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The Processes of Religious Values Reform and Building of New Ethics in Victorian literature: Illustrations in *Silas* by George Eliot

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Abstract

This article explores in George Eliot's *Silas Marner* her perception of the processes of religious reform and the building of new ethics in the nineteenth century through the fable of man's life as he confronts social and ethical justice within his community. It is above all an evaluation of how human inner motives and secret behaviours often deeply break with reality.

Moreover, *Silas Marner* is a satire that relates the hard conditions of the life of the eponym main character of the novel. *Silas Marner* is a figure who stands as a model of moral purity that is shaped by his genuine religious faith that most of his contemporaries deeply lack. To this regard, this article cross-analyses, through an interdisciplinary approach, mainly sociological, anthropological and philosophical, how George Eliot's narrative in *Silas Marner* integrates all the contours of a critique of religious practices of the time. Hence, the novel is read in this article as Eliot's appeal to her contemporaries to rethink the bases of their moral values before suggesting the birth of new moral ethics in an age of a dynamic radical movement or shift from a medieval and traditional life into a modern and industrialised society.

Keywords: Religious values; New ethics, Victorian; Society; Satire

Résumé

Cet article explore dans *Silas Marner* de de George Eliot sa perception ces processus de réformes religieuses et la construction de nouvelles éthiques au dix-neuvième siècle à travers la vie de l'homme dans sa confrontation avec la justice social et éthique au sein de sa communauté. Il est par-dessus tout une évaluation de comment les motivations intrinsèques humaines et ses comportements secrets rompent profondément avec la réalité.

Au-delà, *Silas Marner* est une satire sociétale qui rend compte des dures conditions de vie du personnage principal éponyme du roman. *Silas Marner* est une figure qui représente un modèle de pureté morale façonné par sa foi religieuse qui manque profondément à la plupart de ses contemporains. A cet effet, fait une analyse croisée, à travers une approche interdisciplinaire, sociologique, anthropologique et surtout philosophique, de comment George Eliot intègre dans *Silas Marner* tous les contours d'une critique des pratiques religieuses de l'époque. Par conséquent, le roman est abordé dans cet article comme un plaidoyer envers ses contemporains à repenser leurs valeurs morales avant de suggérer la naissance d'une nouvelle éthique morale dans une époque d'un mouvement radical dynamique ou un virage de de la vie médiévale et traditionnelle vers une société moderne et industrialisée.

Mots clés : Valeurs religieuses, nouvelles éthiques, Victorienne, Société, satire.

Introduction

Mary Ann Evans alias George Eliot is without doubt one of the most famous female writers of the nineteenth-century England. As it is asserted in the preface of *The Essays of George Eliot* edited by Nathan Sheppard, her work can be viewed as one of the best of the Victorian Age. It uncovers certain human lives and conditions, and demonstrates how the transformations that characterized Victorian society are woven and interwoven. In his assessment of Eliot's literary career, Nathan Sheppard says that in her writing "*She reaches clear in and touches the most secret and the most delicate spring of human action*" (Sheppard 27). In the same evaluative process of Eliot's narrative skills and its depth, Sheppard condones its literary quality by comparing her to Charles Dickens: "*Dickens portrays the behavior, George Eliot dissects the motive of the behavior. Here comes the human creature, says Dickens, now let us see how he will behave. Here comes the human creature, says George Eliot, now let us see why he behaves*" (Sheppard 8).

If *Silas Marner* should be read and analysed through the lenses of Sheppard's description, it would be possible to see how deep Eliot's writing of the novel was meant to catch human motives through the prism of the crisis of religious beliefs and practices in nineteenth-century English society. The religious

communities of Lantern Yard and Raveloe serve as important backgrounds and landmarks in the criticism of that nineteenth-century English society. They are two opposing settings that illustrate the drive of Eliot to correct most of the flaws that she observes among her contemporaries' lives. Indeed, if one retains that: "*George Eliot belongs to and is of the greatest of the school of artists in fiction who write fiction as a means to an end, instead of as an end*" (Sheppard 8), it is possible to assume that in writing of *Silas Marner*, as well as the rest of her whole bibliographical production, she aimed at a transition into new religious, cultural and political ethics in English society. Certainly, such a project was a bold one for a female writer in the Victorian era. In her ideas, if they are paralleled with that of prominent romantic writers nineteenth century thinkers like Byron or philosophers like Nietzsche, to name but a few, show as Newton observes it, whatever their differences, that "*there runs in their writings a common notion, held with varying of consciousness and depth, that truth is not an objective structure, independent of those who seek it, the hidden treasure waiting to be found but is itself in all its guises created by the seeker*" (Newton 2). This is all the beauty of Eliot's search for new ethics and religious morality whose truth will debunk old practices that held the individual and society in its claws.

The experience of Silas Marner in Lantern Yard and the trajectory of his life in Raveloe are enough motives that help assert Eliot's formal agreement "*with the ideas of Feuerbach, I agree everywhere*" (Eliot 153), quoted in (Newton 4). In the same vein of perspectives, Eliot's vision of the community, culture, and habits of Raveloe turns this city into a soothing and curative environment for Silas Marner. Raveloe as the epitome of a pre-industrialized organic community brought back Silas Marner into an acceptable human civilization. Raveloe is also a symbolic place for denouncing the myths and superstitions that characterize the community of Lantern Yard. As a matter of fact, in Lantern Yard, it's with regret that the reader witnesses that people's religious and moral face values are expressions of every day disorder life. Compared to Raveloe, Lantern Yard is industrialized to the core and Christianity in this community has adopted the most inhumane dogmas and doctrine as the foundation of both its moral justice and belief.

The philosophical mindset of people in Raveloe, in contrast, reveals a profound doubt on the teachings of epistles - mainly the notion of beneficent providence. In that regard, the revelation that religion as a social pattern does not need a rigid theology mark is a fundamental assumption of the difference between Raveloe and Lantern Yard:

Raveloe was a village where many of the old echoes lingered; undrowned by new voices. Not that it was one of those barren parishes lying on the outskirts of civilization – inhabited by meagre sheep and thinly-scattered shepherds: on the contrary, it lay on the rich central plain of what we are pleased to call Merry-England, and held farms which, speaking from a spiritual point of view, paid highly-desirable tithes. (Eliot 3)

The significance of such a place in the life of Silas Marner allows Eliot to give to the novel all its mythical and mysterious voice that frames the possibility of rethinking the bases and principles of religious beliefs and practices by bringing to the surface all the critical points of Christianity. By the same token, on the hand other, making possible the establishment and affirmation of new religious ethics and revisited human values that will ultimately correct all the flaws of society.

Rethinking the basis of religious beliefs and practices

Silas Marner (1861) is an account of the religious life of English communities of the 19th-century. The life trajectory of the main protagonist of the novel, Silas Marner, whose name also constitutes the title of the novel stands as the core narrative of the sociological dimension of the British subject of the era. It allows the reader access to the critical review that George Eliot makes of the life of those communities.

Indeed, religion as a social and moral construction of those communities gives the reader insights into how a community is made and functions according to the religious principles and the dominant practices that frame it. Caroline W. de la L. Oulton in her book *Literature and Religion in Mid-Victorian England from Dickens to Eliot* contends that:

Evangelicalism has never been easy to argue against. In the nineteenth century, its opponents were traditionally those of liberal belief who found its harsher tenets unacceptable, or those who rejected traditional religion in favour of materialism. Famous Victorians who grew up in evangelical belief, only to lose their faith altogether, include Carlyle, George Eliot and T. H. Huxley. (Oulton 1)

That allegation of a loss of faith in Raveloe appears in the literary production of George Eliot. In that point of view, *Silas Marner* comes out as a fable of the experience of a man who progressively walks away from all belief in the church. If a reading of *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857) allows the reader to have a clear view of the experience of Silas Marner, one can see that: “*No man can begin to mould himself in a faith or an idea without rising to a higherof experience*” (Eliot 228). It is mainly that experience that changed the course of the life of Silas Marner.

Silas Marner’s life was shared between Lantern Yard and Raveloe. The accusation of theft duly planned and stirred up by his best friend, William Dane, exposes Silas Marner’s first betrayal in Lantern as William also suggested that it is not the holy spirit that visits many of the parishioners but rather the devil. The basis of that betrayal is an example of the treacherous life that people in Lantern Yard made which is mainly characterized by the lust and sexual misbehaviour that brought William Dane to break the love relationship and marriage engagement between Marner and Sarah because: «*For a long time he had been engaged to a young servant-woman, waiting only for a little increase to their mutual savings in order to their marriage*” (Eliot 6). Indeed, William Dane was regarded in the community as “*a shining instance of youthful piety*” (Eliot 6). But his behaviour illustrates all of his jealousy of Marner’s fame in the community. He takes advantage of the deacon’s illness to plot the theft of the latter’s money:

At this time the senior deacon was dangerously ill, and being a childless widower, he was tended night by night by the young brethren or sisters. Silas took his turn in the night-watching with William, the one relieving the other at two in the morning. The old-man, contrary to expectations, seemed to be on the way to recovery, when one night Silas, sitting on the bedside, observed that his audible

breathing ceased. The candle was burning low, and he had to lift it to see the patient's face distinctly (Eliot 7).

This quote illustrates the terms of the accusation and the subsequent judgment of Silas Marner. Though most parishioners came to assist the dying ministers, Marner strangely noticed that his friend Willima Dane did not show up. Noteworthily, Marner ignored that the reason of this absence was that Sarah and Dane plotted together to accuse Marner of the theft of the money. Consequently, as the last one to have been sitting next to the minister, he was accused of the theft of the latter's money. Besides, the narrative of this event and the search for truth informs that the judicial system of Lantern Yard based on drawing lots. This constitutes the first critical view of the pseudo-fervent Christianity that seems to animate the town. Recalling Calvinist moral principles, this system of judgment of Lantern Yard corroborates the idea of predestination that stipulates that whatever should happen, it is always God's will. Eliot's criticism of the religious beliefs of the community surfaces by pinpointing the absurdity of the Calvinist idea that justice should be blind lottery based.

Put into trial through this system of drawing lots, Silas Marner was petrified by the results as the narrator declares that:

To people accustomed to reason about the forms in which their religious feeling has incorporated itself, it is difficult to enter into that simple, untaught state of mind in which the form and the feeling have never been severed by an act of reflection. We are apt to think it inevitable that a man in Marner's position should have begun to question the validity of an appeal to the divine judgment by drawing lots; but to him this would have been an effort of independent thought such as he had never known; and he must have made the effort at a moment when his energies were turned into the anguish of disappointed faith. If there is an angel who records the sorrows of men and their sins, he knows how many and deep are the sorrow that spring from false ideas for which no man is culpable (Eliot 9).

As Freud asserted in *Civilization and its Discontents*: "*anyone who sees his quest of happiness frustrated in later years can still find consolation in the pleasure gained from chronic intoxication or make a desperate attempt at rebellion and become psychotic*" (Freud 23). In his case, Silas Marner will

move places after having undergone betrayal and even excommunication from his religious community and immerses into a life of solitude hence confirming the near psychotic perspective that Freud hints at above. Besides, all his consolation will, from the moment on, be confined in a solitude where his sole pleasure remains the accumulation of wealth. One should reaffirm with Freud that Eliot's criticism of religion is based on the idea that either humanistic or materialistic have become in that context relevant refuges from the injustices that are brought forth by religion. She believes that:

By forcibly fixing human beings in a state of psychological infantilism and drawing into a mass delusion, religion succeeds in saving many [people] from individual neurosis. But it hardly does any more; there are, as we said, many paths that can lead to such happiness as is within the reach of human beings, but none that is certain to do so. Not even religion can keep its promises. If the believer is finally obliged to speak to God's 'inscrutable decrees', he is admitting that all he has left to him, as the ultimate consolation and source of pleasure in the midst of suffering, is unconditional submission (Freud 23)

Indeed, Silas has submitted himself to the laws of the church of Lantern Yard though his radical response to walk away from a place that has prompted all the sufferings of his life. Eliot is critical of the religious foundations of Victorian era Britain and through Silas's disappointment with the results of his judgment and with the church. It introduces the disenchantment of the believer with the veneration of religious institutions and the principles that govern them. She also hints that rational analysis of the workings of these religious institutions, and the false morality that results from it, is the first and foremost step into the abolition of all worship. Lantern Yard is a good illustration of the troubles in the life of a religious community and its institutions that are produced by individuals who break the moral stability and purity of others' lives through their cheating and exploitation of the weaknesses of the institutions and the community itself. C. S. Lewis in his book entitled *Mere Christianity* declares that:

Each man is at every moment subjected to several sets of laws but there is only one which he is free to disobey. As a body, he subjected to gravitation and cannot disobey it; if you leave him unsupported in mid-air, he has no choice about falling than a stone. As an organism,

he subjected to various biological laws which he cannot disobey any more than animals can. That is, he cannot disobey those laws which he shares with other things; but the law which is peculiar to his human nature, the law he does not share with animals or vegetables or inorganic things, is the one he can disobey if he chooses. (Lewis 11)

Lewis's theory on the Law of Nature and the possibility for man to disobey at least one thing that is judged unfair is reinforced in his book with the idea that:

People may be sometimes mistaken about them [i.e., moralities] just as people sometimes get their sums wrong. [...] No one of us are really keeping the Law of Nature. If there are exception among you, I apologise to them. [...] Isn't what you call the Moral Law simply our herd instinct and hasn't it been like all our other instincts? (Lewis 13)

The objections and harsh rejection of all pure respect of the Law of Nature by any human being also entails that the judgment system in Lantern Yard is just a mere expression of the general herd instinct that has laid bare all its fallacies and wrong visions of religion and either human or divine justice. Silas's own questioning of his being the thief of the parson's money suggests that he is a man of a moral probity that's higher than that of his judges and the whole community. It expresses his personal exile into anonymity within a community where he consecrated his life to the ethics of work thanks to the "*functions of weaving and hoarding, without contemplation of an end towards which the functions tended*" (Eliot 15). True enough, if one relies on Eliot's perspective of the life people:

Even people whose lives have been made various by learning sometimes find it hard to keep a fast hold on their habitual views of life, on their faith in the invisible, nay, on the sense of their past joys and sorrows are a real experience, when they are suddenly transported to new land, the beings around them know nothing of their history and share none of their ideas- where their mother earth show another lap, and human life has forms than those of their souls have been nourished. (Eliot 10)

However, in Raveloe, the place of his forced exile, Silas undergoes a solitary life, full of contempt from his fellow citizens whose lives were totally the opposite of the moral values that he embodied because:

Anyone who looked at him as the red light shone up his pale face, strange straining eyes and meagre form would certainly would have understood the mixture of contemptuous pity, dread, and suspicion with which he was regarded by his neighbours in Raveloe. Yet a few men could be less harmless than poor Marner. In his trustful simple soul, not the growing greed and worship of gold could beget any vice directly to others. The light of his faith quite put out, his affections made desolate he clung with all his forces to his work and his money; and like all the objects to which a man devotes himself, they had fashioned him into correspondence with themselves. His loo, as he wrought in it without ceasing, had in its turn wrought on him, and confirmed more and more the monotonous craving for its monotonous response. (Eliot 33)

This distance with the community has once more added a great gap in his trust of human life and religion because Marner has chosen to live by the purity of his heart and soul rather than integrate a population full of crooks and robbers. The theft of his money by the immoral Dunsey who first illegally takes money from his brother, Godfrey, then finds no other solution than stealing all the long-treasured money of Marner emphasizes Eliot's point at the necessity of cleansing the community from cheaters and robbers. The suggestion that crime statistics in nineteenth century Britain is a real social issue that even threatened the fundamental religious values that should have guided all the life is without doubt one of the most meaningful messages of Silas Marner. It also sends the signal that religion and faith are fading realities in the life trajectories of people and even the notion of hell and doomsday or the last judgment no longer keep people on the right moral pathway and social attitude.

New religious ethics and revisited human values

In relation to the deterioration of religious, moral and social values, Nietzsche rightly put the questions that follow in his *On the Genealogy of Morality* (...),

hence wondering: *“Under what conditions did man invent the value judgement of good and evil? And what value do they themselves have? Have they obstructed or promoted human flourishing? Are they a sign of distress, poverty and the degeneration of life?”* (Nietzsche 46). To these questions Nietzsche reveals that he:

Distinguished between epochs, peoples, grades of rank between individuals (...) and out of these answers there developed new questions, investigations, conjectures, probabilities until (he) had his own territory, his own soil, a whole silently growing and blossoming world, secret gardens, as it were, the existence on which nobody must be allowed to suspect. (ibid, 46)

In the trail of the nineteenth century and civilization such as developed during the reign mainly at the wake of the industrial revolution in Britain and the subsequent change in all the bases and superstructure of society, one can view Silas Marner as the epitome of moral and faith purity in an era when everyone around is losing the value principles that have always founded society. If it should be reckoned with Eliot that: *“Our consciousness rarely registers the beginning of a growth with us any more than without us: there have been many circulations of the sap before we detect sign of the bud”* (Eliot, 47). The loss of Marner’s money has reinforced his faith as he continued to live in the consolation of the love of Eppie in whom he has the new source of hope. As Kierkegaard would have it, Marner:

Hopes that eternity will take it away, and here in time, no matter how much he suffers under it, he cannot resolve to take it upon himself, cannot humble himself under it in faith. And yet he continues in the God-relationship, and this is his only salvation; it would be sheer horror for him to have to be without God, "it would be enough to despair over," and yet he actually allows himself - perhaps unconsciously - to poetize God as somewhat different from what God is, a bit more like the fond father who indulges his child's every wish far too much. (Kierkegaard 78)

Marner’s mere difference with the people from the community of Raveloe is that his position as an outsider keeps away him from the villagers with whom he does not wish to mingle. He declares to Godfrey who came to him in repentance for abandoning his own child though he knew that Eppie’s mother

had passed away that: *“I’m glad to hear it, sir, but repentance doesn’t alter what has been going for sixteen years. Your coming now and saying “I’m her father” doesn’t alter the feelings inside us. It’s me she’s been calling father her father ever since she could say a word”* (Eliot 141). This radical remonstrance of Godfrey’s attitude shows that the moral platitude that is governing the community of Raveloe and eventually helps Eliot introduce Marner as one whose moral values are higher than any one’s in the village despite the lack of recognition. Regardless of the very attractive financial support that Godfrey puts on the table that would have totally disrupted the child’s social condition by moving her from a lower class and financial status to higher ones, Eppie refuses to join her natural family. She has shown that she is not bound by nature and her strong and deep intent to undermine the plans of Godfrey underlines her consciousness that a change of status would totally destroy her upbringing and would take her away from Silas Marner: *“She could not bear to think of Marner as her father”* (Eliot 147). The shared moral values that stand between Silas Marner and Eppie show the dawn of a new world that comes just after the recovery of Marner’s stolen money. This also demonstrates that there is divine justice, and at the end, truth is the last word. On that, Silas plans a journey back to Lantern Yard. This homecoming appears in the following discussion between Marner and Eppie:

Marner: There is a thing I’ve had on my mind to do this two year, and now the money’s been brought to us, we can do it. I have been turning it over and over in the night, and I think we’ll set out tomorrow, while the fine days last.

Eppie: Where to go, daddy?

Marner: To my old – the town where I was born – up to Lantern Yard. I want to see Mr Paston, the minister: something may have come out to make them know I am innocent of the robbery. And Mr Paston was a man with a deal of light – I want to speak to him about the drawing of lots. And I should like to talk to him about the religion of this countryside, for I partly think he doesn’t know of it. (Eliot 147)

From the trip with Eppie to the place of his birth, Silas clearly sets out to restore hope, the truth about religion and of his innocence. The return to Lantern Yard is a fundamental instance in the narrative of the novel because

it refocuses the attention on the transformations of the place and British society in general. The company of Eppie is very emblematic of the process of remedy of certain principles of Christianity that Eliot judges no longer efficient. It also projects to replace old beliefs and practices with a humanistic vision of religion and life in particular. Losing his money, then finding it much later in the little hearth is a good symbol of the importance human love over material wealth. This sends a great message that: *“To love is to be joyful about our ourselves and another person, about nature or art, about our higher nature purposes or the divine”* (Breggin 210).

At another important discourse level, the switching of the lost gold with Eppie’s full and pure affective ties is one of the most striking symbolic features in the novel. This symbolic substitution shows the will of the narrator to inform the reader that Silas is not morally and spiritually depraved, rather he is regenerated despite all the ordeals that could have destroyed his life and make him forever miserable. Subsequently, divine justice appears in Lantern Yard as near Prison Street, Silas though in his previous home could not fully recognize the city and seeks from Eppie and people in the street: *“Silas bewildered by the changes thirty years had brought over his native place, had stopped several persons in succession to ask them the name of this town, that he might be sure he was under a mistake about it”* (Eliot 147). The irony of this incapacity to find his way in the city to the point of thinking to be in the wrong place despite really being in his native place shows the skills with which Eliot has framed the plot of the novel and all the meaning behind every aspect of it.

Another emblematic figure of the changes that are occurring in the community of Raveloe is Dolly and what can be regarded as the religious ethics she wants to instil in the mindset of people. She observes that:

There’s trouble in this world and there’s things as we can never make out the rights on. And all as we’ve got to do to trust, Marner, Marner – to do the right thing as far as we know, and to trust. For us as knows so little can see a bit of good and rights, we may be sure as there’s a good and a right bigger nor what we can know – I feel it is my own inside as it must be so. And if you could but have gone

trusting, Master Marner, you wouldn't have run away from your fellow creatures and been so alone. (Eliot 120-121)

These in-depth observations on trust and the equality of all knowledges sound like an introduction to Raveloe theology which contrasts with the theology of Lantern Yard in all aspects. Dolly's analysis of religion places God above all the limits of human trust and knowledge. In a dialogue with Mrs Winthrop, on the matters of divine justice and retribution, Silas Marner states that:

There's good in this world – I've a feeling that now; and it makes a man feel as there's a good more nor he can see, in spite of the trouble and the wickedness. The drawing of lots is dark; but the child was sent to me: there's dealings with us – there's dealings" (Eliot 121).

His resilience is uncommon because it is built on human love, and perfect love. The narrative reveals that:

The tender and peculiar love with which Silas had reared [Eppie] in almost inseparable companionship with himself, aided by the seclusion of their dwelling, had preserved her from the lowering influences of the village talks and habits, and had kept her mind in the freshness which is sometimes falsely supposed to be invariable at tribute rusticity. Perfect love has a breath of poetry which can exalt the relations of least-instructed human beings; and this breath poetry had surrounded Eppie from the time when she followed the bright gleam that had beckoned her to Silas's hearth; so that it is not surprising if, in other things besides her delicate pettiness, she was not quite a common village maiden, but a touch of refinement and fervour which came from no other teaching than that tenderly-nurtured unvitiated feeling. (Eliot 121)

This consecrates the birth of a new breed of human beings and a new civilization in the person of Silas and his beloved foster child, Eppie. The reference to the conditions that have favoured Eppie's quality upbringing aware from the community moral corruption is a firm praise of Silas Marner's choice to live in isolation with the unique high purpose to preserve his moral purity and integrity that he has passed through to Eppie. As a new nonconformist, Silas Marner's attitude towards the villagers and untrust towards everything that is human raises and reveals the historic confrontation over religion as a social and spiritual institution and some political groups that wanted a new framework. Of course, since the Norman conquest in 1066

and even earlier, religion had played great role in the administration of the country. But from the glorious revolution in 1688, new voices began to question everything and this will reach an unprecedented peak in the nineteenth century.

Moreover, the debates on the power conferred to the church after the restoration shows that the crisis of the religious orientation of the Church was profound and the dividing line between High Tories and anticlerical Whigs were even deeper as Donald A. Spaeth informs in his very symptomatic book entitled *The Church in an Age of Danger: Parsons and Parishioners, 1660-1740* in the following lines:

Throughout the century after the Restoration nonconformity appeared to many clergymen to represent the greatest threat to the Church of England. Separatists were a constant reminder of the failure of the Restoration settlement of religion. After 1689, the issue of the treatment of dissent remained important as an ideological fault line dividing the political elite between High Church Tories who wished to restore the monopoly of the Church establishment and anticlerical Whigs who decried the intolerance of churchmen. Nonconformity was defined by the refusal to accept the patterns of worship laid down by the liturgy of the Church of England. (Spaeth 155)

In fact, the life experience of Silas Marner and his moral status in the new creed that he represents through his resilience and resistance against the inhuman laws of the church of Lantern Yard and his regeneration as a highly recommendable figure from his exile in Raveloe reveal together the crisis of the religious principles that govern the church. That struggle between differing and conflicting views that each wants to shape its own political conception of the church have jeopardized its role as the best path to salvation. Raveloe and Lantern Yard are not immediate equivalents of life in nineteenth century Britain. But as Jerry White describes city life it in *his London in the Nineteenth Century*:

This was a century of class-consciousness: of discrimination between groups by minute divisions of fashion, taste, speech, smell, behaviour, spiritual belief and interests. It produced a caste system which rendered a lot of people untouchable and demanded

separateness at home and play and work, even if separateness couldn't always be obtained. Yet there was consciousness, too, that these divisions offended against a prevailing Bible-based morality that preached equality in the eye of the Maker. The way out of this conundrum was to raise the moral condition of the people to the level of the middle-class moralists themselves. (White 19)

The idea that society underwent radical social, cultural and political divisions can illustrate the different oppositions between Silas Marner and his fellow countrymen but also the contradictions of life in the two cities where he spent his life.

At another level, George Eliot is part of the new middle-class moralists whose aim is to reshape the foundations of religion and society. In the whole, she has perhaps succeeded not less than his contemporary writers and thinkers in giving a vivid portrayal of the social and religious atmosphere that prevailed in her age. She has put her art forward into correcting all the moral evils. She deemed worth questioning religion in the community through the fable of Silas Marner life story. Marner's penitence and resolution to repair the errors of people's judgment of his life mark an important cornerstone of the moral ethics' restoration and elevation into human appreciation and humane worth. The decay of society symbolically represented by the crimes committed against Silas Marner are conveyed through the withering human features of human beauty and this could read in the life of Godfrey Cass who is described as follows:

The tall man of forty is not much changed in feature from the Godfrey Cass of six-twenty: he is only fuller in flesh, and has lost the indefinable look of youth – a loss which is marked even when the eye is undulled and the wrinkles are not yet come. Perhaps the pretty woman, not much younger than he, who is leaning on his arm, is more changed than her husband: the lovely bloom that used to be always on her cheek now comes but fitfully, with the fresh morning air or with some strong surprise; yet all who love human faces best for what they tell of human experience, Nancy's beauty has a heightened interest. Often the soul is repined into fuller goodness while age has spread an ugly film, so that mere glances can never divine the preciousness of the fruit. But the years have not been cruel Nancy. The firm yet placid mouth, the clear vicarious glance of the brown eyes, speak now of a nature that has been tested and has kept

its highest qualities; even the costume, with its dainty neatness and purity, has more significance now the coquetries of youth can have nothing to do with it (Eliot 113).

In contrast to her husband whose great moral wickedness has led him to conceal to his own wife the birth of his fornication child, Eppie, and the subsequent death of her mother, Godfrey Cass is painted as the face of Satan on earth. Yet still young, but the withering of his youthful features contrast with the blooming beauty of his wife though there is no difference of age between them. This physical difference between husband and wife is another inference to the negative consequences of sin on Godfrey and on every believer in general. It is especially by connecting Marner's life to *Adam Bede*, another of Eliot critical novels that the Jeffrey F. Keuss makes the exegesis of the verbal and visual signs and their centrality in the literature of the nineteenth century. In *A Poetics of Jesus: The Search for Christ through Writing in the Nineteenth Century*, he concludes that one can arrive at the very strong message of *Silas Marner*. Keuss refers to Mieke Bal's "iconographic signifier" (qtd in Keuss 152). With Bal, it won't be too much to consider this iconography of the signifier as a means to:

Recognize the preceding visual tradition, which in turn refers to the verbal text, in the second case the recognition is directly related to the text and the works with the text's verbal devices. [We utilise] the term "iconographic sign for the sign that travels the visual-verbal route. The sign based upon the solely verbal reference then falls under the more encompassing concept of intertextuality and exemplifies the subcategory of pre-textual thematic reference. (Bal, qtd in Keuss 152)

An analysis of the intertextual understanding of sin between the Holy Scriptures and the denunciation of negative moral ethics in society and the church itself brings new religious paradigms. The preceding traditions and the church itself considered as the central causes of the corruption of society are radically being replaced by new traditions. Along the way, all these changes in ethics and social communication through the literary text are suggested solutions for the construction of a community that wants to guarantee human advancement. Finally, this ambition to give new directions to social values is built with an active conservative intellect that chases away

all the old picturesque social and religious inefficiencies that used to draw society backward.

Conclusion

From all evidence, the works of George Eliot and that of many of her contemporaries have provided important social and cultural criticisms that pointed at the dysfunctions of society with a realism that has captured western consciousness through Victorian literature with an unprecedented grasp and insight.

Philip Davies in *Why Victorian Literature Still Matters* (2008) metaphorically describes the nineteenth century in British Literature and the changes occasioned by the industrial revolution in all aspects of life in Britain and almost all Western countries. Davies depicts this age

As an in-between place: a place psychologically as well as historically in transition, moving back and forth ambivalently between the old and the new, the primal and the civilized, amidst a sense of gain and a fear of loss, and with the big questions constantly re-emerging and mutating within specific individual circumstances (Davies 7).

Silas Marner is the full and ambitious expression of all these transitional phases that society and religion in particular have crossed in nineteenth century Britain. It has revealed a great yearning to implement new ideals and values into a progressively industrialized society and walk away from old practices that held society in its claws of injustice, wickedness and rigid practice of religion. The reform of some old beliefs and practices is the ultimate message that Eliot aimed at while writing *Silas Marner*. Thus, the life and experiences of Marner in both Lantern Yard and Raveloe have plainly presented the reader with two pictures that parallel but work together to introduce all the ideals of change from evil to good and from old ethics to new ethics.

The punishment of all evils and wrong-doings in the novel through the healing of Silas Marner is symbolised by his acceptance and integration in Raveloe

but more effectively by his finding pure affection in Eppie filial love and the higher divine justice that brings back his lost money. Beyond that, this healing infers that divine justice stands as the ultimate form of truth. Finally, this shows that Eliot's vision in this novel aimed at the rise of new ethics in a society that was in continual transformation thanks the industrial era that had started to human being a different perspective of how life should be organized and lived.

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