

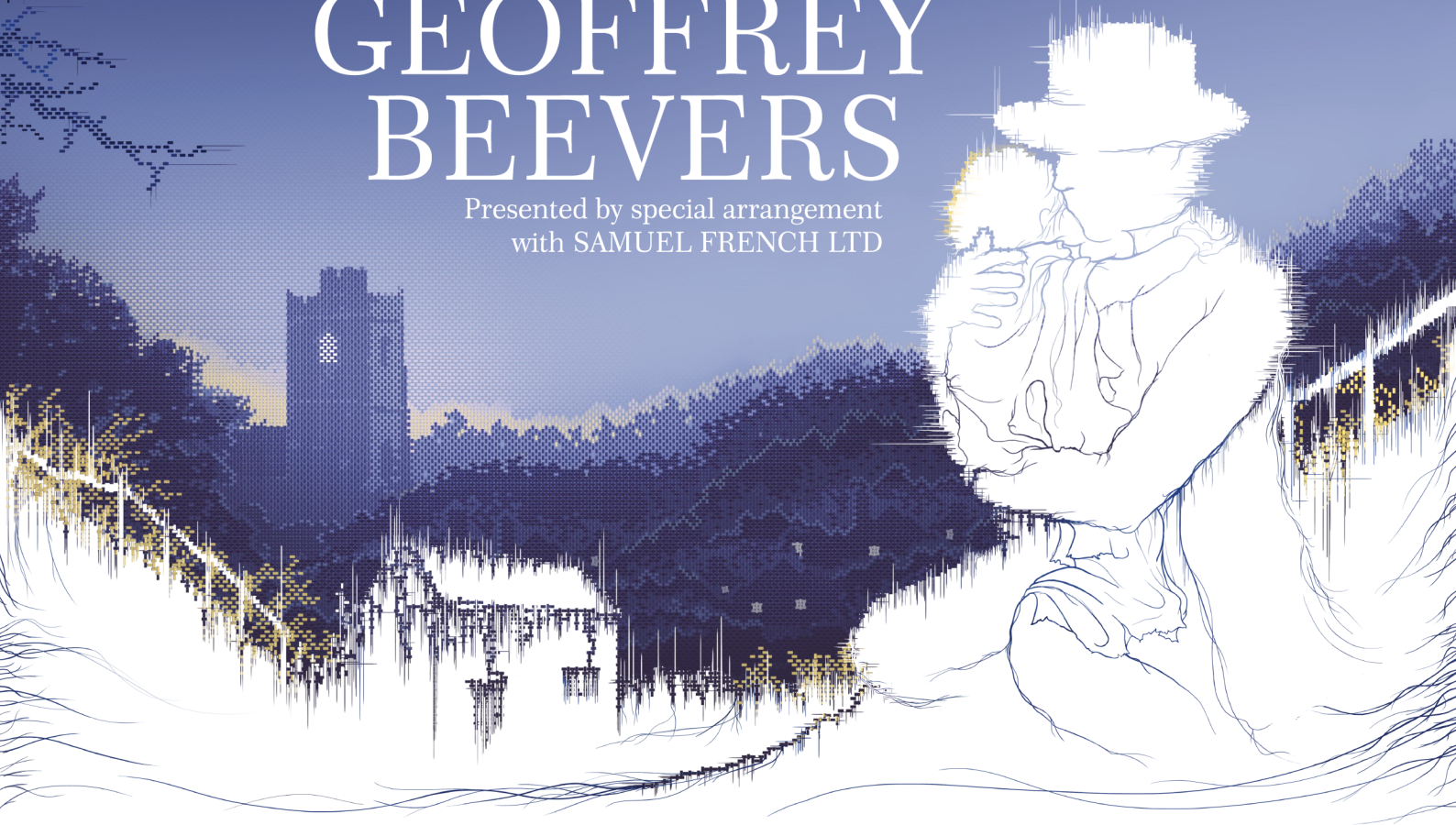
CONN ARTISTS THEATRE COMPANY
IN ASSOCIATION WITH WORTHING THEATRES AND
THE GEORGE ELIOT FELLOWSHIP PRESENT

GEORGE
ELIOT'S
**SILAS
MARNER**

ADAPTED FOR THE STAGE BY:

GEOFFREY
BEEVERS

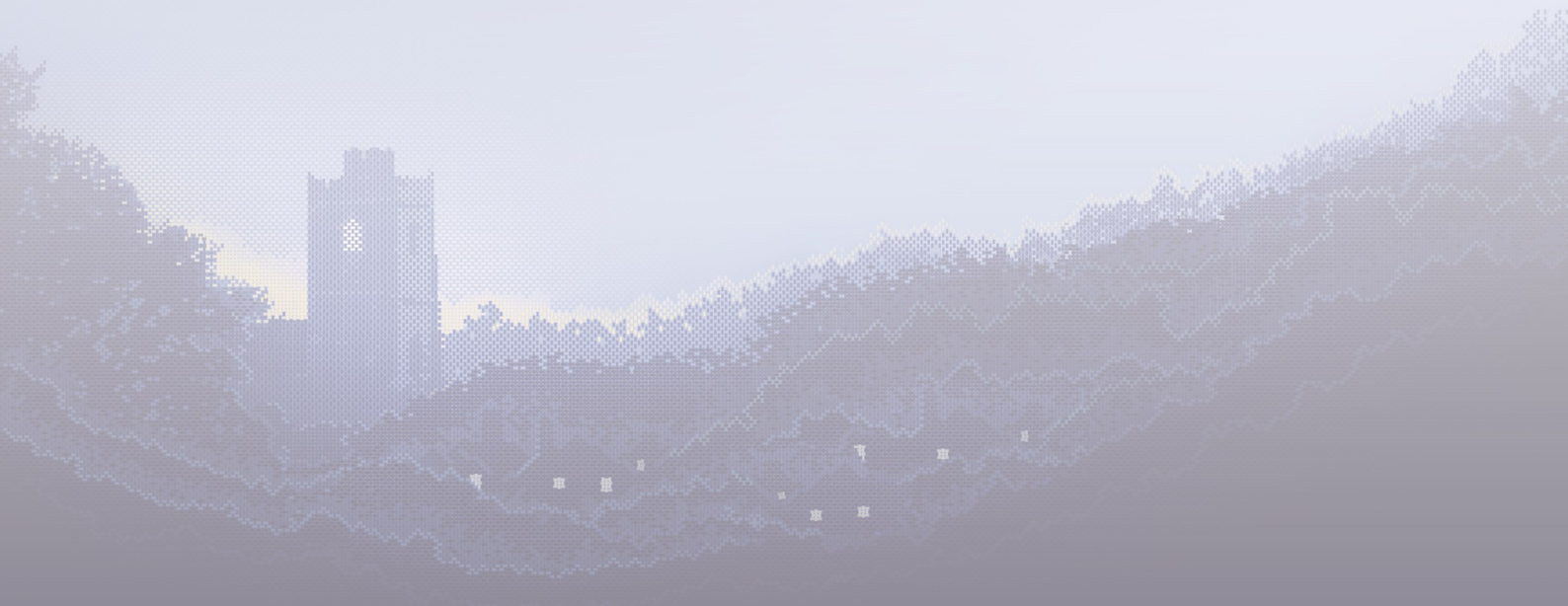
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EDUCATION PACK

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1. About the author

Though she is almost exclusively known by her pen name, George Eliot was born Mary Ann or Marian Evans, in Astley, near Coventry in 1819. Her parents were the farmer and Arbury estate manager Robert Evans and Christiana Evans the daughter of a mill owner. The provincial setting of her upbringing in Warwickshire would go on to influence some of Eliot's best known novels; she became popular for her vivid depictions of the beauty to be found in the seemingly ordinary details of country life. Eliot had two older half siblings from her father's previous marriage and for a short time was sister to twin boys who sadly died in infancy. Her mother also died while Eliot was still a girl and many have commented on the absence of mothers in her novels. Growing up with a mother who was frequently in ill health and who died just as Eliot was coming of age is thought to have impacted on her confidence. She grew up in a strict religious family and would go on to have a complicated relationship with her faith but in her youth she was a devout evangelical Christian who embraced aspects of puritanism such as modesty and maintaining a plain appearance.

