



# *A Most Dangerous Woman*

by  
Cathy Tempelsman

## Know-the-Show Audience Guide

researched and written by  
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of New Jersey





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# George Eliot

## *Her Life*



An 1865 etching of George Eliot, by Paul A. Rajon (Source: New York Public Library).

Mary Ann Evans, better known by her pen name, George Eliot, was born on November 22nd, 1819, in Warwickshire, England. She was the third of five children, but her mother, Christiana Evans, was a permanent invalid who was incapable of or unwilling to care for them. Mary Ann became very close with her older brother, Isaac, but when she was five and Isaac was eight they were both sent off to separate boarding schools, where

they remained for the rest of their childhoods. At school Mary Ann blossomed, proving herself to be an excellent student. She also became deeply religious. After her mother's death, Eliot moved to Coventry to care for her elderly father. During this time she was introduced to new ideas via the intellectual circles in Coventry, and she forsook religion and became interested in pursuing a career as a writer.

Her first publication was a highly successful translation of the work of the German writer Strauss. After her father's death in 1849, she began working as an editor for John Chapman, owner

of *The Westminster Review*. While working with Chapman, Mary Ann became acquainted with many of the elite intellectuals of the day, including painter and feminist Barbara Bodichon, who would become a lifelong friend. She also met scientist and sociologist Herbert Spencer, with whom she became infatuated. Her affection was not returned however, and Mary Ann was heartbroken by his rejection. Shortly afterwards, she met the scientist, philosopher, and literary critic George Henry Lewes, and the two fell deeply in love, despite Lewes existing marriage with another woman. In 1854, Lewes and Mary Ann decided to live openly together as a couple, a decision that scandalized most of their friends and family. Eliot's siblings all broke off contact with her, and the couple found themselves socially isolated from many of their peers and friends.

Lewes began encouraging Mary Ann to write, and in 1857 she wrote her first short story, "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton." Lewes contacted his friend John Blackwood, a prominent publisher, who agreed to print the story under Evans' pen name, "George Eliot."

Eliot's short stories were widely read, and in 1859, her first novel, *Adam Bede*, sold out within weeks of its publication.

### **LEWES'S MARRIAGE**

In 1841, Lewes married Agnes Jerjis, who bore him three children. However, in 1850 she began an affair with Lewes's best friend, Thornton Hunt, with whom she had four children. Despite knowing that the children were Hunt's, Lewes registered them as his own, making it impossible for him to divorce Agnes on grounds of adultery.



As her writing drew more and more attention, curiosity about the real George Eliot began to mount. Eventually she came forward and acknowledged her identity, but the decision brought unprecedented levels of public scrutiny of her relationship with Lewes, a married man.

Eliot retreated into writing her next two novels, *The Mill on the Floss* and *Silas Marner*, which she completed within two years. Throughout their relationship, Eliot and Lewes traveled extensively, both for pleasure and research. They spent extended time in both Italy and Spain as Eliot wrote her next novel, *Felix Holt*, and conducted research for her Italian novel *Romola* and her poem *The Spanish Gypsy*. While traveling, Lewes introduced Eliot to his three sons, Charles, Thorne, and Bertie. Eliot became close to them, coming to view herself as a second mother.

In the 1870s, tragedy struck the Lewes family as two of Lewes's sons died in quick succession. Nevertheless, Eliot continued writing. She published *Middlemarch*, her most acclaimed novel, in 1872, and *Daniel Deronda*, her final novel, in 1876.

Over the course of her career, Eliot's fame as a novelist transformed her and Lewes from isolated social pariahs to the hub of a large intellectual circle and group of friends. They were received by all the most important people in England, including Queen Victoria's daughters and Charles Dickens. Eliot welcomed

fame and the friends it brought her, but she never let distractions interrupt her diligent work as a writer.

In 1878 Lewes became gravely ill, and in late November he passed away. Eliot entered a period of deep mourning and refused to leave her room, even to attend his funeral. For the next year she kept herself largely isolated, finishing both Lewes's uncompleted manuscript and her last published work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*. During that year, she spent time only with Lewes's son Charles and close family friend John Cross. In 1880, she announced her plans to marry John Cross, a decision that shocked many of her friends, who felt it was inappropriate for her to marry a man twenty years younger than her so soon after the death of Lewes.

