

GEORGE ELIOT

“What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult to each other?” (*Middlemarch*)

BY JESSICA TEISCH

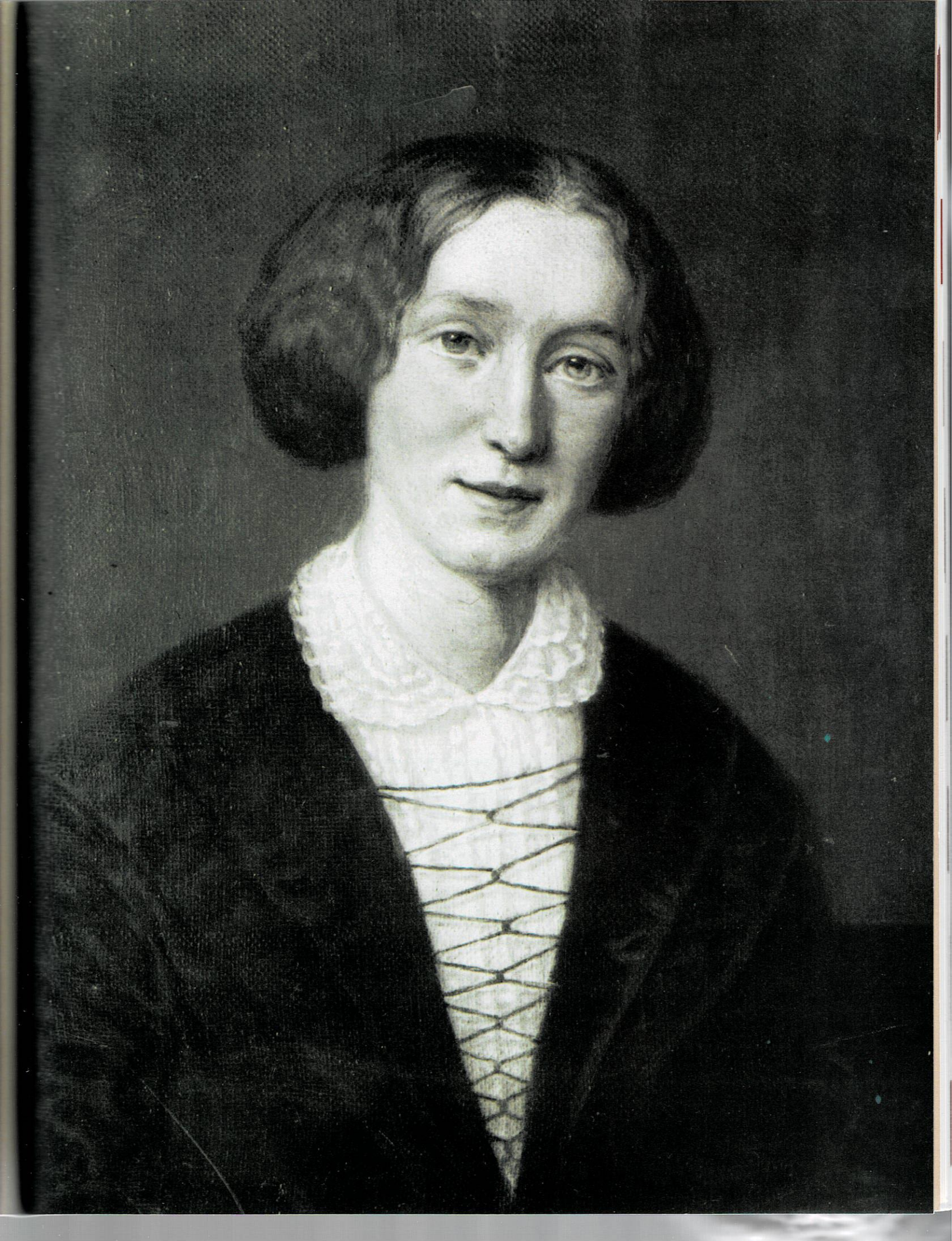
Mary Ann (or Marian) Evans, more popularly known by her male nom de plume, George Eliot, is best remembered as “The Victorian Sage” for her astute depictions of the social and economic forces shaping provincial 19th-century English life. Eliot wrote during a period of momentous change—increasing industrialization in the cities and countryside, technical and scientific innovation, and population growth. Her realist novels, which comment on these transformations as well as on the hypocrisy of Victorian society, possess a deep social consciousness. Her masterpiece, *Middlemarch* (1872), for instance, examines a whole society’s fabric just prior to the Reform Bill of 1832, which extended the franchise to the middle classes. Other novels, including *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866), raised overtly political questions; in *Daniel Deronda* (1876), Eliot took a moral stand against anti-Semitism. Unlike Jane Austen (1775–1817), whom she criticized for despising many of her characters but to whom she is compared in her overall sensibility and use of satire, Eliot limned parlor scenes and social gatherings filled with characters neither good nor bad. If Austen wrote about well-to-do members

