

GEORGE ELIOT'S *MIDDLEMARCH*

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is arguably the greatest nineteenth-century English novel. A 2015 BBC poll ranked it the best English novel ever. Like most Victorian novels, it relies on romance plots, but it explores many other kinds of adult human experience as well—parenting, unhappy marriages, careers gone well or badly, political and social reformism. Virginia Woolf called it “one of the few English novels written for grownup people.” If you read it when you were young, you'll now see perspectives on adult life that you may have missed earlier.

We'll read a few short essays for historical, scientific, and biographical context, but our focus will be on *Middlemarch* itself. The novel is long, so spending an entire course on it will permit us a leisurely reading pace and the chance to examine important passages closely. A central concern for us will be Eliot's attempt to answer the question: “How can we know other people?” Deeply immersed in scientific and philosophical debates, Eliot systematically explored her characters' relationships to highlight both successful and unsuccessful ways of interpersonal knowing. A related concern will be the novel's highly opinionated narrator: when do we trust/mistrust the narrator's knowledge about the characters, or the narrator's constant cautions that we readers may know less about people than we think? We will also explore Eliot's complex and deeply held convictions about the morality of truth-seeking. For Eliot, famously, the greatest impediment to knowledge is “egotism,” but egotism might turn out to be a complex combination of philosophical, cognitive, and moral failures rather than a simple character flaw.

Middlemarch is about individuals and relationships: how characters mistake, deceive, and understand one another, as well as how some learn to sympathize even with those who at times seem repellant—or how they fail to do so. But it's also a novel about communities, social history, and “progress” of many kinds. The provincial town where the action takes place is on the middle of a march—but whither? We'll look at how the various social classes in nineteenth-century provincial England seem to Eliot to be furthering (or in some cases obstructing) advances toward democracy, scientific enlightenment, and, of course, moral progress.

Please buy the edition listed below, since we'll want to move rapidly from passage to passage while all remaining “on the same page.” Available at Labyrinth Books in Princeton:

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Oxford World Classics, 2019 or 2008 (list price: \$10.95)
(both editions have the same pagination)

Please read Book One and the Bodenheimer essay (available in the Dropbox) before our first class meeting.

Reading schedule:

Week 1: *Middlemarch*, Book One, Chs. 1-12; Bodenheimer, “A Woman of Many Names”

Week 2: *Middlemarch*, Book Two, Chs. 13-22; Postelthwaite, “George Eliot and Science”

Week 3: *Middlemarch*, Book Three, Chs. 23-33

Week 4: *Middlemarch*, Book Four, Chs. 34-42; Welsh, “Knowledge in *Middlemarch*”

Week 5: *Middlemarch*, Book Five, Chs. 43-53

Week 6: *Middlemarch*, Book Six, Chs. 54-62; Staten, “Is *Middlemarch* Ahistorical?”

Week 7: *Middlemarch*, Book Seven, Chs. 63-71; Allison, “Utopian Socialism, etc.”

Week 8: *Middlemarch*, Book Eight, Chs. 80-86; Finale

LEADER: John Kucich is distinguished professor emeritus of English at Rutgers University and professor emeritus of English at the University of Michigan. He has written several books on Victorian literature and culture.

LOCATION: Zoom

TUESDAYS: 1:00 to 3:00 p.m, 8 weeks beginning March 1 through April 19

MAXIMUM: 18