

**SILAS MARNER, THE
WEAVER OF RAVELOE, WITH
BIOGRAPHY OF AUTHOR
AND CRITICAL OPINIONS**

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Silas Marner, the Weaver of Raveloe, with Biography of Author and Critical Opinions by
George Eliot

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THE WEAVER OF RAVELOE

BY
GEORGE ELIOT

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INTRODUCTION.

MARIAN EVANS ("George Eliot") was born November 22, 1819, at Griff, near Nuneaton, in Warwickshire. Her father, Robert Evans, is described in the characters of Adam Bede and Caleb Garth, the two manliest of all George Eliot's men. Touches of his personality also appear in the old violin-maker of the poem "Stradivarius." Like Adam, he rose from carpenter to surveyor and land-agent, and Arbury Hall, the home of his principal employer, appears in "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story" as the charming Cheverel Manor. He possessed Adam Bede's stalwart figure and Caleb Garth's sincerity and love of good work for its own sake. Mrs. Evans was a woman of indefatigable industry and epigrammatic, pungent speech, and her portrait is given in the characters of Mrs. Hackit and Mrs. Poysner. There was an older sister, whose picture is partly sketched in the character of Celia, in "Middlemarch," and a brother, whom all know as Tom Tulliver, in "The Mill on the Floss."

She first attended school at a little village near Griff House, the "Shepertou" of her first story. At seven she was sent to Nuneaton, and at twelve to a girls' boarding-school at Coventry, where she astonished her companions with her learning, her music, and her strange manners. A neighbor described her as a "queer, three-cornered, awkward gel." She lacked beauty and grace, was dreamy, serious, and wise beyond her years, and lived almost without child-companionship because of the intellectual distance between herself and others of the same age. Her schooldays ended at sixteen. The death of her mother, and the marriage soon after of her sister, brought upon her the burden of her father's housekeeping. For

the next six years a double education was carried on, for with persistent diligence she continued her studies, while acquiring a practical knowledge of domestic arts, especially the art of butter-making. It was this experience that gave us the delightful description of the dairy in "Adam Bede" and many other such idyllic scenes in the early stories.

George Eliot brought to her novel-writing an intellectual equipment probably unsurpassed, if equaled, by any writer since Shakspeare. To natural endowments of the highest order she added a store of acquired knowledge that is truly marvelous. One reads her books with perpetual astonishment at the richness and fullness of her wisdom. With Bacon's ambition, but without his egotism, she seems to have "chosen all knowledge for her province." She learned French, German, Italian, Spanish, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew mainly without an instructor; was an accomplished musician, and, as a student of literature, language, science, and philosophy, could have taken rank with the first scholars. Moreover, the insatiable desire of the student remained through all her years. Late in life she said in a letter: "I enjoy all subjects, all study, more than I ever did in my life before. I learned Spanish last year but one, and see new vistas everywhere. I could enjoy everything, from arithmetic to antiquarianism, if I had large spaces of life before me. But instead of that I have a very small space. Unfeigned, unselfish, cheerful resignation is difficult; but I strive to get it."

In 1841 Mr. Evans removed to Foleshill, on the outskirts of Coventry, leaving Griff House to his son Isaac, who still occupies it. This was an epoch-making event for Marian Evans, for it brought her suddenly under influences that determined her life-work. She loved her father and brother, but she found no intellectual companionship in their narrow, practical lives. Her eager aspiring mind yearned for sympathy and expression. What had been long lacking in her life she found at Foleshill in the friendship of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Bray and a sister, Miss Sara Hennell, people of wealth, culture, and learning, and engaged in broad intellectual pursuits. In this congenial society she remained nine years, studiously attending to the discipline of her mind. But the most important effect of the change was upon her religious life. Hitherto she had ordered her conduct and thinking by the most rigid principles of Calvinism, being at one time strongly influenced by an aunt, Mrs. Elizabeth Evans, who was a Methodist preacher, and the original of Dinah Morris. Her new friends had accepted some of the most advanced ideas of modern science and philosophy, and, with the broadening of her own knowledge and the developing of that introspective and analytical tendency which became her fixed habit of mind, doubts and questionings crowded in upon her spiritual perceptions that car-

ried her rapidly into agnosticism. It cost her a severe struggle to renounce her early faith—a struggle rendered more painful for a time by the alienation of her father, who could not endure the scandal of "unbelief" in his house. One of the most conspicuous elements of her character as revealed in her writings is intense religiousness. The spirit of religion pervades all her books, and it is pretty certain that the spiritual impulses of her youth continued throughout life to urge their protest against the materialistic conclusions forced upon her by positive science. But her studies were always inspired by a conscientious devotion to truth. "My only desire," she says, "is to know the truth; my only fear, to cling to error." The mental and spiritual struggles of this period, as well as many events of her early life, are faithfully described in "The Mill on the Floss," in the character of Maggie Tulliver.

