Approaches to studying George Eliot's *Middlemarch*

My advice is first and foremost to read, and re-read, the novel.

As you do so, I recommend that you take notes on the themes, characters and plot line, singling out quotations that strike you.

Although I am loath to recommend on-line study guides, this one might be of preliminary help in your first reading to the narrative :
https://www.gradesaver.com/middlemarch

Below you will find :
1. an introduction to the novel
2. an outline of the plot (which you should complete as you read the novel)
3. a list of the characters (to complete and illustrate with quotations)
4. themes and questions to consider and take notes on
5. a select bibliography
6. Professor Georges Letissier's approaches to teaching *Middlemarch*.

1. Introduction[1]

When F.R.Leavis, in *The Great Tradition* (1848), 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 dramatization 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*.

[1] Cited from Josie Billington's "The Connell Guide to *Middlemarch*", 2012.

2. Outline of the Plot[2]

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 doctor. 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 mildmannered 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 10 11 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 newspaper, and installed Will Ladisaw as editor. The mutual dislike between Will and Casaubon grows. Will

[2] Adapted from Josie Billington's "The Connell Guide to *Middlemarch*", 2012.

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.

3. CHARACTERS IN *MIDDLEMARCH*[3]

Dorothea Brooke

Oldest of two daughters, and raised by her bachelor uncle, Mr. Brooke. Dorothea is a pious, socially aware young lady who withdraws from the activities she likes most, and decides to marry Edward Casaubon who is several years older than she is and cannot satisfy her emotionally or mentally. Dorothea, although well-educated, is naïve about the outside world; when her marriage disappoints her, she is forced to learn how she must fulfil her purpose in life through her own effort.

Celia Brooke

Dorothea's younger sister, the more calm and conventional of the two. Celia is sensible and perceptive when it comes to the Middlemarch community around her. She marries the kind

[3] Adapted from the presentation on https://www.gradesaver.com/middlemarch

and sensitive Sir James Chettam, a much better match, and made for better reasons, than her sister's union.

Mr. Brooke

Dorothea and Celia's guardian and uncle, brother to their deceased father. He is a strong-willed man, with definite, though outdated, ideas about what the role of women in society. Mr. Brooke, however, has good intentions and has few qualms about flying in the face of Middlemarch conventions and politics, if need be.

Edward Casaubon

Dorothea's middle-aged husband, a crusty old scholar with an inability to feel emotion or love. He slaves away on a project called "The Key to All Mythologies," a work that is supposed to integrate his life's learning. However, Casaubon really has no intention of finishing it, and has lost both his ability to live. He is prone to jealousy and insecurity, which places a great burden on his young wife, Dorothea.

Sir James Chettam

Begins pursuing Dorothea at the beginning of the novel, but gives her up for her sister Celia when Dorothea becomes engaged to Casaubon. Chettam is an affable man, who listens ardently to Dorothea's plans for improving the life of rural folk, and then takes great measures to make her plans a reality. Unlike many of the men in this novel, he does not subscribe to ideas that women should be weak, ornamental, and limited in their activities to household affairs; this makes his union with Celia a happy one, and cements his friendship with Dorothea.

Mr. Cadwallader

Preacher of Sir James' parish, and a trusted friend and advisor to him as well. He is kind, though has strong opinions in certain issues. He is often at Freshitt, Sir James' estate, for casual occasions and conversations.

Mrs. Cadwallader

Wife of Mr. Cadwallader, also kind-hearted, though with a tendency to be a bit of a busy-body. She knows all about neighbourhood affairs, showing perhaps a little too much interest in other people's business.

Will Ladislaw

Young cousin of Mr. Casaubon, whom Casaubon has little regard for. He is kind though proud, and very intelligent. However, he is of lower social and economic standing than Casaubon because both his mother and grandmother married beneath themselves, and were disowned as a result. He is Dorothea's true love, and they bring out the best in each other.

