

George Eliot's Moral Vision in *Silas Marner*

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Introduction

The reputation of George Eliot (1819-1880) rests mainly on her novels *Adam Bede* 1859, *The Mill on the Floss* 1860, *Silas Marner* 1861 and *Middlemarch* 1871. In *Adam Bede* George Eliot examines the driving forces of her characters who suffer from their inherent egoism and self-deception. *The Mill on the Floss* is a detailed study of a girl's growth towards maturation . In this novel the reader can see that there is a feeling of warmth that comes from the close relationship between the writer and her heroine. *Middlemarch* is, I believe, a masterpiece. According to Virginia Woolf *Middlemarch* is " one of the few English novels written for grownup people." ¹ The novel talks about a static society threatened by the political, economic and intellectual changes from outside. The deep analysis of human nature gives the book a remarkable characteristic.

Silas Marner is a novel of profound moral concerns. The novel shows that George Eliot's approach to the art of fiction is intellectual and analytical. With great respect to truth, David Cecil states that George Eliot " was something very unlike the typical Victorian novelists, she was an intellectual writer." ² George Eliot is not only an intellectual novelist, she is a writer of profound moral vision and psychological penetration. *Silas Marner* is the embodiment of the essence of George Eliot's moral views as it discusses the spiritual development of Silas and his painful struggle to break free from the prison of egoism into a life of sympathy and affection with his community. Silas achieves transcendence of the self with the help of Eppie who fills his heart with light, hope and love.

This study deals with the moral creed that George Eliot tries to propagate in *Silas Marner*. The study falls into three sections. Section One gives an outline of the novel. Section Two concentrates on the moral concerns of the book. Section Three gives a conclusion to the whole study and sums up its findings .

Notes

1. See David Carroll, *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage* ,
(London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p.43.

2. David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists* , (Britain: Collins, 1934), p.217

Section One

An Outline of *Silas Marner*

Silas Marner is a poor weaver who lives in a simple cottage near a village called Raveloe . The people around him look at him with suspicion for many reasons: his trade, the fact that he looks different from the rest of the villagers, his suffering from fits, his knowledge of certain herbs that cure some diseases , and his refusal to communicate with the rest of the people in the village.

During the previous fifteen years of his life Silas has been living in a town where he was a member of a small sect that has some strict religious beliefs. This sect was called the Latern Yard Community. Silas was an extremely honest, simple man who believed strongly in God and the people in the Latern Yard Community. But he was betrayed by his best friend, William Dane, and Silas was accused of stealing money. Actually the money was stolen by William Dane. Silas declared his innocence. The Latern Yard Community decided to use a special way of testing guilt called a drawing of lots, a method sanctioned by the Bible. The lots declared that Silas to be the thief. In this way they accused an innocent person. Accordingly Silas lost faith in God and man and he left his town .

For the next fifteen years Silas settles lonely in Raveloe . His only aim is to acquire money. He works day and night in order to amass gold coins. As he trusts nobody , Silas keeps his gold in a hole inside his cottage.

The richest and most important man in Raveloe is Squire Cass. He has two sons: Dunstan and Godfrey . The former is a vicious man; the latter is a good person, but his weakness has strongly affected the whole course of his life. Hence he makes an unfortunate and secret marriage with a women called Molly Farren who is a drug addict. Dunstan knows about this marriage and he begins to blackmail Godfrey. If Godfrey will not give him money he threatens that he will tell his father about Godfrey's secret marriage .Godfrey is frightened that his father will disinherit him. So he agrees to give his horse to Dunstan to sell it to get money. But, acting foolishly, Dunstan kills the horse. He returns through the fog to the village of Raveloe. He comes across Silas Marner's cottage. He enters inside and steals the gold and disappears.

When Silas returns to his cottage, he finds his money gone. He is completely brokenhearted. He goes to the Rainbow Inn to seek help. The people show their sympathy as they treat him with kindness. They suggest that the peddler might steal the money. With deeply-felt grief Silas returns home and one of his fits attacks him and he falls down on the ground.

