

## Report from the Santa Monica Reading Group: *Mansfield Park* and *Silas Marner*

Hearing that the Ventura Reading Group, inspired by the imaginalist genius of Gracia Fay Ellwod, had read and compared *Mansfield Park* and *Silas Marner*, the Santa Monica Reading Group invited her to join us for our April meeting, to help us have a similar discussion. The meeting was held at a member's Malibu home, and seldom can poor old Silas and nasty Mrs. Norris have been canvassed in a lovelier setting, with crashing surf almost up to the deck as we ate an array of chocolate and lemon cakes that would have sated even Dr. Grant's gourmandism.



The first, urgent question addressed was: Why, in our youth, was *Silas Marner* ever inflicted upon high school students? I remember being completely unable to read it at sixteen, though I had read Sartre, Dostoyevsky, and Margaret Mitchell. Jane Austen, in describing Eleanor Tilney's husband, wrote, "the most charming young man in the world is instantly before the imagination of us all," and to picture the most boring book in the world, for many decades I had to go no farther than to pronounce the name of *Silas Marner*. I presumed that in maturity I might be more equipped to understand and even enjoy the book; and indeed it has so happened: the themes of adoption and humanism are much better suited for older readers, as is the difficult language. Eliot often writes with quite convoluted prose, especially in the beginning; her sentences can be tortuously tangled, a crime of which our unparalleled Austen is never guilty.

Yet the narrative begins to unfold in smoother, more comprehensible style, and is enjoyable in its evocation of pastoral England "in the early years of this century." 19<sup>th</sup>, that is, when Jane Austen still walked the earth, before Eliot was born (she was born in 1819, two years after Austen's death). Eliot's rural descriptions remind me of the rural quietude and superstitious legends of Mary Webb's *Precious Bane*, as when she writes, "Such strange lingering echoes of the old demon-worship might perhaps even now be caught by the diligent listener among the grey-haired peasantry."

*Silas Marner* has a kind of mythic feeling, with the golden treasure disappearing, and golden-haired Eppie appearing, as if by magic; its fairy tale aspect reminded me of Rumpelstiltskin. Perhaps the most important theme that *Silas Marner* and *Mansfield Park* have in common is adoption, as both books examine whether the "real" parent is the adoptive or the biological. In *Silas Marner*, the subject of childlessness is powerfully

addressed. Is Eliot speaking autobiographically? A longing for children is something that does not permeate Austen's books, though she, like Eliot, was childless. But Austen had many children in her life, her family being almost as unexampledly numerous as John Thorpe suggested to General Tilney about Catherine Moreland's family. Eliot may not have had children in her life, but unlike Austen, she was "in a relationship," as they say, with George Lewes, at the time of writing *Marnet* (1861).



Eliot writes, "It is very different - it is much worse for a man to be disappointed in that way; a woman can always be satisfied with devoting herself to her husband, but a man wants something that will make him look forward more - and sitting by the fire is so much duller to him than to a woman."

We cannot imagine many of Austen's characters being "dull" sitting by the fire, for there always seems to be someone conversing with great "spirit and flow," and children in the drawing-room are seen mainly as a nuisance. Austen writes about a class that is above *Marnet's* workingman level, but she is never sentimental about children, whereas Eliot's toothache-inducing sugary Eppie must be one of the sappiest little girls in literary creation - she is specifically what made me run screaming from *Silas Marner* at age sixteen, with as much gaping horror as Lydia felt for Fordyce's Sermons.

Although George Eliot was famously an unbeliever, *Silas Marner* is suffused with religious and moralistic thought. For example, the good but rigid character believes that one must bend to the will of Providence. "She would have given up making a purchase at a particular place, if, on three successive times, rain, or some other cause of Heaven's sending, had formed an obstacle." Is there anybody in Austen that believes such precepts? Who is the most rigidly religious character in Austen? In *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas is strict, and Edmund devout, but both are men of reason. Nancy's beliefs are held without understanding, and smack of superstition. Mrs. Norris, though a clergyman's wife, ironically may be the most superstitious person in all of Jane Austen, providing, as she does, a charm for a servant's ague. Yet she could not be farther from a person of simple, trusting faith.

Eliot writes of religion as opium: "the highest calling and election was to do without opium and live through all our pain with conscious, clear-eyed endurance," though she did not preach agnosticism for others. It's interesting in this context that the poor

character Molly is an opium addict. We cannot imagine that Austen ever seeing religion as opium, even though she did measure out the laudanum drops for her mother.

*Silas Marner* is a story of nemesis, of the inexorable results of the choices people make. Eliot's simple country characters believe that Heaven shows the right. Silas and Dolly are "trusten," but upper class Geoffrey arrives at wisdom through reason, more like Austen characters. Austen's characters get their just deserts too, but in a more realistic way.

Two tiny bits that I liked very much in the book: Eliot describes a small but vital thing I've never seen described in fiction before. "That quiet mutual gaze of a trusting husband and wife is like the first moment of rest or refuge from a great weariness or a great danger." She has caught the exact significance of that moment when you first come home and meet your mate's eyes.

Then there is the tortoiseshell cat. A terrier "rushed with a worrying noise at a tortoiseshell kitten under the loom, and then rushed back with a sharp bark again, as much to say, 'I have done my duty by this feeble creature, you perceive,' while the lady-mother of the kitten sat sunning her white bosom in the window, and looked round with a sleepy air of expecting caresses, though she was not going to take any trouble for them." (This gives me an excuse to present an illustration of one of my own tortoiseshell kittens.) Eliot writes, "The presence of this happy animal life was not the only change which had come over the interior of the stone cottage." It signals the great change in Silas himself, coming to life - and we have seen in my own household, how animals bring a home to new life. In *Silas Marner*, Eliot shows what children do for a life, and the idea is artfully reflected in this little scene with animals.



