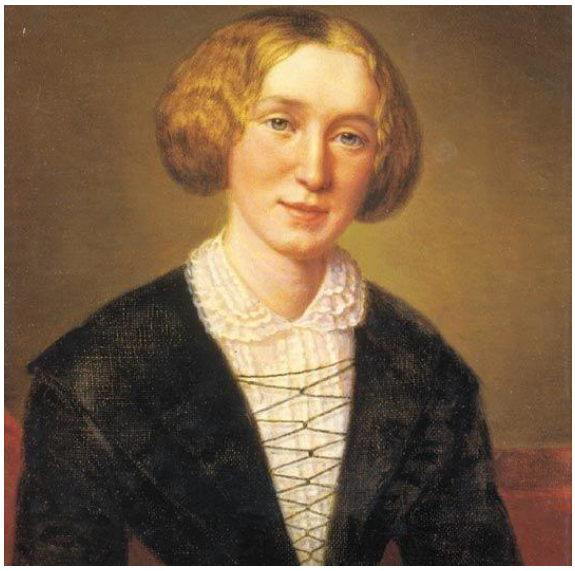
George Eliot: A Biography



George Eliot 1819-1880

George Eliot was the pen name of Mary Ann Evans, a novelist who produced some of the major classic novels of the Victorian era, including *The Mill on the Floss*, *Adam Bede*, *Silas Marner*, *Romola*, *Felix Holt*, *Daniel Deronda* and her masterpiece, *Middlemarch*.

It is impossible to overestimate the significance of Eliot's novels in the English culture: they went right to the heart of the small-town politics that made up the fabric of English society. Her novels were essentially political: *Middlemarch* is set in a small town just as the Reform Bill of 1832 was about to be introduced. She goes right into the minutia of the town's people's several concerns, creating numerous immortal characters whose interactions reveal Eliot's deep insight into human psychology.

During the twentieth century there were numerous films and television plays and serials of her novels, placing her in a category with Shakespeare and Dickens. The distinguished literary critic, Harold Bloom, wrote that she was one of the greatest Western writers of all time.

George Eliot lived with her father until his death in 1849. He was something of a bully and while in his house she lived a life of conformity, even regularly attending church. She was thirty when he died and it was at that point that her life took off. She travelled in Europe and on her return, with the intention of writing, she was offered the editorship of the journal, *The Westminster Review*. She met many influential men and began an affair with the married George Lewes. They lived together openly, something that wasn't done at the time, and, when she became famous after the publication of her first novel, *Adam Bede*, when she was forty, using the name George Eliot, their domestic arrangements scandalised Victorian society.

Lewes' health failed and after his death she married John Cross, a literary agent twenty years her junior. After *Adam Bede* more novels followed swiftly on its heels.

She died in 1880, aged sixty-one, and is buried in Highgate Cemetery beside George Lewes.

Major Works

At Weimar and Berlin she wrote some of her best essays for *The Westminster* and translated Spinoza's *Ethics* (published in 1981), while Lewes worked on his groundbreaking life of Goethe. By his pen alone he had to support his three surviving sons at school in Switzerland as well as Agnes, whom he gave £100 a year, which was continued until her death in 1902. She had four children by Hunt, the last born in 1857, all registered under Lewes's name. The few friends who knew the facts agreed that toward Agnes his conduct was more than generous, but there was a good deal of malicious gossip about the "strong-minded woman" who had "run off with" her husband. Evans's deepest regret was that her act isolated her from her family in Warwickshire. She turned to early memories and, encouraged by Lewes, wrote a story about a childhood episode in Chilvers Coton parish. Published in *Blackwood's Magazine* (1857) as *The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton*, it was an instant success. Two more tales, *Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story* and *Janet's Repentance,* also based on local events, appeared serially in the same year, and Blackwood republished all three as *Scenes of Clerical Life*, 2 vol. (1858), under the pseudonym George Eliot.

Adam Bede,3 vol. (1859), her first long novel, she described as “a country story—full of the breath of cows and the scent of hay.” Its masterly realism—“the faithful representing of commonplace things”—brought to English fiction the same truthful observation of minute detail that John Ruskin was commending in the Pre-Raphaelites. The book is rich in humour. The germ of the plot was an anecdote her Methodist aunt told of visiting a girl condemned for child murder. The dialect of the Bedes she had heard in the conversations of her Derbyshire uncles with her father, some of whose early experiences she assigned to Adam. But what was new in English fiction was the combination of deep human sympathy and rigorous moral judgment. *Adam Bede* went through eight printings within a year, and Blackwood doubled the £800 paid for it and returned the copyright.
In *The Mill on the Floss*, 3 vol. (1860), she returned again to the scenes of her early life. The first half of the book, with its remarkable portrayal of childhood, is irresistibly appealing, and throughout there are scenes that reach a new level of psychological subtlety.