Squire Cass holds a party at his house on Christmas. He invited all the important people to the party. Nancy Lammeter who is a very beautiful girl attends the party. Godfrey loves Nancy but he cannot marry her because he is already married. Nancy, of course, does not know this. During the party a tragic event happens to Molly Farren. She makes up her mind to go to the party to tell the truth. On her way to the party she is overcome by drugs and falls down and

dies in the snow. Her little girl finds her way to Silas's cottage. She enters inside and falls asleep beside the fire. When Silas recovers from his fit, he thinks that his gold has returned to him. Then he realizes that it is the golden hair of a little girl. Looking outside his cottage, Silas finds her mother dead in the snow. Silas goes to the Squire to tell what he has discovered. Godfrey knows that it is his wife and child, but he remains silent.

Silas says that he will keep the little girl. Godfrey could not object because he could not acknowledge his past marriage, otherwise he would lose both his inheritance and Nancy Lammeter, his beloved.

Therefore he remains silent. Silas names the little girl Eppie and brings her up as his own daughter. She provides him with a purpose in life. Gradually he begins to mix with the rest of the people in the village. All the villagers love Eppie and respect Silas for his kindness to her.

Time passes quickly and now almost sixteen years have gone. The stone pit , which is next to Silas's cottage, is drained. The skeleton of Dunstan and Silas's gold are found. Hence the thief is known. Godfrey tells Nancy about his brother. He also tells her about his previous marriage. Godfrey and Nancy get married, but they have no children. So they decide to adopt Eppie. However, Eppie refuses to leave Silas because he is the only father she has ever known. Thus Godfrey is punished for his negligence of his duty many years before. The novel comes to its end with the marriage of Eppie to Aaron Winthrop. They will live with Silas, who, through his love of the child, has been restored to his faith in God and in man.

Section Two

George Eliote's Moral Concerns in *Silas Marnier*

As a novelist, George Eloit is quite conscious of the responsibility of the function of the artist. In a letter to Mrs. Taylor George Eliot says:

My function is that of the aesthetic, not
of the doctrinal teacher—the rousing of the
nobler emotions, which make mankind desire
special right, not the prescribing of special
measures, concerning which the artistic mind,
however strongly moved by social sympathy,
is often not the best judge.¹

She embodies her moral earnestness in terms of aesthetic teaching which is different from didacticism. She believes that the substructure of dogma cannot endure. Her moral vision is essentially humanistic: " The greatest benefit", she says, " we owe to the artist... is the extension of our sympathies."² George Eliot believes that evoking sympathy is a means of teaching. She always tries to achieve noble aims in her works. Thus she observes:

The only effect I ardently long to produce
by my writing is that those who read them
should be better able to imagine and to feel

the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring, human creatures.³

George Eliot's moral concerns and her human sympathy are successfully submerged into the texture of life, vividly depicted and dramatically presented. *Silas Marner* asserts that human love is more important than gold. Eppie, the child, drawn by a bright glancing light on the snowy ground, leaves its dying mother and toddles into Silas's cottage and squats before the hearth. After recovering from his trance, Silas sees her lying asleep, and mistakes her yellow hair for his lost gold. The love she awakens in him brings life and happiness into his heart which has become almost as dead as the machine he operates in his cottage.

The substitution of the child for the lost gold means to transfer Silas's affection from his sterile hoard of gold to the child who gives him a new and living relationship with his community. She helps him free himself from egoism and attain enlightenment as he realizes the barrenness of his previous life. He is aware of the sterility of his life.

The treasure that has been sent to him is, unlike gold, beyond the reach of thieves. Thus he states to Mrs. Winthrop : " There's good i' this world-I've a feeling o' that now; and it makes a man feel as there's a good more nor he can see, I' spite o' the trouble and the wickedness."⁴

In *Silas Marner* George Eliot emphasizes the sublime influence of pure innocent love on human beings. The novelist says that "we see no white-winged angels now. But yet men are led away from threatening destruction: a hand is put into theirs, which leads them forth gently towards a calm and bright land, so that they look no more backward; and the hand may be a little child's."⁵ Marner embraces the blessing that has been sent to him. Eppie awakens a bright gleam of love in his soul. Their lives become inseparable. A fine passage in chapter sixteen is a good example in this respect:

The tender and peculiar love with which Silas had reared her in almost inseparable companionship with himself, aided by the seclusion of their dwelling, had preserved her from the lowering influence of the village talk and habits Perfect love has a breath of poetry which can exalt the relations of the least-instructed human beings; and this breath of poetry had surrounded Eppie from the time when she had followed the bright gleam that beckoned her to Silas's hearth.⁶

Eppie's remedial influence upon Silas's character is great and she deeply transformed his vision of life. She gives fresh water to Silas's withered soul. The stealing of his money would have sent him grave. But simply he regards it an act of wickedness. Now he is so happy that he does not care whether his money comes back to him or not for he has something that is more precious than his

lost gold. His outlook has been changed as he undergoes a process of redemption.

In fact, the theme of redemption and regeneration is a central idea in *Silas Marner*. Eppie's appearance in Silas's life makes him aware of the futility of his past life. The following conversation between Silas and Eppie illustrates this theme:

"If it hadn't been for you, they'd have taken me
to the workhouse, and there'd have been nobody
to love me."

" Eh, my precious child, the blessing was mine . If
you hadn't been sent to me, I should ha' gone to
the grave in my misery. The money was taken away
from me in time; and you see it's been kept-kept
till it was wanted for you. It's wonderful- our
life is wonderful " ⁷

Eppie has not only regenerated him, but she has redeemed him as well. She is a redeemer. This is why he calls her a blessing. His life has gained meaning. He is no longer a prisoner of egoism. So the transformation of his life is real and effective.

By the passage of time Godfrey, Eppie's real father, confesses to Nancy, his wife that he had done a moral mistake by leaving Eppie unowned. Now he feels the great spiritual pain of his folly:

" Nancy," said Godfrey, slowly" when I married
you, I hid something from you—something I ought
to have told you. That woman Marner found dead in
the snow—Eppie's mother—that wretched woman—
was my wife: Eppie is my child." ⁸

He goes on saying that because he loves Nancy he keeps this secret from her. He knows, of course, that this is another mistake:

" I oughtn't to have left the child unowned:
I oughtn't to have kept it from you. But I
couldn't bear to give you up, Nancy. I was led
away into marrying her—I suffered for it." ⁹

Nancy's suggestion to her husband increases his suffering because it is painful:

"Godfrey, if you had but told me this six
years ago, we would have done some of our duty
by the child. Do you think I'd have refused to
take her in, if I'd known she was yours? ¹⁰

Godfrey realizes that his mistakes are not simply futile. They are moral weaknesses that prove him a failure. But Godfrey's justification for what he had done, though we may not accept it, shows that he was afraid of losing his beloved:

" But you wouldn't have married me then, Nancy,
if I'd told you You may think you would now,
but you wouldn't then. With your pride and your
father's, you'd have hated having anything to do
with me after the talk there'd have been." ¹¹

Godfrey acknowledges his moral mistakes. He asks his wife to forgive him: "I'm a worse man than you thought I was, Nancy... can you forgive me ever?"¹². His wife's answer makes his wound even more painful:

"The wrong to me is but little, Godfrey: you've made it up to me – you've been good to me for fifteen years. It is another you did wrong to; and I doubt it can never be all made up for."¹³

Hoping to set right what has gone wrong, Godfrey and Nancy go to Silas's house to take Eppie from him. Though Eppie becomes the centre of his life, Silas does not want to be an obstacle to Eppie's good. He asks her to decide with whom she would go:

"Eppie, my child speaks. I won't stand in your way."¹⁴ But looking at her newly-revealed father, Eppie remarks: "Thank you, ma'am – thank you, sir. But I can't leave my father, nor own anybody nearer than him."¹⁵ Eppie's decided answer comes to increase the sense of guilt of her father who tries to persuade her saying:

"But I've a claim on you, Eppie—the strongest of all claims. It's my duty, Marner, to own Eppie as my child, and provide for her. She's my own child—her mother was my wife. I have a natural claim on her that must stand before every other."¹⁶

But Godfrey's plea is in vain because Eppie will never respond to him for he turned his back upon her long ago. Godfrey's claim fails and he remains childless to the end of his life.

