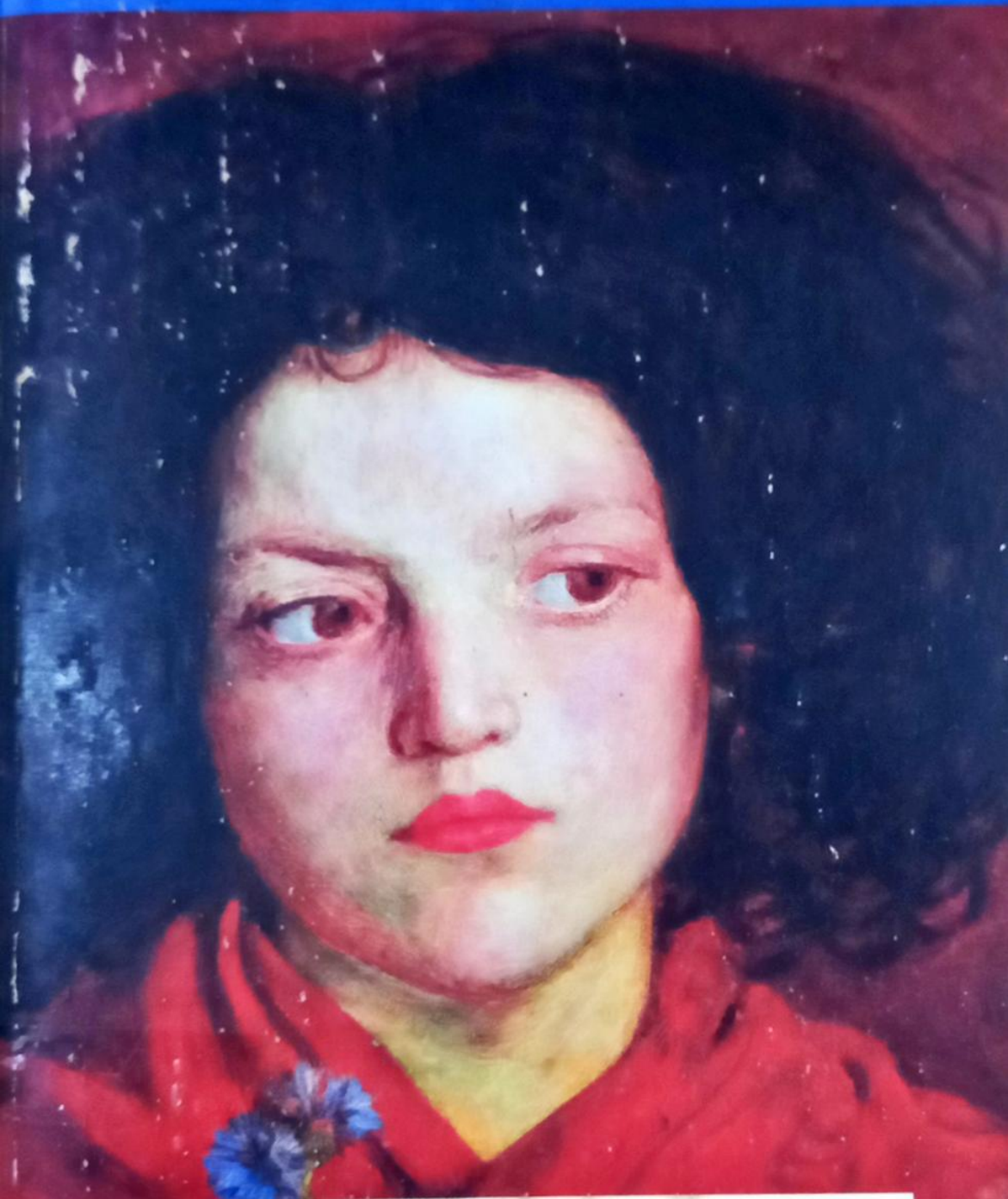


WORLD'S  CLASSICS



GEORGE ELIOT

THE MILL ON THE FLOSS

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GEORGE ELIOT was born Mary Anne Evans on 22 November 1819 near Nuneaton, Warwickshire, on the Arbury estate of the Newdigate family, of which her father was agent. At the age of 9 she was imbued with an intense Evangelicalism that dominated her life until she was 22. Removing to Coventry with her father in 1841, she became acquainted with the family of Charles Bray, a free-thinker, and was persuaded to translate Strauss's *Life of Jesus* (3 vols., 1846). After her father's death in 1849 she spent six months in Geneva, reading widely. On her return she lived in London in the house of the publisher John Chapman, editing the *Westminster Review*. At the focus of many radical ideas here she met George Henry Lewes, a versatile journalist, whose marriage was irretrievably ruined but divorce impossible. In 1854 she went to Germany with him, and for twenty-four years lived openly with him as his wife. Through his encouragement at the age of 37 she began to write fiction. *Scenes of Clerical Life*, serialized in *Blackwood's Magazine*, and reprinted (1858) under the *nom de plume* George Eliot, was an instant success. *Adam Bede* (1859) became a best seller; *The Times* declared that 'its author takes rank at once among the masters of the art'. In *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and the five novels that followed, George Eliot, with increasing skill, continued the subtle probing of human motive that leads many modern critics to regard her as the greatest novelist of the nineteenth century. Lewes's death in 1878 was a devastating blow that ended her writing career. On 6 May 1880 she married John Walter Cross, a banker twenty years her junior, and on 22 December died at 4 Cheyne Walk, London.

GORDON S. HAIGHT, Professor Emeritus of English Literature at Yale University, edited *The George Eliot Letters* (9 vols., 1954-78) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1980) in the Clarendon edition, of which he was also General Editor.

