



## Unit AS 2:

# The Study of Prose pre 1900

## Eliot: *Silas Marner*

In this Unit there are 4 Assessment Objectives involved – A01, A02, A03 and A05.

### A01: Textual knowledge and understanding, and communication

*In this examination, the candidate should be able to articulate informed and relevant responses that communicate effectively knowledge and understanding of a selected novel.*

*This AO involves the student's knowledge and understanding of the novel, and ability to express relevant ideas accurately and coherently, using appropriate terminology and concepts. Quality of written communication is taken into consideration in all units.*

The Novel, its Plot, Characters and Themes

## PART ONE

### HOW SILAS CAME TO RAVELOE

*Silas Marner*, set mainly in the fictitious village of Raveloe in the English Midlands, tells the story – as a moral fable<sup>1</sup> – of the life of a weaver over a period of something over thirty years in the early part of the nineteenth century.

After a brief introduction referring to the trade of the weaver in rural society, and to Silas Marner himself, settled in Raveloe but regarded as an outsider in the village, the narrator explains how he had come to the village “from an unknown region called North’ard”, having fallen victim to an act of malevolence from a presumed friend and been expelled from the narrow and austere conventicle<sup>2</sup> in which he had centred his life.

### SILAS’S ALIENATION

Over the first two chapters, Eliot builds up a picture of Marner as a man damaged by the loss of his past habits, trust, and ways of worship and of thought. In Raveloe he is accepted only because he is economically useful, but his habits, his trade, his demeanour, his observed propensity to “fits” and even his appearance render him an object of suspicion and an outsider. Deprived of and depriving himself of human contact, he finds comfort in the accumulation of his golden guineas and becomes

**1** Fable is a loose term but its use suggests brevity and the presence of marvels or wonderful events. The morals of this fable, it will be seen, are stated explicitly in the case of Godfrey Cass, and conveyed in a more diffuse way in that of Silas.  
**2** A small congregation of Nonconformist worshippers, independent or only loosely associated with any organized or recognized church.



known to the villagers as a “miser”. This carries the story to the fifteenth year of his life in Raveloe, and the narrator heralds that in a second great change of his life “his history became blent in a singular way with the life of his neighbours”.

A second plot line is now introduced: this will tell the story of Godfrey Cass, the son of the local squire<sup>3</sup>, his courtship of Nancy Lammeter, their marriage, and how their lives entwined with that of Silas. Godfrey’s secret marriage to a lower-class woman makes him vulnerable to blackmail and extortion by his morally worthless brother Dunsey. In an attempt to raise money, he lends his horse to Dunsey to sell. This project fails disastrously and Dunsey returns on foot on an evening of thick fog. Opportunistically, he robs Silas’s cottage, stealing the hoarded gold coins on which the weaver has centred his life. He leaves the cottage unseen and disappears from the village. Eventually it comes to be believed that he has “gone for a soldier”. Thus, a new element is added to the story: the mystery or rather mysteries of the disappearance of the gold and of Dunsey.

The devastating effect of the loss on Silas, “a second time desolate”, is then considered, conveyed memorably through the reactions of the drinkers in the “Rainbow”, where he carries the news. The narrator hints that the moral recovery of Silas, which is to lead to the re-establishment of social contact and the sharing of human feelings by the reclusive miser, had its origins in the interest of the rough and ready villagers in the distraught man and his garbled tale. “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.” Silas feels the loss of his gold as the “withering desolation” of a bereavement, but the village, tentatively and without very much tact does try to comfort him. Most significant of these attempts are the visits paid by Dolly Winthrop, clearer in her feelings than in her thinking, who tries to draw Silas towards social contact by suggesting that he attend church, but “the fountains of human love and divine faith had not yet been unlocked” – and Silas spends Christmas Day alone.

