



Weaving a New Ethics in George Eliot's *Silas Marner*

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Abstract— *Sensitive to the moral problems of their time, Victorian writers in general strive to invent a more appropriate moral code to bridge the axiological gap and foster the advent of a more humane society. George Eliot is one of them. In her novels, she keeps expounding moral principles that constitute her ethical philosophy. Drawing on New Historicism and intertextuality, this paper aims to explore Eliot's ethical thinking in Silas Marner. Specifically, it looks at how Eliot, drawing on her own experiences and the various intellectual sources of her time, forges a moral philosophy through her narrative. The analysis concludes that Eliot proposes humanist values such as love, altruism, honesty, understanding, and compassion to counteract the malevolent forces of egoism and wickedness that are corroding society and have ultimately revealed the moral and social danger of Christian doctrine.*



Keywords— *Silas Marner, Eliot, ethics, affection, humanity*

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest literary periods of the UK, the Victorian era is also considered to be the first golden age of the British novel. It notably witnessed the rise and blooming of the social novels. This one was chiefly concerned with the denunciation of the multifarious social injustices essentially resulting from the Industrial Revolution. The chief representatives of this social protest novel include Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Kingsley, Elizabeth Gaskell, the Brontë sisters, Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, and Thomas Hardy.

Alongside the social novel, and similar to it in many respects, developed a form of novel that assumes a plainly moralizing role, that is “to teach and delight” (Xiao 1816), as Sir Philip Sydney earlier put it. These novelists that include Tomas Carlyle (1795-1881), Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), John Stuart Mill (1806-1877), and George Eliot (1819-1880) attempted to draw lines of good conduct in an age where religion, the main moral source, started waning and proved ineffective to guide man’s behaviour. With the decline of faith, literature took over as the receptacle and promoter of values. Thomas Carlyle asserts in this respect that “literature is a branch of Religion, and always participates in its characters: however, in our time it is the only branch that still shows any greenness; and, as

some think, must one day become the main stem” (Qted Xiao1817). Therefore, in the line of German writers such as Hegel and Goethe, the above-mentioned Victorian British writers endowed their aesthetics with a religious or, more precisely, an ethical mission.

George Eliot, the pen name of Mary Ann Evans, proved to be particularly steadfast in this objective of building, through literature, new ethical lines in a context of religious and moral crisis. “Her own age regarded her as an ethical teacher” (Campbell 1). The problematic of ethics is then one of the most central issues of her novels. There are a variety of ethics and a large number of ethical theoreticians. However, ethics is here understood in its broadest sense as a system of thought that teaches how man should act so as to make living in society possible. From her first novel, *Adam Bede* (1859) to the last one, *Daniel Deronda* (1876) through *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner* (1861), *Romola* (1863), *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866), and *Middlemarch* (1871), the British writer keeps displaying moral problems that affected the Victorian society and implicitly suggesting crisis exit solutions. She achieves this by combining a set of complex realities drawn from her own experience, but also from the rich and dynamic intellectual and literary context of her time. She writes: “I have a growing conviction that we may measure true moral and

intellectual culture by the comprehension and veneration given to all forms of thoughts which have influenced large masses of mankind" (Campbell 23). *Silas Marner: the Weaver of Raveloe*, her third novel, seems to perfectly epitomize the plural moral teachings of Eliot. Similar to her eponymous protagonist who weaves like a spider, Eliot weaves an ethical philosophy through the two tumultuous stories of the novel. In this work, we endeavour to unfold the basic moral principles that Eliot has carefully wrapped in her rich and complex narrative.

This study will be conducted with the help of two main literary theories, namely New Historicism and intertextuality. The theory of New Historicism, which teaches us that a literary work is the product of its author's cultural context, will enable us to see how Eliot based her ethical thought on her own experiences and the different currents of thought of her time. In the same vein, the intertextual approach will enable us to see the points of junction between Eliot's narrative text and the many philosophical texts that have guided the English writer's thinking.

II. THE FORMATION OF ELIOT'S MORAL THOUGHT: FROM DOGMATISM TO FREETHINKING

Eliot's ethical creed is at the image of Victorian England that provides its contextual framework. Indeed, like the complex nineteenth-century English society where a multitude of contradictory ideas and social realities existed side by side, the moral philosophy of Eliot is not a homogenous and well structured thought. It is rather made up of a set of diverse moral principles. This can be explained by the multiple sources of influence of Eliot.

Mary Evans is not only a novelist. She is also a critic, a journalist, and a translator who very early developed a taste for reading. Moreover, her father, Robert Evans (1773-1849) ensured his daughter a basic quality education. She left school at the age of 16 mainly because of her mother's illness and became a self-taught woman. In fact, she completed her intellectual training thanks to her incredibly wide and varied readings and the various intellectual encounters with a large number of great thinkers. This mainly accounts for her vast literary and philosophical culture with which her novels are infused. Therefore, the heterogeneity of Eliot's moral vision results from the novelist's choice to draw from her rich readings, but also from her life experiences, the substance of her literary outputs. A few illustrations of her major influences are necessary to help better grasp the formation of Eliot's moral vision.

