

## Mary Ann Evans and George Eliot: One Woman by Annika M. Hughes

### Personal Reflection

Mary Ann Evans was definitely a free thinker, or should I say a free spirit. She did not feel the pressure to be a typical Victorian woman, for if she did, she ignored it. To learn about a woman who did not feel obligated to be a wife, mother, or housekeeper was refreshing. I am not saying that the typical Victorian woman was bad, but that Mary Ann showed that not everyone conformed to the ideals of the society. Everyone likes a rebel.

### Biography

George Eliot was one of the most famous and acclaimed English writers during the Victorian era. Yet George Eliot only existed on paper. Mary Ann Evans used the pen name George Eliot to write her novels in a time when female novelists were seen as only romantic authors. Mary Ann wanted to be taken seriously as a writer, so a man's name got her the credit. She lived her life her way; she was not the typical Victorian woman. Her childhood was similar to most country girls at the time. Though once she entered adulthood, ideas formed, opinions were made, and Mary Ann had a new view for her future. In a time where a woman's place was in the home raising children, Mary Ann Evans defied the norm and became George Eliot.

In the morning on a farm in Warwickshire, England on November 22, 1819, Mary Ann Evans was born. She was the youngest child to Robert and Christiana Evans with four older siblings: Frances Lucy, Robert, Christiana, and Isaac (Crompton, 1960). Mary Ann's education began at Miss Latham's boarding school when she was eight. At eleven she then attended a school for older girls at the Elms, run by Mrs. Wallington. Mary Ann's father encouraged her education because he believed her odd looks would keep her a spinster. He did not want her to be reliant on her brothers, so he hoped for a future as a governess for his daughter (Hughes, 1998). She furthered her education at the Franklin's school. There Mary Ann flourished. She greatly improved her French, her piano skills excelled, and her writing talent began to win admiration among her teachers (Hughes, 1998).

During the end of her school years, Mary Ann's mother's health was declining. Being a dutiful daughter, Mary Ann returned home. Her mother, Christiana Evans, died on February 3, 1836 (Karl, 1995). Mary Ann then assumed the household duties and became the mistress of the home. All her older siblings had married and left. It was her responsibility to take care of her father and the family home. She would spend what little spare time reading books on theology (Uglow, 1987).

Mary Ann was brought up Protestant. While she read theology books, she began to question two evangelical ideas. The first was that women were the sensitive and emotional sex, and that being naturally maternal, women could never put themselves first. The second idea argued that God sacrificed love for humanity which bonds with women's maternal nature (Uglow, 1987). Mary Ann then saw she was not meant for that maternal lifestyle. She could not see herself in the domestic world forever; she even said it could "stunt her growth" (Uglow, 1987, p. 24). When Mary Ann and her father moved to the town of Coventry in 1841, she began to converse with religious radicals and nonconformists. She also began to read books on astronomy and geology. Those subjects raised new questions for her about religion. Both subjects came to the conclusions that the earth was much older than the given dates in Genesis, and so by the end of 1841, Mary Ann became a "free thinker," a Victorian term for an agnostic (Taylor, 1989, p. 40). Her family did not take it well when they learned of her rejection of Christianity. For awhile, they refused to speak or see her. Yet, they did not want a scandal. Her family accepted her to believe what she wanted in exchange for her to attend church to give an appearance of faith (Taylor, 1989). Mary Ann's abandonment of religion was her first step away from the typical Victorian woman. Women during this era were known for their devotion to religious practices (Wikipedia, 2005). For Mary Ann to discontinue her beliefs was quite unusual.

Mary Ann continued with her "free thinker" ways, and in 1844 embarked on translating David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* from German to English. That was abnormal for a Victorian woman to do, even for a "free thinker." The translation took two years. She sent her translated *The Life of Jesus* to Strauss for his approval; he praised her accuracy. She received £20 for the two years' work. *The Life of Jesus* was published in 1846 by John Chapman; Mary Ann's name was not associated with its publication until later when she became George Eliot (Karl, 1995).