However, Eliot's brother Isaac was pleased to finally see her married and contacted her for the first time since 1854. Eliot forgave him for the long silence, and they remained in touch for the rest of her life.

Eliot and Cross went to Europe for their honeymoon, but they returned early after Cross began showing alarming symptoms of depression. They struggled to find a way to live harmoniously together until December 1880, when Eliot came down with kidney failure and died soon after, on December 22. She was buried alongside Lewes with a simple gravestone that read, "Here lies the body of 'George Eliot' Mary Ann Cross."

### PEN NAME

Mary Ann Evans chose the pen name "George Eliot" – 'George' after her partner, George Henry Lewes, and 'Eliot' because she thought it was "a good mouth-filling word."



# Who's Who *In the Play*

**GEORGE ELIOT/MARY ANN EVANS/MARIAN EVANS** – a woman in her mid-thirties whose unconventional life and original novels forever changed Victorian society.

**GEORGE HENRY LEWES** – a writer, scientist, and philosopher, and Eliot's common-law husband. He is unable to marry her because the law forbids him from divorcing his previous wife.

**ISAAC EVANS** – Eliot's older brother, who disapproves of her unconventional life.

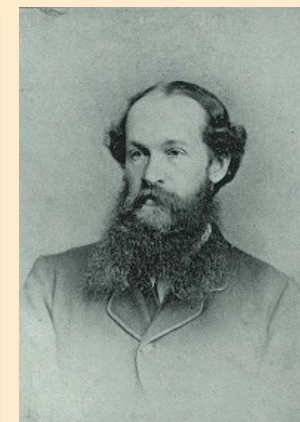
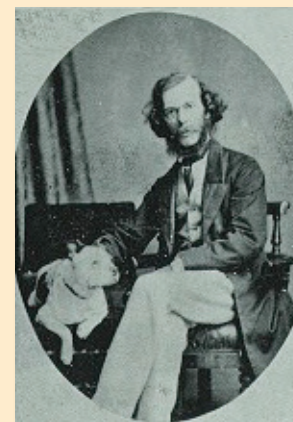
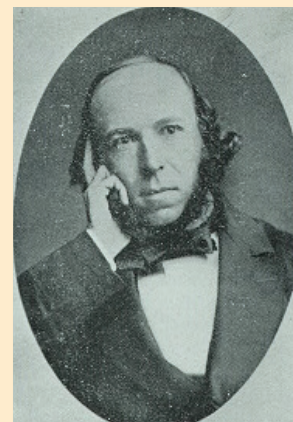
## **Phrenology**

Phrenology was the belief that the brain was a composite of different mental organs that each controlled a different psychological faculty. The development of each of these faculties could be discerned by how the size of the different mental organs affected the shape of the skull. Thus, by examining the contours of someone's skull, you could supposedly learn about their capabilities and character. Though now discredited, phrenology was quite popular in Victorian England, and Eliot actually had her skull examined by the famous phrenologist George Combe.

**JOHN BLACKWOOD** – Eliot's publisher.

**BARBARA BODICHON** – a painter, feminist, and friend of Eliot.

**HERBERT SPENCER** – a writer and intellectual who rejects Eliot's affections.



Portraits of the historical (left to right) Herbert Spencer, George Henry Lewes, and John Walter Cross (Source: New York Public Library).

**GEORGE COMBE** – a phrenologist.

**EDWARD** – a young clerk in Chapman's publishing house.

**CHARLES** – Lewes's eldest son.

**THORNIE** – Lewes's middle son.

**BERTIE** – Lewes's youngest son.

**JOHN WALTER CROSS** – a family friend of Eliot and Lewes's, later Eliot's husband.

**MRS. RICHLEY** – Eliot and Lewes's landlady.

**ASSORTED CHARACTERS FROM ELIOT'S NOVELS AND STORIES**



# An Introduction

Despite living an unconventional life that rendered her a social outcast, George Eliot became one of the most famous and highly acclaimed novelists in Victorian England. She spent her life challenging conventions, both as an author and as a woman. A century and a half later, her novels are still revolutionary and her effect on our society is only just beginning to be appreciated. *A Most Dangerous Woman* is a world premiere play based on the life of George Eliot.



**Please note: Below is a full summary of the play. If you prefer not to spoil the plot, consider skipping this section.**

In the beginning of the play, George Eliot (then still Mary Ann Evans) is living with and working for John Chapman, editor of the journal *The Westminster Review*. Her brother Isaac is concerned about the propriety of her living with Chapman, but she insists that she is happy with her situation and that her relationship with Chapman is purely professional.