Martial the Magnificent

Yet despite such charming moments, and even now that we are old enough to appreciate some beauties in *Marner*, there is no question which book we love more, can reread endlessly, and whose truths we find more enduring: *Mansfield Park*. Old Silas was very, very lucky to get even this second chance.

**Diana Birchall**

***Lydia Bennet's Story* by Jane Odiwe  
Reviewed by Natasha Zwick**

It's always a good sign when Diana Birchall is quoted on the cover of a book. And though, at first, Lydia's observations here didn't feel quite like Lydia's would, the text does ultimately make Lydia into a sympathetic character, one a lot more like her sisters Jane and Elizabeth than *Pride and Prejudice* would leave us thinking she could be. Lydia does many things of which her sisters would be ashamed. She flirts with her own family's servant, she kisses some guy at a dance, and she does things just so her sisters will be jealous. At the same time, in this text, the narrator has the girl thinking more deeply than I think she would. On the first page, for instance, Lydia confesses that Mr. Wickham "has a way of looking into [her] eyes which [she finds] most disconcerting," which seems to me something Lydia wouldn't think. Later, Lydia wishes that her father would say something nice about her; at least this time, the narrator acknowledges the incongruity between her words here and her behavior in *P&P*: "Despite the appearance Lydia gave of caring little for his remarks . . . ."

Her diary and the omniscient narration of the events in it also reveal more than I want to know about the character whose scenes, even in *P&P*, are my least favorite. We perfectly understand now how Lydia and Kitty came, with money enough for shopping, to greet Elizabeth on her journey home from Hunsford; their father needed them out of the house, and was willing to pay to make sure that happened. We learn about how Lydia came to dress Chamberlayne in women's clothes, how much like her mother Lydia really is (she gets "flutterings" all over her when she's excited about Brighton, for instance), how Wickham really gets to Lydia (by embarrassing her), and how Lydia decides that Wickham is no longer the "rightful property" of Elizabeth.

Ultimately, what this work achieves, more than the capturing of the *P&P* Lydia's voice, is the development of sympathy for her in an audience that is unlikely to begin reading the work with a shred of any. That development begins early on, when Wickham first offers to show Lydia around Brighton and she does not plan to take him up on his offer. Our feelings devolve into real pity when an eligible bachelor with money and interest in Lydia kisses her badly. It isn't her fault, after all, that Wickham knows what he's doing, and this other poor shlep does not. It is Wickham who interrupts an unfulfilling make-out session between Lydia and this handsome captain—and Lydia and Wickham slap each other. The violence and unkindness that will soon dominate their relationship is lightly hinted at here—but Lydia, in her silly 15-year-old naiveté, doesn't see it.

So Lydia feels repulsed by the touch of a man who really could court her, and it's almost inevitable that Wickham sweeps in and seduces her. When Wickham finally kisses her—in a dark cavern, away from all their friends, mind you—Lydia is not wholly innocent (she has blown out the candle), but she is not prepared to handle the treachery of this man, and for that, we feel for her. Wickham continues to court another woman, runs out of money, tells Lydia he needs to leave town immediately, and is offered this gift: Lydia has a little money and will give it and herself to Wickham, but only if he takes her with

him. He, with sighs, agrees, and Lydia has duped herself into thinking he proposed marriage. We—and he—know he plans no such thing. “Poor, stupid girl,” indeed.

The interaction with Darcy offers reasonable explanations. Why was Lydia not home when Darcy first visited Wickham? She was finally permitted a shopping excursion. Also interesting is that Wickham knows he needs Darcy’s help, and he actually instructs Lydia to be polite to Darcy, but she doesn’t want to. We see Wickham for exactly what he is, but Lydia, though she is learning, still doesn’t.

The wedding day offers moments of pride—in Mrs. Gardiner, whose performance in scolding Lydia is awesome, and revulsion—in Lydia, who fake cries after getting angry at Wickham for threatening to “thrash” her if she tells anyone Darcy was at their wedding. This is a disgusting spectacle. Still, the reader feels sorry for Lydia, who has been threatened by her new husband on her wedding day, until she wonders how her poor mama can “get rid” of Elizabeth and Jane, whom, she predicts, will soon be old maids.

Just when you’re thinking that maybe she deserves her fate after all, Lydia catches Wickham cheating and unrepentant, and the whole charade begins to crumble. Once Lydia sees that he has never loved her the way she loves him, she begins to change into someone we can not only tolerate, but also want to be happy. Lydia is soon admitting—but only to her diary—what a huge mistake she made, and now she assumes full responsibility for it, even as she decides to show the world only her former, giddy, gloating self so that no one triumphs over her.

This sudden and painful self-awareness and isolation make her attractively sympathetic now, and not just to us. A handsome brother of a friend of Lydia’s keeps appearing, and though Lydia thinks he’s constantly judging and scorning her, we recognize these behaviors from a certain laconic gentleman and know what should happen. Thanks to an additional act of Wickham’s past, all we have to do is wait for it to unfold, and the waiting is so much fun to read.

I can see now why Diana so enjoyed this romp. Only a woman who felt the need to bring some attention to Mrs. Elton’s side of the story could so thoroughly sympathize with Odiwe’s plight in making us care about Lydia as anything other than her sisters’ sister, but much to my surprise and enjoyment, Odiwe—like Birchall before her—succeeds.



Jane Odiwe is a popular English artist and Austen illustrator, and her work can be seen at her website. <http://www.austeneffusions.com/>