Like Thomas Hardy, Eliot came from provincial English, precisely in Griff countryside. She was born into an Anglican Family and was known to be a "very sensitive child, endowed with an emotional nature" (Campbell 5). Robert Evans, her father, had a simple and practical attitude to religion. His Christianity was "a quiet, unimpassioned thing, a simple teaching of rules of life, with dimly expected rewards and punishments to be proportioned to one's actions" (Deakin 23). From this religious conception, Robert built a simple moral line consisting in being honest, truthful and doing one's duty (Jones 11). He attempted to impart these moral principles to her daughter.

At the age of nine, Eliot boarded at Miss Wallington's School in Nuneaton. Maria Lewis, the principal governess of the school, was the tutor of the little Eliot, "early possessed of intense moral earnestness and a passionate nature which tended toward self-mistrust and self-mortification" (Campbell 6). Lewis exercised the first major influence on Eliot and instilled in her an evangelical faith. Deakin (18-19) describes Lewis' religion as

mild and sentimental, emphasizing love and salvation rather than hell fire. She read her Bible constantly and taught its moral examples to her pupils; she visited the sick, comforted the mourner, and embroidered slippers for the curate. The Evangelicalism she inculcated in Mary Anne was a gentle benevolence.

Eliot's subsequent stay at Misses Franklin's boarding school in Coventry at the age of twelve put her to the test of the strict Calvinism. She read extensive Calvinistic writings. The religious teachings of the two sisters, Rebecca and Mary Franklin, combined with her readings, accentuated her evangelical fervour imbued with an austere Calvinistic moral discipline. This one was centred on moral rectitude, self-respect, personal responsibility, and obedience to authority. "In addition to church attendance and prayer meetings, Mary Ann's religious pursuits included organizing clothing clubs and visiting the poor in Coventry" (Jones 14).

Four years under the tutelage of Maria Lewis and three under Rebecca and Mary Franklin were enough to instil into Eliot a strong evangelical faith. Her keen interest in Christianity led her to wish to do further research on the history of this religion. Such an impulse produced nonetheless an unexpected effect. Eliot actually started grappling with a feeling of religious uncertainty. Her first doubts about religion came with her reading of Isaac Taylor's *Ancient Christianity, and the Doctrine of the Oxford Tracts*. Taylor emphasized the unreasonable nature of a faith that encourages self-repression. His views also

caused her (Eliot) to question her ethical assumptions" (Campbell 9).

The Christian faith of the young girl, whose mother had died 5 years before, definitively collapsed in 1841-42 when she settled in Foleshill in the north Coventry with her father. In Coventry, the young Evans was exposed to the influences of new friends such as Charles Bray and the Unitarian Charles Hennel. The two brothers-in-law had both freethinking attitudes to religion. While Bray encouraged her embryonic agnosticism (religious scepticism), the reading of Hennel's *An Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838) precipitated Eliot's loss of Christian faith. Hennel considered that Christianity was not a divine revelation but a mere part of human natural history. In a letter to her father who did not bear her disbelief, Eliot confesses that she regarded the Bible "as histories consisting of mingled truth and fiction" (Purkis 24). Eliot's agnosticism grew owing to the debates she had with other radical thinkers who used to meet at Rosehill, Bray's house where he lived with his wife Caroline known as Cara Bray, Charles Hennel's sister and Eliot's close friend. These liberal thinkers, known as the Rosehill circle, discussed subjects like religion, philosophy, humanitarian values, and politics. They included Robert Owen, Dr John Connolly, Herbert Spencer, George Combe, John Chapman, Auguste Comte, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Fox, James Simpson, and George Dawson.

Eliot's loss of faith was not an isolated or singular fact, but a common reality in Victorian England and in the West as a whole. Indeed, in addition to biblical criticisms, the evolutionary theories of geologists and biologists, specially Darwin with his seminal work, *On the Origin of Species* (1859), introduced widespread scientific ideas that contradicted some of the fundamental teachings of the Bible. The capitalistic mentality inherent in the Industrial Revolution contributed also to diverting people from spiritual concerns to the idea of acquiring material goods. All this resulted in a general decline of faith and, contrastingly, a reverence for science and the idea of progress.

"When faith was lost, man was placed in an indifferent universe that provided neither a response to his consciousness nor a sanction to his values" (Zhang & Zeng 447). There was then an urgent need to establish new bases of morality. Eliot did not find it difficult to invent a new ethics detached from Christian doctrine, that is, a "moral world without God"¹. This is all the more obvious since she much interacted with people (the Rosehill circle specifically) who, though having no belief in God, were

much concerned about moral issues. The enlightened views of these liberal thinkers who hastened her religious scepticism helped her build a secular ethical code.

Hennel instilled in her a moral tenet that he shared with Bray, namely the belief in the doctrine of consequences as a moral law of the universe. According to this natural moral law, which is not antithetical to Eliot's former Calvinistic beliefs, man's good action bears its reward while the bad one bears its own punishment. No one can escape then, here on earth, the consequences of one's actions. Eliot's translation of David Strauss' *The Life of Jesus critically Examined* (1835), few years after her rejection of Christianity, and later her translation of Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), played also a major role in the formation of her half secular and half Christian ethical creed. Like Hennel, Strauss and Feuerbach, though invalidating Christian dogmas, acknowledged the importance and social utility of Christian ethics centred on the humanistic values of love, honesty, helpfulness, and sympathy for the others. Hennel argued that once liberated from the 'fables' surrounding its origins, Christianity can be regarded as 'a system of elevated thought and feeling' (Gaston 319).