George Eliot also attacks the lazy, dishonest, unreliable and weak men who ignore the law, the social and the moral codes, and substitute Chance for their god. Thus in chapter nine the novelist says: "favourable Chance ... is the god of all men who follow their own devices instead of obeying a law they believe in."¹⁷ Godfrey and Dunstan are examples in this respect. Both of them show a lack of humanity and a lack of duty. Each one of them has affected Silas's life in a different way. Dunstan's robbery would have driven Silas to madness. Godfrey's attempt to take Eppie from him can be considered more dangerous because it means the separation of the soul from Silas's body.

It is important to point out that George Eliot thinks that in spite of his greed for gold, Silas remains at heart a simple man who is free of vice. He could never do any act that would injure another human being. He is sharply contrasted with Dunstan Cass. Silas is innately good, Dunstan is innately wicked. Both of them love gold, but the cause of their love is different, and the ways through which they get gold are also different. Silas works to get gold, Dunstan steals. Silas's confidence in man is not destroyed as he is reunited with his community in good terms. He achieves moral integrity whereas Dunstan ends in moral and physical death.

Section Three

Conclusion

The writing of *Silas Marner* marks a watershed in George Eliot's career. The novelist tries to achieve noble moral aims. She helps the reader imagine and feel the pains and the joys of her characters who are real living people. The novel demonstrates George Eliot's belief that the minds of humble people can be made noble through suffering. The essence of the novelist's moral vision is her adherence to what we call the transcendence of self. The spiritual development of the hero is the painful struggle to free himself from the prison of egoism into a life of love and sympathy with his society.

The process of sorrow through which Silas passes enables him to establish a healthy relationship with his world and to understand himself better as he realizes his own faults. This growth is seen by the novelist as a growth of noble feelings. Silas Marner suffers a lot in his loneliness and the appearance of Eppie represents a turning point in the whole direction of his life as it puts an end to his suffering and opens a new stage of life for him.

In *Silas Marner* George Eliot emphasizes the sublime influence of pure innocent love on people. Silas's pure love for Eppie makes him a completely different character. His love for the child substitutes his love for gold. Through love he redeems and regenerates himself. Silas is no longer alone in life, he has someone to love. This power of love redeems Silas from his inner hell.

The novel also expresses George Eliot's belief that shedding tears is not enough to expiate one's moral faults. Godfrey's tears are powerless to bring Eppie to his large red house. He committed a big moral mistake as he abandoned his own child for fear of losing Nancy. Now he is paying the penalty of what he had done. This is why he remains childless to the end his life.

In *Silas Marner* the novelist attacks the ignorant and lazy people in society. Dunstan is an example in this respect. His desire for gold drives him to his tragic end.

The moral concerns of George Eliot in *Silas Marner* are so deep and abundant that we cannot give them their due analysis in a limited study as this. But, I hope, I have touched upon some of the main points which represent the tap-root of the novelist's moral vision.

Notes

¹Quoted in W.J.Harvey, *The Art Of George Eliot*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1969) , p. 38.

²*George Eliot : Essays*, ed. By Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963) p. 270.

³Quoted in Joan Bennet, *George Eliot : Her Mind and Her Art*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1948, rep.1962),p.96.

⁴George Elio, *Silas Marner*, (Longmans 1967), ch.16,p.170.

Subsequent references will appear in my text.

⁵Ibid.,ch.14,p.155.

⁶Ibid.,ch.16,p.171.

⁷Ibid., ch.19,p.193.

⁸Ibid.,ch.18,p.190.

⁹Ibid.,ch.18,p.190.

¹⁰.Ibid.,ch.18,p.191.

¹¹Ibid.,ch.18,p.191.

¹²Ibid.,ch.18,pp.191-2.

¹³ Ibid.,ch.18,p.192.

¹⁴Ibid.,ch.19,p.197.

¹⁵Ibid.,ch.19,p.197.

¹⁶ Ibid.,ch.19,p.198.

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