

George Eliot





George Eliot
1819-1880

The Basics



Born	11.22.1819 Warwickshire, England
Died	12.22.1880 London, England
Career	English author and novelist

George Eliot was the pen name used by the English novelist Mary Ann Evans, one of the most important writers of European fiction. Her masterpiece, *Middlemarch*, is not only a major social record but also one of the greatest novels in the history of fiction.

George Eliot



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MARY ANNE EVANS WAS BORN AT SOUTH FARM, ARBURY, on November 22, 1819. The youngest child of Robert Evans and Christiana Pearson Evans, she had four siblings. Mary Anne shared an especially close relationship with her brother Isaac. However, in 1824, Isaac was sent to school at Foleshill, and Mary Anne was sent to Miss Latham's boarding school. At Miss Latham's, missing the companionship and comfort of her brother, Mary Anne first turned to books as a source of amusement. Those who knew her found Mary Anne a serious, sensitive, and introspective child. She had straight light-brown hair and a plain face.

In 1828, after finishing at Miss Latham's, Mary Anne was sent to Mrs. Wallington's Boarding School at Nuneaton. It was at Mrs. Wallington's that she met the woman who was to be the most influential figure of her early life, Miss Maria Lewis. Maria Lewis, a kind woman with strong evangelical beliefs, was a governess at the school. She took an immediate interest in the shy Mary Anne, and marking the exceptional quality of the child's mind, took it upon herself to foster it. By the time Mary Anne was thirteen, she had learned all that Mrs. Wallington's school had to offer. When she left, however, she maintained a close relationship with Miss Lewis -- a relationship they kept up for nearly fourteen years. Upon leaving Miss Wallington's, Mary Anne attended Miss Franklin's school at Coventry. It was here that Mary Anne worked to rid herself of her Midland accent and cultivated the "low, well-modulated, musical voice, which impressed everyone who knew George Eliot in later years. At Miss Franklin's school, Mary Anne became an accomplished pianist, studied French, was admired for her skill at writing, and read widely. She also wrote poetry and fiction.

Mary Anne then adopted George Eliot as her pen name because at the time, writing was considered to be a male profession... She later told John Cross that she chose the name because "George was Mr. Lewes's Christian name, and Eliot was a good mouth-filling, easily pronounced word"





Drastic changes soon occurred in Mary Anne's life. In February of 1839, Mrs. Evans died, and Mary Anne, then 19, left school to take care of her father. Though not the oldest daughter, Mary Anne had always been close to her father, and she tried to fill in for her mother while continuing her education at home (now Griff House). Robert Evans, proud of his daughter, bought Mary Anne any book she wished to have and arranged for her to receive lessons in Italian and German. In 1841, she and her father moved to a new home at Foleshill. She met George Henry Lewes in October of 1851. Lewes was an unattractive man, but loved by most who came near him because of his outgoing personality and wit. Lewes had married Agnes Jervis in 1841. About eight years into the marriage, Agnes began an affair with Lewes's close friend Thornton Hunt. Both Lewes and Agnes were believers in "free love" and felt that feelings were stronger

than legal bonds. So when Agnes gave birth to Hunt's son, Lewes claimed the illegitimate child as his own. In the coming years, she would bear Hunt four more children. George claimed all of them, but he ceased to view Agnes as his wife. When Mary Anne met Lewes, his marriage had long been over in every sense but the legal one. Lewes came to visit Mary Anne at the Strand often, often enough that by April of 1853, their intimacy had grown far beyond what either of them could have expected. In September of 1853, Mary Anne moved out of 142 Strand and found her own lodgings. This move gave her the opportunity to spend more time with Lewes, and by November they had grown extremely close. In July of 1854, her translation of Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* was published, with her name appearing on the title page. This was the first and last time "Marian Evans" appeared on a work of hers.