In 1849, Mary Ann's father became very ill. He quickly worsened, causing Mary Ann to be at

his side at all times. For five months she watched over her father and would write to her siblings about his condition. On May 31, 1849, Robert Evans passed away. After his funeral, she left for a European continental tour to deal with the grief (Haight, 1968).

Mary Ann returned to England in 1850. Upon her return, she met John Chapman, the man who published her Strauss translation. He asked her to critique Robert Mackay's *The Progress of the Intellect*. It would appear in his paper, *The Westminster Review*. This new job was not a typical position women to hold in the Victorian period. If a woman did have a job, it was most likely as a secretary, not as a writer. Mary Ann moved to London and stayed in Chapman's home with his wife, Susanna, and his live-in mistress, Elisabeth Tilley. Both his wife and Tilley felt threatened by Mary Ann's presence. Mary Ann and Chapman soon became lovers. Chapman's wife and Tilley demanded that Mary Ann move out. Mary Ann then returned to Coventry (Hughes, 1998). Becoming involved with a married man went against the ideals of a Victorian woman. A proper lady was to remain pure for her husband and to never become involved with a married man (Wikipedia, 2005). Even though, Chapman had rather unique circumstances within his household, Mary Ann was still seen as an improper lady to both his wife and mistress.

In 1851, Chapman needed an intellectual editor who would be anonymous and capable of letting him take the credit for the work for the *Westminster*. He believed Mary Ann could do the job perfectly and she took the position, unpaid. Her only source of income would be the inheritance her father left her in his will, which was £2,000, and payments for individual articles she wrote. To take a full time job, Mary Ann was quite the opposite of a typical Victorian woman: she was ignoring her duty to get married, have children, and take care of the home. She moved back into Chapman's home, but this time their relationship was strictly professional. She was the editor for the *Westminster* for two years. She worked amongst an impressive team of writers, including George Henry Lewes (Uglow, 1987).

George Henry Lewes was married to Agnes Jervis. Their marriage was not faithful, mainly on her part, until he met Mary Ann. Jervis had been having an affair with one of Lewes's close friends, Thornton Hunt. She even bore Hunt five children, still being married to Lewes. Their marriage was over in every sense except legal when he met Mary Ann. He and Mary Ann would be company to one another at many social functions. Mary Ann moved out of Chapman's house by October 1853 and found her own residence so she could have privacy for her new blooming love life (Uglow, 1987). She and Lewes kept their intimate relationship secret. In early 1854, Mary Ann gave up her position at the *Westminster* and began translating Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*. It was published in her name (Taylor, 1989).

After the publication of *Essence of Christianity*, Mary Ann and Lewes left for the European continent for eight months. When they returned, their affair was well known. Her friends and family did not approve, yet she did not care. She felt that her and Lewes were married, spiritually married (Crompton, 1960). She was now openly involved with a married man. She was displaying the nature of a sexually free woman- which was not acceptable in Victorian society.

Once she returned to England, Chapman asked her to return to the *Westminster* to be in charge of the "Belle Lettres" section (Haight, 1960). "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" was how it was referred (Hughes, 1998, p. 177). Mary Ann was to critique these writings; yet, with that job she found inspiration on what to avoid in writing a novel. Lewes encouraged her to try to write fiction. and in 1856, she began "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton." Lewes was impressed and presented her piece to publisher, John Blackwood, claiming the writer to be a friend. Blackwood was also impressed. The title changed to *Scenes of Clerical Life* and ran as a series under the pseudonym 'George Eliot' (Taylor, 1989). George Eliot was her *nom-de-plume*. She chose George because it was Lewes's name and Eliot because it was "a good mouth-filling, easily pronounced word" (Crompton, 1960, p. 123). Mary Ann wanted to be taken seriously and not to be compared to other women writers since most women wrote romance stories. Also, her name, Mary Ann Evans, was then associated with her relationship with Lewes, which could have altered reviewers' opinions. George Eliot gave Mary Ann distance from the critiques of her personal life and her work (Hughes, 1998).