Like these three thinkers, Eliot accepted the morality derived from Christianity, while refusing to base her ethics on a belief in a God that will punish wrongdoers and reward benefactors. She declared: "I cannot rank among my principles of action a fear of vengeance eternal, gratitude for predestined salvation, or a revelation of future glories as a reward," (Masters 506). This paradoxical attitude that Eliot and some of her English counterparts adopted towards Christianity earned them this sarcastic remark by Nietzsche (80): "They have got rid of the Christian God, and now feel obliged to cling all the more firmly to Christian morality: that is English consistency, let us not blame it on little blue-stockings à la Eliot." For the theoretician of nihilism for whom the idea of God is one of humanity's false idols, a Christian morality is not only bad; it simply makes no sense.

Eliot was neither a nihilist nor a devout Christian. She was a humanist much concerned with giving a secular, human and rational dimension to the moral values conveyed by religious teachings. To sustain her Christian-like ethics (love, sympathy, honesty, helpfulness, etc.) freed from religious doctrine, she largely leant on the original moral thoughts of Hennel, Strauss, and Feuerbach. She also fed on the ethical thought of the positivist Auguste Comte and of Benedict de Spinoza whose *Ethics* she translated into English in 1856. Because the ideas of these various thinkers constitute the cornerstone of Eliot's moral philosophy, their

¹ In reference to the title of Zhang and Zeng's article entitled « A Moral World Without God : on the religion of

Humanity of George Eliot in *Silas Marner* » (see bibliography)

elaboration in the coming discussion proves necessary. Eliot aesthetically and differently expounds her moral vision in her seven novels. However, the novel that offers a much straight and plain expression of her moral ideas is undoubtedly *Silas Marner* (1861).

III. AN OVERVIEW OF *SILAS MARNER*

Two stories are intertwined together in *Silas Marner*. The first and the main one is about Silas Marner. He is an outstanding member of a Christian sect, a Calvinist congregation, in the industrial English town called Lantern Yard. His close friend, William Dane, robs the money of the religious community and falsely accuses him of being the author of the theft. After an irrational trial system founded upon praying and drawing lots, Silas is found guilty by the brethren and excommunicated. Scandalized and losing all faith in God and in man, he leaves Lantern Yard and settles in the outskirts of a village named Raveloe. In this countryside, he lives in complete isolation like a hermit for 15 years. The villagers regard him with much suspicion as a foreigner. Silas too avoid any relationship with them. His only concern is to work hard (linen weaving) and gain much money. Different incidents in his life gradually drag Silas Marner out of the life of reclusion. The last and the most important one is an orphan and “fatherless” little girl who toddles in his cottage. Silas adopts her and names her Eppie. His love for Eppie and the sympathy that the villagers show him thanks to the girl totally and positively change his life. He and Eppie live happily. Silas gains back his faith in God and in man. He reconciles with himself and his social environment.

The secondary story of the novel revolves around Godfrey Cass, the eldest son of the wealthiest and most respectable family in Raveloe where Silas settled after he leaves Lantern Yard. His immoral younger brother, Dunstan, has maliciously led him to secretly marry a drug-addicted and lower-class girl, Molly Farren. The couple has a little girl. Godfrey is afraid that his father, Squire Cass, will disown him if he discovers the secret marriage. Knowing that, the dishonest Dunstan keeps blackmailing his brother whenever he needs money by threatening to disclose the secret to their father. Godfrey is at the same time in love with Nancy Lammeter, a socially reputable and attractive girl. He is tormented by the idea that Nancy will refuse to marry him if she learns about his secret marriage. These two basic fears drive the good-natured Godfrey to think and act in quite a selfish and cowardly way. He takes advantage of the death of Molly to espouse Nancy. He is not however happy with his new wife since they are childless. He considers then the idea of snatching Eppie from Silas, which Nancy is categorically opposed to. What Nancy does not yet know is

that Eppie is Godfrey's daughter. Learning of the tragic death of Dunstan, Godfrey decides to unveil the secret to his wife, with the aim of convincing her of the legitimacy of taking back Eppie. When he and her wife go to see Eppie at Marner's to convince her to join them she refuses, claiming that the only true father she has is Silas Marner whom she will live with forever. Godfrey admits all his faults and confesses that he cannot expect anything but unhappiness. In these two interlaced stories are interwoven the main principles of Eliot's moral philosophy that we attempt to disentangle.

IV. THE IMMORALITY OF CHRISTIAN DOGMA

The essence of Eliot's moral teachings is structured around the story of Silas Marner, the novel's protagonist. Each of the different experiences of Silas is a literary portrayal of moral principles. They are offered as examples of what should or should not be done. Through Silas's various experiences, Eliot exposes the moral shortcomings of Victorian society and at the same time outline a social ethic as a solution.

One of these evils is the rigid adherence to religious beliefs. Eliot highlights this through Silas's troubled experience in Lantern Yard. He is victim of the narrowness of view of the religious community in Lantern Yard that the narrator refers to as a “little hidden world” (5). The narrow view of these church members refers to their inability to make “an effort of independent thought” (2), as a result of the inhibiting nature of their doctrines or dogmas. An “official judgement or decree” (Acts 16:4) in the Bible, dogma is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “a belief or sets of belief held by a group or an organization that others are expected to accept without argument”. The Christian dogma is a faith in what the church establishes as irrefutably true and which implies a strict morality.