At this time historical novels were in vogue, and during their visit to Florence in 1860 Lewes suggested Girolamo Savonarola as a good subject, George Eliot grasped it enthusiastically and began to plan *Romola* (1862–63). First, however, she wrote *Silas Marner* (1861), which had thrust itself between her and the Italian material. Its brevity and perfection of form made this story of the weaver whose lost gold is replaced by a strayed child the best known of her books, though it has suffered unfairly from being forced on generations of schoolchildren. *Romola* was planned as a serial for *Blackwood’s*, until an offer of £10,000 from *The Cornhill Magazine* induced George Eliot to desert her old publisher; but rather than divide the book into the 16 installments the editor wanted, she accepted £3,000 less, an evidence of artistic integrity few writers would have shown. Details of Florentine history, setting, costume, and dialogue were scrupulously studied at the British Museum and during a second trip to Italy in 1861. It was published in 14 parts between July 1862 and August 1863. Though the book lacks the spontaneity of the English stories, it has been unduly disparaged.
George Eliot’s next two novels are laid in England at the time of agitation for passage of the Reform Bill. In *Felix Holt, the Radical*, 3 vol. (1866), she drew the election riot from recollection of one she saw at Nuneaton in December 1832. The initial impulse of the book was not the political theme but the tragic character of Mrs. Transome, who was one of her greatest triumphs. The intricate plot popular taste then demanded now tells against the novel. *Middlemarch* (8 parts, 1871–72) is by general consent George Eliot’s masterpiece. Under her hand the novel had developed from a mere entertainment into a highly intellectual form of art. Every

class of Middlemarch society is depicted from the landed gentry and clergy to the manufacturers and professional men, the shopkeepers, publicans, farmers, and labourers. Several strands of plot are interwoven to reinforce each other by contrast and parallel. Yet the story depends not on close-knit intrigue but on showing the incalculably diffusive effect of the unhistoric acts of those who "lived faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs."

Daniel Deronda (8 parts, 1876), in which George Eliot comes nearest the contemporary scene, is built on the contrast between Mirah Cohen, a poor Jewish girl, and the upper class Gwendolen Harleth, who marries for money and regrets it. The less convincingly realized hero, Daniel, after discovering that he is Jewish, marries Mirah and departs for Palestine to establish a home for his nation. The picture of the Cohen family evoked grateful praise from Jewish readers. But the best part of *Daniel Deronda* is the keen analysis of Gwendolen's character, which seems to many critics the peak of George Eliot's achievement.

The Mill on the Floss Summary

The Mill on the Floss opens with the unnamed narrator dreaming of Dorlcote Mill as she or he knew it years ago. At that time, Mr. Tulliver, owner of the mill and its farm, has decided to send his son, Tom, away to school so that he can become something more than a miller and farmer. When Tom gets home for the summer, he learns that his younger sister Maggie forgot to feed his rabbits and they have all died, so he is furious with her. Maggie is a very bright girl with good intentions and a strong desire to please her brother, so this devastates her. As will happen frequently throughout their lives, Tom coldly holds her carelessness against her for a little while before forgiving her.

Tom's schooling at Mr. Stelling's begins. Tom finds the lessons largely unpleasant, as he is the only pupil and it is the kind of learning that he finds the most difficult. After the Christmas holiday, though, Philip Wakem joins him at King's Lorton to learn from Mr. Stelling. Philip is the son of Mr. Wakem, a lawyer whom Mr. Tulliver detests, so Tom is prepared to dislike him. Tom is also disturbed by Philip's physical deformity. Philip is overly sensitive but an apt pupil, so he also has a problem with the brutish miller's son. The two reach a wary peace, however, especially when Maggie comes to visit, as Philip is greatly impressed with her intelligence and kind nature.

Two years later, Maggie goes away to school with her cousin Lucy, but is called home when Mr. Tulliver has lost his lawsuit against Mr. Pivart, a neighboring

farmer represented by Mr. Wakem. The loss of the suit combined with his legal fees means he will lose the mill and be completely bankrupt. Right before Maggie's return, he learns that the mortgage on the farm has fallen into Mr. Wakem's hands, and this news on top of everything else causes him to lose his senses. Maggie goes to Mr. Stelling's to deliver the news to Tom, who comes home with her.