of polite society, Eliot portrayed social rebels tortured by unconventional philosophies. Above all, she approached her characters’ heroic struggles with compassion. “[W]hen we consider how distant in time the world of Shepperton and Hayslope is,” wrote Virginia Woolf, “and how remote the minds of farmer and agricultural labourers from those of most of George Eliot’s readers, we can only attribute the ease and pleasure with which we ramble from house to smithy, from cottage parlour to rectory garden, to the fact that George Eliot makes us share their lives ... in a spirit of sympathy” (*The Times Literary Supplement*, 11/20/1919).

In examining the lives of ordinary people facing moral choices and questions of personal responsibility, Eliot delved deep inside the human soul and rendered characters with psychological depth. In clear, simple, and often witty prose, she used people’s interior lives rather than action and setting to reveal the human condition. Eliot’s own unconventional life lent credibility to her protagonists’ often contentious lives. As a self-supporting woman who defied her Christian upbringing and lived with a married man, Eliot broke all of Victorian England’s social taboos.

WHERE TO START

MIDDLEMARCH, considered Eliot’s masterpiece and a Victorian classic, is a landmark (and lengthy!) novel set against a broad social milieu. For more autobiographical works, try **MILL ON THE FLOSS** or **ADAM BEDE** (whose main character is supposedly modeled on the author’s father). Both offer a taste of the moral quandaries of mid-19th-century English life. **DANIEL DERONDA**, one of Eliot’s more overtly political and moral works, marked a decline in Eliot’s popularity, but it is nonetheless an entertaining, classic read—with a lesson, of course.



American novelist Henry James noted, “What is remarkable, extraordinary [is that Eliot,] ... 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” (*The Atlantic Monthly*, 5/1885).

ELIOT WAS BORN in Warwickshire on November 22, 1819. Her father, an overseer at the Arbury Hall estate, inspired many of her yeoman characters, including *Adam Bede*. She received her education both at home and school, where she developed a pious evangelical Protestant faith. Her mother died when she was 17; a few years later Eliot and her father moved closer to Coventry, where she became her father’s housekeeper. In Coventry Eliot met freethinkers Charles and Cara Bray, whose circle greatly influenced her religious and political views. Eliot, who read widely in science, philosophy, and literature, soon adopted nonsectarian religious beliefs based on ideals of common humanity, principles that inspired her humane literature. She depicted her spiritual conversion and the disintegration of her close relationship with her father and brother in *Mill on the Floss* (1860). A small inheritance after her father’s death in 1849 gave her an unusual degree of independence. Settling in London in 1851, Eliot started work as a writer and assistant editor for the *Westminster Review*, the leading journal for philosophical radicals. She soon met Herbert Spencer and other prominent intellectuals, including writer and editor George Henry Lewes. Eliot and Lewes, estranged from his wife though still married, fell in love and entered into a common-law marriage—a relationship that affronted Victorian sensibilities and temporarily led to the couple’s social ostracism. They remained companions until his death in 1878.

