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George Eliot and Realism

A Reading of the Early Novels,
from *Adam Bede* to *Brother Jacob*

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Introduction

George Eliot is one of the most renowned Victorian writers. Her extraordinary life made her already distinguished among her fellow Victorian authors, but even as a novelist she distinguished herself from the other nineteenth-century British writers, with her life-like depiction of rustic life and witty stories.

In this dissertation I deal with George Eliot's life and her early novels and short stories. In the first chapter I analyse the author's remarkable life, from her early years and her strong attachment to her family, in particular to her brother and father. I also explore her strongly religious teenage years, her love for reading, and her acquaintance with the Hennells and the Brays once she and her family moved out of Warwickshire to live near Coventry. Her friendship with the Hennells and Brays, and in particular her reading of Charles Hennell's *An Enquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838), eventually led the young Mary Ann Evans away from her intense religious belief, and in the long run, originated some conflicts between her and her father. Thanks to the Brays, Marian was able to broaden her circle of friends, and was led away from her provincial life. As a matter of fact, at the meetings at the Brays' house, Mary Ann got acquainted with John Chapman, who would be the first to employ her and offer her some lodgings in London after her father's death in 1849. London meant a completely new life for Mary Ann, as not only did she start working as a journalist and essayist, but became acquainted with the most important person in her life, George Henry Lewes. As a matter of fact, her relationship with Lewes pushed her away from her family, as they could not accept that she was living with a married man. George Henry Lewes played a major role in Eliot's pursuit of her novelistic career, as his first supporter. All the experiences and travels Eliot and Lewes made, strongly influenced Marian, who was inspired by her personal experiences and the places she saw in her writings.

In the second chapter I consider how Eliot as a novelist, distinguished herself from her fellow Victorian writers. As a matter of fact, even before she started writing novels, she had already clear in mind what kind of writer she wanted to become. In two essays, in particular, "The Natural History of the German Life" and "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists", she expressed her own aesthetic and literary ideas. In "The Natural History of the German Life" Eliot states that the purpose of art is to rightfully drive people's sympathy, thus giving literature an ethical aim. But in order for art to be truly ethical, it should focus on ordinary life and people, because it is only through such depictions that one can truly acknowledge one's limitations, and thus truly feel with the others, not through the depiction of exemplary and heroic people. In "Silly

Novels by Lady Novelists”, instead, Eliot criticises the pomposity and absurdity of some novels written by some fellow female writers, which undermined women’s capacity to show that they are as capable as men in writing. Therefore, because of Eliot’s appeal to truthfulness, she even distanced herself from great female writers as Elizabeth Gaskell, as Eliot not only reported what was around her, but she went deeper in the consciousness of her character. This psychological depth of her characters also distanced her from the most popular of Victorian writers, Charles Dickens, who despite being the narrator of intriguing stories, he not always explained why certain characters behaved in certain ways.

After having drawn Eliot’s aesthetic and literary ideas, in the third chapter I examine in detail to what extent her ideas on truth and realism are applied, particularly in her early novels. In *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss* some traits belonging to realist novels can be noticed, in particular in the traits that characters such as Adam Bede and Tom Tulliver share respectively with Eliot’s father and brother. Her rural settings, which were inspired by her childhood memories, became some of Eliot’s signature features, especially in her early novels. In these two novels Eliot also deals with the concept of sympathy, which is conveyed through various characters and various ways. For example, through their sensitivity Seth Bede and Maggie Tulliver are able to display sympathy towards the others, although eventually the former has to renounce the woman he loves, while the latter, finding it difficult to reconcile her inner desires and the outward pressures, is faced with a tragic death at the end of the novel. And it is precisely this mythological ending which differentiates the two novels, thus showing Eliot’s increasing distancing from her initial appeal to realism and truthfulness.

In her subsequent short stories there is a progressively intrusion of myth, Gothicism and fabulous traits, which I have analysed in the fourth chapter of my dissertation. In *The Lifted Veil*, Eliot abandons her rural setting in order to tell the story of a failed artist, Latimer, who travels around Europe, and whose clairvoyance and telepathy bear the features of Gothic stories. Another Gothic element in Latimer’s story, is the revivification experiment at the end of the story, which shocks and disturbs the readers. After this brief break in rural realism, Eliot returns to her previous rural settings in her next short novel, *Silas Marner*, although the story of its protagonist, has some elements of myth and of the fairy-tale. These mythical and fabulous traits are balanced with some realist elements and characters, i.e. the ones involving Godfrey Cass. Even more fabulous than *Silas Marner*’s story is the one of David Faux, the protagonist of her next short story, *Brother Jacob*. The protagonist travels abroad in order to make his own fortune, although his behaviour, especially towards his brother, Jacob, distances him from the conventional protagonists of fables. Even the concept of sympathy changes in these novels. As

a matter of fact, in *The Lifted Veil* Eliot tests her idea of sympathy, as Latimer possesses some misogynist traits, although the novelist is able to retrieve it by placing the protagonist's antipathy onto another character, Bertha Grant, the femme fatale of the story. In *Silas Marner*, instead, the concept of sympathy returns, as both Silas and Godfrey Cass show sympathetic attitudes, and sympathy is conveyed through difference here, as both Silas and the community of Raveloe despite not fully understanding one another, are still able to be sympathetic by sharing each other's stories, which brings them closer. Sympathy is basically absent in *Brother Jacob*, as the protagonist of the story is neither sympathetic nor repentant of his misbehaviour, and this can be read, as I argue in my dissertation, as linked to the broader issues of colonialism and racism.

I Chapter: George Eliot's extraordinary life

1.1 1819-1841: Growing up in Warwickshire

George Eliot was born Mary Anne Evans on November 22, 1819,¹ at South Farm, near Nuneaton, Warwickshire, in the English Midlands. She was the fifth child of Robert Evans whom he had with his second wife, Christiana Pearson. Mary Anne's father had had two children from his previous marriage to Harriet Poynton Evans, Robert, and Fanny. After his first wife's death, in 1809, Robert Evans remarried in 1813 to Christiana Pearson, who bore him three other children, Chrissey, in 1814, Isaac, in 1816, and Mary Anne.² Some time after Mary Anne's birth, in the spring of 1820, the Evans moved to a large brick farmhouse, Griff House.³

In 1821 Robert and Christiana welcomed two twins who only lived ten days. This event brought deep changes in the Evans family. According to Nancy Henry, the loss of her babies had a huge impact on Christiana's physical and mental state. She probably suffered from depression after her twin's death, and the difficulty of having a twin pregnancy might have left her a semi-invalid for the rest of her life. Unable to attend properly to her children and step-children, at first Robert's first son, together with his sister Fanny, was sent to Derbyshire to work as a sub-manager in an estate for some old acquaintances of his father's. In the meantime, Chrissey was sent to Miss Lathom's boarding school in Attleborough, and Isaac and Mary Anne were sent to the same Dame school not far from their house.⁴ According to Rosemary Ashton, instead, the decision to send the children away was probably due to the common practise of middle-class families that provided education to their offspring by sending them to boards away from home.⁵ Whichever the reason behind the estrangement of the Evans children, they were all sent away by 1824.

During this time, Mary Anne grew closer to her brother Isaac.⁶ Moreover, she was already showing a peculiar aptitude towards art and fancy. According to Ashton, Mary Anne later in her life enjoyed remembering how she used to imagine experiencing adventures, which were excited in her by the reading of many and different books.⁷

¹ A. Fleishman, *George Eliot's Intellectual Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 12

² N. Henry, *The Life of George Eliot: A Critical Biography*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, pp. 25-30

³ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, London: Penguin Books, 1997, p. 12

⁴ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31

⁵ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, p. 17

⁶ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 31

⁷ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, p. 16

In 1824, Mary Anne joined her older sister Chrissey at her boarding school in Attleborough, while Isaac was sent to a boarding school near Coventry. Those changes could be considered extremely important to a very young Mary Anne who had to be separated from all the things that until that time were familiar to her, especially her brother.

Subsequently, in 1828 Mary Anne and Chrissey moved to a boarding school near Nuneaton, while Isaac was sent to Birmingham and had a private tutor. Mary Anne was a very bright student and was pretty skilled in languages such as Italian, German, Latin and Greek. During that time, she also started reading Sir Walter Scott, who then became her favourite author. In those years she became the best pupil of Maria Lewis, who might be considered one of the most influential people of her early years. As a matter of fact, Mary Anne kept in contact with Maria Lewis even after the former left Nuneaton to move to Misses Franklins' school in Coventry, in 1832,⁸ which she would attend until 1835.⁹ During this period, she came into contact with three kinds of religion, Evangelicalism, Baptism and Methodism. Evangelicalism was the most influential religion of her childhood since her beloved teacher, Miss Lewis was an Evangelical, but thanks to her other teachers, the Baptist Misses Franklins, she was able to encounter this other religion. Mary Anne came into contact with the Methodist thinking because of an uncle and an aunt of hers, Samuel and Elizabeth Evans, who were both Methodists.¹⁰ Because her most relevant influence was Ms Lewis, Mary Ann, according to Ashton, had started during this time be very strict with herself, and she started refusing all the things she believed to be mundane and vain, such as fancy clothes and her own appearance. Despite her aversion for the frivolous, Mary Anne had still a strong passion for literature. In particular, at that time, on her school notebook, Mary Anne used to copy poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge, but she also wrote poems or historical fictions of her own.¹¹

That was Mary Anne's life up until 1835. Around the end of that year, her mother was diagnosed with a fatal illness, probably breast cancer, and a few months later, on February 3, 1836, she died. At the time of her mother's death, even her father's health was starting to decline, since in 1835 started suffering from kidney stones.

This chapter of her life was characterised by a turn to religion on Mary Anne's side. In particular, she seemed to follow a sort of polarized and personalised form of Evangelicalism.

⁸ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 31

⁹ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, p. 18

¹⁰ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 31

¹¹ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, p. 19-21

As a matter of fact, between 1836 and 1841 Mary Anne seemed very keen into pietism and self-abnegation. Besides this evangelical turn, during this time, Mary Anne started spelling her name as Mary Ann, which could be seen interestingly as sign too of the changes in her according to Henry.

In 1837 her sister Chrissey got married, therefore, it became Mary Ann's duty to take care of her father. It is likely that during this period Mary Ann had begun to feel insufferable of her new condition. According, again, to Henry, it might be that she even started having depression. Despite turning to religion after her mother's death, the life of a housewife was not what Mary Ann felt suited her.¹² As a matter of fact, her sole tasks were those of taking care of the house while her father and brother were out, making jams, visiting the poor and bring them some second-handed clothes. Understandably, this was a limiting situation to a bright mind such as that of Mary Ann. Therefore, her only way of escaping was turning to religion and to Maria Lewis, but there was still one issue, and it was the fact that according to her religious beliefs, she could not accept 'vain' activities such as reading and writing, which she could really not live without. As a matter of fact, during this period she had also came up with an idea for a chronological chart of ecclesiastical history, and she hoped to finish it by November, 1840, but eventually this project had to be abandoned since there was already a chart of that sort.¹³

1.2 1841-1848: New life in Coventry and the rebellious phase

New changes came in 1841, when her brother Isaac got married in June of that year. Firstly, with also her brother getting married, Mary Ann was probably starting to feel even more pressured about finding a husband for herself. Moreover, she and her father had to move to Foleshill, around Coventry, since they wanted to leave their old house, Griff House, to Isaac and his wife.

