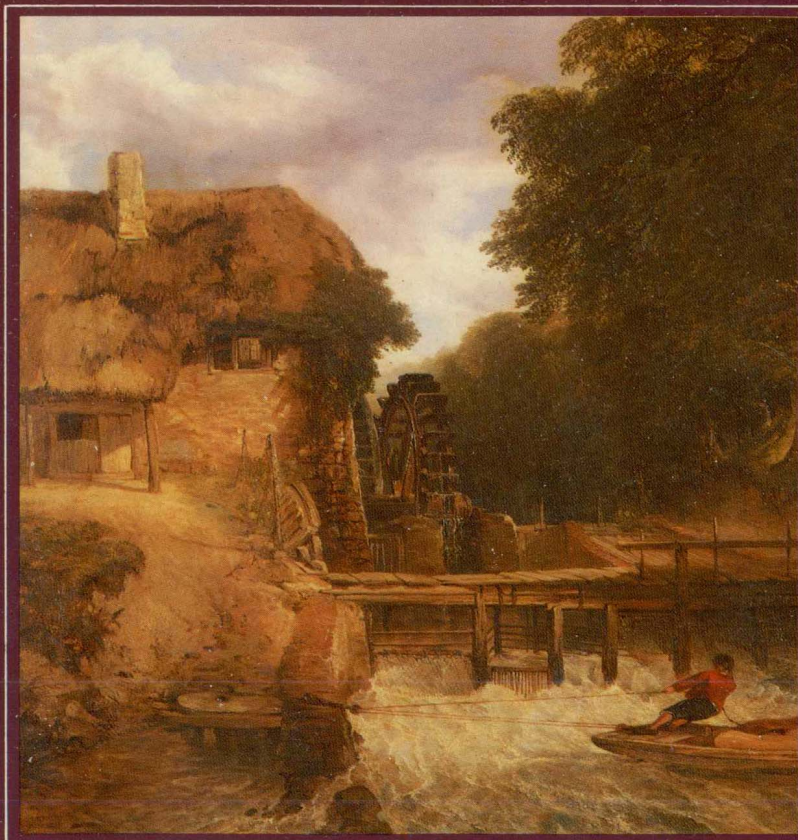
THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

GEORGE ELIOT

THE MILL ON THE FLOSS



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The Mill on the Floss

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY

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INTRODUCTION

THE MILL ON THE FLOSS is not a good title. Though George Eliot accepted it when her publisher John Blackwood proposed it, she observed that 'the Mill is not *strictly* on the Floss', but on its small tributary the Ripple. Nor is the Mill the central interest of the novel. While writing it George Eliot usually referred to it as 'Sister Maggie' or 'Maggie'. Maggie is certainly the heart of the story. Many episodes – the dead rabbits, the battered doll, the jam puffs, and running away to the gypsies – are admittedly autobiographical, deriving their intense vividness from the author's early memories. All the elements of character that bring about the tragedy are foreshadowed in Maggie's childhood experiences. She is first seen standing at the water's edge, and the first words that Mrs Tulliver speaks to her give the dire warning: 'You'll tumble in and be drownded some day, an' then you'll be sorry you didn't do as mother told you.' Sitting happily with Tom at the Round Pool, Maggie, looking dreamily into the glassy water, catches a fish without realizing it. Later, drifting down the Floss with Stephen, she falls into the same fit of absence she was always liable to and was hardly conscious that they had passed Luckreth. The love of books shown early in her talk with Mr Riley and during her visit to Tom at Mr Stelling's prepares us for her anguish at losing them and for the joy they bring to her meetings with Philip in the Red Deeps. Susceptibility to music is another foreshadowed trait. To little Maggie the singing of the waits at Christmas Eve seemed supernatural voices of angels; and the simple tune played by Uncle Pullet's snuff-box excites her so that she throws her arms round Tom's neck and spills half his cowslip wine. So in later times Stephen's full-toned bass would betray her

> by the cozenage of sense . . .
> To a voluptuous influence
> That taints the purer, better mind.[1]

[1] Wordsworth, 'On the Power of Sound', st. 6.

hypothesis that 'she never recovered from the debilitating effects of giving birth to Mary Ann', but lived on 'in a state of semi-invalidism, thus withdrawing in a way common to women who do not really desire the families they produce'[2] ignores the fact that Mrs Evans bore twin sons eighteen months after Mary Ann. They died, much lamented, ten days later. In *The Mill on the Floss* George Eliot transfers them to Mrs Moss, who always regretted losing them, though (like Chrissey) she had eight others.