Lewes encouraged Eliot, who up to this time had been writing book reviews, to consider fiction; she first serialized *Scenes of Clerical Life*, realistic portraits of the people of Warwickshire, in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in 1857. Although the public received her early work with some indifference, her novels, including her first, *Adam Bede* (1859), met with financial success and critical acclaim. A few friends had guessed her identity by the time she published *Adam Bede* and *Mill on the Floss*, but Eliot continued to use a pen name, possibly to ensure that the public took her work seriously and to prevent press coverage of her relationship with Lewes. After Lewes’s death Eliot married John Cross, an American banker 20 years her junior. Eliot, whose novels were praised as astounding artistic successes during her lifetime, died on December 22, 1880, less than a year after her marriage. A memorial stone in the Poet’s Corner of Westminster Abbey honors her memory.

Eliot’s Realism

“The world was,” said Henry James, “first and foremost, for George Eliot, the moral, the intellectual world; the personal spectacle came after” (*The Atlantic Monthly*, 5/1885). Critics agree that Eliot’s greatest contribution to modern literature was her use of realism. Contemporaries like Charles Dickens, who praised Eliot’s novels, penned highly dramatic, action-packed plots; often created caricatures rather than fully developed characters; and immersed readers in period detail, colorful sentimentality, and biting social commentary. Eliot, by contrast, refused to distort characters or events. Instead, she described life as she saw it. “I aspire to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind,” she wrote in *Adam Bede* (1859), her greatest defense of literary realism—the belief that life, not art, should inspire art. “The mirror is

SELECTED OTHER WORKS

* Covered in Major Works

SCENES OF CLERICAL LIFE (1858)

These three tales, which originally appeared in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, contain thematic sparks of Eliot’s great novels, including the effects of religious controversy and love on provincial life.

* ADAM BEDE (1859)

THE LIFTED VEIL (1859)

Initially published in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, this dark, fantastical short story, told by a clairvoyant man, reveals Eliot’s own moral philosophy and interest in scientific

experimentation.

* THE MILL ON THE FLOSS (1860)

* SILAS MARNER (1861)

ROMOLA (1863)

Set in Renaissance Italy—a departure from Eliot’s English rural communities—*Romola* features a virtuous woman inspired, and then defeated, by Savonarola’s fanatical teachings. Mixing fact and fiction, the novel reconstructs the life, career, and martyrdom of Savonarola during a time of great turmoil.

FELIX HOLT, THE RADICAL (1866)

In rural England just after the passage of the 1832 Reform Bill, a working-class radical and a wealthy

landowner’s son compete for the attention of Esther Lyon. She must measure them both against her own social and economic goals.

THE SPANISH GYPSY (1868)

A drama written in blank verse.

* MIDDLEMARCH (1871)

THE LEGEND OF JUBAL (1874)

A collection of verse.

* DANIEL DERONDA (1876)

IMPRESSIONS OF THEOPHRASTUS SUCH (1879)

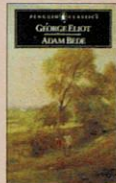
Eliot’s last published work features an unnamed London narrator who, through a set of essays, introduces intellectual fables about prejudice, morality, achievement, the arts, and humanity’s many flaws.

doubtless defective ... but I feel as much bound to tell you, as precisely as I can, what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath."

Critics have long hailed Eliot's classic defense of realism as setting a new standard in literature. (Her Russian contemporary Fyodor Dostoevsky developed a comparable narrative technique.) This new, realistic novel focused on everyday life and its social, political, and economic influences, and linked character motivations to historical process. *Mill on the Floss*, for example, depicts Mr. Tulliver's downfall in the context of the British midlands' growing materialism in the 1850s. But society alone does not drive his fate; Mr. Tulliver reacts both to other characters and a community governed by diverse values, social circles, and relationships. Eliot also emphasized human will: a character may make a choice that determines later actions. This "ethical determinism," also resonant in *Adam Bede*, ultimately explains human behavior. If some critics faulted Eliot for moralizing her characters' (mis)deeds or revealing too much about them, her realism distinguished her novels from her contemporaries. Ultimately, her fiction became a vehicle not only for discussing timeless intellectual issues but also for ruminating on the condition of the human soul.

MAJOR WORKS

Adam Bede (1859)



Eliot completed the first part of this three-volume novel after her return from Europe with Lewes. An immediate success, *Adam Bede* established her reputation as a realist novelist as well as a humanist who encouraged her readers to love

and accept their fellow humans. Eliot reputedly modeled the title character after her father, who had been a carpenter before becoming an estate agent. While reviewers praised the novel for its unsentimental description of a young woman's fall from grace, they also criticized its scandalous subject.