## THE FINDING OF EPPIE

Eliot then presents two sharply contrasting chapters (11 and 12). First there is a long description of a New Year’s Eve party at Squire Cass’s house. The complete range of social strata of the village is present and we see that it is through such events that the social ties that bind Raveloe together as a community are ceremonially re-affirmed. This chapter is full of realistic details of speech, dress, travel, accommodation, music and entertainment, domestic occupations – many of the aspects of early nineteenth-century rural life.

This description is interrupted by the brief chapter which tells of the wonderful event which changes Silas Marner’s life – the appearance of the child Eppie. Her mother, Godfrey’s secret wife and a victim of “the demon Opium” lies dead in the snow and the child, attracted by the light toddles into Silas’s cottage and up to the warm hearth. When Silas becomes aware of her, it seems to him momentarily like a restoration of what he had lost: “to his blurred vision, it seemed as if there were gold on the floor in front of his hearth. Gold! His own gold – brought back to him as mysteriously as it had been taken away!....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.” The narrator reveals Silas’s awed impression of “some Power presiding over his life” and his sense of mystery in the child’s sudden presence.

**3** A landowner, taking in rents from his tenants. A figure of some local importance in English villages and parishes of former times.



For a second time Silas makes a dramatic appearance out of a stormy night. At the Rainbow he had been reporting what he had lost; now as he enters the Squire's house carrying the child he is reporting what he has found. The narrator tells this part of the story mainly from the point of view of Godfrey Cass, and his anguished state of mind and conflicting motives and impulses are contrasted with the more detached curiosity and mild surprise of the other guests. Godfrey is fearful lest the facts that the dead woman in the snow was his wife and that the child in Silas's arms is his daughter should be revealed. This would expose him to the anger of his father and would mean the certain loss of any hope of winning the love of Nancy Lammeter. From now on in the tale the moral predicament faced by Godfrey and his prevarication will become increasingly central, and the narrator glances forward hinting at the outcome. As Silas is rewarded, Godfrey will be punished – for his moral evasiveness, his indifference (or worse) to the dead woman, his hopes to achieve happiness through deceit. "If she is [dead] then I may marry Nancy; and then I should be a good fellow in future, and have no secrets..."

## **EPIE GROWING UP**

In the upbringing of the child Silas is aided by Dolly Winthrop, who shares his growing belief that there is a guiding Providential hand in his affairs - "there's Them as took care of it, and brought it to your door..." The practical difficulties of rearing a child are as nothing to Silas's sense that he is being rewarded or compensated for what he has lost. The reward extends beyond Eppie. The narrator makes clear that her presence nurtures the growth of the links between Silas and the community.

## **PART TWO**

### **SIXTEEN YEARS LATER**

Part Two re-opens the story after a lapse of sixteen years. Silas and Eppie are leaving the village church. His attendance can be interpreted as a token of his entire integration into the village community. Eppie is on the point of accepting a proposal of marriage from Aaron Winthrop. It is clear that there has been sustained and discreet financial assistance to the weaver from Godfrey Cass, and this is interpreted by Silas and the village as a whole as arising simply from kindness. There is a placid and rather sentimental<sup>4</sup> picture of the happiness of the ageing weaver (he is now fifty-five), but this is accompanied by Silas's continuing serious reflection that there is a Providential hand in their affairs, which he still shares with Dolly Winthrop and which is expressed in their stumbling conversation: "the child was sent to me: there's dealings with us – there's dealings". In a fumbling way he interprets the appearance of Eppie as a compensation in balance with the tribulation that followed the "drawing of the lots" in Lantern Yard.

### **GODFREY'S MARRIAGE**

Godfrey had not attained the perfect happiness he had promised himself in marrying Nancy. There had been one baby which died in infancy but otherwise the marriage is childless. Nancy has persistently denied his wish that they should adopt, and that the adopted child should be Eppie, and we see her engaged in a process of moral self-examination in which she defends to herself her thwarting of her husband's wishes.

<sup>4</sup> Sentimental: designed to produce an easy or uncritical emotional response.



