

Review of *Silas Marner*
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The purpose of required reading assignments is to introduce students to works of writing that they would not otherwise be likely to explore. *Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe* (1861), written by Mary Anne Evans under the nom de plume of George Eliot, is one such work. The novel's age and reputation for dullness may inhibit many potential readers from absorbing the book's unique setting, literary creativity, and hopeful message, thence making *Silas Marner* a good choice for mandatory reading.

Eliot's work is probably best known for its demonstration of the difference between perceived and genuine happiness. The protagonist, Silas Marner, grew up in Lantern Yard, where he was an active and respected member of a religious community. However, after being framed for a theft and refusing to admit his culpability, Marner is forced to leave Lantern Yard. He heads for the rural village of Raveloe, where he becomes a solitary weaver, aloof from his neighbors and his past. With nothing else to fill his emotional hollowness, Marner begins to obsessively crave the gold that he earns from his work, and he counts it every night after dark. When the gold is stolen, Marner's perceived emotional fulfillment collapses, and his actual internal barrenness is once again exposed. Marner might have remained in this state for the rest of his life were it not for a child that appeared on his hearth. By adopting the young girl, Marner connected to his neighbors, regained his sense of religious faith and purpose, and restored the genuine happiness that he had not felt since his days at Lantern Yard. Thus, Eliot's novel leaves readers with a spirit of hope, by exhorting them to seek out those aspects of life that truly matter and by reminding them that it is never too late to change and grow.

In addition to an inspiring message, *Silas Marner* offers readers fascinating insights into the society of England in the early 1800s. The novel portrays the superstitions and beliefs of the rustic lower class, such as widespread distrust of foreigners, apprehension over the influence of the devil, and unshakable faith in the rightness of God. Also evident is the marked contrast between the rich and the poor, which manifests itself in disparate levels of education, forms of dress, and modes of speech. Even transportation is a sign of class, as the wealthy Dunstan Cass was embarrassedly aware when his horse was killed and he was temporarily forced to walk on foot.

The feature of nineteenth-century England that the book demonstrates most strikingly, however, is its grandiloquence, at least among the aristocracy. Eliot's sentences routinely exceed one hundred words, and her patterns of expression often seem intentionally prolix. For example, instead of simply explaining that Dunstan lied just for fun even when he was not likely to be believed, Eliot wrote that his "delight in lying, grandly independent of utility, was not to be diminished by the likelihood that his hearer would not believe him..." Similarly, Eliot gave the age of the Raveloe parish clerk not as "86" but as "fourscore and six." This writing style, while verbose, permits enjoyable creativity in expression that is largely absent from the concise prose of the present day. And Eliot's creativity is also evinced by the wealth of figurative language that she invents. For example, Marner's surprising entrance into the local bar is illustrated by the statement that the men's "long pipes gave a simultaneous movement, like the antennæ of startled insects." Eliot likewise employed an effective simile in explaining the personality of Squire Cass: "he made resolutions in violent anger, and he was not to be moved from them after his anger had subsided—as fiery volcanic matters cool and harden into rock."

Some students may not enjoy Eliot's creative and challenging use of language, but her style is one with which everyone should at least be somewhat familiar. In addition, *Silas Marner* offers rich historical insight into life two hundred years ago, as well as the lesson that it is never too late to reform oneself. Therefore, *Silas Marner* should be a mandatory book, so that students who would not otherwise consider reading it will have exposure to those aspects that make it unique and worthwhile.

Task

Please write a short (but detailed) review of this novel (about two typed pages) in which you address this question: “Should this novel be mandatory reading for next year’s AP class?”