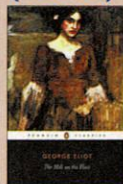
THE STORY: Adam Bede, an earnest carpenter, tries to woo the pretty, self-seeking dairymaid Hetty Sorrel. The careless Captain Arthur Donnithorne, a local squire, seduces Hetty, and she soon carries his child. When he abandons her, Hetty, whose actions shake the foundation of their community, turns to Adam. But many obstacles—including a conviction for child-murder, a sentence, and Methodist preacher Dinah's love and sense of justice—quickly thwart domestic contentment.

"Adam Bede has taken its place among the actual experiences and endurances of my life." CHARLES DICKENS, QUOTED IN THE INTRODUCTION TO *ADAM BEDE*, BY JOANNA TROLLOPE, MODERN LIBRARY CLASSICS.

"Adam Bede is remarkable, not less for the unaffected Saxon style which upholds the graceful fabric of the narrative, and for the naturalness of its scenes and characters, so that the reader at once feels happy and at home." THE ATLANTIC, 10/1859.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A classic tale of seduction and betrayal—and of moral growth and redemption.

The Mill on the Floss (1860)



This novel, considered Eliot's most autobiographical work, reflects her own life experiences, particularly her relationship with her older brother Isaac and family rivalries in her community on the outskirts of Warwickshire. The heroine, of course, resembles Eliot. The novel marks the author's transition from depicting provincial life to exploring an entire community's social and economic fabric. By the time Eliot completed the novel, the public had guessed her real identity, though she continued to publish under a pen name.

THE STORY: In this portrait of the struggles inherent in provincial life, the passionate, rebellious Maggie Tulliver recounts her experiences as a girl and an unconventional young adult, her stormy relationships with her beloved brother Tom and her family, and the romantic tangles that lead to her disgrace. In the small town of St. Ogg's, Maggie must reconcile her personal desires and passions with society's complex moral codes.

"Inferior to Adam Bede in varied interests of three or four good characters, it is superior as a work of art; with a higher aim and that aim more artistically worked out." THE SPECTATOR,

4/7/1860.

"[I]gnorance gives one a large range of probabilities." (*Daniel Deronda*)

"It is by her nature, complex, passionate, sensuous, by her sex, intellectualized and

spiritualized, that Maggie Tulliver is most important to the reader. ... All the more I must own that the heroine's character, from the sort of undisciplined, imaginative, fascinating little girl we see her at first, into the impassioned, bewildered, self-disciplined woman we see her at last, is masterly. ... It is a great and beautiful story." W. D. HOWELLS, IN

HEROINES OF FICTION, 1901.

"[M]orally energetic yet unsentimentally perceptive novel about the meaning of experience. Like all her works, it is thoroughly coherent and gains its coherence from a unified version." GEORGE LEVINE, DICTIONARY OF LITERARY BIOGRAPHY, 1983.

THE BOTTOM LINE: One of Eliot's most popular novels, an exploration of human relationships and moral dilemmas.

Silas Marner (1861)



In this commercially successful novella, Eliot once again exhibited her Victorian humanism. The lessons: act responsibly toward oneself and society, learn to love one's fellow human beings, and redeem oneself through love. The lines from Wordsworth's poem "Michael"—"[A] child, more than all other gifts/ That earth can offer to declining man/ Brings hope with it, and forward-looking thoughts"—reputedly inspired the plot. Like Eliot's other novels, it features ordinary men and women in rural 19th-century England.

THE STORY: The lonely weaver Silas Marner, falsely accused of murder and theft many years before and exiled from his religious community, lives as a recluse. He finds solace only in his money. When the burglary of his riches leaves him heartbroken, his wealth symbolically reappears—he becomes the guardian of an orphaned little girl during the Christmas season.

