

Joseph Luzzi • *The Middlemarch Seminar* • Class 1
Virtual Book Club • February 8th, 2023 • Study Guide* • © Joseph Luzzi

Please note: the below are only intended to help you “get inside” Eliot’s extremely complex, intricate work—please do not feel compelled to answer them in full, unless you wish to, and if there are questions or elements that you don’t understand, no worries, we will explain all when we meet for our upcoming seminar!

1. Why do you think that *Middlemarch* is often considered one of the greatest novels of all time? Do you agree with this assessment? Why or why not—and if you do, what do you think is the particular source of its brilliance?
2. How would you describe Eliot’s literary style? How would you compare her to other 19th-century novelists that you’ve read—perhaps Charles Dickens and Jane Austen?
3. The prelude of *Middlemarch* reads:

Who that cares much to know the history of man, and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time, has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the life of Saint Theresa, has not smiled with some gentleness at the thought of the little girl walking forth one morning hand-in-hand with her still smaller brother, to go and seek martyrdom in the country of the Moors? Out they toddled from rugged Avila, wide-eyed and helpless-looking as two fawns, but with human hearts, already beating to a national idea; until domestic reality met them in the shape of uncles, and turned them back from their great resolve. That child-pilgrimage was a fit beginning. Theresa’s passionate, ideal nature demanded an epic life: what were many-volumed romances of chivalry and the social conquests of a brilliant girl to her? Her flame quickly burned up that light fuel; and, fed from within, soared after some illimitable satisfaction, some object which would never justify weariness, which would reconcile self-despair with the rapturous consciousness of life beyond self. She found her epos in the reform of a religious order.

What does this opening reveal or suggest about Eliot’s writing? And how does it anticipate or frame the subsequent themes and issues of the novel we are about to read?

4. What kind of “character” in the novel is the town of Middlemarch itself? What is the special meaning of that word “provincial” in the title: *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*?
5. Much of the early portion of the book deals with the relation between Casaubon and Dorothea. What are the main issues involved in their marriage? How do they relate to the overall concerns of the novel?
6. Would you consider Eliot to be a *philosophical* novelist? Why or why not?
7. What does *Middlemarch* reveal to you about the class structure of its 19th-century English world? Does it remind you of other novels on this subject that you have read, and if so, how?
8. How are issues of gender and female identity developed in these early chapters of *Middlemarch*?
9. There is much discussion of political issues in the early chapters of *Middlemarch*. What main points regarding politics do you think the novel is trying to convey?
10. What aspect of *Middlemarch* do you find to be the most relevant to our world, and why?

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