

George Eliot

The author and her work



© Hulton archive

Some of the greatest English novelists of the nineteenth century were women, and George Eliot was one of the best and most famous of them. Although 'George' is a man's name, the novelist George Eliot was a woman. Her real name was Mary Anne (or Mary Ann, or Marian) Evans. She used all these three spellings of her forename at various times in her life.

During most of the nineteenth century, women who were well educated rarely had paid jobs. But many of them enjoyed writing, and they had a lot of time to do it. Some of these women wanted their books to be published so that other people could read them, but there were two problems for women writers at that time. The first problem was that men controlled the publishing companies, and many of these men did not believe that women could write well enough to be published. The second problem was that middle and upper class people thought that it was not 'respectable' for women to have books published. Earning money by writing was like doing a job, and it was shameful for men if people *thought* that their wives and daughters had to earn money, even if this was not true.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there were women who had books published, but they usually did this 'anonymously' – their own names did not appear on the cover. On the title pages, these books were often described simply as 'by a Lady'. The six novels of the great early-nineteenth century writer, Jane Austen, including *Emma* (1816), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), and *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), were all first published anonymously.

Another way that women writers overcame the problems at that time, was to use male 'pen names' – false names, so that the publisher would think the book had been written by a man. If a book became a success and its publisher later found out that it was by a woman, he would not stop printing it! Mary Anne Evans also used this trick of using a male pen name by calling herself George Eliot. But she had another reason for wanting to be anonymous.

Mary Anne Evans was born on November 22, 1819, at a farm near Chilvers Coton, a village in the county of Warwickshire in the English midlands. Her father worked as a land agent for a rich family on an estate in that area. From the age of five, Mary Anne lived at various schools, where she became interested in evangelical Christianity. In this kind of religion, the most important thing is to believe in the complete truth of the Bible. Mary Anne certainly believed in this in 1836, when her mother died and she returned home to take care of her father. But around this time she became friends with a couple who were free-thinkers – people who did not believe in the truth of Christianity. Soon, Mary Anne's own doubts about religious truth grew strong, and this change of mind caused a bad argument with her father. Things were difficult between them after that.

Mary Anne was good at languages and wanted to write, so she started translating books by German free-thinkers. The first of these, a translation of *The Life of Jesus* by D.F. Strauss, was published anonymously in 1846.

Three years later, Mary Anne's father died, and she used some of the money which he left her to travel in Europe, where she read many books

and thought a lot about her future. In 1850, she met John Chapman, the publisher of the *Westminster Review*, a famous magazine which included articles by many serious thinkers. Mary Anne wrote for the magazine and also worked as an unpaid editor for it.

In 1854, Mary Anne's translation of Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* was published. In the same year she travelled to Germany with George Henry Lewes, an author with whom she fell in love. When they returned to England, they moved into a house together.

Lewes was already married but the marriage was not a success. Though his wife already had several children by one of his friends, Lewes still wasn't able to divorce her. When he started to live with Mary Anne like husband and wife, there was a scandal. For many years, people from their own middle class society would not meet George and Mary Anne, nor have anything to do with them. It was only when Mary Anne became very famous as a writer that this situation began to change.

In 1856, Mary Anne wrote and published the first story of a series which she called *Scenes from Clerical Life*. It was published using the name George Eliot and many people who would not speak to Mary Anne because of her relationship with Lewes, read it and enjoyed it without knowing who its author was. In 1859, Mary Anne's first full-length novel, *Adam Bede*, was published using the pen name George Eliot. It too was very successful. Soon after this, a man called Joseph Liggins claimed that he had written Mary Anne's work, and Mary Anne was forced to reveal that *she* was really George Eliot.

Mary Anne's next three novels were *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner* and *Romola*. These

works sold very well and by 1863 Mary Anne was a rich woman and a much-admired writer. It was at this time that Mary Anne began writing novels which were concerned with the social problems of her time, publishing *Felix Holt: The Radical* in 1866, and then in 1869 her greatest book, *Middlemarch*. *Middlemarch* is – among many other things – about the difficulties encountered by a young, clever, and spirited woman who lived in the male-dominated society of the provincial towns of the nineteenth century. The famous twentieth century English writer, Virginia Woolf, called *Middlemarch* 'one of the few English novels written for grown-up people'.

Mary Anne's last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, is also a masterpiece. In *Daniel Deronda*, the problems of Jewish people in nineteenth century English society, and their desire for a homeland, appear as the background to the story of an unhappy marriage. Together with *Middlemarch*, *Daniel Deronda* is a very important work in English literature.

George Lewes died in 1878, two years after the publication of *Daniel Deronda*. During his and Mary Anne's relationship, they had mostly been very happy together, and for a time after his death Mary Anne was very unhappy. But in 1880, she married a much younger man, John Walter Cross, who had been a friend of Lewes and herself. The marriage did not last long, however, because Mary Anne died on December 22nd, 1880. She was buried next to Lewes in Highgate cemetery, London.

Mary Anne Evans also wrote some essays and many poems, but it is the outstanding quality of her novels which has established her as one of England's greatest writers.

A selection of works by George Eliot

Novels

- 1858 *Adam Bede*
- 1860 *The Mill on the Floss*
- 1861 *Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe*
- 1862-3 *Romola*
- 1866 *Felix Holt, The Radical*
- 1871-2 *Middlemarch*
- 1874-7 *Daniel Deronda*

Stories

- 1857 *Scenes of Clerical Life*
- 1859 *The Lifted Veil*

Essays

- 1879 *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*

Poems

- 1868 *The Spanish Gypsy*
- 1869 *Brother and Sister*
- 1870 *The Legend of Jubal*
- 1871 *Armgart*

(For a list of George Eliot's stories that have been simplified for the Macmillan Guided Readers Series, see a copy of the current Readers catalogue.)