

ENGL 285

8 April 2022

Descriptive Bibliography: Middlemarch

This textual object is an edition of Middlemarch by George Eliot, published by Penguin Classics in 2011. An immediately striking aspect of the book is its thickness. It is 880 pages long, suggesting a work of literary seriousness and importance. Likewise, the edition is bound with a hard cover, contributing both to the book's heftiness and its image of textual value; the text deserves protection and a sense of material quality. The edition also contains paratext: a short introduction preceding the text and several pages of explanatory notes at its end. Both of these sections suggest that the book is an intended object of literary study. The presence of an introduction signals that previous scholars have appreciated Middlemarch, thought critically about the text, and see value in its continued circulation. Likewise, both the introduction and notes serve to place the text in a historical literary canon. It is old enough to need contextualization and clarifications for the modern reader, yet the attention scholars and editors have given it imply that the book must be worthy of continued import. From its size and paratext, we infer that the book is an object of significant value, both as literature and as a piece of history.

Returning to aesthetic features of the edition, they too suggest an object intended to be valued by its generic owner. The book is ornate and uses quality materials, evident from its pink cloth cover. The cover also conveys a historical motif; it is embossed with silhouettes, reminiscent of the 18th and 19th centuries, manufactured to appear faded and to suggest the text's age. The edition's endpapers are a rich, deep red, complementing the cover and further suggesting an aesthetic purpose for the book. The edition also has a red ribbon bookmark sewn in, reinforcing the book as an object of literary significance; it is for a serious reader, and it is for a reader who wants to feel a sense of quality and care in the construction of their book. A final,

particularly noteworthy element of this edition is a facsimile title page reproduced from the first edition of *Middlemarch*. This feature implies that the book is intended for a consumer who wants to own a piece of literary history. And not just own it; this edition is designed to be valued aesthetically and to project its worth. Thus, it is also for the consumer who cares about outwardly manifesting their own appreciation of literary history.

Turning to an analysis of this individual copy of the edition, its most distinct feature is an inscription on its front endpaper. The inscription is addressed to a specific individual and is signed, suggesting that the book was given as a gift. Furthering this interpretation is an envelope kept between the book's front cover and front endpaper, addressed to the same person as the inscription and containing the description of an English departmental award. From this, we again infer that the book was given as a prize or gift, and its aforementioned aesthetic value supports the analysis; it is a giftable book with value beyond just the textual. As a gift, the book seems also to be prized by its recipient. The keeping of the award description in the book implies a sense of pride or nostalgia associated with both the award and the book itself.

Notably, the book is also in excellent condition. The spine is fully intact, no pages are torn or tattered, the cover bears no signs of wear, and the text contains no annotations or marginalia. This condition signals on the one hand that the book is a prized possession, an extension of its connotations as a prize. One may also take the book's pristine condition to mean that it has been left unread, furthering other trains of analysis: that the book serves more of an aesthetic function than literary, that it is historical, and thus perhaps daunting to engage with, or that it was picked out for the owner, not by the owner. All of these interpretations fall in line with our overall understanding of the edition as a textual object, illuminated throughout this analysis. Although designed for the serious reader, it is an object equally designed to be appreciated for its

historical and aesthetic value, and, crucially, designed to project its own worth. Given as a literary gift, the book's actual use seems to be a near-perfect reflection of its intended use.