Despite the feeling of loneliness Mary Ann felt in her new house, she was soon able to make new friends. As a matter of fact, that year Mary Ann met and befriended the Brays, which then became one of the most important and influential friendships of her life. It all started when Mary Ann, in 1841, bought a book by Charles Christian Hennell, *An Enquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838), a book which strongly influenced some of her ideas, and forever changed her way of thinking. Charles Hennell's sister, Caroline (Cara) had married in 1836

¹² N. Henry, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-45

¹³ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, p. 25-31

Charles Bray, whose sister were Mary Ann's next-door neighbour, and this connection brought the three friends, Mary Ann, Cara and Charles, together. In 1842 Mary Ann also came to know Cara's sister, Sara Hennell, who became another dear friend of hers. Both the Hennells and the Brays were Unitarian and when Mary Ann read Hennell's *Enquiry* and confronted herself with the Brays, she saw many of their ideas reflecting what she internally was starting to believe too, in particular concerning her idea of Christianity. The Brays' house at that time, Rosehill, became her second house.¹⁴ But the more Mary Ann grew closer to the Brays, the more she distanced herself from Maria Lewis. Gradually Mary Ann started to become more formal with Miss Lewis, starting by avoiding using pet names that up until that time they had always used to refer to each other. Despite everything, Maria Lewis was still willing to be a friend to Mary Ann, so much so that she even went to visit Mary Ann at the beginning of 1842. As a matter of fact, Miss Lewis was at Foleshill the day Mary Ann refused to go to church. From that moment on, Mary Ann and Maria Lewis took different paths, even though they still kept writing to each other merely generic letters about their lives.¹⁵

The decision not to attend church on the 2nd of January 1842, may be considered a turning point of Mary Ann's life, according to Henry. Firstly, that choice made explicit her crisis with her previous religious beliefs. Moreover, this crisis brought some conflicts within her family. As a matter of fact, her father, Robert, was so saddened by the event that he even threatened to leave their house, Bird Grove.¹⁶ Luckily, the Brays were close to her. Mrs Pears, her neighbour and Charles Bray's sister, even offered her to help her find new lodgings and a job. But her family did not completely desert her. As a matter of fact, Mary Ann's brother, Isaac, was understanding of the situation. He and his wife even harboured Mary Ann for some time, in order to deal peacefully with the issue.¹⁷ Eventually they were able to reach an agreement. Because her father's health was decreasing, Mary Ann decided to return home to him, and even attend church with him, although she did not believe anymore. Actually, these arrangements proved beneficial to Mary Ann as well. As a matter of fact, although she still had to attend Church and behave as the proper unmarried daughter of that time, she was able to visit the Brays and thus expanding her literary views and acquaintances.¹⁸ Indeed, Rosehill was the meeting spot of some of the most influential personalities of the nineteenth century. Among its visitors there were Robert Owen, John Chapman, J. A. Froude, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mr

¹⁴ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, pp.45-48

¹⁵ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, p. 19-21

¹⁶ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 50

¹⁷ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, p. 45

¹⁸ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51

and Mrs George Combe, Hebert Spencer, and Harriet Martineau. Thus, Mary Ann had the opportunity, thanks to the Brays, to meet such relevant figures, some of which would affect both her social and intellectual life, such as Chapman and Spencer.

In October Mary Ann met Rufa Brabant, Charles Hennell's fiancée at that time. Rufa during that period was working on the translation of Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (1835-36), a book which at that time was rather popular among the British literary elite. After marrying Hennell, Rufa eventually left the task to Mary Ann.¹⁹

In November 1843, once Charles and Rufa Hennell left for their honeymoon, Mary Ann went to visit Rufa's parents to spend some time with them and to keep them company. But there, Mary Ann started to have a small affair with Dr Brabant, Rufa's father, who had caught her attention due to his bright intelligence. The affair was cut short when Mrs Brabant asked her to leave their house after the former had noticed what was happening between the other two.²⁰ According to Ashton, the incident between Mary Ann and Dr Brabant proved something that Chapman had noticed about the young woman upon knowing her. Mary Ann was so passionate not only emotionally, but also intellectually, and she felt attracted by people who besides showing her affection, were also able to stimulate her intellect.²¹

In 1845 Mary Ann was able to receive a proposal from a mysterious picture restorer, but soon after meeting and starting to know him, she decided to end this relationship. While she was not being very lucky in finding a partner suited for her, her working life was still vigorous, despite some understandable difficulties. The Strauss's translation proved to be a daunting task for Mary Ann. It was giving her a hard time but, thanks to the Brays, Mary Ann was able to take a break for the project, see more of the Midlands and in October 1845 they took her with them in Scotland, where she finally got the chance to see the places and sceneries of which she had many times read in Walter Scott's novels. Her trip unfortunately was cut short because her elderly father broke his leg at that time. Her trip to Scotland was only the first of a long series of trips she made throughout her life.

Finally, in 1846, Mary Ann was finally able to complete her translation of Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu*. That year, Charles Bray bought the *Coventry Herald*, and Mary Ann became one of the journal's essayists and reviewers. Moreover, she also finally met the London

¹⁹ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, pp. 41-47

²⁰ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 52

²¹ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, p. 49

publisher John Chapman, whose acquaintance would eventually lead Mary Ann to move to London in 1850.²²

For the *Coventry Herald* Mary Ann wrote five short sketches between December 1846 and February 1847. Around October 1847, she was thinking about writing either a book or an essay, but her father's poor health prevented her from the task.

1848 was spent taking care of her father, but also keeping him company by reading to him some of Scott's novel. Despite the stressful situation at home, Mary Ann was able to take a break in May, when she went to St. Leonard's, near Hastings. Moreover, in July she was also able to meet Ralph Waldo Emerson, who during that time came to visit the Brays.

1.3 1848-1854: London

Unfortunately, her father's health was steadily declining, and Mary Ann stood by his side and took care of him until his death on May 30, 1849. Her father's death meant a new beginning for Mary Ann. She was scared about the future, and about her new life without her father. But she was not alone. In the summer of 1849, she once again travelled with the Brays and they visited France, Italy, and Switzerland, visiting Calais, Paris, Genoa, Milan, Como, Geneva and Vevey. In July, the Brays came back to England, while Mary Ann decided to stay alone in Geneva, first living in a boarding house, and then staying at an acquaintance's house, the painter François D'Albert Durade. The D'Albert Durades took Mary Ann under their protective wing, and Mary Ann even started calling Mme D'Albert Durade 'maman'. In Switzerland Mary Ann was able to recover from her father's loss. She usually went for a walk, read, played the piano, and she even attended some lectures on experimental physics at the University in December.

Mary Ann returned to England in March 1850, accompanied by D'Albert Durade. Once in England, at first she stayed for some time at the Griff, her childhood house, with her brother Isaac and his wife Sarah, but she did not feel at ease with them. The idea of becoming a maiden aunt was not appealing at all to her. Moreover, at the time she had probably made up her mind to move to London. Before making this huge step in her life, Mary Ann went to visit her sister Chrissey at Meriden, and stayed there for a couple of weeks.²³

On January 8, 1851, Mary Ann finally moved to London. 142 The Strand. The Strand was not only Mary Ann's new lodging, but also the office and house of the editor John

²² N. Henry, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-58

²³ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, pp. 60-74

Chapman. This decision, to go and live alone, work for a journal and interact mainly with men, was rather unconventional at that time. According to Henry, this new lifestyle made her think about changing her name. 'Mary Ann' probably felt no longer suited for her, and therefore she decided to start calling herself Marian. The first years in London would become the most influential of her emotional and professional life.

In May 1851 John Chapman started dealing with the purchase of the *Westminster Review*, and being well aware of Marian's brilliance, he asked her to become the editorial assistant of the journal, a task which Marian performed anonymously for three years, until 1854. During this first period in London she was rumoured to have had a liaison with Chapman, who besides being married to Suzanna Chapman, had also already a mistress at home, Elizabeth Tilly. As a matter of fact, due to the tense situation which was created at 142 The Strand, Marian decided to return to Coventry in March 1851, but came back to London in September, after John Chapman had finished purchasing the journal and offering her the editor task. From that moment on, they worked only as business partners, free from complicated emotions.

With her new job and her new life, Marian was able to meet different London intellectual and literary personalities, such as Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Richard Owen, Harriet Martineau, and Bessie Rayner Parkes and Barbara Leigh Smith. She came to personally encounter also Hebert Spencer, a scientific and sociological theorist. They met in August 1851 and started a relationship, which was however short lived, and they ended it in July 1852.

In 1851 Marian also met George Henry Lewes, the most influential person in her life. They met at a bookstore, and it was John Chapman who introduced them on October 6 of that year. G. H. Lewes was both a journalist and a drama critic, but he was also a playwright, actor, and novelist. He had contributed to the *Westminster Review*, and was also a friend of Hebert Spencer's. As a matter of fact, it was Spencer who reintroduced Marian to Lewes in 1852, the year in which Lewes started becoming influential in Marian's life.

At that time Lewes was a married man with children. His was not a happy marriage, though. His wife, Agnes Lewes, had been having an affair with a friend of Lewes's, Thornton Hunt. It was unclear when Agnes and Hunt started their affair, but they probably started it around 1849, since on April 16, 1850, Edmund Lewes was born. Before Edmund's birth, Lewes and Agnes had had three children together, Charles, born in 1842, Thornton, born in 1844, Hebert, born in 1846. In October 1851, Agnes gave birth to a girl, Rose Agnes, who was registered, like Edmund, as Lewes' child. Agnes would continue to bear two children, Ethel Isabella, born in 1853, and Mildred Jane, born in 1857, even after Lewes moved out of their house.

G. H. Lewes and Thornton Hunt had met at a young age, when Lewes was an assistant for Leigh Hunt, Thornton's father. The older Hunt had influenced both his son and Lewes with his ideology. Moreover, Leigh Hunt was a representative of Romantic poetry, and for this reason he and Lewes met in the first place, because in 1834 Lewes wanted to write Shelley's biography, and therefore had contacted Hunt in order to gain some information about the poet. Both Lewes and Thornton became great admirers of Shelley, and the two probably bonded on the shared interests and way of thinking. The two became very close and in 1850 they co-founded the radical periodical, the *Leader*. Despite being both strong Shelley enthusiasts, it did not seem that Lewes was happy with the familiar situation that he was living at home, and did not seem very keen to Shelley's idea of free love, and therefore to sharing his wife with Thornton Hunt, who was also married at that time to Katherine Gliddon Hunt. Moreover, on his side, Lewes never seemed to have had an affair with Hunt's wife, and at first seemed also clueless of what was going between his best friend and his own wife, according to Henry.

This was the situation G. H. Lewes was living at home when he first met Marian. Marian was quick to realize that despite his happy demeanour, Lewes was actually very sad on the inside.²⁴

Marian and Lewes supposedly started getting closer around the end of 1852 and 1853. As a matter of fact, she started writing about him more to her friends around September 1852. Unfortunately, both the Brays and Sara Hennell did not like Lewes, and his status as a married man did not appeal them either. Despite what her friends thought, Marian could not help but be drawn by Lewes. He was intellectually stimulating, much like Marian, he was fluent in various languages, such as French, German, Spanish, and he also knew Italian, Latin, and Greek. Moreover, they were both free thinkers, as Ashton noted.

In January 1853 Marian talked to Chapman about her intention of moving out of The Strand,²⁵ and in October 1853 Marian was able to leave Chapman's house and moved to Cambridge Street.²⁶ Even Lewes had left his house in Bedford Place, Kensington, and around the summer of 1853 was living in a flat in Cork Street, near Piccadilly, which he borrowed from an acquaintance of his, the *Times* correspondent F.O. Ward.

1.4 1854-1858: Lewes and travelling around Europe

²⁴ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-83

²⁵ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, pp. 101-105

²⁶ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 80

In January 1854 Marian started translating Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christenthums* (1841), *The Essence of Christianity*, which then was on the *Westminster Review* published in July of that year. Feuerbach too, much like Hennell and Strauss, became influential to Marian's understanding and view of Christianity. In January she was also able to visit her sister Chrissey and help her with planning the future for her teenage boys. In March Marian quitted her job as editor of the *Westminster Review*.

Between April and May 1854 Marian started helping Lewes with his own journal, *The Leader*, since his health was starting to slowly decrease. It was during this time that she and Lewes decided to take one big step in their relationship, which was going to openly live together. Because Lewes needed to visit Germany for his project of writing a biography of Goethe, he decided to take Marian with him, and thus to all their friends and acquaintances that they were indeed a couple and that they intended to live together.²⁷

Before leaving in July of 1854, the only friends that knew about Marian's intention to go away with Lewes were Charles Bray and John Chapman. This extremely important decision affected all their future private and public lives. Living as an unmarried couple, but still considering each other husband and wife, was not seen as respectable by part of the society, and Marian lost both her family and her childhood friends because of it. As a matter of fact, her relationship with Cara Bray and Sara Hennell got strained after they found out that she had left with Lewes without mentioning anything about her intentions to them.

Moreover, she would not see her siblings anymore. Her brother Isaac did not speak to her until much later in her life, and only through one simple letter, neither could Marian speak to her sister Chrissey, who died in 1859 without encountering her one last time, although she had written a letter to her little sister saying that she regretted all those years of silence. Therefore, according to Henry, her life was about to be completely turned upside-down after this important decision.

During their journey to Weimar Marian and Lewes passed through Frankfurt, Brussels, Liege, Antwerp, Mainz, and Cologne. They also lived for several months in Berlin. During these months in Germany, both Marian and Lewes were able to write. Lewes wrote some essays for his journal concerning Heinrich Heine and travelling, while Marian wrote a review for the *Westminster* which dealt with Victor Cousin's biography of Madame de Sablé. Moreover, they were also able to meet some interesting European artists and intellectuals, such as the pianist Franz Liszt. In November of that year they moved to Berlin. There Lewes kept on working on

²⁷ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, pp. 104-111

Goethe's biography, while Marian read a lot and started to translate Baruch Espinoza's *Ethics*, which Lewes had actually started before she took him over on the task.

