

# George Eliot

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

**Mary Ann Evans**



George Eliot at 30 by François D'Albert Durade

**Pseudonym:** George Eliot

**Born:** November 22, 1819  
South Farm, Arbury, near Nuneaton

**Died:** December 22, 1880 (aged 61)

**Occupation:** Novelist

**Mary Ann Evans** (22 November 1819 – 22 December 1880), better known by her pen name

**George Eliot**, was an English novelist. She was one of the leading writers of the Victorian era. Her novels, largely set in provincial England, are well known for their realism and psychological perspicacity.

She used a male pen name, she said, to ensure that her works were taken seriously. Female authors published freely under their own names, but Eliot wanted to ensure that she was not seen as merely a writer of romances. An additional factor may have been a desire to shield her private life from public scrutiny and to prevent scandals attending her relationship with the married George Henry Lewes.

## Contents

- 1 Biography
- 2 Literary assessment
- 3 Works
  - 3.1 Novels
  - 3.2 Other works
  - 3.3 Poetry
- 4 Bibliography
  - 4.1 Context and background
  - 4.2 Critical studies
- 5 Notes

- 6 External links

## Biography



George Eliot's birthplace at South Farm,  
Arbury

Mary  
Ann  
Evans  
was  
the  
third  
child  
of

Robert and Christiana Evans (née Pearson). When born, Mary Ann, often shortened to Marian, had two teenage siblings, a half-brother and sister from her father's previous marriage to Harriet Poynton. Robert Evans was the manager of the Arbury Hall Estate for the Newdigate family in Warwickshire, and Mary Ann was born on the estate at South Farm, Arbury, near Nuneaton. In early 1820 the family moved to a house named Griff, part way

between Nuneaton and Coventry.

The young Evans was obviously intelligent, and due to her father's important role on the estate, she was allowed access to the library of Arbury Hall, which greatly aided her education and breadth of learning. Her classical education left its mark; Christopher Stray has observed that "George Eliot's novels draw heavily on Greek literature (only one of her books can be printed without the use of a Greek font), and her themes are often influenced by Greek tragedy".<sup>[1]</sup> Her frequent visits also allowed her to contrast the wealth in which the local landowner lived with the lives of the often much poorer people on the estate, and different lives lived in parallel would reappear in many of her works. The other important early influence in her life was religion. She was brought up within a narrow low church Anglican family, but at that time the Midlands was an area with many religious dissenters, and those beliefs formed part of her education. She boarded at schools in Attleborough, Nuneaton and Coventry. At the second she was taught by the evangelical Maria Lewis—to whom her earliest surviving letters are addressed—and at the Coventry school she received instruction from Baptist sisters.

In 1836 her mother died and Evans returned home to act as housekeeper, but she continued her education with a private tutor and advice from Maria Lewis. It was while she was acting as the family's housekeeper that she invented the Marmalade Brompton cake. She passed the recipe to a local baker who produced it on a commercial basis and, for a while, it was the most popular cake in England. When she was 21, her brother Isaac married and took over the family home, so Evans and her father moved to Foleshill near Coventry. The closeness to Coventry society brought new influences, most notably those of Charles and Cara Bray. Charles Bray had become rich as a ribbon manufacturer and had used his wealth in building schools and other philanthropic causes. He was a freethinker in religious matters, a progressive in politics, and his home, Rosehill, was a haven for people who held and debated radical views. The people whom the young woman met at the Brays' house included Robert Owen, Herbert Spencer, Harriet Martineau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Through this society, Evans was introduced to more liberal theologies, many of which cast doubt on the supernatural elements of Biblical stories, and she stopped going to church. This caused a rift between herself and her family, with her father

threatening to throw her out, although that did not happen. Instead, she respectably attended church and continued to keep house for him until his death in 1849. Her first major literary work was the translation of David Strauss' *Life of Jesus* (1846), which she completed after it had been begun by another member of the Rosehill circle.

Before her father's death, she travelled to Switzerland with the Brays, and on her return moved to London with the intent of becoming a writer and calling herself Marian Evans. She stayed at the house of John Chapman, the radical publisher whom she had met at Rosehill and who had printed her translation. Chapman had recently bought the campaigning, left-wing journal *The Westminster Review*, and Evans became its assistant editor in 1851. Although Chapman was the named editor, it was Evans who did much of the work in running the journal for the next three years, contributing many essays and reviews.