Eliot's friend Herbert Spencer comes to visit, and Eliot is hopeful that he will propose marriage to her. However, Spencer tells

Eliot that he thinks they should spend less time together in order to dispel rumors that they are in a relationship. Crushed, Eliot goes to the opera alone that night, where she begins talking to George Henry Lewes. Powerful chemistry develops between them and Lewes invites her to come to Germany with him to help with translations for his newest book. Ignoring warnings from her friend Barbara Bodichon, Eliot decides to accompany Lewes to Germany. They become lovers, despite the fact that Lewes is unable to divorce his wife ([see page 2](#)).

Back in England, gossip begins to spread about Eliot's relationship with a married man. When Eliot and Lewes return to England, they are constantly on the move, living and working in different remote locations to avoid public scrutiny. Despite Eliot's happiness with Lewes, her brother Isaac breaks off relations with his sister because of the scandalous relationship.

Eliot begins to grow increasingly bored with writing journal articles, so Lewes pushes her to start writing her own stories.

## ***The Westminster Review***

*The Westminster Review* was a quarterly journal founded in 1824. At the time, the other two major Reviews were both fairly conservative, and the Westminster was intended to be a liberal competitor. Its contributors included most of the important progressive thinkers of nineteenth century England, and it was especially committed to publishing articles on women's issues and educational reform.

Eliot starts with the short story sequence *Scenes of Clerical Life*, and Lewes helps her get it published by showing it to his friend and publisher, John Blackwood. Though at first hesitant about printing an anonymous story, Blackwood eventually agrees to publish it under the pen name “George Eliot.”

As she continues writing, Eliot’s books begin to attract more attention and critics demand that the real George Eliot reveal “himself.” As Eliot’s novels earn her fame and success, she begins to feel increasingly trapped by her anonymity. Eventually, she reveals her identity to Blackwood and sinks into a deep depression, convinced that she has ended her career. However, her career takes off as never before, and Eliot is overjoyed at being able to live her life honestly.

However, in the midst of her triumph, Lewes passes away. In the legal discussions following Lewes’s death and the execution of his will, Eliot’s mercurial identity and unconventional life come to the fore. The play ends as her literary creations take the stage and join their voices to hers.



Mr. Casaubon and Dorothea in a scene from *Middlemarch*, in an 1888 etching by W. L. Taylor (Source: Wombat Books).



# In This Production



Above: Costume designs for George Eliot (*left*) and Barbara Bodichon (*right*) by Hugh Hanson.

*Right*: Early set designs by Nicholas Dorr.





# Interview *with the Playwright*

*An interview with Cathy Tempelsman, author of A Most Dangerous Woman. Cathy Tempelsman is a new playwright who began work on A Most Dangerous Woman after falling in love with George Eliot's novels. Prior to playwriting, she was a journalist, teacher, and freelance writer.*

**Q: Why did you choose George Eliot as a subject for a play?**

**A:** I fell in love with Eliot's writing, and then I became interested in her life. She was the most brilliant, fascinating woman I had ever read about—her life was entirely modern and unconventional. Then from the biographies, I moved on to her letters and journals, and all of a sudden a very different George Eliot began to emerge. There was a kind of "disconnect"—as if the biographers hadn't connected all the dots. Eliot's letters revealed a much more passionate, complicated person, and an even more remarkable set of choices. They made me understand the novels in a whole new light. And that was the George Eliot I wanted to write a play about.

**Q: How did you start writing plays?**

**A:** I learned about George Eliot and just felt determined to see her on the stage!

**Q: So this is this the first play you've written?**

**A:** It is, but I often joke that it's also the first four plays I've written. Historical plays are tricky, and I came at the material in so many different ways that it was almost like writing four different plays. It took time. Eliot wrote about one of her novels that she started it as a young woman and finished it as an old woman. I sometimes feel that way about *A Most Dangerous Woman*!