Coming back to England in 1855, Marian and Lewes lived a short period of separation. She went to live for some time in Dover, while Lewes had to take care of his personal situation at home. His friend Hunt had left his position of editor at the *Leader* and became the editor for another journal, the *Daily Journal*, and his wife Agnes had contracted some debts which were his legal task to provide for. Besides that, Lewes was also trying to find a new home near London, where he could live with Marian. What is more, Marian needed assurance about Agnes's wish not to go back to her husband. Eventually, the couple settled in Richmond, and started calling themselves Mr and Mrs Lewes.

The decision they both took, to live as a married couple although Lewes was still married and never asked for a divorce from his legal wife might be different and complex. During the Victorian era both second marriages and bigamous relationships were common, but it was also true that divorce laws at that time were also very restrictive. Rather interesting was also the fact that Lewes recognized legally and kept providing even for his children. This choice might have been dictated by the fact that at the time it was complicated for Lewes to legally prove that those children were not his. What Henry says on the matter is that, probably both Marian and Lewes had decided to live according to their own feelings and principles rather than living according to the common law of that time, therefore living as a married couple, although illegally, and still helping and trying to provide for Lewes' and Agnes' children throughout their lives.²⁸

After having settled themselves in Est Sheen, near Richmond Park, Marian and Lewes tried to at least talk about the new situation with Marian's Coventry friends, but after the visit of Charles Bray in July 1855, it became rather clear that Marian could not have back the old relationship she had with them, according to Ashton. Both Marian and her friends, Cara Bray and Sara Hennell in particular, remained of their positions, neither of them believing of being in the wrong, although all three of them still deeply cared for one another. Despite this difficult situation with her lifetime friends, Marian was still able to count on the visits and friendship of Rufa Hennell, Bessie Parkes and Barbara Leigh Smith.

While her social life was being stressful and disheartening, Marian was flourishing in her job. As a matter of fact, in March 1855 she was asked by Chapman to edit the section of

²⁸ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-92

Belle Lettres of the *Westminster Review*. In October “Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cumming”, an article which Marian was so proud to have written, was published on the *Review*.

That month the Leweses moved to Park Shot, Richmond. In December, instead, Marian was able to see her sister Chrissey for Christmas, who at that time, together with Isaac still did not know about Marian’s completely new life.²⁹

In 1856 Marian had a lot of work to do. As a matter of fact, she was able to write some essays, most notably “German Wit” on Heinrich Heine, “The Natural History of German Life”, and “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists”. In both “The Natural History of the German Life” and “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists”, Marian expressed her own aesthetic ideas which she had developed over the years thanks to her editorial and critical work. These ideas would become rather influential also in her literary work as a novelist.

During the summer of 1856, Marian and Lewes visited some English coasts such as Ilfracombe, Tenby, the Scilly Isles and Jersey, thanks to Lewes who at that time had to make some scientific research in those areas. It was during this time that Marian turned to writing fiction. Being her first supporter and having various connections with publishing houses, Lewes contacted the editor of Blackwood’s *Edinburgh Magazine*, John Blackwood,^[51] and by November sent the anonymous manuscript “The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton”, telling the editor that it was by a friend of his. Blackwood saw the potential in the manuscript that Lewes had sent him, therefore a name for the author of Amos Barton was needed. In February 1857, when finally giving a name to the anonymous writer, Marian decided to identify herself as George Eliot.

1.5 1858-1878: the novelist George Eliot

Here started the new chapter of Marian Evans’ life as George Eliot. This choice of using a pseudonym was much probably due to Marian’s will to prevent the general public from being influenced in her opinion as a writer by her name and her personal life only. As a matter of fact, she kept her identity secret even from her editor for some time, revealing it only in 1858.

Her first pieces of fiction, “Amos Barton”, “Mr Gilfil’s Love Story” and “Janet’s Repentance” were firstly serialized anonymously in the *Blackwood’s Magazine* in 1857, and then published as a book under the pseudonym of George Eliot and with the title of *Scenes of Clerical Life* in 1858. The book became rather popular and both in London and her hometown Nuneaton people were curious about the identity of this author. During this period, in 1858,

²⁹ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, pp. 140-152

another important event happened in her life. As a matter of fact, Marian's family decided to cut her out of their lives, after she became a partner of a married man.³⁰

After the publication of *Scenes of Clerical Life*, in January 1858, decided to finally come out to their editor Blackwood, as it was pointless continuing on keeping it a secret from him. As a matter of fact, Blackwood met George Eliot in February. But while Blackwood knew who the real author behind the pseudonym George Eliot was, Marian and Lewes had decided to keep her anonymity. In truth, the only other person who knew about this secret was Hebert Spencer, to whom the Leweses confided the truth after a visit from him in 1856.

Up until March 1858 the identity of George Eliot remained a secret, despite the general public's increasing curiosity for the author behind the pseudonym.

In April, Marian and Lewes left England to spend a few months in Munich and Dresden, where Lewes needed to seek advice from some scientists for his next project, *Psychology of Common Life*. In Munich, despite not feeling always well Marian worked copiously on her next project, *Adam Bede*, a novel.³¹ With this new fiction Marian wanted to go beyond 'clerical scenes', and deal with darker themes which she only lightly touched in her previous short stories. As a matter of fact, the novel would deal with alcoholism, but also infanticide.

Despite this break from England, Marian was still living a stressful situation. Besides her crisis with her family, it was increasingly becoming difficult for Marian to keep her identity a secret. As a matter of fact, rumours had started spreading that a certain Joseph Liggins, a native of Nuneaton, was the person behind the pseudonym George Eliot. Liggins did not deny these assumptions, thus allowing the general public to keep suspecting him as the real author. Despite these rumours, at first Marian decided not to address this issue and keep her anonymity. But the situation got complicated when the vicar of Attleborough, Reverend James T. Quirk, started a campaign in favour of Liggins, who the reverend thought mistreated by some publishing house.

Moreover, even Marian's friends did not help in such a stressful situation. As a matter of fact, Hebert Spencer did not keep Marian's secret, and told it to Chapman who subsequently spread the news. At this point, after the increasing attacks Marian was receiving concerning her authorship, she and Lewes felt like they could not keep this secret any longer.³²

³⁰ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-104

³¹ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, pp. 188-196

³² N. Henry, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-110

This stressful situation was happening between 1858 and 1859. At that time a lot was happening in Marian's life. In January 1859, the Leweses started looking for some new lodgings, as they felt they needed more space. In February, *Adam Bede* was finally published and was being rather successful. Moreover, they finally moved to their new house, Holly Lodge, in Wandsworth, that month. Unfortunately, Marian could not enjoy the favourable reviews of her novel and her new house, since the Liggins issue was giving her anxiety and depression. Moreover, in March her beloved sister Chrissey died of consumption and Marian was much saddened and shocked by the news, since she did not know about her sister's illness. Eventually, in June, Marian and Lewes put an end to the rumours about the real identity of George Eliot, and exposed Marian as the real author.

In January, Marian had started to think about her next novel, and she expressed her wish of dealing with a flood, this time, but, after the difficult months she had to endure at the beginning of 1859, had just started working on her second novel, she interrupted this project to write something completely different from her previous pieces of fiction, *The Lifted Veil*. This short story was completely different from any piece of fiction Marian had up until that point written, and no other short stories nor novels by Marian would contain such Gothic and supernatural elements in them like this fiction did.

In July the Leweses took a short trip to Switzerland. Lewes took the chance to go visit his sons at Howfyl, while Marian stayed at Lucerne. In Lucerne the Leweses were able to get closer to Congreves, who were their new neighbours at their new lodging in Wandsworth and who accompanied the Leweses in this trip.³³

During this period there came also some issues with her editor, Blackwood. As a matter of fact, Marian and Lewes did not like the way Blackwood had handled the Liggins situation. What is more, Marian was starting to become rather famous and many other publishing houses were trying to have her as their author and wanted to be the publishers of her next novel, *The Mill on the Floss*. Even Charles Dickens wanted to serialize her next novel in his magazine, *Household Words*.³⁴ Despite the offers she was receiving, another issue with Blackwood was that that the two of them were not being able on reaching an agreement for the payment of her new novel.³⁵ Luckily, after a meeting at Holly Lodge in December 1859, the Leweses and Blackwood worked on their differences, and were able to reach an agreement. Thus, Marian was able to peacefully work on *The Mill on the Floss*, which, much like *Adam Bede*, dealt again

³³ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, pp. 210-225

³⁴ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 112

³⁵ G. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography*, London: Penguin Books, 1992, p. 306

with provincial life, and it also had some autobiographical elements. As a matter of fact, the novel was centred around a brother and a sister, and their relationship resembled that of Marian and her brother Isaac.

In March 1860, Marian finally finished the novel, which was then published in April. That month, Marian and Lewes left England once again to travel through Italy, France, and Switzerland.

In Italy the Lewes visited and stayed in Rome, Naples, Florence and Venice and they really enjoyed going to museums, churches and galleries learning more and more about the Italian culture. As a matter of fact, in Florence, where she stayed three weeks between May and June, Marian took a particular fascination for Girolamo Savonarola, the Dominican monk who ruled the city for some years in the late 1490s. She was impressed by this Italian historical figure so much that Lewes suggested taking him as a subject for a future novel. However, Marian did not work properly on the project only the following year.

After this broad journey around Italy, Marian and Lewes reached Switzerland. As was usual for him, Lewes went to visit his sons at Hofwyl,³⁶ but this time he took Marian with him, who for the first time met the Lewes's boys.³⁷ This was a decisive period for the Lewes's sons, in particular Charles and Thornie. Charles had just finished his studies and it was decided that he came to England with Lewes and Marian, while they were trying to find a solution for Thornie, who was about to finish his studies, instead. At first, they considered moving him to Geneva once he finished his studies at Hofwyl and further his education, although subsequently they thought about Edinburgh.

In July 1860 the Leweses, together with Charles, got back to London. Back in England, Marian started writing again. That month finally she was able to publish on the *Cornhill Magazine* another short story that she had come up with after writing *The Mill on the Floss*, in 1860. This short story was titled "Brother Jacob" and it dealt with a young man, a confectioner, who thought himself way clever than anyone else, and his idiot brother, the titular Jacob. In the meantime, Charles took his Civil Service examination, and after passing the exam, in August, he started his job as a clerk in the Post Office. To help Charles with his career, the Leweses decided to move from Wandsworth to central London, and in December 1860 they moved to Blandford Square.³⁸ Here, finally, Marian was able to be introduced to Lewes's

³⁶ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, pp. 231-243

³⁷ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 123

³⁸ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, pp. 243-245

mother, Mrs John Willim, who up until that time had only heard about Marian, but who was also positively impressed by her after their meeting.³⁹

In November 1860, Marian wrote on her journal about her next project, a short novel, *Silas Marner*, a story about family bonds and betrayals. She worked on it until March 1861. After its publication in April, the Leweses left once again for Italy, in order for Marian to do some research for *Romola*, the interrupted Italian novel which she had thought about the previous year.⁴⁰

In Florence Marian particularly read sermons, poems and political pieces which were written around the time of Savonarola. With Lewes, they also studied and observed the geography and architecture of the city, besides visiting museums and meeting intellectual personalities who helped them in this task, like Thomas Trollope. *Romola* ended up becoming Marian's most mature and complex novel that she had up until that time written.

The publication of *Romola* came with some conflicts with her editor Blackwood. As a matter of fact, in February of 1862, Marian had received an interesting offer from a publisher, George Smith, who owned the *Cornhill Magazine*. Smith wished to serialize *Romola* on his own magazine and offered Marian 10,000 pounds and subsequently her full copyright of the novel. An agreement was not immediately reached, since Marian needed more time to work on her novel, but after resolving these issues, the publication was set, and Marian wrote to Blackwood to inform him. On his part Blackwood felt betrayed by the situation, but this new conflict gave Marian the feeling of not being valued as a writer by her publisher.⁴¹

Romola proved a rather daunting task for Marian. After many hesitations she only began to write it in January 1862, and she was able to finish it only in June 1863, suffering from headaches and depression in the meantime. Despite all these efforts and her argument with her previous publisher, *Romola* was selling well. This made Marian regretful of her decision of changing her publisher and serialize the book.