A former Evangelical and Calvinist Christian, Eliot was acquainted with the Christian dogma. The realisation that such a doctrine did not accord with her emotional, sympathetic and understanding temperament and with her ideas (Masters 506), most of which resulted from the influence of her freethinkers friends and or her admired liberal thinkers, led her to free herself from the grip of dogmatic belief. Growing into a religious sceptic, she proved critical of any form of ideology held as undeniably true. She saw religious doctrine as an evil that unfortunately constitutes the drive of actions of most people.

The narrator's description, in flashback mode, of the “narrow religious sect” (5), in Lantern Yard stems from the author's will to emphasize the irrational and harmful nature of rigid religious principles. In a deterministic view of cause

and effect, characteristic of the positivism of August Comte and the philosophy of Spinoza with which she was familiar, Eliot, through her narrator, traces the metamorphosis of Marner's inward life (5) back to his experience in the religious circle in Lantern Yard.

The first remark that can be drawn from the narrator's portrayal of the religious congregation in Silas' hometown is that dogma makes one intellectually blind. Silas for example is so convinced of the power of prayer that he rejected, as unlawful, the practical and efficient medicinal herbs that he inherited from his mother. He even goes so far as to deprive himself of the "delight to wander through the fields in search of foxglove and dandelion and coltsfoot" (6) which he considers to be a temptation of the devil. A large proportion of his weekly earnings (a low salary as he works for a wholesale dealer) goes to object of piety and charity (12). Silas' religious radicalism and asceticism remind us of the fanaticism of Eliot's evangelical teachers in Nuneaton that preached the doctrines of "serious Christianity" (Purkis 29). They have also much to do with Eliot's own former Calvinistic zeal and self-mortification spirit that pushed her to reject worldly pleasures.

The irony implied in the portrayal of Silas' devotion, which prevents him from enjoying the simple delight to stroll in the fields, can be an echo of the influence on Eliot of Spinoza's moral view. Following an epicurean tradition, Spinoza insists on the need to take advantage of the petty delights of existence. "It is part of a wise man", he writes, "to refresh and invigorate himself with moderate and pleasant eating and drinking, with sweet scents and the beauty of green plants..." (Spinoza 218). Eliot's renunciation of the austere culture of her childhood and her adherence to the counter culture of liberal bourgeois in Coventry, led her to consider self-denial as useless. Like Isaac Taylor, she arrived at the conclusion that this form of superhuman piety is almost impractical if it does not promote the welfare of others (Campbell 9). The dogma that dictates its law in the church assembling in Lantern Yard does not seemingly contribute to the well-being of its members, still less to that of the others who are external to it. On the contrary, it proves to be as harmful as a poison.

William Dane makes uses of the blind nature of faith to put all brethren to sleep and veil his moral shortcomings. According to the omniscient narrator, William is nasty and haughty. He is extremely wicked toward weaker brethren and considers himself very enlightened and wiser even than his teachers. Yet, he manages to have all his co-religionists believe that he is "a shining instance of youthful piety" (6). For Silas - "with whom he had long lived in such a close friendship that it was the custom of their Lantern Yard brethren to call them David and Jonathan" (6) - William is

simply faultless. William's false accusation of theft against his closest friend, Silas, constitutes then a biting irony.

Silas is known for his particular discipline; he is highly thought of and is believed to be a young man of exemplary life and ardent faith (5). In consequence, the accusation against him would have easily been found groundless if the brethren had not fallen in the trap of the blinding nature of dogmatism. To better shoe his Christian brothers and convince them of Silas's guilt, William resorts to the persuasive power of words drawn from the Calvinistic moral theology, with a focus on the idea of sin and repentance. He first succeeds in making them believe that the cataleptic fits of Silas, which was first commonly agreed to be a divine sign, looks "more like a visitation of Satan than a proof of divine favour" (7). He then exhorts "his friend to see that he hid no accursed thing within his soul" (7) and "to confess, and not to hide his sin any longer" (8). Silas and the other brethren are so short of spirit of discernment that they are unable to realize that William is rolling out a plan, under the guise of religious devotion, to morally destroy his so-called friend. Mazaheri (13) points out with relevance: "William Dane represented the fake religious person, a Tartuffe, whereas Silas was rather the naive kind who trusted him. And, apparently, most of the brethren at Lantern Yard were naive too, since they believed William". Leading Silas to the altar of sacrifice like a lamb, the brethren or the "God's people" (7), as Silas gullibly looks upon them, are convinced that they are fulfilling a divine mission. Silas too naively considers that his best friend is honestly mistaken, and relies "on his innocence being certified by immediate divine interference" (9). His has no doubt that God will clear him (8). Each of his attempts to justify his innocence is met with William's insistence that he is in league with Satan. "How do I know what you may have done in the secret chambers of your heart, to give Satan an advantage on you"? (8), William retorts. The intellectual blindness of all brethren including Silas reaches its peak when they decide to resort to prayer and drawing lots to find out the truth. The strangeness of this measure is underlined by the fact that it is in flagrant contradiction with the "principles of the church in Lantern Yard, according to which prosecution was forbidden to Christians" (9). Unsurprisingly the lots declare Silas guilty. He is suspended from church membership. Revolted and losing his faith in God and man, Silas leaves Lantern Yard to settle in Raveloe. Few times before his departure, we learn that William has married Sarah, the servant-woman whom Silas had been engaged to.