Dr. Tertius Lydgate

A young doctor of about 30, of good family and social connections. He has recently arrived in Middlemarch, and gains a lot of criticism from the old guard for his new methods and outsider status. He is proud to a fault, bright, and thinks that he has the capacity to be a great innovator in medicine. He falls in love with Rosamond and marries her, though his finances are less than secure.

Rosamond Vincy

A vain, somewhat empty-headed young woman, though her social graces and manner are perfect. She loves Lydgate because he is an outsider with impressive connections, who often flatters her. She needs constant attention from male suitors, even after marriage, and only the finest things around her. She treasures expensive possessions and furniture even more than her husband Lydgate, which causes great discord.

Mr. Vincy

Rosamond and Fred's father, mayor of Middlemarch. His family is one of the foremost in local society, and he is a merchant of good standing, dealing in cloth. Their family is not all

rich, but acquired money from business. Mr. Vincy is very economical and works hard, though the rest of his family does not.

Mrs. Vincy

Wife to Mr. Vincy, and the source of many of her daughter Rosamond's flaws. She is also rather empty-headed, materialistic, and impractical; she accustoms Rosamond to a very high standard of living, beyond even her husband's needs. She is not a bad woman, though she is recognized as being flawed, and not as steady as her husband.

Fred Vincy

The Vincys' only son; he starts out as a spendthrift and a very irresponsible young man, though by the end of the novel, he is doing decidedly better. He is in love with Mary Garth, though she is below him in social standing. However, Mary is much more sensible than he is, and gets him to work hard and thus to prosper.

Mary Garth

Oldest child of the Garths, she works for Mr. Featherstone at Stone Court until his death. She is an intelligent young woman who knows a good deal about literature, and she also has good knowledge of human nature. Mary is very affable, practical, and independent. She also helps Fred to improve himself immeasurably.

Caleb Garth

Mary's father, a hard-working man who manages estates and does improvements and construction projects on properties. He is far from rich, and very generous in spirit; overall a good man, who is always honest, and treats people well. He has a number of children, Mary playing the most significant role in this narrative. Fred becomes his apprentice when he improves his behaviour.

Mrs. Garth

Wife of Caleb, just as honest and upstanding. She gives lessons to her own children and to village children as well, making extra money from this. She prizes responsibility, education, and honesty, and makes sure her children have these traits. She is a harder judge than her husband, but they are still a good match.

Mr. Featherstone

Owner of Stone Court, and very wealthy; related to both the Vincys and the Garths through his two childless marriages. He is a stern, unkind old man who uses his wealth as a threat to other people. He leaves his estate to his illegitimate son Mr. Rigg, which disappoints the Vincy family a great deal.

Mr. Rigg

Illegitimate son of Featherstone; he is disliked by people in Middlemarch for his common origins, and for being an outsider. He handles business and accountancy matters, and sells Stone Court to Mr. Bulstrode. He is stern and not very social, but not as mean as his father.

Mr. Bulstrode

Another prominent figure in Middlemarch, who runs a bank, a hospital, and other institutions. He has a good deal of money, and is prosperous; but his tendency to sermonize and keep an absurdly pious façade in public means that he is very unpopular with many people.

Mrs. Bulstrode

Mr. Vincy's sister; she is a very good woman, honest, upstanding, and faithful. She is also very good at evaluating other people, and their affairs. She gives excellent advice to Rosamond about marrying, and to the Vincys as well. Though her husband's career was launched in London, she is a true Middlemarcher, with a long family history there.

Mrs. Waule

Mr. Featherstone's sister, whom Mr. Featherstone does not like. She only comes to see him when he is dying, with the expectation that he will give her money in his will. A rather unpleasant woman, and not good company either.

Farebrother

A very honest and good man, who is also human and would be the first to say so. He is a member of the clergy, with a low income; he supports his sister, mother, and aunt with this money, which puts him under financial strain. He is a good friend to Ladislaw, Lydgate, and others; he is also in love with Mary Garth, and she regards him highly.