Middlemarch, her greatest novel, was probably inspired by her life at Coventry. Eliot combined the work from a tale of a young doctor, which she started in 1869, and then abandoned, and the satirical story of the frustrations of Dorothea Brooke. Eliot weaves into her story several narrative lines, which throw light on the aspirations of the central characters. Middlemarch tells of English provincial life in the early nineteenth century, just before the Reform Bill of 1832. The book was called by the famous American writer Henry James a 'treasure-house of detail.'





In June of 1856, Mary Anne and George moved to Tenby on the coast of South Wales. When Barbara Leigh Smith visited them in July, she remarked that the couple was very happy. At Tenby, Mary Anne began to think more and more about her childhood dream of writing fiction. She felt that she could competently write the descriptive passages of a novel, but feared that she lacked the talent to render dramatic and dialogue passages effectively. When she shared these thoughts with George, he encouraged her to try her hand at fiction writing. In August, the Lewes's moved back to London, and on September 23rd of 1856, Mary Anne began to write "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton," which would later become a part of *Scenes of Clerical Life*. Despite his avowed confidence in her, George still had some doubts about Mary Anne's ability to write fiction. Those doubts were removed when he read her Amos Barton story. Her fears were unfounded -- she could write good dialogue and she could create

drama to stir the emotions. Lewes sent her story to his publisher, John Blackwood, claiming it was the work of a male friend who wanted to remain anonymous. The story was published on New Year's Day, 1857, less than two months after Mary Anne's thirty-seventh birthday. Evans' first collection of tales, *Scenes of Clerical Life* appeared in 1858. It was followed by her first novel, *Adam Bede*, a tragic love story in which the model for the title character was Eliot's father. He was noted for his great physical strength, which enabled him to carry loads that three average men could barely handle. When impostors claimed authorship of *Adam Bede*, it was revealed that Marian Evans, the Westminster reviewer, was in fact George Eliot. The book was a brilliant success. Her other major works include *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), a story of destructive family relations, and *Silas Marner* (1861) a story about a low class linen-weaver, who has smartly accumulated a goodly sum of gold. In the end *Silas Marner* is accepted as part.

In June of 1854, Mary Anne went to Rosehill for the last time. Mary Anne had decided to live openly with George Lewes as his lover and spiritual wife. The decision was not an easy one. Mary Anne knew that this bold move would bring public censure and that if George ever left her, she would be alone and outcast. She wrote the following to

John Chapman on the subject, "I do not wish to take the ground of ignoring what is unconventional in my position. I have counted the cost of the step I have taken and am prepared to bear, without irritation or bitterness, renunciation of all my friends. I am not mistaken in the person to whom I have attached myself"



“What is remarkable, extraordinary – and the process remains inscrutable and mysterious – is that this quiet, anxious, sedentary, serious, invalidical English lady, without animal spirits, without adventures, without extravagance, assumption, or bravado, should have made us believe that nothing in the world was alien to her; should have produced such rich, deep, masterly pictures of the multifold life of man.”

(Henry James in The Atlantic monthly, May 1885)



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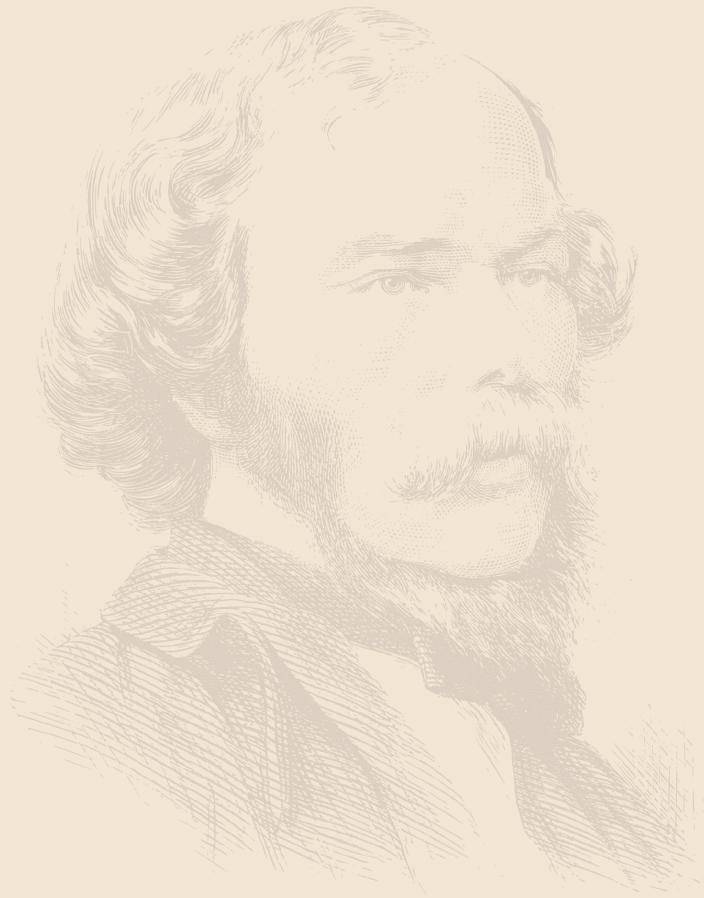
Career

