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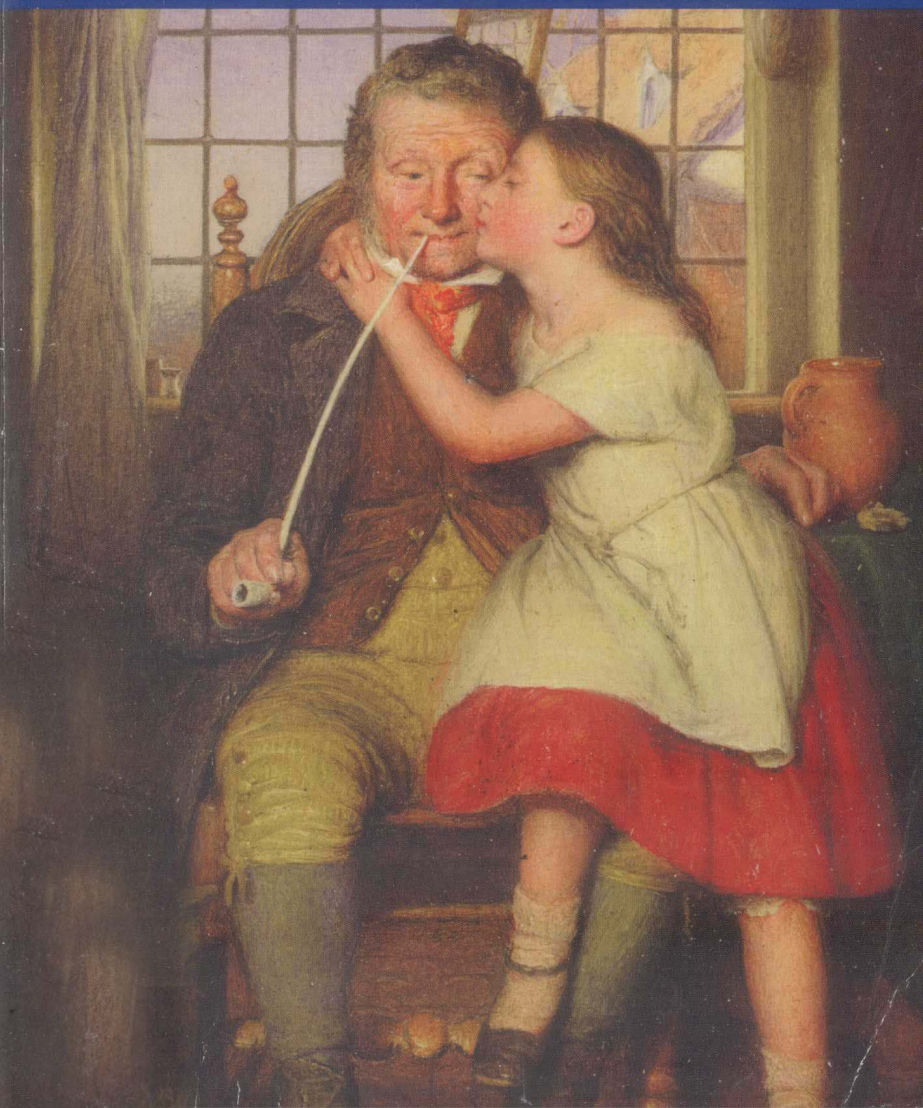
Silas Marner

GEORGE ELIOT



SILAS MARNER

George Eliot

Introduction and notes by
R. T. JONES

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

'George Eliot' was the pen name adopted by Mary Anne Evans when, in her late thirties, she began to write fiction. Born in 1819 in Warwickshire, where her father was manager of an estate, she grew up in an agricultural area. She went to school in Nuneaton and Coventry, and became ardently evangelical. When she was sixteen years old her mother died, and she took over the management of the household. Finding local teachers to guide her she studied German, Italian, Greek and Latin. At twenty-two, as a result of her reading and of discussions with thoughtful and sceptical friends, she ceased to believe in the supernatural elements of Christianity, and at first refused to go to church, but later resumed attendance in deference to her father's wishes, on the understanding that she was not engaging in an act of worship but would occupy her mind on other things. In 1844 she undertook to complete the translation (begun by a friend) of D. F. Strauss's *Life*

of Jesus Critically Examined, which had appeared in German nine years earlier; her translation was published in 1846.