Women writers

were not

uncommon at the time, but Evans's role at the head of a literary enterprise was. Even the sight of an unmarried young woman mixing with the predominantly male society of London at that time

was unusual, even scandalous to some. Although clearly strong-minded, she was frequently sensitive, depressed, and crippled by self-doubt. She was well aware of her ill-favoured appearance, and she formed a number of embarrassing, unreciprocated emotional attachments, including that to her employer, the married Chapman, and Herbert Spencer. However, another highly inappropriate



*She had a low forehead, a dull grey eye, a vast pendulous nose, a huge mouth full of uneven teeth and a chin and jawbone 'qui n'en finissent pas' ... Now in this vast ugliness resides a most powerful beauty which, in a very few minutes, steals forth and charms the mind, so that you end, as I ended, in falling in love with her. Yes, behold me in love with this great horse-faced bluestocking.*

— Henry James

attraction would prove to be much more successful and beneficial for Evans.

The philosopher and critic George Henry Lewes met Evans in 1851, and by 1854 they had decided to live together. Lewes was married to Agnes Jervis, but they had decided to have an open marriage, and in addition to having three children together, Agnes had also had several children with other men. As he was named on the birth certificate as the father of one of these children despite knowing this to be false, and since he was therefore complicit in adultery, he was not able to divorce Agnes. In 1854 Lewes and Evans travelled to Weimar and Berlin together for the purpose of research. Before going to Germany, Evans continued her interest in theological work with a translation of Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* and while abroad she wrote essays and worked on her translation of Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics*, which she would however never complete.

The trip to Germany also doubled as a honeymoon as they were now effectively married, with Evans calling herself Marian Evans Lewes, and referring to George Lewes as her husband. It was not unusual for men in Victorian society to have



mistresses, including both Charles Bray and John Chapman. What was scandalous was the Lewes's open admission of the relationship. On their return to England, they lived apart from the literary society of London, both shunning and being shunned in equal measure. While continuing to contribute pieces to the *Westminster Review*, Evans had resolved to become a novelist, and she set out a manifesto for herself in one of her last essays for the *Review*: Silly Novels by Lady Novelists. The essay criticised the trivial and ridiculous plots of contemporary fiction by women. In other essays she praised the realism of novels written in Europe at the time, and subsequently an emphasis placed on realistic story-telling would become clear throughout her subsequent fiction. She also adopted a new nom-de-plume, the one for which she would become best known: George Eliot. This masculine name was chosen partly in order to distance herself from the lady writers of silly novels, but it also quietly hid the tricky subject of her marital status.

In 1857 *Amos Barton*, the first of the *Scenes of Clerical Life*, was published in *Blackwood's Magazine* and, along with the other *Scenes*, was well received. Her first complete novel, published in 1859, was *Adam Bede* and was an instant

success, but it prompted an intense interest in who this new author might be. *Scenes of Clerical Life* was widely believed to have been written by a country parson or perhaps the wife of a parson. With the release of the incredibly popular *Adam Bede*, speculation increased markedly, and there was even a pretender to the authorship, one Joseph Liggins. In the end, the real George Eliot stepped forward: Marian Evans Lewes admitted she was the author. The revelations about Eliot's private life surprised and shocked many of her admiring readers, but this apparently did not affect her popularity as a novelist. Eliot's relationship with Lewes afforded her the encouragement and stability she so badly needed to write fiction, and to ease her self-doubt, but it would be some time before they were accepted into polite society. Acceptance was finally confirmed in 1877, when they were introduced to Princess Louise, the daughter of Queen Victoria, who was an avid reader of George Eliot's novels.

After the popularity of *Adam Bede*, she continued to write popular novels for the next fifteen years. Her last novel was *Daniel Deronda*, published in 1876, whereafter she and Lewes moved to Witley Surrey; but by this time Lewes's health was failing and he died two years later on 30 November 1878.

Eliot spent the next two years editing Lewes's final work *Life and Mind* for publication, and she found solace with John Walter Cross an American banker whose mother had recently passed away.

On 6 May 1880  
George Eliot  
courted  
controversy once  
more by marrying  
a man twenty  
years younger than  
herself, and again  
changing her  
name, this time to  
Mary Anne Cross.  
The legal marriage  
at least pleased her  
brother Isaac, who  
sent his  
congratulations  
after breaking off  
relations with his  
sister when she  
had begun to live  
with Lewes. John Cross was a rather unstable  
character, and apparently jumped or fell from their  
hotel balcony into the Grand Canal in Venice



George Eliot died at 4  
Cheyne Walk, Chelsea.

during their honeymoon. Cross survived and they returned to England. The couple moved to a new house in Chelsea but Eliot fell ill with a throat infection. This, coupled with the kidney disease she had been afflicted with for the past few years, led to her death on the 22 December 1880 at the age of 61.

