



Silas Marner

BY GEORGE ELIOT



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Notes

What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

George Eliot, the pseudonym for Mary Ann (Marian) Evans, was born in 1819. She chose to use a pseudonym to ensure that her writings were taken seriously. Even though there were many contemporary female writers, Eliot did not want to be known for writing romances, as some of the others were. In addition, Eliot was romantically involved with George Henry Lewes—a married man. She desired secrecy and wanted to keep her personal life as private as possible. Lewes died in 1880, and Eliot then married John Cross, an American.

As a child, Eliot attended boarding schools that were strictly evangelical. These strong Christian influences led Eliot to decide to live without organized religion, and despite her family's disapproval, she remained agnostic for the rest of her life.

George Eliot is renowned for being an extremely sympathetic Victorian author whose use of realism and irony show her brilliance. Her writing is eloquent and clear, and her characters are developed with compassion and vigilance. Among her other writings, Eliot is also known for *Middlemarch*, *Adam Bede*, and *The Mill on the Floss*; all of which incorporate childhood memories and her experiences with different aspects of religion. *Silas Marner* was specifically written to express her values as a mature adult and to depict the beauty in relationships.

George Eliot lived an accomplished life, and her stories have endured throughout the ages and have become classics with modern readers. She died of kidney complications on December 22, 1880.

Pointers

R E A D I N G P O I N T E R S

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

Technique:

Eliot uses various rhetorical techniques throughout *Silas Marner*, which allow her characters to be better understood, in addition to giving readers a clear illustration of her themes and ideas.

Irony: Pay close attention to the irony used in specific situations, especially concerning the Cass family and Silas himself.

Metaphor: Metaphors are used throughout, but are more prominent in the beginning. Be aware of Eliot's description of Silas. What is he compared to? How is the comparison relevant as the story progresses?

Speech: Eliot develops her characters in numerous ways. Among other obvious distinctions, the characters' manner of speaking or dialect makes each one unique, while also adding to the tone of the scene or supplying an additional element to an underlying motif or theme. Pay close attention to different characters and how they speak. How does Squire Cass's speech sound? What is different or uncharacteristic about Pricilla's manner of speaking? Why does she speak in this way?

Themes:

Industrialization's negative impact: In Lantern Yard, Silas's hometown, a factory is built that is dirty, gloomy, and full of infection and disease. This rise in industrialization completely demolishes all the town's tradition, in addition to erasing the memory of how life used to be. The industrialization of Lantern Yard and ultimately, its disappearance, is also symbolic of Silas's personal triumphs: he has moved out of the past and eventually finds happiness despite the sadness he once experienced in Lantern Yard.



PART ONE

CHAPTER I

SILAS MARNER, THE WEAVER OF RAVELOE.

IN THE DAYS when the spinning wheels hummed busily in the farm-houses—and even great ladies, clothed in silk and thread-lace, had their toy spinning wheels of polished oak—there might be seen, in districts far away among the lanes or deep in the bosom of the hills, certain pallid, undersized men, who, by the side of the brawny country folk, looked like the remnants of a disinherited race. The shepherd's dog barked fiercely when one of these alien-looking men appeared on the upland, dark against the early winter sunset; for what dog likes a figure bent under a heavy bag?—and these pale men rarely stirred abroad without that mysterious burden. The shepherd himself, though he had good reason to believe that the bag held nothing but flaxen thread, or else the long rolls of strong linen spun from that thread, was not quite sure that this trade of weaving, indispensable though it was, could be carried on entirely without the help of the Evil One.† In that far-off time superstition clung easily round every person or thing that was at all unwonted, or even intermittent and occasional merely, like the visits of the peddler or the knife-grinder. No one

†Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

knew where wandering men had their homes or their origin; and how was a man to be explained unless you at least knew somebody who knew his father and mother? To the peasants of old times, the world outside their own direct experience was a region of vagueness and mystery; to their untraveled thought a state of wandering was a conception as dim as the winter life of the swallows that came back with the spring; and even a settler, if he came from distant parts, hardly ever ceased to be viewed with a remnant of distrust, which would have prevented any surprise if a long course of inoffensive conduct on his part had ended in the commission of a crime, especially if he had any reputation for knowledge or showed any skill in handicraft. All cleverness, whether in the rapid use of that difficult instrument the tongue, or in some other art unfamiliar to villagers, was in itself suspicious; honest folk, born and bred in a visible manner, were mostly not over wise or clever—at least, not beyond such a matter as knowing the signs of the weather; and the process by which rapidity and dexterity of any kind were acquired was so wholly hidden that they partook of the nature of conjuring. In this way it came to pass that those scattered linen weavers—emigrants from the town into the country—were to the last regarded as aliens by their rustic neighbors, and usually contracted the eccentric habits which belong to a state of loneliness.

In the early years of this century, such a linen weaver, named Silas Marner, worked at his vocation in a stone cottage that stood among the nutty hedgerows near the village of Raveloe, and not far from the edge of a deserted stone pit. The questionable sound of Silas's loom, so unlike the natural cheerful trotting of the winnowing machine or the simpler rhythm of the flail, had a half-fearful fascination for the Raveloe boys, who would often leave off their nutting or birds'-nesting to peep in at the window of the stone cottage, counterbalancing a certain awe at the mysterious action of the loom, by a pleasant sense of scornful superiority, drawn from the mockery of its alternating noises, along with the bent, tread-mill attitude of the weaver. But sometimes it happened that Marner, pausing to adjust an irregularity in his thread, became aware of the small scoundrels, and, though chary of his time, he liked their intrusion so ill that he would descend from his loom, and, opening the door, would fix on them a gaze that was always enough to make them take to their legs in terror. For how was it possible to believe that those large brown protuberant eyes in Silas Marner's pale face really saw nothing very distinctly that was not close to them, and not rather that their dreadful stare could dart cramp, or rickets, or a wry mouth[†] at any boy who happened to be in the rear? They had, perhaps, heard their fathers and mothers hint that Silas Marner could cure folks' rheumatism if he had a mind, and add, still more darkly, that if you could only speak the devil fair enough,[†] he might save you the cost of the doctor. Such strange, lingering

echoes of the old demon-worship might perhaps even now be caught by the diligent listener among the gray-haired peasantry; for the rude mind with difficulty associates the ideas of power and benignity. A shadowy conception of power that by much persuasion can be induced to refrain from inflicting harm is the shape most easily taken by the sense of the Invisible[†] in the minds of men who have always been pressed close by primitive wants, and to whom a life of hard toil has never been illuminated by any enthusiastic religious faith. To them pain and mishap present a far wider range of possibilities than gladness and enjoyment; their imagination is almost barren of the images that feed desire and hope, but is all overgrown by recollections that are a perpetual pasture to fear. "Is there anything you can fancy that you would like to eat?" I once said to an old laboring man, who was in his last illness, and who had refused all the food his wife had offered him. "No," he answered, "I've never been used to nothing but common victual, and I can't eat that." Experience had bred no fancies in him that could raise the phantasm of appetite.

And Raveloe was a village where many of the old echoes lingered, undrowned by new voices. Not that it was one of those barren parishes lying on the outskirts of civilization, inhabited by meager sheep and thinly scattered shepherds: on the contrary, it lay in the rich central plain of what we are pleased to call Merry England, and held farms which, speaking from a spiritual point of view, paid highly-desirable tithes.[†] But it was nestled in a snug, well-wooded hollow, quite an hour's journey on horseback from any turnpike, where it was never reached by the vibrations of the coach-horn, or of public opinion. It was an important-looking village, with a fine old church and large churchyard in the heart of it, and two or three large brick-and-stone homesteads, with well-walled orchards and ornamental weather-cocks, standing close upon the road, and lifting more imposing fronts than the rectory, which peeped from among the trees on the other side of the churchyard:—a village which showed at once the summits of its social life, and told the practiced eye that there was no great park and manor-house in the vicinity, but that there were several chiefs in Raveloe who could farm badly quite at their ease, drawing enough money from their bad farming, in those war times,[†] to live in a rollicking fashion, and keep a jolly Christmas, Whitsun, and Easter tide.[†]