In 1849 her father died and she left home, staying for several months alone in Geneva, then with friends in Coventry; in 1851 she went to London. There she helped to edit, and contributed articles and reviews to, the *Westminster Review*; she quickly became familiar with the most active and influential intellects in London and was highly respected by them. In 1854 she published her translation from German of Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*, a closely argued interpretation of Christianity that makes humanity, rather than an external God, the source of moral values and the proper object of worship.

In the same year she formed a close emotional relationship with G. H. Lewes, a writer on a wide variety of subjects ranging from the history of philosophy to the biology of the seashore. They travelled together in Germany, and lived together until Lewes's death twenty-four years later, but were not able to marry because, under the laws of the time, the fact that when his wife had had a child fathered by her lover he had accepted it as his own meant that he had condoned her misconduct and therefore could not seek a divorce on the grounds of her subsequent adulteries. Mary Anne Evans considered, however, that she and Lewes were married in the sight of Heaven, and although some of their friends disapproved, she was far from being a social outcast (she had several invitations from Queen Victoria's daughters).

In 1857 George Eliot's first fictional work was published: Part I of 'Amos Barton', itself part of *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858). *Adam Bede* followed in 1859, *The Mill on the Floss* in 1860 and *Silas Marner* in 1861. *Romola*, a historical novel, came out in parts in the *Cornhill Magazine*, and in book form in 1863. *Felix Holt* appeared in 1866, *Middlemarch* in 1872 and *Daniel Deronda*, her last novel, in 1876. Lewes died in 1878 and two years later she married John Cross, but died only seven months afterwards.

George Eliot's novels hardly need introductions: she wrote them for the public at large, not for a highly educated few; she tells us all we need to know about their historical and social backgrounds, and she draws our attention to interesting features of her narrative and suggests explanations of her characters' motivations. A reader need only read and enjoy.

But a large part of the enjoyment we can get from reading a novel by George Eliot consists in the pleasure of accompanying

her exceptionally interesting mind as she applies it to a wide variety of subjects. When she turned away from the supernatural features of religion she did not abandon her profound interest in religion as a part of human life; she took very seriously the new science of sociology (to which she hoped her novels would be a contribution); her knowledge of the natural sciences was deepened and broadened by her association with G. H. Lewes, with whom she also collaborated on a biography of Goethe; and she kept up to date, as a reader and reviewer, with literary and philosophical books in German and French as well as English. This range of interests and knowledge was always at hand for her, and in her novels she applies to the processes – psychological or social – that are involved in her story the same critical acuteness that she was accustomed to exercise in her scholarly reading and writing. Thus in *Silas Marner*, when enquiries are being made about the theft of Marner's gold, we find the narrator reflecting sceptically on the reliability of eyewitness evidence:

> Mr Snell was correct in his surmise, that somebody else would remember the pedlar's ear-rings. For, on the spread of inquiry among the villagers, it was stated with gathering emphasis, that the parson had wanted to know whether the pedlar wore ear-rings in his ears, and an impression was created that a great deal depended on the eliciting of this fact. Of course every one who heard the question, not having any distinct image of the pedlar as *without* ear-rings, immediately had an image of him *with* ear-rings, larger or smaller, as the case might be; and the image was presently taken for a vivid recollection, so that the glazier's wife, a well-intentioned woman, not given to lying, and whose house was among the cleanest in the village, was ready to declare, as sure as ever she meant to take the sacrament, the very next Christmas that was ever coming, that she had seen big ear-rings, in the shape of the young moon, in the pedlar's two ears; while Jinny Oates, the cobbler's daughter, being a more imaginative person, stated not only that she had seen them too, but that they had made her blood creep, as it did at that very moment while there she stood. [*Silas Marner*, Chapter 8, p. 53]