Besides these concerns related to work, during this period Marian was progressively taking the role of stepmother to Charles, Thornton, and Bertie. The major concern for the Leweses was particularly Thornton. In 1861 it was decided that he would be preparing for the Civil Service examination for India.⁴² Despite having passed his first Civil Service examination, Thornie did not have much luck in his future career. At the time, the prospect of

³⁹ G. Haight, *op. cit.*, p. 337

⁴⁰ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, pp. 245-252

⁴¹ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-135

⁴² R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, pp. 255-263

a career in India did not warrant a bright future. Rather, whoever decided to embark on that path was doomed to be a failure. And that was what happened to Thornton Lewes.⁴³ In June 1863, the Leweses welcome home both Thornie and Bertie, and thus all three the Lewes's boys were with Marian and their father. Thornie came to London to take his second Indian Civil Service examination, while Bertie had just finished his studies at Hofwyl. None of the three Leweses were being successful at that time. Charles was not doing well at work, and that prevented him from any promotions. Thornie failed the examination and did not want to wait two years to retake it. Bertie was sent in Edinburgh to learn about farming so he could eventually have a farm of his own in Natal. In October, Thornie decided to leave for Natal without any kind of apprenticeship, since in Barbara Bodichon, an old friend of Marian, had some acquaintances there. In the meantime, they were also able to find a solution for Bertie, who was sent to work in a farm in Lanarkshire.⁴⁴

In November of that year, Marian and Lewes moved to Priory, near Regent's Park. Their new house later became the meeting point of the Leweses and their friends. They lived there until 1878, when George Henry Lewes died.⁴⁵ Priory would then become the meeting point, each Sunday, of all the friends, acquaintances, and literary elite that the Leweses. Among the visitors there were Owen Jones, Pigott, Spencer, Browning, Trollope, and Burton.⁴⁶

In 1864 they were able to travel more and Marian had also the chance to think about her next project. They went first to Glasgow to see their friend, the actress Helen Faucit, perform, and then went to Thankerton to visit Bertie. In May, together with Frederic Burton, an artist and a friend of theirs, Marian and Lewes left for Italy. They firstly spent three weeks in Venice, and during this trip Marian had the idea of writing *The Spanish Gypsy*. After travelling through Italy and Switzerland, they ended their trip in Paris before coming back to England. Once they returned home, they got the news of Charles's engagement to Gertrude Hill, which took them by surprise, but at least he was making a life for himself.

Marian spent the last months of 1864 trying to focus and study for *The Spanish Gypsy*, which she intended to make it into a drama. It was not easy, though. Marian struggled a lot on this new project, and her insecurities and depression were taking a toll on her. Moreover, even Lewes' health was not good at that time, and therefore they decided to spend some time at a famous spa in Malvern, Worcestershire.

⁴³ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, p, 141

⁴⁴ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, pp. 266-267

⁴⁵ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 159

⁴⁶ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, p. 270

At the beginning of 1865 Marian was still facing many difficulties in writing her drama, but at least it did not have a deadline, therefore it allowed her to focus on other things and take breaks from that project when she wanted and needed to. As a matter of fact, Marian during that time wrote a series of short essays which she published under the pseudonym Saccharissa, and also reviewed W. E. H. Lecky's essay "History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe" (1865). Even Lewes had a lot of new working opportunities. As a matter of fact, he was asked to become the advisor of *The Pall Mall Gazette*, which was run by George Smith, and even Trollope offered Lewes to become the editor of his new journal, *The Fortnightly Review*. In March Charles got married. Moreover, Marian also started writing her new novel, *Felix Holt*, which also needed a lot of research, especially on the legal field. Thus, she completely paused her work on *The Spanish Gypsy*.

In June she and Lewes heard also from Thornton, who wrote to them that he had just started a trading business in South Africa, but his business soon ended in bankruptcy. Thornton later volunteered for the Frontier Guard.

In August Marian and Lewes travelled through Normandy and Brittany, while she kept on working on *Felix Holt*. Even the project was giving Marian hard times, and as a matter of fact, she continued to focus on it all through the rest of the year. Luckily, at the beginning of 1866 she was able to meet Frederic Harrison, a positivist lawyer and a friend of the Congreves. Thanks to Harrison's help she was able to perfect the legal part of the plot and finish the second of the three volumes of the book by April. For its publication, the Leweses returned to Blackwood after Smith had turned down the manuscript and their offer due to some commercial grounds. Thus, Marian was able to finish the book by June and it was published in three volumes on June 14.

On June 7, Marian and Lewes travelled again to Germany to visit the places and people that they had visited almost ten years before.⁴⁷ Before returning home in August, the Leweses were able to enjoy visiting Holland and Belgium and they also really appreciated Flemish paintings. In Amsterdam they also were able to visit its Portuguese synagogue.⁴⁸

In September Marian and Lewes got the news that Bertie was leaving for South Africa, while Thornie wrote that he had received some land. In November Bertie wrote to them that he was not able to meet Thornie as originally planned, but once Thornie finally received the letters from his family which were held by the Post Office of Durban, they finally met. Thornie did

⁴⁷ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, pp. 159-167

⁴⁸ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, p. 287

not have good news, though, since he admitted that he did not receive a farm and would probably never get one. These were the reports of the Lewes boys from Africa, who despite having received a considerable amount of money from their father and Marian, had to ask for more in order to start working as colonial farmers.

Around the end of 1866, Marian was finally able to return to her work on the drama, *The Spanish Gypsy*. After being reluctant to travel that year, in particular due to Lewes' poor health, Marian and Lewes eventually went through Biarritz and Spain. In Spain they visited Barcelona, Granada, Seville, and Madrid, where they were able to admire the intriguing Moorish architecture, to visit cathedrals and museums and appreciate Spanish art.

They returned home in the Spring 1867, but in London they felt depressed and physically ill again. Moreover, in July, they received a letter from Thornie and Bertie which reported to them that their house had burned to the ground. Therefore, they once again travelled to Germany to spend the rest of the summer there. In September Thornie wrote again to them telling them that he thought he suffered from sciatica.

They came back from Germany in October and in November Marian was asked by her editor to write an essay concerning *Felix Holt*, in which she needed to explain some of the novel's complex points and the political views present in it. Although she was not enthusiastic about the task, she accepted it and in January 1868 "Address to the Working Men, by Felix Holt" was published in the *Blackwood's Magazine*. That month Thornie wrote to the Leweses that he was diagnosed with kidney stones and that also their crops had failed.

In April 1868 Marian finished *The Spanish Gypsy*, which would be published in May. By the time of its publication, and she travelled with Lewes again to Germany to make some research concerning Lewes's new project, *Problems of Life and Mind*. In Germany they went to different spas in order to improve their health and returned home in October. That same month, Thornie wrote once again, this time asking his father for some more money and asking permission to come back home in order to see a doctor there, but unfortunately, Marian and Lewes only received this letter in January 1869. Therefore, both Marian and Lewes, despite their concerns and issues, kept on living their lives. As a matter of fact, by the end of the year, Marian wrote on her journal about her future projects for the following year, including *Middlemarch*.

Moreover, in March 1869 Marian and Lewes travelled to Italy and spent much of their time in Florence and Rome. In Rome they met an old acquaintance, Mrs Elizabeth Bullock, who was travelling along with her mother and brother, Anna and John Walter Cross. During

this trip the friendship between the Leweses and the Crosses grew and became one of the most important relationships of their lives.⁴⁹

In May 1869, they came back home, and some days after, a bit earlier than expected, Thornton came back too, but he was seriously ill. Both his mother Agnes and his brother Charles came to Priory as soon as they heard about Thornie's poor health. Charles even fainted at the sight of his sick brother. The months passed, but besides occasional improvements, Thornie's health conditions remained critical, and he died on the 19th of October. After his funeral, Marian and Lewes decided to leave for Surrey in order to process what had happened and mourn the young boy.⁵⁰

During the months of Thornie's illness, Marian did not have much time to focus on her work, since the boy's health became the priority, but at least she was able to write a poem, "Brother and Sister" in July, to advance a little in her work on *Middlemarch*, and also began a long poem, "The Legend of Jubal", which she completed in January 1870.

In December 1869, Marian started weekly Hebrew lessons with Emanuel Deutsch, a Hebraist and transcriber, which would later benefit her, providing useful insight for the writing of *Daniel Deronda*.

In January 1870 Marian and Lewes travelled again through Berlin, Prague, Vienna and Salzburg, once again to do some research for Lewes's *Problems of Life and Mind*. As a matter of fact, in Berlin they also visited Carl Friedrich Otto Westphal, who was an expert in psychiatric diseases such as agoraphobia and narcolepsy. Moreover, they were also able to attend talks by prestigious figures of the Prussian elite, such as Bismarck, and also to listen to Wagner.

After the winter abroad, during the summer, from June to August, they went on the Yorkshire coast, and also spent a couple of weeks in Whitby, and in August they went back to Limpsfield, Surrey. There, Marian was able to work on "Armgart", a dramatic poem. In October they received news from Bertie in South Africa, who announced that he had got engaged to Eliza Harrison, the daughter of an English Colonist, whom he would marry in May 1871.⁵¹

Despite these happy events, during this period Marian was suffering from headache, depression and was anxious and scared about her career. In January 1871, she returned to writing fiction and started writing a story which at first was not linked to *Middlemarch*, "Miss

⁴⁹ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, pp. 167-176

⁵⁰ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, pp. 299-301

⁵¹ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, 2012, pp.181-213

Brooke”, which she had interrupted. Eventually she linked the two stories, making them the two parts of the whole novel. Still, Marian was still unsure how to publish this new project, since she wanted to avoid circulating libraries. After discussing the matter with Blackwood, they opted for following the publishing of Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, which had been divided into eight parts that were published every two months. It took Blackwood and Marian a whole year to publish the whole novel, which came out between December 1871 and December 1872.⁵²

With *Middlemarch*, Marian returned to focus on the provincial life that had been at the centre of her first novels, but this time, her book was full of the new philosophical and psychological knowledge that she had acquired throughout her various journeys and the scientific research that she had made while travelling and helping Lewes with his own works and writings.

Despite the difficulties Marian had along the way, Marian had been able to work steadily on her new novel. As a matter of fact, in May 1872, she had already written five parts of the novel. For the summer of that year, Marian and Lewes rented a house in Redhill, Surrey, for three months. Here Marian kept on writing, and upon her returning to London in September, she had completed eight parts of it. That same month the Leweses travelled to Germany once again, and returned home in October, after Marian had completed and sent the final part of the book, which would be published eventually in December.

Some months after returning from Germany, Marian started researching for *Daniel Deronda*. In May 1873 Marian spent a couple of days in Cambridge with some friends, among whom there were Henry Sidgwick, Frederick Myers, Edmund Gurney, and Leslie Stephen, who, together with other personalities from Oxford too, seems to have given her some inspiration for her next novel. In the summer of 1873 Marian and Lewes travelled through Frankfurt, Homburg, and Mainz in order to gather some impressions and information for her new novel, *Daniel Deronda*, whose protagonist was of Jewish origins. They visited synagogues, but they also wanted to travel to the Middle East. They were prevented from doing this trip due to their health issues. In June Thornton Hunt died. His death brought to light a life insurance policy that he had for Agnes.

The Leweses spent the months of September and October near Bickley, in Kent, where Marian kept reading for *Daniel Deronda*. In February 1874 Marian had her first attack of

⁵² R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, p. 312

kidney stones.⁵³ Luckily, she was pleasantly shocked and cheered up a little thanks to the visit at Priory of the eldest of her brother Isaac's daughters, Edith.⁵⁴

During that period, she felt like publishing a collection of poems, which came out in May with the title of *The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems*. The Leweses spent June in Surrey, at Redhill, where Marian worked steadily on *Daniel Deronda*.

In 1875 the Leweses were reached by the news of Bertie's death. He had died in June, but the Lewes received news of his death only in August, after they had received the happier news of the birth of Bertie's second child in July.

During the last years of the 1870's it was becoming increasingly evident that Lewes's health was gradually decaying. It was not an easy situation for Marian, but their time at Witley in 1877 with the Crosses and the Tennysons was rather relaxing. Between June and October, Marian started feeling restored and was also able to think about her next project, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*. During the winter they were able to keep themselves distracted through their Sunday gatherings with their friends and acquaintances at the Priory, but also by attending some concerts. Between 1877 and 1878 Marian and Lewes were also able to broaden the circle of their Oxford and Cambridge friends, such as Benjamin Jowett, Mark Pattison, R. C. Webb.