“To adopt a child, because children of your own had been denied you, was to try to choose your own lot in spite of Providence”, and Nancy recoils from this impiety. Although in all else she has been a tender and loving wife, Godfrey’s dissatisfaction about the absence of children and the constraint caused by his deception of her about the existence of his previous wife, who had been neglected and almost abandoned, and of his unacknowledged child have effectively spoiled Godfrey’s marriage.

The denouement<sup>5</sup> of the earlier mysteries occurs at this point with the discovery of Dunsey’s body with Silas’s gold in a quarry. The story of the ancient robbery is soon reconstructed. The effect on Godfrey is to prompt him to a full confession to Nancy, in the belief that God is visiting retribution upon him for his previous evil actions: “Everything comes to light, Nancy, sooner or later. When God Almighty wills it, our secrets are found out.”

The climax<sup>6</sup> of the tale may be considered to be Chapter 19 in a confrontation between Godfrey and Nancy (who is now convinced that adopting and providing for Effie is a duty) on the one hand, and Silas and Effie on the other. Godfrey’s talk of restitution for the wrong done to Silas by the Cass family seems like the reverse to the weaver, who fears being deprived of the girl he had come to think of as his daughter. Eppie must make the decision and she refuses to leave the man she has been calling father for sixteen years. Godfrey, half angered at being thwarted in his desire to put his old error right, discloses the secret of his relationship. This in turn angers Silas to a degree unknown to him since his betrayal in the Lantern Yard conventicle more than thirty years before. He lets Godfrey know that his repentance comes too late. However, again Eppie is invited to choose, and to Godfrey’s mortification chooses to remain with Silas.

Godfrey reflects to his wife afterwards that the girl’s dislike for him is part of his punishment, and that our actions have consequences we cannot avoid or change: “there’s debts we can’t pay.” There is a strong sense in this part of the novel of poetic justice<sup>7</sup>, expressed mainly by Godfrey in his acceptance of his disappointment but also in other places by the narrator.

## LANTERN YARD REVISITED

Apart from one brief flashback in Chapter 1 which emphasised Silas’s rootedness in the northern town where he had a life filled with “movement...mental activity. And... close fellowship”, the story has been set in Raveloe. Now, still fretting over the injustice of his expulsion from what had been home, he sets out with Effie to revisit Lantern Yard.

He finds all changed – a grim and squalid “manu-facturing” town where his struggle to find old landmarks and failure to confirm old associations leave him bewildered and distressed. Lantern Yard, pastor, congregation and community, is gone. As he tells Dolly Winthrop on his return, “The old home’s gone. I’ve no home but this now.” In this way, through a brief change of setting, Eliot points the theme of loss of home and reintegration into society.

## EPPIE’S WEDDING

The novel ends, in a conventional way, with a wedding. Although there is evidence of generosity and good-will on the part of Godfrey and Nancy, Godfrey absents himself,

**5** Denouement: literally the untying of a knot; the unravelling or clearing up of a mystery of the plot

**6** The point in a story, usually towards the end, where events reach their greatest intensity and its themes are presented with greatest clarity.

**7** Poetic justice: the distribution of rewards and punishments in accordance with moral deserving, rather than the rather haphazard fashion which experience tells us is the norm in real life.



pained and unwilling to face the moral reproach which the event presents him with. Our final view is of four united and happy people back at home in their garden<sup>8</sup>.

**8** This garden has been gaining in symbolic significance in the final stages of the novel, since Aaron's courtship of Effie. It comes to represent Silas's sending down roots in the community, the bonds of affection growing among Silas, Eppie, Dolly and Aaron, and the established family life of which the alienated Silas has been deprived for so long.