In the first half of this extract George Eliot outlines, very clearly and concisely, one process (there must be many others) by which people form false memories; in the second half she presents, for our amusement, illustrations of some of the wholly irrelevant things people say to add weight to their assertions. In the phrase 'whose

house was among the cleanest in the village' we find George Eliot herself, as narrator, doing exactly the same thing: the cleanliness of the witness's house is offered to us as if to assure us that what she says is trustworthy; and if we are taken in by it, we may then realise, on reading the similar guarantees of truth given by the glazier's wife and by Jinny Oates, the cobbler's daughter, that we are being teased for our gullibility It would be hard to deny that, in passages like this, reading George Eliot is an educative experience!

Very few readers, if any, are familiar with the full range of George Eliot's knowledge, but this does not hinder our enjoyment, because she uses it to make her meaning clearer, not to obscure it. But in order to enjoy the liveliness and strength of her intellect we do need to take an attentive interest in the questions that she addresses in the novel – in the case of *Silas Marner*, how, if at all, an uprooted individual can be restored to full membership of a community.

In all her novels George Eliot explores aspects of the relations between individuals and the society they live in. She has already, in *Adam Bede*, explained the importance of having 'roots' in a familiar and loved place; she writes of Hetty Sorrel in that novel,

> There are some plants that have hardly any roots: you may tear them from their native nook of rock or wall, and just lay them over your ornamental flower-pot, and they blossom none the worse. Hetty could have cast all her past life behind her, and never cared to be reminded of it again. I think she had no feeling at all towards the old house, and did not like the Jacob's Ladder and the long row of hollyhocks in the garden better than other flowers – perhaps not so well. [*Adam Bede*, Chapter xv]

George Eliot saw such affections, established in childhood, as giving a moral stability (which Hetty lacks); the idea is one that she keeps coming back to, and this is how she puts it some seventeen years later in *Daniel Deronda*:

> Pity that Offendene was not the home of Miss Harleth's childhood, or endeared to her by family memories! A human life, I think, should be well rooted in some spot of a native land, where it may get the love of tender kinship for the face of earth, for the labours men go forth to, for the sounds and accents that haunt it, for whatever will give that early home a familiar unmistakable difference amidst the future widening of knowledge: a spot where the definiteness of early memories may be inwrought with

affection, and kindly acquaintance with all neighbours, even to the dogs and donkeys, may spread not by sentimental effort and reflection, but as a sweet habit of the blood.

[*Daniel Deronda*, Chapter III]

'Rootedness' is a major concern in *Silas Marner*. In it George Eliot explores the case of an imagined man who *does* have roots, and is then painfully uprooted. The way in which a part of one's early life may be important to one's being, to the sense of who one is, is given in Silas's recollection of the place and the people he has had to leave, the congregation in the Lantern Yard; and the very structure of the sentence – a list of elements not particularly significant in themselves, followed by an emphatic statement of their significance in one man's experience – is a careful attempt to describe an emotional reality in unemotional language:

The white-washed walls; the little pews where well-known figures entered with a subdued rustling, and where first one well-known voice and then another, pitched in a peculiar key of petition, uttered phrases at once occult and familiar, like the amulet worn on the heart; the pulpit where the minister delivered unquestioned doctrine, and swayed to and fro, and handled the book in a long-accustomed manner; the very pauses between the couplets of the hymn, as it was given out, and the recurrent swell of voices in song: these things had been the channel of divine influences to Marner – they were the fostering home of his religious emotions – they were Christianity and God's kingdom upon earth. [*Silas Marner*, Chapter 2, p. 13]