1.6 1878-1880: Lewes's death and final years

In 1878 Marian started writing her *Impressions*. In this piece of fiction she wanted to depart from what she had previously written, becoming more like a reflection on her career.^[119] In June 1878 the Leweses arrived at Witley and was able work quietly on her next project, being Lewes' health rather steady at that time . As a matter of fact, even Lewes was able to slowly work on the final parts of *Problems of Life and Mind*, although his stomach did give him trouble from time to time. Despite the various distractions he was getting from his friends and intellectual activities, his health was decaying. While focusing on her writing, Marian also noted how Lewes was progressively getting worse, to the point that both him and Marian could not work, since he needed assistance. On November 11, 1878, they got back to London, but Lewes's health was deteriorating fast. In all this stressful situation, Marian was able to send to Blackwood the manuscript of the *Impressions* on the 21st.

On the 30th Lewes died, and was buried some days later, on December 4, at Highgate Cemetery. This was one of the most heart-breaking events of Marian's life, losing her first

⁵³ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, pp.192-212

⁵⁴ R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life, cit.*, 1997, p. 332

supporter and the man that for more than 20 years had been her husband, although not legally. His loss was too much for Marian and she could not even attend his funeral, and she could not leave her room for a while. Her sole visitor was Lewes's son, Charles.

In 1879 she decided to finish Lewes' unpublished manuscript. She decided to publish it in two volumes, the first with the title *The Study of Psychology*, and the second with the title *Mind as a Function of the Organism*. In March she returned to work on her *Impressions*.^[126] In February she saw Cross for the first time. Although, at first, she was reluctant to let him enter her life, as the months passed, Cross proved to be very helpful to Marian, both concerning financial matters and as a good friend. In fact, Cross too had recently lost his mother, precisely ten days after Lewes's death, and their losses must have contributed to bring brought them together. In May, Marian spent the summer in Witley, and returned to Priory only in November.

In October John Blackwood died, and Marian lost another important figure of her life. Around the end of 1879, Cross seems to have proposed to Marian, who did not accept immediately. Despite her initial reluctance she married Cross on May 6, 1880.^[131] Also this new relationship was unconventional though, both because Cross was twenty years younger than Marian, and because it took place too shortly after Lewes' death. The one who accepted this new relationship and marriage was Marian's brother, Isaac, who finally saw his sister legally married, even though with a man much younger than herself. He wrote a congratulatory letter to his sister after hearing the news: it was the first and last letter he wrote to her after he knew about Marian's relationship with Lewes. For their honeymoon, Marian and Cross travelled through France and Italy. Those countries and places were full of the memories Marian had with Lewes, but despite the sad recollections, Marian and Cross had some relaxing time. Cross seemed also very impressed by Marian's knowledge and her energy. His health, instead, did not seem to be good, and Marian became so concerned about Cross's health, and in particular about some symptoms of depression, that in Venice she consulted Dr Ricchetti.

One day of June, while Marian was on the phone with the doctor, Cross went to a balcony overlooking the Grand Canal and jumped in. Luckily, he was immediately rescued by some gondoliers that were nearby. It was unclear what had actually happened, but with the passing days, Cross seemed to improve. Cross's brother, Willie, on hearing the news immediately reached them in Venice. The three travelled to Innsbruck, where Cross took some rest while Marian went to some spas she already knew thanks to her previous journeys with Lewes. Willie left them at Wildbad, while Marian and Cross spent some time in Baden before returning to England on July 26. Upon returning to England Marian noted that Cross was often away, and when he was home, he dedicated himself to some physical and diverting exercise.

On December 3, Marian and Cross moved to Cheyne Walk, their new house. Some time after Marian started having a sore throat, which the doctor George Mackenzie identified as laryngitis. But her health gradually declined when she suffered from a kidney failure which subsequently led to a heart attack which was fatal to Marian. She died on December 22, 1880 and was buried in Highgate Cemetery.⁵⁵

II Chapter: George Eliot's literary aesthetic

2.1 George Eliot's idea of "realism"

⁵⁵ N. Henry, *The Life of George Eliot: A Critical Biography*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, pp.212-263

“By the time George Eliot died”, according to the critic George Levine, “she was celebrated as the greatest contemporary English novelist”.⁵⁶ But despite being cited among other renowned Victorian writers, like for example Charles Dickens, George Levine argues that George Eliot has often been associated by posterity with “the prudishness and humorless solemnity” of the Victorian society, so much so the Eliot is usually deemed “the voice of a higher culture, learned, self-reflexive, tormented by her own aesthetic and moral aspirations”.⁵⁷ Yet, although it might be true that, as a “woman [George Eliot] was susceptible to the conventions and comforts of respectability”, George Levine points out that, as a writer, Eliot tried to “[build her] art from a refusal of such conventions, in resistance to the very kind of moral complacency and didacticism of which she has often, in the years following her death, been accused”.⁵⁸ Eliot “disguised it, compromised it, resisted it”, Levine maintains, but she “created her art out of a cluster of rebellions, particularly against reigning social, moral and aesthetic conventions”.⁵⁹

Even before becoming a novelist herself, Eliot had already in mind the kind of writer she wished to become, and also what her idea of the purpose of literature, and art in general, was. As a matter of fact, during her years as a journalist for the *Westminster Review*, Eliot wrote various essays, among them “The Natural History of the German Life”, and “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists”, which Levine deems “polemical, severe, brilliant attacks on falsification, distortion, sentimentality, pomposity”, in which Eliot pointed out the conventions she went against, but also where she expressed her literary aesthetics.⁶⁰ In both her essays and her novels, Levine argues, George Eliot “appeal[s] to authenticity of feeling, to the higher morality “of a love that constrains the soul, of sympathy””,⁶¹ and in order to achieve such an “authenticity of feeling”, George Eliot turned to write realist novels.

In the famous XVII Chapter of *Adam Bede*, titled “In Which the Story Pauses a Little”, George Eliot “articulates a kindred vision through her own novelistic practice”, according to Deidre D’Albertis.⁶²

⁵⁶ G. Levine, “Introduction: George Eliot and the art of realism”, in G. Levine (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 1

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 2

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 5

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 6

⁶² D. D’Albertis, “The Realist Novel”, in L. H. Peterson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 122

It is for this rare, precious quality of truthfulness that I delight in many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise. I find a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence, which has been the fate of so many more among my fellow-mortals, than life of pomp or of absolute indigence, of tragic suffering or of world-stirring actions. I turn, without shrinking, from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sibyls, and heroic warriors, to an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner, while the noonday light, softened perhaps by a screen of leaves, falls on her mob-cap, and all those cheap common things which are precious necessities of life to her; - or I turn to the village wedding, kept between four brown walls, where an awkward bridegroom opens the dance with a high-shouldered, broad faced bride, while elderly and middle-aged friends look on, with very irregular noses and lips, and probably with quart-pots in their hands but with an expression of unmistakable contentment and good-will.⁶³

Here Eliot states that she enjoys Dutch paintings, of which she appreciates their “quality of truthfulness”. She enjoys their “faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence” as they elicit sympathy in her. In pointing at such features of Flemish painting that she enjoys best, Eliot thus introduces her own aesthetic, saying that she does not want to embellish anything concerning everyday ordinary life.⁶⁴ “I am content to tell my simple story”, Eliot admits, “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 no reason to dread. Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult”.⁶⁵

According to Marvin Henberg, Eliot in this chapter seems to suggest that “Art [...] should not strive for idealized standards of beauty, symmetry and perfection”, and that “[h]onesty is the more fundamental standard, and an artist may not flinch at depicting ‘broad-faced brides’, man with ‘irregular noses’, or ‘old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands’”.⁶⁶

Moreover, Eliot maintains that it would be easy for a writer to create as many fanciful images and put them into words, but the real obstacle is to be as faithful as possible to the

⁶³ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, C. A. Martin (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 161

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160-161

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 160

⁶⁶ M. C. Henberg, “George Eliot’s Moral Realism”, *Philosophy and Literature*, 1979, p. 24

ugliness that surrounds us, the ugliness of the tragedies and events that one can go through, or the least appealing beauty of many people.⁶⁷

Although “George Eliot’s most famous justification of her realism comes in [the aforementioned] chapter of [...] *Adam Bede*”, George Levine maintains that she had already pointed out some of her literary aesthetic in her ‘The Natural History of the German Life’, her review of Wilhelm Heinrich von Riehl.⁶⁸ In her essay George Eliot drew attention on “[h]ow little the real characteristics of the working-classes are [nown to those who are outside them, how little their natural history has been studied”].⁶⁹ Eliot maintains that,

[E]ven those among our painters who aim at giving the rustic type of features, who are far above the effeminate feebleness of the “Keepsake” style, treat their subjects under the influence of traditions and prepossessions rather than of direct observation. The notion that peasants are joyous, that the typical moment to represent a man in a smock-frock is when he is cracking a joke and showing a row of sound teeth, that cottage matrons are usually buxom, and village children necessarily rosy and merry, are prejudices difficult to dislodge from the artistic mind, which looks for its subjects into literature instead of life.⁷⁰

After denouncing the prejudiced views painters still have on rustic life, Eliot keeps arguing that

[t]he painter is still under the influence of idyllic literature, which has always expressed the imagination of the cultivated and town-bred, rather than the truth of rustic life. Idyllic ploughmen are jocund when they drive their team afield; idyllic shepherds make bashful love under hawthorn bushes; idyllic villagers dance in the checkered shade and refresh themselves, not immoderately, with spicy nut-brown ale. But no one who has seen much of actual ploughmen thinks them jocund; no one who is well acquainted with the English peasantry can pronounce them merry.⁷¹

⁶⁷ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, *cit.*, pp. 160-161

⁶⁸ G. Levine, *op. cit.*, p. 8

⁶⁹ G. Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life”, in N. Sheppard (ed.), *The Essays of George Eliot*, New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 2009, p. 142

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 143

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Deidre D’Albertis points out that “Eliot blames [this] distorting ‘influence of idyllic literature’ for the perpetuation of conventional images, even as she calls for greater fidelity to the conditions of agricultural and provincial life”, but also that “[l]iterature and painting bear a special burden when it comes to representing rural laborers”.⁷² As a matter of fact, Eliot maintains in her essay that

Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot. All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the People. Falsification here is far more pernicious than in the more artificial aspects of life. It is not so very serious that we should have false ideas about evanescent fashions—about the manners and conversation of beaux and duchesses; but it *is* serious that our sympathy with the perennial joys and struggles, the toil, the tragedy, and the humor in the life of our more heavily laden fellow-men, should be perverted, and turned toward a false object instead of the true one.⁷³

D’Albertis argues that “Eliot defines as ‘sacred’ the ‘task’ of representing ‘true’ objects so as not to ‘pervert’ but rightly to train ‘our sympathy’”.⁷⁴

Because the purpose of Eliot’s is to educate the feelings, Henberg argues, one may believe that Eliot’s literary purpose would be didactic, as she seems to be educating her readers about ethics, but Eliot does not make such an error, as she does not adopt abstract precepts and situations in order to teach morality, but rather she takes from ordinary people in their everyday lives.⁷⁵ As a matter of fact, as Henberg points out, “she depicts fictional characters whose struggles, failings, and passions are ultimately akin to what we ourselves are likely to experience” and, moreover, “[h]er ethical precepts are not aimed at proving themselves in every conceivable situation”, but instead “[t]hey are [...] precepts which are sometimes susceptible to ruin, just as are the changeable creatures who profess them”.⁷⁶

Moreover, Marvin Henberg maintains that George Eliot, “recognizes that human beings do not lead lives of metaphysical omniscience” and that, instead, “[t]hey dwell [...] in a world

⁷² D. D’Albertis, *op. cit.*, p. 123

⁷³ G. Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life”, *cit.*, p. 145

⁷⁴ D. D’Albertis, *op. cit.*, p. 124

⁷⁵ M. C. Henberg, *op. cit.*, p. 21

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

framed by passions and incomplete knowledge”.⁷⁷ Therefore, it may be argued that George Eliot rather than giving ethical precepts to her readers, seems to be more interested in trying to understand what actually drives people’s actions and decisions, but in order to truly understand one’s behaviour, the artist has to turn to working people in their everyday life, with their daily struggles, and not to exemplary people or people of the higher society.

As a matter of fact, George Eliot herself states that

The thing for mankind to know is, not what are the motives and influences which the moralist thinks *ought* to act on the laborer or the artisan, but what are the motives and influences which *do* act on him. We want to be taught to feel, not for the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant, but for the peasant in all his coarse apathy, and the artisan in all his suspicious selfishness.⁷⁸

According to Henberg, to Eliot “[m]oral realism requires a combination of clear-eyed perception and imaginative sympathy”, because, since the “the ethical task is to educate our feelings” it achieves this purpose by adopting imagination which is able to create “experiments in life”, which are “unflinching projections of the actual likely consequences of our actions”.⁷⁹ As a matter of fact, Henberg maintains that it is through imagination that one is able to “give life to the real”, and when then imagination is combined with observation, “it enables persons to produce imaginative experiments in life”, thus achieving moral realism.⁸⁰ “For Eliot”, Henberg points out, “only the imagination, checked by clear perception, can grasp the unseen relations which implacably govern [one’s] moral as well as physical existence”⁸¹.