## A02: Narrative methods

*In this examination, the candidate should analyse the writer's use of such narrative methods as form, structure and language.*

*The student should analyse relevantly the ways in which meanings are shaped in novels. This means identifying narrative methods and showing how these methods relate to the key terms of the question.*

Discussing narrative methods - advice to teachers and students:

As this unit is closed book, examiners will be realistic about the amount of detail which can be provided in the time available. It is anticipated that the larger-scale features of form, structure and language will be most useful in constructing a relevant response in the time available.

A few general stylistic features:

- Form and Structure

### **Setting** (spatial organization)

Most of the action of *Silas Marner* takes place in Raveloe. The story begins and ends there, but Eliot 'frames' the telling of the tale with two brief episodes set in the northern town which was Silas's original home. These changes of setting allow contrasts to be set up between for example the austere and puritanical Dissenting<sup>9</sup> congregation of Lantern Yard and the rather slack and careless religious observance in the Church of England in Raveloe. Another example of such contrasts would be between the dirt and squalor of the urban environment of the large industrial town at the end of the novel and the peaceful, fertile rural countryside around Raveloe. Several other contrasts could be pointed out. Eliot uses these to emphasise the wrench felt by Silas in the loss of his original home and his later satisfaction in putting down roots in the village.

The dual setting also enables Eliot to give a more complete picture of the England of the early 1800s and how there were good times - but only for some - "in those war times". When she wrote *Silas Marner*, Eliot was looking back perhaps forty years at a provincial England which she had known as a girl but which even then was passing away. The religious practices of Lantern Yard, based in the seventeenth century would survive into the twentieth, but were already old-fashioned. The growth of the factory system and the movement of population to the towns which characterize the Industrial Revolution can be seen in the urban setting at the end of the novel. The peasants drinking in the bar of the Rainbow still cling to their traditional smock-frock work garments but, the narrator tells us, the squires as a social class were already drinking and gambling and idling themselves out of existence.

### **Use of Double Plot**

The main plot strand is that of Silas's reward (as he comes to think of it) after his long period of suffering and puzzlement about "the drawing of the lots" at the time of his expulsion from Lantern Yard. This is deliberately set against the plot strand of Godfrey's disappointment – in his childlessness, and in his later hopes to adopt Eppie

<sup>9</sup> Dissenters (or Non-conformists) were so called because they refused to assent to the doctrines of the Church of England.



– which we see as the consequence of his dishonesty.

One advantage of the double plot is that Eliot is able to present a range of the ways in which we explain our lives to ourselves. Silas is baffled by the injustice inflicted on him, transfers his affections to his gold coins, is struck by apparently undeserved misfortune a second time and is reduced to “moaning” in solitary wretchedness. But, guided by Dolly, he comes to see Eppie as his recompense, as part of a divine plan which will justify his previous sufferings. The narrator encourages us to see things this way: “In the old days there were angels who came and took men by the hand and led them away from the city of destruction. We see no white-winged angels now. But yet men are led away from threatening destruction: a hand is put in theirs... and the hand may be a little child’s.” However, Silas is essentially a passive character and we may wonder what he has done to deserve either his punishment or his reward.

Godfrey comes to understand his life in a grimmer way. He realizes that the frustrations of his life are the consequences of his previous actions. His lack of honesty towards Nancy about his secret marriage and his silence about the existence of his child are deeds which must be paid for, as all our deeds must be paid for. The conversations between husband and wife in Chapters 18 and 20 make this very clear.

## **The Authorial Voice**

In *Silas Marner* Eliot employs an “omniscient narrator”, who from time to time gives us hints of future events and indeed of the outcome of the story. George Eliot was criticized in her own time for her “moralizing”, but this method helps her give a convincing account of mental processes, for example of Godfrey’s hope and fear and guilt at the time of the discovery of Molly’s body.

Very occasionally the narrator comes forward and speaks in the first person, addressing the readers directly. At points like these, the narrator almost becomes a character in her own story. (But can we assume the narrator is female?) The tale is told discursively, and there are many asides as the narrator considers a wide range of matters of interest to her – the experience of alienation, the comfort of routine to a psychologically wounded individual, the ways of thinking of simple and uneducated men and women, the extravagance of the “squirearchy”, the “hallowing charm” of domestic life.

