

Silas Marner

George Eliot



About the author

George Eliot, one of the leading writers of the Victorian era, was born Mary Anne Evans in the British Midlands in 1819. She grew up the youngest of three children in a large, comfortable house. There was poverty all around them, however, and the contrast she saw between the rich and the poor features heavily in much of her work. Mary Anne was a gifted child and received a more thorough education than most girls did in those days. When her mother died in 1839, she returned home from school to look after her father and run the family home. Here she read widely and began to have serious doubts about her religious convictions. After her father died in 1849, Mary Anne moved to London and started to earn her living as a journalist. She worked as a translator and an editor for the *Westminster Review*, a free-thinking magazine. She came to novel-writing quite late, publishing her first full-length novel, *Adam Bede*, in 1859. It was immediately successful but led to much public gossip as to who the author of the book really was. At this time she was living with a married man, George Lewes, which constituted a scandalous arrangement at that time. Some say she took on her pen name to protect herself from malicious talk, although Mary Ann herself claimed that it was so that she would be taken seriously like male authors and not simply cast as a writer of romances as many women authors at that time were. She went on to write many more great works, including *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe* (1861) and *Middlemarch* (1871–2). She died in 1880 and is buried in Highgate Cemetery in London.

Summary

Silas Marner is a weaver who is wrongly accused by his 'best friend' of stealing money from the church. He loses all his faith in people and the church and moves to the small village of Raveloe. There, he lives an isolated life, weaving all day and counting the money he has made at night. He doesn't go to church or the village bar and the other villagers are suspicious of him. Silas makes a lot of money, however, and after some years he has a lot of gold and silver coins. One night, when Silas is out, the younger son of the village Squire steals the money and Silas is unhappier than ever. A few months later, a woman collapses in the snow and dies and her little girl wanders into Silas's cottage. Silas finds her, gives her the name 'Eppie' and decides to bring her up as his daughter. Now he is a happy man. Unknown to everyone, Eppie is in fact the secret child of the Squire's oldest son, Godfrey. When Eppie is eighteen, Godfrey reveals his secret to his wife. They have no children of their own and they try, unsuccessfully, to adopt Eppie. Although they offer her a life of wealth, Eppie loves 'her father', Silas, and prefers to live a simple life with him.

Chapters 1–3: Silas Marner is an honest, religious man, who is in love with a girl called Sarah. He loses everything, however, when his friend, William Dane, betrays him. William manages to convince the church people that Silas has stolen some money. Forced from his hometown, Silas goes to live in Raveloe in a small cottage by the quarry. He works hard and earns a lot of money, but he lives a lonely life and rarely mixes with the village people. The village Squire has two sons. One of them, Godfrey, is a good man who is in love with Nancy Lammeter. The other, Dunstan, is a drunk and a liar. Dunstan knows that Godfrey has secretly married a poor woman called Molly and he uses this knowledge to persuade Godfrey to sell his horse to get the money that Dunstan has taken from his father and must return.

Chapters 4–6: Dunstan rides Godfrey's horse to a hunt to sell it. He agrees to sell the horse later that day to a man called Bryce. Then, while jumping walls, he falls and the horse dies. He begins walking home and passes Silas's house. He enters and steals two bags of money, which have been hidden in a hole under the floor. Silas, who had gone out to get water, returns and finds the money gone. He goes to the village bar and tells the villagers what has happened. They feel sorry for Silas and agree to help him by searching his house for clues to who the thief is.



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Chapters 7–9: After finding a tinder-box near the quarry, some of the villagers believe that a pedlar who had visited Raveloe a month earlier was the thief. Nobody suspects Dunstan, who hasn't arrived home. Godfrey finds out from Bryce that his horse is dead and decides to tell his father, the Squire, the whole story. The next day, however, he lacks the courage to tell his father about his secret marriage, although he does tell him about the money Dunstan has taken. The Squire insists that Godfrey ask Nancy to marry him. Godfrey is afraid as he knows this is impossible. Meanwhile, the villagers try to be kind to Silas. One woman, Mrs Winthrop, visits him with her son, Aaron. She takes him cakes and tries to persuade him to go to church on Christmas day. Silas is polite to her, but he is still very sad about the money and stays at home alone at Christmas.

Chapters 10–12: On New Year's Eve, the Squire holds a party. Godfrey's wife, Molly, is on her way there to tell everybody about her marriage. It's very cold and she takes some opium and then collapses in the snow. Her young daughter wanders off and finds warmth in Silas's cottage. Silas finds and comforts her and then finds her mother's body in the snow. He goes to the Squire's party with the child. Godfrey recognises her but doesn't tell anybody she is his child. The doctor proclaims Molly dead and Silas says that he wants to keep the child. Mrs Winthrop teaches Silas how to look after the child, who he has called Eppie. Although at times it is difficult, Silas's life is transformed by the sweet child. He loves her dearly and everybody in the village loves Eppie too.

Chapters 13–15: Sixteen years later, Godfrey is married to Nancy and a happy Silas regularly attends church with his 'daughter' Eppie. Mrs Winthrop's son, Aaron, is in love with Eppie and asks her to marry him. Godfrey and Nancy are happy together but have never been able to have children and although Godfrey wanted to adopt a child, Nancy refused. One day, Godfrey comes home and tells Nancy that Dunstan's body has been found in the quarry alongside Silas's gold. Then he tells her everything about his first wife and child. Nancy accepts it and says that they must now look after Eppie as their own.