**Q: Why did you, as someone who was not previously a playwright, choose to use the form of a play instead of a novel or another artistic format?**

**A:** I just felt that such a dramatic, controversial life belonged in the theatre. Plays tend to provide an emotional truth that biographies don't necessarily give us. And this was especially important in the case of Eliot. Her life is so full of paradoxes—I wanted to go beyond the facts and the chronology to the person inside. It took such courage to make the choices she made, and I thought, "She must be such an icon for feminists." But what I discovered was that feminist critics hated her! I thought their expectations were unfair—that they hadn't looked at her life in context. Writing a play was an opportunity to dramatize the life and the remarkable choices she made, in the context of her time.

**Q: What was the traditional feminist take on George Eliot?**

**A:** Feminist critics wanted to see novels that had female role models, and they objected that Eliot's heroines weren't as



successful and inspiring as she was—that she didn’t write the life she lived, as they put it. And so they thought she had betrayed women. I thought that was unfair. I thought it was a real misreading of what she was doing. What many people overlook is that, as a writer, Eliot was committed to realism. She believed so strongly that art had to be truthful, that anything false in art was “pernicious”—that was the word she used to describe art that idealized life. For her, this was a moral issue. It was her manifesto. She was determined to write about ordinary people and real life, and that made her novels truly radical.

**Q: So feminist critics seem to think she approved of the life she portrays in the novels?**

**A:** It’s as if she succeeds too well. She portrays Victorian lives so realistically that many modern critics assumed she was endorsing that society. On the contrary, she was exposing the limited lives that women led. I thought it was to her credit that, despite her own success, she writes about ordinary women who wish they could lead meaningful lives. It distressed Eliot that women received what she called a “thimbleful” of education. So I see her as proto-feminist—she had a brilliant mind, and she saw the “Woman Question” in much more complex terms. She thought that men and women suffered because Victorian society had such rigid expectations for both.

**Q: What do you think of George Eliot’s essay “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” that condemned a lot of the other female**

**novelists of her time?**

**A:** Well, she wasn’t condemning all women writers. She had great respect for people like Jane Austen; she clearly respected that writing. What she was objecting to was what she called the “mind-and-millinery” set, these vapid, melodramatic, sentimental novels that were being churned out by women. She objected fiercely to the superficiality of this type of writing, the falseness of it. Again, it was a moral issue for her. She also felt that these stories did a terrible disservice to women because they lowered the bar.

**Q: How do you think George Eliot’s unconventional life influenced her novels?**

**A:** One thing I still find so poignant is that Eliot never set out to be a rebel. She was quite conservative at heart. She desperately wanted the love and approval of her family—and yet she becomes the most scandalous woman in Victorian society. She’s almost hardwired for controversy. And then out of her own experience of rejection she develops a remarkable insight into human suffering and the way people keep the truest part of themselves hidden. Eliot sees beneath the veneer of Victorian society and the face people present to the world—she takes the mirror and turns it inside the human soul. And she does this decades before Freud. She sees that human beings are highly complicated and flawed, that we have unconscious needs and desires. She writes the first deeply psychological novels and changes English literature forever. I don’t think people give her



enough credit for that. And she truly wants her stories about ordinary men and women to help “enlarge the sympathies,” as she puts it. I think all of that comes out of her own experience of being misjudged and misunderstood.

**Q: George Eliot famously hated biographies and felt that “The best history of a writer is contained in his writings.” How does that make you feel as someone who is writing a biographical play about her?**

**A:** She did hate biographies, but there’s a little qualifier in one of those letters, where she condones biography if it sets the record straight, or something to that effect. I sighed with relief when I saw that—I’d like to think that’s the case here!

**Q: What about Eliot’s life and *A Most Dangerous Woman* do you think is most relevant to modern issues?**

**A:** It’s sad, but in her own life, Eliot was forced to go outside her family and conventional society to find love and acceptance—even as a child, she didn’t fit in. And I think that’s so relevant to the debate we have today about what constitutes marriage and how to define a family. In fact, her novels are very subversive in this way. Many of her characters are severed from their families—they have to go outside their biological families for love and understanding. They find true affinities in adoptive families and create communities for themselves. In the various readings we’ve done, audiences have also responded to the issue of female beauty. Eliot was notoriously unattractive—people are

always commenting on her appearance—and this has so much to do with the options that weren’t open to her as a woman and the scandalous relationship she chooses. I think we still struggle with this. Women are still expected to look and behave in a certain way. Eliot was profoundly sensitive to the difference between a person’s exterior and the unacceptable feelings and passions that we’re forced to keep hidden.

