

# Adam Bede

## Introduction

The name "George Eliot" was the pseudonym<sup>(pen name)</sup> of Mary Ann Evans. Eliot was born in 1819 at the estate of her father's employer in Chilvers Coton, Warwickshire, England. Because of her father's important role as the manager, Eliot was given permission to spend time in the estate's library, where she expanded her knowledge by reading. As a young girl she was educated at the local school and then at boarding school. Eliot was deeply religious throughout her childhood and adolescence because of her pious family background and the influence of the evangelical Maria Lewes, one of her instructors at boarding school.

When Eliot was seventeen, her mother died and Eliot came home to care for her father. In 1841, Eliot and her father moved to Coventry<sup>(Historical Cathedral city)</sup>. While living in Coventry, Eliot met Charles and Caroline Bray, who led her to question her faith by introducing her to new religious and political ideas. Eliot began reading rationalist works in 1841, which prompted her to reject formalized religion. She also became acquainted with intellectuals in Coventry who broadened her mind. To her father's dismay, she stopped going to church. This renunciation put a strain on their relationship until his death in 1849. Eliot identified herself as a rationalist for the remainder of her life. In 1844, she was commissioned to translate David Strauss's *Life of Jesus* from German into English. She completed the translation in 1846. After traveling abroad in Europe for two years, she returned to England and became acquainted with a group of rationalists, among them John Chapman.

In 1851, Eliot became the assistant editor at Chapman's *Westminster Review*, a position that was important both for her career and her personal life. Through her work on the *Review*, she met several prominent philosophers and theologians of the time, including Herbert Spencer, who introduced her to George Henry Lewes, a drama critic and philosopher. The pair fell in love but could not marry because Lewes already had a wife, from whom he was estranged. In a rather scandalous move for the age, Eliot and Lewes later lived together in 1854, even though Lewes was married and could not divorce his wife. At this point in her life, Eliot was still primarily interested in philosophy, but Lewes encouraged her to focus on fiction. Because writing was considered a male profession, Eliot chose a male pseudonym, George Eliot. Under the pen name, Eliot published her first collection of short stories in 1853, bringing immediate acclaim from critics as prestigious as Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray. Eliot began working on *Adam Bede* on October 22, 1857, and completed the novel on November 16, 1858. The book was published in 1859, and its success led a number of imposters to claim authorship. In response, Eliot asserted herself as the true author, causing quite a stir in a society that still regarded women as incapable of serious writing.

Eliot's personal life likely influenced *Adam Bede* in several ways. First, the portrayal of Methodists as a positive social force possibly stems from Eliot's own rejection of some organized religions. While Methodism is an organized religion, Eliot was particularly drawn to the religion's belief that salvation is possible for all people through personal effort. Second, the character of Dinah, who is strong and powerful beyond normal social conventions, is perhaps inspired by Eliot's own willingness to step outside normal social convention in her common-law marriage to Lewes and her novel writing. Finally, the sardonic tone that the narrator takes toward social convention and the "lady reader" suggests a rejection of tradition. Such a rejection fits with Eliot's life, in which she was criticized for