The death of her mother prompted Eliot to leave school aged sixteen and attend to her father and the needs of the household, a great change to her life so far and likely a great pressure on the sixteen year old. Up until this point she had received a thorough education at several high-ranking boarding schools in which she excelled across the board. She found a significant friend and confidante in her teacher Maria Lewis and even wrote her first novel *'Edward Neville'* at the age of just fourteen. She read very widely during this time, developing a precocious interest in philosophy and ethics, which in turn increased her self-assuredness.

Eliot received a far more extensive education than was given to girls at the time. Some say that her father's motivation for this was the perception that she was not a beautiful girl and would therefore need some education of her own in case she was unable to find a husband to support her. Despite this slight it is thought that Eliot was her father's favorite child, she gained a great wealth of experience in the years she spent tending to and accompanying him on his duties. While he was conducting business she would speak to the servants and local people at the houses he visited, developing a profound understanding of their lives, as well as a great empathy for those in the workhouse or who had fallen on hard times. Even though her formal education had ceased, overtaken by her new role in the home, Eliot continued her education, accessing a library at Arbury Hall and devouring books on theology.



GEORGE ELIOT, 1864. / CSU Archives/Everett Collection / Bridgeman Images

At the age of 21, Eliot moved with her father to Coventry, which proved to be the catalyst for many important changes in her life and worldview. It was around this time that she changed her first name from Mary Ann to Marian and formed a close friendship with the philanthropic and progressive couple Charles and Cara Bray, spending many hours at their home. It was here that she was exposed to an elite social circle of great minds in the sphere of science, politics, and literature. Among those she met were Herbert Spencer, Harriet Martineau and R.W Emerson, these radical thinkers introduced Eliot to the idea that there was an alternative to the strict



South Farm on Arbury Estate, where Eliot was born | Image courtesy of Warwickshire Library and Information Service

1. About the author

religious upbringing of her youth. Eliot was offered the opportunity to translate Strauss' *Life of Jesus*, a controversial text that questioned the miracles performed in the Old Testament. This combined with years of discussion and rumination on the subject led to Eliot's decision not to attend church any more. This was a shock for her family, especially her by this time ailing father, leading to the compromise that she would continue to attend sporadically in an act of superficial conformity.

After her father's death in 1849, the Eliots travelled to Europe with the Bray's, a period that provided some much needed emotional healing and recuperation. Upon her return, Eliot became the assistant editor for the *Westminster Review*, a left wing publication. It was an extremely unusual role for a woman to hold and during this time she engaged in a number of romantic attachments, many of which were unrequited or temporary, she also continued to meet and talk with notable thinkers of the time such as Charles Dickens, Charles Darwin and Karl Marx.

In 1851 Eliot met George Henry Lewes, a critic and philosopher who was already married. This did not stop them pursuing a relationship, indeed Lewes' existing wife had already given birth to children fathered by other men and their marriage was considered to be, unusually for the time 'open'. The pair travelled in Europe together for eight months where they were accepted in more liberal, bohemian circles. Upon their return however, Eliot and Lewes' assertion of the legitimacy of their extra marital relationship created a scandal in society and her remaining family and Eliot became estranged from her brother Isaac. They would not speak until the death of Lewes in 1878.

With both of their families to support, Lewes prompted Eliot to try her hand at writing fiction. This led to the creation of the collection of stories in *Scenes of Clerical life: The sad fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton*. Lewes submitted the work anonymously to a publisher who recognised the talent of the writer immediately. He communicated with Eliot via Lewes and it was in this correspondence where she first signed off with the pseudonym George Eliot, perhaps a tribute to her beloved George Henry Lewes. She was generously paid for these submissions and received praise from Charles Dickens himself. Her second novel *Adam Bede* was an instant success, even being read by Queen Victoria. Readers were captured by Eliot's realistic worlds and the detailed characters who inhabited them. The sales of the book secured the purchase of Eliot's own house, where she lived with Lewes and his eldest son, referring to herself openly by this time as Marian Lewes. This happiness was overshadowed somewhat by the death of Eliot's sister



Griff House on the Arbury Estate, where the Eliots moved to after she was a few months old | Image courtesy of Warwickshire Library and Information Service

Chrissie, with whom she had had little contact since the beginning of her relationship with Lewes.

Adam Bede was followed by *The Mill on the Floss* in 1860 and *Silas Marner* in 1861, another enormously popular novel. Lewes continued to be a constant source of support for Eliot, as well as taking on the management of all her business negotiations and in 1863 they bought a property close to Regents Park. In 1878, after a period of ill health, George Henry Lewes died, Eliot was devastated and went into a period of intense grieving and isolation. It was months before she would receive visitors but when she did she found herself reacquainted with John Cross, a friend who had made frequent visits years earlier and who had helped Eliot and Lewes find their country residence in Surrey. Eliot and Cross began to spend leisure time together and before long Cross suggested they marry, a proposal Eliot accepted. Shortly after the wedding and much to her delight, Eliot's brother Isaac Evans re-connected with the sister he had shunned for so long.

Eliot and Cross honeymooned in Italy and enjoyed a short period of happily married life. Sadly this was not to last as Eliot became ill with kidney disease. She passed away on 22nd December 1880 and was buried in Highgate cemetery, next to her beloved Lewes. Her legacy lives on and today George Eliot and her work is lodged firmly in the canon as one of the greatest writers of literature in the West.

2. Plot Summary

Part 1

The beginning of the novel introduces the reader to Silas Marner, a lonely linen weaver living on the outskirts of Raveloe. The villagers treat him as a strange and suspicious outcast partly due to him having a medical condition (catalepsy), which causes him to periodically fit and enter a strange trance.

As a young man, Silas lived in Lantern Yard; a religious community in a city to the north. Here his seizures were regarded by folk as a sign of his closeness to God. He had a fiancé, Sarah and close friend William Dane and enjoyed popularity. However, when a bag of money goes missing, Silas is framed by William Dane- the real culprit. Silas protests his innocence but the church congregation pray and draw lots to determine whether he is guilty. Silas is confident God will clear his name but is found guilty of the theft. To add to this injustice, Sarah breaks off their engagement and instead marries William Dane. Silas leaves, feeling betrayed by humanity and by God, and moves to a cottage in Raveloe.

Once settled, Silas works hard and begins to make a regular income through his weaving. When he is not working Silas spends time counting his gold pieces. He lives a life of solitude, grieving the life he once had and only caring for the gold that he collects and covets. His only friend is Dolly Winthrop who visits with her son Aaron and brings lard cakes for Silas. On one occasion he is moved to help the cobbler's wife with a herbal remedy to ease her chest pain and this soon leads to visits from other villagers seeking their own cure. Silas refuses to help his neighbours and explains he has limited knowledge, retreating back into his reclusive existence.