**Q: How much historical research did you do while working on this script?**

**A:** I’ve done a great deal of research. But the interesting thing about history plays is that, ultimately, they have to contain very little history if they’re going to work dramatically. Initially, I wrote a one-woman play, and it turned out to be a long, encyclopedic, very boring history of her life! I finally learned that an historical figure may have led a fascinating life, but that isn’t enough. At a playwriting conference I attended years ago, Romulus Linney told me, “You’ve been faithful to the book. Now be faithful to the theater.” He meant that a play must go deeper than a biography—theatre audiences are looking for something more meaningful. The material has to be shaped. With a work of drama, there has to be some invention—you can’t simply tell what happened historically. That’s why it’s thrilling to be doing this play in a theatre devoted to Shakespeare. He was the master as far as using history as a starting point for drama.

**Q: Shakespeare liked to take an event from history and then**



**change it to suit his dramatic purposes.**

**A:** That's right. He locates the human drama and then shapes the play accordingly.

**Q: How many different versions or drafts did you go through? What major changes happened between the first draft and now?**

**A:** Somebody once told me, "Playwriting is rewriting," and it's true. Plays are written and constantly rewritten, and it's important to love that part of playwriting. Again, I've come at the material in many different ways over the years. But it's been a long process and an exciting one. The biggest change is that the script has gone from a one-woman show to a cast of nine playing more than forty different characters. So that's a tremendous change! But it was thrilling to bring these characters to life—along with a Victorian world that's very surprising, even shocking. I think the Victorians sometimes make us look like Puritans!

**Q: What was the workshopping process like?**

**A:** I've done many different workshops and readings over the years, and it always helps to hear a play before an audience. Richard Maltby became interested in the script several years ago, and he brought a wonderful clarity and understanding to Eliot's story. It's been a very special, happy collaboration. I think the big difference now is that Eliot is more active in the current script. I realized it was very important for her character to drive the

action, for her to be at the center of every scene.

**Q: What is your involvement in the production going to be like?**

**A:** I've been fortunate because it's been so collaborative. It's a joy and a privilege working with Bonnie Monte and Richard. They've brought me into so many aspects of this production, including set design and costumes. It's a new play, and so I'll be doing some rewriting during rehearsals, too. I just feel extremely lucky to be working with so many wonderful, talented people.



A silhouette of George Eliot from the collections of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

# Selected writings by George Eliot

**Scenes of Clerical Life** (1857) – a collection of three short stories that focus on three different rural clergymen in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

**Adam Bede** (1859) – Eliot's first novel; it tells the story of a love triangle and a young woman who abandons her unwanted infant in a field.

**The Lifted Veil** (1859) – a novella in which Eliot explores science fiction and horror. The story focuses on a man named Latimer who is able to read the minds of everybody except his beloved, an unkind woman named Bertha.

**The Mill on the Floss** (1860) – a semi-autobiographical novel focusing on the relationship of two siblings, Tom and Maggie. Because they clash over Maggie's unconventional desires and Tom's deep conservatism, many have read their relationship as at least semi-autobiographical about Eliot and her brother Isaac.

**Silas Marner** (1861) – *Silas Marner* is the tale of a weaver who lives as an outcast from his town until he is spiritually restored by adopting a young girl whose parents abandoned her.

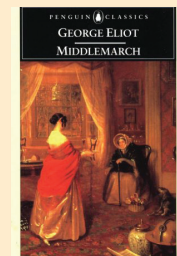
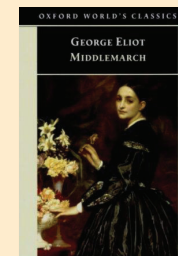
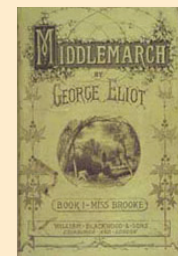
**Romola** (1862-3) – a novel set in fifteenth-century Venice that parallels Renaissance Italy and Victorian England through the story of a failed marriage.

**Felix Holt, The Radical** (1866) – George Eliot's most political novel; it follows political disputes in a small town in England on the eve of the 1832 First Reform Act.

**The Spanish Gypsy** (1868) – an epic poem about racial struggles in fifteenth-century Spain.

**Middlemarch** (1871-2) – Eliot's most famous and most popular novel is a portrait of British society in the 1830's, primarily focusing on the intertwined stories of a young woman, Dorothea Brooke, and an ambitious doctor, Tertius Lydgate.