ONE OF ELIOT'S MAIN CONCERNS IS THE WAY WHICH THE past moulds the present and the attempts of various characters to control the future. Dorothea, an idealistic young woman, marries the pedantic Casaubon. After his death she marries Will Ladislaw, Casaubon's young cousin, a vaguely artistic outsider. Doctor Tertius Lydgate is trapped with the egoistic Rosamond Vincy, the town's beauty. Lydgate becomes involved in a scandal, and he dies at 50, his ambitions frustrated. Other characters are Bulstrode, a banker and a religious hypocrite, Mary Garth, the practical daughter of a land agent, and Fred Vincy, the son of the mayor of Middlemarch. For modern feminist readers Middlemarch has been a disappointment: Dorothea was not prepared to give up marriage. "I know that I must expect trials, uncle. Marriage is a state of higher duties, I never thought of it as mere personal ease," said poor Dorothea." However, Eliot's lament for Dorothea left no doubts about her views: "Some have felt that these blundering lives are due to the inconvenient indefiniteness with which the Supreme Power has fashioned the nature of women: if there were one level of feminine incompetence as strict as the ability to count three and no more, the social lot of women might be treated with scientific certitude. Meanwhile the indefiniteness remains, the limits of variation are really much wider than any one would imagine from the sameness of women's coiffure and the favorite love stories in prose and verse."

In 1860-61 Eliot spent some time in Italy collecting material for her historical romance Romola. It was published serially first in the Cornhill Magazine and in book form in 1863. Eliot received for Romola £7,000, the highest advance paid for an English novel. Henry James considered it the finest thing she wrote, "but its defects are almost on the scale of its beauties." In 1871 she mentioned to Alexander Main: "I have the conviction that excessive literary production is a social offence." When Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote admiringly of Silas Marner in 1869 Eliot began a correspondence with her. In a letter from 1876 she wrote about Daniel Deronda "As to the Jewish element in 'Deronda', I expected from first to last in writing it, that it would create much stronger resistance and even repulsion than it has actually met with. But precisely because I felt that the usual attitude of Christians towards Jews is – I hardly know whether to say more impious or more stupid when viewed in the light of their professed principles, I therefore felt urged to treat Jews with such sympathy and understanding as my nature and knowledge could attain to. Moreover, not only towards the Jews, but towards all oriental peoples with whom we English come in contact, a spirit of arrogance and contemptuous dictatorialness is observable which has become a national disgrace to us." Eliot's translation works include D.F. Strauss's Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet Ludwig Feuerbach's Das Wesen des Christentum, and Spinoza's Ethics. Eliot's thoughts of religion were considered at that time advanced.



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To my dear husband,
George Henry Lewes, I give the manuscript of a work which would never have
been written but for the happiness which his love has conferred on my life.