The wealthy Cass family are revered and respected by all in Raveloe. Squire Cass has two sons: Godfrey and Dunstan who are each troublesome in their own way. Godfrey is secretly married to Molly Farren, an alcoholic and laudanum addict. Dunstan is the only other person to know of their secret marriage and uses this to blackmail Godfrey. The brothers owe their father money and Dunstan suggests they sell Godfrey's prize horse Wildfire in order to pay him back. Godfrey is hesitant but Dunstan threatens to reveal his secret.

He felt his heart begin to beat violently, and for a few moments he was unable to stretch out his hand and grasp the restored treasure (engraving), English School, (19th century) / Private Collection / © Look and Learn / Bridgeman Images

On his way to selling the horse, Dunstan passes Silas's cottage and contemplates how much money he must have. After selling the horse and on the way to delivering it to the new owner, Dunstan decides to take Wildfire on one last hunt. He pushes the horse too far and it ends up dead. On the walk home, he once again passes Silas' cottage and decides to try and negotiate a loan. He finds the door open and the fire roaring, there is no sign of Silas so Dunstan locates the gold and takes it.

Upon his return, Silas does not immediately notice the gold is missing, largely due to his poor eyesight. When he eventually realises it is gone he searches the whole house before going to the Rainbow pub where his obvious distress causes the villagers to feel sympathy for him.

After much discussion, a travelling peddler is blamed for Silas's robbery. Meanwhile, Dunstan's unexplained absence is put down to him trying to lie low following the death of Wildfire.



"He felt his heart begin to beat violently, and for a few moments he was unable to stretch out his hand and grasp the restored treasure."—PAGE 97.

2. Plot Summary

Godfrey Cass is pursuing the affection of Nancy Lammeter, who comes from another wealthy Raveloe family. She is oblivious to his existing marriage and is frustrated by his inconsistent wooing of her; nevertheless they share a tender moment at the New Year's Eve party held by Squire Cass. Unknown to all, Molly Farren is approaching the party with a plan to crash the event and get revenge on Godfrey for abandoning her and their infant child. The bad weather conditions mean that Molly dies in the cold and snow in an opium-fuelled deliriousness, leaving her child all alone in the elements where she will surely perish.

The child, drawn by the flickering light, wanders into Silas's cottage and falls asleep by the fire. When Silas discovers this he initially mistakes her golden hair for his missing gold returned to him, but soon realises it is a little girl and discovers her mother's dead body outside. Silas travels to the Rainbow Inn to alert the villagers and Godfrey recognises the child as his own but does not say so. Silas adopts the girl, naming her Eppie and raising her as his own daughter. Godfrey is pleased that he is now free to act on his desire to marry Nancy.

Part 2

The story picks up sixteen years later and Godfrey has married Nancy. The couple have suffered the death of their baby and long to have a child. Godfrey has suggested adoption to Nancy who refuses - believing it to be against God's will.

Silas has assumed a quiet contentment, he has embraced some of the customs of Raveloe and the people now accept him and feel warmly towards him. Silas has spent the years living alongside the beautiful and kind Eppie who has provided companionship and care to him as she has grown up. She is engaged to be married to Aaron, the son of Dolly Winthrop but also remains loyal to Silas, whom she loves as a father.

When the Stone Pits are drained and Dunstan Cass's body is discovered alongside Silas' gold Godfrey is forced to admit his past and own up to being Eppie's father. The couple visits Silas and Eppie at their cottage, offering to adopt her and give her greater financial security but Eppie denies this offer and reiterates the importance of Silas, who raised her.

Now that Silas has been given back the gold that was rightfully his he desires to visit Lantern Yard with Eppie to exonerate his name. He has spent many years discussing

the accusations made against him and has come to terms with the injustices he has suffered.

Nevertheless, he decides it would give him closure to revisit the place where this occurred and to get answers to his questions. Upon arrival, Silas and Eppie find the town a scary place and much changed. The chapel has been replaced with a factory and Silas leaves with his questions unanswered, though he and Dolly conclude that their own knowledge of the truth is all that matters. Once back in Raveloe, Eppie and Aaron marry and there is celebration through the village. Eppie concludes that she and Silas must be the happiest people in the world.



3. Principal Characters

Silas Marner

*Simple * Honest * Goodhearted * Isolated*

“There is no just God that governs the earth righteously, but a God of lies, that bears witness against the innocent.”

Silas is the protagonist of the story and a weaver by trade. He is a flawed man, created by Eliot to show that real humans who do not possess heroic traits may still demonstrate courage and growth. Silas changes a great deal throughout the novel; he undergoes trials that challenge his faith in the goodness of his fellow man as well as in God. When his best friend William Dane betrays him and the people of Lantern Yard draw lots to determine his guilt, Silas' faith in a just God is destroyed. Although at his heart Silas is a man who wishes to see the good in those around him, this core trait becomes less and less present as he endures the trials that befall him. Instead of God, Silas learns to rely on his work and then his gold. After his gold is stolen, Silas is given a new focus in the form of Eppie. Her presence in his life redeems Silas' faith in humanity and reconnects him with those around him.

Eppie

*Even-tempered * Devoted * Kind * Mischievous*

“There was ... a dreamy feeling that this child was somehow a message come to him from that far-off life.”

For the first part of the novel, Eppie appears only as a small child. She is beautiful and angelic with golden hair, evocative of the gold Silas has just lost. Eppie provides Silas with something of much greater value than the gold he has lost; she develops into a loyal daughter and acts as the bridge between Silas and the society from whom he has been detached for so long. When Eppie finds out Godfrey is her father she is staunchly opposed to his desire to replace the father she has always known and is not swayed by Godfrey's offer that she will become a lady. But the end of the novel Eppie is rewarded for her loyalty to Silas by her marriage to Aaron, the son of Dolly Winthrop.

Nancy Lammeter

*Respectable * Graceful * Diligent*

“I should never have married anybody else. But I wasn't worth doing wrong for—nothing is in this world. Nothing is so good as it seems beforehand”

As a young girl Nancy is amiable and elegant, she is the attractive and headstrong young woman whom Godfrey pursues and later marries. She has strong principles, living by a strict code of conduct that means that she does not want to associate with people of poor reputation or weak morals. She is as resistant to change as Silas, plus superstitious and compulsive. Throughout the novel there are hints that Nancy would perhaps like to forgo her rigid principles and instead allow her heart to rule her head, such as is her concealed love for Godfrey at the beginning of the novel.



Eppie | Image courtesy of Warwickshire Library and Information Service

3. Principal Characters

Dunstan Cass

*Reckless * Immoral * Manipulative*

"A dull mind ... is rarely able to retain the impression that the notion from which [an] inference started was purely problematic."

Dunstan, sometimes referred to as Dunsey, is the younger of Squire Cass's two sons. He is a rogue and a thief as well as a gambler and drunkard. In contrast to his almost redeemable brother Godfrey, Dunstan is truly bad. As seen in his exchanges with Godfrey, Dunstan is dishonest, arrogant and manipulative, often without motive. Before his death, relatively early in the novel, Dunstan commits several crimes; the irresponsible killing of Godfrey's horse Wildfire and of course the theft of Silas's gold which functions to relieve Silas of his obsession with wealth. Although Dunstan maintains an almost crude characterisation of villainy, beneath this there is a noticeable repression of his anxiety over the way others perceive him.

Godfrey Cass

*Conflicted * Indecisive * Cowardly*

"His religion will be the worship of blessed Chance ... that religion ... by which the seed brings forth a crop after its kind."