It was fifteen years since Silas Marner had first come to Raveloe;[†] he was then simply a pallid young man, with prominent, short-sighted brown eyes, whose appearance would have had nothing strange for people of average culture and experience, but for the villagers near whom he had come to settle it had mysterious peculiarities, which corresponded with the exceptional nature of his occupation and his advent from an unknown region called "North'ard." So had his way of life: he invited no comers to step across

his door-sill, and he never strolled into the village to drink a pint at the Rainbow[†] or to gossip at the wheelwright's; he sought no man or woman, save for the purposes of his calling, or in order to supply himself with necessaries; and it was soon clear to the Raveloe lasses that he would never urge one of them to accept him against her will—quite as if he had heard them declare that they would never marry a dead man come to life again. This view of Marner's personality was not without another ground than his pale face and unexampled eyes; for Jem Rodney, the mole catcher, averred that one evening as he was returning homeward he saw Silas Marner leaning against a stile with a heavy bag on his back, instead of resting the bag on the stile, as a man in his senses would have done; and that, on coming up to him, he saw that Marner's eyes were set like a dead man's, and he spoke to him, and shook him, and his limbs were stiff, and his hands clutched the bag as if they'd been made of iron; but just as he had made up his mind that the weaver was dead, he came all right again, like, as you might say, in the winking of an eye, and said "Good-night," and walked off. All this Jem swore he had seen, more by token that it was the very day he had been mole catching on Squire Cass's land, down by the old saw-pit. Some said Marner must have been in a "fit," a word which seemed to explain things otherwise incredible; but the argumentative Mr. Macey, clerk of the parish, shook his head, and asked if anybody was ever known to go off in a fit[†] and not fall down. A fit was a stroke, wasn't it? and it was in the nature of a stroke to partly take away the use of a man's limbs and throw him on the parish, if he'd got no children to look to. No, no; it was no stroke that would let a man stand on his legs, like a horse between the shafts, and then walk off as soon as you can say "Gee!" But there might be such a thing as a man's soul being loose from his body, and going out and in, like a bird out of its nest and back; and that was how folks got over-wise, for they went to school in this shell-less state to those who could teach them more than their neighbors could learn with their five senses and the parson. And where did Master Marner get his knowledge of herbs from—and charms, too, if he liked to give them away? Jem Rodney's story was no more than what might have been expected by anybody who had seen how Marner had cured Sally Oates, and made her sleep like a baby, when her heart had been beating enough to burst her body for two months and more, while she had been under the doctor's care. He might cure more folks if he would; but he was worth speaking fair, if it was only to keep him from doing you a mischief.

It was partly to this vague fear that Marner was indebted for protecting him from the persecution that his singularities might have drawn upon him, but still more to the fact that, the old linen weaver in the neighboring parish of Tarley being dead, his handicraft made him a highly welcome settler to the richer housewives of the district, and even to the more provident

cottagers, who had their little stock of yarn at the year's end. Their sense of his usefulness would have counteracted any repugnance or suspicion which was not confirmed by a deficiency in the quality or the tale of the cloth he wove for them. And the years had rolled on without producing any change in the impressions of the neighbors concerning Marner, except the change from novelty to habit. At the end of fifteen years the Raveloe men said just the same things about Silas Marner as at the beginning; they did not say them quite so often, but they believed them much more strongly when they did say them. There was only one important addition which the years had brought: it was that Master Marner had laid by a fine sight of money somewhere, and that he could buy up "bigger men" than himself.