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INTRODUCTION

The Mill on the Floss, published on 4 April 1860, marks a turning point in Eliot's life as a writer. She began work on it in January 1859, a month before *Adam Bede*, her first full-length novel, was published. Nearly 40 years old, she had reached a moment of uncertainty. She could not know that *Adam Bede* would be a triumphant success, setting her on the road to fame and prosperity. Her first thoughts, as she embarked on this next piece of fiction, were of disaster. She combed the Annual Register 'for cases of inundation',¹ and copied details into her commonplace book—bridges swept away, houses flooded, fields submerged. In choosing the setting for her new novel, Eliot seemed to be continuing a pattern begun with *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), her first published fiction, and *Adam Bede*. Like those works, *The Mill on the Floss* looks back on the provincial life she had experienced as a child and young woman. It too is placed in the past, but a past that is still close enough to be recalled by the living. In this novel, however, Eliot is thinking of her own history in very much more immediate terms than she had allowed herself in her first fictional works. *The Mill on the Floss* is in part an expression of her sorrow for the irrevocable loss of the life she had known in childhood. Many details of Maggie Tulliver's experiences draw directly on memories of rural Warwickshire, personal recollections which Eliot idealized as they grew more distant. Dorlcote Mill, home to the Tulliver family, recalls Arbury Mill, where Mary Anne Evans had played as a child. The Round Pool from whose banks Maggie and Tom happily fish resembles the pool close to Griff House, the 'old, old home'² of Mary Anne's youth. Maggie's intense relations with her older brother Tom reflect the young Mary Anne's adoration of her only brother, Isaac Evans. In defending

¹ See Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968, 302.

² *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols., New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954-78; iii. 224.

the homely location of her story, Eliot affirms that it is sanctified by loving memory: 'What novelty is worth that sweet monotony where everything is known, and loved because it is known?' (p. 41)

In its searching exploration of the roots of adult destiny in childhood experience *The Mill on the Floss* owes an evident debt to her reading of Wordsworth, the great poet of memory.³ Ten years later, Eliot was to compose a Wordsworthian series of sonnets, 'Brother and Sister', in which she traces the sources of her nature in her childish love for Isaac: 'Those hours were seed to all my after good'.⁴ One of the chapters of *The Mill on the Floss* is also called 'Brother and Sister', and 'Sister Maggie' is among the titles Eliot considered for the book. The ineffaceable love that Maggie bears for Tom directs the deepest currents of the life that Eliot remembers and mourns in *The Mill on the Floss*. Yet Maggie's childhood is never an untroubled Eden. She is both unruly and emotionally vulnerable, constantly harassed by adult demands for a feminine conformity which is alien to her nature, and distressed by Tom's reluctance to return her passionate affection. Tom Tulliver's severity, which grows ever more implacable as Maggie develops, also has roots in Eliot's own history. Isaac Evans could not accept the firm-minded choices that his devoted little sister made as she matured into a learned and stalwartly independent woman, abandoning the Evangelicalism of her adolescence, earning her own living, and scandalously setting up house with George Henry Lewes, who was already married. Isaac refused to see or write to this increasingly insubordinate member of his respectable family, and he forbade his sisters to maintain any contact with her. The illness and death of Eliot's favourite sister Chrissey came in March 1859—just as Maggie Tulliver's story was taking shape. Eliot was bitterly grieved. 'It has ploughed up my heart.'⁵ Chrissey's death, like Isaac's intransigence, casts a long shadow over *The Mill on the Floss*.

³ See Donald D. Stone, *The Romantic Impulse in Victorian Fiction*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980; also Margaret Homans, 'Eliot, Wordsworth, and the Scenes of the Sisters' Instruction', *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (1981), 223-41.

⁴ George Eliot, *The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems*, Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1874, 209-19.

⁵ Eliot, *Letters*, iii. 23.

Maggie Tulliver's misfortunes are closely intertwined with Eliot's own family difficulties. The novel insists on the claims of remembered affection, and at its sombre climax Maggie voices Eliot's strongest convictions: 'If the past is not to bind us, where can duty lie? We should have no law but the inclination of the moment' (p. 475). But the past had not, after all, bound Mary Anne Evans. She had needed to cast it off in order to become George Eliot, and in the shape of the inflexible Isaac, it had still more conclusively rejected her. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot simultaneously represents and rewrites hard memories. The final catastrophe is an expression of damage beyond repair. A divided past can never be mended: 'the parted hills are left scarred: if there is a new growth, the trees are not the same as the old, and the hills underneath their green vesture bear the marks of the past rending' (pp. 521-2). Nevertheless, the novel's ending insists on restored unity, a tragedy invested with the power to heal—'In their death they were not divided' (p. 522).

The apparent disparity is characteristic of the energies of *The Mill on the Floss*, for this is a book whose richness is woven out of tension and persistent difference. Dorlcote Mill is not quite Arbury Mill, and the topography of St Ogg's is drawn from research in Lincolnshire, not Warwickshire. Eliot chose the town of Gainsborough, close to the meeting point of the Idle and the Trent, as an appropriate model for the provincial community that produces and then condemns Maggie Tulliver. Following F. R. Leavis, many critics have argued that Eliot is too close to Maggie, and is given to special pleading on her behalf.⁶ The reader is repeatedly asked to pity 'poor Maggie', and there is no doubt that her comfortless history dominates the novel. Yet this is a complicated matter, for Maggie is not merely an embryonic George Eliot, and in the presentation of her rebellious story Eliot is careful to set a critical distance between the narrator and her unlucky heroine. St Ogg's, 'that venerable town' (p. 115) which is served by Dorlcote Mill, is like Maggie's childhood presented in terms of its origins in nature and the past. 'It is one of those old, old towns which impress one as a

⁶ Leavis makes this point in the pioneering study of George Eliot in his *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1948, 42.

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