiving handouts, but is always compassionate and accepting of the young gambler and wastrel Fred Vincy, who loves his daughter Mary. Indeed, Caleb is the only one who sees promise in Fred who succeeds in the end.

Both Dorothea and Caleb are good exemplars of those filled with lovingkindness, unconditional acceptance of others. We don't need to be religious about this, but realistic. And if we are caught up in the grasp of religion, then we need to rise above it to touch what is truly good in us and everyone.⁷

R352 Simple Joys 254

Piya Tan ©2014

⁷ For an inspiring study on Dorothea and Caleb, see esp Matthew Rich, "'Not a church, but an individual who is his or her own church': Religion in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*," in B G Hornback (ed), *George Eliot: Middlemarch*, 2nd ed, A Norton Critical Ed, NY & London: W W Norton, 1977:649-656.