It is worth noticing here that what George Eliot is telling us about Marner is itself a challenge to our prejudices – the prejudices of her society and ours. We may be accustomed to the Wordsworthian idea of recollections of childhood being associated with natural piety and the growth of our moral being – provided that the childhood was spent in the country; but George Eliot here suggests persuasively that the different images of an urban childhood may serve the same purpose. We should not be surprised to hear of someone whose religious emotions were rooted in the familiar rituals of the place of worship he attended in early life – as long as it was Anglican, or Jewish, or Catholic, or Quaker, or some other denomination that we had heard of and considered vaguely acceptable, but George Eliot invites us to consider whether somebody's religious emotions might not be just as firmly rooted in the

activities of a sect we have never heard of (we are not told its name, and the congregation in the Lantern Yard may, for all we know, be free-standing and self-invented, the only one of its particular kind). George Eliot makes a habit of inviting us to rethink what we have taken for granted, and it is probably with an educational (and provocative) intention that she echoes the passage quoted above when she describes, in *Daniel Deronda*, the highly educated Deronda visiting a synagogue:

> . . . the chant of the *Chazan's* or Reader's grand wide-ranging voice with its passage from monotony to sudden cries, the outburst of sweet boys' voices from the little quire, the devotional swaying of men's bodies backwards and forwards, the very commonness of the building and shabbiness of the scene where a national faith, which had penetrated the thinking of half the world, and moulded the splendid forms of that world's religion, was finding a remote, obscure echo – all were blent for him as one expression of a binding history, tragic and yet glorious. [*Daniel Deronda*, Chapter XXXII]

What the parallels between these two passages suggests is that two people of widely different cultures, times and places, may experience things that happen to them in similar ways – emotionally similar, although perhaps the things remembered may have very little in common.

In George Eliot's view it is not the truth of the doctrine or the ostensible meaning of the ritual that makes the recollected experience significant, but a neighbourly community gaining strength and comfort by taking part in a familiar activity together – 'Agreement between intellects seems unattainable, and we turn to the *truth of feeling* as the only universal bond of union' (letter to Sara Hennell, 19 October 1843). Silas possesses, as much as if he had been brought up in a long-established religion, a piety rooted in memory; but he is torn violently away from it by the criminal behaviour of his friend William Dane and the failure of the god whom Marner trusts to declare his innocence. Dolly Winthrop, on the other hand, has an unshaken traditional religion which she is able to share with him though he is puzzled by the incoherent fragments and superstitious practices that constitute her notion of Christian doctrine.

George Eliot once described her writing as 'a series of experiments in life' (G. S. Haight, *The George Eliot Letters*, Vol. VI, p. 216). In this novel the principal 'experiment' involves tracing the changes in

Silas Marner's emotional life as he settles in a different part of the country, and the author invites us to join her in pondering whether (and if so, how) such a man would ever be able to 'put down roots' again, whether he could be accepted by his new neighbours, whether he could ever become a full member of the community of Raveloe. 'Experiment' suggests that a novel can give us answers – a surprising claim. The way it works, if it does work, is that the author carefully imagines how a particular kind of person, with a particular background and personal history, would behave in a specific situation; if then a substantial number of people read the novel and find it plausible, so that they too can imagine that that is, or could very well be, how such a person would behave, then the experiment has produced a result. In this case it leads us to conclude that the uprooted man may become rerooted, but only if circumstances are exceptionally favourable.

One of the conditions that George Eliot invites us to see as favourable, although we should not have expected it to be so, is the growing collection of guineas that are all Marner has to 'love' during the years when he has hardly any human contact. Moral fables usually cast money as the enemy of human love, but here it serves as a stand-in, however unsatisfactory, for a human object of affection. The coins are, of course, quite literally tokens of Marner's economic relationship with the people of Raveloe, so they do represent the fact that he does, even at that stage, have a real function in the community and a connection with it, but what George Eliot focuses on is the way the coins, like the broken jug that Marner mends and keeps although it is no longer useful, serve to keep his affections alive (though dormant) during his period of isolation.

The transfer of his affections to a human being is brought about by two events: the theft of the gold, and the arrival of the child who becomes Eppie. The first, though unusual in a village like Raveloe, is not inherently improbable; no reader would be much surprised to find that somebody steals the gold. But what is characteristic of George Eliot's narrative imagination is that she should invite us to see it as entirely probable that the burglary should be committed by the squire's son against the drudging weaver – though when we stop to think about it (and that is what she makes us do), we can see that the comparatively rich young man may well be short of money, and the weaver whose frugality suggests poverty may have a heap of gold under his floor.