The Dodson sisters, Mrs Glegg, Mrs Pullet, and Mrs Deane, were drawn with broad Dickensian touches from George Eliot's childhood memories of her aunts, all but one of whom had died before she was in her teens. Despite their absurdities she was fond of them and really hurt when a reviewer called them 'mean and uninteresting'. The Dodson religion was of a simple, semi-pagan kind, consisting in

> revering whatever was customary and respectable; it was necessary to be baptised, else one could not be buried in the churchyard, and to take the sacrament before death as a security against more dimly-understood perils; but it was of equal necessity to have the proper pall-bearers and well-cured hams at one's funeral, and to leave an unimpeachable will.

Years later George Eliot declared that 'we owe them much for keeping up the sense of respectability, which was the only religion possible to the mass of the English people'. Careful readers will not mistake realism for satire, nor, like the humourless Freudians, dismiss the Dodsons as mere specimens of anality.

The Church plays a more muted part in *The Mill on the Floss* than in any other George Eliot novel. There is nothing like the Sunday procession of the Poyser family through the fields to Hayslope, where Mr Irwine was a sympathetic friend to squire and farmhand alike. The Tullivers are never shown at Church. The vicar of their 'charming rural parish' of Dorlcote is a man of excellent family, who had taken honours; but he is nameless, never seen or heard in the novel, even in the Tullivers' deepest adversity. Though Mr Tulliver regards the vicar with dutiful respect, he knew that 'the Church was one thing and common-sense another'. He used his family Bible as a register in which (despite Maggie's protest) he has Tom record a vow of vengeance

[2] Ruby V. Redinger, *George Eliot. The Emergent Self*, 1975, p. 29.

on Wakem. Good Dr Kenn, the Vicar of St Ogg's, has been touched by the Tractarians enough to put tall candles on the altar. He 'has something of the real apostle in him', and his charity is genuine. Though the ladies of his parish embroider slippers for him, he cannot persuade them to judge Maggie fairly.

Her bleakest years in 'The Valley of Humiliation' reflect something of the gloomy Calvinism of George Eliot's adolescence, when in concern for the state of her soul she abstained from the most innocent pleasures. 'I used to go about like an owl,' she said, 'to the great disgust of my brother, and I would have denied him what I now see to have been quite lawful amusements.' Help came to Maggie by chance from *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, which taught her self-renunciation. It was the same book in which Marian herself found comfort during the last months of her father's long illness. Honesty had compelled her to abandon belief in orthodox Christianity, but she never ceased to be deeply religious. *The Imitation* became her private manual of devotion. She recommended it to persons as various as John Chapman, Maria Congreve, and Benjamin Jowett, the Master of Balliol; in 1851 she gave a copy of it to Sara Hennell, and she inscribed another to John Walter Cross on their wedding day in 1880. In describing the solace Maggie found in 'the little, old, clumsy book' George Eliot was writing from experience.

For Philip Wakem no 'original' has been found among George Eliot's friends. In 1845 she met a young artist, an unnamed picture-restorer, who was much taken with her and after a three-days' acquaintance proposed marriage. But she soon decided that she could not love him and broke off the affair. Again, there was a certain physical resemblance between Philip and François D'Albert Durade, in whose house she boarded in Geneva; his spine had been deformed since childhood, and he was scarcely four feet tall. But apart from this deformity, it is impossible to trace Philip in the forty-five-year-old Swiss with a wife and two grown sons. When Maggie first saw Philip she thought him just a clever schoolmate of Tom's. His humpback interested her, for she had always 'rather a tenderness for deformed things' like the wry-necked lambs. But it was his thoughtfulness towards Tom that quickened her feeling for Philip, and in gratitude she kissed him quite earnestly. 'I shall always remember you and kiss you when I see you again, if it's ever so long,' the little girl said. Five

or six years later when they met in the Red Deeps, Philip at twenty-one was quite aware of what he wanted of her, but the idea that he might become her lover in more than a fraternal sense had not occurred to her. Finally, pressed to admit that she loved him, Maggie found it not easy to answer. She 'smiled, with glistening tears, and then stooped her tall head to kiss the pale face that was full of pleading, timid love — like a woman's'. Her affection for him always comprised more of pity than love. After Tom's brutal termination of their meetings, 'How was it that she was now and then conscious of a certain dim background of relief in the forced separation from Philip?'

From childhood Maggie displayed a healthy appetite. When Tom was sent to bring her down from the attic, where she had hidden, weeping, after his rebuke for neglecting his rabbits, he offered her a bit of his plum cake.

> Maggie's sobs began to subside, and she put out her mouth for the cake and bit a piece: and then Tom bit a piece, just for company, and they ate together and rubbed each other's cheeks and brows and noses together, while they ate, with a humiliating resemblance to two friendly ponies.

Again, when Tom was sent upstairs for her, sitting forlorn among her shorn locks, Maggie 'was *so* hungry' that the prospect of pudding and custard and dessert soon induced her to come slowly downstairs. And when discoursing to the gypsies, she interrupted her account of Columbus to exclaim, *'I want my tea so!'* From these examples it is a natural inference that more mature appetites had developed in her by the age of nineteen, when she first met Stephen Guest. Her 'broad-chested figure has the mould of early womanhood'; her arm recalls the Parthenon marbles, with 'the warm tints of life' added; her 'coronet' of hair is jet black; her brown cheek is 'firm and rounded'; her lips 'full and red'; her eyes, 'large and dark'. One can understand Stephen's initial impression: 'An alarming amount of devil there'. Her effect on him is accented by contrast with the slim, neat prettiness of Lucy Deane, who has the fair skin and blonde curls of the true Dodsons. Lucy tells Maggie plainly that she is not engaged to Stephen; indeed, she doesn't want even to think of being married soon. Surely, sound instinct not evasiveness underlies Stephen's delay in asking her.

The critics have treated Stephen harshly. They call him a

provincial coxcomb, a mere hairdresser's block, a disagreeable vulgarian, an insensitive egotist, a cur beneath the notice of any man's horsewhip, an aggressive person of the narcissistic type, and other unflattering names. They object to his open contempt for the Tullivers, though nothing he had heard about the paranoid miller or his addle-pated wife could have given him a favourable opinion of either of them. Of course Stephen is provincial. So is Maggie, whose social experience has been limited to a year or two of boarding school with Lucy at Laceham and about two years as governess in a third-class schoolroom. To assume that she is too good for Stephen or that she ought to be disgusted by him disregards the careful values of George Eliot's delineation. Stephen has done some serious reading like Buckland's Bridgewater treatise on geology and theology. He has good taste in music that includes both Purcell and *The Beggar's Opera*. Compared with the bookish Philip he seems rather flippant in intellectual interest, but the bantering chatter is heard only when Lucy and Philip are with them. In simple biological terms Stephen is a better mate for Maggie than Philip or the silly red-headed young Torry with his ridiculous eye-glass, the only other eligible males St Ogg's can offer. Stephen is tall, has long legs, strong firm hands, 'a square forehead with short dark-brown hair standing erect with a slight wave at the end like a thick crop of corn, and a half-ardent, half-sarcastic glance from under his well-marked horizontal eyebrows'. Physically, he and Maggie are admirably matched, as George Eliot makes clear in Chapter 45, 'Illustrating the Laws of Attraction'.

Bulwer Lytton, an authority on coxcombs and dandies of the 1830s, took no exception to Stephen, not even mentioning the 'diamond ring, attar of roses, and air of *nonchalant* leisure' that curl the nostrils of democratic readers today, unaware that in those days gentlemen did not work. But Lytton was seriously concerned about Maggie's breach of social decorum by falling in love:

> The *indulgence* of such a sentiment for the affianced of a friend under whose roof she was, was a treachery and a meanness according to the Ethics of Art, and nothing can afterwards lift the character into the same hold on us.

Writing to John Blackwood, George Eliot denied Lytton's charge:

Maggie's position towards Stephen is too vital a part of my whole conception and purpose for me to be converted to the condemnation of it. If I am wrong there – if I did not really know what my heroine would feel and do under the circumstances in which I deliberately placed her, I ought not to have written this book at all, but quite a different book, if any. If the ethics of art do not admit the truthful presentation of a character essentially noble but liable to great error – error that is anguish to its own nobleness – *then*, it seems to me, the ethics of art are too narrow, and must be widened to correspond with a widening psychology.