Henberg maintains that to Eliot there is “no difference in principle between the observation and understanding of human nature and the observation and understanding of physical phenomena”, and therefore, “[t]he honest moralist respects facts as scrupulously as the honest scientist”, but, “[n]either investigator, however, should be persuaded that facts alone reveal the whole truth” since “[t]he facts must be incorporated into laws, regularities which go beyond the facts to reveal the relations among them”, and this is where imagination comes in and helps one to fully grasp what actually motivates human beings.⁸²

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 22

⁷⁸ G. Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life”, *cit.*

⁷⁹ M. C. Henberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 32

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 22

⁸² Ibid.

According to Henberg, “[a]t the heart of Eliot's literary realism lies this quest for what we might call depictive truth”, and this sort of quest shows an influence of Wordsworth’s and Romanticism on George Eliot, but she goes deeper than the Romantics as her characters do not grow “unnaturally”, their growth has reason to develop the way it does, and moreover, her choice to adopt popular or laudable characters further distances her from the Romantics, since such characters with “god-like attributes” would not be fit to provide a proper ethics to people.⁸³ Moreover, Henberg argues, to Eliot “[t]he writer’s primary obligations, whether [one] be a moralist, sociologist, or novelist, is to inform with practiced and undistorting eye”, and therefore, “[s]entimentality is an adversary of understanding [others] [...] and the willingness to distort fact in the name of art destroys literature’s value as an experiment in life”.⁸⁴

As Henberg points out, Eliot does not simply adhere to the conventions of her age, but rather, her aesthetic “choices are highly self-conscious and reflective”, and moreover, to Eliot “aesthetic standards unavoidably involve ethical standards”, as “[t]he two [...] share a common highest value” which is “that of truth”.⁸⁵ As a matter of fact, Henberg maintains, “[t]ruth is an ally to moral action” since it turns the readers’ attention to “realistic views” and not mere abstract concepts which would wrongly drive our sympathy.⁸⁶ Henberg points out that “Eliot insists that a further fault of teaching ethics via abstract precept is the ease with which precepts are abandoned in impassioned choice situations”.⁸⁷

Moreover, according to Henberg, “[i]t is [...] noteworthy that Eliot insists upon the same standard of realistic depiction for art as well as for social science”.⁸⁸ As a matter of fact, as Eliot points out, “a real knowledge of the people [...] [would demand a study of] the natural history of our social classes”.⁸⁹ But “[s]ocial science alone”, D’Albertis also argues, “is not enough”, and therefore, “the natural historian’s (and by extension the realist novelist’s) observations are presented [...] as an invaluable ‘aid to the social and political reformer’”.⁹⁰ Therefore, it could be said, Henberg argues, that Eliot’s “realism [...] is at once moral and aesthetic”.⁹¹

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 24-26

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 25

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 23

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 25-27

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 27

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 25

⁸⁹ G. Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life”, *cit.*, p. 146

⁹⁰ D. D’Albertis, *op. cit.*

⁹¹ M. C. Henberg, *op. cit.*, p. 25

George Levine, as well, maintains that for George Eliot “[t]he aesthetic and the moral were [...] intertwined”, since “to treat art lightly, to indulge mere triviality, to allow [...] exaggerations and pretensions [...] was to fail not only aesthetically, but morally”.⁹²

It is important to notice, George Levine argues, that “Eliot’s commitment to the moral vocation of art and realism” should not be mistaken as “a disregard of formal concerns”. As a matter of fact, Levine points out, to George Eliot “[a]rt works morally only [...] if it aesthetically effective”.⁹³

Levine maintains that “[t]he strenuousness of George Eliot’s art is due not only to this commitment to tell the truth (as though in a trial at law) but to the awareness of how very hard it is to do so, to avoid being false”.⁹⁴ As a matter of fact, Levine argues that Eliot’s “novels explore with a subtlety new to the history of English literature the devious ways of the mind, the natural and psychological and social impediments to knowing or speaking the truth”, and moreover, “George Eliot was alert not only to the complications of society, but to the subtle difficulties of the medium, language, itself”.⁹⁵ Eliot was cautious of metaphors as well, Levine points out, since “[m]etaphor[s] always [threaten] to escape the limits of its denotation and is at the heart of language” and therefore, “the writer must be, as George Eliot sought to be herself [...] a scholar of language and meaning, scrupulous, meticulous, unrelentingly attentive”.⁹⁶ “The yields of these labors of realism to resist the conventional simplifications of art or personal interest”, Levine maintains, “turned out often to be only partially compensatory”.⁹⁷ As a matter of fact, Levine points out, “[t]here are costs to the realist program, for the “truth” George Eliot insists on is, primarily, the hard truth that the world is not made in our interest, not “mindful” of us”, since “[r]eality is largely what conventional art would treat as banal and dismiss in the name of heroism or elegance”.⁹⁸ Levine argues that “[t]he sympathy her art is designed to evoke depends on a recognition of our mutual implication in ordinariness and limitation” and “[t]he direction of her novels and of realism itself is toward accommodation to the ordinary, toward acceptance of limitation”.⁹⁹ Therefore, Levine maintains that “through the largest part of her fiction writing career, her novels describe their protagonists’ education in

⁹² G. Levine, *op. cit.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

renunciation” and “[t]heir triumphs are precisely in their acceptance of limits, their return to the ordinariness they at times dreamed of transcending”.¹⁰⁰

Eliot’s appeal to truthfulness, therefore, means that writers should not adopt a complex and factitious language, but also, that they should also turn to the ordinary, to ordinary people and ordinary lives, and recognize that human beings have their weaknesses and limitations, and art should never try to adorn such plainness and simplicity. And since art’s purpose is to correctly drive people’s sympathy, and it does so by submitting to accurate observation and imagination, which enable people to fully understand what their motivation actually is, thus going deeper into people’s actions and thoughts and understanding one’s flaws and faults.

2.2 George Eliot and her fellow female writers

The importance that honesty and truthfulness have for Eliot also influences another of her essays, “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists”, in which Eliot strongly criticizes novels written by women and which are filled with what she dubs “the frosty, the prosy, the pious, [...] the pedantic”, features of novels of “the *mind-and-millinery* species”.¹⁰¹ According to Deidre D’Albertis, “[w]ith considerable drollness, [Eliot] reviews a wide range of literary works by women writers, outlining in the process a negative taxonomy of generic conventions”.¹⁰² As a matter of fact, after having pointed out at the major characteristics of these “silly novels”, Eliot then proceeds in a sarcastic tone to list all the generic conventions and tropes that she could not tolerate in those novels. She cannot stand the depiction of the female protagonists of these novels, because despite their respectful countenances and their diffidence towards men, they are still able to make the wrong marriage choices and therefore they have to go through unnecessary troubles only for the story eventually to turn for the better and everything ends up well for the protagonists.¹⁰³ According to Eliot,

We may remark, by the way, that we have been relieved from a serious scruple by discovering that silly novels by lady novelists rarely introduce us into any other than very lofty and fashionable society. We had imagined that destitute women turned novelists, as they turned governesses, because they had no other “ladylike” means of getting their bread. On this supposition, vacillating syntax, and improbable incident

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 11

¹⁰¹ G. Eliot, “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists”, in N. Sheppard (ed.), *The Essays of George Eliot*, New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 2009, p. 178

¹⁰² D. D’Albertis, *op. cit.*

¹⁰³ G. Eliot, “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists”, *cit.*, pp. 178-179

had a certain pathos for us, like the extremely supererogatory pincushions and ill-devised nightcaps that are offered for sale by a blind man. We felt the commodity to be a nuisance, but we were glad to think that the money went to relieve the necessitous, and we pictured to ourselves lonely women struggling for a maintenance, or wives and daughters devoting themselves to the production of “copy” out of pure heroism—perhaps to pay their husband’s debts or to purchase luxuries for a sick father.¹⁰⁴

Here Eliot points out the imaginary the Victorian society had on female writers, women who wrote as a means to provide some money for their families despite them not having a proper education, and thus a proper “syntax”. But Eliot argues that this imaginary is rather deceitful. As a matter of fact, Eliot maintains that,

Under these impressions we shrank from criticising a lady’s novel: her English might be faulty, but we said to ourselves her motives are irreproachable; her imagination may be uninventive, but her patience is untiring. Empty writing was excused by an empty stomach, and twaddle was consecrated by tears. But no! This theory of ours, like many other pretty theories, has had to give way before observation. Women’s silly novels, we are now convinced, are written under totally different circumstances. The fair writers have evidently never talked to a tradesman except from a carriage window; they have no notion of the working-classes except as “dependents;” they think five hundred a year a miserable pittance; Belgravia and “baronial halls” are their primary truths; and they have no idea of feeling interest in any man who is not at least a great landed proprietor, if not a prime minister.¹⁰⁵

Female writers of silly novels, then for Eliot, were not women who tried to make ends meet through their difficulties, but rather women who had no notion of the working-class, and of the world, in particular. As a matter of fact, Eliot argues that,

It is clear that they write in elegant boudoirs, with violet-colored ink and a ruby pen; that they must be entirely indifferent to publishers’ accounts, and inexperienced in every form of poverty except poverty of brains. It is true that we are constantly struck

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., pp. 179-180

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 180

with the want of verisimilitude in their representations of the high society in which they seem to live; but then they betray no closer acquaintance with any other form of life. If their peers and peeresses are improbable, their literary men, tradespeople, and cottagers are impossible; and their intellect seems to have the peculiar impartiality of reproducing both what they *have* seen and heard, and what they have *not* seen and heard, with equal unfaithfulness.¹⁰⁶

Therefore, Eliot maintains that these writers do not have any knowledge of the real struggles of people, and from their “elegant boudoirs” they were only able to properly write about the little insight they had of higher societies, but they were completely unaware of the lives of lower classes.

After the harsh criticism Eliot moves towards the unfamiliarity with the world that ‘silly novelists’ have, she then proceeds to criticise the unrealistic way the protagonists are able to talk in Semitic and Oriental languages, among them Greek and Hebrew, so much so that at times they are not even able to speak properly in their own mother tongue, English.¹⁰⁷ According to D’Albertis, “[a]lthough [Eliot] mocks ‘mind-and-millery’, ‘white neck-cloth’, and ‘modern-antique’ novels, as irredeemably trivial, [she] reserves special scorn for the pseudo-learning and philosophizing found in [these novels]”.¹⁰⁸ As a matter of fact, Eliot states,

The most pitiable of all silly novels by lady novelists are what we may call the *oracular* species—novels intended to expound the writer’s religious, philosophical, or moral theories. There seems to be a notion abroad among women, rather akin to the superstition that the speech and actions of idiots are inspired, and that the human being most entirely exhausted of common-sense is the fittest vehicle of revelation.¹⁰⁹

Eliot finds it “pitiable” that through “*oracular* [...] novels” female writer try to have a trivial teaching aspiration. As a matter of fact, according to Eliot,

To judge from their writings, there are certain ladies who think that an amazing ignorance, both of science and of life, is the best possible qualification for forming an

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, pp. 180-181

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, pp. 181-182

¹⁰⁸ D. D’Albertis, *op. cit.*, pp. 124-125

¹⁰⁹ G. Eliot, “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists”, *cit.*, p. 188

opinion on the knottiest moral and speculative questions. Apparently, their recipe for solving all such difficulties is something like this: Take a woman's head, stuff it with a smattering of philosophy and literature chopped small, and with false notions of society baked hard, let it hang over a desk a few hours every day, and serve up hot in feeble English when not required. You will rarely meet with a lady novelist of the oracular class who is diffident of her ability to decide on theological questions—who has any suspicion that she is not capable of discriminating with the nicest accuracy between the good and evil in all church parties—who does not see precisely how it is that men have gone wrong hitherto—and pity philosophers in general that they have not had the opportunity of consulting her.¹¹⁰

What Eliot deems intolerable is that female writers seem truly to believe that they may be capable of teaching their female readers notions of good and evil through mere abstract precepts, when these female writers themselves, as it has been noted, have no real knowledge of the actual world that surrounds them. In addition, Eliot maintains that,