There is, on the other hand, something of a miracle about the golden-haired child's turning up in Marner's cottage, not because

there is anything impossible or even improbable about the sequence of events that brings her there, but because the timing of her arrival is as if it were planned (by a kind god's providence, not just by a skilled and thoughtful novelist). The effect of this touch of the wonderful in the novel is in the first place very simple: it makes the story more engaging, more surprising. But it has a further effect, which is more complex and paradoxical: this novel which generally keeps so close to the realities of life, and is so firmly anchored in historical reality, now suggests to us that a human life may be shaped by a plan, and that, in Hamlet's words, 'there's a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will'; but the very fact that this, when it happens in the novel, strikes us as a wonder, reminds us that in the world in which we live benevolent interventions are exceptional, if they occur at all, and are certainly not to be counted on. As in Shakespeare's last plays, sometimes called romances, what we are left with is the sad reflection that the happy ending has been brought about not only by the passage of time, which is common enough, but also by several coincidences, of a kind that is not usual in the real world.

Some of George Eliot's imaginative perceptions are at first sight improbable; she makes them convincing by getting us, her readers, to acknowledge that we might, in those circumstances, behave in a similar way ourselves:

> Meanwhile, why could he not make up his mind to the absence of children from a hearth brightened by such a wife? Why did his mind fly uneasily to that void, as if it were the sole reason why life was not thoroughly joyous to him? I suppose it is the way with all men and women who reach middle age without the clear perception that life never *can* be thoroughly joyous: under the vague dulness of the grey hours, dissatisfaction seeks a definite object, and finds it in the privation of an untried good. Dissatisfaction, seated musingly on a childless hearth, thinks with envy of the father whose return is greeted by young voices – seated at the meal where the little black heads rise one above another like nursery plants, it sees a black care hovering behind every one of them, and thinks the impulses by which men abandon freedom, and seek for ties, are surely nothing but a brief madness. [*Silas Marner*, Chapter 17, p. 138–9]

During Mary Anne Evans' early years of evangelical Christianity it would have been part of her religious self-discipline to examine

her conscience each night before going to sleep. This would involve a critical examination of all that she had done during the day, questioning her motives, detecting her self-deceptions, failures and evasions. No doubt there are limits to any person's ability to gain self-knowledge by such means, but the way George Eliot reveals and analyses hidden motivations in her characters shows a skill that is probably the result, at least in part, of her early training in disciplined introspection. In the passage I have just quoted, readers are implicitly invited to verify the generalised assertion about 'all men and women who reach middle age without the clear perception that life never *can* be thoroughly joyous' by looking into their own mental processes, and are shown how to detect in themselves the self-deception that is attributed to Godfrey Cass. So the appeal to the reader's experience works both ways: it helps to make Godfrey's, or any other character's, ways of thinking more clearly intelligible to the reader, and at the same time it develops and exercises the reader's own ability to understand his or her own thought processes.

George Eliot is sometimes blamed for 'moralising' in her novels. The word is not entirely appropriate: she does indeed try to educate her readers, but usually what is called 'moralising' in her work could be more accurately described as trying to get us to see what is before our noses. She is evidently concerned that people generally are far too ready to be deceived by irrational arguments, whether these come from others or from themselves. She makes a point of emphasising that actions have consequences, and that once we have done something there is no more point in wishing that our action will not be followed by its consequences than there would be in wishing a waterfall to fall upwards: deeds are not exempt from natural laws, which are as irrevocable as those of physics.