But while opinion concerning him had remained nearly stationary, and his daily habits had presented scarcely any visible change, Marner's inward life had been a history and a metamorphosis, as that of every fervid nature must be when it has fled or been condemned to solitude. His life before he came to Raveloe had been filled with the movement, the mental activity, and the close fellowship, which, in that day as in this, marked the life of an artisan early incorporated in a narrow religious sect, where the poorest layman has the chance of distinguishing himself by gifts of speech, and has, at the very least, the weight of a silent voter in the government of his community. Marner was highly thought of in that little hidden world, known to itself as the church assembling in Lantern Yard; he was believed to be a young man of exemplary life and ardent faith, and a peculiar interest had been centered in him ever since he had fallen, at a prayer-meeting, into a mysterious rigidity and suspension of consciousness, which, lasting for an hour or more, had been mistaken for death. To have sought a medical explanation for this phenomenon would have been held by Silas himself, as well as by his minister and fellow-members, a willful self-exclusion from the spiritual significance that might lie therein. Silas was evidently a brother selected for a peculiar discipline; and though the effort to interpret this discipline was discouraged by the absence, on his part, of any spiritual vision during his outward trance, yet it was believed by himself and others that its effect was seen in an accession of light and fervor. A less truthful man than he might have been tempted into the subsequent creation of a vision in the form of resurgent memory; a less sane man might have believed in such a creation; but Silas was both sane and honest, though, as with many honest and fervent men, culture had not defined any channels for his sense of mystery, and so it spread itself over the proper pathway of inquiry and knowledge. He had inherited from his mother some acquaintance with medicinal herbs and their preparation,—a little store of wisdom which she had imparted to him as a solemn bequest,—but of late years he had had doubts about the lawfulness of applying this knowledge, believing that herbs could have no efficacy

Glossary

Chapter I.

the Evil One – the devil, Satan

“cramp, or rickets, or a wry mouth” – many believed that certain people had the ability to curse people or cause various other problems; Silas’ “dreadful stare,” caused by his vision, is sometimes interpreted as a symbol of evil.

“speak the devil fair enough” – having the devil help a person; this superstition would include somehow getting on Lucifer’s “good side” or through a person selling his or her soul to the devil.

the Invisible – the supernatural being that people believe exists

tithes – one-tenth; ten percent of household earnings in many communities was given to the church.

war times – a reference to the war with France that ran from 1793–1815

Christmas, Whitsun, and Easter tide – three church festivals

Raveloe – a different name for the city of Bulkington in Warwickshire, England; Eliot was a local from this town.

Rainbow – an inn; because literacy rates were so low at the time, many inns were marked by signs, such as rainbows, which would be recognizable to those who could not read.

“In a fit” – Marner was actually having cataleptic seizures, but the rural people understood these only as “fits”; catalepsy, a nervous system disorder, is characterized by awkward facial contortions, distorted postures, and bodily rigidity that have no connection to any outward stimulus.

David and Jonathan – from the Bible; these were biblical characters who were inseparably close friends.

Assurance of Salvation – a reference to the biblical concept of being certain of entering heaven at death

cataleptic fit – caused by epilepsy, during which Marner’s limbs became rigid, frozen in place, and he became unaware of activity around him (see note “*In a fit*” above)

more like...divine favor – Some people inferred that Silas’ cataleptic seizures are from Satan, while others believe that they are from God.

prosecution was forbidden to Christians – the Bible encourages Christians not to sue one another

drawing lots – used in the Bible to make a decision; there are many references to drawing lots in the Old and New Testaments (see Jonah 1:7 as an example).

Vocabulary

Chapter I.

accession – an increase, improvement
advent – a beginning, appearance
agitation – an annoyance
ardent – passionate, intense
ascertaining – finding, identifying
averred – strongly claimed
benignity – innocence
bequest – a gift
blasphemy – impiety, heresy
brawny – muscular
chary – cautious
colloquies – everyday conversations
conception – an idea
conjuring – magic
culpable – guilty
efficacy – effectiveness
exhorted – strongly encouraged
fervid – devout, earnest
fervor – intensity
hedgerows – a row of bushes forming a hedge
imperativeness – insistence
impetuously – hastily, carelessly
impressible – open, receptive
incorporated – merged, involved
indispensable – vital, needed
induced – tempted, convinced
intermittent – irregular, periodic
jarred – disagreed
moithered – confused
pallid – pale
perpetual – constant
phantasm – a delusion
protuberant – bulging
provident – thrifty, frugal
queries – questions
rectory – a parish priest's or minister's house
render – to give
repugnance – disgust, repulsion, distaste
resurgent – renewed, revived
sanctioned – approved
self-complacent – self-satisfied, content
singularities – differences, peculiarities