Adam Bede was her first full-length novel. It was an immediate success, but attracted fervent public gossip as to who the real author was. When it was discovered that Eliot was Mrs. Marian Evans Lewes, many castigated her but she was also lauded by friends, fellow authors, and feminists. The dedication in Adam Bede read; The Lifted Veil (1859) reflects the personal struggles Eliot went through as a woman and author in the spotlight since the success of Adam Bede. She still felt self-doubt at times and had bouts of depression--this sensitive inner-life reflected in many of the portraits painted of her. But always Lewes was there to urge her forward. Eliot's most autobiographical novel The Mill on the Floss (1860) was followed by Silas Marner: the Weaver of Raveloe (1861). Her epic historical novel for which she did much research, Romola (1862-3), is based on the life of Dominican Monk

Savonarola. It was followed by Brother Jacob (1864) and Felix Holt: The Radical (1866), a political story set in the time of the Great Reform Act of 1832. Eliot wrote many poems including her epic "The Spanish Gypsy" (1868) and "How Lisa Loved the King" (1869). Other poems would be included in The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems (1870). Eliot's masterpiece Middlemarch (1871-2) was followed by Daniel Deronda (1876). Around this time the Lewes's went to live at "The Heights" in Witley, Surrey. George had been sick for some time, and died on 30 November 1878. Eliot was profoundly grieved, but found some comfort in editing his Problems of Life and Mind. She was also working on her own last work, a collection of essays titled Impressions of Theophrastus Such While Eliot isolated herself from family and friends, she did allow banker John Walter Cross to visit her.





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Career

Through much of her career, the author of *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch* commanded great critical and public esteem. But her reputation began to decline with the new century until the epochal year 1933. It was then that a young American instructor named Gordon Haight came across a cache of Eliot letters in the Yale University Library. For the next 50 years Haight devoted himself to the correspondence. He became the general editor of the definitive Clarendon Edition of Eliot's novels and, in 1968, produced a fine, now standard biography. Haight's crowning achievement was an edited and annotated edition of her letters.

She espouses a variety of radical causes. She denounces slavery in America and anti-Semitism in England, and demands better education for women. After the fall of France's King Louis Philippe in 1848, she confides to a friend that

she sympathizes with the revolutionaries. To her, Victoria Regina is "our little humbug of a queen," and she suggests that the world's monarchs should be put into "a sort of Zoological Garden, where these worn out humbugs may be preserved."

As the unpaid and unacknowledged editor of the celebrated *Westminster Review*, she enters into fierce arguments about political and religious subjects. Her article "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" excoriates authors who mistake "vagueness for depth, bombast for eloquence, and affectation for originality." Even after it becomes known in 1859 that George Eliot is actually a woman, she is never accused of similar foolishness. For the rest of her life she is regarded as the formidable equal of such eminent Victorians as Charles Dickens and Herbert Spencer.

D.H. Lawrence once wrote:

“It was really

The young Henry James described her as:

George Eliot

“...magnificently, awe-inspiringly ugly.

who started it all.

but he also studied her work

It was she who

carefully, and critically,

started putting

and acknowledged her greatness as a writer.”

action inside.”



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THE LETTERS IN HAIGHT'S SELECTIONS HAVE BEEN JUDICIOUSLY culled from his nine volume magnum opus. Furnished with explanatory notes, the correspondence may be read as an unself-conscious autobiography recounted in the voice Henry James found as "soft and rich as that of a counselling angel." Eliot also delights in playing the devil with Victorian cant and hypocrisy. In 1842, the self-taught country girl from Warwickshire writes to her father declaring that she will no longer attend church. Speaking of the Scriptures, she pronounces, "I regard these writings as histories consisting of mingled truth and fiction." There is no arguing with her; Eliot knows as much about theology as the clergymen affronted by her heresy. Even the Rev. Ralph Waldo Emerson is impressed when she informs him that Jean Jacques Rousseau's Confessions is the first book to "awaken her to deep reflection."

Eliot has re-emerged whole from the Victorian era, as a novelist and as a woman of uncommon fascination.