**Daniel Deronda** (1876) – Eliot's last novel. Its main character, a British gentleman, discovers that his parents are Jewish, and this revelation leads him to turn away from British intolerance and move to Palestine.



A sample of *Middlemarch* cover art from a variety of time periods and publishers.



# Quotable:

FROM THE ESSAYS OF GEORGE ELIOT

TEACHING BY AESTHETICS: My function is that of the aesthetic, not the doctrinal teacher – the rousing of the nobler emotions, which make mankind desire the social right, not the prescribing of special measures, concerning which the artistic mind, however strongly moved by social sympathy, is often not the best judge. It is one thing to feel keenly for one’s fellow-beings; another to say, ‘This step, and this alone, will be the best to take for the removal of particular calamities.’ – *“Letter to Mrs. Peter Taylor”* (1878)

THE PREACHING PROFESSION: Where is that Goshen of mediocrity in which a smattering of science and learning will pass for profound instruction, where platitudes will be accepted as wisdom, bigoted narrowness as holy zeal, unctuous egoism as God-given piety? Let such a man become an evangelical preacher; he will then find it possible to reconcile small ability with great ambition, superficial knowledge with the prestige of erudition, a middling morale with a high reputation for sanctity.

– *“Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming”* (1855)

MARRIAGE OF MINDS: Let the whole field of reality be laid open to woman as well as to man, and then that which is

peculiar in her mental modification, instead of being, as it is now, a source of discord and repulsion between the sexes, it will be found to be a necessary complement to the truth and beauty of life. Then we shall have that marriage of minds which alone can blend the hues of thought and feeling in one lovely rainbow of promise for the harvest of happiness.

– *“Woman in France”* (1854)

LADY NOVELISTS: When men see girls wasting their time in consultations about bonnets and ball dresses . . . they can hardly help saying, “For Heaven’s sake, let girls be better educated; let them have some better objects of thought – some more solid occupations.” But after a few hours’ conversation with an oracular literary woman, or a few hours’ reading of her books, they are likely enough to say, “After all, when a woman gets some knowledge, see what use she makes of it! . . . instead of being subdued into modesty and simplicity by a larger acquaintance with thought and fact, she has a feverish consciousness of her attainments; she keeps a sort of mental pocket-mirror, and is continually looking in it at her own ‘intellectuality’; she spoils the taste of one’s muffin by questions of metaphysics; . . . And then, look at her writings! . . . she struts on one page, rolls her eyes on another, grimaces in a third, and is hysterical in a fourth. . . . No – the average nature of women is too shallow and feeble a soil to bear much tillage; it is only fit for the very lightest crops.”

– *“Silly Novels by Lady Novelists”* (1856)



# Explore Online

George Eliot's novels are available for free online through the University of Adelaide:

<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/e/eliot/george/index.html>

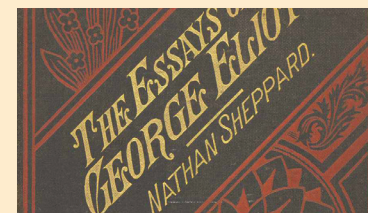
A collection of essays by George Eliot, with commentary by Nathan Sheppard:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/28289/28289-h/28289-h.htm>

Interviews, essays, and production notes for PBS's 2004 adaptation of Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronda*:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/deronda/index.html>

ak — there might be seen in distr  
y country-folk, looked like the re  
nd, dark against the early winter s  
ous burden. The shepherd himself  
pun from that thread, was not qu  
In that far-off time superstition c  
of the pedlar or the knife-grinder



# The Woman Question

“The Woman Question” referred to a series of debates in the nineteenth century over the status and condition of middle-class women. While one of the primary issues included in the “Woman Question” was suffrage, divorce rights and property rights were considered just as important. During most of the nineteenth century, women couldn’t legally own property or sign contracts once they were married, and it was much harder for a woman to seek a divorce than for a man. These two factors combined to make married women virtually powerless both in society and in their marriages.

While Eliot’s novels often engaged with the struggles of women, she was always reluctant to commit herself politically. Despite her close friendship with Barbara Bodichon, a feminist leader of the day, she insisted that her vocation was writing fiction, not participating in political struggles. In her view, creating good

art meant refraining from any open political advocacy, and that political rather than aesthetic art was deeply offensive (see page 13).