*Scenes of Clerical Life* was a success, and she then began her career as a novelist. Her next project was *Adam Bede*. It was released in 1859, and once Queen Victoria read it and praised it, the sales soared (Haight, 1968). Yet there was a mystery as to whom George Eliot really was. Chapman had told a few members of the London literary community the true identity of George Eliot. Soon everyone knew. Mary Ann had written her next novel, *The Mill on the Floss*, and was now worried since her identity had been revealed. *Floss* was a success (Uglow, 1987).

George Eliot was a successful writer while Mary Ann Evans was a social outcast. Mary Ann became a celebrity through her novels, but that caused her private life to become public. People criticized her and Lewes' union, even creating Lewes' wife a victim. Mary Ann and Lewes were not popular as guests and in return they had very few visitors (Karl, 1995).

Mary Ann went on to write *Silas Marner*, *Romola*, *Felix Holt*, *The Spanish Gypsy*, *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda* over a sixteen year period. Though not all were successful, she was earning quite a fortune. *Middlemarch* was her most successful novel, as well as her longest. Mary Ann wanted to "omit nothing" and it was published in eight books (Crompton, 1960, p. 178). By 1879, *Middlemarch* sold 30,000 copies, giving Mary Ann £9,000 from that novel alone (Haight, 1968). George Eliot was getting the same recognition and praises as other Victorian writers - Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, and the Brontës (Crompton, 1960). When Dickens passed away in 1870, George Eliot was then declared the leading English novelist (Taylor, 1989).

She and Lewes were no longer outcasts after the success of *Middlemarch*. People had either forgotten or accepted their unofficial marriage. But Lewes became seriously ill in 1878. He hid his ailments from Mary Ann for as long as he could. On November 30, 1878, George Lewes died, ending their twenty-six year union. Mary Ann did not take his death very well; she did not even attend his funeral. She would seek comfort from John Cross, her friend and business-like manager (Taylor, 1989).

Cross was twenty years younger than Mary Ann. Their friendship became very close. Cross proposed three times before she finally accepted. On May 6, 1880, Mary Ann married Cross. Yet by November, her health was deteriorating. On December 19, 1880, she complained of a sore throat. The doctor said it was only laryngitis and that there was nothing to worry about. Cross stayed at her bedside till she unexpectedly passed away on December 22, 1880 (Haight, 1968).

Like Charlotte Brontë, Mary Ann wanted to be judged on her work, not her sex. Using the name George Eliot got her the credibility she sought, and even after her true identity was revealed, she maintained it. She has been recognized by other writers, such as Virginia Woolf, as one of the all time greatest English novelists (Taylor, 1987). Mary Ann Evans was an opinionated and an ambitious woman who felt no obligation to become the typical Victorian woman.

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### **Timeline**

1819: Mary Ann Evans was born, November 22.

1827: Mary Ann started her education.

1836: Her mother, Christiana Evans, died on February 3.

1837: Queen Victoria began her reign.

1841: Mary Ann became a "free thinker."

1844: She translated *Das Leben Jesu*.

1849: Her father, Robert Evans, died on May 31.

1850: She moved to London and critiqued *The Progress of the Intellect for The Westminster Review*. She began and ended an affair with John Chapman.

1851: The First World's Fair- the Great Exhibition was held in London. Mary Ann became the silent editor to the *Westminster*. She met George Lewes and started a 26 year spiritual marriage.

1854: The Crimean War broke out (ended 1856). Mary Ann translated *Essence of Christianity* and got it published with her name. Her relationship with Lewes became public.

1856: Mary Ann worked on "Belle Lettres." She wrote *Scenes of Clerical Life*.

1857: She adopted 'George Eliot' as her pen name.

1859 - 1876:: *Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss, Silas Marner, Romola, The Spanish Gypsy, Middlemarch, Daniel Deronda* published.

1878: George Lewis died on November 30.

1880: Mary Ann married John Cross on May 6. Mary Ann Evans died on December 22.