Mr. Tyke

Another clergyman in the area, though his preaching is more sanctimonious, and favoured by Bulstrode. He is appointed chaplain at the hospital for political reasons, although his rival Farebrother is favored personally and as a preacher by most of the neighbourhood.

Naumann

Will's painter friend in Rome, who appreciates Dorothea's beauty.

Trumbull

Town auctioneer, and business advisor to Featherstone. He seems to know Featherstone better than anyone else, and is the only person other than Rigg who receives anything from his will.

Mr. Raffles

Rigg's stepfather, a good-for-nothing. Also a former business partner of Bulstrode's. He helped Bulstrode in some very disreputable trade deals, and comes back years later to blackmail him. He effectively blackens Bulstrode's name, then dies of alcoholism while under his care.

Christy Garth

The Garths' oldest son; he is a real academic excelling in languages and other subjects. He is responsible, upright, and everything that the Garths treasure in a person's character.

Captain Lydgate

Lydgate's flighty, wealthy, and airheaded cousin. Lydgate doesn't care for him at all, though Rosamond adores him because he flatters her with his attention.

Godwin Lydgate

Lydgate's very wealthy uncle, who turns down Rosamond's request for a loan. He seems haughty and lacking in generosity.

Miss Noble

Farebrother's spinster aunt. She is kindly, and Will is a good friend to her.

Ned Plymdale

Vain suitor of Rosamond's who rejects him. He goes on to do well financially, and to marry another woman.

Mrs. Plymdale

Ned's mother, very proud and boastful about her son's success. Bitter that Rosamond rejects him.

4. Themes/questions

What role does the narrator play?

Marriage

Work

Money

Women : Is *Middlemarch* a feminist novel?

Religion and the church

Community

Medicine, doctors

Imagery, symbols

Web of relationships

5. Extraits de la bibliographie sur *Middlemarch* établie par Georges Letissier (Professeur à l'Université de Nantes)

La bibliographie complète se trouve en ligne à cette adresse :
http://saesfrance.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/2020-Biblio-Middlemarch-G.-Letissier.pdf

Recommended Edition

ELIOT, George. *Middlemarch* [1871-72]. Edited by David Carroll and David Russell. Third edition. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2019.

Other useful edition:

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→ Interesting background sources, letters from George Eliot to Sara Sophia Hennell, 9 October 1843, Barbara Bodichon, 26 December, 1860 and 15 February 1862. Extract from **"The Natural History of German Life"** (*Westminster Review* 66 – July 1856)**. Selected passages from "Amos Barton", *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857) and *Adam Bede* (1859), affording parallel, contrastive readings with *Middlemarch.* ***Quarry*** for *Middlemarch* – George Eliot called *Quarry* a small notebook that she used throughout her planning and writing of the novel. It contains precious background sources: the research the novelist conducted (on medicine, cell theory, historical events contemporary with the novel's story, directions for plotlines and characterisation etc.)** Among the contemporary reviews, two are especially worthy of interest: Henry James's "George Eliot's *Middlemarch*", reprinted from *Galaxy* (March 1873) and Leslie Stephen's "On *Middlemarch*", from *George Eliot,* London : Macmillan, 1902. Also of interest, Bert G. Hornback's "The Moral Imagination of George Eliot", pp. 606-618.

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6. Éléments de cadrage du cours : Georges Letissier

(Modestes propositions qui n'ont aucune valeur de modèle).