Godfrey's low status demeanor and weak will mean that he is burdened with guilt for much of the novel. Although he is the heir to the Cass estate and quite a good-natured man, he makes many questionable decisions such as marrying Molly Farren and failing to take responsibility for Eppie following her discovery by Silas. Godfrey's life is ruled by passivity; he is blackmailed by his brother who knows about his secret marriage to Molly. His only release from the shame of the marriage and his brother's manipulation is the deaths of Molly and Dunstan. Much of Godfrey's action or inaction stems from his selfishness. His

confession that he is Eppie's father happens many years too late and only once Dunstan's body has been discovered. Despite marrying Nancy, Godfrey is punished in the form of the couple's childlessness and rejection by Eppie.

Dolly Winthrop

*Kind * Wise * Selfless*

"You were hard done by that once, Master Marner, and it seems as you'll never know the rights of it; but that doesn't hinder there being a rights, Master Marner, for all it's dark to you and me"

Dolly is the epitome of Christian goodwill and kindness. Unlike Silas, she possesses an unshakeable faith. Although Silas has closed himself off from the rest of Raveloe, Dolly demonstrates the goodness of humanity and visits Silas on many occasions, cementing their friendship. With a son of her own, Aaron, Dolly provides invaluable advice when Silas adopts Eppie. She is a wonderful example of the tenderness and nurturing a mother can provide. Ultimately, Dolly believes that God has plans for everyone and mortals cannot hope to know the complexity of them.



ABOVE: Silas Marner by George Eliot, 1861. Eppie the orphan, showing Silas Marner, the weaver, how much she likes him. Illustration by Mary L.Gow (1851-1929) published 1882. / Universal History Archive/UG / Bridgeman Images

LEFT: Nancy's Married Life (engraving), English School, (19th century) / Private Collection / © Look and Learn / Bridgeman Images



4. Themes

Custom and Tradition

"It's gone, child," he [Silas Marner] said, at last, in strong agitation—"Lantern Yard's gone. It must ha' been here, because here's the house with the o'erhanging window—I know that—it's just the same; but they've made this new opening; and see that big factory! It's all gone—chapel and all."

Raveloe is ruled by the traditions it has held for hundreds of years. In many ways traditions can hold communities together and create great stability for the inhabitants. However, when a tradition is upheld merely because of custom, it can also be a barrier to the inclusion of new people or ways of life.

Silas represents a new unknown and as a result the people of Raveloe are suspicious and hostile towards him. In a broader sense, the people of Raveloe and other rural towns like it would soon be seeing great change as a result of the industrial revolution. This can be seen when Silas visits Lantern Yard at the end of the novel; so much has changed and a factory has replaced the chapel. Silas realises that the ominous changes that have altered Lantern Yard are heading for Raveloe too, but he has a newfound resilience, and perhaps even embraces change after all the good it has brought him.

Fairytales and Magic

"there might be seen in districts far away among the lanes, or deep in the bosom of the hills, certain pallid undersized men, who, by the side of the brawny country-folk, looked like the remnants of a disinherited race"

Eliot was explicit about her intention for the novel to contain mythical elements, as she was inspired in childhood by the sight of a linen weaver with a bag on his back. The residents of Raveloe see Silas as a curious and eerie outsider, a creature more than a man. There is neatness to the morality of the tale; the good are blessed and the bad are punished in a narrative form reminiscent of a fable, or folk tale. Silas, who has acted selflessly in his care for Eppie sees the greatest reward for his actions in the form of acceptance and peace. While villains such as

Dunstan meet their demise dramatically and early on in the novel. Godfrey is denied the chance to be a father to Eppie as he was so quick to disown her in the first place, which is a fitting punishment for his behavior. Although there is nothing truly implausible in the content of the story, Eliot allows for some elements to skirt very close to the fantastical. When the residents of the Rainbow Inn are discussing supernatural tales they evoke the ghostly figure of Silas into their midst, and when Silas first sees Eppie's golden hair he believes his stolen gold is returned and has morphed into the child who will save him, all in a magical alchemy reminiscent of Rumpelstiltskin, who spun hair into gold.

Chance and coincidence

"Favourable Chance is the god of all men who follow their own devices instead of obeying a law they believe in."

At the beginning of the novel, while he is at Lantern Yard, Silas believes his life to be ruled by the guiding hand of God who will take care of his destiny. However, when he is unfairly betrayed by the people of the town Silas loses faith and decides to take control of his own successes, ploughing effort into hard graft. As the novel progresses his life is moulded by coincidence and manipulated by chance, leading to his acceptance and reintegration into society. Even though the reader is fully informed about how these seemingly strange occurrences happen, Silas believes them to be inexplicable. For example, readers realise that it is coincidence that Silas's door is left open allowing Eppie to just wander in but he can't imagine a way that Eppie could have appeared other than divine intervention.

Other instances of chance and coincidence include when Silas's fate is determined by the random 'drawing of lots' by the community at Lantern Yard, the coincidence that Molly dies so close to Silas's cottage, as well as Silas's cottage happening to be vacant for the robbery. Godfrey also uses chance to his advantage and as a solution to his indecisiveness; rather than make his own decisions he relies on accidental happenings to guide his progress.

4. Themes

When Silas returns to Lantern Yard he is unable to find the redemption he seeks because the place has been very much changed. Dolly Winthrop advocates the belief that human knowledge is limited and we cannot seek to know more than we already do. She believes that only a higher power can truly ensure the happiness of an individual. This exploration of chance versus predestination is indicative of the theological position of Eliot at the time of writing. She was interested in the idea that people can behave morally and make the most of their circumstances, even if an omnipotent force does not control the trajectory of their life.

Love

"There was love between him and the child that blent them into one, and there was love between the child and the world"

Love in many forms occurs throughout the novel as Eliot shows the reader that the love of others supersedes the love of money and material possessions. The residents of Lantern Yard worship a cruel and punishing God and as such they harshly punish those they consider to be sinners, thinking only of their own salvation. Once in Raveloe, Silas develops a greater sensitivity but ultimately

only feels love for inanimate objects, namely his gold. When his gold is stolen from him Silas begins to open his heart to compassion, pitying Jem Rodney who he accuses of the theft. He feels empathy for the man, having personally experienced being wrongly accused. His subsequent apology is essentially an act of love. Dolly Winthrop is the greatest example of a kind and loving individual and it is perhaps by following her example that Silas learns to embody love towards another. The main subject of his affection turns out to be Eppie, whose innocence and joyful nature make her easy to love. Eppie is Silas's gateway to giving love, receiving love and embracing the acceptance of the villagers of Raveloe who have shunned him for so long.

By contrast, Godfrey and Dunstan have been starved of love with a distant father and a mother who is long dead. Dunstan is entirely devoid of love and acts with hatred and immorality as a result. Godfrey claims to love Nancy but their relationship seems shallow and insubstantial at times. It is only when Nancy says she could not bring herself to adopt a child and Godfrey accepts this, that he realises he truly loves her unconditionally.



5. Historical Context

Industrialisation and the disappearance of the English countryside

The first part of the novel is set before the industrial revolution, and as a weaver Silas was one of many people whose trade was a 'cottage industry'. These small industries were specialised by region, for example coal mining in the Northeast and metal production in the Midlands. Crafts people were highly skilled but the process was relatively unsophisticated. New technologies in agriculture set the cogs in motion that would lead to the industrial revolution. Where previously machinery had operated using waterpower, windmills and horse power, the advent of steam power dramatically changed this. As time went on they were put to greater and greater use and by 1800 around 2000 steam engines were being used in Britain. The result was that coal was more readily available and could be used to run machines such as power looms and weaving frames that rapidly replaced human labor.