Her friend Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* (1855) had related psychology to evolution. On reading Darwin's *Origin of Species*, which was published in November 1859, while she was in the middle of *The Mill on the Floss*, George Eliot predicted that 'it will have a great effect in the scientific world, causing a thorough and open discussion of a question about which people have hitherto felt timid.' Though there are no direct allusions to Darwin in *The Mill on the Floss*, an extraordinary number of references to animals appear: horses, donkeys, bulls, lambs, seven or eight clearly characterized dogs, kittens, rabbits, fowl of every sort, fish, rats, ferrets, snakes, toads, snails, spiders, bears, boars, and wolves. There are also many technical details of natural history garnered from her work with Lewes on *Sea-side Studies*: the rock-boring mollusc; the seed with hooks that cling to unreceptive surfaces; the beaver that built a nest far from the water on the top floor of a London house; the thumb, which makes the difference between man and monkey; the 'superior power of misery which distinguishes the human being, and places him at a proud distance from the most melancholy chimpanzee'. In the rival attractions that Philip and Stephen exert on Maggie we may perhaps recognize the 'struggle between the males' that Darwin called Sexual Selection.

In this permissive age it is difficult to realize the prudery of the 1860s regarding sex. The custom of reading aloud to the family, the proliferation of shilling magazines, and the dominance of the circulating library effectively banished from fiction the mention of anything that could bring a blush to the cheek of the 'Young Person'. The love of Maggie and Stephen, which today seems to have been treated too timidly, was assailed by contemporary reviewers as 'a gross passion much more akin to lust than love', and 'a detailed unlikely picture of animal feelings, far less suited

to ordinary readers than the superficial coarseness of Joseph Andrews'. Another complained of its lingering 'on the description of the physical sensations that accompany the meeting of hearts in love. . . . There are emotions over which we ought to throw a veil.' And another, 'The picture of passion . . . is one which had better never have been set before us with so much plainness.' Bertrand Russell's mother, four years before her marriage, was permitted to read only the first half of *The Mill on the Floss*. 'I should have thought Maggie would turn out very well when she was older,' she wrote to her brother, 'but I am told that she is so wicked.'

Ironically, it is Lucy and Philip who unwittingly send Maggie and Stephen off in the boat alone. Stephen persuaded her to come by merely looking into her eyes, and she came without a word of protest. Neither of them had the faintest notion of an elopement; the idea of marriage did not occur to Stephen until they had passed Luckreth. Then he was truly contrite. His plan to go on to Scotland and marry seemed the most honourable and practical course they could take. He argued earnestly that 'the feeling which draws us to each other is too strong to be overcome; that natural law surmounts every other'. But he cannot convince Maggie; she steadfastly refuses to consider any 'future that will break the ties of the past'. In this subjection to the past one critic sees evidence of a Freudian fixation on her family that would have prevented Maggie from ever marrying anyone.[3] Another traces her behaviour throughout the book to anality, the Freudian doctrine of infantile concern with excretion.[4] Still another detects an unhealthy death-wish that causes her 'long suicide'.[5] One psychiatric study casts Maggie as a neurotic with a morbid dependency on her brother, and attributes her involvement with Stephen to a suppressed desire for revenge against Tom and a vindictive triumph over Lucy.[6] The most detailed analysis finds

[3] William R. Steinhoff, 'Intent and Fulfillment in the Ending of *The Mill on the Floss*', in *The Image of the Work: Essays in Criticism* by B. H. Lehman and others, 1955, pp. 231–51.

[4] Michael Steig, 'Anality in *The Mill on the Floss*', *Novel, A Forum on Fiction*, 5, 1971, pp. 42–53.

[5] Elizabeth Ermarth, 'Maggie Tulliver's Long Suicide', *Studies in English Literature*, 14, 1974, pp. 587–601.

[6] Bernard J. Paris, 'The Inner Conflicts of Maggie Tulliver: A Horneyan Analysis', *Centennial Review*, 13, 1969, pp. 166–99.

the organizing principle of the whole novel in a mutual 'unconscious incestuous passion between Maggie and Tom'; his youthful scoldings of Maggie gratify her 'desire for punishment', and the violence of his denunciations of Philip and Stephen is rooted in his 'unconscious sexual rivalry' with them for his sister's love. Their final embrace in the flood is 'equivalent with the passionate "death" of the sexual orgasm'.[7]