L'étude de *Middlemarch* est une chance et un défi. Une chance parce qu'on a pu tenir ce roman pour l'exemple emblématique du roman victorien, sans qu'il n'ait pour autant pris aucune ride. Un défi parce que c'est un texte d'une infinie richesse qui nécessite une lecture immersive dans la durée. C'est aussi un roman qui se livre à une narration détaillée du quotidien, sur le mode de la chronique – il annonce d'une scertaine façon toutes les séries télévisées qui relatent la vie

des habitants d'une rue, d'un quartier[4] – tout en poursuivant une réflexion d'une haute exigence intellectuelle sur des questions d'une grande profondeur : le temps, l'historiographie, l'herméneutique, l'épistémologie, la religion, le genre (genre et gender), la passion, l'art, la création etc. Le phénomène de la réception de George Eliot dans son ensemble, et de *Middlemarch* en particulier, est tout à fait passionnant. En effet, Eliot a traversé des périodes d'oubli avant que la modernité de son écriture et les subtiles nuances de sa pensée ne soient enfin reconnues. Il est encore intéressant de noter que Eliot, à la différence de Jane Austen, des Brontë (principalement Charlotte et Emily) ou encore de Charles Dickens, échappe dans une large mesure au phénomène néo-Victorien[5].

Une première étape pourrait consister à replacer *Middlemarch* dans la constellation des romans victoriens. Comme nombre d'entre eux, il se fonde sur l'écart temporel entre le temps de la narration (à partir de 1868) et celui de la diégèse, les Midlands (Middlemarch, Coventry ? mais le toponyme mérite d'être analysé dans sa polysémie) avant le Reform Act de 1832, voté le 4 juin. Selon Jerome Beaty la trame narrative se déploie du 30 septembre 1829 à la fin mai 1832. À l'instar de tant d'autres romans victoriens, *Middlemarch* poursuit des intrigues multiples (multiplot novel) ; au moins quatre, le destin de l'héroïne Dorothea Brooke qui épouse en premières noces Edward Casaubon puis Will Ladislaw après le décès de ce dernier ; la relation tumultueuse entre Tertius Lydgate et sa jeune et séduisante épouse Rosamond Vincy, l'histoire d'amour au dénouement heureux entre Fred Vincy et Mary Garth, enfin le récit autour du riche banquier Nicholas Bulstrode, pieux méthodiste, dont le passé se révèle être ténébreux. Comme de nombreux romans victoriens, *Middlemarch* rassemble différents modes narratifs : le mélodrame, peut-être sous forme parodique à travers le récit enchâssé du premier amour de Lydgate, Madame Laure, meurtrière impénitente et le roman réaliste social à la Balzac. Il inclut en outre des éléments de roman romanesque sur fond pastoral. C'est aussi un roman d'idées, dont les réflexions sont nourries de la pensée philosophique de Baruch Spinoza, David Friedrich Strauss, Ludwig Feuerbach et Auguste Comte. *Middlemarch* se lit encore comme une fiction scientifique, l'influence de Charles Darwin y est patente (voir Gillian Beer et George Levine) ; le personnage de Camden Farebrother est l'exemple typique de l'homme du XIXe siècle féru de biologie, d'entomologie, et des sciences du vivant d'une manière générale. Le roman d'Eliot est encore une fiction médicale ; à travers le personnage de Lydgate se trouvent représentés les débats autour du renouveau apporté par l'anatomie et la physiologie cellulaires qui viennent s'opposer à une approche plus empirique fondée sur la prescription de remèdes en l'absence d'examens cliniques sérieux. Il convient encore de ne pas oublier que *Middlemarch* est aussi, d'une certaine façon un roman historique, (voir le hiatus temporel entre temps du récit et temps de l'histoire racontée, indiqué ci-dessus) qui s'interroge à l'occasion sur la manière dont s'écrit l'Histoire, conjoignant ainsi l'historique et l'historiographique. Ce qu'une première approche devrait pouvoir faire ressortir c'est la pluralité d'une œuvre qui procède néanmoins à une synthèse organique de cette diversité.