A secret organization calling themselves the 'Luddites' rose up in protest against the destruction of the livelihoods of skilled workers. During the harsh economic era of the Napoleonic wars (1803-1815) they burned mills and smashed up factory machinery. Eliot became increasingly concerned with the rise of industrialisation and the destruction of the beautiful rural areas. She grew up witnessing the swathes of people who moved from the countryside into the workers' slums in the city. While authors like Dickens sought to depict these conditions, Eliot chose to focus on the remaining idylls.

Religious beliefs

Whilst it is known that Eliot herself had rather a complicated relationship with her faith, the novel provides a relatively neutral take on the tensions between religious beliefs at the time. The mid 19th Century was an era of religious tensions and struggles as the Anglican Church dismissed groups such as evangelicals and puritans as dissenters, and developments in science (such as Darwin's theory of evolution) challenged the religious belief in the way the world was created. In *Silas Marner* Eliot demonstrates how goodness can be achieved without God. Despite the apparent rejection of her Christian upbringing, many of her novels, including *Silas Marner* maintain a pre-occupation with spreading religious and moral codes.

While Eliot is skeptical of religion, she never truly deserted it and could not have been considered an atheist. Instead Eliot embraced the 'religion of humanity', a growing movement amongst Victorians which sought to maintain the ethical precepts of the old religion whilst doing away with the supernatural elements. We see Eliot's personal transition mirrored in the character of Silas, who seeks to save his soul himself, without the intervention of God and discovers that human values such as love, sympathy and fellow feeling amongst humans are superior to following God blindly.

Women and education

In the mid-Victorian period when Eliot was writing the novel there were great stirrings in the move towards women's emancipation; women in influential higher social spheres were beginning to reject the domestic roles assigned to them by Victorian society and take up independent careers, with women such as Florence Nightingale paving the way. Eliot herself both embodied this freedom and yet openly seemed to oppose it. Though she had been incredibly well educated and was one of the highest earning women in Britain, she was against women getting the vote and expressed concern over the setting up of a women's only college at Cambridge University.



A Pit Head, c.1775-1825 (oil on canvas), English School, (19th century) / Walker Art Gallery, National Museums Liverpool / Bridgeman Images

5. Historical Context

The problematic absence of strong or successful women in many of Eliot's novels could be indicative of these views or perhaps the absence of her own mother in her formative years. In *Silas Marner* there is a strong focus on the importance of a feminine presence within the home, as well as the isolation and sadness experienced where there is none. Silas is brought great comfort and solace from the feminine presence of Eppie who appears at his hearth, perhaps a symbol of female domesticity. Similarly, Nancy longs for a child of her own, Eppie craves a motherly figure and Silas laments the loss of his sister.

Eliot emphasises the important role of women as domestic, maternal and caretaker figures. It was exactly this stereotypic view of gender that led Eliot to use a male pen name for her novels. Her rejection of the simplistic and 'typically female' morality tale was thought to be uncouth and she would have faced backlash and risked rejection by publishers if she had presented her novels as a female author. Eliot even went so far as to satirize the commercial fiction written by and for women with her essay '*Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*' published during her time as assistant editor at *The Westminster Review*.

Class distinctions

Class distinctions are very much present in *Raveloe*, Eliot paints a picture of the lives of the working class through signifiers such as their rustic clothing, informal and colloquial language as well as the way they behave. The class divide is represented by the vast chasm between the villagers in *Raveloe* and the Cass family. For Silas, labour is nothing more than a way to collect gold coins but for the Cass family, it is an unknown because as landowners, they make their living from the rent collected from tenants. Dunstan is especially idle, spending his time stealing and betting as ways of making money without working.

In the 19th century people followed a strict social caste system and there was segregation between the rich and the poor. The *Raveloe* people are uneducated and thus they are ruled by superstition over reason, convinced that Silas is involved in black magic.

Prior to the industrial revolution the upper classes and aristocracy were the most powerful section of British

society, Eliot represents this through the characters of Squire Cass, Godfrey and Dunstan; wealthy but selfish folk who inflict damage on the rest of society. The advent of new methods of manufacture and increased trading led to a rise in professional, clerical and technical jobs that meant that the middle classes swelled in number. Owning land was no longer the only way to be rich and people defined their class by their profession rather than their family history. The middle classes began to campaign for electoral reform and free trade and the Victorians placed great value on the concept of healthy competition for social mobility, and the idea that one could overcome his humble origins if he strove hard enough.

It is significant that Eppie chooses to stay with the unassuming Silas, despite being from upper class stock. This shows that although the upper class Cass family believe they are more privileged, a greater value is placed on the hard working people who have honed their craft and toiled for what they have.



"She retreated to her father's chair again, and held him round the neck,"

6. The George Eliot Fellowship

The George Eliot Fellowship, founded by Mr. A.F Cross in 1930 has been an invaluable resource in the creation of this Education pack. The fellowship was established in response to a 25 year long campaign to create a memorial to George Eliot in her hometown of Nuneaton.

Mr. Cross gained support from academics, writers, biographers and admirers of George Eliot's work and the fellowship held annual dinners with speeches as well as laying a wreath every year at the obelisk at Arbury park, in her memory.

In 1986 the fellowship commissioned a statue of George Eliot, by local artist John Letts and it stands in Newdegate Square in Nuneaton.

This year is an especially busy one for the fellowship who are currently raising funds to transform the farm outbuildings of Eliot's childhood home, Griff House into a visitor centre in keeping with the original style of the building. They are hoping to open the centre in time for the bicentenary of George Eliot's birthday.

For more information or to sponsor the building by buying a brick or a tile, visit <https://georgeeliot2019.com>



Statue of George Eliot / Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council



Notes on Silas Marner

by Geoffrey Beevers (Adapter)

Silas Marner, the most “mythical” of all George Eliot’s novels – reads most like a fairy story or a parable. It is full of mysteries, legendary elements; weavers, ghosts and buried treasure, death in the snow, a skeleton in the quarry, gold stolen and a child found...echoes of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, *The Winter’s Tale*, even an inverted *Cinderella Story*...

There are three worlds in the story. First the world of Silas, the cottage at the Stone Pits. His journey is the stuff of fairy tales. The man with the burden on his back. Three crises: At Lantern Yard, the loss of all faith and love. Fifteen years later, the loss of his gold and the coming of the child. Another fifteen years later, the threatened loss of the child. By the time of the third crisis he has learnt to trust life again, though, with great difficulty. He is able to let go, the sign of true love. The burden on his back was not original sin, but lack of trust in life; the answer is not religion, but the ‘remedial influence of pure natural human relations’. Silas has been saved by the coming of a child in winter. A humanist equivalent of the Christmas story.

The second world is that of the Red House. A definite place, a definite time (the Napoleonic wars). Talk of horses, money, blackmail. An earthier sub plot, for once given to the landowning class? Central image of the horse...Where Silas’ crises fall on him from heaven, the corresponding crises of Godfrey’s life seem to give him more choice, mingle with the subtle dilemmas of real life. How can he go on courting Nancy, when he’s made a foolish marriage already? He trusts to luck, as does Dunsey. But luck that’s undeserved has a habit of running out, the seed brings forth a crop according to its kind. Nevertheless, when Nemesis comes, his belated honesty unexpectedly brings Nancy closer to him...Nancy’s journey is interesting too, from narrowness to an unexpected generosity. Their story is not all loss.