## **• Language and Imagery**

### **Imagery**

Perhaps the most memorable piece of imagery is the metaphor in which Silas is compared to a spinning insect. This image is apt in several ways. It refers to his trade as a weaver (compare the legend of Arachne). It suggests the quality of unquestioning repetition in his life in those early years in Raveloe. And as his face and figure shrank and bent, he came to resemble an insect. This is marked in a thought-provoking way in Chapter 7, when he enters the Rainbow with news of his loss. Not only Silas with his “strange unearthly eyes”, but also his audience who move their pipes “like the antennae of startled insects” seem to be described in terms of this group of images.

We also read of the “withering” period of Silas’s life, and that during it “the sap of affection was not all gone”. That the arrival of Eppie “stirred fibres” in Silas. That



human contact acted in Silas like the circulation of a plant, and that a bud was to be expected. This organic imagery encourages us to see Silas's re-integration into society as a natural process, as if he were, for example a plant just starting to send out roots.

### **Symbols**

There are some remarks about the symbolic meanings of Silas's gold coins, Eppie's golden curls and Silas's garden under A01.



## A03: Contexts

*In this examination, the candidate should demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which a novel is written and received by drawing on appropriate information from outside the novel.*

*No particular type of context will be stipulated in the question. However, contextual information which is made relevant to the key terms of the question will be rewarded. Students should be aware that little credit can be given for contextual information that is introduced merely for its own sake. They should remember that the text has primacy over the context. A good response will use contextual information sparingly and judiciously.*

The following information is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students. It reflects some of the contextual areas which might be found useful. Remember the remarks above about balancing text and context in a response.

These contextual points may be found relevant to *Silas Marner*.

- **Literary context**

*Silas Marner* as a Victorian Novel

The critic Leslie Stephen, writing twenty years after George Eliot's death, saw her passing as marking the end of the great age of the Victorian novel. If we look at *Silas Marner* as a Victorian novel we shall find many of the characteristics which made that genre widely popular.

**Realism:** for example her descriptions of the interior of Silas's cottage; her account of the ways of thought of the Lantern Yard worshippers (their reluctance to consult the doctor, their trust that "drawing the lots" will reveal God's will); the details of an English provincial life which was passing away.

**Sentimentality:** the unblemished happiness of the ending; some of the descriptions of Eppie as a child and of Silas towards the end of the novel.

**Mystery:** where is Dunsey? who robbed Silas's cottage?

Melodrama: the conversation between Godfrey and Dunsey in Chapter 3.

The influence of the nineteenth-century Romantic poet Wordsworth was explicitly acknowledged by George Eliot. It can be seen in the interest in the affairs of everyday life, in the moralizing tendency, in the hallowing of the domestic and particularly in the association of the child with the angelic.

- **Biographical context**

George Eliot's father was an estate manager and as a young girl she accompanied him on his rounds of inspection where she became aware of how rural working people lived their lives and the problems they faced.

As a girl at school she became a devout and rather puritanical Evangelical Christian.



At the age of twenty-three she told her father that she had “lost her faith in Church doctrine”, by which she meant the supernatural element in the Christian religion. From then on she became increasingly involved with and influenced by radical and innovatory thinkers.

She translated “*The Essence of Christianity*” by the German philosopher Feuerbach in which he argued that God was a projection of man and that the divine must be sought in human relationships.

- **Social and historical context**

**Established religion and dissenting sects** in early nineteenth-century England: the Church of England often maintained its influence in rural areas, the Dissenters in the industrializing towns. Critics of the Established Church claimed that it was lax, materialistic and saw its role as supporting the status quo. Critics of the Dissenting sects claimed that they were narrow-minded, fanatical and hypocritical.