[4] On compte au moins deux adaptations télévisées de *Middlemarch*, la plus connue celle de la BBC en 1994 a connu un franc succès, Anthony Page était le réalisateur, le scénario était d'Andrew Davies et les principaux rôles étaient tenus par Juliet Aubrey, Rufus Sewell, Douglas Hodge et Patrick Malahide.

[5] Sur ce point, voir Margaret Harris, « Afterlife », in Margaret Harris, ed. *George Eliot in Context*, Cambridge : C.U.P., 2013, pp. 52-61. « George Eliot has never been assimilated into the heritage industry », p. 55. Une exception serait Patricia Duncker, lectrice passionnée et passionnante de George Eliot qui a publié en 2015 *Sophie and the Sibyl. A Victorian Romance.* London: Bloomsbury.

La structure du roman est un deuxième point d'entrée ; chacun des huit volumes se vit attribuer un titre qui fut conservé dans la version finale. La genèse de l'œuvre est déterminante pour aborder cette question ; *Middlemarch* résulte de la fusion (sans sutures ?) de deux projets initiaux : un récit se focalisant sur Dorothea Brooke et la petite aristocratie rurale d'un village des Midlands, le second correspondait à l'image qui est donnée dans la version finale du roman de la communauté urbaine de Middlemarch, avec notamment Lydgate et Rosamond Vincy. La longue gestation du roman est à la mesure de l'ambition qu'il porte : « She recognizes this novel would be her fullest statement. Its gestation period was the longest of any works, and it would have the furthest reach »[6]. Le roman est ouvragé jusque dans ses moindres détails, en cela il évoque la peinture préraphaélite. Eliot s'est vu reprocher ce sens du détail, Henry James parlant de *Middlemarch* évoquait :« a treasure-house of details […] but an indifferent whole ». Comme preuve de cette minutie, l'insertion d'épigraphes allographes ou autographes mérite une analyse sur le rapport (illustratif, analeptique, proleptique, dialectique) entre ces éléments du paratexte et le « corps » du texte (Genette *Palimpsestes* et *Seuils*). La publication feuilletonesque est également déterminante ; le rythme, le temps, l'action, les personnages, les lieux sont autant d'éléments qui permettaient aux lecteurs de s'y retrouver d'une livraison à l'autre. Il n'est pas indifférent non plus de souligner que l'intérêt pour la forme et la technique qui ont été longtemps négligés au profit de la profondeur morale du propos s'affirme avec Barbara Hardy qui fit beaucoup pour promouvoir des lectures sensibles à l'architecture de l'œuvre et à l'agencement du texte : la transposition de la structure tragique dans le quotidien ordinaire, ou encore le recours à des chaînes métaphoriques (la toile ou encore le labyrinthe notamment dans *Middlemarch*). La figure de l'analogie est centrale dans l'économie de l'œuvre.

La poétique narrative appelle le plus grand soin pour préparer l'explication de texte en particulier. L'emploi sophistiqué d'une narratrice omnisciente complexe (W.J. Harvey *The Art of George Eliot*, 1961), mérite qu'on s'y attarde. J. Hillis Miller voit dans le narrateur omniscient une sorte de figure de substitution en lieu et place de la présence tutélaire divine qui se serait éclipsée, dans un monde où la foi est mise à mal par les avancées de la science. Le discours intériorisé, la psycho-narration (Dorrit Cohn), les transferts délicats du point de vue d'un personnage à l'autre, les voix et les registres sont encore des sujets d'étude qui requièrent une grande vigilance.

La construction du personnage, domaine de prédilection du roman victorien, est une étape obligée. Concernant Eliot, son appétence éclectique insatiable pour les savoirs se retrouve dans cette façon bien à elle qu'elle a de camper ses personnages. Ainsi emprunte-elle tour à tour ou simultanément à la sociologie[7] : « A Study of Provincial Life », à la psychologie, à la physiologie et à la physionomie au sens darwinien, sur ce dernier point voir notamment le personnage de Caleb Garth. La critique a parfois considéré Dorothea Brooke comme un personnage hautain et distant et vu en Will Ladislaw une idée plus qu'un personnage. En

[6] Frederick R. Karl, *George Eliot. A Biography. Voice of a Century.* New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995. p.452.