George Eliot's literary career began with the translation of Strauss's "Life of Jesus," which appeared in 1846. Her next work was a translation of Feuerbach's "Essence of Christianity," which was published in 1854, with her name upon the title-page, the first and only time her real name appeared in print. She also left in manuscript a complete translation of Spinoza's "Ethics," executed about this time. These translations won for her little beyond a reputation among her immediate friends for profound scholarship.

In 1849 the death of her father occurred, bringing upon her a long and almost insupportable grief. Her friends, the Brays, always tenderly watchful of her, arranged a trip to the continent, where she remained one year, mainly in quiet study at Geneva. Upon her return she was invited to become the assistant editor of the *Westminster Review*. The next six years were occupied with editorial work, writing critical essays, and with study. She was intimately associated with some of the greatest thinkers of the age—Thomas Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, and, more important than all, George Henry Lewes, with whose life her own was linked for twenty-four years. Her first story, "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton," appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine*, in 1857. Two other short stories were written during the year, and the three appeared in 1858 as the "Scenes of Clerical Life." With the appearance of "Adam Bede," in 1859, the unknown "George Eliot" was acknowledged to be one of the greatest writers of the age. "The Mill on the Floss" followed in 1860, and in 1861, "Silas Marner," the most perfect novel in the language, in respect to artistic qualities, many critics maintain. "Romola," a study of Florentine life in the time of Savonarola, was published in 1863, and "Felix Holt" in 1866. She now turned her attention for a time to poetry. "The Spanish Gypsy," her most important achievement in verse, ap-

peared in 1868, and "The Legend of Jubal, and Other Poems" in 1874. But the restraints of verse were ill suited to her genius, and the finest work of her imagination is found in her prose. "Middlemarch," generally regarded as her greatest novel, appeared in 1871, and "Daniel Deronda" in 1876. Her last published work was "The Impressions of Theophrastus Such," an anomalous mixture of fiction and didactic criticism that added nothing to her reputation.

Mr. Lewes died in 1878. On May 7, 1880, George Eliot was married to John Walter Cross, and the surprise of this event had hardly passed away when, in December of the same year, the news of her death spread sorrow and regret throughout the world. Her life was one of noble aims and grand achievement. She is the one woman in literature who has been worthily compared with Shakspeare, and in her writings she has reached that immortality which "makes undying music in the world."

"In her personal bearing George Eliot was seldom moved by the hurry which mars all dignity in action. Her commanding brows and deep, penetrating eyes were seconded by the sweet, restrained, impressive speech, which claimed something like an awed attention from strangers. But to those very near to her there was another side of her nature, scarcely suspected by outside friends and acquaintances. No one could be more capable of enjoying and of communicating genuine loving, hearty, uncontrollable laughter. It was a deep-seated wish, expressed in the poem of "Agatha"—"I would have young things merry." And I remember, many years ago, at the time of our first acquaintance, how deeply it pained her when, in reply to a direct question, I was obliged to admit that, with all my admiration for her books, I found them, on the whole, profoundly sad. But sadness was certainly not the note of her intimate converse, for she had the distinctively feminine qualities which lend a rhythm to the movement of life. The quick sympathy that understands without words; the capacity for creating a complete atmosphere of loving interest; the detachment from outside influences; the delight in everything worthy—even the smallest thing—for its own sake; the readiness to receive as well as to give impressions; the disciplined mental habit which can hold in check and conquer the natural egotism of a massive, powerful personality; the versatility of mind; the varied accomplishments—these are characteristics to be found more highly developed among gifted women than among gifted men. Add to these the crowning gift of genius and, in such companionship, we may possess the world without belonging to it.—*Life of George Eliot, by her husband J. W. Cross.*

CRITICAL OPINIONS.

THE plot of "Silas Marner" is good, and the delineation of character is excellent. But other writers who have the power of story-telling compose plots as interesting, and perhaps sketch characters as well. It is in the portraiture of the poor, and of what it is now fashionable to call "the lower middle class," that this writer is without a rival, and no phase of life could be harder to draw. The gift is so special, the difficulty is so great, the success is so complete, that the works of George Eliot come on us as a new revelation of what society in quiet English parishes really is and has been. . . . Within its limits "Silas Marner" is quite equal to either of its predecessors, and in combining the display of the author's characteristic excellences with freedom from blemishes and defects is perhaps superior.—*Saturday Review*, XI. 369.