**Social changes in the nineteenth century** included the growth of large cities, and in many trades the replacement of the individual craftsman by the factory system of production. The Corn Laws were in operation during the period described in the novel and these favoured land-owners (such as Squire Cass) by guaranteeing high prices for grain.



## A05: Argument and interpretation

*In this examination, the candidate should offer opinion or judgment in response to the given reading of the text, taking account of the key terms as the basis of the argument. This AO is the driver of Unit AS 2 and is of primary importance.*

*A05 can be satisfied in full by the candidate developing his/her own reading in response to the given reading. If, however, critics are used, they must be:*

- *used with understanding*
- *incorporated into the argument to reinforce or be seen as an alternative to the student's opinion*
- *not used as a substitute for the development of the student's own opinion*
- *properly acknowledged.*

Coherence and relevance of argument will be rewarded. Students should be aware of the importance of planning in the sequencing and illustration of the reading they wish to put forward. They should also beware of the danger of replacing the key terms of the question with others of their own choosing which they assume mean much the same thing.

It might also be helpful to note that in the predecessor of this unit examiners frequently regretted the sacrifice of quality to quantity in responses.

### Specimen question:

*Silas Marner* is a fairy tale.

With reference to the narrative methods used in the novel, and relevant contextual information, **show to what extent** you agree with the above statement.

In order to construct a meaningful and cogent argument (and to move beyond making simple assertions and offering unsupported opinions) students should use A02 and A03 elements to support and enhance their point of view. Convincing arguments will be based on a secure understanding of how Eliot has used narrative methods (A02) to convey her message. Students will also encounter difficulties in presenting an argument which is focused on the stimulus statement without knowledge of the context(s) in which the novel is written and received (A03).

The following information is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a starting point for teachers and students. It reflects some of the thematic, stylistic and contextual issues which may be explored and developed further both in the classroom and through teachers' and students' own independent research.

A few features of the fairy tale are listed below. Some of these will come to mind at once. Some are the product of a little reflection. These will enable the student to define a fairy tale, and this definition (which would be enriched by mentioning a few specific fairy tales by name) can then be matched with the novel itself and the narrative methods which Eliot uses.



- A far-fetched plot, with many improbabilities and marvels.

Do the circumstances of Eppie's arrival on Silas's hearth strike the reader as improbable? Silas himself comes to see the arrival of the child as a marvel, almost as a miracle.

- The presence of elements of the supernatural.

Raveloe's interest in ghosts. Dolly's belief in "Them". There may be no supernatural, but some of the characters believe it is not far away.

- The plot often features the success of the weak or humble against overwhelming odds.

Can Silas be seen in this way? What are these odds? What qualities does he bring to the struggle? Are they the qualities of a fairy-tale hero?

- Fairy tales have come to be regarded as stories for an audience of children.

The analysis of Godfrey's duplicity might be argued to be far beyond the understanding of children.

- "A fairy-tale ending" has become a common phrase for sudden, unexpected and perfect happiness. There are no loose ends and everyone lives happily ever after.

How appropriate is this to the ending of the novel? Do the tensions of the confrontation between Silas and Godfrey in Chapter 19 overshadow the ending?

- The traditional opening phrase of a fairy-story, "Once upon a time" really takes the story out of time: the events take place in a non-specific period.

The realism of the detailing of early nineteenth century provincial life. Does this accord with the nature of a fairy tale?

Other contextual areas/information will of course be accepted provided relevance is demonstrated.

It is not necessary for the student wholly to agree or disagree with the stimulus statement. Probably a qualified answer will emerge, demonstrating that in some respects *Silas Marner* is similar to a fairy-story, for example in the unalloyed happiness of the ending. However, by the use of the double plot Eliot pays much more attention to the flawed lives of the Casses than would occur in a fairy-story.



## Glossary

Moral fable

Structure

Imagery

Plot

Theme

Climax

Denouement