"*Silas Marner*, though it can hardly be said to fall under the category of short stories, extends to no great length,

and, in construction and treatment, shows a perfect sense of proportion on the part of the writer. Indeed, competent judges have pronounced it, in form, George Eliot's most finished work, while none of her larger novels surpasses it in delicacy of pathos." THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF ENGLISH AND AMERICAN LITERATURE IN 18 VOLUMES (1907–21). VOL. XIII. THE VICTORIAN AGE, PART ONE.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Love and hope redeem all—more or less, anyway.

THE MOVIE: 1994; *A Simple Twist of Fate* starring Steve Martin, Gabriel Byrne, and Laura Linney, and directed by Gillies MacKinnon.

Middlemarch (1872)



Many critics claim that Eliot's most famous and successful work, *Middlemarch* (initially serialized in *Blackwood's Magazine*), represents a turning point in the history of the novel. Inspired by Eliot's life at Coventry and merging stories of three couples in a small English town on the eve of the Reform Bill of 1832, the novel weaves a

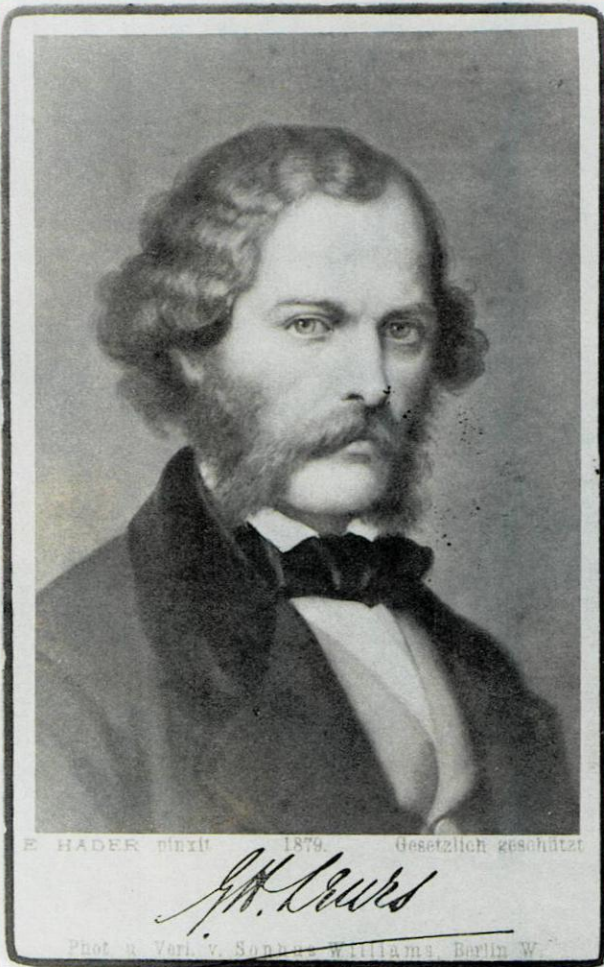
PARTNERS IN ART

From *Lives of Girls Who Became Famous* by Sarah K. Bolton (1914)

And now at thirty-seven George Eliot was to begin her creative work. Mr. Lewes had often said to her, "You have wit, description, and philosophy—those go a good way towards the production of a novel." "It had always been a vague dream of mine," she says, "that sometime or other I might write a novel ... but I never went further toward the actual writing than an introductory chapter, describing a Staffordshire village, and the life of the neighboring farmhouses; and as the years passed on I lost any hope that I should ever be able to write a novel, just as I desponded about everything else in my future life. I always thought I was deficient in dramatic power, both of construction and dialogue, but I felt I should be at my ease in the descriptive parts."

After she had written a portion of *Amos Barton* in her *Scenes of Clerical Life*, she read it to Mr. Lewes, who told her that now he was sure she could write good dialogue, but not as yet sure about her pathos. One evening, in his absence, she wrote the scene describing Milly's death, and read it to Mr. Lewes, on his return. "We both cried over it," she says, "and then he came up to me and kissed me, saying, 'I think your pathos is better than your fun!'"

Mr. Lewes sent the story to Blackwood, with the signature of "George Eliot,"—the first name chosen because it was his own name, and the last because it pleased her fancy. Mr. Lewes wrote that this story by a friend of his, showed, according to his judgment, "such humor, pathos, vivid presentation, and nice observation as have not been exhibited, in this style, since the *Vicar of Wakefield*." ■



rich historical tapestry of life and suggests that past events influence the present and the future. In order to write the book, Eliot conducted careful research into political and social campaigns, medical practices (and cholera outbreaks), and the imminent arrival of the railroad.