The sad fate of Silas is a satiric representation of the danger of dogmatism. The beautiful ideals that the Christian doctrine entails are radically opposed to the ugly facts that it is able to produce. To Silas' enthusiasm for Christian

dogma - illustrated by the discussions about "Assurance of Salvation" (6) that he uses to have with his friend William - succeeds the bitter reality of damnation that the same friend has led him to out of jealousy and wickedness. William manages to wrap his worst intentions in the best blankets of dogmatism. Faith can thus be immoral if it is hypocritically used for selfish purposes. This rightly justifies Eliot's abhorrence of doctrines. For her, "there is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of direct fellow-feeling" (Masters 510). In Eliot's view, doctrines are less important than the feelings of love and sympathy in which they must be anchored. Nowhere do the accusers of Silas show him the slightest love of which they are certainly, and much paradoxically, great theoreticians as "devoted Christians". In the absence of human feelings, doctrines become, in the hands of wicked and egotistic people like William, a dangerous weapon to destroy others. It is as if they had no meaning except to hide man's selfishness. Understanding this is a crucial aspect in the pursuit of improved ethical standards.

V. THE SIN OF SELFISHNESS

The Thesaurus dictionary defines selfishness as "a concern for one's own welfare or advantage at the expense of or in disregard of others". To speak of the sin of selfishness in Eliot's novel may seem contradictory, given that the novelist refutes the existence of a transcendent God who would dictate a code of conduct to man. Eliot therefore does not believe in the idea of sin understood as a transgression of the divine will. However, her strong Christian background has obviously influenced her non-religious view of ethics. Campbell (16) rightly asserts that "the moral values of Calvinist Methodism were too deeply ingrained in her to be wholly erased". For example, "as a result of her early schooling at Miss Franklin's, selfishness was a sin which G. Eliot was quite unable to pardon" (Campbell p35). We therefore understand why selfishness, conceived by Eliot not as a sin from a strictly Christian point of view, but an immoral act that "causes trouble in the world" (Cooper 11), is a recurrent issue in her novels.

In *Silas Marner* the first major act of selfishness takes place inside the church through William's false accusation against Silas. The other major irony is that at the heart of this moral scandal is money against which the Bible warns men for its corrupting effect. That religion, which is supposed to be the foundation of morality, is infected by the virus of egoism or is used for selfish purposes, is an evident proof of the depth of this evil in the English society. It cannot be otherwise. In a capitalist environment marked by the race for wealth and the quest for well-being and good social standing, egoistic

attitudes are likely to be commonplace. It is not for nothing that William's self-centredness, which leads him to destroy his fellow man out of jealousy, is the trigger for Silas's process of social transformation; a transformation that seems to be the key element of the narrative. It is as if egoism were the main evil to be overcome in order to transform people and the world. What is certain is that it is so easy to give in to this temptation that even the good-natured Silas, to a certain extent, ends up falling victim to it.

Having lost his faith in God and man following his ordeal in Lantern Yard, Silas decides to lead, in the village of Raveloe where he takes refuge, a life totally withdrawn into himself, with total disregard for others. "He invited no comers to step across his door-still, and he never strolled into the village to drink a pint at the Rainbow or to gossip at the wheelwright's: he sought no man or woman, save for the purposes of his calling, or in order to supply himself with necessaries" (3). Like the elderly indifferent businessman, Ebenezer Scrooge, in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, he clings "with all the force of his nature to his work (weaving) and his money" (33). Mainly because of this antisocial behaviour and his unusual physical appearance, Silas is considered by the villagers to be "a dead man come to life" (4). His relationship with God and man is replaced by his close connection with his guineas (money), which he admires and even worships. "He handled them, he counted them, till their form and colour were like the satisfaction of a thirst to him; but it was only in the night, when his work was done, that he drew them out to enjoy their companionship" (14).

To better understand the existential plight of Silas at Raveloe, one has to remember that he has been on a twofold quest for truth and liberation ever since he discovered the oppressive lies of religious dogma within the community of 'believers' in Lantern Yard. He is looking for a world that is true, a world that does not lie to him and that also does him justice. He thought he would find it, not in the village of Raveloe, which merely served as a means of erasing his painful memories of his hometown, but deep inside himself.

Silas's Cartesian solipsism, however, proves to be an ideal that is not only impossible, but suffocating. Living outside the human community is not human. This is what Aristotle (30) taught since Antiquity when he said: "but the man who is unable to be a member of a community is in no way part of a city, and is therefore either a brute or a god" (my

translation)². Silas is in this atypical situation that brings him closer to a brute or an abstraction. In place of a dialogue with his inner self, he has surrendered his life to the dehumanising power of money, which empties him of all social sensitivity. Indeed, « there was nothing that called out his love and fellowship toward the strangers he had come amongst » (12). Faith in money imprisons Silas in what Sartre refers to as the “being-in-itself”, meaning a mode of being peculiar to inanimate things devoid of self-awareness and freedom of choice. The realization that his life is reduced to weaving and hoarding without any definite purpose leads the narrator to compare him with “a handle or a crooked tube which has no meaning standing apart” (15).

