CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

Middlemarch

George Eliot · *1871–72 · original English text*

In a provincial English town around 1830, two ardent young people want to do great good. Dorothea Brooke marries a dry old scholar to serve his work; the doctor Lydgate marries a pretty, selfish wife and loses his ideals to debt. Around them a whole town (bankers, farmers, clergymen, heirs) is tested in honesty, marriage and work.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

How does an ardent soul do real good when the world gives no great stage?

"Here and there is born a Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances"

The narrator · Prelude

Not by one heroic deed, but by faithful, hidden acts of truth and mercy that spread outward into other lives, as Dorothea's do.

KEY CHARACTERS

Dorothea Brooke
ardent goodness, humbled and matured

Mr. Casaubon
learning without love

Tertius Lydgate
high ideals, weak against vanity

Rosamond Vincy
polished selfishness

Will Ladislaw
warm, unsettled, sincere

Fred Vincy
a careless heir reformed by work

Mary Garth
plain honesty and good sense

Caleb Garth
the dignity of honest work

Nicholas Bulstrode
piety as a mask for sin

THE FINALE

"for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and 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."

The narrator, on Dorothea · Finale

"Look up, Nicholas."

Mrs. Bulstrode to her disgraced husband · Book VIII, ch. LXXIV

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01 Dorothea's Choice

BOOK I

A noble mistake made for noble reasons.

- **Dorothea Brooke**, earnest and devout, longs for a life of great usefulness
- She refuses the kind Sir James Chettam
- She marries the aging scholar **Mr. Casaubon**, hoping to serve his "Key to all Mythologies"
- Her sister Celia, more practical, marries Sir James

02 Disenchantment

BOOKS II–III

Ideals meet other people's limits.

- In Rome, Dorothea finds her husband cold and his great work hopeless
- Casaubon's young cousin **Will Ladislaw** befriends her
- The new doctor **Lydgate** arrives with plans to reform medicine
- Lydgate is charmed by the mayor's daughter, **Rosamond Vincy**

> *"If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat"*
> **The narrator** · Book II, ch. XX

03 Debts and Wills

BOOKS III–IV

Money tests every household.

- **Fred Vincy**'s unpaid debt costs the honest Garth family their savings
- **Mary Garth** refuses the dying Featherstone's demand to burn a will
- Featherstone leaves nothing to the hopeful heirs
- Mary will not marry Fred unless he finds honest work
- Lydgate marries Rosamond

04 The Dead Hand

BOOKS V–VI

A jealous will, and a buried past.

- Casaubon asks Dorothea to promise to finish his work; he dies before she answers
- His will strips her of his property if she marries Ladislaw
- The pious banker **Bulstrode** is visited by **Raffles**, who knows his shameful past
- Fred goes to work for Caleb Garth and learns to love it

> *"You must be sure of two things: you must love your work, and not be always looking over the edge of it, wanting your play to begin."*
> **Caleb Garth to Fred** · Book VI, ch. LVI

05 Two Temptations

BOOKS VII–VIII

Hypocrisy exposed, and an innocent man stained.

- Lydgate falls into debt; Rosamond thwarts every plan to economize
- He accepts a loan from Bulstrode
- Raffles falls ill; Bulstrode lets the doctor's orders be disobeyed, and Raffles dies
- The scandal breaks, and Lydgate is suspected of a bribe
- Mrs. Bulstrode learns the truth and stands by her husband in his disgrace

06 Sunset and Sunrise

BOOK VIII & FINALE

One person's trust restores others.

- Dorothea alone publicly believes in Lydgate and pays his debt
- She visits Rosamond, who, moved by her goodness, tells her Will loves only her
- Dorothea gives up Casaubon's fortune and marries Will
- Lydgate leaves town and dies young; Fred and Mary marry

> *"What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult to each other?"*
> **Dorothea** · Book VIII, ch. LXXII

Vocation · Marriage · Honest Work · Hypocrisy & Confession · Mercy & Trust · Hidden Goodness

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. Compare the two marriages, Dorothea and Casaubon, Lydgate and Rosamond. What did each partner want from the other?
2. Watch how small acts (an unpaid debt, a refused will, a loan) spread through the whole town.
3. Bulstrode prays and gives to the church while hiding his sin. Follow how hypocrisy works on him from inside.
4. Notice Mrs. Bulstrode's choice in Book VIII. What does faithful love look like after disgrace?
5. Ask which characters grow through suffering and which only harden.
6. Read the Prelude and the Finale together. What has the novel taught you about a "hidden life"?

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