She is buried in Highgate Cemetery (East), Highgate, London in the area reserved for religious dissenters, next to George Henry Lewes.

## **Literary assessment**

Eliot's most famous work, *Middlemarch*, is a turning point in the history of the novel. Making masterful use of a counterpointed plot, Eliot presents the stories of a number of denizens of a small English town on the eve of the Reform Bill of 1832. The main characters, Dorothea Brooke and Tertius Lydgate, long for exceptional lives but are powerfully constrained both by their own unrealistic expectations and by a conservative society. The novel is notable for its deep psychological insight and sophisticated character portraits.

Throughout her career, Eliot wrote with a politically astute pen. From *Adam Bede* to *The Mill on the Floss* and the frequently-read *Silas Marner*, Eliot presented the cases of social outsiders and small-town persecution. No author since Jane Austen had been as socially conscious and as sharp in pointing out the hypocrisy of the country squires. *Felix Holt, the Radical* and *The Legend of Jubal* were overtly political novels, and political crisis is at the heart of *Middlemarch*. Readers in the Victorian era particularly praised her books for their depictions of rural society, for which she drew on her own early experiences, and she shared with Wordsworth the belief that there was much interest and importance in the mundane details of ordinary country lives. Eliot did not, however, confine herself to her bucolic roots. *Romola*, an historical novel set in late 15th century Florence and touching on the lives of several real persons such as the priest Girolamo Savonarola, displays her wider reading and interests. In *The Spanish Gypsy*, Eliot made a foray into verse, creating a work whose initial popularity has not endured.

The religious elements in her fiction also owe much to her upbringing, with the experiences of Maggie Tulliver from *The Mill on the Floss*

sharing many similarities with the young Mary Anne Evans' own development. When Silas Marner is persuaded that his alienation from the church means also his alienation from society, the author's life is again mirrored with her refusal to attend church. She was at her most autobiographical in *Looking Backwards*, part of her final printed work *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*. By the time of *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot's sales were falling off, and she faded from public view to some degree. This was not helped by the biography written by her husband after her death, which portrayed a wonderful, almost saintly, woman totally at odds with scandalous life they knew she had led. In the 20th century she was championed by a new breed of critics; most notably by Virginia Woolf, who called *Middlemarch* "one of the few English novels written for grown-up people". The various film and television adaptations of Eliot's books have re-introduced her to the wider-reading public.

As an author, Eliot was not only very successful in sales, but she was, and remains, one of the most widely praised for her style and clarity of thought. Eliot's sentence structures are clear, patient, and well balanced, and she mixes plain statement and unsettling irony with rare poise. Her commentaries

are never without sympathy for the characters, and she never stoops to being arch or flippant with the emotions in her stories. Villains, heroines and bystanders are all presented with awareness and full motivation.

## Works

### Novels

- *Adam Bede*, 1859
- *The Mill on the Floss*, 1860
- *Silas Marner*, 1861
- *Romola*, 1863
- *Felix Holt, the Radical*, 1866
- *Middlemarch*, 1871-72
- *Daniel Deronda*, 1876

### Other works

- Translation of "The Life of Jesus Critically Examined" by David Strauss, 1846
- Translation of "The Essence of Christianity" by Ludwig Feuerbach, 1854
- *Scenes Of Clerical Life*, 1858
  - *Amos Barton*
  - *Mr Gilfil's Love Story*
  - *Janet's Repentance*

- *The Lifted Veil*, 1859
- *Brother Jacob*, 1864
- *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, 1879

## Poetry

Poems by George Eliot include:

- *The Spanish Gypsy* (a dramatic poem) 1868
- *Agatha*, 1869
- *Armgarth*, 1871
- *Stradivarius*, 1873
- *The Legend of Jubal*, 1874
- *Arion*, 1874
- *A Minor Prophet*, 1874
- *A College Breakfast Party*, 1879
- *The Death of Moses*, 1879
- *From a London Drawing Room*,

## Bibliography

- Haight, Gordon S., *George Eliot: A Biography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1968, ISBN 0-19-811666-7.
- Haight, Gordon S., ed., *George Eliot: Letters*, New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press, 1954, ISBN 0-300-01088-



5.