There they find that Mr. Tulliver recognizes only Maggie, and a bailiff has come to sell off all of their household goods and furniture, which Mr. Tulliver had used as a security against one of his loans. Mrs. Tulliver turns to her sisters - Mrs. Pullet, Deane and Glegg - for help, but they are more interested in making their moral superiority known, and they only buy the goods that they would want anyway. Tom goes to his uncle Deane for advice on starting out in business so that he can help his family. Mr. Deane is somewhat discouraging, but he eventually finds Tom a starting position at Guest & Co., Mr. Deane's employer, and sets him up with lessons in bookkeeping.
Mrs. Tulliver goes to see Mr. Wakem to try to discourage him from buying the mill when it comes up at auction, but she inadvertently convinces him to do just that. Mr. Tulliver has been slowly improving, and when they tell him that Mr. Wakem now owns the mill and is willing to keep him on as manager, he agrees to do so even though he despises the idea of working under Mr. Wakem, since he believes he owes it to his wife, and he doesn't want to make his family have to move.

Mr. Tulliver's only focus now is on saving enough money to repay all of his remaining outstanding debts. Tom and Mrs. Tulliver agree this is the honorable thing to do, so Tom gives all of his earnings from his new job to this cause, and Mrs. Tulliver does everything she can to economize. Bob Jakin gives Maggie a pile of books as a gift, among which is a spiritual treatise which recommends self-renunciation as the path to peace. Maggie becomes convinced this is the only way she will be happy, but she goes at it with an egotistical zeal which is against the true nature of the renunciation.
Bob Jakin offers Tom (now 19) an investment opportunity that he takes with the help of Mr. and Mrs. Glegg, and he manages to quickly multiply his savings. Meanwhile, Philip Wakem meets Maggie on one of her walks, and pleads with her to meet with him regularly, secretly. She eventually agrees, and they do so for almost a year. Philip finally tells Maggie that he is in love with her, and she tells him that she can't imagine loving anyone more than she does him, but she could never marry him and risk hurting her father and brother so deeply.

Tom figures out that Maggie has been meeting Philip and tells her that if she ever sees or communicates with Philip again without Tom's permission, he will tell

their father all about it, which will probably cause him to lose his sanity again. She accepts his terms, and Tom follows her to her next meeting with Philip. Tom is very cruel to him, and Maggie tells Philip she must end their friendship.

Tom manages to earn enough money with his investments to pay back all of Mr. Tulliver's debt. Mr. Tulliver is joyous, and decides to quit working for Mr. Wakem, but when he runs into him and tells him this, his anger gets the best of him and he ends up attacking Mr. Wakem with a horsewhip. This brings on a stroke of some sort for Mr. Tulliver, and he dies soon after, telling Tom that he should work to buy the mill back, and he should never forgive the Wakems.

Two years later, Maggie returns to St. Ogg's to stay with her cousin Lucy Deane after having worked at a school since her father's death. When Maggie learns of Lucy's friendship with Philip Wakem, she tells Lucy about her prior, forbidden relationship with him; Lucy begins to scheme ways to get the pair together. Maggie meets Stephen Guest, who has been courting Lucy, and immediately is very attracted to him, and he to her. Though they both try to ignore their feelings, eventually they are overwhelmed by them, and so Maggie goes to visit her aunt Moss to get away for a little. Stephen comes to her there and tells her that he loves her and that they have to be together. Though Maggie is tempted, she insists that she could never be happy with him because of the guilt she would feel about Lucy and Philip.
When Maggie returns to St. Ogg's, Lucy, trying to solidify the relationship between Maggie and Philip, arranges for them to be alone on a boat ride. Philip, though, is depressed because he has realized Maggie and Stephen have feelings for one another, so he arranges to have Stephen take his place, unintentionally leading to Stephen and Maggie being alone in the boat together. Stephen convinces Maggie to elope with him, so they leave the rowboat for a steamship to York. The next morning, however, when they dock, Maggie realizes she can't allow herself to get her happiness out of Philip and Lucy's hurt, so she tells Stephen she can't marry him after all, and heads back to St. Ogg's.

When Maggie returns to St. Ogg's five days later, everyone believes the worst of her, including Tom, who refuses to offer her a home with him. Mrs. Tulliver supports her, though, and together they lodge at childhood friend Bob Jakin's. A letter comes from Stephen to his father, absolving Maggie of guilt, but the damage to her reputation has been done. The town's clergyman, Dr. Kenn, tries to help her and even gives her a job as governess to his children, but when rumors start to swirl about the two of them, he tells her it would be best if she moved to another town altogether.

Lucy, who has been unwell since the shock of Maggie and Stephen running off together, sneaks out one night to visit Maggie and tells her that once she is well again, she will come see her often. Maggie gets two letters, one from Philip telling her he doesn't blame her and wishes her to feel no guilt for his sake, and one from Stephen pleading with her to marry him. She resolves to turn him down for good.

She realizes the house is flooding and, after waking Bob and his family, gets into a boat to get to Dorlcote Mill. Mrs. Tulliver is safely out of town, but Tom is there and gets into the boat with her. They have a moment of unspoken resolution, but a large piece of debris comes right into their path and drowns them. Everyone else survives the flood and the siblings are buried next to one another.