“It came to me first of all quite suddenly as a sort of legendary tale, suggested by my recollections of having once, in early childhood, seen a linen-weaver with a bag on his back.” - George Eliot

Yet George Eliot seems to be harder on privilege than she is in some of her other novels. The treatment of the

‘horse riding’ classes is more satiric, there is criticism of laziness and waste, a lack of responsibility to the poor, and finally a narrowness of vision. Aaron says “There need nobody run short of victuals if the land was made the most on.” Parallels with the message of *Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

The third world in the story is the world of Raveloe, the Rainbow. The voices of the village folk. Their journey in the play mirrors that of Silas. They go from hostility and suspicion, gradually to accept him, to include him. They carry the gift of inclusion, interpreted according to country wisdom, almost like a chorus. Led by Macey and Dolly – not idealised, full of faults and prejudices, comic at times, but there is always respect for their inner lives. George Eliot’s description of humour: it “affirms all that is genuinely human” and is “an exuberant sympathy in company with the ludicrous”. In fact, doesn’t the whole story move slowly from the mythic and destructive, towards the real and human?

Then there’s the movement, from male authority, to female influence in the story. As the Squire dies, Nancy and Priscilla come into the Red House, Eppie grows, and Silas discovers a gentler side of himself under the influence of Dolly. Godfrey is effectively sidelined and the women’s choices become the important ones. At the end, all hangs on the choice of Eppie, the child woman, and it is the wisest in the play.

Remembering why I was first drawn to adapt this novel, it was partly the challenge, a huge theme in a small space. A large number of characters, a small cast. A span of thirty years in one evening. How to realise in the audience’s imagination such things as looms and hunts and horses dying, or children growing from babies to adults. But mostly it is the chance to revisit George Eliot, to share with a live audience the ironic brilliance of her mind, and her hard won, sharp felt compassion.

*A child, more than all other gifts
That earth can offer to declining man,
Brings hope with it, and forward-looking thoughts*
- Wordsworth (Michael 1800)

Costume & Set Design

by Laura Kimber

The Costume for the production, unlike the set, would have to be naturalistic to an extent. If you go to extreme abstract or minimalist you risk your audiences interpretation of the period in which it was set. We are limited by budget, time and personnel restraints so to hire in or buy costume is the most sensible option, some of these characters need more than one change of costume so to make all of them from scratch is a tall order.

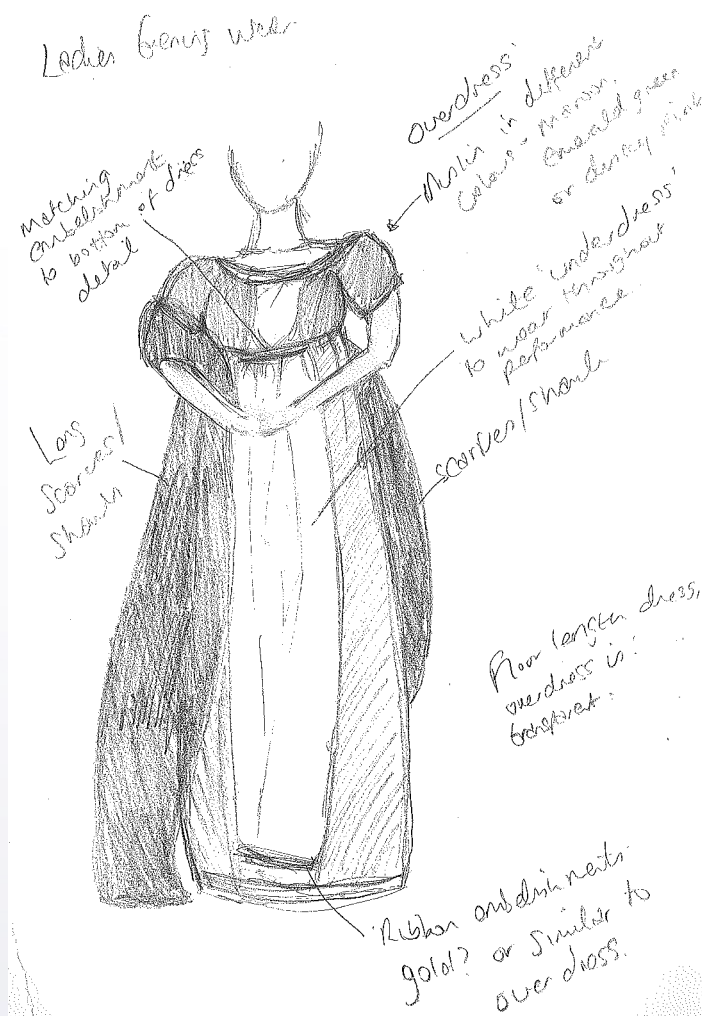
I did want a little bit of imagination to be used with the costumes, as one of the themes throughout the play is the weaving and the selling of linen, using material throughout was an idea that helped with the budgets and also actually finding the period costumes in the first place. Introducing a way to change costume without going off stage would be interesting, so the idea of placing boxes and other furniture on stage which contained the material was put to the director.

A majority of what happens on stage can come out of the rehearsals, so designs and ideas need to be fluid. Props lists are also created but worked upon and the director can ask for something complex last minute so there is always a challenge to find the right item to fit the period and the budget!

To design a set for a production you have many elements to consider; does the production stay in one place; does it need to show every scene; does the director have ideas that they would like portrayed in the set; will it be a naturalistic, abstract or absurdist piece; will it be obvious to the audience what it is or what it is trying to say; does it need to be obvious?

With any design you want to make a statement as it is your work being shown, but you also don't want to distract from the action on the stage, not to make it too complicated so it does not work or breaks or fails whilst the production is live on stage. The Actors have their job to do as do the Technicians so the set has got to be 'self sufficient' to an extent. So I was thinking about all this when coming up with the initial design for Silas Marner.

The brief I gave myself was; it had to show 4 main areas of where the play was set (Silas Marner's Cottage, The Red House, The Stone Quarry and the front of Silas'



cottage); it had to be small enough for some stages and large enough to not look too insignificant on the larger stages; it had to be transportable in a van alongside the other equipment needed; not too heavy and bulky; to be quickly assembled and taken down by 3 people each time we got to the different venues. Also budget restraints are to be considered.

The first step is to read the play in full, then make notes about colours, shades, moods, textures and then an idea starts to formulate. I thought about the actors being visible and using the set to pick out their props and costume so they have easy access to these without going out of sight, I thought about the Loom and how it's a central part of the central character's life.

I thought about Silas' life and how his life weaves its way into the community around him so my mind went to visualising a 'door way' with cotton and threads winding themselves around the frames. We needed more than one door way because we needed to represent the different settings featured in the play, so this was added, as was a third wall which was filled in as with a wall in a house or lit a different way could be the carved cliff side of the quarry.

I decided to rule out the use of projection as it is not an easy thing to tour because of all the rigging and focusing needed and also risky that the actors may knock it out of focus if not placed correctly, the play is a period drama so a projector could not be easily camouflaged in the set. So the design needed to in one state reflect all the places the play is set.

