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BOOK REVIEW

by Kathleen Porter

The World's Classics Series: *Middlemarch* by George Eliot.

Edited with an Introduction by David Carroll, Oxford University Press, 1988 £2.75

"It is a curious fact that when a writer has attained to a certain eminence, we English cease to bother ourselves about him. There he is, recognised, accepted, labelled." I recalled these words, from the conversation of Katherine Mansfield in 1920, and recorded in her journal, when I opened the World's Classics paperback edition of *Middlemarch* edited by David Carroll, Professor of English Literature at the University of Lancaster. Katherine Mansfield's opinion may have been well-grounded in 1920, but it would certainly not be valid today, especially in relation to George Eliot and her work. A glance at the Select Bibliography shows that in recent years many people have 'bothered' themselves about her. It will be seen that a significant number of them are American, but some are English.

With regard to *Middlemarch*, David Carroll points out that it is seen as "the archetypal Victorian novel", and it is much studied and written about. His own excellent introduction to this edition amounts to a comprehensive, yet succinct, critical study. He begins by quoting the tribute of the historian Lord Acton, who wrote: 'No writer ever lived who had anything like her power of manifold, but disinterested and impartially observant sympathy.' Added to this, after showing her readers the world through the eyes of her characters, she was able to step back, become the narrator, and expose their souls to scientific and independent scrutiny.

Throughout her writing career, George Eliot was intent on showing the reality of human nature, not 'vague forms', thus heightening the awareness and understanding of her Victorian readers as she does ours today. David Carroll emphasises that the central question asked in the novels is: 'how do people make sense of the world?' *Middlemarch* is particularly concerned with the relationship between the individual and society, the broad medium in which people live is essential to their development. George Eliot's view is complex; subtle changes in society react on individuals, so that changes in each are seen to be interdependent, and society and culture grow and develop from within.

David Carroll's exposition of the role of the narrator in *Middlemarch*, which he describes as 'of crucial importance', is masterly. The narrator attempts to explain the complex world the author has created, and at the same time reveals the immense difficulty of the task. Views from without and within a character, the influence of past and present, expansion to the panoramic and contraction to the individual are continually opposed, and the narrator himself may even increase the general uncertainty about the real world and the world of the novel. By the use of irony, George Eliot's narrator manages to retain his balance, but, David Carroll suggests, perhaps with a nod towards Henry James, the tradition of the omniscient narrator is beginning to fade away.

George Eliot made as her historical setting for *Middlemarch* the period when reform was the order of the day. She created several plots which link the characters and show the movement of social change. Each social group is given its own separate importance, but the centre of one group is shown to be the background of another. In this way, the scope of the novel is enlarged without the sense of unity being lost.

David Carroll discusses the manner in which the particular structure of *Middlemarch* was influenced by the unusual way in which the novel came to be written, and by the method of

publication. He dealt fully with the fusion of the stories and the publication in parts in his introduction to the Clarendon Edition of Middlemarch, published in 1986.

George Eliot's characters, all 'trying to make sense of the world', are given very full treatment, even the relatively minor ones. Their philosophies are implicit in themselves as their creator draws and explains them, often in terms of their vocation or their position in society. The major characters are all forming their views of the world, or having them changed in some way. Eventually, they come up against the difference between their own notions of reality and the fictional real world in which they find themselves.

David Carroll tells us that the Victorian reviewers, although impressed by the breadth of the novel, all agreed that it 'was a melancholy study of failure and disillusionment'. Bright, young hopes are certainly not fulfilled, and possibly Middlemarch is a novel which appeals most to those of us who have left our callow youth behind. Our response may be conditioned by 'what lies outside' us, our own 'imperfect social state'. None of us lives an 'ideally beautiful' life, but I have seen a modern provincial tombstone on which the last four lines of the Finale are quoted as an eulogy, which suggests that they may indicate, to those living today, that an unheroic, limited, but realistic kind of fulfilment is worth achieving.

This paperback edition will prove invaluable for students and readers of every kind, and the Explanatory Notes will help to smooth the way to understanding.