My dear Thomas

Dear Thomas

Your proposition that I should write my journal in the form of letters to you, strikes upon me invitingly. You say that books of thought & knowledge are hardly ever scribbled upon except when they come to you associated with a personality, & that you think just now in my shape than by reading whole books of dead men who have written for no one but you. That will induce me to write down the things that come into my mind with more completeness than I have ever had resolution to do in the stiff sort of regularity that belongs to diary journal writing. In flowing weather I shall fancy you with you fast on your pen, your death eye face on your nose, looking at me with friendly smile as if to tell you of my little affairs, - read the impression of my daily life, & find me in the quiet, I shall fancy that as we started together would you for ever, which you continue to repeat into a large form by elaboration of thought & habit, showing as much but not your original sparkling for which there is no any ordinary of others would speak even in our large camp & find the world in the chilly way. I, your companion, have mechanically when you pause - look at a man when you look at her - in the flight of a glance which you have with you being that, & at the which shall occasionally about my own thoughts & things, & complacently reflecting now & then, how very useful I am to you by helping up your eyes with a will when language is at a more sophisticated stage than the usual. I have now further still against my fingers, & the my fingers would admit he could not as I write, I am in the country, without the trouble of putting up: I see the autumn leaves, I see the garden paths of the autumn air between the hills now in the green lanes, & the narrow the path is turning over in the woodlands, as I wrap my head round me & enjoy the December hour just that before every thing is done before

York January 21st 1850

My dear Thomas

There were by me you of the name, for what part but one faithful & able ally, would be soon have displaced me from the seat of some of doubt in which I must necessarily be held as to the strength of the chains but better of your frame under the trial of some hours' concentration. Happily the steady, unshakable temperament has some counterbalance among advantages to those of the sanguine. It does sometimes meet with results more favourable than it respects, and by its work of imagining the passionate about the world of it, power to be disappointed. The very same like originality of this sort of sentiment is the fact that you will be more cheerfully if yourself than I had been thinking of that size. I am, please, now for my own doing -



“It’s
never
too late
to be
who you
might
have
been.”

(George Eliot)

Though Eliot corresponds with a network of women friends, her governing passion is for men. In her boldest act, she chooses to live with the science writer George Henry Lewes, even though he can never legally free himself from his conspicuously unfaithful wife. Eliot’s scandalous but happy liaison with Lewes produces few letters, because for 24 years the couple are hardly ever out of each other’s sight. Still, Eliot’s correspondence is full of references to the man who insists that she write fiction and who encourages his self-doubting and often depressed companion, novel after novel. In gratitude she chooses his first name for her pseudonym.