She was also hesitant about the wisdom of many of the reforms advocated by feminists. On the subject of marriage reform, she stated that she did “not trust very confidently to my own impressions on this subject,” and she referred to women’s suffrage as “a doubtful good.” To her, any changes that happened needed to happen as slowly as possible, with multiple checks and safeguards put in place to prevent too radical an upset to society.



Millicent Fawcett, leader of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, addresses a rally in Hyde Park in 1913 (Source: BBC).

equals, and the changes demanded by feminists would happen in their own time.

However, Eliot did enthusiastically endorse women’s education. To her, education was a precursor to other women’s rights: until women were on an equal educational footing with men, they did not deserve to be on an equal legal footing. In Eliot’s view, as women gained access to education men would come to view them as



# Commentary & Criticism

*Though Eliot's novels were highly acclaimed during her time, after her death her literary reputation began to decline. By the first half of the twentieth century her work was rarely read or discussed. In the 1970's, however, feminist critics began to pay more attention to Eliot, and her reputation has grown steadily since then. Now she is considered one of the greatest English novelists. Approaches to her work have varied considerably over the years; this section aims to demonstrate some of the critical diversity.*

**EARLY PRAISE:** “[Eliot's novels] not only display creative power, dramatic skill, pathos, and humor, but also intellectual strength, faithfulness of observation, and keenness of perception. . . . But power is not the only remarkable quality of this writer's mind. Her novels display a breadth of culture extraordinary in a woman, and a painstaking patience truly admirable. Hence it is that they do more than interest and amuse; they arouse and excite, being not only full of thought themselves, but, like Falstaff's wit, the cause of thought in their readers.” – I.M. Luyster, 1861



An illustration of Maggie Tulliver in an 1880 edition of *The Mill on the Floss* (Source: Open Library).

**AUTHORIAL COMMENTARY:** “In reviewing the first volume of the work we noticed her tendency to analyze, as well as present, her characters. She explains, and comments upon, their words, movements, and changes of countenance; sometimes a chapter seems to open in some realm of abstract philosophical speculation, out of which the author slowly descends to take up the thread of her story. Sometimes these disquisitions are so sound and admirably stated that we are glad to come upon them: frequently they strike us as unnecessary and not particularly important; and occasionally they are mere high-sounding platitudes.”

– Bayard Taylor, 1880

**PSYCHOLOGY:** “It was really George Eliot who started it all. It was she who started putting action inside.”

– D.H. Lawrence, 1905

**ELIOT'S SISTERHOOD:** “Those who fall foul of George Eliot do so, we incline to think, on account of her heroines; and with good reason; for there is no doubt that they bring out the worst of her, lead her into difficult places, make her self-conscious, didactic, and occasionally vulgar. Yet if you could delete the whole sisterhood you

would leave a much smaller and a much inferior world, albeit a world of greater artistic perfection and far superior jollity and comfort.” – Virginia Woolf, 1919

**SAINT THERESA SYNDROME:** “Why, when Eliot herself was able to



defy social tradition and achieve her own epic life, did she relentlessly consign Dorothea to the unmitigated mediocrity of a conventional marriage to Will Ladislaw? At the heart of this controversy about Eliot's feminist consciousness in *Middlemarch* is what critics have come to refer to as the "Saint-Theresa Syndrome," the terms of which are laid out by Eliot herself in the novel's "Prelude." This phenomenon describes the especially female fate, as Eliot would have it, of desiring an epic life but finding no outlet for achievement apart from the socially limiting role of "common womanhood," i.e., marriage. For, no matter what attitude they take, the recent feminists admit that Eliot has raised a perplexing issue about feminine destiny in *Middlemarch*."

