

SILAS MARNER

by George Eliot



THE AUTHOR

Mary Anne Evans (1819-1880) was born in Warwickshire, England, the youngest daughter of an estate agent (after whom Caleb Garth in her classic *Middlemarch* seems to have been modeled). She was raised as an Evangelical Protestant, but in her early twenties she turned away from the faith of her parents and rejected organized religion, becoming a freethinker. She even translated David Friedrich Strauss' radical *Life of Jesus* and Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* into English, and thus had an impact on the growth of theological liberalism in England.

After spending several years writing for a radical political journal, she began living with married writer George Henry Lewes, creating a scandal in English society. She continued to live with him until his death in 1878. It was with Lewes' encouragement that she began to write works of fiction under the pseudonym of George Eliot. Her first full-length novel, *Adam Bede*, published in 1859, was widely acclaimed, as were its successors, *The Mill on the Floss* and *Silas Marner*. After trying her hand at historical and political novels, she returned to the environment she knew best with her classic *Middlemarch*, published in serial form in 1871-2. In 1880, she married John Walter Cross, who was twenty years her junior. She died two months later.

George Eliot is best remembered as a writer who possessed peerless insight into human character. She understood and communicated with great skill the motives and intents of the heart, and demonstrated herself to be a shrewd observer of the English class system and its fine distinctions. Her use of the English language demonstrated her to be a fine stylist, and her wide-ranging knowledge of history, literature, art, and science placed her in a realm rarely visited by women in Victorian England. In fact, her writings were often criticized by her contemporaries because women were expected to confine themselves to the sphere of vapid romance.

PLOT SUMMARY

The narrative of George Eliot's *Silas Marner* begins with the young weaver, who is also a religious mystic subject to seizures, deeply involved in a small evangelical community. Within that community, he is betrayed by his best friend, who steals money and frames Silas for the deed. By means of the casting of lots, Silas is judged guilty and ejected from the community. His betrayer then courts and marries Silas' former beloved, who broke off with him after the theft.

Silas then moves to the village of Raveloe, becoming a recluse and miser. Money, for him, takes the place of the God in whom he could no longer believe. His money is his only love, and he spends each evening counting and caressing his gold coins. Meanwhile, the villagers avoid him as someone strange and different, some even believing that he is bewitched.

After fifteen years of hoarding a considerable amount of gold, Marner's fortune is stolen by Dunstan Cass, the younger son of the local aristocrat, in order to pay a debt he owed his father. Dunstan's older brother Godfrey had given him rent money from a local farmer to pay the debt, which Dunstan had squandered; Dunstan had then decided to raise the money by selling Godfrey's horse, but he carelessly killed the horse before he got it to market; desperate for funds, he then stole Marner's gold. He still never repaid the debt, because he never returned home after the theft of the gold.

Godfrey, the older brother, had gotten involved in a secret marriage with Molly, a local barmaid, by whom he had had a child. Dunstan's threats to reveal this unwise alliance allowed him to bend Godfrey to his will; thus the incidents narrated above involving the money and the horse. Godfrey wishes to marry Nancy Lammeter, an aristocratic beauty, but cannot do so because of his prior marriage.

Later, the Cass family holds their annual New Year's Eve party. Molly decides to crash the party and demand recognition and support for her child. She is so weakened by drugs, however, that she passes out in the snow on the way to the Cass mansion, and dies from cold and exposure. The child wanders off, winding up in the nearby cottage of Silas Marner. Silas, believing the little girl is a replacement for his lost gold, adopts her and raises her as his own. Meanwhile, Godfrey, freed from obligations of wife and child, marries Nancy.