[7] Ce champ d'étude pourrait paraître anachronique pour une romancière du XIXe siècle, il est toutefois communément appliqué à Eliot, preuve, s'il en fallait encore une, de son extrême modernité. Voir l'introduction de George Levine dans son *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot,* pp. 1-19 ; Terry Eagleton, "Two Approaches in the Sociology of Literature," Critical Inquiry, Vol. 14, No. 3, *The Sociology of Literature* (Spring, 1988), The U. Chicago P. pp 469-476 et James F. English, "Everywhere and Nowhere: The Sociology of Literature After 'The Sociology of Literature'", *New Literary History*, Vol. 41, No 2, New Sociologies of Literature (SPRING 2010), pp. V-XXIII, The Johns Hopkins University Press.

revanche James ne tarit pas d'éloges pour parler de la justesse de la représentation du couple Rosamond Vincy, Tertius Lydgate : « there is nothing more powerfully real…in all English fiction, and nothing certainly more *intelligent* » !

L'étude de nombreuses questions plus thématiques ou contextuelles s'impose : la religion (l'humanisme agnostique mais néanmoins empreint du sentiment religieux d'Eliot après son apostasie, son portrait tout en finesse de Farebrother confronté aux contradictions de sa foi) ; la politique (Eliot conservatrice et néanmoins soucieuse de progrès social) ; la circulation de l'argent (voir la très victorienne question de l'héritage de Peter Featherstone – ne jamais oublié l'onomastique – et la rapacité des prétendants au magot). Enfin la question du genre (la question de l'éducation des femmes, différente pour Dorothea et Rosamond, Mary Garth et son rapport au savoir)[8] est elle aussi déterminante. La critique s'est partagée entre celles et ceux qui ont voulu ne retenir que l'intellectuelle affranchie qui choqua ses contemporains en décidant de vivre avec un homme marié, George Henry Lewes – dont l'épouse avait déjà eu des enfants de son meilleur ami, que Lewes devait reconnaître d'ailleurs – et des féministes plus résolu(e)s qui reprochèrent à la romancière une idéologie du compromis, complaisante *in fine* avec les codes de la société patriarcale victorienne. Les derniers mots du roman ont suscité de nombreux commentaires : « that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs. » La/e lectrice/eur se fera son idée.

Middlemarch est un roman savant qui déploie une érudition impressionnante. Le texte présente la difficulté de paraître parfois digresser pour aborder au passage des sujets appartenant à quasiment tous les champs de la connaissance. En outre, la phrase éliottienne ne se livre pas toujours de prime abord et nécessite souvent une relecture pour bien fixer tous les éléments de sens qu'elle recèle. C'est cette dimension intellectuelle et cérébrale qui a permis la réhabilitation d'Eliot, en particulier grâce à F.R. Leavis dans *The Great Tradition.* En effet à la suite du naturalisme, du décadentisme et de l'esthétisme fin-de-siècle s'était imposée l'image d'une romancière bas-bleu, compassée, et volontiers pontifiante, notamment à travers les interventions d'un narrateur omniscient dont le traitement subtil et nuancé échappait encore largement à la critique. Il appartient donc au lecteur de prêter attention à la complexité de l'enchevêtrement des discours et à la technique maîtrisée du style indirect libre.

Enfin on pourrait envisager le dialogue entre fiction et épistémologie, fiction et mythographie, fiction et arts (la peinture, bien sûr, avec notamment les nazaréens – voir le personnage de Naumann – mais aussi la musique

[8] Pour une bonne synthèse sur la question, Kate Flint, "George Eliot and Gender," in George Levine ed., *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, Cambridge: C.U.P., 2001. pp. 159-180.