Some of these writers are tempted to extend their exploration of Maggie to the author herself, who was the first English novelist to penetrate deeply into psychology. But, as David Smith admits, 'One can only speculate about Eliot's own erotic obsessions.' Though she wrote on the title-page of *The Mill on the Floss* 'In their death they were not divided', in their life she and her brother Isaac had for nearly two years been most unhappily divided. In 1857 when the *Scenes of Clerical Life* were appearing in *Blackwood's Magazine*, she wrote to tell him she hoped he would be glad to learn that she had changed her name and had a husband to take care of her in the world. Outraged that his sister, now thirty-eight years old, whom he had left lonely and unregarded, should have taken this step without consulting him, Isaac gave her letter to the family solicitor to answer, and for twenty-three years, until her marriage to John Walter Cross in 1880, addressed not a single word to her. As she relived her childhood in writing her novel, his cold rejection rankled bitterly in her mind. Little Maggie's plea: 'O Tom, please forgive me – *I can't bear it* – *I will always be* good – always remember things – do love me – please, dear Tom!' is an obvious appeal to Isaac's old affection. One would give a good deal to know his feelings on reading it.

Tom plays so slight a part in the last two books that we are surprised at his prominence in the final tableau. George Eliot explained that the epic breadth into which she was beguiled by love of her subject in the first two volumes 'caused a want of proportionate fulness in the treatment of the third'. There are a few hints that Tom, who gave Lucy the black spaniel she was so fond of, might have emerged as her lover. Maggie's influence in deepening Stephen's character could have been more adequately treated. One can only deplore that glimpse of him in the Conclusion visiting her grave 'with a sweet face beside him – but

[7] David Smith, '"In their death they were not divided": The Form of Illicit Passion in *The Mill on the Floss*', *Literature and Psychology*, 15, 1965, pp. 144–62.

that was years after'. Even with added space it is difficult to believe that the tragic ending could have been made satisfactory. The flood was not an afterthought to sweep away Maggie and her problems, but the first element George Eliot fixed upon when she began to write the story. In January 1859 at the British Museum she copied from the *Annual Register* reports of inundations, many details of which appear in the final chapter: a vessel stranded far out over the fields, the bridge broken down, the rescue from an upper-storey window. She drew Dorlcote Mill from memories of the mill at Arbury, close to her birthplace. However, the little stream of water from the Hall Pond that turned its wheel could never run deep enough to drown Maggie and Tom. When Volume I was nearly finished, after careful search George Eliot found what she thought a suitable setting on the River Trent where the Idle joins it. But over the wide plain and level fens with no steep hills to confine it the flood could not have risen above the hedgerows to the first floor of Dorlcote if the entire twenty-five-inch annual rainfall of Lincolnshire had dropped on St Ogg's in one night. F. R. Leavis found 'no symbolic or metaphorical value' in the flood. 'It is only the dreamed-of perfect accident that gives us the dreamed-of heroic act' of her rescuing Tom to 'provide a gloriously tragic curtain'.[8] The frequent foreshadowings scattered through the book warn us that death by water is to be Maggie's fate, yet we cannot feel satisfied that it was inevitable. Henry Crabb Robinson was right in thinking that the fault lay in using the natural event of a flood rather than some direct act of Maggie or Tom to bring about the catastrophe. George Eliot, who had been reading the Greek dramatists, conceived of Maggie as the protagonist of a modern tragedy, a noble heroine, compromised by one impulsive mistake that placed her in conflict with those she loved best. Whatever doubt may be felt about Maggie's death, her life will endure for all time among the finest creations of the English novel.

[8] *The Great Tradition*, 1948, pp. 45–6.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

THE manuscript of *The Mill on the Floss* is in the British Library (Add. MS. 34023–25). Four editions published in George Eliot's lifetime are available to the editor. For the first (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 3 vols, 1860) she corrected page proof, now at the Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, but she saw none for the second edition (2 vols, 1860). In preparation for the third (1 vol., 1862) she corrected a copy of the second (also at the University of Texas) and sent it to Blackwood with the note that she hoped all future editions of the book would be printed from it. The stereotyped plates of the third were used for the illustrated edition (1867) and many later issues. The fourth or Cabinet edition (2 vols, 1878), the last published in George Eliot's lifetime, went through the press during George Henry Lewes's final illness without her seeing proof. Accordingly, the third edition, collated with the others and with the manuscript, was used for the Clarendon edition (Oxford: 1980) and for this World's Classics text. The most frequent emendations are in the spelling of words in *-ise*. George Eliot, like Dickens, the Brontës, Thackeray, Trollope, Meredith, and others, spelt *apologize, criticize*, and so forth with the *z*. But in 1847 Blackwood adopted the *-ise* style and changed George Eliot's spelling to conform. Though the *Oxford English Dictionary* sanctioned *-ize* as correct, its quotations from the novels represent these authors as using the *-ise* form, which they never did. Following the Clarendon edition this text restores George Eliot's original spelling where it conforms with that of the *OED*.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

