

# Berwick-upon Tweed Educational Association

## 'An Introduction to *Middlemarch*'

By Dr Richard Moore, creative writer and lecturer, Newcastle University

Friday 1<sup>st</sup> September 2017 10am – 1.00pm

### Content of Study Morning

When Samuel Butler's friend Miss Savage learned of the publication of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, she wrote to him that she was going to buy a dictionary so that she could read the novel in the original. It is a witty joke but it tells us something about George Eliot as a novelist. Particularly in her later works she brought erudition, moral philosophy, a huge vocabulary and serious social comment to her writing. Art that had no moral purpose was to her not art at all. She lamented the tendency of some novelists to descend from the picture to the diagram. She excoriated *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*, in an 1856 article in the *Westminster Review*.

One thing *Middlemarch* is certainly *not* is "silly". It is in fact one of the most profound studies in English literature of moral responsibility within the interwoven mesh of provincial life. To criticise it, as some have, for being too limited – not enough like *War and Peace* - is missing the point. The book is about English life and English social structures. *Middlemarch* itself is often said to have been based on Coventry – much smaller of course in the 1830's than it is now.

The novel was published in 1872 but it takes for its subject the Midlands of George Eliot's childhood. Deliberately she places the characters in a period of legislative change and social clamour, yet she embeds all this in the traditional modes of a semi-rural society, brilliantly depicting the human motivations and preoccupations that exist in any age. One of her skills is in sympathetic but forensic analysis. All her characters are viewed with imaginative empathy, whether they be the idealising lofty-minded Dorothea Brooke or her mirror-opposite, the beautiful self-centred Rosamond Vincy. Nor is symbolism lacking. When Rosamond wins Dr. Lydgate's heart she is doing some "chain-work". Later the marriage will chain him. Yet Rosamond is not wicked. She is "a sylph caught young and educated at Mrs. Lemon's".

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The humour latent in the text is sometimes broader than this. In particular, Peter Featherstone's relations circling about as he lies dying provide brilliant comic cameos. Yet the novel is above all about moral dilemmas and moral relativities. Significantly, although George Eliot admired *Jane Eyre* (certainly not a silly modern novel), she regretted the absolutism of its moral judgements, favouring instead a sliding scale of relative assessments. She insists that individual character should be viewed not in isolation but as part of a complex web of social relationships.

The quality of George Eliot's mind makes reading her an enlightening experience. During the study morning we shall see what influences shaped her and put her in her socio-historical context. We shall also try to see why she is so important – why too she broadens the scope of the Victorian novel from the popular "sensation" mode. George Eliot is far too compassionate to descend from the picture to the diagram. And she is also too discriminating. Sometimes, she says, we are victims of our own actions. Sometimes we are subject to external pressures. As she remarks in *Romola* : "Our deeds determine us as much as we determine our deeds". But, there again, as we are told in *Middlemarch*, we are parts of something wider. There is "no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside of it".

The study morning will be accessible to all, and you do not have to have read the novel. If you do have a copy, bring it along.

**The cost of the study morning is £9.00 including refreshments.**

**The study morning will be held at the Berwick Voluntary Centre, Tweed St, Berwick-upon-Tweed, 1<sup>st</sup> Sept, 10 -1.00pm.**

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