For a humanist and optimist like Eliot, “who believed in amelioration of the human condition by individual human action” (Cooper 14), there is nothing more disheartening than to see a man of Silas's caliber succumb to a mechanical existence, to the extent of resembling a weaving spider or a non-living entity. This is precisely the “sin” of Silas' self-centredness. Even if it serves as a method of self-protection, selfishness is not the true path to salvation that Silas seeks.

Eliot illustrates a distinct form of egoism exemplified by Squire Cass's two sons, Godfrey and his sibling Dunstan. The first is described as a good person, but whose defence of self-interest determines his relationship with others. His calculating mind makes him a moral coward who does not accept responsibility. For example, he thinks that marrying Nancy will make him happy, and that means abandoning his wife Molly and their daughter, the future Eppie. Behind his choice lies an economic issue. Godfrey is trying to safeguard his share of the inheritance, which he could lose if his father disowns him upon discovering his marriage to a woman of low social standing. Molly's drug-related death provides him with an opportunity to marry the woman he loves, and the fatal accident of his brother - the only person who was aware of his clandestine marriage - gives him the courage to divulge this secret to Nancy. If Godfrey thinks and acts according to his own interests, his younger brother proves to be more than just selfish. He is a sadistic man who derives joy from causing harm to others. His neighbours describes him as “a spiteful jeering fellow, who seemed to enjoy his drink the more when other people went dry” (18). Among other immoral acts, out of jealousy he torments his brother Dunstan by blackmailing him and steals the bag containing all of poor Silas's savings, causing him to literally collapse.

Silas's selfishness harms no one but himself. This is what the narrator specifies about this point: “yet few men could

be more harmless than poor Marner. In his truthful simple soul, not even the growing greed and worship of gold could beget any vice directly injurious to others” (33). It is not, however, the case of the egocentrism of the two brothers, especially that of Dunstan, which is absolutely detrimental to others. This is why both come to an unhappy end. Indeed, according to the theory of the moral law of nature to which the ex-Calvinist Eliot adheres, following his freethinking friends, Hennel and Bray, man cannot escape the fruits of his actions. Bad deeds always turn against their perpetrators, just as good deeds bear their rewards. It is this universal moral law also known as the doctrine of consequences that justifies the tragic end of the sadistic Dunstan who falls and drowns in the stone pit. Godfrey and Nancy's unhappy childless marriage follows the punishment logic resulting from Godfrey's moral cowardice. The narrator makes this clear:

In Godfrey's case there were further reasons why his thoughts should be continually solicited by this one point in his lot: his consciousness, never thoroughly easy about Eppie, now gave his childless home the aspect of a retribution; and as the time passed on, under Nancy's refusal to adopt her, any retrieval of his error became more and more difficult (132-133).

Immortality leads to damnation, while good deeds lead to salvation. This is the moral principle that we can draw from the bad conduct of the Cass brothers and the exemplarity of Silas who succeeded in seeing the path to social and moral liberation.

VI. POSITIVE ATTITUDE AND HUMAN FEELINGS: THE MORAL ROAD TO SALVATION

Silas's story is commonly interpreted as a metaphorical journey to freedom. After being trapped by strict religious doctrines in Lantern Yard, he finds himself in a similar predicament in Raveloe, the withdrawal into oneself that engenders the dehumanising attachment to money. About this reflexive attitude, the narrator of Eliot's *Middlemarch* specifies that “there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside” (824-25). Therefore, the sole prospect of redemption for Silas rests in his receptiveness to the social world outside. The narrator implicitly states that love is what he truly requires to overcome his moral and social apathy: “The future was all dark, for there was no Unseen Love that cared for him” (12).

² « Mais l'homme qui est dans l'incapacité d'être membre d'une communauté, ne fait en rien partie d'une cité, et par conséquent est ou une brute ou un dieu ».

As we shall see, Eliot presents love as an alternative to the social and moral crisis resulting, among other things, from the loss of faith in God. It is the driving force behind the new religion espoused by the author of *Adam Bede* (1859), which the Victorians call the religion of Humanity. Purkish explains the phrase as follows:

The religion of humanity was a widely used term in the nineteenth century. On the one hand, it could be used to refer precisely to the new religion invented by Comte, and on the other hand to various post-Christian attempts to salvage the ethical precepts of the old religion while abandoning entirely its supernatural basis. (Qted Zhang & Zeng 447).

The religion of Humanity takes up the essence of Christian morality, based on love but stripped of all supernatural considerations. Theorised by the French thinker, Auguste Comte (1788-1857), in his work, *The System of Positive Polity* (1851), the Religion of Humanity preaches a moral society grounded on the principles of love, altruism, justice, equity in order to overcome the prevailing social crisis. Comte's secular religion offers Silas a redemptive way out of his social torpor following his profound religious crisis. Silas must indeed love and be loved. In a much hostile environment, it takes true individual qualities to rise to such a challenge. It is thanks to these qualities, each of which constitutes a moral principle, that Silas succeeds in finding the path to liberation.