The easiest approach is usually to make it with wooden or material flats and paint them to depict the scenes. This suits some productions but not all and I felt it not suit this particular production. I prefer the slightly abstract/

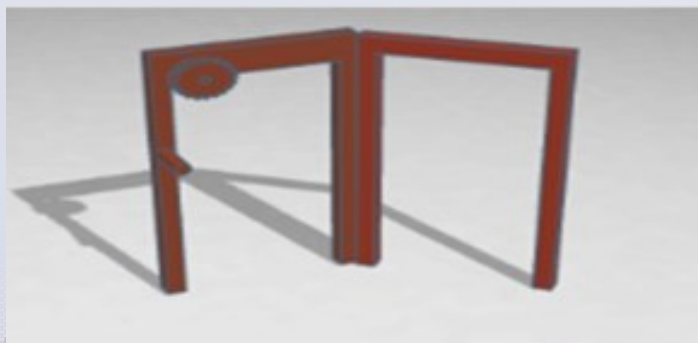
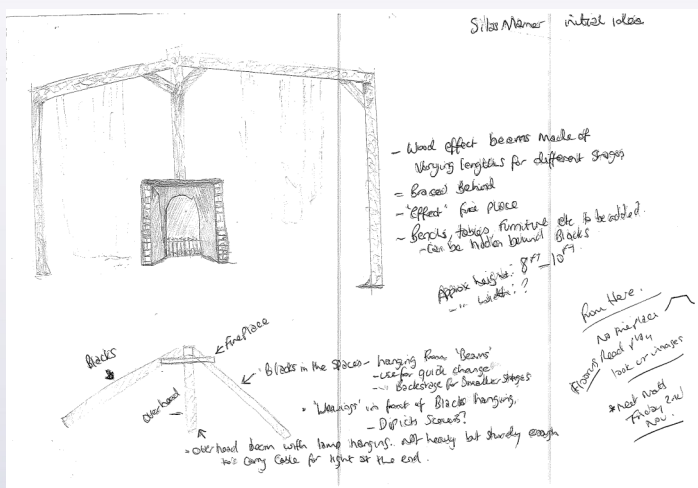
minimalist look which gives the audience something to imagine whilst they are watching the drama unfold. After reading the Geoffrey Beevers adaptation of the play two things stood out for me, the use of the actors on the stage at all times and the lack of Loom in Silas' Cottage. I started there with the design.

My next step was to get this out of my mind and into something to show the director and Technical Manager so it could start the discussion about if this was to work and how the director could visualise the actors using and moving around the set and also for the Tech point of view as they will be constructing and assembling the set. With this I could either sketch it out, (not all designers can necessarily draw well I have discovered!) make it as a model or use computer software. I chose the latter two. These are the results:

The model box is a rough mock up of the idea, it shows in 3D what I had imagined but not in scale, this would be realised in greater detail later on. The image of the software is just the start of the design being created to show you how it all started. The great thing about the programme is that you can make it with all the dimensions, this would be given to the Tech manager to use to build the end result.

This design was discussed in a meeting with the Director, Tech Manager and Producer, plus myself and another member of the design team. Out of that meeting came some fantastic ideas about the use of the Loom as a 'working device' and how we give more of a visualisation for the other scenes for example the snow outside Silas' Cottage when we first meet Eppie after Molly comes to find Godfrey, the dance scene and the stone quarry.

Without giving any more away, what came out of that meeting along with anything that comes out of rehearsals is what you will see on the stage.



Silas Marner

Notes by Nick Young (Director)

What a book! What a story! What a wonderful piece of living theatre!! Silas Marner is one of the great works of literature, but sometimes underestimated.

The book is set at a time of change in English society, just as we are going through a massive change today. It is a change where the small village community is being superseded by the industrial revolution and a great manufacturing city of the North. Silas himself represents a dying breed of journeyman artisans that must have been part of English society for 1000 years. He's a lone Weaver as for now, but the task of weaving is being taken over by the huge 'satanic' mills of Lancashire and Yorkshire.

The book and play look at two societies: the North and Lantern Yard, where Silas is falsely accused of theft and loses the love of his fiancée, and he is ostracised from society and leaves for the South. He loses his Christian faith, and moves to Raveloe in the south where he becomes a hermit, spending all his time weaving for gold. This second community is far more easy going, but they are suspicious of all strangers – especially those who live alone and shun society as Silas does. When Silas has his gold stolen, he appears to have lost everything, but the loss of the gold leads to his redemption with the arrival of the orphan Eppie.

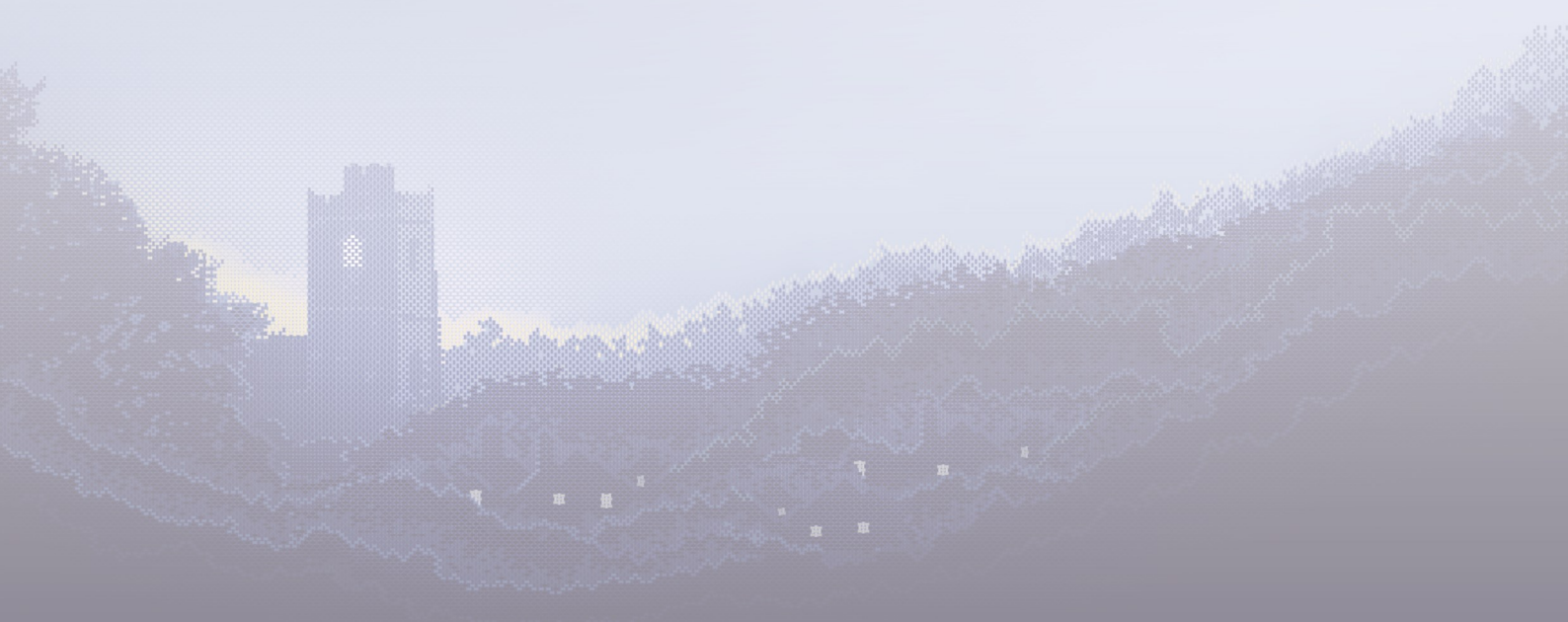
The stage version of Silas Marner is a wonderful opportunity for actors to create live theatre- it's sounds and actions using the simplest of props to create a whole community and action. Masks and puppets are used to

enhance the production. The great range of three-dimensional characters, and the moral dilemmas faced by many of them, offers performers enormous scope, whilst at the same time creating an ensemble company.

Silas is a naïve loner. Life treats him appallingly. But he does not allow feelings of hatred to overcome him. He 'shuts down,' as who would not in such circumstances, but when fate grants him Eppie, he allows love and kindness to thaw his character, and he is justly rewarded.