THE STORY: The idealistic, socially conscious Dorothea Brooke and the handsome young physician Tertius Lydgate both hope for extraordinary lives, but their expectations and society put obstacles in their path. Dorothea marries the overbearing, middle-aged Reverend Edward Casaubon after rejecting a titled suitor. After his death, she gives up her inheritance to wed his poor younger cousin, the politically progressive Will Ladislaw. Lydgate, who tries to modernize medical practices at the new hospital, becomes caught in a scandal as the beautiful Rosamund Vincy traps him.

"If we have a fault to find with *Middlemarch*, it is that it is almost too laboured. ...

[The points] have been written and re-written, polished and re-polished, until they glitter almost painfully. When

Mrs. Cadwallader says that Casaubon's great soul is a great bladder for dried peas to rattle in, and when she adds to this the further remark that a drop of his blood was put under a magnifying class, and it was all semicolons and parentheses, we cannot resist a certain sense of effort." ATHENAEUM, 12/7/1872.

"It is not the moral nor is it the artistic purpose of a work of fiction (or indeed of sound literature at all) to produce this state of mind and to invite such afterthoughts." QUARTERLY REVIEW, 4/1873.

"This profound study of certain types of English character was supreme at the time of its writing, and it remains supreme, of its school, in European literature. Thackeray is brilliant; Tolstoi is vivid to a point where life-likeness overwhelms any consideration of art; Balzac created a whole world; George Eliot did not create, but her exposition of the upper and middle class minds of her day is a masterpiece of scientific psychology." "GEORGE ELIOT," ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA, 1911 EDITION.

"It is not that her power diminishes, for, to our thinking, it is at its highest in the mature *Middlemarch*, the magnificent book which with all its imperfections is one of the few English novels written for grown-up people." VIRGINIA WOOLF, THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT, 11/20/1919.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A Victorian classic about the dialectic of historical and human change. Eliot's stated goal: to give her readers "a clearer conception and a more active admira-

tion of those vital elements which bind men together and give a higher worthiness to their existence."

Daniel Deronda (1876)



Critics highly regarded the last of Eliot's works of prose fiction, though it raised more controversy than her previous novels. The work, also serialized in *Blackwood's Magazine*, exposed (and condemned) the rampant anti-Semitism in English society. Though critics faulted Eliot's characters as overly moralizing and though the novel as a whole was only moderately successful, Eliot wrote a story she believed had great social importance.

THE STORY: In 1870s England, the destinies of two strong-willed characters overlap. Daniel, the adopted son of an aristocrat, embraces Jewish traditions and Zionism when he meets a Jewish philosopher, Mordecai, and his sister; he soon discovers his Jewish roots. Gwendolen, an

intelligent beauty locked in a bad marriage, finds salvation in Daniel and attacks the legal obstacles to her inheritance.

"The self-contained strength of matured powers is impressed upon this book. ... *Daniel Deronda* exhibits all the signs of an author in the fullest enjoyment of his most proper gifts ... we rejoice to recognise in the first book the promise of a work belonging to the best 'period' of its author's creations." THE GUARDIAN, 1/19/1876.

"Between Mirah's horror of what is polluting and Gwendolen's ineffectual wish not to burden herself with relations closer than any to which her nature responds, creates a very fine situation, which we trust George Eliot may so work out in her future numbers as to place *Daniel Deronda*, in spite of some superficial defects, on, or not far from, the same level with *Middlemarch*." R. H. HUTTON, THE SPECTATOR, 4/1876.

"The critics have had their say [and] have written down *Daniel Deronda* a failure. And there seems to be at least this much truth in their judgment that one of the parts of which the book is composed has failed to interest or even to reach its audience." JOSEPH JACOBS, MCMILLAN'S MAGAZINE, 6/1877.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Not Eliot's most popular novel, but a timely critique of anti-Semitism and a touching story about self-identity. ■