THE primary sources are *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals*, ed. John W. Cross, 3 vols, 1885, and *The George Eliot Letters*, 9 vols, 1954–78, ed. Gordon S. Haight, whose *George Eliot. A Biography* was published in 1968 with a revised paperback edition in 1978. For bibliographies consult the *New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, vol. 3, 1969, pp. 899–912 and the sections on George Eliot by W. J. Harvey in *Victorian Fiction. A Guide to Research*, ed. Lionel Stevenson, 1964, pp. 294–323, and by U. C. Knoepflmacher in *Victorian Fiction. A Second Guide to Research*, ed. George H. Ford, 1978, pp. 234–73. In addition to the few works noted in the Introduction, some of the most useful criticisms of *The Mill on the Floss* are found in Joan Bennett, *George Eliot: Her Mind and Art*, 1948; Barbara Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot*, 1959; paperback ed. 1967; and her *Critical Essays on George Eliot*, 1970, especially pp. 42–58; W. J. Harvey, *The Art of George Eliot*, 1961; U. C. Knoepflmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels. The Limits of Realism*, 1968; F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, 1948; George Levine, 'Intelligence as Deception', *PMLA*, 80, 1965, pp. 402–409; David Molstad, '*The Mill on the Floss* and *Antigone*', *PMLA*, 85, 1970, pp. 527–31; Bernard J. Paris, *Experiments in Life: George Eliot's Quest for Values*, 1965; Thomas Pinney, 'The Authority of the Past in George Eliot's Novels', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 21, 1966, pp. 131–47; Leslie Stephen, *George Eliot*, 1902 (English Men of Letters series); Jerome Thale, *The Novels of George Eliot*, 1959; Alexander Welsh, 'George Eliot and the Romance', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 14, 1959–60, pp. 241–54. Reviews of *The Mill on the Floss* are reprinted in *The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Carroll, 1971; *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 1965; and *George Eliot and Her Readers*, ed. John Holmstrom and Laurence Lerner, 1966.

CONTENTS

A CHRONOLOGY OF GEORGE ELIOT

1819 22 Nov.	Born Mary Anne Evans at Arbury, Warwickshire
1825–7	At Miss Lathom's School, Attleborough
1828–32	At Mrs Wallington's School, Nuneaton
1832–5	At the Miss Franklins' School, Coventry
1836 3 Feb.	Her mother Mrs Robert Evans dies
1841 Mar.	Moves with her father to Foleshill, Coventry
1842 Jan.–May	Refuses to go to Church
1844–6	Translates Strauss's *Life of Jesus*, 3 vols
1849	Father dies; GE spends winter at Geneva
1851 8 Jan.	Goes to live at 142 Strand, London
1852–4	Edits the *Westminster Review*
1854	Translates Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*
1854 20 July	Goes to Germany with G. H. Lewes
1854–6	Writes articles for *Westminster Review*
1856	Lewes encourages her to write fiction
1857 Jan.	'Amos Barton' begins in *Blackwood's Magazine*
1858 Jan.	*Scenes of Clerical Life*, 2 vols, published
1859 12 Jan.	Studies floods for *The Mill on the Floss*
1859 1 Feb.	*Adam Bede*, 3 vols, published
1859 Sep.	Finds site for Dorlcote Mill on the Trent
1860 4 Apr.	*The Mill on the Floss*, 3 vols, published
1861 1 Apr	*Silas Marner* published
1862 27 Feb.	Offered £10,000 for *Romola*
1862 July	*Romola* begins in *Cornhill Magazine*
1863 6 July	*Romola*, 3 vols, published
1863 21 Aug.	Buys the Priory, 21 North Bank, Regent's Park
1866 15 June	*Felix Holt*, 3 vols, published
1868 29 Apr.	*The Spanish Gypsy* published
1871 1 Dec.	*Middlemarch*, Book I, published
1872 1 Dec.	Concluded with Book VIII; published, 4 vols.
1874 May	*The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems* published
1876 Feb.–Sep.	*Daniel Deronda* published in 8 Books

1878	30 Nov.	Lewes dies
1879	June	*Impressions of Theophrastus Such* published
1880	6 May	Marries John Walter Cross
1880	22 Dec.	Dies; buried in Highgate Cemetery