Chapters 16–18: Godfrey and Nancy visit Silas and Eppie and they ask Eppie to go and live with them as their daughter. Eppie refuses and although Godfrey tells her the truth about her birth, it makes no difference to Eppie, who knows only one real father, Silas. Godfrey and

Nancy leave empty-handed. Eppie marries Aaron and they go to live with Silas. Their house is more beautiful now as Godfrey has given them money and they feel like the happiest people in the world.

Background and themes

Community: In the early nineteenth century, a person's village or town was all-important, providing a great deal of material and emotional support. Although Marner lives an isolated life, the village people still try to help him in times of crisis.

Love versus money: Eliot tries to show how love is more important than money in this story. Happiness does not come to either Squire Cass's family or Silas through the money they have, but it is achieved through Silas's love for Eppie.

Class: At this time, the class system was strictly defined and this is reflected in the book. The Cass family sits at the top of the social hierarchy whereas Silas, as an outsider, is at the bottom. Nevertheless, Silas shows himself to be of better character than his superiors and Eppie also prefers a simple working class life to that of the rich.

Discussion activities

Before reading

- 1 Research:** Divide the class into two groups. Ask one group to do some research using the Internet to find out information about Victorian England. Ask the other group to find out about the author, George Eliot. Get feedback in class.
- 2 Pair work:** Explain to the students that the main character in this story, Silas Marner, is often unhappy in the story. Ask them to talk in pairs about the things that normally make people happy or sad. Get feedback from the whole class.

Chapters 1–3

While reading (p. 3, after 'She did not want to marry Silas or see him again.')

- 3 Write:** Ask students to discuss in pairs what they think Sarah actually wrote in her message. Then ask them to write the note individually.
- 4 Role play:** (p. 6, at the end of the first paragraph.) Put the students in pairs to act out a conversation between Silas Marner and one of the villagers who wants help.
Villager: Talk to Silas. Tell him about your illness and ask for help. Offer him money.
Silas: Talk to the villager. Tell him/her that you can't help. Say you don't want the money. In the end, you get angry and tell the villager to go away.



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After reading

- 5 **Discuss:** Write the names of the main characters on the board: Silas Marner, William Dane, Sarah, Dunstan Cass, Godfrey Cass. Put students in small groups to discuss the following questions: *What kind of person is he/she? What good and bad things has this person done? Would you do the same as this person?*

Chapters 4–6

While reading (p. 20, after 'Silas told his story and answered all their questions.')

- 6 **Role play:** Put students into groups of three. One of them is Silas and the other two are villagers. Tell them to act out the scene in the bar, in which the villagers ask Silas about what happened to his money. Brainstorm some questions with the whole class first (see key).

After reading

- 7 **Discuss:** Put students in small groups to discuss the following questions: *What signs can Mr Dowlas look for in Silas's house? What things do the police normally do after a crime has happened? How can they catch a criminal? If they catch Dunstan, what do you think they will do? Has a thief ever stolen anything from you? What happened?*

Chapters 7–9

While reading (At the beginning of Chapter 8)

- 8 **Pair work and role play:** Focus the students' attention on the title of the chapter and ask them to talk about relationships between father and son. Encourage them to think of typical problems and arguments that arise in this relationship. Get feedback and then ask each pair to choose a problem and write a dialogue between father and son where they discuss this problem. Have students act out the dialogues for the rest of the class.

After reading

- 9 **Discuss:** Put students in small groups to discuss the following questions: *What are your neighbours like? Have you ever had any problems with your neighbours? What makes a good neighbour and what makes a bad one?*

Chapters 10–12

Before reading

- 10 **Discuss:** Remind the students that it is Christmas in the story. If the students celebrate Christmas and New Year, ask them to discuss how they normally celebrate at this time. If they don't, ask them to discuss what time of year they normally celebrate and how. As a follow-up, students could do some research using the Internet about other international festivals.

While reading (At the end of Chapter 11)

- 11 **Pair work:** Remind students that Silas wants to keep the child. Ask them to talk about whether they think he will be a good father in pairs. Encourage them to talk about what you need to know and do to look after a child well.

After reading

- 12 **Pair work:** Remind students that Eppie was 'bad' when she cut the cloth. Ask them to talk in pairs about the 'bad' things they did when they were children and how they were punished. Tell them also to discuss how they think parents or teachers should punish small children.

Chapters 13–15

After reading

- 13 **Write:** Ask the students to imagine they are journalists, writing for the Raveloe newspaper about the body in the quarry. Let them discuss what to include in pairs first and then get them to write the article individually.
- 14 **Write and ask:** Write 'Who was going to help Silas with the garden?' on the board and elicit the answer (Aaron). Ask students to write another question about something in Chapters 13–15. Check their work as they do this. Now have students stand up and mingle, asking and answering each others' questions.

Chapters 16–17

Before reading

- 15 **Guess:** Remind students that Silas has his gold back now. Ask them to discuss what they think he will do with it and whether it will make him happier.

After reading

- 16 **Write:** Refer students back to page 68, where Godfrey says he is going to write a letter that people can open at the end of his life. Get students to discuss what he would write and then write the letter individually.
- 17 **Discuss:** Remind students that the story is set in Victorian England and ask them to discuss how life in a village or small town has changed since this time. Encourage them to say what changes they think have been for the better and which have been for the worse.
- 18 **Game:** Put the students into small groups and ask them to write ten questions about any part of the book. When they've finished each group reads out their questions and the other groups have to write their answers on a piece of paper. The group with the most correct answers wins.

Vocabulary activities

For the Word list and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.