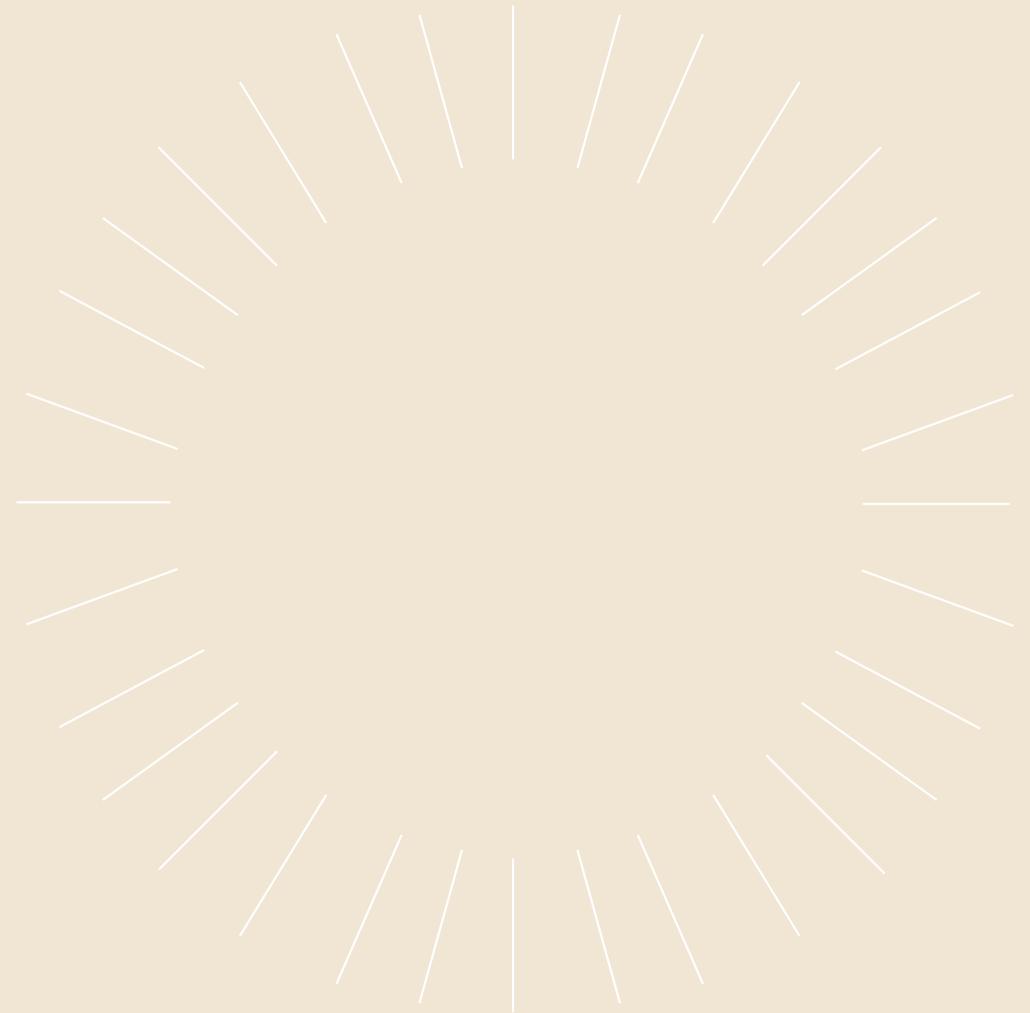
Among Eliot’s most revealing letters are those she sent to her publisher, John Blackwood, over a period of 22 years. Her replies to his unwelcome suggestions for changes in her manuscripts amount to a literary credo. When he proposes that she make one of her characters less “abjectly devoted” to an unworthy girl, she answers, “My artistic bent is directed not at all to the presentation of eminently irreproachable characters, but to the presentation of mixed human beings in such a way as to call forth tolerant judgment, pity, and sympathy.” Indignantly, she adds, “And I cannot stir a step aside from what I feel to be true in character . . . Alas! Inconsistencies and weaknesses are not untrue. It is at moments like this that her world of “knowledge, pride and power” stands fully revealed.

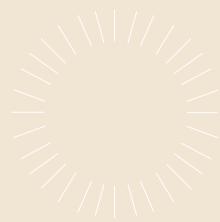


George Eliot died on 22 December 1880. She now rests with Lewes in Highgate Cemetery in London, England. Her epitaph reads:

“Of those
immortal dead
who live again,
In minds made
better by
their presence.
Here rests
the body of
George Eliot.”

Although Eliot's wish to be buried in Westminster Abbey was not granted, in 1980 a memorial was placed in Poet's Corner in her honour, among other such esteemed literary figures as William Blake, Aphra Behn, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.





- 1857 Scenes of Clerical Life
- 1859 Adam Bede
- 1859 The Lifted Veil
- 1860 The Mill on the Floss
- 1861 Silas Marner: the Weaver of Raveloe
- 1863 Romola
- 1864 Brother Jacob
- 1866 Felix Holt, The Radical
- 1868 The Spanish Gypsy
- 1872 Middlemarch
- 1876 Daniel Deronda
- 1869 Agatha
- 1869 Brother and Sister
- 1869 How Lisa Loved the King
- 1870 The Legend of Jubal
- 1871 Armgart
- 1874 Arion
- 1874 A Minor Prophet
- 1874 Stradivarius
- 1878 A College Breakfast Party
- 1879 The Death of Moses
- 1879 Impressions of Theophrastus Such