As the narrator emphasises again and again, Silas is a good man. His natural goodness is expressed in three major qualities that he displays while facing hardships in Raveloe and that will win him the sympathy he needs to reconcile with himself and his society. The first of these qualities is humility, expressed in the simple lifestyle of a weaver living in a small cottage on the outskirts of a village. Additionally, acknowledging one's errors and seeking forgiveness requires humility. Silas falsely accuses Jem Rodney of stealing his bag of money. However, convinced of Rodney's innocence mainly by Mr Snell, the landlord of Rainbow, the social centre where the village's VIPs meet, and Mr Macey, the parish clerk, he humbly asks Rodney's forgiveness after admitting his mistake. « I was wrong », he said, « yes, yes – I ought to have thought. There's nothing to witness against you, Jem. Only you'd been into my house oftener than anybody else, so you came into my head. I don't accuse you – I won't accuse anybody » (47). Besides, the simplicity with which he describes his misfortune convinces his audience that the theft is real: “the slight suspicion with which his hearers at first listened to him, gradually melted away before the convincing simplicity of his distress” (46). His humbleness thus makes the villagers more sensitive to his

misfortune and he is likely to be transformed by this positive human experience, as mentioned by the narrator.

This strangely novel situation of opening his trouble to his Raveloe neighbours, of sitting in the warmth of a hearth not his own, and feeling the presence of faces and voices which were his nearest promise of help, had doubtless its influence on Marner, in spite of his passionate preoccupation with his loss (46).

The integrity perceived in Silas's explanations is indeed a defining characteristic of his persona, as previously demonstrated in what could be dubbed the Sally Oates anecdote. Moved by compassion for Sally's suffering, Silas offers her a remedy that his own mother, suffering from the same illness, used. Silas' kindness and compassion are reminiscent of those of Mrs Dolly Winthrop, a female figure who is the personification of altruism. The narrator describes her as “a very mild, patient woman, whose nature it was to seek out all the sadder or more serious elements of life, and pasture her mind upon them” (66). Beyond her invaluable support for Silas, whom she showers with affection and sympathy, Mrs Winthrop is “the person always first thought of in Raveleo when there was illness or death in a family” (66).

Thanks to the miracle of his remedy, the villagers look upon the unknown Silas as a professional healer. They invade his home to seek treatment. However, Silas has no gift for healing. He turns away those who come to see him for this purpose, even though he could dishonestly make money off these poor people. His sincerity earns him a reputation as a disciple of Satan, and shatters the spirit of sociability that the cure had opened up for him. The narrator explains: “thus it came to pass that his movement of pity towards Sally Oates, which had given him a transient sense of brotherhood, heightened the repulsion between him and his neighbours, and made his isolation more complete” (14). If we take the full measure of the falsity of this judgement, which betrays a selfish interest, we will then understand why Eliot, who is sympathetic by nature, seems to suggest understanding and affection for human beings. After all, according to the Bible, love does not judge or bear false witness. Fortunately, Silas would rather be slandered, judged, condemned and abandoned than be dishonest. In other words, his honesty is pure. It does not depend on circumstances.

Silas' human qualities, his humility, helpfulness, compassion, and honesty not only constitute moral principles, but also seem to illustrate the idea propounded by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) that God is a mere projection of the human nature purified. In *The Essence of Christianity* translated into English by Eliot herself, the German anthropologist and moralist, often called the father

of modern atheism, writes: "Man- this is the mystery of religion- projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject" (Feuerbach 29-30). The qualities that humans attribute to this transcendent entity (God), which, according to Feuerbach, does not actually exist, are those embodied by Silas.

Eliot appears to utilise Silas as an exemplar to illustrate the magnificence of humanity, only expressible through the aforementioned simple and humanistic traits. We find in Silas the sacredness of man that was attributed to a distant God who alone was worthy of all praise. Eliot thus places humanity above all that exists. The maxim that human beings are each other's cure is central to Eliot's ethical philosophy. It is no longer God, but man who saves man. This is reflected in the narrator's comment:

In old days there were angels who came and took men by the hand and led them away from the city of destruction. We see no white-winged angels now. But yet men are led away from threatening destruction: a hand is put 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 (111).

If it is indeed human wickedness that has caused Silas's misery, it is also the power of human love that will bring him out of it and lead him towards the enlightenment and happiness of life - a miracle that cannot be achieved by either dogmatic religion or attachment to material possessions. The narrator had already predicted the manifestation of this love - in the form of Nancy's affection - as the only means of Godfrey's redemption. Unfortunately, the latter was not conscious of this: « Instead of keeping fast hold of the strong silken rope by which Nancy would have drawn him safe to the green banks where it was easy to step firmly, he had let himself be dragged back into mud and slime, in which it was useless to struggle" (25).

Following the doctrine of consequences, Godfrey cannot take advantage of the pure love that Nancy offers him as salvation because of his selfishness and moral cowardice. As for Silas, his inclination to do good and avoid causing harm to others cannot be in vain. This is precisely why little Eppie's arrival in his life can be seen as a gift sent down from heaven to console him and heal all his wounds, a kind of poetic justice. Silas is amazed: "my money's gone, I don't know when - and this is come from I don't know where" (99). It is significant that Eppie appears shortly after Dunstan Cass steals Silas's gold. Indeed, Providence has rewarded Silas' humility, frankness and helpfulness by giving him what he really needed. "The gold had turned into the child" (103). Providence offers Silas the sweetness of

human warmth to rescue him from the prison in which his rough silver coins had kept him.