Great writers, who have modestly contented themselves with putting their experience into fiction, and have thought it quite a sufficient task to exhibit men and things as they are, she sighs over as deplorably deficient in the application of their powers. “They have solved no great questions”—and she is ready to remedy their omission by setting before you a complete theory of life and manual of divinity in a love story, where ladies and gentlemen of good family go through genteel vicissitudes, to the utter confusion of Deists, Puseyites, and ultra-Protestants, and to the perfect establishment of that peculiar view of Christianity which either condenses itself into a sentence of small caps, or explodes into a cluster of stars on the three hundred and thirtieth page.¹¹¹

What Eliot sternly criticizes of these oracular novels is that their authors insist on teaching morality through philosophical and theological dogmas which are far from the daily lives of ordinary people. Eliot then proceeds by stating that,

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

It is true, the ladies and gentlemen will probably seem to you remarkably little like any you have had the fortune or misfortune to meet with, for, as a general rule, the ability of a lady novelist to describe actual life and her fellow-men is in inverse proportion to her confident eloquence about God and the other world, and the means by which she usually chooses to conduct you to true ideas of the invisible is a totally false picture of the visible.¹¹²

Here Eliot questions female writers' ability to properly represent the reality of everyday life, and therefore their purpose of teaching morality becomes inefficacious, as they take from abstract precepts rather than from daily existence. According to D'Albertis, "Eliot's critique encompasses novels of high society, clerical novels, novels of ideas, and reformist tracts, all of which she asserts will confirm male suspicions that women are not worth educating and incapable of genuine learning" and moreover, "silly novels by lady novelists' falsify the very object they purport to represent [thus] producing"¹¹³ what Eliot would call "[a] drivelling kind of dialogue, and equally drivelling narrative, which like a bad drawing, represents nothing".¹¹⁴

What is more, Eliot notices that

[w]e are aware that the ladies at whom our criticism is pointed are accustomed to be told, in the choicest phraseology of puffery, that their pictures of life are brilliant, their characters well drawn, their style fascinating, and their sentiments lofty. But if they are inclined to resent our plainness of speech, we ask them to reflect for a moment on the chary praise, and often captious blame, which their panegyrists give to writers whose works are on the way to become classics.¹¹⁵

Female writers, Eliot maintains, are often recognized for the pomposity of both their language and images, although she is also aware that this is partly due to Victorian critics, who appreciated and encouraged this kind of writing. Moreover, according to Eliot, "[n]o sooner does a woman show that she has a genius or effective talent, that she receives the tribute of being moderately praised and severely criticised".¹¹⁶ Therefore, Eliot seems to put

¹¹² Ibid, pp. 189-190

¹¹³ D. D'Albertis, *op. cit.*, p. 125

¹¹⁴ G. Eliot, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists", *cit.*, p. 199

¹¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 201-202

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 202

the blame for silly novels on both women and the critics of her time. In addition, Eliot maintains that

[t]he foolish vanity of wishing to appear in print, instead of being counterbalanced by any consciousness of the intellectual or moral derogation implied in futile authorship, seems to be encouraged by the extremely false impression that to write *at all* is proof of superiority in a woman. On this ground we believe that the average intellect of women is unfairly represented by the mass of feminine literature, and that while women who write well are very far above the ordinary intellectual level of their sex, the many women who write ill are very far below it.¹¹⁷

Here Eliot turns again to criticize her fellow female writers, who in order to “appear in print”, they adapt to literary conventions, thus reiterating the prejudices concerning female writing, but also falsely representing women’s true ability to properly write novels. But Eliot maintains that in her essay she does not want to argue whether women can “fully equal man”, since “[a] cluster of great names, both living and dead rush to our memories in evidence that women can produce novels not only fine, but among the very finest – novels, too, that have precious speciality, lying quite apart from masculine aptitude and experiences”.¹¹⁸

Moreover, Eliot maintains, it is not a matter of “educational restrictions [which may] shut women out from the materials of fiction” nor “species of art which is so free from rigid requirements”, but “it is precisely this absence of rigid requirement[s]” which according to Eliot are “genuine observation, humor, and passion”, that “constitutes the fatal seduction of novel-writing to incompetent women”.¹¹⁹ Despite being disapproving of the way women wrote, Eliot admits that writers like “Harriet Martineau, Currer Bell [AKA Charlotte Bronte], and [Elizabeth] Gaskell have been treated as cavalierly as if they had been man”.¹²⁰

Deidre D’Albertis points out how “both [Harriet Martineau and Elizabeth Gaskell] [...] like Eliot, wrote realist novels representing contemporary economic, social and political concerns”, but were some differences, in particular with Elizabeth Gaskell, in their ideas about realism.¹²¹ As a matter of fact, as D’Albertis maintains, “Gaskell’s ideas about realism [...] overlapped with Eliot’s insofar as both sought ethically and formally to reinvent narrative

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 203

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 202

¹²¹ D. D’Albertis, p. 126

perspective”, because “where Eliot invoked the representational fidelity of Dutch art, Gaskell preferred mechanical metaphors of registering and recording the world around her”.¹²² What is more, as D’Albertis points out, “Gaskell invokes an alternative model of realism as reportage, recording life as ‘an accident in the street’”, thus lacking the psychological depth found in Eliot, where not only observation, but also imagination help the reader understand human motivations, that are at the basis of Eliot’s moral realism.¹²³ Moreover, as D’Albertis maintains, “Gaskell’s [...] work builds on narrative forms questioned by Eliot as too closely allied with an inferior tradition of domestic realism”.¹²⁴

Therefore, also in “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” Eliot reaffirms her own idea of realism while outlining the negative features of the novels that she deems silly. The pretentious language adopted in such novels could not be tolerated by Eliot’s solicitation for a cohesive language, and the unrealistic scenarios and situations found in those novels contrast Eliot’s preference towards the depiction of ordinary life, and the supposed moral teachings of some of these novels diverge from Eliot’s interest in the truth and in the understanding of people’s actions. As a matter of fact, D’Albertis maintains that ““Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’ delivers both an indictment of amateurism and a manifesto for what was to become Eliot’s trademark moral realism”,¹²⁵ and it could be also said that it further distinguishes her from her fellow female writers and from the didactic purpose that for centuries had wrongly been given to her.

2.3 George Eliot, George Henry Lewes and Charles Dickens

But Eliot did not only distinguish herself from other Victorian female writers, but also from the most famous Victorian writer, Charles Dickens.

George Levine points out that while George Eliot has been usually linked with Victorian didacticism, Dickens has been considered “the great popular entertainer” whose “comic and melodramatic energy” has for centuries appealed the readership.¹²⁶

In order to understand what actually distinguishes the two Victorian writers from one another, it would be useful to mention once again George Henry Lewes and his relation to both George Eliot and Charles Dickens.

¹²² Ibid., p. 127

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 128

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 125

¹²⁶ G. Levine, *op. cit.*, p. 1

Rosemary Ashton has dealt with the connection between these three Victorian personalities, and in particular how this connection comes from the lifelong interactions between George Henry Lewes and Charles Dickens. As a matter of, Ashton maintains, being a renowned literary critic, Lewes besides writing critiques concerning novelist such as Tennyson, Browning, Elizabeth Barrett, Arnold, Dickens, Thackeray and the Brontë sister, throughout his life, he also wrote “three detailed criticisms of Dickens’s works”, which include a “literary review” concerning *Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist* in 1837, a review of *Bleak House* in 1852-53, while in 1872, he wrote “on Dickens’s work as a whole [...] after the novelist’s death”.¹²⁷

Ashton points out that is worth noticing that that while Lewes is “one of Dickens’s best critics” and “the enabler of George Eliot’s genius”, he “never actually wrote a public word of criticism specifically on George Eliot’s works”.¹²⁸ Ashton maintains that Lewes’s lack of criticism or even public appreciation towards Eliot’s work was probably due to the fact that “she fulfilled from the start his critical requirements for the writing of fiction”.¹²⁹ As a matter of fact, Lewes had been Eliot’s first and biggest supporter when she decided to turn to writing novels and even helped her in dealing with her publisher throughout her novelistic career, but Ashton argues if their shared literary ideas has perhaps led Lewes to keep Eliot away from “adverse criticism”.¹³⁰

While being one of Eliot’s strongest supporters, Lewes has been rather harsh towards Charles Dickens, instead, according to Ashton.¹³¹ As a matter of fact, Ashton maintains, in his “1872 essay, ‘Dickens in Relation to Criticism’ [...] Lewes [...] pinpoint[s] elements in Dickens which [he] found weak”, and moreover, “Lewes [even describes] Dickens’s imagination as hallucinatory”.¹³² Although Lewes deemed Dickens “gifted [...] ‘with an imagination of marvellous vividness, and an emotional, sympathetic nature capable of furnishing that imagination with elements of universal power’”, he nonetheless considered Dicken’s imagination “a ‘seer of visions’”, according to Ashton.¹³³ Despite appreciating “the extraordinary intensity of Dickens’s imaginative creations”, Lewes still acknowledges that not all of Dickens creations were great.¹³⁴ As a matter of fact, Ashton maintains, to Lewes Dickens

¹²⁷ R. Ashton, *Dickens, George Eliot and George Henry Lewes*, London: University of London Press, 2020, pp. 1-3

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4

is able to be “magnificently [introspective] in relation to single characters, particularly his alter ego David Copperfield, as well as Pip in *Great Expectations*, both of whom tell their own stories in first person narrative”, but he seems to render other characters with the same internal intensity”.¹³⁵ Dickens seems to work best in novels that adopt first person narrations, where “inevitabl[y] [...] the narrator-protagonist will see others from his own ‘centre of self’” and where “the novel’s emotional power [lies]” since “we see with the eyes of the narrating individual”, but “[i]n [his] novels written from a third person point of view [Dickens] does not [...] render relationships – mutual feeling, understandings and misunderstandings between his characters – from the inside out”, according to Ashton.¹³⁶ And this lack of introspection is what distinguishes Dickens from George Eliot. As a matter of fact, Ashton maintains, “both in his letters to Charlotte Brontë and his literary journalism” and essays, Lewes seems to deem George Eliot capable of “[getting] inside the heads and hearts of her characters more fully than any previous novelist” and that to Lewes “there is ‘a marked absence of the reflective tendency’ in Dickens”.¹³⁷

In his 1872 essay, in particular, Lewes states “that ‘keenly as [Dickens] observes the objects before him, he never connects his observations into a general expression, never seems interested in general relations to things’”, according to Ashton.¹³⁸ And the remarks that Lewes makes on Dickens’s writing, Ashton maintains, are like a sort of “analysis of George Eliot’s genius he would have written if he had ever put pen and paper directly on that subject”, meaning that there is a difference between “character analysis as opposed to character presentation, of conscious imaginative art versus an overflowing energy of creative imagination”.¹³⁹ Just as is it is not enough to simply observe a person or an incident, too much overflowing imagination, which also has the fault of lacking consideration, is unable to produce “psychological realism”, an important feature in literary realism for both Lewes and Eliot.¹⁴⁰

This commentary on Dickens, though, did not sit right with John Forster, Dickens’s first biographer who “accused Lewes [...] of ‘prodigious professions of candour’ masking ‘a trick of studied deprecation’”, according to Ashton.¹⁴¹ But, as Ashton points out, Dickens himself “would have been less offended than Forster on his behalf”, as he had long accepted

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 6

¹³⁷ Ibid., pp. 4-6

¹³⁸ Ibid., pp. 6-7

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 6

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 7

“his extraordinary intensity and facility in writing”.¹⁴² Moreover, as Ashton points out, “Lewes explains in his essay [that] Dickens always had vivid dreams, and enjoyed analysing them with his friends”, in particular about the “dream-like intensity of his creation of character”, so intense that once Dickens confessed to Lewes that at times he was able to hear his characters.¹⁴³ At this statement, Forster accused Lewes of deeming Dickens insane, since the latter seemed to be suggesting that Dickens was affected by hallucinations, Ashton maintains, but Lewes had admitted that he appreciated “Dickens’s imaginative power”, although he “den[ie]d him powers of reflection”.¹⁴⁴

“Dickens, on his part,” Ashton points out, “might have responded that there is danger in the reflective tendency” since the novelist had criticized “George Eliot when she intermittently stands back from the action she is presenting to analyse, to demand that we shift our point of view”.¹⁴⁵ As a matter of fact, according to Ashton, Dickens might have argued that “[t]he reflective tendency potentially carries within it the not always resisted tendency to buttonhole the reader”.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, despite having written “some generous praise of *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede*”, Dickens throughout his life barely commented on George Eliot’s works, except objection he made to Wilkie Collins about Eliot’s “analytical method” which to him had “dissective property” and it is “[t]he term ‘dissective’”, Ashton maintains, that “brings us to the distinctive quality of Lewes’s critical thinking and George Eliot’s literary practice, pointing up the difference of method between her and Dickens”.¹⁴⁷