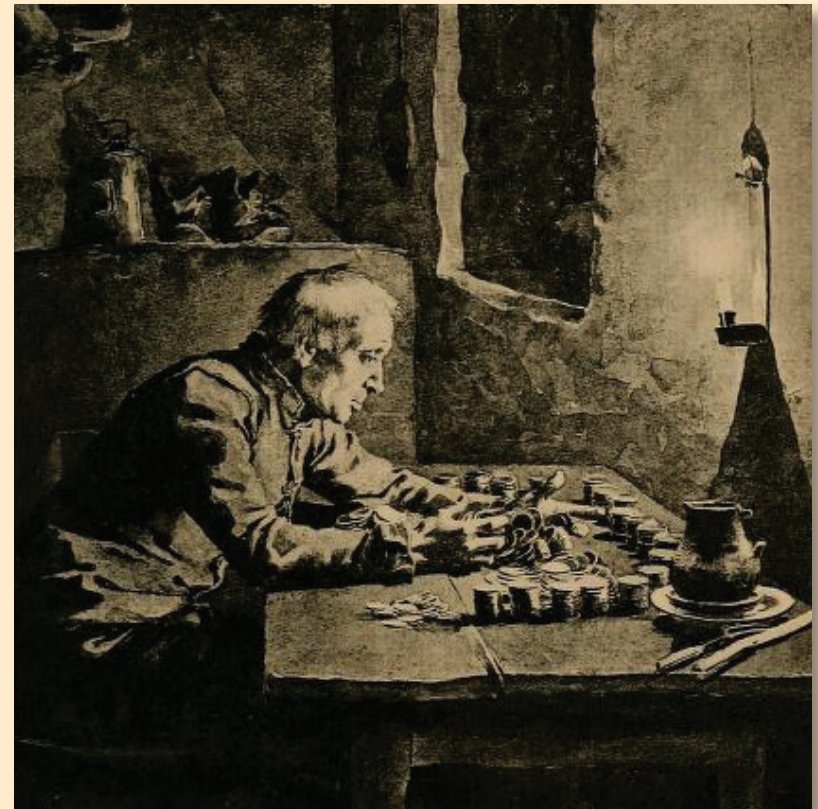
– Ellin Ringler, 1983

**FEMINISM AND CONSERVATISM:** "While she is not a political reformer . . . I think there can be no doubt that she is profoundly feminist – in her insight into the restrictions on women's development and the complex social and psychological dynamics that maintain those restrictions, and in her feeling for the human waste and suffering often thereby engendered. But her philosophic and dramatic sensibility admittedly couple that feminism with what emerges as a deep conservatism, nurtured by her appreciation of the tangled web of which any issue is but a strand and her experienced awareness that all change bears mixed and unpredictable results."

– Jeanie G. Thomas, 1980s

**ATHEISTIC MORALITY:** "Spiritual belief had begun to ebb during the Victorian era; what was there to replace it? Matthew Arnold in "Dover Beach" wistfully invokes love as the raft to cling to. But Eliot presents a more practical solution. Her novels explore how the cultivation of moral character can serve as a source of meaning, even in the absence of a belief in God."

– Paula Marantz Cohen, 2006



An illustration of Silas Marner in an 1880 collection of Eliot's works (Source: Open Library).

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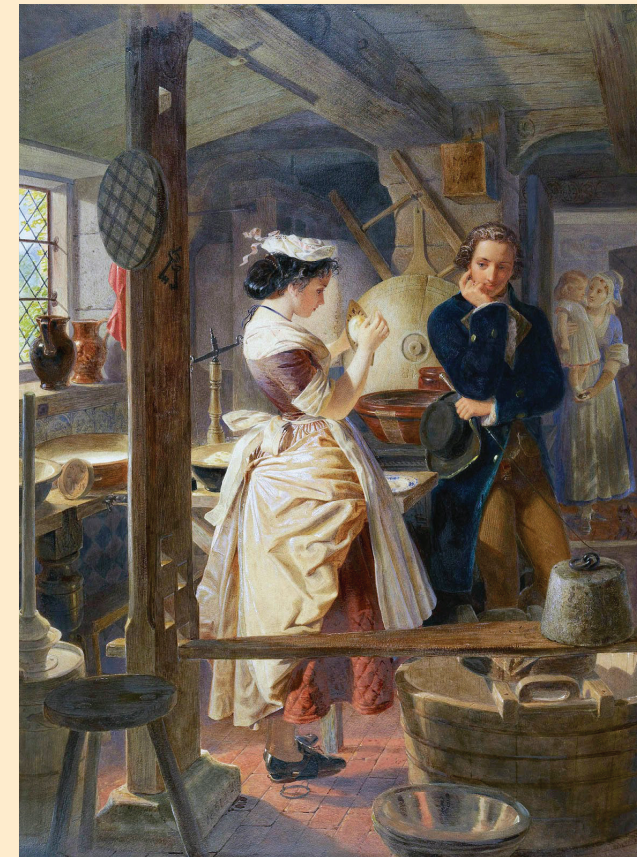
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