

The Character of Silas Marner

Silas Marner is an eponymous hero: that is his name is also the title of the novel. Why do you think George Eliot might have chosen to name the novel after him? What other titles might have been appropriate? Do you think he is the lead character or is someone else more central to the novel? What about Hephzibah (Eppie) or Godfrey Cass?

Read the following descriptions of Marner from the novel:

‘For how was it possible to believe that those large brown protuberant eyes in Silas Marner’s pale face really saw nothing very distinctly that was not close to them, and not rather that their dreadful stare could dart cramp, or rickets, or a wry mouth ...’ (p.2)

‘It was fifteen years since Silas Marner had first come to Raveloe; he was then simply a pallid young man, with prominent, short-sighted brown eyes, whose appearance would have had nothing strange for people of average culture and experience, but for the villagers near whom he had come to settle it had mysterious peculiarities which corresponded with the exceptional nature of his occupation, and his advent from an unknown region called “North’ard”.’ (p.4)

‘He seemed to weave, like the spider, from pure impulse, without reflection. Every man’s work, pursued steadily, tends in this way to become an end in itself, and so to bridge over the loveless chasms of his life. Silas’s hand satisfied itself with throwing the shuttle, and his eye with seeing the little squares in the cloth complete themselves under his effort. Then there were the calls of hunger; and Silas, in his solitude, had to provide his own breakfast, dinner, and supper, to fetch his own water from the well, and put his own kettle on the fire; and all these immediate promptings helped, along with the weaving, to reduce his life to the unquestioning activity of a spinning insect.’ (p.14)

‘Anyone who had looked at him as the red light shone upon his pale face, strange straining eyes, and meagre form would perhaps have understood the mixture of contemptuous pity, dread, and suspicion with which he was regarded by his neighbours in Raveloe.’ (p.40)

‘But while poor Silas’s loss served thus to brush the slow current of Raveloe conversation, Silas himself was feeling the withering desolation of that bereavement, about which his neighbours were arguing at their ease. To anyone who had observed him before he lost his gold, it might have seemed that so withered and shrunken a life as his could hardly be susceptible of a bruise, could hardly endure any subtraction but such as would put an end to it altogether. But in reality it had been an eager life, filled with immediate purpose, which fenced him in from the wide, cheerless unknown. It had been a clinging life; and though the object round which its fibres had clung was a dead, disrupted thing, it satisfied the need for clinging. But now the fence was broken down – the support was snatched away. Marner’s thoughts could no longer move in their old round, and were baffled by a blank like that which meets a plodding ant when the earth has broken away on its homeward path. (p.75-76)

Using different coloured pens fill in the key below and then, using the appropriate colour, identify relevant words or phrases of description from the extracts above:

Eyes <input style="width: 30px; height: 20px;" type="text"/>	Face <input style="width: 30px; height: 20px;" type="text"/>	Loneliness or isolation <input style="width: 30px; height: 20px;" type="text"/>
Hands <input style="width: 30px; height: 20px;" type="text"/>	Insect or spider <input style="width: 30px; height: 20px;" type="text"/>	Superstition <input style="width: 30px; height: 20px;" type="text"/>

1. What do these descriptions suggest to us, the readers, about Silas Marner?
2. What sort of picture does George Eliot create by her choice of language?
3. Why does Eliot focus so much on Marner's physical appearance, particularly his hands and eyes?
4. Do you think Eliot wants us to feel sympathy, empathy, dislike or something else for Marner? What makes you think this?
5. A number of times in the extracts above, colours are used; what impression do they give?
6. What is implied about other people in Raveloe from these extracts?

Now look through later chapters in the novel and note down below other descriptions, with page references, of Silas Marner. Does the language used to describe him change? In what way does the language change and what accounts for it? Can you find any similarities? Comment on your findings: