Università
Ca'Foscari
Venezia

Master's Degree in
Lingue e Letterature Europee, Americane e Postcoloniali
(D.M. 270/2004)

Final Thesis

George Eliot's *Silas Marner* and Gustave Flaubert's *Un Coeur Simple*:

a Comparative Study of the Theme of Simplicity

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Academic Year
2019 / 2020

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General Introduction

This comparative study aims to investigate the realist theme of simplicity as it is conceived and applied by two well-known nineteenth-century European writers in two illustrative works, namely George Eliot's *Silas Marner* and Gustave Flaubert's *Un Coeur Simple*.

After having provided an introductory definition of realism and having presented the major modes and themes being employed by European realist authors, the first chapter will primarily focus on the culture of realism in Great Britain and France in order to trace the similarities and differences featuring George Eliot's and Gustave Flaubert's ideas of realism. As a matter of fact, in spite of their different aesthetic philosophies leading to the use of opposite literary devices, several connections will be identified in terms of thematic choices and characterization. These parallelisms will be further investigated in the second chapter, where the main social aspects of simplicity such as the depiction of rural settings, the role of the Industrial Revolution and the authors' minute portrayal of humble characters will be significantly explored. Since the writers' greatness also lies in their psychological portrayals of simplicity, the third chapter will be especially centred on the analysis of the two protagonists, namely Silas and Félicité, so that the psychological construction of their marginalization being dictated by the countless adversities to which they are subjected can lead to explain the pivotal role of Silas' Eppie and Félicité's parrot as sources of sympathy and subsequent redemption. All the aforementioned reasons will thus contribute to concluding that Eliot and Flaubert are properly regarded as pioneers of the modern novel.

Introduction

Nineteenth-century European Realism

To begin with, realism may generally be defined as the accurate, detailed and unembellished depiction of nature or of contemporary life, which is the reason why realism tends to reject imaginative idealization in favour of a close observation of outward appearances.[1] Apart from having been applied to the visual arts and especially to ancient Hellenistic Greek sculptures as well as to 17th-century paintings, realism finds some of its greatest applications in the works of 18th-century English novelists like Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and Samuel Richardson. However, realism was not consciously adopted as an aesthetic term until the mid-19th century in France, where it became a major trend in novels and paintings between 1850 and 1880. One of the first appearances of the term realism is actually to be found in the 'Mercure Français du XIX Siècle', in which the word is used to describe a doctrine based upon the truthful and accurate depiction of the models that nature and contemporary life offer to the artist rather than upon imitating past artistic achievements. The French representatives of realism particularly agreed in their rejection of the artificiality of both Classicism and Romanticism and in their claiming for the necessity to produce life-like works of art. They subsequently focused on portraying the lives, appearances, problems, customs, and mores of the middle and lower classes as well as of the unexceptional, the ordinary, the humble, and the unadorned. Indeed, French realists set themselves to reproducing all the hitherto-ignored aspects of contemporary life and society – i.e. its mental attitudes, physical settings, and material conditions.[2]

1 Cf. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Realism', in www.britannica.com, https://www.britannica.com/art/realism-art, (accessed July 2020).
2 Cf. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Realism', in www.britannica.com, https://www.britannica.com/art/realism-art, (accessed July 2020).

Realism was clearly stimulated by several intellectual developments taking place in the first half of the 19th century, among which it is possible to mention the German anti-Romantic movement with its emphasis on the common man as an artistic subject, Auguste Comte's Positivist philosophy emphasizing the importance of a scientific study of society, the rise of professional journalism with its accurate and dispassionate record of current events and the development of photography with its capability to mechanically reproduce visual appearances with extreme accuracy.[3] As far as literature is concerned, the novelist Honoré de Balzac can be considered as the chief forerunner of realism thanks to his attempt to create a detailed, encyclopaedic portrait of the whole range of French society in his *La Comédie Humaine.* Nonetheless, literary realism was consciously theorized starting from the 1850s when Courbet's aesthetic stance was made popular thanks to the intervention of the French journalist Champfleury, who transferred the artist's theories to literature in what is known as *Le Réalisme*. The latter is widely regarded as an influential critical manifesto whose revolutionary scope depends on the fact that the hero of a novel is made to coincide with an ordinary man rather than with an exceptional figure.[4] Needless to say, the publication of Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* with its unrelentingly objective portrait of the bourgeois mentality and with its examination of the psychological nuances to which an unhappy and adulterous middle-class wife is subjected, became both a masterpiece of French realism and the work that established the realist movement on the European scene. Other important realist writers, such as the brothers de Goncourt, were able to cover a variety of social and occupational milieus and to frankly describe social relations among both the upper and the lower classes.

3 Cf. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Realism', in www.britannica.com, https://www.britannica.com/art/realism-art, (accessed July 2020).

4 Cf. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Realism', in www.britannica.com, https://www.britannica.com/art/realism-art, (accessed July 2020).

Realist tenets finally entered the mainstream of European literature during the 1860s and 1870s, when realist emphasis on detachment, objectivity and accurate observation as well as its lucid and restrained criticism of society and contemporary mores together with a humane understanding underlaying moral judgements became distinctive characteristics of the modern novel.[5] For instance, Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, and George Eliot in England, Ivan Turgenev, Lev Tolstoy, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky in Russia, William Dean Howells in the United States, and Gottfried Keller and the early Thomas Mann in Germany all incorporated and developed realist elements in their novels. Naturalism eventually needs to be mentioned as a significant offshoot of literary realism, that is to say a late 19th- and early 20th-century movement that aimed at an even more faithful and unselective representation of reality and whose major exponent was the French novelist Émile Zola.[6] As it has previously been suggested, the novel has been conceived as the realist literary genre par excellence since the 19th century and has become an effective instrument of both entertainment and education for most bourgeois members thanks to its realistic and didactic configuration. In spite of this, far from adopting conformist attitudes, Victorian novelists often employ irony and satire together with comic and grotesque elements and assign central roles to female characters to the point of provoking a number of polemical reactions in the name of moralistic values. Victorian novelists can therefore be defined as realist writers because of their tendency to communicate with their readership as well as with institutions in order to acquire a predominant social role by means of their moral and didactic novels.[7]

5 Cf. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Realism', in www.britannica.com, https://www.britannica.com/art/realism-art, (accessed July 2020).

6 Cf. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Realism', in www.britannica.com, https://www.britannica.com/art/realism-art, (accessed July 2020).

7 Cf. Carlo Pagetti e Oriana Palusci, 'Dal Romanticismo all'età contemporanea', in *Storia della letteratura* inglese, Vol. 2, a cura di Paolo Bertinetti, Torino, Einaudi, 2000, pp. 67-163, in particular pp. 80-81.

Consequently, following Henry Fielding's and Daniel Defoe's examples, the greatest novelists have adopted the technique of the omniscient narrator who regulates and guides his characters' existence by continuously expressing his ethical judgements, by entering the characters' inner dimension, and by giving way to a number of digressions and meditations concerning politics, historical events and morality. Two main forms of publication were initially taken into account, that is either the triple-decker form or the monthly instalments, the latter being associated with complex plots and ramified structures, which gave rise to the so-called multi-plot novel especially featuring the mid-victorian novel. Yet, towards the end of the century proses became lighter and abandoned both the triple-decker form of publication and the monthly instalments, which may also be seen as the result of the rise of the genre of the short story. As a consequence of major changes being engendered by modernity, it is evident that 19th-century novels appeared quite original in their modes and themes; as a matter of fact, 19th-century novelists were able to convey both good teachings and pleasure through their works, which obviously implies the presence of a mixture of realism and sensationalism as well as a blend of virtue and vice. British writers like Dickens and Eliot hence resort to Balzac's and Flaubert's realism beacause of the latter's ability to overcome certain Victorian conventions at the moment when mere didactic realism does no longer appear sufficient to effectively investigate contemporary reality.[8] Balzac's work actually suggests that realism means sincerily adhering to the humblest social realities by employing simple narrative techiniques, which is the reason why French writers like Beaudelaire and Flaubert completely abandon the Romantic aesthetics and set the basis for a new way to conceive poetic and narrative art.[9]

8 Cf. Carlo Pagetti e Oriana Palusci, 'Dal Romanticismo all'età contemporanea', *op. cit.*, pp. 82-86.

9 Cf. Ida Merello, 'L'ottocento', in *Storia europea della letteratura francese: Dal Settecento all'età contemporanea*, a cura di Lionello Sozzi, Torino, Einaudi, 2013, pp. 129-233, in particular pp. 166-167.

After this brief history of realism and of the rise of the novel, it is fundamental to analyze the idiosyncratic features of this new literary genre following the work of various historians of the novel. On the whole, scholars have seen ‘realism’ as the defining characteristic which differentiates the work of the early eighteenth-century novelists from previous fiction and the term ‘realism’ has particularly been associated with the French school of Realists. ‘Réalisme’ was actually first used as an aesthetic description in 1835 to denote the ‘vérité humaine’ featuring Rembrandt’s paintings as opposed to the ‘idéalité poétique’ characterizing neo-classical painting and it was later consecrated as a specifically literary term by the foundation in 1856 of ‘Réalisme’, namely a journal edited by Duranty.[10] As a result, the term realism came to be used primarily as the antonym of the term idealism, and this sense, which is actually a reflection of the position taken by the opponents of the French Realists, has in fact informed much critical and historical writing about the novel. In spite of this simplistic opposition, as Watt tellingly underlines, the novel’s realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but rather in the way it presents it and, what is more, the French Realists have evidently drawn attention to an issue which the novel raises more sharply than any other literary form – i.e. the problem of the correspondence between the literary work and the reality which it imitates. At the same time, from the Renaissance onwards, a growing tendency for individual experience to replace collective tradition as the ultimate arbiter of reality has become predominant and, needless to say, this transition constitutes an important part of the general cultural background standing at the basis of the rise of the novel.[11] The reason for the importance of Defoe, Richardson and Fielding has to do with the fact that they initiated what has later become the novel’s usual practice, namely the use of non-traditional plots which can be either wholly invented or partly based on contemporary incidents.

10 Cf. I.Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, (1957), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977, p. 1.
11 Cf. I.Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, (1957), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977, pp. 2-3.

In other words, these three 18th-century geniuses set the basis for that interpenetration of plot, character and emergent moral theme which is to be found in the highest examples of the art of the novel. To begin with, the actors in the plot and the scene of their actions started being placed in a new literary perspective, which means that the plot had to be acted out by particular people in particular circumstances rather than, as had been common in the past, by general human types against a background being primarily determined by appropriate literary conventions. The novel is also distinguished from other genres and from previous literary forms of fiction by the amount of attention it habitually accords both to the individualisation of its characters and to the detailed presentation of the surrounding environment.[12] As a consequence, early novelists made an extremely significant break with tradition by naming their characters in such a way as to suggest that they were to be regarded as particular individuals and as part of the contemporary social reality. Such a point of view is characteristic of the novel as is made explicit in the works of those novelists, from Sterne to Proust, who have been particularly interested in the exploration of the psychology of their characters as it is defined by the interpenetration of their past and present self-awareness. In order to fully portray individualised characters, novelists also tend to depict a background of particularised time and place and the novel's plot groundbreakingly uses past experience as the main cause of present action; a causal connection operating through time definitely replaces the reliance of earlier narratives on disguises and coincidences, thus providing the novel with a much more cohesive structure.[13] All in all, it is possible to notice that the novel has interested itself much more than any other literary form in the development of its characters in the course of time, which is the reason why the individual case is always defined by reference to two coordinates, that is space and time.[14]

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12 Cf. I.Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, (1957), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977, pp. 3-4.
13 Cf. I.Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, (1957), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977, p. 5.
14 Cf. Bertoni, F., *Realismo e letteratura. Una storia possibile*, Torino, Einaudi, 2007.

Hence, there is no doubt that the pursuit of verisimilitude led Defoe, Richardson and Fielding to initiate that power of "putting man wholly into his physical setting"[15], which constitutes for Allen Tate the distinctive capacity of the novel form aiming at the production of what pretends to be an authentic account of the individuals' current experiences. The adaptation of prose style so as to provide the text with an air of complete authenticity necessarily followed all the aformentioned innovations, thus leading Defoe, Richardson and Fielding to break with the accepted canons of prose style in order to achieve that immediacy and closeness of the text to what is being described. According to Watt, the narrative method whereby the novel embodies this circumstantial view of life may finally be called its formal realism, namely the premise, or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience, and is therefore under an obligation to satisfy its reader with details concerning the individuality of the actors and the particulars of the times and places of their actions, which are presented through a more largely referential use of language in relation to other literary forms.[16] Both Watt and Mazzoni agree on the idea that the rise of the novel is not merely to be seen in opposition to Renaissance Classicism and to the conventions featuring the Ancien Régime, but rather as the result of a series of changes, adaptations, contradictions and compromises. Nonetheless, the two scholars clearly state that a totally new modern way of telling is to be identified and codified in the first decades of the XIX century, while Mazzoni also highlights that the novel only acquires its distinctive physignomy with Jane Austen, Walter Scott, Stendhal and Balzac: it is actually thanks to the aforementioned authors that a merely entertaining genre actually acquires that centrality and that prestige being usually associated with this new form.

15 Allen Tate, 'Critiques of Fiction', quoted in I.Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977, p. 10.
16 Cf. I.Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977, p. 10.

A very effective and all-encompassing definition of the term novel is provided at the beginning of Mazzoni's work:

> A partire da una certa data, il romanzo diventa il genere in cui si può raccontare qualsiasi storia in qualsiasi modo.[17]

Hence, it is evident that the novel represents a peculiar version of mimesis, that is a discourse proposing a prototypical knowledge of the world not unlike science, philosophy and religion. Its ascent thus coincides with the development of the modern aesthetics, that is with the acknowledgement of the fact that truth may lie in a medium which does not necessarily correspond to conceptualized theories. As part of the mimetic tradition, the novel also inevitably presents a number of implicit characteristics such as extended chronology, spatial and temporal coordinates, multi-layered plots, individualized and plural characters being put in action by desires or deficiencies, the narrator's mediation and the subsequent creation of different levels of reality. [18]

Apart from novels, short stories can be observed to become particularly widespread in the 19th century to the point of competing with and almost overcoming the former's fame. The short story is usually concerned with a single effect conveyed by means of a few significant episodes or scenes. This genre thus encourages economy of setting, concise narrative, and the omission of complex plots; character is therefore disclosed in action or in dramatic encounters, but is seldom fully developed. Despite its relatively limited scope, though, a short story is often judged by its ability to provide a complete or satisfying treatment of its characters and subject.[19]

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17 Mazzoni, Guido, *Teoria del Romanzo*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2011, p. 73.

18 Cf. Mazzoni, Guido, *Teoria del Romanzo*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2011.

19 Cf. Arlen J. Hansen, 'Short Story', in www.britannica.com, https://www.britannica.com/art/short-story (accessed July 2020).

Like its literary peers, before the 19th century short stories were not generally regarded as distinct literary forms, but although they may seem to constitute a uniquely modern genre, humankind has enjoyed various types of brief narratives throughout history, among which it is possible to mention jests, anecdotes, studied digressions, short allegorical romances, moralizing fairy tales, short myths, and abbreviated historical legends. Nevertheless, none of these constitutes a short story as it has been defined since the 19th century, but they acutally constitute a fundamental part of the backgroud from which the modern short story emerged. The rise of the modern short story actually took place in the 19th century and emerged almost simultaneously in Germany, the United States, France, and Russia. The new respect for the short story was especially evident in France, as Henry James observed, "when Mérimée, with his handful of little stories, was elected to the French Academy."[20] As *Columbia* and *Carmen* demonstrate, Mérimée's stories are widely regarded as masterpieces of detached and dry observation featured by emotionally charged subject matters, which have subsequently been taken as models by the greatest realist writers. The two major French impressionist writers of short stories were Charles Nodier, who experimented with symbolic fantasies, and Gérard de Nerval, whose collection *Les Filles du Feu* was born out of recollections of his childhood. What is more, artists being primarily known for their work in other forms also attempted the short story, among whom novelists like Honoré de Balzac and Gustave Flaubert as well as poets like Alfred de Vigny and Théophile Gautier need to be mentioned.[21] In order to provide a better insight into the genre of the short story, Donata Meneghelli attempts to deal with the apparently banal task of defining short stories by initially wondering:

20 Cf. Arlen J. Hansen, 'Short Story', in www.britannica.com, https://www.britannica.com/art/short-story (accessed July 2020).
21 Cf. Arlen J. Hansen, 'Short Story', in www.britannica.com, https://www.britannica.com/art/short-story (accessed July 2020).

"What is a short story?" and by subsequently drawing a very shady conclusion according to which in the middle of contemporary society

> Il racconto è dappertutto, e quasi tutto - sembra - è racconto.[22]

Rather than aiming to provide definitions, she consequently focuses on analyzing the epistemological characteristics of the short story, which is intrinsically put into perspective and which, in Meneghelli's own words,

> Incrina il modello cartesiano e/o positivista introducendo da una parte una dialettica molto più flessibile tra caso singolo e legge generale e, dall'altra, mettendo in gioco la dimensione soggettiva della cognizione.[23]

Needless to say, unlike short stories, novels are featured by an epistemological model where the choice of events and plots are functional to the conclusion; in other words, everything has a meaning and everything boasts of a function as well as of its own sense in relation to the story, whose structure might definitely be defined as teleological.

This complex historical and literary framework has undoubtedly influenced major 19th-century European authors like George Eliot and Gustave Flaubert, whose *Silas Marner* and *Un Coeur Simple* would both seem to realistically depict scenes of provincial life where quasi-anachronistic simple characters living at the margins of the Industrial Revolution are confronted with several disadventures and injustices being often connected to the advent of new capitalist ideas and new forms of production.

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22 Meneghelli, Donata, *Storie proprio così. Il racconto nell'era della narratività totale*, Milano, Morellini Editore, 2012, p. 14.

23 Meneghelli, Donata, *Storie proprio così. Il racconto nell'era della narratività totale*, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

Chapter One

The Culture of Realism in Great Britain and France: George Eliot and Gustave Flaubert

1.1. George Eliot's Realism

> I wish the picture had been a more cheery one and embraced higher specimens of humanity, but you paint so naturally that in your hands the veriest earth-worms become most interesting perfect studies in fact.[24]

As John Blackwood's telling comment suggests, although George Eliot is widely recognized as one of the major representatives of the prototypical Victorian novel, whose tradition had been initiated by Dickens, Thackeray and Trollope, the author has also introduced a peculiar interpretation of the novel according to which the portrayal of everyday life and minute existential details becomes fundamental. In particular, it is universally acknowledged that Eliot's study of humanity tends to focus on either little communities or limited social groups where psychological, emotional and intellectual dynamics are usually dictated by a complex mechanism made of causes and effects. As a matter of fact, the author strongly believes and subsequently aims to demonstrate that humble lives can only be depicted by means of truthfulness, thus avoiding both sentimentalism and sensationalism. Apart from Eliot's capacity to provide her readers with provincial and social portrayals being primarily inspired by Dutch paintings, the novelist realist attitude is especially to be praised for her unprecedented ability to carry out psychological and emotional enquiries into the inner reasons standing at the basis of her characters' actions.[25]

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24 'Correspondence between John Blackwood and George Eliot' in Eliot, George, *Silas Marner* (1861), ed. David Carroll, London, Penguin, 2012, p. 209.

25 Cf. Carlo Pagetti e Oriana Palusci, 'Dal Romanticismo all'età contemporanea', *op. cit.*, pp. 103-108.

Needless to say, Eliot's chief test of merit is her realism, namely the truth to life featuring her novels together with the author acting as a kind of neutral factor "faithfully depicting life and leaving it to teach its own lesson, as the stars do theirs."[26] Her notion of realism would therefore seem to be inspired by Lewes' main theories which express his denial of a distinction between art and reality, and his insistence upon a distinction between realism and falsehood, the former being "the basis of all art." Hence art, when attempting to paint a picture of ordinary life, must always apply "the utmost fidelity", which may be summarized by the aid of Lewes' following assumption:

> "Either give us true peasants, or leave them untouched; [...] either keep your people silent, or make them speak the idiom of their class." [27]

This general principle would appear to apply no less rigorous a standard of realism to the painting of ideal life, since the idealist begins with actuality but goes on to add a touch of sentiment to his characters, a touch of poetry which will evoke the reader's sympathy for those characters' emotions. Idealists create compassion for the inner life of their characters, thus developing somewhat more real approaches. Yet, the ideal is always to be built upon the real and it is accordingly understandable that George Eliot can emphatically apply the same standard of realism in the realm of historical romance, which "demands as much accurate and minute knowledge as creative vigor."[28] In order to better understand Eliot's conception of realism, two reviews belonging to the 'Westminster Review' and making marked concessions to the trends of naturalism need to be mentioned, the former being an article on Balzac and the latter concerning Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.

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26 Cf. William J. Hyde, 'George Eliot and the Climate of Realism', in *PMLA*, Vol. 72, No. 1, Mar. 1957, pp. 147-164.

27 George Henry Lewes, 'Realism in Art: Recent German Fiction' (1858), quoted in William J. Hyde, 'George Eliot and the Climate of Realism', *op. cit.*, p. 149.

28 Cf. William J. Hyde, 'George Eliot and the Climate of Realism', *op. cit.*, pp. 147-164.

By means of George Eliot's characteristic allusions to painting, what these revealing writings underline is the fact that Balzac copies directly from the nature around him and, as head of the French realistic school, is comparable to the Dutch painters in his exactness with the treatment of external settings. As far as Flaubert’s masterpiece is concerned, the severe, painful, uncompromising truth featuring *Madame Bovary* is at first too much for the reviewer: "We flung the book to the four corners of the room; but we took it up again, and finished it." In other words, unpleasant as Flaubert may be, his truthfulness is not to be denied and his treatment, too, is right: if adultery is to be the subject of a novel, it must be laid out boldly in all its ugliness, “not tricked out in meretricious allurements.”[29] What is more, among the many articles and reviews in the ‘Westminster Review’ that have been been ascribed to George Eliot, one stands out for its recommendation of a thoroughgoing realism akin to naturalism. In anticipating how the peasants are to be rendered, the novelist actually first suggests an idea of their uniform simplicity:

> Many thousands of men are as like each other in thoughts and habits as so many sheep or oysters, which constitutes the weight of the peasantry in the social and political scale.[30]

Novelistic treatment of the peasantry will thus not need to be complex, since “their actions are simpler, proceeding from simpler motives, and they are principally to be studied from without." Eliot also adds that novelists have made the mistake of overlooking the simplicity of the peasant and of complicating him with emotions, joys and sorrows, of which he knows nothing.

29 Cf. William J. Hyde, 'George Eliot and the Climate of Realism', *op. cit.*, pp. 147-164.
30 George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856), quoted in William J. Hyde, 'George Eliot and the Climate of Realism', *op. cit.*, p. 151.

Family ties are for instance binding upon him, "but tender affection, as it exists amongst the refined part of mankind, is almost as foreign to him as white hands and filbert-shaped nails."[31] Secondly, George Eliot implies the fundamental sordidness characterizing the peasant, which leads to reveal that her main appeal is for writers to "approach nearer" and then report accurately what they see. It is hence clear that even before becoming a novelist, Eliot had experimented and developed an emphatic devotion to this kind of realism. In spite of this, the search for traces of naturalism in George Eliot's rural novels, if the term naturalism is referred to the display of the lowliest kinds of sordidness, has never revealed to be fruitful for the author primarily centres her works on the study of the homely and of the commonplace rather than on mere records of the lowliest forms of human life. By considering especially her remarks about the peasantry, it is therefore evident that what differenciates George Eliot's realism is her ability to reach at times beneath the middle ground, to where the commonplace shades into the vulgar. Undoubtedly, as it is made explicit by numerous sketches featuring Eliot's earliest works, the idea of presenting "the peasant in all his coarse apathy"did not only constitute a pleasure, but also a duty owed to her realistic creed.[32] It is in fact in the application of the broad concept of realism as the basis of all fiction that the significance of her crticism becomes apparent in her novels. To begin with, as many critics have already observed, Eliot tended to deal with scenes and people thouroughly familiar to her and even without a distinct pattern of autobiography, all of the rural novels from *Scenes of Clerical Life* to *Middlemarch* are felt to be demonstrations of the author's deep familiarity with rural people and with the ways of village life featuring the Midlands of her childhood.

31 George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856), quoted in William J. Hyde, 'George Eliot and the Climate of Realism', *op. cit.*, p. 153.

32 Cf. William J. Hyde, 'George Eliot and the Climate of Realism', *op. cit.*, pp. 147-164.

Following the repeated advice in the 'Westminster Review', George Eliot initially discarded the fanciful and unfamiliar in favour of "her own actual experience," depicting life

> Not as [she had] read of it or dreamed of it, but as [she had] felt and suffered it.[33]

Secondly, George Eliot chose for her subject the accurate representation of the commonplace. Far more important than to display the eccentrically ugly or the superhumanly virtuous was it to her to extend the readers' understanding and sympathies to the mass of everyday people. In other words, Eliot's great merit has to do with her unequalled capacity to take up the commonplace and to make it intimately known. Those humble and simple kinds of people appearing in her beloved Dutch paintings are subsequently taken as models and are made to constitute her privileged literary subject as is described in *Adam Bede*:

> Those old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands, those heavy clowns taking holiday in a dingy pot-house, those rounded backs and stupid weather-beaten faces that have bent over the spade and done the rough work of the world - those homes with their tin pans, their brown pitchers, their rough curs, and their clusters of onions.[34]

Thinking of the simplicity and even of the triviality characterizing George Eliot's characters in the everyday routine of their lives thus allows both readers and critics to put the extent of her treatment of the commonplace into proper focus. This second form of realism actually suggests that it is her aim as a novelist to increase her readers' sympathies for the average humanity, not only by limiting her choice to the subjects of the Dutch paintings, but especially by bringing her characters to life with the minute realistic touches of a Dutch painter.

33 George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856), quoted in William J. Hyde, 'George Eliot and the Climate of Realism', *op. cit.*, p. 155.
34 Eliot, George, *Adam Bede* (1859), ed. Margaret Reynolds, London, Penguin, 2008, p. 195.

Last but not least, given that ugliness of incident and coarsness of sentiment can readily be found within typical human species, George Eliot willingly devotes much attention to these aspects in all of her rural novels. Nonetheless, what makes the more complex of George Eliot's characters memorable has nothing to do with their objective reality. As a matter of fact, apart from detailed reports of speech, actions, and appearances, her greatest works are enriched by inward penetration and sympathy. The author has basically built her sequence of action on a preconceived moral theory of consequences that served to direct the story towards an end rather than on direct observation and recording of life. If good nature at last attains quiet happiness in *Adam Bede*, *Silas Marner* and other pivotal characters or the protagonists are all alike engulfed in the consequences of evil, suffering is always traced from an initial wrong or thoughtless act which must relentlessly work itself out by the end of the novel. Plots are unified by Eliot's own moral certainty as she unravels the web of circumstances, and her realistic treatment of character would seem to help to strengthen her moralistic plots. Contrary to popular belief, character rather than events lies at the core of George Eliot's novels, and it is upon character that the body of criticism in the 'Westminster Review' has had its brightest influence:

> Only that literature is effective, and to be prized accordingly, which has reality for its basis, and effective in proportion to the depth and breadth of that basis.[35]

In particular, characters are almost condemned to reconsider their initial aspirations to the point that reconsideration is made to become the founding motif standing at the basis of most of Eliot's plots.

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35 George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856), quoted in William J. Hyde, 'George Eliot and the Climate of Realism', *op. cit.*, p. 160.

It is exactly the presence of inevitable compromises and final failures that constitutes the best quality of her characters as well as the most original contribution of the author to the culture of the novel, i.e. her perculiar conception and subsequent application of the notion of realism.[36] Unlike French exponents of the so-called determinism, who were primarily interested in the detailed depiction of humanity in the middle of specific social backgrounds, Eliot is more concerned with individuality and therefore aims to portray her characters' failures as not wholly depending on external factors. Consequently, instead of comparing Eliot to her French realist peers, her idea of realism can only be seized by referring to Ruskin's theories, which the novelist undoubtedly admired.

> La verità di infinito valore che ci insegna è il realismo – la dottrina che verità e bellezza vanno perseguite attraverso lo studio umile e fedele della natura, e non sostituendo forme vaghe, alimentate dall'immaginazione sulle nebbie del sentimento, alla sua precisa e sostanziale realtà. La completa accettazione di questa dottrina darebbe nuova forma alla nostra esistenza, e colui che ne insegna l'applicazione in una qualsiasi delle sfere dell'azione umana con la potenza di Mr. Ruskin, è un profeta per la sua generazione.[37]

The vital core of Eliot's realism thus resides in a humble and faithful study of nature as opposed to the vagueness featuring sentimental imagination, which is the reason why all her plots are aimed to demonstrate that individual success is to be found in human emancipation from moral stupidity and has paradoxically nothing to do with self-realization and personal achievements.

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36 Cf. Villari, E., 'Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult'. Adam Bede e il Realismo di George Eliot, in Fornasiero, S., Tamiozzo, S., eds., *Studi sul Sette-Ottocento offerti a Marinella Colummi*, Venezia, Edizioni Ca' Foscari Digital Publishing, 2015, pp. 253-254.

37 Eliot, George, 'Review of Modern Painters III', quoted in Villari, E., 'Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult'. Adam Bede e il Realismo di George Eliot, cit., p. 255.

Needless to say, that final willing reconsideration of initial sublime ambitions, which is almost unconceivable for modern cultures being dominated by narcissism, becomes indeed a distinctive sign of modern greatness in George Eliot's fictional worlds. Eliot hence attempts to oppose moral stupidity and universal narcissism, which appear to threat both isolation and loneliness, by means of sympathy being defined in *Adam Bede* as a word that defines people's intelligence and ability to love. The notion of sympathy is clearly to be considered as a key-concept residing at the core of the author's viewpont in life as well as of her aesthetics. On the whole, it is actually possible to assume that George Eliot's choice to depict those people living in a state of simplicity is linked to her need to observe and subsequently communicate the reasons and the logics lying underneath the connection between the displacement of greatness from what is sublime to what is ordinary and sympathy, which constitutes the most distinctive feature of George Eliot's aesthetic realism.[38] However, her recurrent tendency to portray severe protagonists being progressively brought back to tenderness thanks to the vicinity and piety coming from other human beings serves not only to warn her readers against a threatening evolution in modern society, but also to suggest the only possible way to divert such menacing tendency. This leads to notice some significant common elements characterizing Eliot's and Flaubert's provincial stories, which mark a sort of revolutionary turn in the perception of the two novelists in spite of undisputable differences featuring their aesthetic modes. Starting from *Adam Bede* and *Madame Bovary*, both authors began to conceive modernity as a source of anthropological mutations in the female genre and in the human being in general.[39]

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38 Cf. Villari, E., 'Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult'. Adam Bede e il Realismo di George Eliot, cit., pp. 255-256.

39 Cf. Villari, E., 'Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult'. Adam Bede e il Realismo di George Eliot, cit., p. 259.

Eliot's *Adam Bede* particularly highlights the importance of sorrowful experiences to extend human sympathies and thus to counteract the modern tendency to hardness of heart, namely a mechanism that will be further developed in all the artist's greatest works:

> It was part of that growing tenderness which came from the sorrow at work within him. […] Let us rather be thankful that our sorrow lives in us as an indestructible force, only changing its form, as forces do, and passing from pain into sympathy – the one poor word which includes all our best insight and our best love.[40]

Taking everything into account, George Eliot's idea of "art as the nearest thing to life" which "sets – or is intended to set – in a strong light the remedial influences of pure, natural human relations" is wonderfully expressed in the following quotation:

> L'arte è ciò che più ci avvicina alla vita; è un modo per amplificare l'esperienza ed estendere il contatto con i nostri simili al di là dei confini del nostro destino personale.[41]

In other words, George Eliot identified the defeat of falsehood as the main purpose of her realist contribution as a writer, which led her to declare that a purely sublime conception of existence leaving out common and ordinary constituents of both social and individual life was fatally stained by that falsehood being found in those highly criticized *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*. In Eliot's view, realism thus functions as a corrective means of the widespreading falsehood, which is also the reason standing at the basis of the following famous declaration of poetics in chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*:

40 Eliot, George, *Adam Bede* (1859), ed. Margaret Reynolds, London, Penguin, 2008, pp. 531-532.

41 Eliot, George, 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856), quoted in Villari, E., 'Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult'. Adam Bede e il Realismo di George Eliot, cit., p. 263.

> So I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things seem better than they were; dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity, which, in spite of one's best efforts, there is reason to dread. Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult.[42]

To sum up, it is in the portraiture of the poor and of what it was fashionable to call "the lower middle class", that this writer is without a rival. There are two points especially with regard to the poor which George Eliot has mastered, and the mastery of which conveys a lifelike reality to her novels. These are the frankness of the poor and their religion, which make up those pictures of humble life having constituted the great merit of George Eliot's works.[43] What is more, Eliot gives proof of unparalleled sympathetic insight into her characters' minds which is one of the rarest of intellectual gifts, thus chatacterizing incomplete states of development while also portraying the manner in which all human beings are influenced by their environment. In other words, Eliot's art is widely regarded as remarkable because of both the vivid social painting of life and the profound remarks on the psychological effect of the life.[44] For all these reasons, the author has often been classified as an exponent of moral realism, according to which motivation is thought to come from the feelings and the novelist's ethical task is to educate the readers' feelings by imaginative "experiments in life," namely insightful projections of the possible consequences of human actions. This means that Eliot treats the observation and understanding of human nature like the observation and understanding of physical phenomena, so that her novels constitute an exercise in acquainting her readers with the resistless force of that natural law which, "governing the habits, becomes morality and, developing the feelings of submission and dependence, becomes religion".[45]

42 Eliot, George, *Adam Bede* (1859), cit., pp. 194-195.

43 'Correspondence between John Blackwood and George Eliot' in Eliot, George, *Silas Marner* (1861), ed. David Carroll, London, Penguin, 2012, pp. 209-210.

44 'Two Contemporary Reviews' in Eliot, George, *Silas Marner* (1861), ed. David Carroll, London, Penguin, 2012, pp. 211-219.

45 Cf. Henberg, Marvin, 'George Eliot's Moral Realism', in *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 3(1), January 1979, pp. 20-38.

As a consequence of her significative philosophical training, aesthetic standards are conceived as inherently connected with ethical standards since both evidently share a common highest value, that is truth. Needless to say, Eliot's anti-perfectionism boasts of a philosophical basis leading her to claim that the writer's primary obligation, whether he be a moralist, sociologist, or novelist, is to inform with a practiced and undistorting eye, to the point that sentimentality is seen as an adversary of understanding. And the willingness to distort fact in the name of art actually destroys the value of literature as an experiment in life. Furthermore, Eliot's moral realism is the result of her conviction that the individual's personal experience as a source of learning is severely limited and thus requires amplification through the mechanism of sympathy. On the one hand, Hume's theories led Eliot to conceive ethics as a branch of psychology primarily centering upon the empirical investigation of men's relations and emotive capacities, especially following the idea that the heart is a powerful source of understanding. On the other hand, Eliot's analysis of Spinoza mainly focused on the concept of spiritual liberation through acceptance of the inevitable as well as on the idea that since individuals must act as well as learn and since actions are primarily influenced by passions, the analysis of feeling need to occupy a central place in the novelist's work. Eliot's moral realism, then, aims to educate the feelings as Benjamin Jowett's recollection of a conversation with the author reveals:

> She wanted to have an ethical system founded upon altruism; and argued that there was no such thing as doing any action because it was right or reasonable, but only because it accorded with one's better feelings toward others.[46]

Jowett's recollection undoubtedly accords well with the way in which sympathy and fellow-feeling channel the moral actions of Eliot's protagonists while also demonstrating that reason is indeed a slave of the passions when it comes to particular choices.

46 Benjamin Jowett quoted in Henberg, Marvin, 'George Eliot's Moral Realism', *op. cit.*, p. 28.

What is more, Eliot’s moral realism implies that traditional moral precepts often become successful conduits for her characters’ better feelings in relation to her belief that tradition encompasses the hard-won moral knowledge of past generations, which allows both the moral realist and her characters to acquire deep consciousness of human feelings. Eliot's distribution of sympathy in her narrative thus follows the edicts of moral realism, which is the reason why her descriptions correspond both to what she outwardly perceives and to what she inwardly experiences.

To conclude our argument about Eliot, the value of moral realism has to do with its ability to enable people to produce imaginative experiments in life as well as to be confronted with the actual probable consequences of one’s choices. As a matter of fact, George Eliot is aware that observation alone, whether of physical particles or of human beings, only provides facts and relations, but imagination must be necessarily employed to explain those facts. In other words, realism applied to the study of man also requires the identification of exact relations among the unobserved facts of emotive life. In particular, Eliot's revolutionary contribution to the analysis of moral weakness is widely regarded as substantial because of her ability to remind us of the modest virtues and act of kindness of common people while cautioning us at the same time against resting content with moral formulae which purport to solve moral dilemmas before their being experienced. Eliot’s highly intelligent and educated mind is therefore capable to sharpen one's intellect and to tutor one's feelings by means of realistic examination of the actual promptings of individual men, in order to guide one’s better feelings toward their proper objects. The feeling-based ethics featuring Eliot’s novels actually boasts of countless advantages over prescriptive systems of universal principles being found in philosophical treatises.[47]

47 Cf. Henberg, Marvin, 'George Eliot's Moral Realism', *op. cit.*, pp. 20-38.

1.2. Gustave Flaubert's Realism

Needless to say, Gustave Flaubert is primarily known as a novelist and is widely regarded as the prime mover of the realist school of French literature. As a matter of fact his best known masterpiece *Madame Bovary* dating back to 1857 is particularly praised for its realistic portrayal of bourgeois life, which also led to a trial due to the novel's alleged excessive realism almost bordering on immorality. Among other works, the four versions of *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* show how the author's ideas changed in the course of time ranging from the influences of Spinoza's nihilistic philosophy to the impact of Spencer's respect for religious feeling that was not present in earlier writings;[48] in other words, Flaubert's poetics is centred on reconciling the Spencerian notion of the Unknown with Spinozism to the point that the writer had come to believe that science and religion, instead of conflicting, rather constitute the two poles of thought. After the failure of *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, Bouilhet encourages Flaubert to start some new projects and perfectly summarizes the features of the style which characterizes the author's greatest works:

> Du moment que tu as une invincible tendence au lyrisme, il faut choisir un sujet où le lyrisme serait si ridicule que tu seras forcé de te surveiller et d'y renoncer. Prends un sujet terre-à-terre, un de ces incidents dont la vie bourgeoise est pleine, quelque chose comme la Cousine Bette, comme le Cousin Pons, de Balzac.[49]

As is widely acknowledged, *Madame Bovary* is actually based on a commonplace story of adultery which has become a highly appreciated book because of its profound humanity.

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48 Cf. René Dumesnil and Jacques Barzun, 'Gustave Flaubert', in www.britannica.com, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gustave-Flaubert (accessed July 2020).

49 Maxime du Camp, *Souvenirs Littéraires*, Hachette, 1906, t. 1, pp. 313-314, quoted in Thierry Laget, Notice of Flaubert, Gustave, *Madame Bovary* (1857), ed. Thierry Laget, Éditions Gallimards, 2001, pp. 453-462, p. 453.

As a matter of fact, the novel being subtitled *Moeurs de Province* and being featured by unprecedented unrelenting objectivity, by which Flaubert meant the dispassionate recording of every trait or incident that could illuminate the psychology of his characters and their role in the logical development of his story, marks the beginning of a new age in literature. Similarly, *Trois Contes* containing the three short stories “Un Coeur simple”, namely a tale about the drab and simple life of a faithful servant, “La Légende de Saint Julien l’Hospitalier” and “Hérodias” shows Flaubert’s talent in all its aspects and has often been held to be his masterpiece in spite of the diversity of the themes of the stories.[50] Technically speaking, Flaubert’s aim in art was to create beauty, and this consideration often tended to override both moral and social issues in his depiction of truth. Following a variety of experiences and experiments, his idea of art gradually became more exact and his changing attitude is made particularly explicit in his letters to Louise Colet. His actual ambition was to achieve a style “as rhythmical as verse and as precise as the language of science” and, in Flaubert’s view, “the faster the word sticks to the thought, the more beautiful is the effect.”[51] In other words, Flaubert often repeated that there was no such thing as a synonym and that a writer had to track down “le seul mot juste” to convey his thought precisely. At the same time, the author always expressed his need for cadence and harmony of sounding syllables in his prose, so that art can appeal not only to the readers’ intelligence but also to their subconscious mind in the same way as music does, in order to thus produce a more penetrating effect than the mere sense of the words at their face value.

50 Cf. René Dumesnil and Jacques Barzun, ‘Gustave Flaubert’, in www.britannica.com, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gustave-Flaubert (accessed July 2020).

51 Gustave Flaubert quoted in René Dumesnil and Jacques Barzun, ‘Gustave Flaubert’, in www.britannica.com, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gustave-Flaubert (accessed July 2020).

Flaubert basically sought objectivity above all else in his writing and actually believed that “the author, in his work, must be like God in the Universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere.”[52] Like Beaudelaire, Flaubert also conceives art as a means to sublimize those elements being found in nature in order for the artist to present reality in the perfect microcosm of the literary work, where even the simplest everyday events become a way to investigate human conditions. Nevertheless, unlike the contemporary poet who was soon detached from the simplistic definition of realist author, the identification of Flaubert’s poetics has always been troublesome and his character is often superficially associated with that of the chief realist writer. To make it simple, what was only the author’s means of aesthetic production has been misinterpreted as its main purpose. Apart from having treated various genres ranging from philosophy to fantasy and from autobiography to tragedy and history, Flaubert’s works boast of numerous models among which it is necessary to mention Homer and Shakespeare, who “hanno compreso nel loro cerchio l’umanità e la natura”, as well as Montaigne, Rabelais, Voltaire and Byron, who made him acquainted with the themes of folly, death and the devil. What primarily strikes the writer, nevertheless, is the existence of evil, which stands at the basis of his radical pessimistic vision of the world where no hope, solidarity or divine entities are to be found. In particular, the artist’s sensation of living in an epoch when everything has already happened has been defined as “ennui” and is usually rendered through a crepuscolar dimension which may be compared to Beaudelaire’s idea of “spleen”. Both authors actually feel entrapped in a limited world and subsequently dream of the infinite, thus conceiving art as the only means of redemption for their senseless lives.[53] Moreover, the pivotal theme around which his whole poetics turns is the reflection on the potential of the words, which will be developed throughout his whole career.

52 Cf. René Dumesnil and Jacques Barzun, ‘Gustave Flaubert’, in www.britannica.com, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gustave-Flaubert (accessed July 2020).

53 Cf. Ida Merello, ‘L’ottocento’, in *Storia europea della letteratura francese: Dal Settecento all'età contemporanea*, *op. cit.*, pp. 176-183.

After having written a novel being dictated by autobiographical needs, namely *Novembre*, Flaubert produces the first version of *L'Éducation Sentimentale*, which focuses on the theme of love as a source of influence on the personaliy and on the characters' relationship with society. In particular, this novel makes explicit the author's aversion to both progress and humanitarian philantropy beyond which class prejudices and superficial views of the world are believed to lie. It is especially through its protagonist that Flaubert first conveys his initial idea of art, that is a means of knowledge and a way to "arrivare alla coscienza della verità." In other words, art is to be defined as a blend of structural and harmonious relations which help to make beauty emerge even from the nastiest things by tending towards the absolute ideal:

> L'arte disegnava tutte quelle linee, cantava tutti quei suoni, scolpiva tutte quelle forme, ne afferrava le rispettive proporzioni, e per vie misteriose le portava a quella realtà più bella della realtà stessa, perché risale all'ideale da cui questa deriva.[54]

L'Éducation Sentimentale also introduces one of Flaubert's fundamental researches, that is to say his keen study of his epoch and of his country together with its customs and its people aiming to seek "l'umanità nell'arte, e, direi quasi, l'arte nell'umanità." Nonetheless, as has already been outlined, it is the publication of *Madame Bovary* that allows the author to demonstrate "che la poesia è puramente soggettiva, che non esistono in letteratura bei soggetti d'arte," and to delineate his realist style by carrying out researches on contemporary everyday news that he inserts in his story to make it more lifelike by also implicitly hinting at two of Balzac's writings.

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54 Gustave Flaubert quoted in Ida Merello, 'L'ottocento', in *Storia europea della letteratura francese: Dal Settecento all'età contemporanea*, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

In accordance with realist tenets, the novel is tellingly set in the author's native land, namely Normandy, and its construction pays particular attention to balance as though Flaubert was creating a painting. Yet, at the same time, the point of view of the novel continuously shifts from one character to the other as if the author aimed to convey the characters' subjective view of things. Following Flaubert's distinctive tendency to hide in order to perform the role of mere "language operator" as Bruneau once called him, Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson will praise his idea of "art for art's sake" and will subsequently give rise to a debate on the novelistic use of the omniscient narrator to the point that Flaubert will finally constitute an undiscussed model for future generations.[55] After having been accused of both immorality and excessive realism, the novelist turned towards a novel of pure imagination, namely *Salammbô*, before publishing the second version of *L'Éducation Sentimentale,* which is widely considered as a masterpiece of sociological and historical analysis where Flaubert's disillusion is evident in his pessimistic view of men and life. Overall, his production has repeatedly oscillated from realist works being set in the contemporary world to erudite works being featured by their imaginary potential and by their visionary character as the publication of *Trois Contes* reveals. As a matter of fact, the more imaginative stories "Saint-Julien l'Hospitalier" and "Hérodias" are brilliantly counterbalanced by "Un Coeur Simple", that is the story of a positive servant called Félicité who maintains all her sweetness and candour in spite of the numerous adversities to which she is subjected.[56] On the one hand, the reason for Flaubert's multiple condemnations hence resides in the fact that "il imprime le dégoût du vice en offrant le tableau des désordres qui peuvent exister dans la société" rather than pursuing the mission of literature, i.e. "d'orner et de récréer l'esprit en élevant l'intelligence et en épurant les moeurs."

55 Cf. Ida Merello, 'L'ottocento', in *Storia europea della letteratura francese: Dal Settecento all'età contemporanea*, *op. cit.*, pp. 176-183.
56 Cf. Ida Merello, 'L'ottocento', in *Storia europea della letteratura francese: Dal Settecento all'età contemporanea* , *op. cit.*, pp. 176-183.

On the other hand, however, his various merits have also been acknowledged as follows:

> M. Gustave Flaubert tient la plume comme d'autres le scalpel. On ne le lit pas sans de fréquentes révoltes, mais on va jusqu'au bout, captivé par le charme du style, la vigueur de l'expression, la grâce des détails et la belle ornementation de l'oeuvre.[57]

Like Balzac and Stendhal, Flaubert is usually praised for his subtle descriptions and for his impartiality for he appears to be "sourd et muet d'impression à tout ce qu'il raconte." Last but not least, referring to *Madame Bovary*, Beaudelaire exclaims: "Un roman, s'exclame-t-il, et quel roman! Le plus impartial, le plus loyal"[58], thus clarifying that Flaubert's genius lies in his capacity to understand that the moral dimension of the text is secondary and that works of art need to detach from morality in order to respond to other more important criteria. It is widely agreed that realist writers must attempt to discover people they already know in real life and portray them in novels as they exist rather than recomposing them by synthesis. Still, it possible to define Flaubert as a realist not only because of the treatment of his heroines as people that he discovered instead of characters that he created, but also according to Edwin Preston Dargan's modern definition of realism which is to be found in his book *Studies in Balzac's Realism*:

> It is the art of representing actuality viewed largely from the material standpoint, in a way to produce as closely as possible the impression of truth.[59]

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57 Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du Lundi*, Garnier Frères, t. XIII, 1858, p. 297, quoted in Thierry Laget, Notice of Flaubert, Gustave, *Madame Bovary* (1857), ed. Thierry Laget, Éditions Gallimards, 2001, pp. 453-462, p. 459.

58 Charles Beaudelaire quoted in Thierry Laget, Notice of Flaubert, Gustave, *Madame Bovary* (1857), ed. Thierry Laget, Éditions Gallimards, 2001, pp. 453-462, p. 461.

59 Edwin Preston Dargan, *Studies in Balzac's Realism,* quoted in Thierry Laget, Notice of Flaubert, Gustave*, Madame Bovary* (1857)*,* ed. Thierry Laget, Éditions Gallimards, 2001, pp. 453-462, p. 461.

In addition, Dargan also provides a very accurate list of the main characteristics being associated with modern realism, most of which perfectly fit Flaubert's style. Gustave Flaubert evidently strives for truth and for objective reality in his harsh portrayal of the bourgeoisie, and most of his characters are taken from real life. Like the majority of Balzac's novels, materialism and scientific approach to the characters are to be detected by analyzing Flaubert's narrative modes. Human beings are actually classified in his novels almost as a biologist would classify animals by species. Furthermore, the author is widely considered as extremely impersonal in his attitude towards facts and characters appearing in his stories to the point that seldom does he either manifest any personal feelings or express any personal opinions. Since the novelist's pivotal interest is accuracy, the documentary method implying the use of documents as well as of his own technical erudition is employed. This might mislead some readers to associate tediousness with Flaubert's way of writing due to the presence of too many accessory characters pursuing too many goals and never attaining any as well as the insertion of many digressions and episodes leading the reader to get lost and to forget Flaubert's real purpose. Besides, apparent dullness is not only dictated by his obsessive preoccupation with style and with perfection of vocabulary, but also by his extensive use of mediocrities and trivialities. By introducing each character together with both a detailed contextualized background and abundant sociological features, solidity and logical progression are granted in the sense that his characters are always presented as products of their milieu. Despite all these undisputable realist tenets, the fact that Flaubert does demonstrate no sympathy for ordinary life and his disgust with the bourgeois class also allow to assume that realism is sometimes blended with romanticism in his major works. Seeing that harmony is considered as superior in relation to content, Flaubert would seem to imitate Rabelais' and Montaigne's 16th-century language which was said to "provide the mind with so much ease in expressing itself".

However, despite his opposing the strict observance of rules, all his characters boast of their own manner of expressing so that their social position and their profession may be characterized:

> Chacun parle exactement le langage qui lui convient et à l'exclusion de tout autre.[60]

Balzac and Flaubert are thus undoubtedly to be defined as realists in the modern sense of the word; as a matter of fact, as Auerbach suggests, "chez Flaubert, le réalisme devient impartial, impersonnel et objectif". In particular, according to Auerbach, the two main traits exemplifying Flaubert's modern realism are already evident in *Madame Bovary,* namely everyday events taking place to the inferior social classes and especially to the so-called provincial bourgeoisie, which are contextualized in relation to contemporary history, that is the depiction of provincial life under the reign of Louis-Philippe. Yet, the varying viewpoints featuring Flaubert's stories somehow contribute to dissolving the effect of reality, which is the reason why the concept of subjective realism has often been employed to summarize such an inner contradiction. Although Flaubert himself has repeatedly claimed that "faire vrai ne me paraît pas être la première condition de l'Art. Viser au Beau est le principal, et l'atteindre si l'on peut", the initial means being used to attain the aforementioned goal do not at all differ from those means being employed by his contemporary realist peers who assumed that

> On doit tout savoir et, si possible, tout voir afin de tout reproduire, et la volonté de tout reproduire relève bien, en soi, d'un projet réaliste. Il faut faire des tableaux, montrer la nature telle qu'elle est, mais des tableaux complets, peindre le dessous et le dessus.[61]

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60 Edwin Preston Dargan, *Studies in Balzac's Realism,* quoted in Thierry Laget, Notice of Flaubert, Gustave, *Madame Bovary* (1857), ed. Thierry Laget, Éditions Gallimards, 2001, pp. 453-462, p. 460.

61 Edwin Preston Dargan, *Studies in Balzac's Realism,* quoted in Thierry Laget, Notice of Flaubert, Gustave, *Madame Bovary* (1857), ed. Thierry Laget, Éditions Gallimards, 2001, pp. 453-462, p. 460.

This realist attitude basically allows Flaubert to digest the initial objective vision of the world in order to stimulate his imaginative faculties and to transform reality into the sublimized object of his art. Therefore, it appears evident that Flaubert is to be placed among the realists of his epoch not only because of his recurrent obsession with accuracy - “informez-vous près de lui si tout cela est exact” - and because of his interest in the notion of truth - “explique-moi clairement et véridiquement”, but also because it is exactly realism that leads the writer to constantly seek for right words and to almost obsessively refine his writing process. As far as the concept of nature is concerned, apart from being respected, it needs to be melted within preestablished materials, which means obeying to the literary genesis rather than the other way round. Reality hence serves as both a source of motivation in the sense that the author can thus obtain details being able to inspire his creativity while also remaining faithful to the transmission of truth, and as a source of confirmation. In accordance to Flaubert’s idea of art, material reality is subsequently to be regarded as a mere “tremplin pour s’élever plus haut”, which suggests that his scriptural process may be summarized as follows: documentary notes coming from real experiences provide the author with basic textual material starting from which he can easily begin the writing process. Hence, Flaubertian realism might seem to lie in the much more difficult tasks of classification and rewriting rather than mere invention.

Apart from having been born only two years apart and having both died in the same year, that is 1880, George Eliot and Gustave Flaubert apparently led lives that seemed at times to move strikingly in parallel without ever touching. For instance, two of their earliest writings, such as Flaubert’s *Mémoires d’un Fou* and George Eliot’s “Poetry and Prose from the Notebooks of an Eccentric” attempt to portray imaginings of marginal and eccentric outsiders. What is more, their final works, namely *Bouvard et Pécuchet* on the one hand and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* on the other hand, both aim to exploit marginal and eccentric figures as vehicles for an ironic and critical approach to contemporary culture.

The most relevant similarities featuring both authors' careers date back to the mid-nineteenth century though, which corresponds to the moment when both writers achieved fame by publishing novels of provincial life such as *Madame Bovary* and *Adam Bede.* Besides, *Salammbô* and *Romola* constitute laborious reconstructions of the distant past in seemingly contemporaneous historical novels, whereas *L'Éducation Sentimentale* and *Daniel Deronda* are widely labelled as very different versions of the Bildungsroman. The reason for this might depend on the fact that Eliot and Flaubert shared a common literary heritage being made up of Balzac's and George Sand's influences together with fruitful literary friendships with Ivan Turgenev and Henry James. As it has been argued, similar backgrounds and experiences might have shaped their literary careers as well; as a matter of fact, not only did George Eliot frequently travel to France throughout her adult life and not only did Flaubert pay several visits to London, but they also both visited the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park. Curiously enough, Eliot and Lewes set out on a tour of Normandy and Brittany during which they also visited Rouen, which is located just a few miles from Flaubert's home in Croisset. George Eliot's visit of Paris then allowed her to meet numerous intellectuals and writers at Madame Mohl's, among whom Flaubert's intimate friend Ernest Renan is to be mentioned. Still, little evidence has been detected of either any meetings between the two novelists or of any familiarity with each other's work. These first considerations evidently aid to highlight both Flaubert's and Eliot's commitment to the 'realistic' literary mode, which established itself during their lifetime as the most representative mode of the century. While differing in their ways of dealing with similar subjects and in the ways in which they employ different levels of 'realism' in connection with those subjects, both writers' aesthetics is the result of their parallel research in the realistic-scientific culture of their time that led to establish some long-resisting preconceived ideas about their different poetics and about the misleading label of 'realism'.

As it has previously been suggested, the emergence of the realist literary movement is to be considered as the product and expression of the dominant mood of its time, that is a pervasive rationalist epistemology that rejected Romantic sentimentalism and Idealism and was shaped by the impact of the political and social changes as well as the scientific and industrial advances of its day.[62] The evolution of the critical debate on the subject also suggests that the simplistic conception of realism as an imitation of external reality, based on the assumption of a transparent language, is to be dismantled. In spite of the different philosophy informing the writers' narrative choices, a biographic approach to the two novelists helps not only to disclose the striking points of intersection connecting Eliot's and Flaubert's intellectual training, but also to set their extraordinarily extensive reading within the scientific bias of the culture of their age. Parallels and differences are therefore to be found in Eliot's and Flaubert's narrative modality; for instance, *Madame Bovary* and *Middlemarch* both illustrate the ravages of disillusionment and incommunicability in unhappy marriages, both *L'Éducation Sentimentale* and *Daniel Deronda* focus on the theme of a young man's sentimental education and search for a vocation, and all the novels actually explore the dialectics between story and history. What is more, a careful reading of the novels suggests that, despite their different underlying philosophy, both the inventor of pure aesthetics and the champion of human sympathy were great formal artists, equally preoccupied with a highly organized novel structure. However, in accordance with the tenet of the separation of art and morality, Flaubert's novels are featured by an increasingly prevailing textual dimension, whereas Eliot's programmatic choice of the so called authorial intrusion delineates her constant interest in the reader's response.[63] Regardless of the differences featuring their aesthetic philosophies and literary modes, it is yet possible to trace some continuities between Eliot’s and Flaubert’s thematic choices.

62 Cf. Guzzoni, Agnese, *The Culture of Realism: George Eliot and Gustave Flaubert*, PhD Dissertation, Venezia, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, 2004.
63 Cf. Guzzoni, Agnese, *The Culture of Realism: George Eliot and Gustave Flaubert*, PhD Dissertation, Venezia, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, 2004.

First of all, the most emblematic literary phenomena appearing in nineteenth-century Europe are undoubtedly connected with the main contemporary historical and social events, such as Industrial Revolution, French Revolution, colonial enterprises and women's role in society. For this reason, starting from the mid-nineteenth century, most European writers including George Eliot and Gustave Flaubert began to favour simple characters being somehow marginalized by familiar, social or human communities because of their problematic relation with modernity as their main subject matter. The nineteenth-century European literary scene is therefore enriched by characters who are conceived to stage and problematize the given relationships between norms and transgressions, inclusion and exclusion as well as the notions of individual freedom, sympathy and social responsibility. Furthermore, the publication of Walter Scott's *Waverley*, which is widely known as the first historical novel in Europe, clearly contributed to the rise and fortune of both George Eliot's regional novels and Gustave Flaubert's realist works. In fact, these are characterized by both social and psychological portrayals of simplicity, which becomes a distinctive sign of modern greatness. In other words, Scott's innovative depiction and investigation of the clash between the old feudal system featuring ancient Catholic Scotland and the new values featuring modern Hannoverian England, introduces the fundamental debate concerning past and present due to the disrupting events of the French Revolution. As a consequence, the rural setting of George Eliot's *Silas Marner* and the bourgeois setting of Gustave Flaubert's *Un Coeur Simple* together with their realist depiction of humble sympathetic characters also aims to represent ancient forms of life co-existing with, and even clashing against, the more modern ways of life dominating the contemporary European scenario. A number of historical, political and ethical issues would actually seem to have led both authors to literary displace the idea of greatness from what can theoretically be defined as sublime to what is considered as commonplace, which is thought to better represent the social reality of modern life.

Chapter Two

Social Portrayals of Simplicity

2.1. Past Rural Settings in *Silas Marner*

What enables George Eliot to avoid the quality of the documentary in most of her novels is the fact that her material is inspired by actual experience or by personal association and is effectively transformed into fiction by memory and reflection. In other words, apart from stating facts and recording the accurate impressions of local people, the author is powerfully able to provide her vision of a way of life that continues to exist in her imagination in spite of its being rooted in the past. As various passages of *Silas Marner* demonstrate, the quality of objectivity characterizes George Eliot's treatment of all her social material, that is both her depiction of a historical era where she is betrayed neither into sentimental idealization of the past nor into simple glorification of the present and her analysis of numerous social classes. No other Victorian novelist moves more firmly and confidently through almost the entire range of nineteenth-century society, the total picture appears as a tribute to her vision of catholicity, and her success with rural types and with the world of middle-class commercialism cannot be doubted. In the so-called rural novels, on which her reputation mainly depends, Eliot focuses on rural and provincial England, but also deals with an era that belongs to her own youth or to the youth of the preceding generation. It is thus possible to identify, as it were, two historical centres towards which her imagination is strongly attracted. The former corresponds to the England of the turn of the century that she thinks of as both innocent from industrialism and undisturbed by religious and social turmoils, whereas the latter corresponds to the England of the late twenties and early thirties being featured by Catholic Emancipation and Reform Bills, that is an England moving quickly toward a new epoch where religion has become habit or has split into sects and where the old social structure is menaced by industrialism and new political faiths.[64]

64 Cf. Hardy. B., *The Novels of George Eliot*, London, The Athlone Press, 1963.

Yet, although George Eliot boasts of a distinctive ability to embrace a diversity of social material such as economic status, class division, professional characteristics and political divergences, she also boasts of an unprecedented power to naturally fuse this material with her analysis of private motives. Hence, what differentiates Eliot's social portrayals of simplicity has to do with the fact that her vision of society and her vision of the individual are always intertwined in a method of social analysis that has been refined into a subtle and complex art:

> In *Silas Marner*, the dead level and dry bones of English country life fifty years since, are illumined and vivified by a power of sympathetic insight which is one of the rarest of intellectual gifts.[65]

As far as *Silas Marner* is concerned, the novel may be stated to represent not so much a definite stage in the development of George Eliot's philosophy as a concise restatement of the essence of her teaching in previous novels and as an introduction to her scientific line of thought. Since *Silas Marner* is the story of the life of a pious, trusting, simple-minded weaver, it constitutes a great example of Eliot's ability to provide her readers with minute portraits of the English Midlands while also giving her best as an analyst of home life and as an interpreter of human activities.[66] In particular, *Silas Marner* is complete in design and admirable in construction, namely a masterpiece through which it is possible to study our author in detail. The main plot is actually concerned with the misfortunes of Silas Marner, where the human problem involved is the influence of a child upon a narrow, lonely, and embittered man who seemingly resides at the bottom of the ladder of life because of his physical weaknesses such as near-sight and cataleptic fits, his intellectual flaws and his lost spirituality. The reaon why readers tend to sympathize with such a simple character can be understood by referring to Wordsworth's thesis, according to which

65 'Unsigned Review' in Eliot, George, *Silas Marner* (1861), ed. David Carroll, London, Penguin, 2012, p. 217.
66 Cf. Morehead, Ella Watson, *George Eliot's Life and Philosophy as Reflected in Certain Characters of her Four Early Novels*, PhD Dissertation, Denton, Texas, University of North Texas Libraries, 1944.

> The lives of ordinary men and women, especially those in rural life, are full of romance and poetic feeling if only we have eyes to see.[67]

As it is widely acknowledged, George Eliot was a true heiress of the middle of the nineteenth century in that she was thoroughly imbued with its scientific spirit, which appears in her novels in many ways. As a matter of fact, she is extremely careful to provide accurate descriptions of the settings of her stories and, since she believes that characters are powerfully influenced by their environment, she is also keen on reconstructing the exact conditions under which they live.[68] The novelist's power of exact observation and description, but also the application of her analytic power are thus explained by Eliot herself:

> It is the habit of my imagination to strive for as full a vision of the medium in which a character moves as of the character itself. The psychological causes which prompted me to give such details of Florentine life and history as I have given [in *Romola*] are precisely the same as those which determined me in giving the details of English village life in *Silas Marner*, or the 'Dodson' life, out of which there developed the destinies of poor Tom and Maggie.[69]

A significant body of literary criticism suggests that nineteenth-century fiction is often associated with static representations of place, so that nineteenth-century British realist fictions of provincial life are superficially defined as nostalgic, miniaturized and immbile places. By contrast, the seemingly static depictions of provincial life featuring many works of the realist writer George Eliot evidently disclose a pattern of micro-mobilities within the local. Eliot's rural novels actually disclose a preoccupation with an embodied practice of dynamic place deriving from pedestrian practices and tactile labour on the one hand.

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67 William Wordsworth quoted in Morehead, Ella Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

68 Cf. Fairley, Edwin, 'The Art of George Eliot in *Silas Marner*', in *The English Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 4, April 1913, pp. 221-230.

69 George Eliot*, The George Eliot Letters*, quoted in Fairley, Edwin, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

On the other hand, her fiction would appear to offer a sense of place that is portable, thus not only providing frictionless mobility for readers, but also problematizing nostalgic ideas of home and return by highlighting the patterns of movement, rest, and encounter that make the idea of belonging a dynamic process.[70] In order to understand how fiction works to convey a strong sense of place on the basis of just a few scattered loco-descriptive lines and how novels can create passionate attachments to a particular locality, a case study of the writer George Eliot may contribute to demonstrating how her work explores the interplay of movement, memory, and materiality in the creation of a sense of local attachment and belonging in the middle of a rootless modernity. First of all, in her critical writings Eliot argued that realist art of the sort she was producing could provide a means by which people could feel attached to locality and develop a strong sense of place despite coming from a mobile and more rootless world, thus suggesting that the art form of her realist, provincial fiction provides the portable textual reference of a mobile, urbanizing, and increasingly global nineteenth-century community. In the case of Eliot’s short novel *Silas Marner,* i.e. the story of a migrant who eventually makes a new place feel like home through a series of tiny steps, the narrative reflects upon locality as it is experienced in the everyday mobilities of rural labouring life. In particular, the novel’s attention to everyday micro-mobilities echoes David Seamon’s concept of “place ballet”[71] as the means by which a sense of place is conveyed by habitual, repeated movements, even though full reattachment to place can only occur when the protagonist begins to create analogical similarities between the objects in his new village and the old world from which he has escaped.[72]

70 Cf. Livesey, Ruth, 'On Writing Portable Place: George Eliot's Mobile Midlands', in *Mobilities*, 12:4, pp. 559-571.
71 David Seamon quoted in Livesey, Ruth, *op. cit.*, p. 561.
72 Cf. Livesey, Ruth, *op. cit.*, pp. 559-571.

George Eliot's Midlands and especially the precision with which Eliot evokes that landscape and its history constitutes the keynote to her rapid identification as one of the leading authors of her age. As a matter of fact, most of Eliot's novels are set in her native North Warwickshire, but were written during a self-imposed exile in London. For this reaon, one contemporary reviewer suggested that the "peculiar distinction" of Eliot's work was that it "carries the reader" out of metropolitan life and into distinctly rendered rural scenes and characters to the point that *Silas Marner* was particularly praised for delivering rural place as an "organic whole". The novel seems quite explicit at its opening about focusing on the vision of a self-contained and static local place being hostile to mobility since, unlike settlements such as those being connected with Eliot's own childhood home in the hamlet of Griff, Raveloe lies "quite an hour's journey on horseback from any turnpike, where it was never reached by the vibrations of the coach horn, or by public opinion."[73] Spatial, social, and temporal immobility intertwine at the opening of the novel, which is willingly set over forty years earlier, in order to imply that isolation from the new turnpike road is equated to living outside developing nineteenth-century political and industrial modernity. The village of Raveloe hence stands for a "far-off time" at the beginning of the nineteenth century, that is a time and a place where distrust surrounded the figure of the migrant in spite of his coming from neighbouring counties:

> To the peasants of old times, the world outside their direct experience was a region of vagueness and mystery: to their untravelled thought, a state of wandering was a conception as dim and distant as the winter life of the swallows who came back with the spring.[74]

At first sight, then, Eliot would seem to present Raveloe as an immobile place and as a sort of shelter from all the rapid changes in mobility and communication technologies that characterised the first half of the nineteenth century.

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73 Eliot, George, *Silas Marner* (1861), ed. David Carroll, London, Penguin, 2012, Ch. 1, p. 5, hereafter referred to as *Silas Marner*.

74 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 1, p. 3.

Nevertheless, certain patterns of movement, memory, and belonging appearing throughout the novel are revealed to function as a means to convey a sense of home in a world that is increasingly moving forward. The need to create a sense of place in a mobile world has actually always preoccupied Eliot's thinking since, as it is noted in one of her review essays, "attachment to the local was much more tenuous in England than in continental Europe". In other words, Germany was characterized by settled customs of agricultural life and shared religion knitting the "common people" or peasantry into local communities that were "incarnate history": so the actual German society was the living organic record of past cultural forms. In England, by contrast, "Protestantism and commerce have modernized the face of the land and the aspects of society in a far greater degree", so that English people need to recall their "vital connection" with the past by an "effort of memory and reflection".[75] The need for the aforementioned effort is clearly intertwined with Eliot's claims for the ethical power of art, according to which the superiority of art over factual investigations of living conditions and localities lie in the fact that art can simulate the effort of memory and reflection being necessary to feel attached to socially distant places and inhabitants. Such a picture of life painted by a great artist allows the readers to experience sympathy and identification with people and places being located outside their own personal experience. Therefore, Eliot's art form is not only aimed to develop "deep human sympathy" for those living a "monotonous homely existence", but it also constitutes an aesthetic device to convey a sense of attachment and proximity in a scattered, cosmopolitan, and increasingly secular world.[76] Ian Duncan clearly argues that, unlike regional fiction, provincial fiction boasts of a weak place identity in relation to regional fiction in the tradition of Scott or the Brontës, and that Eliot's evocations of provincial places gain identity by simply differentiating themselves "from the metropolis".

75 George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856), quoted in Livesey, Ruth, *op. cit.*, p. 560.
76 George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856), quoted in Livesey, Ruth, *op. cit.*, p. 560.

The setting of regional fiction is contrariwise specified through "geographical, natural historical, antiquarian, ethnographic and/or sociological features that differentiate one region from any other region". Furthermore, provincial fiction is conservative and immobilising in that its sites "select and absorb the forces of change, renewing, rather than surrendering" the "traditional properties" of an Imperialist England. While regional fiction contains a dynamic place "tied to a real historical geography", Eliot's provincial fiction is featured by a more "tenuous association" with real place, and her settings could thus correspond to any non-metropolitan where.[77] However, a more attentive study of *Silas Marner* suggests that a strong sense of place – in this case evoked by the minute detailed descriptions of literary realism – is not necessarily hostile to internal movement. First of all, Marner is an immigrant to the community of Raveloe, in which he settles in self-imposed exile from an industrial town; he comes from a Calvinist fundamentalist religious group, which can find no common ground with the faith of the barely-literate villagers; he possesses suspicious forms of knowledge in his skills of weaving and herbalism, and his fits of catalepsy provoke yet further village suspicion of this potentially demonic alien. Consequently, Josephine McDonagh appropriately assumes that the narrative of the novel reverses the historical truth of the nineteenth century, that is an era characterised by mass emigrations from rural areas to industrialising towns as well as colonial settlements. It is in this respect, she argues, that Eliot's tale enacts what she suggests is the erasure of mobility by place in nineteenth-century realist fiction.[78] Apart from this, Marner's narrative is also emblematic of the aftermath of migration including all those practices of everyday life that make a foreign land a place called home, which is the reason why the domesticated setting of Eliot's narrative draws close attention to the micro-mobilities that enable the construction of a sense of belonging across time.

77 Ian Duncan quoted in Livesey, Ruth, *op. cit.*, p. 563.
78 Cf. Livesey, Ruth, *op. cit.*, pp. 564-565.

For much of the narrative, the result of traumatic migration is a fractured self barely holding together, but continually in motion, that is to say a pure "body subject" locked into mobility as repetition:

> 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 the sense that their past joys and sorrows are a real experience, when they are suddenly transported to a new land.[79]

Nonetheless, contrary to popular belief, the idea of feeling at home in this novel has to do with a range of small pedestrian journeys that interrupt the restrictive economic routine plunging Silas into a purely work-related "place ballet" rather than a matter of settling into stillness. As a matter of fact, the first part of the novel only foregrounds movement by instinct or habit, while in the second part of the novel, set sixteen years later and into the more recognisably modern world of the 1820s, characters move with conscious intent and volition. At a certain point in the narrative, trying to unravel the mysteries of fate that have periodically interrupted his life, Marner takes a key four-day journey to his former home in the "great manufacturing town", only to find all trace and memory of Lantern Yard itself erased by a new factory and the whole town bewilderingly unrecognisable after his thirty-year absence. It is as if Eliot quite deliberately aimed to stage the representational challenge nineteenth-century urbanization and industrial development posed to the aesthetics of literary form.[80] Against his expectations, Marner can learn nothing from the location that was once his community in Lantern Yard and thus refers to Raveloe by acknowledging that his "old home's gone" and that "I've got no home but this now"; his troubled urban past remains "dark to the last".[81]

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79 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 2, p. 15.
80 Cf. Livesey, Ruth, *op. cit.*, pp. 559-571.
81 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 21, p. 203.

In a nation moving so rapidly from country to city in the whirl of industrialisation, how is it possible to depict what Raymond Williams terms “knowable communities” and how can writers endow this new unstable site known as the industrial city with a sense of place?[82] Echoing Lewes’ materialised memory, the fact of holding the plants he once knew well in his hand brings a series of memories back to Marner and it is this tactile revival of a lost past place that allows the creation of analogical patterns leading the protagonist to blend into Eppie’s organic sense of local belonging. At the same time, the abortive attempt to find full resolution by returning from exile to his own home town acts as an acute reminder of the impossibility of healing nostalgia in a nineteenth-century world on the move. As a consequence, place represents continual change rather than stasis in a variety of ways, whether on the grand scale of the northern industrial city, or on the small scale of the microscopic shifts taking place in a midland village “quite an hour’s journey on horseback from any turnpike or mail coach route”.[83] Although this is also a novel in which the desire to get back home is frustrated at every turn with muddy slides into pits, snowdrifts, and cataleptic arrests on the threshold, the effect engendered by closely observed objects of the natural world offers a means to reconstruct place and to bring a sense of home in a changing world.[84] Close to Thomas Hardy in her careful delivery of a retrospective vision of place influenced but not overcome by nineteenth-century modernity, Eliot’s Midlands and homes register little present-day traffic in comparison to Dorchester and the trade of Hardy’s Wessex, which might be due to the particular historical geography of North Warwickshire. Like the landscape of Eliot’s own time, her fiction registers a landscape dotted by canals, coal mines, gravel pits and new railway lines as well as industrial towns and agricultural villages; moreover, each locality stands absorbed in itself as the centre of the world.

82 Raymond Williams quoted in Livesey, Ruth, *op. cit.*, p. 568.
83 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 1, p. 5.
84 Cf. Livesey, Ruth, *op. cit.*, pp. 559-571.

However, in addition to the less obvious attraction of a small triangle between industrial Coventry, Birmingham, and Nuneaton, something about the nature of attachment to place that Eliot's works deliver might be seen to militate against a reinscription of North Warwickshire as 'Eliot country'. As it has already been stated, the provincial nature of Eliot's fiction implies a pretty tenuous connection between her work and any actual locality, unlike the strong regionalism associated with Scott or the Brontës. And Eliot's works themselves often seem at first to inscribe a generic sense of place, locating action in *Felix Holt, the Radical*, for example, on "that central plain, watered at one extremity by the Avon, at the other by the Trent". The Midlands, at such moments, seem to stand as a metaphor for a generic middle-England.[85] *Silas Marner* is yet a reminder of how Eliot's realist mode works to deliver a sense of place that is precisely localised through a series of tactile details, such as types of stone, colours of mud and lichen, thatch or slate, marl pits and coal mines, hedgerow lanes or breezy uplands. What is more, the micro-mobility of Marner's walks with Eppie duplicate the intensity of the miniaturized scale of the narrative, since moving slowly allows Marner to engage with environmental details through touch as much as by his extremely myopic vision. Pedestrian wanderings appear to deliver the place of Raveloe to the protagonist – and to the implied reader – as small parts, colours, textures to pick up and hold rather than as any aesthetically framed views of a regional landscape, perspectively outlined from the privileged vantage point of horseback.[86] The consumption of place by the privileged gaze of the freely mobile subject is implicitly contrasted with the tactile formation of a sense of belonging by the hesitant steps of a man who cannot even distinguish the outline of an object on his own hearth.

85 Cf. Livesey, Ruth, *op. cit.*, pp. 559-571.
86 Cf. Livesey, Ruth, *op. cit.*, pp. 559-571.

This slow feeling into place provides a sense of attachment for the traumatized migrant and even for the reader by linking what is already remembered into a new analogical relation to the unfamiliar.[87] Because of all its fairy-tale qualities, it is possible to claim that the narrative structure of *Silas Marner* problematizes nineteenth-century nostalgia as the desire for home. Still, the migrant's deracination can never be cured through an act of return due to the fact that place is depicted as a continual dynamic process rather than stasis, namely an unravelled fabric constantly emerging from the motion of time, industry, body power and individual mobility. All characters and especially Silas himself finally discover that it is impossible to go back and to modify past events. This reveals to be as true in the slow rural life of Raveloe, where Eppie shocks her biological father by refusing to uproot herself on his eventual acknowledgement of her, as it is in the bewildering urban developments around Lantern Yard. Yet, in accordance with Eliot's social thought, this mode of fiction also schools readers in a way of feeling for locality that is portable because of its scale. In this light, Eliot's fiction presents a possible cure for nineteenth-century nostalgia thanks to its continual reminders that a sense of place can be felt and remembered through a tactile engagement with minute environmental details. Her works have actually often been observed to frame this dynamic in the light of what in French might be called *terroir* - i.e. a language of soil, rock, mud, and plant colorations that both evoke locality and assume a more dispersed knowledge of selected environments.[88] Eliot's analysis tellingly implies that a sense of place emerges much more strongly from objects and "signs of permanence" that can be held, smelled, touched and tasted as opposed to the overlaying new coach roads, canals, or railway lines cutting across "the easily alterable lineaments" of "our Motherland".[89]

87 Cf. Livesey, Ruth, *op. cit.*, pp. 559-571.
88 Cf. Livesey, Ruth, *op. cit.*, pp. 559-571.
89 George Eliot quoted in Livesey, Ruth, *op. cit.*, p. 570.

To sum up, in order to create a simpler vision of a community more unified and harmonious than the materialistic provincial town society of the 1860s, George Eliot turns to the small village of Raveloe and sets Silas' story in a more distant past. Thus in *Silas Marner*, labelled by Eliot herself "a story of old-fashioned village life," the author depicts a rural community with a social structure and a traditional body of values much like those featuring Hayslope in *Adam Bede*. Eliot's narrator immediately directs the readers' attention to the distance in time, space, and culture between the villagers of the past and the more sophisticated readers of the late nineteenth century, as the novel opens in "that far off time [...] the early years of this century." In addition to this, the inhabitants of Raveloe are referred to as "the peasants of old times," for whom "the world outside their own direct experience was a region of vagueness and mystery." These initial circumstancial details obviously serve to frame the village as a typical isolated and prosperous community where the wide social distance between landowners and humble workers is maintained. Despite many evident similarities between *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner* in terms of setting, characters, and themes, the community of Raveloe is presented in a more condensed form, with fewer static scenes of everyday life, while the less attractive elements in the rural society are provided with a stronger accent.[90] George Eliot's provincial setting hosts a number of characters who, as representatives of their rural community, influence the readers' view of the main character and his relationship within that community. In particular, the depiction of the provincial village of Raveloe, which is based on places known by Eliot since her childhood, includes life-like portrayals of dialects, customs, folklore, religion, local history, daily work, and conversations of the rural natives. As the following discussion will show, the novelist actually uses a variety of supporting characters in order to create a rich and concrete view of the social environment where the humble protagonist struggles to establish and subsequently maintain his place in the community.

90 Cf. Hanlon, Bettina Louise, *Supporting Characters and Rural Communities in the Novels of George Eliot and Thomas Hardy*, PhD Dissertation, Ohio, The Ohio State University, 1983.

2.2. Simple and Humble Characters: Félicité, Silas and Background Characters

> "Ce n'est pas une petite affaire que d'être simple."[91]

Flaubert's straightforward assumption being found in a letter addressed to Louise Colet and dating back to 1851 might partly explain the reason why there are telling moments in Flaubert's texts that might be called moments of simplicity. One of these passages occurs in *Un Coeur Simple* when Félicité, who has become deaf, engages in tender dialogues with her parrot:

> Ils avaient des dialogues, lui, débitant à satiété les trois phrases de son répertoire, et elle, y repondant par des mots sans plus de suite, mais où son coeur s'épanchait. Loulou, dans son isolement, était presque un fils, un amoureux.[92]

This passage must be read for its simplicity and especially for the simplicity with which the author characterizes his heroine beyond, though not outside irony, since the objective absurdity of the situation is hardly difficult to discern. As a matter of fact, the language that provokes Félicité's passionate responses is mechanical, quite literally alien to its interlocutor, and Félicité herself, being deaf, is incapable of receiving and interpreting such conversation. The overflowing of meaning and sentiment beyond the ordinary limits of discourse that might appear inaccessible also suggests the fleeting possibility of a place in language for the heart, which is succinctly asserted in the title of Flaubert's famous short tale where he thus describes the subject of the story:[93]

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91 Gustave Flaubert, 'Letter to Louise Colet' (1851), quoted in Hope, Christiansen, 'Two Simple Hearts: Balzac's Eugénie and Flaubert's Félicité', in *Romance Quarterly*, 42:4, 1995, p. 195.
92 Flaubert, Gustave, *Un Coeur Simple,* (1877), ed. M.F. Azéma, Paris, Le Livre de Poche, 2019, Ch. 4, p. 77, hereafter referred to as *Un Coeur Simple*.
93 Cf. Hope, Christiansen, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-202.

> L'Histoire d'un coeur simple est tout bonnement le récit d'une vie obscure, celle d'une pauvre fille de campagne, dévote mais mystique, dévouée sans exaltation et tendre comme du pain frais. Elle aime successivement un homme, les enfants de sa maîtresse, un neveu, un vieillard qu'elle soigne, puis son perroquet; quand le perroquet est mort, elle le fait empailler et, en mourant à son tour, elle confond le perroquet avec le Saint-Esprit. Cela n'est nullement ironique comme vous le supposez, mais au contraire très sérieux et très triste. Je veux apitoyer, faire pleurer les âmes sensible, en étant une moi-même.[94]

Flaubert's explanation functions as a useful strarting point to analyse his extremely peculiar rhetoric of narrative simplicity by first considering some useful indications provided by the title itself. The term "simple" actually implies naivety, frankness, innocence, spontaneity, modesty, profound mysticism almost going beyond ordinary religious experience as well as credulity or even simple-mindedness. The protagonist of the story, consequently, can be interpreted as signifying a naive emotional relation to the world. As it has been often noted, the name of the servant is derived from Latin *felicitas* and from the adjective *felix*, namely happy, and is to be associated not only with contentment but also with religious beatitude. The simplicity featuring Félicité's sentimental and cognitive relations to the world thus appears almost unconceivable for modern readers: both the ways in which Félicité understands and how Félicité makes associative connections relating to people and objects. As far as Félicité's awareness of the world of others is concerned, it is evident that she understands various events only as they immediately impact upon her rather than as linked to any overriding past or future pattern integrating the personal and the social spheres. Furthermore, the terms *simple* and *naturel* refer to the way in which the protagonist interprets the sequence of events taking place in her life, that is by exercising the same ignorance of complexity and the same lack of interpretive distance on events.[95]

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94 *Un Coeur Simple,* p. 98.
95 Cf. Hope, Christiansen, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-202.

Félicité's relationship to history hence remains within the uncomplex schem of the chronicle and avoids any evaluations of the relative importance of events, which is the reason why no representation of a general social context from her point of view is to be found throughout the whole narrative. Felicité does not distinguish the personal from the universal for the simple reason that she does not perceive any differences; therefore, meaningful events are repeatedly described as "*naturels*" or "*tout simples*". As a consequence, although emotions arise in moments of retrospection, those moments are uncomplicated by any meditation on causality or ultimate purpose. For instance, the conflation of the parrot and the Holy Ghost is neither a singular occurrence nor an example of the stunning immediacy of the sacred or of a dotty hallucination, but it actually partakes of the simplicity that is inscribed throughout the tale.[96] Similarly, simplicity also constitutes the fundamental characteristic featuring most characters appearing throughout George Eliot's narrative. The humble nomadic weaver living at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the middle of those landscapes and cultures representing past provincial life actually belongs to that group of simple characters who are treated philosophically because of their affinity with the subjects of Eliot's beloved Dutch paintings.[97] *Silas Marner* is purposely named after its hero who works as a village artisan and is enriched by a number of community representatives who speak and interact in order to reveal the more positive and enduring values of the village code. As the Winthrops and other neighbours help Silas find lasting peace and fellowship in Raveloe, the novel actually moves from a sad portrayal of alienation to a happy ending that creates an idyllic picture of simple village life. In particular, the Rainbow Inn is made up of a male chorus of villagers introducing the traditional customs and attitudes of the community, which is revealed to be one of the protagonists of the novel.[98]

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96 Cf. Wing, N., 'Reading Simplicity: Flaubert's *Un Coeur Simple*', in *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1-2, Fall-Winter 1992-1993, pp. 88-101.
97 Cf. Villari, E., 'Introduzione a *Il Velo Sollevato',* in Eliot, George, *Il Velo Sollevato,* Venezia, Marsilio Editori, 2010, pp. 9-32, p. 11.
98 Cf. Hanlon, Bettina Louise, *op. cit.*

The remnants of primitive belief characterising Raveloe as well as Raveloe's lack of the religious enthusiasm and austere lifestyle featuring Lantern Yard is balanced by the human sympathy and common sense which eventually lead the villagers to open their hearts to Silas, after fifteen years of mutual distrust and fear. Like the differences between Loamshire and Stonyshire in *Adam Bede*, the physical and moral contrast between Lantern Yard and Raveloe emphasizes the idyllic aspects of the rural village which are part of the unique simplicity surrounding the novel.[99] Needless to say, the final obliteration of Lantern Yard confirms that Silas can have no home but the happier village of Raveloe, and the qualities that eventually make Raveloe a contented home for Silas are embodied in the background figures representing the village workers. Although the novel begins with a negative view of the villagers, the endearing and valuable elements of simple village life are revealed as Silas' interaction with the community develops. The narrator's initial analysis in the first two chapters is especially critical and detached as most of this section insists on "the rude mind" of the peasants of that time in general terms as well as on their narrow lives of hard toil and ignorance of the outside world. Silas' hoard of useless gold and few household possessions thus becomes his only companions, but this pathetic attachment to money is just a temporary condition primarily dictated by his simple humanity. The Rainbow Inn is initially presented as the community centre and this community is introduced dramatically, not through detailed scenes showing them hard at work, but through a single scene in which they are drinking and arguing. The narrator actually suggests that "hectoring and condescension" are the favourite pastimes for the class-conscious society found at the inn, and the scene opens with a dull argument about a cow's carcass, which becomes more bitter, sarcastic, and comic, as the mild butcher insists he'll "quarrel wi' no man," while continuing to insist on his point.

99 Cf. Hanlon, Bettina Louise, *op. cit.*

This petty arguing is one way in which, as Henry Auster points out, the rustic charm of Raveloe is undercut by the "grossness, laxness, and dullness of mind and spirit" displayed by the villagers.[100] Besides, when the men tease the deputy-clerk and argue over a local ghost legend, they reveal several of the limitations of the village mentality, such as the belief in superstitions, the ignorance of everything outside their own narrow experience, the antagonism between the old and the young, and the intolerance of the older generation for any change or innovation in established practices. Nevertheless, these traditional attitudes brilliantly convey a wide variety of rural customs and values: Dowlas, the farrier, is the only one who is unreasonably fierce and stubborn while arguing - "a man intensely opposed to compromise" – while several of the other men are described as jocose or jolly, and the landlord, Mr. Snell, always preserves peace and unity by insisting that there must be some truth in both sides of an argument. What adds to the villagers' simplicity resides in the reiterated importance of work, which is emphasized when the men are frequently identified by their positions and when they make comments of pride at their professions as well as their discussions of the church rituals and choir, their respect for decent families like the Lammeters and their admiration for talented or knowledgeable people such as the musician Solomon Macey and the parson. Among others, Mr. Macey is the most articulate male representative of the community to the point that his acts of storytelling portray one of the richest traditions of village life, with the ritualistic prefatory encouragements and the audience listening to the old familiar tales like "a favourite tune." The villagers' responses to Silas' crisis reveal more of their collective attitudes, since even though the robbery becomes a source of village gossip and an excuse for more drinking at the Rainbow on the one hand, the villagers' comically ignorant and argumentative behaviour does not overshadow their solid underlying values of sympathy, common sense, and fair play.[101]

100 Henry Auster quoted in Hanlon, Bettina Louise, *op. cit.*, p. 149.
101 Cf. Hanlon, Bettina Louise, *op. cit.*

Despite an oppressive atmosphere of continued superstition and suspicion, the villagers act responsibly when the need for neighbourly help and justice is first revealed, and their instinctive and immediate action contrasts with the gentry's annoyance at being later called out in the snow to help Silas with the dead woman. Their first kind attempts to talk to him are described as "beery and bungling," but at least they are not "complimentary and hypocritical," which could perfectly describe the conversation in more sophisticated society. At a certain point in the narrative, Mr. Macey's role as the most articulate and sensible villager is then substituted by motherly Dolly Winthrop. Her conversations with Silas carry as much weight in the novel as the combined discussions of the male chorus, and are finally more effective in bringing Silas into the life of the village. The woman clearly functions as the dominant spokesperson for community values because of her being an exceptionally diligent housewife and doting mother, with a fund of proverbial phrases for every occasion, and an amused tolerance for the "troublesome ways of those clumsy animals called men". She is also described as a mild, patient, and grave woman who always helps her neighbours during any illness or death in the village. Dolly's sympathetic simplicity and humility are immediately revealed during her first encounter with Silas; as a matter of fact, he feels "a slight stirring of expectation at the sight of his fellow-men, a faint consciousness of dependence on their goodwill" thanks to her unmistakable "desire to give comfort" and her "soothing persuasive tone" evoking a response from Silas as no other contact with the villagers does. This first meeting also demonstrates that her faith in the beneficial influence of the gift of lard cakes, of her child with his talent for singing carols, and of the church service and Christian solemnities act as distinctive signs of social cohesion and personal fulfillment that villagers find in their family life and religious traditions.[102]

102 Cf. Hanlon, Bettina Louise, *op. cit.*

At the moment when little Eppie appears at his hearth, the doctor immediately sends for Dolly as the best source of help in such emergencies. After the gossip about this event spreads through the village, both "notable" and "lazy" mothers offer Silas advice, but only Dolly's mild, unpretentious counsel is acceptable. She subsequently aids Silas' discovery of "the ties and charities that bound together the families of his neighbours" by offering to help with the child, while remaining sensitive to his desire to care for her from the start by himself. Her peculiar concern with raising the child "like christened folks's children" has a moral, social as well as spiritual significance for Silas and his new daughter. While her confusion of innoculation and baptism is comically ignorant, her warning that Silas must do everything possible to keep harm from this child, which was sent to him so miraculously, is a convincing expression of human sympathy and responsibility. It is strong feelings featuring humble rural societies, rather than "phrases and ideas," that eventually awaken the memories of his previous life and enable him to participate in this human community.[103] Apart from Eliot's minute depiction of simple villagers, at the beginning of the novel the focus also shifts towards the environment of negligence and vice that led Godfrey Cass to marry in secret, and to the social pressures that pushed him to abandon his child. Unlike all the aforementioned traditional values, the scenes involving the Cass family are inserted into the narrative in order to reveal many ways in which obligations to family and community are violated by the gentry. The "chiefs in Raveloe," including Squire Cass, "could farm badly quite at their ease" in their prosperous district, and make enough "in those war times, to live in a rollicking fashion" without risking ruin through overindulgence. "The greatest man in Raveloe," Squire Cass is the only landed farmer called "Squire," simply because he has a couple of tenants.[104]

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103 Cf. Hanlon, Bettina Louise, *op. cit.*
104 Cf. Hanlon, Bettina Louise, *op. cit.*

His "monument in the church and tankards older than King George" are the signs of his rank and privilege in the village, but his sons who "had turned out rather ill" are the evidence of his flaws. His house is the grandest in the parish, although its interior is dark and disorderly, and his own appearance and habits are coarse. Without a wife's wholesome influence in the parlour, the squire is said to prefer "to preside in the parlour of the Rainbow", so that his vices are revealed from the start. Dunsey Cass is another product of this lax and indifferent environment. He is an unredeemable villain, who is disposed of early in the novel, after his crimes set in motion the central conflicts of the plot. His arguments with Godfrey display a mocking tone and ruthless indifference that contrast with Godfrey's more complex, but pathetic personality. Dunsey also loves drinking, lying, cheating, and manipulating his older brother, who says Dunsey is "made to hurt other people". As a matter of fact, he has trapped Godfrey into a secret marriage in order to degrade him and gratify his own "jealous hate and his cupidity," while Godfrey suffers from "natural irresolution and moral cowardice," with enough conscience to regret "his own vicious folly". Dunsey blackmails Godfrey into giving him a tenant's rent money and takes Godfrey's horse to sell it with no pity for Godfrey's loss of his last valuable possession, but he commits his worst violation of the values of his community and the responsibilities of his class when he steals the savings of poor Silas. Ironically, his own greed and carelessness lead to his death in the Stone-pit, which might be read as a dinstinctive sign of George Eliot’s own morality. As far as the irresponsible father is concerned, he remains in view through the first half of the novel, adding to our understanding of Godfrey's egoism and lack of self-discipline. The squire is described as "an implacable man," with an injudicious "system" for handling both his sons and his tenants.[105] Letting evils grow through his own negligence until forced to act, he would then turn on the offender "with fierce severity and became unrelentingly hard".

105 Cf. Hanlon, Bettina Louise, *op. cit.*

Contrary to popular belief, Godfrey does not enjoy lying, but he gets himself deeper into deceit fearing his father's anger and the possibility of disinheritance. For this reason, he has "a vague longing for some discipline that would have checked his own errant weakness and helped his better will," and he would like to help manage the estate. Yet, rather than providing any constructive guidance, the proud squire only belittles and reprimands him after wrongs are committed and exposed. The New Year's Eve dance evidently dramatizes the empty formalities and idle lives of the gentry, bringing many members of the community together so as to reveal their reputations and relationships. In fact, this event inevitably shows that the distances between classes and individuals exist even in provincial Raveloe to the point that only a few "privileged villagers" are invited to watch the dancing from benches at the door. By contrast, "all the society of Raveloe and Tarley" gather for the traditional event although most are merely "acquaintances" who are often "separated by misunderstandings" or linked only by "intermittent condescension," and their arrival is tellingly called a "siege" on the Red House. The narrator also introduces the inherent differences between the villagers and the gentry by juxtaposing opposite Christmas activities: the villagers' faithful and merry trip through the cold to church contrasts not only with Silas' solitude, but also with the Cass's family party of tiresome anecdotes, card-playing, and drinking. The "pre-eminently brilliant celebration of the year" on New Year's Eve is then said to have “some charming elements suggestive of idyllic village life”, but the sense of a warm communal celebration is counterbalanced by satiric references to the gentry's appearance and demeanour, and by the squire's attitudes and Godfrey's secret problems troubling his conscience. Other background characters included among the guests are supposedly selected to make them seem coarse and comical in relation to the more sympathetic villagers.[106]

106 Cf. Hanlon, Bettina Louise, *op. cit.*

Apart from the rector, his wife is actually presented as the most absurd and insignificant character, that is "a small blinking woman" who constantly fidgets with her finery and makes "subdued noises, very much like a guinea-pig". Similarly, the Kimbles' dignified position in the community is undercut by references to their appearance and provincial attitudes. As it has previously been outlined, contrary to the villagers' reactions, when Silas interrupts the festivities with the news of Eppie's mother's death, Kimble grumbles at having to leave his card game, and calls Godfrey a fool for going out unnecessarily to see the woman. The ladies are genuinely concerned about the orphan child; Mrs. Kimble offers to care for her, but stops short of allowing the "dingy clothes" close to her ornate gown. Thus, the fastidious and self-indulgent habits of the gentry keep them at a distance from the child, and it is poor villagers who humbly care for the orphan after her having been rejected by the rich.[107] Priscilla Lammeter is perhaps the most tactless female member of the gentry, but she functions primarily as a contrast to her pretty younger sister Nancy. Despite Priscilla's ugliness and her honest but thoughtless remarks, the Lammeters are an exceptionally admirable family of farmers in this Raveloe society. They are portrayed as generous and frugal in their household management, which is the reason why the first scene at the Cass's explains that Godfrey's "essentially domestic nature" yearns for "the neatness, purity, and liberal orderliness of the Lammeter household". At the dance, the Lammeters are therefore anxiously awaited guests with reserved places of honour at the tea-table, and Mr. Lammeter's "spare but healthy person and high-featured firm face" immediately appears in sharp contrast with the figures of the squire and other farmers. Lammeter actually never indulges in excess like the others, and his daughters know that he is "the soberest and best man in that country-side". Their strict personal and moral standards are also embodied by Mr. Lammeter's sister, namely Mrs. Osgood.

107 Cf. Hanlon, Bettina Louise, *op. cit.*

Similarly, Nancy Lammeter takes her place in the novel as the virtuous supporting character who redeems Godfrey and replaces both the squire and Dunsey, who have done him so much harm. Nancy's character is attentively analyzed by the aid of the Miss Gunns from Lytherly, who are depicted as sophisticated outsiders showing reactions of disdain at Nancy’s work-worn hands, country dialect, and lack of education. Nevertheless, everyone present is struck with pleasure while observing her "rustic beauty's toilette” and describing everything belonging to Miss Nancy as “delicate purity and nattiness". As it often happens in George Eliot’s masterpieces, the narrator also defends her against the criticism and pity of the Miss Gunns by pointing out that Nancy is not ashamed of her life of farm work and by stating that in spite of her not being well-educated, she boasts of all the essential attributes of a lady - high veracity, delicate honour in her dealings, deference to others, and refined personal habits, - “and lest these should not suffice to convince grammatical fair ones that her feelings can at all resemble theirs, I will add that she was slightly proud and exacting, and as constant in her affection towards a baseless opinion as towards an erring lover”. The subtle descriptions of Nancy together with her dialogues already show balance between her provincial narrowness and excessive adherence to standards of propriety as well as her pure affections and sympathy for others. Nancy’s and Godfrey’s ambivalent behaviour is observed by the chorus of villagers, who provide a humorous confirmation of the views of the gentry presented in this episode. As a matter of fact, it is ironic that the villagers show such respect for the gentry simply because of their superior social positions, while remaining unaware of the crimes through which Godfrey and Dunsey violate their social responsibilities.[108] As the narrator highlights, Dunsey's disappearance is not connected with the robbery because of his family's position: “even if any brain in Raveloe had put the said two facts together,

108 Cf. Hanlon, Bettina Louise, *op. cit.*

I doubt whether a combination so injurious to the prescriptive respectability of a family with a mural monument and venerable tankards, would not have been suppressed as of unsound tendency, [...] no one cared to be specific in their inquiries on a subject delicate to a respectable family". All things considered, this first social analysis of the two authors' works thus reveals that Félicité and especially Silas perform the role of humble main characters whose personal traits, thought, or fate changes in the course of the plot. As far as Eliot's novel is particularly concerned, this study has also focused on the depiction of a number of supporting characters who tend to either change minimally or remain static, and serve to provide an exact social portrayal of their time, place, and class through a series of background and significant comments on the virtues and vices of their rural community. Background characters have finally been mentioned as a framework to the social background of the novel, since they often serve as voices of traditional community values.[109] Both supporting characters and background figures perform a variety of fundamental functions in the complex Victorian novel, providing depth and detail to the novel's view of the social milieu of the protagonists. As Harvey properly emphasizes, the novel can establish the reality of characters by placing them in "the human context" and providing a variety of perspectives. Here is his comment on the background characters' contribution to the social context of the protagonists:

> Clearly this social setting is one of the most important of all human contexts, and while the novelist can do a great deal by way of direct description and analysis, society must also be seen as a complex web of individual relationships. This is most economically achieved by establishing a range of background characters whose individuality need be no more than is adequate to typify social trends or pressures; without them society will tend to become hopelessly abstract and external.[110]

109 Cf. Claude T. Bissell, 'Social Analysis in the Novels of George Eliot', in ELH, Sep., 1951, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Sep., 1951), pp. 221-239.
110 Harvey quoted in Hanlon, Bettina Louise, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

Chapter Three

Psychological Portrayals of Simplicity

3.1. Silas and Félicité: Solitary Characters Confronted with Adversities

As suggested in the previous chapters, the humble protagonist of *Un Coeur Simple* ironically unveils the futility and fatuousness of specific bourgeois practices while stimulating at the same time the undeniable sympathy of the reader for the simple protagonist. In order to portray Félicité with sympathy and even with tenderness, Flaubert willingly avoids the so-called "style indirect libre" especially because the servant needs to be depicted as incapable of formulating her thoughts or impressions on any precise or sophisticated level. Flaubert's heroine actually never experiences complicated consciousness of her predicament, and her aspirations are indelibly imprinted with simplicity and innocence.[111] For this reason, the author chooses to look at Félicité with discreet omniscience and subsequently avoids editorial comments, content to present his protagonist by initially listing details that characterize her appearance:

> Son visage était maigre et sa voix aiguë. À vingt-cinq ans, on lui en donnait quarante. Dès la cinquantaine, elle ne marqua plus aucun âge; - et, toujours silencieuse, la taille droite et les gestes mesurés, semblait une femme en bois, fonctionnant d'une manière automatique.[112]

Flaubert also endows the heroine of his short story with the kind of homogenous vision of reality that enables her to retain a remarkably even sense of composure in the face of tragedy and adversities.

111 Cf. Robert T. Denommé, 'Félicité's View of Reality and the Nature of Flaubert's Irony in *Un Coeur Simple*', in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 7, No. 4, Fall 1970, pp. 573-581.
112 *Un Coeur Simple,* Ch. 1, p. 19.

As a matter of fact, Félicité is able to achieve that peculiar homogeneity of vision by transforming ordinary reality through her imagination. Her instinctive retreat into the more predictable world of her private imagination is in fact prompted by the overwhelming confusion and bewilderment she experiences when compelled to face the jarring complexities of external reality.[113] For instance, in her insecurity featuring the incident at Colleville, Félicité accepts Théodore's invitation to dance with him but is rudely shaken when she must resist his crude ouvertures:

> Elle se tenait à l'écart modestement, quand un jeune homme d'apparence cossue, et qui fumait sa pipe les deux coudes sur le timon d'un banneau, vint l'inviter à la danse. Il lui paya du cidre, du café, de la galette, un foulard et, s'imaginant qu'elle le devinait, offrit de la reconduire. Au bord d'un champ d'avoine, il la renversa brutalement. Elle eut peur et se mit à crier. Il s'éloigna.[114]

Thus, her subsequent withdrawal from the pressing requirements of a complex external reality appears as a defensive reaction to which she has recourse when she intuitively realizes that she is ill-equipped to function effectively under such circumstances. Henceforth, Félicité actually gazes at reality through her imagination and with her innate common sense. Although her daily existence is repeatedly defined by boredom, disappointment and discouragement that mar the security and serenity of an ordered life, unlike Emma Bovary, she always preserves her equanimity: she proceeds with remarkable resilience to repair whatever havoc may have been engendered by personal tragedy, indifference, and even cruelty. Being condemned to perform the simplest chores, she escapes from most of the ravages of boredom by directing her attention onto other human beings such as Mme Aubain, Paul and Virginie, Victor, the père Colmiche and the parrot.

113 Cf. Marsh, Leonard, 'Visual Perception in Flaubert's *Un Coeur Simple*', in *Studies in Short* Fiction, Vol. 23, No. 2, Spring 1986, pp. 185-189.
114 *Un Coeur Simple,* Ch. 2, p. 22.

Surprisingly enough, of all the characters appearing in *Un Coeur Simple*, it is Félicité who emerges most successfully in the battle against frustration by means of positive and durable activity.[115] Ultimately, it is Félicité's constructive attitude that allows her to escape the effects of an uninteresting existence due to the monotonous and oppressive routine of provincial life. The protagonist is actually repeatedly exposed to the cruel indifference and callousness of society that in one instance, when Théodore sectretely marries another woman, nearly succeeds in unnerving her to the point of imbalance:

> Ce fut un chagrin désordonné. Elle se jeta par terre, poussa des cris, appela le bon Dieu, et gémit toute seule dans la campagne jusqu'au soleil levant. Puis elle revint à la ferme, déclara son intention d'en partir; et, au bout du mois, ayant reçu ses comptes, elle enferma tout son petit bagage dans un mouchoir, et se rendit à Pont-l'Évêque.[116]

Her nostalgia is short-lived though and the troubling memory of her misfortunes is doubtlessly allowed to surface because of her semi-conscious physical and mental state at the time. It is thus evident that Flaubert aims to show Félicité actively resisting the stultification caused by monotony and by the slow and tragic passage of time. The progressive shrinkage of Félicité's recognizable universe, brought about through the deaths of those she loved, the eventual loss of part of the Aubain property and the inevitable decrease in her hearing and seeing faculties apparently condemn her to a life of virtually absolute isolation. Yet, the opposite effect unexpectedly takes place. The physical isolation she experiences somehow enables her to proceed unhampered and uninhibited by external forces so as to mould the kind of private and homogenous world that brings about the solace and security that she seeks.

115 Cf. Wing, N., 'Reading Simplicity: Flaubert's *Un Coeur Simple*', in *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1-2, Fall-Winter 1992-1993, pp. 88-101.
116 *Un Coeur Simple,* Ch. 2, p. 27.

In other words, as her solitude increases, the powers of her creative imagination also increase, and the faithful servant of *Un Coeur Simple* thus succeeds in inducing the transformations that allow her to rectify the inequities of reality.[117] Similarly, almost all George Eliot's novels are featured by a crisis of disenchantment being described in images which echo, more or less closely, a passage appearing in one of her letters. On 4th June 1848 she wrote to Sara Hennell:

> Alas for the fate of poor mortals which condemns them to wake up some fine morning and find all the poetry in which their world was bathed, only the evening before, utterly gone!-the hard, angular world of chairs and tables and looking-glasses staring at them in all its naked prose![118]

This image of the disenchanted day-lit room is one of the most important recurring images in her work, and there is certainly some interest in following the course of an image which suggested itself in experience or in imagination nine years before George Eliot began to write novels. Its persistent recurrence undoubtedly suggests both the impact of the first experience and the common thematic thread which runs from novel to novel. In order to look more closely at the common element featuring these scenes of disenchantment, it is yet necessary to refer again to the letter to Sara Hennell. After describing the awakening in the disenchanted room George Eliot writes:

> It is so in all the stages of life: the poetry of girlhood goes – the poetry of love and marriage - the poetry of maternity - and at last the very poetry of duty forsakes us for a season, and we see ourselves, and all about us, as nothing more than miserable agglomerations of atoms – poor tentative efforts of the Natur Princip to mould a personality.[119]

117 Cf. Wing, N., *op. cit.*, pp. 88-101.
118 George Eliot to Sarah Hennell (1848), quoted in Hardy, B., 'The Moment of Disenchantment in George Eliot's Novels', in Creeger, G., ed., *George Eliot. A Collection of Critical Essays*, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1970, pp. 55-64, p. 55.
119 George Eliot to Sarah Hennell (1848), quoted in Hardy, B., *op. cit.*, p. 56.

Such a disappearance of glamour is an essential part of the process of every novel, and this letter was almost a forecast of what she was to write. Yet, this "poetry" is usually not a lost glory, as it is in Wordsworth and Coleridge, and perhaps in Newman. It is a poetry erected on a dream, a dream in which the dreamer occupies the centre, and disenchantment is the waking which forces the dreamer to look painfully at a reality that puts him in his place. "Nothing more than miserable agglomerations of atoms" highlights that sense of dislocation within the personality which George Eliot felt as strongly as Wordsworth and Coleridge had before her. Her metamorphosis, as she called it, was indeed like Wordsworth's in that they were both haunted by a double sense of disintegration: by the break between past and present on the one hand, and by the break between the heart and the reason on the other hand. It is the first break though, i.e. the loss of continuity in time and the sense of an isolated present detached from the past, which she emphasizes most vigorously in her novels.[120] As a matter of fact, in their very different ways, Maggie, Silas, Esther, Dorothea, and Gwendolen all share with their creator this feeling of fragmentariness and unreality. In their lives, as in hers, fragmentariness was a stage in the metamorphosis. For most of them the break with the past constitutes a break with an opiate, with the exception of Silas, whose opiate was provided by the very isolation of the present and for whom exile in place and hence in time was desirable:

> Minds that have been unhinged from their old faith and love, have perhaps sought this Lethean influence of exile, in which the past becomes dreamy because its symbols have all vanished, and the present too is dreamy because it is linked with no memories.[121]

Whether or not they are reduced to a point, her heroines are certainly forced from the centre to the periphery, from the dream of a self which filled the world to a sort of consciousness of a reduced self. The place of the oppressive room in this process is therefore plain.

120 Cf. Hardy, B., *op. cit.*, pp. 55-64.
121 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 2, p. 15.

It might not only represent the physical enclosure, the daily life, and the woman's sense of imprisonment, but also any crisis in the development of the egoist temperament where self shrinks and vision expands.[122] Three weeks after she wrote to Sara Hennell describing her disenchantment, she also wrote, with a backward glance:

> All creatures about to mould, or to cast off an old skin, or enter on any new metamorphosis, have sickly feelings. It was so with me. But now I am set free from the irritating worn-out integument.[123]

This is the key notion to interpret Eliot's fiction. Disenchantment marks a stage in metamorphosis: it is the well-lit day which makes George Eliot's dark night of the soul. It is a test and a prelude to change. Barbara Hardy aptly associates the discontinuities of Eliot's own experience with those which disrupt her characters' lives: "her own feelings of horror when her rejection of Christianity seemed to dislocate past and present, reason and emotion," is repeated in different forms in most of her heroines, and continuity subsequently emerges as a major theme in her novels. Still, it is the character of Silas Marner rather than one of Eliot's heroines that predominantly illustrates the nightmare of disintegration and discontinuity. Silas has lost virtually all connections, and his suffering dramatizes the human need for connections, however artificial, in order to fill in the gaps of experience and keep us from seeing ourselves as nothing more than "miserable agglomerations of atoms." There is good reason for Silas to be, as the villagers call him, "mushed." His life is actually made up of a staggering series of discontinuities, of broken connections and of losses. For all these reasons, the novel and Raveloe itself first treat him as an alien:

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122 Cf. Hardy, B., *op. cit.*, pp. 55- 64.
123 George Eliot to Sarah Hennell (1848), quoted in Hardy, B., *op. cit.*, p. 60.

> [he is one of] certain pallid undersized men who, by the side of the brawny country-folk, looked like the remnants of a disinherited race.[124]

What is more, Silas' lack of visible connections appears as a vaguely sinister mystery in the eyes of Raveloe:

> No one knew where wandering men had their homes or their origin; and how was a man to be explained unless you at least knew somebody who knew his father and mother?[125]

Not even Silas knows his father and mother, his origin, or his real home. The archetypal orphan is literally an orphan and the last remnant of his race since not only are his parents dead but so, too, is his little sister. Falsely accused of robbery, Silas then loses at once his best friend, his betrothed, and his God. He is forced to break with the church which has given meaning to his life and has provided him with a community in place of his lost family. Fifteen uneventful years in Raveloe are also marked by the tragic theft of his gold. Still, what is oddest and most striking in this series of misfortunes is his subjection to cataleptic fits, that is a discontinuity of consciousness which persists through the thirty years of his history. Eliot’s choice of catalepsy may be claimed to contribute more to the theme than to the plot, since it reinforces the sense of the fragility of human connections that the novel is keen on portraying. Furthermore, Silas' career is also presented as the most compelling example of man's need for annual vacancy. The fervent young Methodist, trusting that God's love and law fill the universe, does not at first conceive vacancy. He initially hesitates to take any action which could be construed as an attempt to alter or compete with the divine scheme. Already orphaned, he doubly disinherits himself by refusing the medical knowledge his mother "imparted to him as a solemn bequest." He resists the "inherited delight" as "a temptation" because he "has doubts about the lawfulness of applying this knowledge".

124 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 1, p. 3.
125 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 1, p. 3.

Silas' renunciation of medicinal herbs clearly serves to exemplify his radical fundamentalism.[126] Though later references to his inherited science emphasize the science and ignore the inheritance, it is not insignificant that Silas' knowledge is a bequest from his mother. By refusing it, he actually renounces not only natural science but also natural ties, even those ties sanctioned and venerated by religion, in the belief that all relationships, whether between human beings or between cause and effect, are created by and grounded in God. In spite of the fact that he replaces his vertical ties to his lost family with the horizontal ties to church membership and friendship, that "mysterious rigidity and suspension of consciousness" which is repeatedly "mistaken for death" by the methodist community, Silas' catalepsy stands as the novel's model for discontinuity, death, and chaos, for the void which must somehow be filled in or bridged over. Silas cannot be converted to a concept of fraternity different from that being based on filiation, and in losing God he loses all sense of relationship. After the rejection on the part of his surrogate family, he sees himself and all about him "as nothing more than miserable agglomerations of atoms," and must therefore take over the task of the missing Natur Princip so that his own personality can be moulded. Yet, whether moulding suggests that he shapes himself into an organic whole or merely sticks the broken pieces of himself back together like his broken earthenware pot, it is clear that he cannot consciously accomplish such deed.[127] The simplicity of Silas' character and the ultimately happy ending of his story ironically tend to divert the reader’s attention from the intensity of his suffering, which indeed constitutes the vital core of Eliot’s narrative:

126 Cf. Cohen, Susan R., ‘A History and a Metamorphosis: Continuity and Discontinuity in *Silas Marner*’, in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, FALL 1983, Vol. 25, No. 3, *Nineteenth-Century French and English Literature* (FALL 1983), Texas, University of Texas Press, pp. 410-426.
127 Cf. Cohen, Susan R., *op. cit.*, pp. 410-426.

> If there is an angel who records the sorrows of men as well as their sins, he knows how many and deep are the sorrows that spring from false ideas for which no man is culpable. […] He filled up the blank with grief. As he sat weaving, he every now and then moaned low, like one in pain.[128]

He undergoes the nightmare experience not once but twice, and twice he must reconstruct his self and his world. Having lost his religion and his community through the false accusation, he comprehensibly finds a new religious purpose in weaving and hoarding. Beginning "to think [the gold] was conscious of him as his loom was", he even sets up for himself a pathetically private community. Silas' weaving and hoarding save his life and his sanity by "fencing him in from the wide, cheerless unknown", but these two compulsive activities can only preserve a very reduced life and a very tenuous sanity. As a matter of fact, Silas' first fifteen years in Raveloe are, as the novel makes quite clear, a form of death in life to the point that Silas does not appear as fully human during this period. He has reduced his life "to the unquestioning activity of a spinning insect", and as his activity becomes more and more mechanical, he himself becomes only a supplementary part of the machine:

> Strangely Marner's face and figure shrank and bent themselves into a constant mechanical relation to the objects of his life, so that he produced the same sort of impression as a handle or a crooked tube, which has no meaning standing apart.[129]

Even the image of the child is undeniably perverted:

> [Silas] thought fondly of the guineas that were only half-earned by the work in his loom, as if they had been unborn children.[130]

Intuitively enough, he loves these children because they fill an empty space and provide an external confirmation of his self's existence, and Eliot actually explains Silas' miserable existence in terms of a need to create order:

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128 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 1, p. 14.
129 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 2, p. 21.
130 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 2, p. 21.

> Have not men, shut up in solitary imprisonment, found an interest in marking the moments by straight strokes of a certain length on the wall, until the growth of the sum of straight strokes, arranged in triangles, has become a mastering purpose? Do we not wile away moments of inanity or fatigued waiting by repeating some trivial movement or sound, until the repetition has bred a want, which is incipient habit? That will help us to understand how the love of accumulating money grows an absorbing passion in men whose imaginations, even in the very beginning of their hoard, showed them no purpose beyond it.[131]

Eliot thus purposely describes Silas' inward life during his first fifteen years in Raveloe as "a history and a metamorphosis". The two terms, apparently joined only in casual repetition of each other, are in fact antithetical. The term history suggests a continuous development as well as an unbroken narrative line, while the term metamorphosis suggests sudden gaps in consciousness, unexplained physical changes as well as the absence of any traceable line between one state and another. In other words, Eliot's description effectively serves as a hint at Silas' passive metamorphosis from human life to mechanical death and back.[132] There is certainly little doubt that Silas experiences the most complete reversal of desires than any character appearing throughout all George Eliot's novels: nothing could actually reveal more completely remedial than the substitution of love for money as Silas returns to the proper world of "pure, natural human relations." As is widely acknowledged, his love for gold is exchanged for his love for Eppie, but what is often unnoticed in this reversal of human values is the special way by which Silas' metamorphosis takes place. His emotional life is initially channeled into love for gold, he must at forty begin "to learn reverence, piety for nature and for the common details of life," but there is still one more thing Silas must do, or rather undo, before his humanity returns. As the novel opens, readers are made aware of the weaver Marner's social disintegration within the parish of Lantern Yard.

131 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 2, p. 20.
132 Cf. Cohen, Susan R., *op. cit.*, pp. 410-426.

Calumniated by the vicious William Dean and finally outcast by the village, Silas seeks his living elsewhere and moves to the distant village of Raveloe where he begins his life of total isolation. One of the early important statements concerning Silas' loneliness appears through the dialogue between the protagonist and Mrs. Oswood, when her table linen is praised as the symbol of a careful job.[133] More important than the mutual exchange taking place between Silas and the woman, however, is Eliot's comment on the nature of work as a person's duty, as well as a substitute for love and companionship:

> Every man's work, pursued steadily, tends to become an end in itself, and to bridge over the loveless chasms of his life.[134]

With the world turning its back on Silas, he retires more and more completely into himself and his work, but as misery haunts him, Silas' weaving ceases to become an end in itself. The gold, the individual pieces that Silas starts hoarding and worshipping, becomes his “raison d'être”. Each gold piece leads to a want for more as Eliot informs us:

> […] that geometrical progression will help us to understand how the love of accumulating money grows an absorbing passion in men whose imaginations showed them no purpose beyond it.[135]

Silas becomes intent on pursuing a fantasy-dream that transcends or even negates any viability of action and interaction within the world outside of the self, namely Silas’ own ego. After having been rejected by the external world, Silas understandably takes refuge in his meagre cottage feeding his hunger and inflaming his fever for more gold. As Eliot describes Silas in this state of greed and rabid egoism, his life has evidently narrowed and steeled itself "more and more into a mere pulsation of desire and satisfaction that had no relation to any other being".

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133 Cf. Cohen, Susan R., *op. cit.*, pp. 410-426.
134 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 2, p. 20.
135 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 2, p. 20.

Later on, as Silas' shield against the harshness of the world hardens, we are also told that

> His gold, as he hung over it and saw it grow, gathered his power of loving together into a hard isolation like its own.[136]

Though Silas lacks the "egoistic guilt" of Hetty Sorrel, like Hetty, he still turns to the material goods of this world when his well-ordered life is disordered. Somewhat unlike Hetty, however, Silas is delivered of his greed in time and can then learn to love and care for another than himself. Love is the great transformer, and Silas shares an experience common to many characters in Eliot's later novels: "the problem of opening up, thawing out, unhardening the self-walled, the blockaded personality."[137] In other words, Silas is faced with the very real problem of understanding his false ideals, compromising with them, and accepting the initially new world surrounding him. Surely, there are alienations of affection and social misplacements in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, *Adam Bede*, and *The Mill on the Floss,* but not until the final novels are readers confronted with the unavoidable juxtaposition of spiritual forces with social forces as they conflict in considerably complex characters. Nor do we get a full treatment of that special character-type exemplifying the penetration of the world of ideas featuring nineteenth-century British society into the mind of a simple commonplace man until after *Silas Marner*. For this reason, as the following statements argue, different and more powerful forces will reveal to be necessary in order for a dramatic change to occur within Silas and for the real metamorphosis to take place:

> This good wholesome woman could hardly fail to have her mind drawn strongly towards Silas Marner, now that he appeared in the light of a sufferer. […] Formerly, his heart had been as a locked casket with its treasure inside; but now the casket was empty, and the lock was broken.[138]

136 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 2, p. 22.
137 George Eliot quoted in Cohen, Susan R., *op. cit.*, p. 424.
138 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 10, p. 91.

3.2. Sympathy and Redemption: Silas' Eppie and Félicité's Loulou

The positive value assigned to psychological simplicity by Flaubert's short story may easily be verified by observing Félicité's dying moments, which are depicted as literally enshrined in the brilliant rays of a golden sun and are counterpointed by the joyous religious ceremony of the Fête-Dieu, thus suggesting the triumphal apotheosis of the faithful servant and of her parrot. In particular, the "perroquet gigantesque" figures by virtue of its hyperbole as the embodiment of a focal point of certitude occupying the totality of an amorphous expansive space of doubt. It is the point where the axes of certitude and doubt intersect, where reason is illuminated by faith, where the physical and spiritual intertwine:

> Une vapeur d'azur monta dans la chambre de Félicité. Elle avança les narines, en la humant avec une sensualité mystique; puis ferma les paupières. Ses lèvres souriaient. Les mouvements de son coeur se relentirent un à un, plus vagues chaque fois, plus doux, comme une fontaine s'épuise, comme un écho disparaît; et, quand elle exhala son dernier souffle, elle crut voir, dans les cieux entrouverts, un perroquet gigantesque, planant au-dessus de sa tête.[139]

Clearly hallucinatory but nonetheless illuminative, here is where Flaubert redeems Félicité's simplicity, justifies her defective vision, and allows her to experience in almost a mystical way the puzzling God she knew only as the Spirit in the form of Loulou. The death scene of Félicité therefore suggests a striking impression of harmony and respect for those simple hearts that have been facing adversities throughout their lives, but are finally granted a peaceful state of redemption by means of imaginative sympathetic relationships. As argued at the beginning of this dissertation, morality and sympathy also constitute two recurrent key notions in George Eliot's masterpieces. In particular, Eliot is aware of the fact that learning how to apply ethical rules requires wisdom, and that there is no deliberative procedure one can master that will provide the right answer in all cases. Instead, one must be sensitive to situational details.

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139 *Un Coeur Simple*, Ch. 5, p. 95.

Perhaps the primary textual basis for this claim is Eliot's notion that sympathy must "check" the application of moral doctrines. It is crucial that Eliot sees sympathy as "check[ing]" and "enlighten[ing]" doctrines and judgments rather than replacing them entirely. As Eliot puts it at one point, morality has two different sides: a "theoretic and preceptive side" as well as an "emotional side."[140] As a consequence, sympathy cannot replace principled moral conceptions, which remain essential to human agency, but must operate in accordance with them. Eliot's ideal moral agent, then, is not an agent of pure sympathy, but instead one in whom sympathy and principles are constantly balancing each other. Let me put it another way: according to Eliot, human beings' principled conceptions of themselves always generate possible reasons for action, and in the process of acting those reasons need to be submitted to the testing or "check[ing]" process of sympathy, which insures they pass the test of selflessness.[141] In addition to this, as Eliot's thought developed, she increasingly came to understand the achievement of self-mastery through reverence for an end as practically corresponding to a vocation. Yet, if the principles of vocations are morally transformative, they are at the same time inadequate by themselves, and subsequently require supplement and correction by the sympathetic awareness of others. As Mintz illuminatively puts it, since vocation offers a "self-consuming ambition promising redemption," it can also be "a dangerously modern legitimation of egotism and self-aggrandizement."[142] This is the reason why Eliot's principled moral agents are always shown to be in danger of excessively detaching from their originally selfless motivations for caring instead about their vocational projects, caring about the projects as a means to satisfy selfish desires.[143] Eliot's oeuvre undoubtedly describes and represents sympathy in a number of different and not immediately consistent ways,

140 George Eliot quoted in Fessenbecker, P., 'Sympathy, Vocation and Moral Deliberation in George Eliot', in *ELH*, Vol. 85, No. 2, Summer 2018, p. 501.
141 Cf. Fessenbecker, P., *op. cit.*, pp. 501-532.
142 Mintz quoted in Fessenbecker, P., *op. cit.*, p. 505.
143 Cf. Fessenbecker, P., *op. cit.*, pp. 501-532.

but recalling the role of vocations can clarify how these different representations and descriptions fit together. In particular, situating sympathy alongside vocation allows the importance of reasons to emerge: sympathy can fundamentally be defined as the act of understanding the reasons standing at the basis of people's actions, and of affectively identifying with them when they are genuinely selfless. Eliot's conception of sympathy thus involves inhabiting the identities of others in such a way that their ends – i.e. those projects they consider as intrinsically valuable, and which provide them with sensible reasons for action - become clear. At this point, it is important to recall a passage taken from *Adam Bede* that suggestively refers to sympathy as "the one poor word which includes all our best insight and our best love." Both are equally important: the awareness of other people's mental states is a necessary but not sufficient component, also requiring identification coming with a loving relationship. As it happens in Eliot's *Silas Marner*, it is thus possible to have compassion without understanding in the character of the illiterate Dolly Winthrop, and it is equally possible to understand without feeling compassion as in the case of the stern Nancy Lammeter. However, Eliot tellingly represents "love" and "insight" as inadequate ethical responses on their own, thus implying that a combination of the two is necessary.[144] Starting from Eliot's suggestion that moral principles transform an agent from an animal life of mere self-satisfaction into a person with a "great central ganglion" capable of pursuing intrinsically valuable projects, the act of identifying with someone's reasons precisely means identifying with what makes them human. The combination of instinctive compassion towards other human beings and awareness of their existence, where that awareness entails a grasp of their motivations for action and a discernment as to whether their actions are driven by selfless reasons or selfish desires, suggests that Eliot's notion of sympathy is in fact a form of respect. Eliot's account of sympathy makes it easy to understand why and how vulnerability is always connected with sympathy:

144 Cf. Fessenbecker, P., *op. cit.*, pp. 501-532.

because sympathizing with someone's ends requires identifying with them in a way mere respect might not; sympathy requires not only altering, but also destabilizing one's own conception of which ends are worthwhile, that is one's vocation.[145] It is clearly possible to notice that Eliot's fiction demonstrates its philosophical complexity in dramatizing this process of sympathetic engagement, and the most straightforward example of sympathetic awareness correcting the application of moral principle in Eliot's fiction perhaps occurs in *Silas Marner*. As a matter of fact, Silas ultimately acts on another human being's behalf and starts looking after Eppie when he perceives his motivation by a genuine conception of what is good. As the narrator points out, in spite of initial scepticism, spontaneous goodness and human kindness predominate when the little child appears at Silas' hearth:

> Silas pressed [Eppie] to him, and almost unconsciously uttered sounds of hushing tenderness.[146]

Apart from such instances of sympathetic deliberation, George Eliot's fiction also addresses the aforementioned issue by means of what one might call scenes of sympathetic perception. Unlike scenes of sympathetic deliberation, which are centred on one agent sympathizing with another and subsequently deciding to act, scenes of sympathetic perception involve one or more agents treating someone sympathetically. Such sympathetic agents hence identify with another person's human nature as such: not only with the person's inner goodness, but also with his/her ability to be a better person than he/she is as the peasants' reaction to the news of the theft of Silas' gold reveals:

> That softening of feeling towards him which dated from his misfortune, that merging of suspicion and dislike in a rather contemptuous pity for him as lone and crazy, was now accompanied with a more active sympathy, especially amongst the women.[147]

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145 Cf. Fessenbecker, P., *op. cit.*, pp. 501-532.
146 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 12, p. 126.
147 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 14, p. 137.

Correspondingly, the identification lacks content and subsequently takes less the form of a shared sense that something is valuable, shifting instead towards a sort of trust as the changing relationship between Silas and Dolly Winthrop demonstrates. Notwithstanding this, upon closer look, it becomes clear that sympathizing perception achieves its power not by dismissing discernment, but precisely by stimulating the neighbours' trust despite their discernment of initial egoism in Silas:[148]

> The repulsion Marner had always created in his neighbours was partly dissipated by the new light in which this misfortune had shown him. […] This change to a kindlier feeling was shown in various ways.[149]

Ideal sympathetic agents like Dolly or other inhabitants of Raveloe may actually trust Silas and act on his behalf as soon as they discern that egoism is not a permanent condition. The power of this mechanism thus resides in the beneficial effects coming from being genuinely and sympathetically treated. As Velleman suggests, love is a kind of perception that acknowledges but still sees past flaws, and Eliot's use of the terms "baptism" and "consecration" in one of her groundbreking essays similarly indicates that a person can be transformed by simply being perceived in a loving way. Such affection creates a pressure to be more than mere egoists as well as to act for someone or something outside one's own self. If sympathetic perception exerts a pressure on those who lack a conception of the good, it can also offer relief to Silas and to all those who do. At the moment when Dolly Winthrop first knocks at his door, Silas actually starts conceiving human sympathy as his only possible source of redemption:

> Silas had inevitably a sense, though a dull and half-despairing one, that if any help came to him it must come from without; and there was a slight stirring of expectation at the sight of his fellow-men, a faint consciousness of dependence on their goodwill.[150]

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148 Cf. Fessenbecker, P., *op. cit.*, pp. 501-532.
149 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 10, pp. 86-87.
150 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 10, p. 91.

Silas' parental vocation and the inhabitants' sympathetic attitude consequently seem to grant a way out from the same problem, namely egoism.[151] Provided that sympathy imposes the test of selflessness on one's actions, it is finally worth remembering that the idea of intrinsically good purposes – i.e. projects that could be willed for their own sake rather than because of their satisfying egoistic desires leading to the definition of a redemptive vocation is central to the development of most of George Eliot's protagonists. And this is particularly explicit in *Silas Marner*, owing to what has ben called its fairy-tale ingredient. At the end, bad actions are evidently punished and characters pay for their moral infractions through the judicial system, but especially either through more local forms of social censure or by way of internal rituals of self-condemnation. Conversely, good actions are rewarded and virtuous characters get married, prosper, and enjoy the admiration of their communities, which allows the reader to feel that the whole range of characters "got what they deserved":

> And all differences among the company were merged in a general agreement with Mr. Snell's sentiment, that when a man had deserved his good luck, it was the part of his neighbours to wish him joy.[152]

Hence, Eliot's early novels may be assumed to rely on modes of consciousness and self-reflection in order to constitute sociality.[153] Like her contemporary John Stuart Mill, Eliot insists that social engagement and self-consciousness go hand in hand, and she is also led to regard social custom as allowing for the expansion of consciousness rather than as inhibiting the individual's sense of self. It is in the seemingly pastoral social and economic community of *Silas Marner* that Eliot more clearly demonstrates what are the principles of modern social identity. The novel perfectly exemplifies the individual's ability to forge self-conscious and meaningful relationships to the standards of larger groups, thus informing Eliot's

151 Cf. Fessenbecker, P., *op. cit.*, pp. 501-532.
152 *Silas Marner*, Conclusion, p. 207.
153 Cf. Berger, C., 'When Bad Things Happen to Bad People: Liability and Individual Consciousness in *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner*', in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction, 33:*3, Summer 2000, pp. 307-27.

vision of both moral and social order. It is through *Silas Marner* that the author reshapes her vision of social identity as not functioning according to customary acceptance, but rather as driven by the individual participant's cultivated commitment to the society's coherence and effectiveness. Furthermore, Eliot does not dismiss modern economic relations as alienating or anti-social, but she rather understands them as integral to sociality: she revisits customary relations, such as familial relations, in order to call attention to how they already serve as the basis for modern social relations. By imagining new ways to describe how individuals belong to groups, Eliot simultaneously accepts a world driven by commerce and governed by tradition or custom. At the same time, by refashioning the relationship between belief and individual consciousness, Eliot reverses a traditional understanding of social order as hereditary, and thus alters the valence and function of social identity itself.[154] The world embodied in *Silas Marner* is no less a puritan place than the world represented in *Adam Bede*. Some characters transgress and consequently pay for their mistakes, while other characters are rewarded: Silas actually gains both the girl and the gold, thereby achieving both a social and an economic success. Rather than exploiting legal or religious apparatus, the novel allows for justice to arise almost spontaneously out of the existing world. This simple correlation between acts and moral judgment is what makes the novel amenable to being read as magical, prelapsarian, or parable-like in its account of human relations. On the contrary, *Silas Marner* relies even more fully than other Eliot's novels on an understanding of the internal psychology of individuals as a means for articulating the individual's commitment to the social world. In this novel, Eliot steps back and considers how individuals subscribe to a community before submitting themselves to the community's standards. By imagining individual commitment to the social welfare as constitutive of social cohesion and then allowing a version of responsibility or liability to be the product of such a conscious subscription, *Silas Marner* enacts social relations as a complex version of the social contract.

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154 Cf. Berger, C., *op. cit.*, pp. 307-27.

For Eliot, there is no initial or originary moment of social relations but rather an ongoing and highly personal cultivation of the social realm.[155] Having been exposed to the arbitrariness of the rules that regulate the group, Silas is forced into a social re-education in which he must learn to live as if he naturally belonged to another community; he must therefore draw new connections between form and feeling as well as new human connections. First and foremost, the drama of Silas' cultural assimilation is framed in terms of geographical displacement precipitating his life not just into a crisis of social identity, but also into a crisis of self-identity. Deprived of a geographical referent for his identity, Silas initially re-creates that contextualizing relationship with his loom and his work, but his mechanized life is depicted as unproductive because it is completely isolated from an external social system. Work neither engages Silas with the marketplace nor does it draw him into social relations, making him look like a mere repository for the coins that mark his labour. While Silas' work distances him from the world of social interaction, the product of that work allows him to mimic social relations.[156] Silas' hoarding, therefore, does not derive primarily from a desire to monopolize economic power, as the Raveloe community interprets his refusal to either spend money or interact with the townspeople; instead, Silas develops an affective attachment to his own labour in the form of money, which in turn he translates into a pseudo-social connection. Silas' difficulty seems to lie in the fact that he cannot distance himself from the profits of his labour. His proprietorship or custodial relationship to these "unborn children" produces an attachment that bars him from engaging fully with a commodity culture. Moreover, Silas' compulsive work and accumulation of money bars him from even contemplating the historical: he neither sees himself as a being who exists over time and whose actions refer back to himself, nor does he see the world around him as providing a context for his changing self. Eppie, therefore, is not simply an instrument for joining Silas to the community; she also clarifies how the links between

155 Cf. Berger, C., *op. cit.*, pp. 307-27.
156 Cf. Berger, C., *op. cit.*, pp. 307-27.

individuals within the community are constructed around both economic and emotional needs:

> The child created fresh links between his life and the lives from which he had hitherto shrunk continually into narrower isolation. Unlike the gold which needed nothing, and must be worshipped in close-locked solitude-which was hidden away from daylight, was deaf to the song of birds, and started to no human tones-Eppie was a creature of endless claims and ever-growing desires [...] The gold had kept its thoughts in an ever-repeated circle, leading to nothing beyond itself; but Eppie was an object compacted of changes and hopes that forced his thoughts onward, and carried them far away from their old eager pacing towards the same blank limit-carried them away to the new things that would come with the coming years.[157]

In other words, context does not need to be inextricably linked to a geographical place. The type of rootless lack of identity that Eliot identifies at the beginning of the novel as the symptom of non-geographic grounding can only be remedied emotionally rather than geographically. Finding a place within an affective economy entirely substitutes for a geographical identity. Through raising Eppie, Silas too undergoes the process of recognizing the value of his position within the Raveloe community. He experiences this new form of identification not as his assimilation or absorption into a natural social and economic order but rather as a decision to create a place for oneself and to have that place acknowledged by others. The story thereby allows Silas finally to belong within his new context without destroying either the community's sense of order or the individual's sense of a coherent identity. The effect of Eppie's education is that it reproduces in Silas a consciousness of having had a history as well as deserving a future. Through Eppie, Silas begins to bring together the previously disparate parts of his life. The sense of loneliness induced by the purely formal world of weaving is linked back to Silas' past life as part of a religious community; then, as a unified force, Eppie

157 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 14, p. 143.

provides Silas with a way to reflect on his place within the social identity of Raveloe:

> By seeking what was needful for Eppie, by sharing the effect that everything produced on her, he had himself come to appropriate the forms of custom and belief that were the mould of Raveloe life; and as, with reawakening sensibilities, memory also reawakened, he had begun to ponder over the elements of his old faith, and blend them with his new impressions, till he recovered a consciousness of unity between past and present.[158]

Unlike Nancy's failure, Silas' social success derives from his being forced to model his beliefs according to what surrounds him as well as from learning to adopt new people and new ways of life. *Silas Marner* begins with that moment of extraction from a social group rather than with social coherence, thus calling into question the unstable connection of the self to the group. The novel then investigates the rudiments of social identity by wondering how people feel a sense of belonging and why people accept the standards of a group. Silas' dual initiation into psychological wholeness and social awareness exemplifies the interdependence of the two modes of identity. It is this interplay between individual and social identity that finally allows moral standards to have force without their having to be universal or unchanging.[159] Taking as its temporal zero point the Christmas season during which Silas loses his gold and finds Eppie, the novel looks backward fifteen years to his first arrival in Raveloe and follows him forward sixteen years until Eppie's wedding day. In particular, as it has already been outlined, Silas' second sixteen-year period evidently redeems all his previous misfortunes and actually allows him to rediscover a sense of wholeness and continuity. Eppie becomes his daughter as well as an extension of his person forward into the future and outward into society: "the little child had come to link him once more with the whole world". Silas learns to live again through the little child and, with reawakened memory, he also recovers "a consciousness of unity

158 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 16, p. 162.
159 Cf. Berger, C., *op. cit.*, pp. 307-27.

between his past and present". What is more, by naming Eppie after his dead mother and little sister, he is finally able to resituate himself both in the community of Raveloe and in his own lost family. Silas' restoration is so gratuitous to the point of appearing as almost miraculous and, according to Dolly Winthrop, Silas' story also exemplifies the workings of a mysterious but benevolent providence:

> There's trouble i' this world, and there's things as we can niver make out the rights on. And all as we've got to do is to trusten, Master Marner- to do the right thing as fur as we know, and to trusten. For if us as knows so little can see a bit o' good and rights, we may be sure as there's a good and a rights bigger nor what we can know- I feel it i' my own inside as it must be so.[160]

Eppie's status as agent and emblem of Silas' regeneration thus explains the reason why the child is compared to "a precious plant". The beneficial effect of "pure, natural human relations" is once again highlighted when Eliot defines Silas' adoption of Eppie as a blessing rather than a curse, whose ground has nothing to do with either Nancy's providence or Godfrey's natural law. The blessing apparently resides in the actual relationship between Silas and Eppie, which leads the baby to reject her "new unfamiliar father". Needless to say, the oxymoronic pun on family ties reinforces the concept of human relationships as artificial when based on social and linguistic conventions. On the other hand, it also emphasizes that what is usually considered as artificial may even be more humanly real and valuable. Blood relationships hence become a mere coincidence, while the true bond is depicted in the form of creative human affections. The fact that the theme of adoption in *Silas Marner* constitutes a model for the human construction of connections and for the imagination which must fill up voids and bridge over gaps is revealed by Eppie's own consciousness that artificial relationships can paradoxically be the most natural:

160 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 14, pp. 140-141.

> Had she not a father very close to her, who loved her better than any real fathers in the village seemed to love their daughters? [She has no need for Godfrey to] "fill the place of that black featureless shadow which had held the ring and placed it on her mother's finger" [for the place had already been filled by Silas].[161]

Silas clearly succeeds in moulding himself a personality and his safety is acquired in two different stages: piecing himself back together through weaving and hoarding on the one hand, and growing into new wholeness through Eppie on the other hand. In other words, his life eventually resumes the conscious continuity he had lost in Lantern Yard after having been subjected to cataleptic unconsciousness and revelatory consciousness, finding grace and redemption in the semiconsciousness of habitual life with Eppie.[162] Silas' "truthful simple soul" finds peace and forms a community not with the slowly accumulating gold coins but with the slowly growing, golden-haired Eppie. Although the two experiences of loss are quite similar, the two forms of restitution are explicitly contrasted:

> The gold had kept his thoughts in an ever-repeated circle, leading to nothing beyond itself; but Eppie was an object composed of changes and hopes that forced his thoughts onward, and carried them far away from their eager old pacing towards the same blank limit.[163]

He is so eager to watch her grow to the point that, thanks to her advent, biological continuity replaces mechanical repetition and growth replaces accumulation as the dominant figurative pattern. Consequently, after having been freed from the eternally repeated present, Silas' consciousness is able to project toward the future and to reconsider his past:

> 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.[164]

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161 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 19, p. 191.
162 Cf. Cohen, Susan R., *op. cit.*, pp. 410-426.
163 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 14, p. 149.
164 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 14, p. 144.

As the narrator's comment underlines, it is Eppie's sympathetic presence that allows Silas to reenter life and a temporality which he can now accept as an organic continuity rather than an annihilating void. His regeneration is also revealed by his renewed interest in looking "for the once familiar herbs again". Like Dolly's conception of providence, Silas accepts Eppie's coming as a mystery:

> He had a dreamy feeling that this child was somehow a message come to him from that far-off life: it stirred fibres that had never been moved in Raveloe […] old impressions of awe at the presentiment of some Power presiding over his life.[165]

What Silas experiences as a benevolent Power undoubtedly represents Eliot's beloved "remedial influence of pure, natural human relations", which might explain why Eppie is also quite explicitly described as a naturalized version of the infant Jesus:

> 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.[166]

Taking everything into account, even though Eppie is initially presented as a mere object of wonder to Silas appearing as she does, unaccountably and seemingly from nowhere, during one of Silas' cataleptic seizures, she may be said to transfuse new blood and life into her foster father:

> Marner took her on his lap, trembling with an emotion mysterious to himself, at something unknown dawning on his life. Thought and feeling were so confused within him, that if he had tried to give them utterance, he could only have said that the child was come instead of the gold - that the gold had turned into the child.[167]

165 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 12, p. 126.
166 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 14, p. 150.
167 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 12, p. 126.

Indeed, the "golden" Eppie apparently functions as the human surrogate for the stolen gold pieces. However, more importantly, Silas' new-found treasure serves as a means to rejoin the human race and to revise his varied sense of values and ideals:

> 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 his weaving, and made him think all its pauses a holiday, reawakening his senses with her fresh life.[168]

In brief, Silas reawakes and rediscovers his human nature as well as his capability of compassion, sacrifice and love for another human being. It is a simple conversion or a metamorphosis engendered by suffering and aided by the natural workings of sympathy.[169] Such a seemingly miracolous change is particularly made possible by George Eliot's brilliant use of the geography of uneven development, according to which a modern time characterized by egoistic attitudes coexists with people and situations that are representatives of past selfless values and sympathetic attitudes. The idea of reawoken sensibilities, given the aura of the idyllic in this fairy-tale novel or the sense of the very real in other novels, is a crucial theme for Eliot since simple and faulty human beings who are able to redeem their flaws are what better represents her idea of modern greatness. Now, going back to the parallel consideration of the theme of simplicity in *Silas Marner* and *Un Coeur Simple,* we can notice that if Silas' loving sympathy is eventually reawoken by little Eppie thanks to whom the embittered greedy weaver is saved from social and psychological alienation, Félicité's fate deprives her life of all those objects she can so genuinely and fully love, thus obliging her to direct all her sympathy towards a parrot that is even imaginatively transformed into an abstract religious symbol. We can venture the hypothesis that this happens because Félicité was meant by Flaubert to poetically sum up all the characteristics

168 *Silas Marner*, Ch. 14, p. 143.
169 Cf. Simpson, Peter, 'Crisis and Recovery: Wordsworth, Eliot and *Silas Marner',* in *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 2, Winter 1978/79, pp. 95-114.

of a simple heart, and actually embody it in terms of perceptions, emotions and reactions, while Silas' simple heart and all its vicissitudes were conceived by Eliot on the background of a typically British religious culture based on strict puritan ideas. Consequently, Silas' simplicity allows to easily observe the effect of such fundamentalist principles onto commonplace human beings, as Wordsworth's declaration of poetics appearing in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* and presenting the virtues of simplicity suggests. In other words, following the two authors' common feeling for simple and humble humanity, their depictions of simplicity produce different aesthetic results dictated by their need to achieve different literary goals. George Eliot's novel hence implies a more realistic treatment of the subject matter and is actually characterized by deeper social analysis and psychological insight being conveyed through dialogues and interventions on the part of the narrator, whereas Gustave Flaubert's short story entails fewer contextual references as well as a more abstract and symbolic treatment of the protagonist. It finally seems to me that all these considerations are largely confirmed by George Eliot's own letter to John Blackwood preceding the publication of her novel, which also functions as a proper conclusion to this chapter:

> I don't wonder at your finding my story, as far as you have read it, rather sombre: indeed, I should not have believed that any one would have been interested in it but myself (since William Wordsworth is dead) if Mr Lewes had not been strongly arrested by it. But I hope you will not find it at all a sad story, as a whole, since it sets – or is intended to set – in a strong light the remedial influences of pure, natural human relations. The Nemesis is a very mild one. I have felt all through as if the story would have lent itself best to metrical rather than prose fiction, especially in all that relates to the psychology of Silas; except that, under that treatment, there could not be an equal play of humour. It came to me first of all, quite suddenly, as a sort of legendary tale, [...] but, as my mind dwelt on the subject, I became inclined to a more realistic treatment.[170]

170 'Correspondence between John Blackwood and George Eliot' in Eliot, George, *Silas Marner* (1861), ed. David Carroll, London, Penguin, 2012, pp. 210-211.

Conclusions

George Eliot and Gustave Flaubert: Pioneers of the Modern Novel

> Era veramente una delle creature più scettiche e singolari che avessi mai conosciuto, ed era questo il lato del suo carattere che mi attraeva di più. […] Spero che in futuro una nuova edizione, o una nuova opera, restituisca presto sale e spezie al resoconto di quell'esistenza totalmente non convenzionale che fu la vita di George Eliot.[171]

As it is made explicit both in Rosemary Ashton's all-encompassing biography[172] and in Joan Bennet's crtical study,[173] the most suitable adjective to describe George Eliot's private life and literary career is "unconventional". Throughout her career, Eliot might actually be claimed to have written with strong political and moral commitment. For instance, from *Adam Bede* to *The Mill on the Floss* and *Silas Marner*, she acutely presented the stories of social outsiders or all those issues related to provincial lifestyle, whereas *Felix Holt, the Radical* and *The Legend of Jubal* constitute overt depictions of political crisis, a theme also lying at the heart of *Middlemarch*. Eliot's novels are also particularly notable for their deep psychological insight and sophisticated characterization on the one hand, and for the application of her innovative realist philosophy on the other hand, whose roots can be easily detected in her review of John Ruskin's *Modern Painters* appearing in the *Westminster Review*. Victorian readers subsequently praised her novels for their faithful depictions of rural society, which were rendered so life-like thanks to the fact that much of the material featuring her prose was drawn from her own personal experience.[174]

171 William Hale White quoted in Villari, E., 'Introduzione a *Il Velo Sollevato',* cit., p. 40.
172 Cf. Ashton, R., *George Eliot. A Life*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1996.
173 Cf. Bennett, J., *George Eliot. Her Mind and Her Art*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978.
174 Cf. Gordon S. Haight, 'George Eliot', in www.britannica.com, https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-Eliot, (accessed July 2020).

In spite of the fact that she shared with Wordsworth the belief that much value and beauty were to be found in the simple details of ordinary country life, Eliot did not limit her repertoire to stories portraying the English countryside as the historical novel *Romola* demonstrates. What is more, working as a translator, Eliot was often exposed to German texts of religious, social, and moral philosophy such as Friedrich Strauss' *Life of Jesus*, Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, and Spinoza's *Ethics*. Elements inspired by these works thus appear in her fiction, much of which is written with her keen sense of agnostic humanism. Among all these philosophical treatises, she particularly focused on Feuerbach's conception of Christianity, positing that human understanding of the nature of the divine was ultimately to be found in the nature of humanity projected onto a divine figure. Signs of this complex philosophy somehow appear in *Silas Marner* but will be further developed in later novels, where Eliot's protagonists often display a "surprisingly modern readiness to interpret religious language in humanist or secular ethical terms."[175] Though Eliot herself abandoned all confessional forms of religion, her novels always show respect for religious traditions and for their capacity and for their capacity to convey a sense of social order and morality. Numerous religious elements appearing in her fiction clearly owe much to her upbringing: the experiences of Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* share many similarities with the experiences of the young Mary Ann Evans, and Silas Marner's alienation from the church simultaneously implying his alienation from society equally mirror George Eliot's early life.[176] Following Eliot's nearly vestigial respect for religion, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche thus noticed her system of morality for figuring sin as a debt that can be expiated through suffering, which he defined as characteristic of "little moralistic females à la Eliot."[177]

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175 George Eliot, *Romola* (1863), quoted in Gordon S. Haight, *op. cit.*
176 Cf. Gordon S. Haight, 'George Eliot', *op. cit.*
177 F. Nietzsche quoted in Gordon S. Haight, 'George Eliot', *op. cit.*

Despite the fact that by the time of the publication of *Daniel Deronda* Eliot's sales were decreasing and that she had faded from public view to some degree, in the twentieth century she started being championed by a new range of critics such as Virginia Woolf, who appropriately called *Middlemarch* "one of the few English novels written for grown-up people".[178] Besides, literary critic Harold Bloom placed George Eliot among the most important Western writers of all time in 1994, and following a 2007 authors' poll by *TIME Middlemarch* has become the tenth greatest literary work ever written.[179] It is finally telling that in 2015 writers coming from outside the United Kingdom voted some of her novels first among all British novels "by a landslide". The various film and television adaptations of Eliot's books also evidently reveal her success among an ever-growing reading public thanks to the peculiar characteristics featuring her works. For example,

> The most remarkable peculiarity and distinguishing excellence of *Silas Marner*, is the complete correlation between the characters and their circumstances; the actors in this story come before us like the flowers of their own fields, native to the soil and varying with each constituent of the earth from which they spring, with every difference that is implied in defective or excessive nutriment, but yet no more the creatures of blind chance, each asserting his own individuality after his kind, and none over-stepping the possibilities of culture furnished by such a world-forgotten village as Raveloe.[180]

If compared to George Eliot's style of writing, it seems to me that the term "unconventional" may also be referred to Gustave Flaubert's literary innovations. Critic James Wood actually refers to Flaubert's distinctive career as follows:

> Novelists should thank Flaubert the way poets thank spring; it all begins again with him. There really is a time before Flaubert and a time after him.

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178 Virginia Woolf quoted in Gordon S. Haight, 'George Eliot', *op. cit.*

179 Cf. Paris, B. J., *Rereading George Eliot: Changing Responses to her Experiments in Life*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2003.

180 'Unsigned Review' in Eliot, George, *Silas Marner* (1861), ed. David Carroll, London, Penguin, 2012, pp. 217-218.

> Flaubert decisively established what most readers and writers think of as modern realist narration, and his influence is almost too familiar to be visible. We hardly remark of good prose that it favours the telling and brilliant detail; that it privileges a high degree of visual noticing; that it maintains an unsentimental composure and knows how to withdraw, like a good valet, from superfluous commentary; that it judges good and bad neutrally; that it seeks out the truth, even at the cost of repelling us; and that the author's fingerprints on all this are paradoxically traceable but not visible. You can find some of this in Defoe or Austen or Balzac, but not all of it until Flaubert.[181]

As it has often been noticed, as a writer other than a pure stylist, Flaubert might equally be defined as a romantic and a realist. Hence, members of various schools and especially realists and formalists have traced their origins to his unprecedented work. The exactitude with which his expressions are adapted to his purpose can be seen in all parts of his work, and especially in the portraits of the figures appearing throughout his main novels and short stories.[182] For this reason, the degree to which Flaubert's fame has extended since his death presents "an interesting chapter of literary history in itself".[183] Like Eliot, Flaubert's lean and precise style of writing has highly influenced twentieth-century writers such as Franz Kafka and J. M. Coetzee. In particular, as Vladimir Nabokov discussed it in his famous lecture series:

> The greatest literary influence upon Kafka was Flaubert's. Flaubert who loathed pretty-pretty prose would have applauded Kafka's attitude towards his tool. Kafka liked to draw his terms from the language of law and science, giving them a kind of ironic precision, with no intrusion of the author's private sentiments; this was exactly Flaubert's method through which he achieved a singular poetic effect.

181 James Wood quoted in René Dumesnil and Jacques Barzun, 'Gustave Flaubert', in www.britannica.com, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gustave-Flaubert (accessed July 2020).
182 Cf. René Dumesnil and Jacques Barzun, *op. cit.*
183 Hugh Chisholm quoted in René Dumesnil and Jacques Barzun, *op. cit.*

> The legacy of his work habits can best be described, therefore, as paving the way towards a slower and more introspective manner of writing.[184]

Nonetheless, as it often ironically happens to great novelists, the publication of *Madame Bovary* in 1856 was followed by more scandal than admiration, and at first it was difficult to acknowledge that this novel marked the beginning of something new – i.e. the scrupulously truthful portraiture of life. This aspect of his genius was yet gradually acknowledged, and at the time of his death he was widely regarded as the most influential French Realist to the point that he exercised an extraordinary influence upon Guy de Maupassant, Edmond de Goncourt, Alphonse Daudet, and Émile Zola. What might be taken as the major sign of his greatness is that Flaubert did not lose prestige in the literary community even after the decline of the Realist school. Needless to say, he currently continues to appeal to other writers because of his deep commitment to aesthetic principles, his devotion to style, and his indefatigable pursuit of the perfect expression leading to the creation of unique social and psychological portrayals.[185] As a consequence, he has been either simply admired or extensively discussed by almost every major literary personality of the twentieth century including philosophers and sociologists such as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Paul Sartre. Georges Perec defined *L'Éducation Sentimentale* as one of his favourite novels and, last but non least, in a public lecture Marshall McLuhan claimed: "I derived all my knowledge of media from people like Flaubert and Rimbaud and Baudelaire."[186] In order to explain why George Eliot and Gustave Flaubert are widely regarded as pioneers of the modern novel, I will finally address two equally important realist innovations featuring their greatest works: their conscious use of intermodality standing at the basis of their social portrayals of simplicity on the one hand, and their introductory contribution to the rise of the modern psychological novel on the other hand.

184 Vladimir Nabokov quoted in René Dumesnil and Jacques Barzun, *op. cit.*
185 Cf. René Dumesnil and Jacques Barzun, *op. cit.*
186 Marshall McLuhan quoted in René Dumesnil and Jacques Barzun, *op. cit.*

To begin with, many nineteenth-century European writers, among whom George Eliot and Gustave Flaubert, rely on intermodality – i.e. transmutability of form – in their portrayal of heroes and heroines.[187] Thanks to their recurrent use of synaesthesia, these writers actually provide linguistic stimuli allowing the reader to visualise the story. In particular, pictorial intermodality is to be detected when dealing with individual focus or overall pictures, sculptural intermodality serves to vivify individual descriptions, while architectural intermodality is used to convey the idea of social order. As far as pictorial intermodality is concerned, Eliot evidently transposes the physical features of landscape painting in her prose while also translating the devices of the nineteenth-century landscape into literary minutiae. Similarly, Flaubert's use of nineteenth-century painting devices is what has often led to compare his writings to impressionist works of art, especially because of the indeterminacy featuring his descriptions and all his characters' portraits. What is more, Eliot takes advantage of sculptural formulae as an ironic framework in protagonal collimation, but she also exploits the principles of texture and tactility to produce immediate, clear and close portraits as well as to create a link between the physical world and the emotional sphere. Like his British peer, Flaubert's extensive use of haptic imagery is intimately connected to his understanding of the sensual power of sculptural features. Architectural intermodality is finally associated with Eliot's novels because of their appearing as architectural compositions thanks to the author's brilliant use of leitmotifs and imagery. In a similar manner, Flaubert's concern for unity and balance inevitably contributes to enriching his narrative with a number of leitmotifs aiming to provide the illusion of temporal and spatial rhythm. As already argued, the two authors' realist innovations also lie in their ability to stress protagonal singularity by means of Eliot's pictorial elements on the one hand, and by means of Flaubert's impressionist techniques on the other hand.[188]

187 Cf. Durey, Jill Felicity, 'Intermodality in the Novels of George Eliot, Lev Tolstoj and Gustave Flaubert', in *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, Vol. 66, No. 2, Apr. 1 1992, pp. 173-193.
188 Cf. Durey, Jill Felicity, *op. cit.*, pp. 173-193.

Both writers actually transgress artistic boundaries in their works in order to suit personal ideology and different narrative modality, so that their unprecedented use of intermodality can be assumed to constitute a model which has contributed to changing the very nature of the literary canon. In addition to these technical remarks, Professor Barbara Smalley would seem to have undertaken a fruitful study of the existing relation between the art of Flaubert and that of George Eliot as well as of the ways in which both contributed to the development of the modern psychological novel. As a matter of fact, as many critics have noted, both writers are regularly preoccupied with the effect of romantic illusion on their protagonists, and subsequently treat this common theme by means of different aesthetic devices. As a consequence, when comparing the two artists' narrative techniques, Brunetière utterly preferred and praised George Eliot because of her broader compassion and humanity.[189] In spite of numerous similarities, the comparison between Flaubert and George Eliot also encourages considerations of differing attitudes towards sexuality, different cultural preoccupations, and especially different cultural contexts inevitably affecting literary techniques. Nothing is more striking, for example, than the way in which both writers underwent a sort of martyrdom for their art and employed obsessive scrupulosity. Flaubert, of course, was self-consciously inventing an "art," thus struggling with hateful materials to curb his own romanticism, while George Eliot felt self-confident in what Flaubert would have felt to be hateful, but also suffered physical agonies when trying to almost obsessively refine her details and her narratives. Feeling the pain of a different kind of martyrdom to a public which put upon her an enormous responsibility, she struggled in each of her novels to reconcile the longing for justice and personal satisfaction with the terrible reality she perceived with such clarity. However, the major subject featuring their works has to do with the way in which both Flaubert and George Eliot develop the interior portrait of their characters.

189 Cf. Smalley, Barbara, *George Eliot and Flaubert: Pioneers of the Modern Novel*, Ohio, Ohio University Press, 1974.

Smalley's study of these writers should actually have completely overthrown the readers' simplistic ideas and thrown light on the whole cultural movement that finally led from an initial disenchantment with romantic dreams to the minute psychological investigations of Henry James and later novelists. For this reason, Professor Smalley's comparative analysis focuses on juxtaposing the two realist writers in order to make comparisons with James as a third party.[190] The scholar thus establishes a coherent and complex basis for the comparison of the two novelists by employing certain recent structuralist or sociological approaches to the novel, which allow her to take Flaubert and Eliot as instances in the reexamination of some aspects of the poetics of the novel. The two writers are said to "focus on the intimate patterns of the inner life of their characters with an emphasis unknown in the novelists that preceded them."[191] Further, they "are in their separate ways influences of great interest and value for the work of the eminent novelist [Henry James] who was to carry the psychological novel a stage further toward the twentieth century".[192] Corollary to this premise are a number of themes which, it is argued, are central to both writers, notably the "drama of incommunicability" and the romantic illusions of certain protagonists induced by their reading of sentimental literature – i.e. "the betrayals of literature". Both authors' plots also tend to focus on "an exploring in double perspective of private lives of illusion that flourish in the midst of provincial realities."[193] By elaborating the points of contact between *Silas Marner* and *Un Coeur Simple*, as we have done in this dissertation, Flaubert and Eliot may evidently be assumed to concentrate on the inner lives of their protagonists rather than on outer fortunes, which needs to be taken as the chief index of a decisive "advance in psychological realism" heralding the culminating achievements of Henry James, Marcel Proust, James Joyce or Virginia Woolf.

190 Cf. Smalley, Barbara, *op. cit.*
191 Smalley, Barbara, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
192 Smalley, Barbara, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
193 Smalley, Barbara, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

Smalley's view of the progress of the novel is apparently focused on technique, specifically on the innovative ways in which Eliot and Flaubert are able to render psychological data in fiction. Nonetheless, taking Auerbach's comparative analysis as a model, her study has also elaborated on the kinds of links between cultural context, forms of consciousness, and literary technique that cannot be disregarded when investigating thematic connections and aesthetic disconnections characterizing these two realists.[194] To conclude, since there are no ready-made recipes for comparing literature and literary texts, the leading subject does not exist until the interpreter devises a theoretically justifiable basis for the comparison. This is the main reason for the structure of this dissertation: after having provided general background information on European realism and on the selected authors' different conceptions and applications of realism, I have tried to demonstrate that their focus on social and psychological simplicity is what primarily enables to compare *Silas Marner* and *Un Coeur Simple* without superficially claiming that similarities simply depend on the literary techniques of their realist creators. Despite their varying aesthetic philosophies and literary devices, due to a number of political, social and ethical reasons, both works would actually appear to have been conceived in order to demonstrate that modern beauty and greatness primarily lie in ordinary characters and situations rather than in the sublime deeds of ancient heroes, thus seemingly taking Wordsworth's groundbreaking ideals as a model:

> The principal object, then, was to chuse incidents and situations from common life, [...] Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated;[195]

194 Cf. Baker, W. , *Critics on George Eliot*, London, George Allen&Unwin, 1973.
195 William Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1802.

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