



Course Title: The Greatest British Novel: George Eliot's *Middlemarch*

Course Code: LIT 111

Instructor: (Dr.) Rebecca (Becky) Richardson

Course Summary:

In this course we will read George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, what Virginia Woolf called "one of the few English novels written for grown-up people." We will read this expansive novel across its eight installments - just as the Victorians first encountered it. Across the class, we will put the novel in its historical and literary context, while also considering how it offers a culmination of Eliot's philosophical and artistic vision. Class will generally involve a 50-minute lecture, a 5-minute break to think over questions and pour a cup of tea, and a 50-minute discussion.

**Please see course page for full description and additional details.*

Note About Live Attendance and Recording:

The lecture and discussion will be recorded each week in case you'd like to refer back or if you're unable to attend live. While attendance and participation is a valued part of the course, I also understand if sometimes life happens (especially in the uncharted territory of the ongoing pandemic). We'll also carry on discussions via Canvas, so that you can participate asynchronously if needed or desired. I encourage questions and discussions both spoken and written (that is, voiced aloud or written out in the "chat" feature of Zoom), both "live" in class and "asynchronously" via Canvas). I look forward to our discussions carrying over between class and Canvas!

Grade Options and Requirements:

- **No Grade Requested (NGR)**
This is the default option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.
- **Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)**
Students must attend at least 80% of class sessions (at least 7 out of 8 classes).
- **Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass)**
Students must attend at least 80% of class sessions (at least 7 out of 8 classes) and submit a 1-2 page double-spaced, 12-point-font reading

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 365 Lasuen St., Stanford, CA 94305
 continuingstudies@stanford.edu
 650-725-2650

response for each session beyond the first day (7 responses in total). These responses will be submitted on Canvas under “assignments.”

**Please Note: If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit option. Courses taken for NGR will not appear on official transcripts or grade reports.*

Tentative Weekly Outline:

Week 1, Book 1, “Miss Brooke” (chs 1 through 12): The origins and context of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, from epic to realist novel

Middlemarch begins by juxtaposing epic ambitions and realistic limitations - suggestive of challenges George Eliot faced in her own life.

**Note: It’s highly recommended to read Book 1 for today if you can. However, the lecture and discussion will be designed to welcome everyone, even if you signed up late and didn’t have a chance to read yet. Our emphasis will be on the opening chapter, Eliot’s biography, and the themes to watch for as we go further into the novel. We’ll delve more closely into both Book 1 and Book 2 in our second class - giving everyone time to catch up.*

Week 2, Book 2, “Old and Young” (chs. 13 through 22): Building society from individuals — using the tools of the Victorian novel

Eliot uses the novel — and specifically the bildungsroman, realism, and the historical novel — to question the relationship between the individual and society.

Optional supplemental text: Excerpt from Eliot’s Adam Bede (1859)

Week 3, Book 3, “Waiting for Death” (chapters 23 through 33): Plotlines, Perspective, and Victorian-era Philosophy, Psychology, and Science

Middlemarch weaves together plotlines and contrasts perspectives, influenced by contemporary ideas across philosophy, psychology, and science.

Optional supplemental texts: Brief excerpts from George Henry Lewes’s Problems of Life and Mind (1874-79) and Darwin’s Origin of Species (1859)

Week 4, Book 4, “Three Love Problems” (chapter 34 through 42): The Marriage Plot, Family, and Inheritance

Middlemarch's "love problems" play on the novel's inheritance of comic and tragic conventions.

Week 5, Book 5, "The Dead Hand" (chapter 43 through 53): Tradition and Reform

Eliot represents a balance between the traditional (or "dead") and the progressive (or "living"), with the town of Middlemarch confronting both political and medical reforms - suggestive of ongoing Victorian debates and questions.

Optional supplemental text: Eliot's "Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt" (1868)

Week 6, Book 6, "The Widow and the Wife" (chapter 54 through 62): Eliot's Deep Psychology

The threads of the plot draw closer together as material constraints assert themselves against youthful aspirations - culminating in Eliot's in-depth portraits of the psychology of disillusionment.

Optional supplemental text: Excerpt from Lakoff and Johnson, Metaphors We Live By

Week 7, Book 7, "Two Temptations" (chapter 63 through 71): Tests and Ethical Systems

The recurring temptations that test characters in Eliot's fiction are suggestive of her larger ethical system - and how such systems might be developed with or without religion.

Week 8, Book 8, "Sunset and Sunrise" (chapter 72 through the end): Growing Up and Becoming "A Good Diffus'd"

Eliot creates a "sense of an ending" that is committed to realism as well as to her philosophical and ethical system.

Optional supplemental texts: Eliot's "The Choir Invisible" and brief excerpt from her dramatic poem Armgart.