GEORGE ELIOT is one of the few thinkers who can see the weakness of humanity, and the comparatively disappointing and mean nature of most objects of pursuit, without being driven by the violence of a common reaction into transcendental artifices. Nobody in her books is made to talk of rapture as a mood of happiness, or as the remedy for failure and the littleness of things. Practical resignation to the harshness and inflexibility of many of those conditions which are the material that a man has to make his life out of, and a sober, not ecstatic, resolution to seize such elements as remain, and force them into the pattern which we have chosen for ourselves,—this is a state of feeling and will which seems to count for a great deal more with her than any solace which can come of beatific visions and discourses of eternal, unspeakable aspirations. . . . Like Mr. Carlyle, too, in this, as in a great many other points, George Eliot perceives that the only course for honest and worthy folk in the tangle which fools contrive to make of the world is to stick to the work that the hand findeth to do.—JOHN MORLEY: *Macmillan's Magazine*, XIV. 272.

CERTAIN that she belongs to the foremost intellectual forces of our time, and seeing that she is a novelist (for neither poems nor essays express her genius truly) some are apt to decide that she stands in the very front rank of the artists of the modern world. That is surely to claim a great deal too much. Cervantes, Fielding, Scott, of course stand immeasurably apart and above, by virtue of their wealth of imagination, their range of insight into manners, and sympathies with characters of every type. . . . The place of George Eliot will ultimately be found in the group where are set George Sand, Balzac, Jane Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontës. Judging her purely as an artist, we can hardly hope that her ultimate popularity will quite equal theirs. That she is immeasurably superior to them all as a thinker, teacher, inspirer of thought and purifier of soul, will perhaps be little disputed. As facile creator of types, painter of varied char-

acter, veracious chronicler of manners, she has not their range, vivacity, irrepressible energy. . . . The inexhaustible charm of George Sand, the microscopic vivacity of Jane Austen, the pathetic oddities of Charles Dickens, the terrible Hogarthian pencil of Balzac and Thackeray, were all deliberately foregone by a novelist who read so deeply, who looked on life so profoundly, and who meditated so conscientiously as George Eliot.—FREDERIC HARRISON: *Fortnightly Review*, XLIII. 716.

COMPLETE in all its parts, and strong in all, the nature of George Eliot is yet not one of those rare natures, which without effort are harmonious. There is no impression made more decisively upon the readers of her books than this. No books bear more unmistakably the pain of moral conflict, and the pain of moral victory, only less bitter than that of defeat. Great forces warring with one another, a sorrowful and pathetic victory,—that is what we discern.—E. DOWDEN: *Studies in Literature*, 258.

THERE is no danger of arousing any controversy in saying that the works of her first period, the "Scenes of Clerical Life," "Adam Bede," "Silias Marner," and "The Mill on the Floss," have the unmistakable mark of high genius. They are something for which it is simply out of the question to find any substitute. Strike them out of English literature, and we feel that there would be a gap not to be filled up; a distinct vein of thought and feeling unrepresented; a characteristic and delightful type of social development left without any adequate interpreter. A second-rate writer can be more or less displaced. When you have read Shakespeare you can do very well without Beaumont and Fletcher, and a study of the satires of Pope makes it unnecessary to plod through the many volumes filled by his imitators. But we feel that, however much we may admire the other great English novelists, there is none who would make the study of George Eliot superfluous. The sphere which she has made specially her own is that quiet English country life which she knew in early youth. It has been described with more or less vivacity and sympathy by many observers. Nobody has approached George Eliot in the power of seizing its essential characteristics and exhibiting its real charm. She has done for it what Scott did for the Scotch peasantry, or Fielding for the eighteenth-century Englishman, or Thackeray for the higher social stratum of his time. Its last traces are vanishing so rapidly amidst the changes of modern revolution that its picture could hardly be drawn again, even if there were an artist of equal skill and penetration. And thus when the name of George Eliot is mentioned, it calls up to me at least, and, I suspect, to most readers, not so much her later and more ambitious works, as the exquisite series of scenes so lovingly and vividly presented in the earlier stage.—LESLIE STEPHEN: *Cornhill Magazine* for February, 1881.