- Uglow, Jennifer, *George Eliot*, London, Virago, 1987, ISBN 0-394-75359-3.
- Jenkins, Lucien, *Collected Poems of George Eliot*, London, Skoob Books Publishing, 1989, ISBN 1-871438-35-7

### **Context and background**

- Beer, Gillian, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983, ISBN 0-521-78392-5.
- Beer, Gillian, *George Eliot*, Prentice Hall / Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1986, ISBN 0-7108-0511-X.
- Chapman, Raymond, *The Sense of the Past in Victorian Literature*, London, CroomHelm, 1986, ISBN 0-7099-3441-6.
- Cosslett, Tess, *The 'Scientific Movement' and Victorian Literature*, Brighton, Harvester, 1982, ISBN 0-312-70298-1.

- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Gubar, Susan, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press, 1979, ISBN 0-300-08458-7.
- Hughes, Kathryn, *George Eliot: The Last Victorian*, New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1998, ISBN 0-374-16138-0.
- Jay, Elisabeth, *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979, ISBN 0-19-812092-3.
- Pinney, Thomas, ed., *Essays of George Eliot*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963, ISBN 0-231-02619-6.
- Shuttleworth, Sally, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, ISBN 0-521-25786-7.
- Uglow, Jenny, *George Eliot*, London, Virago Press, 1988, ISBN 0 86068 400 8.

- Willey, Basil, *Nineteenth-Century Studies: Coleridge to Matthew Arnold*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1964, ISBN 0-14-021709-6.
- Williams, Raymond, *The Country and the City*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1973, ISBN 0-19-519810-7.

## **Critical studies**

- Alley, Henry, "The Quest for Anonymity: The Novels of George Eliot", University of Delaware Press, 1997.
- Ashton, Rosemary, *George Eliot*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Beaty, Jerome, *'Middlemarch' from Notebook to Novel: A Study of George Eliot's Creative Method*, Champaign, Illinois, University of Illinois, 1960.
- Carroll, David, ed., *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971.
- Daiches, David, *George Eliot: Middlemarch*, London, Edward Arnold, 1963.

- Dentith, Simon, *George Eliot*, Brighton, Harvester, 1986.
- Garrett, Peter K., *The Victorian Multiplot Novel: Studies in Dialogical Form*, New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press, 1980.
- Graver, Suzanne, *George Eliot and Community: A Study in Social Theory and Fictional Form*, Berkeley, California, University of California Press, 1984.
- Harvey, W. J., *The Art of George Eliot*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1961.
- Kettle, Arnold. *An Introduction to the English Novel, vol. I*, London, Hutchinson, 1951.
- Leavis, F R *The Great Tradition*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1948.
- Neale, Catherine, *Middlemarch: Penguin Critical Studies*, London, Penguin, 1989
- Swinden, Patrick, ed., *George Eliot: Middlemarch*, London, Macmillan, 1972.

## Notes

1. ^ *Classics Transformed*, p. 81

Christopher Stray, *Classics Transformed: Schools, Universities, and Society in England, 1830-1960*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

## External links

- Victorian web biography
- Literary Encyclopedia biography
- Biography
- George Eliot in LoveToKnow 1911 Encyclopdia
- Works by George Eliot at Project Gutenberg
- *The Life of George Eliot by John Morley*, available at Project Gutenberg.
- *The Ethics of George Eliot's Works by John Crombie Brown (first published in 1879)*, available at Project Gutenberg.
- George Eliot Quotations
- A Summary of "The Mill On The Floss"
- Athenaeum review of *The Mill on the Floss* by Geraldine Jewsbury, (April 7, 1860)
- Works by George Eliot in e-book
- BBC Coventry & Warwickshire - George

Eliot

- Chronological list by date of publication of George Eliot's novels, short stories and poems
- full text downloads in HTML, PDF, text formats at [ebooktakeaway.com](http://ebooktakeaway.com)

Retrieved from

"[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George\\_Eliot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Eliot)"

Categories: 1819 births | 1880 deaths | Alumni of Royal Holloway, University of London | English essayists | English novelists | Women novelists | People from Warwickshire | Women of the Victorian era | Female authors who wrote under male or gender-neutral pseudonyms | English women writers | Burials at Highgate Cemetery

---

- This page was last modified 16:24, 3 August 2007.
- All text is available under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License. (See **Copyrights** for details.)  
Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., a US-registered 501(c)(3) tax-deductible nonprofit charity.