> Favourable Chance, I fancy, is the god of all men who follow their own devices instead of obeying a law they believe in. Let even a polished man of these days get into a position he is ashamed to avow, and his mind will be bent on all the possible issues that may deliver him from the calculable results of that position. Let him live outside his income, or shirk the resolute honest work that brings wages, and he will presently find himself dreaming of a possible benefactor, a possible simpleton who may be cajoled into using his interest, a possible state of mind in some possible person not yet forthcoming. Let him neglect the

> responsibilities of his office, and he will inevitably anchor himself on the chance, that the thing left undone may turn out not to be of the supposed importance . . . The evil principle deprecated in that religion, is the orderly sequence by which the seed brings forth a crop after its kind. [*Silas Marner*, Chapter 9, pp. 63]

George Eliot is not unusual in trying to draw her readers' attention to something about the way things are in the real world. What *is* unusual about her is that she gives us such a clear statement of the doctrine of inflexible consequences in a novel that seems not to support it. As author, she is at liberty to make her story bear out her teaching, but instead she goes to exceptional lengths not to do that. For the 'favourable chance' that Godfrey wishes for does come, and solves his problems; his secret wife dies, his unacknowledged daughter is not linked with him, his blackmailing brother disappears, and all these things conspire to enable him to marry the admirable Nancy Lammeter. Yet, curiously, these events do not seem to invalidate the doctrine: we are left with the more subtle delineation of moral consequences – Godfrey Cass having to live with the knowledge of the means by which he has come to be married to Nancy, the knowledge that if he had been honest she would have refused him.

Yet the terms of George Eliot's doctrine of consequences in this novel – 'the orderly sequence by which the seed brings forth a crop after its kind' – are less clear-cut than they seem. The 'orderly sequence' and the 'crop after its kind' must surely mean that 'good' actions result in 'good' consequences, and 'bad' actions have 'bad' consequences and, on the whole, this is not what happens in the novel. When Godfrey does at last tell Nancy about his unacknowledged child, she says,

> 'And – O, Godfrey – if we'd had her from the first, if you'd taken to her as you ought, she'd have loved me for her mother – and you'd have been happier with me: I could better have bore my little baby dying, and our life might have been more like what we used to think it 'ud be.'
>
> . . .
>
> 'But you wouldn't have married me then, Nancy, if I'd told you,' said Godfrey, urged, in the bitterness of his self-reproach, to prove that his conduct had not been mere folly . . .
>
> [*Silas Marner*, Chapter 18, p. 142]

He is surely right here; all we know of Nancy and her 'little code'

convinces us that she would *not* have married him, and she does not now deny it, though she does say she would never have married anyone else. So the novel leads us to conclude that if Godfrey had done the right thing, acknowledged his first wife and her baby as his, Nancy would not have married him; Eppie (under a different name, of course) would have grown up in the Red House with no mother and a resentful father; so Godfrey, Nancy and Eppie would have had very little opportunity for happiness, and of course Silas Marner would have remained an exile from human society. Earlier in the novel we are shown Godfrey's self-justification for not giving his daughter her birthright: 'The child was being taken care of, and would very likely be happy, as people in humble stations often were – happier, perhaps, than those who are brought up in luxury' (*Silas Marner*, p. 115). This seems to quote Godfrey's thoughts, and to show how he evades his responsibility; yet, as when he is shown hoping for favourable chance to get him out of trouble, his reprehensible way of thinking seems to be endorsed by the novel: Eppie *is* taken care of, she *is* happy. Yet the effect is not to weaken, but to strengthen, the novel's judgement on Godfrey: *even if*, it implies, *even if* the matter turns out (up to a point) as he wishes, it was still unwise and unworthy to count on it.

It is Dunsey's crime and Godfrey's silent lie, together with some favourable chances, that make possible the happier outcome that the novel gives us: 'O, father,' said Eppie, 'what a pretty home ours is! I think nobody could be happier than we are' (*Silas Marner*, 'Conclusion', p. 157).

But if, by the time we reach the end of the novel, we have a suspicion that George Eliot is not always as straightforward as she seems, we may be left with some doubts about the apparent conclusiveness of that fairy-tale ending.

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I think there is more than enough literature of the criticising sort . . . To read much of it seems to me seriously injurious: it accustoms men and women to formulate opinions instead of receiving deep impressions, and to receive deep impressions is the foundation of all true mental power.

GEORGE ELIOT

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PART ONE