The narrative then jumps forward sixteen years. Godfrey, now the squire, and Nancy are happily married, but unable to have children. Silas and Eppie have become a happy little family, beloved by their neighbors and once again reconciled to the Church (though it took Silas some time to become accustomed to the strange practices of the Church of England, of which he knew nothing). When water is diverted for an irrigation project, Dunstan's body is found in the stone pit near Marner's cottage, along with the stolen gold. Godfrey confesses all to his wife; she forgives him, and they decide to attempt to adopt Eppie (who is, after all, Godfrey's real daughter). They show no consideration for the feelings of Silas or Eppie at this point, apparently assuming that anyone in her right mind would choose wealth over familial affection. Eppie, however, surprises them by turning down their offer. She remains with Silas (though the Cass family offers support whenever needed), and ultimately marries Aaron Winthrop, the son of the local wheelwright.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Silas Marner - A weaver who, after losing his faith, makes gold his idol. His life is transformed when a little girl, whom he subsequently adopts, wanders into his cottage after the death of her mother.
- William Dane - Marner's friend, who frames him for the theft of money and causes him to be expelled from the religious sect to which he belonged. Dane also woos and marries Sarah, Marner's beloved.
- Eppie - The unacknowledged daughter of Godfrey Cass, she wanders into Marner's cottage when her mother passes out in the snow. He raises her as his own, and she changes his life. When she reaches the age of sixteen, Godfrey tries to claim her and bring her into his family, but she refuses, choosing to remain with her adoptive father instead. At the end of the book, she marries Aaron Winthrop.
- Squire Cass - A gentleman of Raveloe, the father of Godfrey and Dunstan.
- Godfrey Cass - The elder son of Squire Cass, he foolishly contracts a marriage with Molly, a barmaid, by whom he has a child (Eppie). After Molly's death, he marries Nancy Lammeter, but the two are unable to have children. He tries to make Eppie his own, but she refuses to leave Silas.
- Dunstan Cass - Godfrey's younger brother, a scoundrel who wastes his father's money and blackmails Godfrey with knowledge of his secret marriage. He steals Marner's gold, but that same night falls into the stone pit and drowns. His body is discovered sixteen years later.
- Molly - A local barmaid to whom Godfrey Cass is secretly married; thus Eppie's mother. She decides to force Godfrey to acknowledge her, but dies in the snow on the way to the Cass estate.
- Nancy Lammeter - The daughter of a gentleman in the region, she is Godfrey's true love, whom he marries after Molly's death.
- Dolly Winthrop - Local wheelwright's wife who befriends Silas, becomes Eppie's godmother, and ultimately her mother-in-law.
- Aaron Winthrop - Dolly's son, who grows up as Eppie's playmate and ultimately marries her.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“He hated the thought of the past; there was nothing that called out his love and fellowship toward the strangers he had come amongst; the future was all dark, for there was no Unseen Love that cared for him. Thought was arrested by utter bewilderment, now its old narrow pathway was closed, and affection seemed to have died under the bruise that had fallen on its keenest nerves.” (p.20)

“”The yoke a man creates for himself by wrong-doing will breed hate in the kindest nature; and the good-humored, affectionate-hearted Godfrey Cass was fast becoming a bitter man, visited by cruel wishes, that seemed to enter, and depart, and enter again, like demons who had found in him a ready-garnished home.” (p.37)

“Our consciousness rarely registers the beginning of a growth within us any more than without us: there have been many circulations of the sap before we detect the smallest sign of the bud.” (p.62)

“The heap of gold seemed to glow and get larger beneath his agitated gaze. He leaned forward at last, and stretched forth his hand; but instead of the hard coin with the familiar resisting outline, his fingers encountered soft, warm curls.” (p.119)

“Godfrey felt a great throb; there was one terror in his mind at that moment: it was that the woman might *not* be dead. That was an evil terror - an ugly inmate to have found a nestling place in Godfrey’s kindly disposition; but no disposition is a security from evil wishes to a man whose happiness hangs on duplicity.” (p.123)

“As the child’s mind was growing into knowledge, his mind was growing into memory: as her life unfolded, his soul, long stupefied in a cold, narrow prison, was unfolding too, and trembling gradually into full consciousness.” (p.136)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Compare and contrast the moral transformations undergone by one character from each of George Eliot’s great novels, *Middlemarch* and *Silas Marner*. Which transformation was more credible? Which more satisfying to the reader? Why?
2. Both George Eliot’s *Silas Marner* and *Middlemarch* are critical of the British class system in general and the aristocracy in particular. Which book, in your opinion, presents a more effective critique? Support your opinion with specific incidents from both books.

3. George Eliot grew up in an evangelical Christian church, but turned away from the faith in which she had been raised when she reached adulthood. Both *Silas Marner* and *Middlemarch* present a negative view of evangelical religion, while speaking favorably of the more liberal, tolerant Latitudinarianism that then dominated the Church of England. Based on evidence from the two novels, what was there about the evangelical church that had disillusioned the budding author? Do you think the primary problem lay with the church, or with George Eliot herself? Why?
4. George Eliot's *Silas Marner* clearly depicts the nature of idolatry - once God is cast aside, money takes His place, and is given the same single-minded devotion. But the shift of the weaver's devotion from his gold to his adopted daughter is a bit more complex. Is his devotion to Eppie merely another form of idolatry, allowing her to fill a void in his life that only God should fill, or does his love for her turn him from idolatry altogether and back to the rightful object of his worship? Support your conclusion.
5. Evaluate the religion of Silas Marner. Is the weaver, either before his move to Raveloe or after his discovery of Eppie, a fair representation of Christian faith? Why or why not?
6. Discuss the significance of the protagonist's nearsightedness in George Eliot's *Silas Marner*. What role does it play in the plot? What is its symbolic contribution to the development of the themes of the story?
7. Compare and contrast the characters of Jane in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and Eppie in George Eliot's *Silas Marner*. What personality traits do these two female protagonists have in common, and in what ways are they different? Which character do you consider more admirable, and why?