The book and play do have elements of Victorian melodrama, also what is known as 'pathetic fallacy', a literary device in which human emotions are attributed to aspects of nature, such as the weather. There is an Ibsen-like quality to the plotting and characters as well.

Silas Marner is a multi-faceted piece of work which draws the audience in, has them sitting on the edge of their seats, makes them worry about what will be the outcome of a situation, and allows them to rejoice in the 'happily ever after' conclusion, which has only been earned through the behaviour of the eponymous hero.



Activities & Discussion

The following are suggestions meant to offer students studying the novel and those who will be coming to see the live stage production ideas to stimulate discussion and exercises to try out.

Before seeing the production

- Re-read Chapter 3 of the novel and explore the relationship between the two brothers Godfrey and Dunstan Cass. How are their individual characters established? What are their primary motivations? What do they want? What are their attitudes to money, each other and to other people including their father Squire Cass and Nancy Lammeter? How does this scene contribute to the portrayal of the upper class in the story?
- Look back at the Themes section regarding Fairytales and Magic and discuss the question Geoffrey Beevers raises in his *Notes on Silas Marner* when he asks “In fact, doesn’t the whole story move slowly from the mythic and destructive, toward the real and human?” Can you cite other scenes, moments and specific examples from the novel which demonstrate this? Why do you think George Eliot uses this movement in the story?
- Discuss Geoffrey Beevers’ assertion in his notes about “the movement from male authority, to female influence in the story”. As well as referencing examples from the novel discuss modern comparisons and parallels with women’s roles in today’s society including family life and the workplace. What are the differences between now and the time of Eliot’s novel? Are there any similarities?
- Explore George Eliot’s attitude towards religion and her views on life. How is this reflected in the novel? Discuss the differences between Lantern Yard’s harsh treatment and wrongful condemning of Silas Marner with the compassion and acceptance ultimately found in the village of Raveloe.

ACTING EXERCISE: walk about the room imagining you are at party. Now nominate or decide as a group to exclude one particular person. You all have to make sure you put another person between *that* person and yourself at all times with the largest possible distance between you. After 1-2 mins ask the person who was singled out how they felt about being ostracised by the group.

After seeing the production

- Discuss the set and costume in the production – how were these used to highlight the themes in the play?
- Choose one particular character in the story and compare the actor’s live performance with your original reading of the character in the novel. How well did the actor depict the character as you had envisaged them to be beforehand and did the live performance change your opinion of the character in any way? How did the actor’s performance bring the character alive?
- If you were given a budget of £1000 to adapt and produce a stage version of *Silas Marner* for a school performance that could last no longer than 1 hour and 30 minutes how would you do it? How many actors would you use? How would you design the show? Are there any aspects of the story that you would want to specifically highlight for a modern audience especially when considering current issues of today such as immigration, including refugees, homelessness (cf. Eppie when abandoned in the snow due to her mother’s death) and the break-up or loss of communities; adoption and more diverse and unconventional forms of family life being accepted; poverty and addiction (cf. Molly Farren); and the pursuit of money not leading to happiness (cf. Silas’ obsessive hoarding of gold coins; cf. Godfrey and Dunsey’s use of and attitude towards money) when considering today’s over-emphasis on the accumulation of wealth.

Conn Artists Theatre Company

We are the professional in-house theatre company at the Connaught Theatre Worthing who have supported us since 2013.

Conn Artists was founded by Ross Muir, Laura Kimber and Matthew Pike out of a passionate desire to keep regional theatre burning bright and alive. The aim was to give opportunities to like-minded artists to come together and create exciting theatre work which would tour.

In 2017 we mounted our first regional tour with an adaptation of Hilaire Belloc's book 'The Four Men' adapted by Ann Feloy and directed by former Artistic Director of the Connaught Theatre, Nick Young. Supported by the South Downs National Park Authority and working in partnership with Worthing Museum the show was a critical success with regional audiences receiving 5 star and 4 star reviews in The Argus, The Stage, The Sussex Newspaper and Theatre South East.

Prior to this, in 2015 we produced the UK premiere of 'Courage' by John Pielmeier adapted from the writings of J.M. Barrie receiving a 4 star "tour de force" review in The Argus. In 2014 we were awarded Arts Council England funding for a revival of Neil Simon's 'The Good Doctor'. That same year, we contributed a piece to Worthing's first WOW Literary Festival for which we produced Michael MacLiammoir's 'The Importance of Being Oscar' directed by Mitch Jenkins; Ross Muir received a standing ovation for his performance and the Mayor of Worthing tweeted "Best one-man show I've ever seen".

Back in 2013, where it all began, our debut production of 'Vintage Hitchcock: A Live Radio Play' was supported by a Worthing Community Chest grant. The Argus said, "Based on this production, Worthing audiences can look forward with anticipation to future work from this excellent company".

Workshops

Interactive workshops led by members of the *Silas Marner* acting company are available for schools. These explore the themes within the story in a practical way with students looking at and discussing key scenes.

As our tour is funded by Arts Council England the workshops are available at a specially reduced and subsidised rate of **£120 per workshop**. To book or to enquire about a workshop session please contact ross@conn-artists.co.uk


About this Pack

This pack was written by Lucy Fennell with contributions from Geoffrey Beevers, Nick Young, Laura Kimber and Ross Muir. Contents may be reproduced for educational purposes but not for commercial use without prior consent of Conn Artists Theatre Company.

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Silas Marner - Tour 2019

Thursday 26th September 7:30pm	Connaught Theatre, Worthing
Friday 27th September 2:00pm & 7:30pm	Connaught Theatre, Worthing
Saturday 28th September 7:30pm	Connaught Theatre, Worthing
Monday 30th September 7:30pm	Maddermarket Theatre, Norwich
Tuesday 1st October 2:00pm & 7:30pm	Maddermarket Theatre, Norwich
Wednesday 2nd October 7:30pm	Hazlitt Theatre, Maidstone
Thursday 3rd October 7:30pm	The Spring Arts & Heritage Centre, Havant
Friday 4th October 8:00pm	The Sherling Studio, Lighthouse Poole
Saturday 5th October 7:30pm	The Phoenix Theatre & Arts Centre, Bordon
Tuesday 8th October (private performance)	Colyton Grammar School, Devon
Wednesday 9th October 7:30pm	Theatre Royal Margate
Thursday 10th October 7:30pm	Stantonbury Theatre, Milton Keynes
Friday 11th October 7:30pm	Norden Farm Centre for the Arts, Maidenhead
Saturday 12th October 7:30pm	Sussex Studio, White Rock Theatre, Hastings
Sunday 13th October 7:30pm	The Capitol, Horsham
Tuesday 15th October 7:30pm	Pomegranate Theatre, Chesterfield
Wednesday 16th October 2:00pm & 7:30pm	Pomegranate Theatre, Chesterfield
Thursday 17th October 7:30pm	The Georgian Theatre Royal, Richmond, North Yorkshire
Friday 18th October 2:00pm & 7:30pm	The Albany Theatre, Coventry
Saturday 19th October 2:30pm & 7:30pm	The Albany Theatre, Coventry



Further Reading

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/eliot/dawson1.html>

<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/an-introduction-to-silas-marner-fairytale-realism-and-labour>

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/0ded/80671deb1053a5bb4b71289c03112f82c5d2.pdf>

<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/book-of-a-lifetime-silas-marner-by-george-eliot-1771566.html>

<https://www.arcjournals.org/pdfs/ijsell/v4-i8/3.pdf>

<https://www.cambridgescholars.com/download/sample/58927>

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/56273443@N04/collections/72157628997755395>