The gold had asked that he should sit weaving longer and longer, deafened and blinded more and more to all things except the monotony of his loom and the repetition of his web; but Eppie called him away from this weaving, and made him think all its pauses a holiday, re-awakening his senses with her fresh life, even to the old winter-flies that came crawling forth in the early spring sunshine, and warming him into joy because she had joy. (106)

The little girl whom Silas names Eppie after her late mother and little sister and whom she also calls treasure (108) has enabled him to rediscover the fullness of his senses. The miracle of love gradually pulls Silas out of his social apathy. The narrator explains: "as the child's mind was growing into knowledge, his mind was growing into memory : as her life unfolded, his soul, long stupefied in a cold narrow prison, was unfolding too, and trembling gradually into full consciousness » (106). Eppie serves as the connection between Silas and his immediate world. He "began now to think of Raveloe in relation to Eppie" (110). The affection they share is reciprocated by the society's fondness for Eppie and her adoptive father, Silas. In fact, "there was love between him and the child that blent them into one, and there was love between the child and the world" (110). "The truth of feeling as the only universal bond of union" (Koo 1) is exemplified by this social interaction.

Eppie has opened up the world to Silas once and for all. He has regained all his sociability and is now fully integrated into the village. "There was no repulsion around him now, either for young or old; for the little child had come to link him once more with the whole world" (110). Love makes life harmonious. It helps to distinguish the essential from the superfluous. Thanks to the love and joy with which Eppie fills him, Silas has freed himself from the power of money. "The coins he earned afterwards seemed as irrelevant as stones brought to complete a house suddenly buried by an earthquake" (111). It is fortunate that, just when he needs money to prepare his adopted daughter's wedding to Aron, the son of his benefactress Mrs Winthrop, his stolen money, discovered with the skeleton of the thief Dunstan at the bottom of the pit, is returned to him. Although he is happy to have his money back, he makes it clear that it takes no hold of him now (138). Just then, the childless couple, Godfrey and Nancy, arrive to collect Eppie. Eppie prefers the love, gentleness, benevolence and poverty of her adoptive father to the opulence and good upbringing that Godfrey promises her at home. The dialogue that follows between Eppie and Silas is very edifying.

- “But you must make sure, Eppie”, said Silas, in a low voice – “you must make sure as you won’t ever be sorry, because you’ve made your choice to stay among poor folks, and with poor clothes and things, when you might ha’ had everything o’ the best”.
- “I can never be sorry, father, said Eppie, ‘I shouldn’t know what to think on or to wish for with fine things about me, as I haven’t been used to’” (143).

For Eppie, as for Silas, the human comes before the material. Eppie's choice to live with her poor adoptive father consecrates the triumph of love over money, the primacy of human relationships over material considerations. It also reflects the importance of gratitude and altruism. Eppie is also concerned about Silas's happiness, which might have been compromised if he had accepted Godfrey's proposal. Silas deserves this happiness because he has a positive spirit. These are important moral principles that Eliot proposes in an industrial society plagued by individualism and materialism.

Silas seems to be undergoing a process of initiation into the complex reality of life. This process, which is a sum of unhappy and happy experiences, has given him a whole new understanding of existence. Like his creator, Eliot, Silas makes the most of his many experiences to construct a flexible ethic, more suited to the Victorian context; but a humanistic ethic that places man at the beginning and the end of everything. The following comment by the narrator sums up this ethic.

By seeking what was needful for Eppie, by sharing the effect that everything produced on her, he had himself come to appreciate the forms of custom and belief which were the world of Raveloe, he had begun to ponder over the elements of his old faith, and blend them with his new impression. The sense of presiding goodness and the human trust which came with all pure peace and joy had given him a dim impression that there had been some error, some mistake, which had thrown that dark shadow over the days of his best years. (118)

VII. CONCLUSION

The moral principles outlined by Eliot in *Silas Marner* are as complex as the events that punctuate the life of the novel's protagonist. However, by carefully examining the many experiences of Silas Marner, we have been able to identify the essential principles that make up Eliot's ethical thinking. In order to understand this ethic, we need to relate it to Eliot's major intellectual influences and life experiences that underpin it.

Eliot bases her ethics on the realization of the immorality of Christian dogmatic discourse. She then sets out to show the evil of individualism and the materialistic spirit that dehumanises, objectifies and imprisons the individual in the vicious circle of the absurd. Finally, Eliot proposes the warmth of human relationships as the only real alternative to social and moral misery. These relationships must be founded on the principles of love, altruism, honesty, compassion, understanding and helpfulness that make life harmonious and constitute the essence of humanity. For example, sympathy can “provoke the middle classes to recognize the contingency and instability of their social status when they identify themselves with social outcasts such as beggars and fallen women” (Koo 9). Because the law of nature dictates that each individual should reap the rewards of his or her actions, to violate these principles is to expose oneself to life's little misfortunes, whereas those who abide by them steadfastly, like Silas, always end up discovering happiness and the meaning of life.

Eliot thus proposes an idealist ethic, secular and rational, but rooted in Christianity. One of Eliot's greatest successes is her ability to bring her complex ideas to life through a tumultuous narrative. The beauty of the stories she presents is such that one can even lose sight of the rich aesthetic in which she covers her ethical philosophy.

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