Ashton points out that “Lewes was from an early age interested in psychology”, as it is shown in a letter he wrote to Dickens in 1838 where he dealt with “the psychology of fictional invention”.¹⁴⁸ Moreover, Ashton maintains that at first “[t]he two men had much in common”, as “[b]oth were social outsiders, upstarts in the literary world, having obscure and even shaming backgrounds – Dickens had a debtor father and Lewes’s mother and stepfather lived a peripatetic life during his childhood” and “[n]either men went to university [...] [and] both had a patchy and unfinished schooling”, therefore, “[b]oth were self-taught, [...] and sought an entrée into London’s literary world by means of the pen: literary journalism in Lewes’s case, parliamentary reporting in Dickens’s”, and moreover, “[b]oth inhabited bohemian circles, and

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 7-8

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 8

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

both held radical political views”.¹⁴⁹ Ashton points out that “[b]oth aspired at one time to acting as a career, and indeed it was acting which brought them together again after the initial friendly correspondence of 1838”, although they only acted together for a short period of time between 1847 and 1848.¹⁵⁰

In 1847 and 1848 Lewes made “two attempts at novel writing” with the publication of *Ranthurpe* (1847), and *Rose, Blanche, and Violet* (1848), none of which well received critically, according to Ashton, with Jane Carlyle even deeming “Lewes’s novels [...] [as] ‘execrable’”.¹⁵¹ As a matter of fact, Ashton maintains, “Lewes’s novels [...] illustrate in their very failure the kind of novel Lewes thought he ought to write”.¹⁵² “*Ranthurpe*”, Ashton points out, “is about a literary youth of no family or fortune who struggles to make his name through various adversities”, but despite “[t]here [being] conventional plotting of the circulating-library kind” such as “murder, false accusation, and imprisonment of the hero, deliverance, then exile [...] these events are not integrated with the plentiful remarks on politics, society, aristocratic [...] literary [...] [and] bohemian London [...] with which Lewes adorns the text”.¹⁵³

“Everywhere Lewes tells us what motivates his people”, Ashton maintains, “but he cannot show them acting according to their minutely dissected psychologies [...] thus illustrat[ing] the dangers of the analytical method” as “it fails to mesh the telling with the showing”.¹⁵⁴ But, as Ashton points out “*Rose, Balance and Violet* is an even greater failure [than] [...] *Ranthurpe*”, as “[t]his time, [...] [Lewes] leaves the moral to ‘shift for itself’”, but in doing thus he is unable to “guarantee the desired immediacy or naturalness of character and action” and therefore, “confusion results from Lewes’s attempt to illustrate the idea that people act impulsively, contrarily, out of complex motives, so that even a shrewd analysis of their characters is not proof against surprise at their actions”.¹⁵⁵ This is an error George Eliot never commits, Ashton maintains, as she is able to give reason to her characters’ actions or switches of ideas or motives, like for example when in *The Mill on the Floss* “she has the narrow-minded Aunt Glegg stick up for Maggie Tulliver in her disgrace in *The Mill on the Floss*” since “Mrs Glegg’s [might seem] an unexpected act of bravery and generosity, but George Eliot shows that, surprising though it is, it arises as naturally from Aunt Glegg’s fierce feelings of family

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 9

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid., pp. 9-10

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 10

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

superiority” contrary to what the “opposite response [...] would have done”, that is “shun Maggie and exclude her from her family”.¹⁵⁶

After his last failed attempt at novel writing with *Rose, Blanche, and Violet*, according to Ashton, Lewes “realis[ed] that fiction was not his forte” and “later [even] recognized in Marian Evans the gift he lacked, that of imaginatively embodying complex ideas”.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, as Ashton maintains, also Lewes’s “acting adventures” ended, and he “Lewes founded [...] the *Leader*” in 1850 together “with Thornton Hunt”, thus he and Dickens went separate ways.¹⁵⁸

Despite going different ways, both Lewes and Dickens remained on cordial terms, although their relationship cooled after Lewes’s review of *Bleak House* on *The Leader* in 1852, as Ashton points.¹⁵⁹ In his review of the renowned writer’s latest novel, Lewes harshly criticized “the spontaneous combustion scene” present in the book, that to him made no sense scientifically, and therefore Lewes as a learned man could not reprimand it, according to Ashton.¹⁶⁰ Moreover, as Ashton maintains, Lewes “objected to Dickens’s use of a ‘vulgar error’ for the purposes of art” and even “lectured Dickens on psychological fact and probability”, thus irritating Dickens who was already sensitive to the criticism that often had been made him about the “lack of verisimilitude in his novels” and “his scientific learning”, and as he “felt obliged to defend his novels against [these] charges of lack of realism from contemporary critics instead of arguing for their imaginative inventiveness and their use of symbolic patterning”, he preferred to ignore Lewes’s advice.¹⁶¹ Ashton suggests that “[b]eneath Lewes’s attack, and beneath Dickens’s high-pitched response to it, lies an insecurity in both men arising from their lack of formal education”, but most importantly, with this “argument [...] we touch the heart of Lewes’s theory of literature as a reflection in some sort of reality”, as “[h]e was concerned that art, when not employing language symbolically, should use it correctly”, and moreover, “[i]nasmuch as literature, especially the novel, reflects the world and has a wide influence on its readers, its practitioners should take care to be truthful and, where they claimed to inform, to inform accurately”.¹⁶²

Ashton argues that “[f]or Lewes and George Eliot it was an important element of the organic unity of human endeavour that the method of both literature and science should be the

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 11

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 11-12

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid., pp. 12-13

scrupulous application of imagination and verisimilitude”, but also point out that “Victorian novel has tended to pour scorn on what its practitioners take to be a naïve realism on the part of George Eliot and others” and that “Dickens is exempted from such criticism because of his power of symbolic representation, his allusion to myth and fairy tale, the subordination of character analysis to archetypal representation”.¹⁶³ “But in defence of George Eliot”, Ashton maintains, “it should be said that she is not so simply the theorist and practitioner of the ‘classic realist text’ as hostile critics like Colin MacCabe have suggested” and who argued “that the narrator of the novel seeks to impose [their] version of reality on the whole, claiming to offer ‘a window on reality’ which [they are] patiently unable to do, since all versions of reality are incomplete, subjective and relative”.¹⁶⁴ But, as David Lodge has shown, “George Eliot’s narrative voice is a much more flexible instrument than this, since [she] is ‘well aware of the indeterminacy that lurks in all efforts at human communication’”, according to Ashton.¹⁶⁵ “Lewes too”, Ashton points out, “was aware of the fatuousness of attempting to represent reality directly in art, of claiming to offer a window on the world” and he even wrote “a series of articles [...] in 1865, ‘Principles of Success in Literature’,” in which he “attacks the ‘coat-and-waistcoat’ kind of realism of those authors who try to become ‘photographers’, who confound realism with mere ‘detailism’”.¹⁶⁶

What is more, Ashton maintains, “[t]he most successful writing, in Lewes’s view, is that which marries creativeness with accurate observation”, and this idea was shared by George Eliot too, who expressed this concept in her essays, as we have seen.¹⁶⁷

With time, Ashton points out, “Lewes wrote less literary criticism and became more a scientific investigator” whose “concern as a scientist was to use his imagination in posing a hypothesis, and then to investigate whether the facts filled the hypothesis”.¹⁶⁸ This scientific turn on Lewes’s part also influenced Eliot, who in her “novels, as has often been noticed, sometimes with regret, increasingly employ scientific analogies to describe and dissect human character in action”, although this “scientific analogy does more than provide George Eliot with a rich vocabulary for metaphor” as “[i]t penetrates to the heart of her method of writing”, according to Ashton.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶³ Ibid., pp. 13-15

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 15

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 15-16

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 16

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 16-17

Eliot's method, Ashton maintains, is "a method [that] [...] combines imagination with observation" but which is also able of "being [...] in uncertainty", and "in these respects", therefore, it is "different from Dickens's method, in which the observations are less self-conscious and self-exploring and the imaginative renderings more direct".¹⁷⁰ Thus, according to Ashton, "George Eliot risks irritating readers with her minute analyses and cleverness about her characters", while "Dickens, conversely, often disappoints those who want character presented in their interaction with other characters who are equally fully rendered".¹⁷¹

Moreover, Ashton points out that "Dickens renders human nature in ways which cannot best be appreciated by the test of psychological realism", while "George Eliot, who passes that test with flying colours, can seem over-conscious, even over-conscientious, in her rendering of what Henry James called 'felt life'".¹⁷²

III Chapter: George Eliot's Realism in her early novels

After having looked into George Eliot's life and her realist aesthetics, we can examine her early novels, and in particular *Adam Bede* (1859) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), focussing on the way in which sympathy and morality are conveyed throughout these first two long novels.

3.1 Adam Bede

3.1.1 The "germ" of Adam Bede

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 17

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 18

Adam Bede is the first novel George Eliot wrote and takes inspiration from her childhood memories as “George Eliot’s own early life was spent among people like her characters in *Adam Bede*”, C A Martin points out, and “[h]er childhood experience of different occupations and classes different dialects, and different forms of religious dissent was stored in her memory and many years later informed the realism of” her early novels.¹⁷³ The most relevant example is surely the character of Adam, who has a strong resemblance to George Eliot’s father, Robert Evans. As a matter of fact, as C.A. Martin maintains that both Robert Evans and Adam started their careers as carpenters and then both became managers of the estates of wealthy and eminent squires. But Adam also takes after George Eliot’s father in his character traits, C A Martin points out, as he at the beginning of the novel, much like Robert Evans, is rather stern towards the people around him that do behave or act in the way he believes to be correct, and he is also extremely proud of his working capacity.¹⁷⁴

But C.A. Martin points out that Robert Evans was not the only person to influence Adam’s personality as he “was also influenced by a historian figure in the same mould, George Stephenson”, whose “mathematical knowledge, [...], [and] inventiveness, [...] [are] evident in the characterization of *Adam Bede*”.¹⁷⁵

But other people in George Eliot’s life influenced her in conceiving of her characters, as for example Dinah Morris, who “was inspired by [...] her father’s sister-in-law Elizabeth Evans (a Methodist preacher)”, as Nancy Henry maintains.¹⁷⁶ According to C A Martin, Elizabeth Evans, besides being a model of one of her characters, she even provided Eliot with her knowledge of Methodism. But her Methodist aunt also provided Eliot with the “germ” of *Adam Bede*, the story of the novel, C A Martin points out, as Eliot, after “a conversation she had in 1836 with her aunt”, appointed “[i]n her journal [an] entry [titled] ‘History of “*Adam Bede*”’, where she reported about “Mrs Evans’s story of the 1802 trial and conviction of Mary Voce for infanticide”.¹⁷⁷ Eliot herself wrote,

The germ of “*Adam Bede*” was an anecdote told me by my Methodist Aunt Samuel (the wife of my Father’s younger brother): an anecdote from her own experience. We were sitting together one afternoon during her visit to me at Griffes [*sic*], probably in 1839 or 40, when it occurred to her to tell me how she had visited a condemned

¹⁷³ C. A. Martin, “Introduction”, in G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. viii

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. ix-x

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. x

¹⁷⁶ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

¹⁷⁷ C. A. Martin, *op. cit.*, p. xii

criminal, a very ignorant girl who had murdered her child and refused to confess – how she had stayed with her, praying, through the night and how the poor creature at last broke out into tears and confessed her crime.¹⁷⁸

Eliot maintains that “[t]he story, told by my aunt with great feeling, affected me deeply, and I never lost the impression of that afternoon and our talk together”.¹⁷⁹ Therefore, the story of *Adam Bede* supposedly comes from an actual incident which Eliot’s aunt had experienced, and which fascinated George Eliot so much that not only she reported it on her journal, but she even took inspiration from the grim story and she came with a novel out of it.

3.1.2 Realist traits in *Adam Bede*

Eliot’s choice of drawing upon her own personal experiences, and her alleged inspiration from an actual incident of her time, follow into the autobiographical inspirations that characterize the realist novels, as pointed out by Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel*¹⁸⁰.

Of the realistic traits of the novel drawn by Watt, Eliot takes not only autobiographical references and real-life incidents, but she also sets the story in a given time and space.¹⁸¹ As a matter of fact, she starts the novel by stating,

With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink, at the end of my pen, I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799.¹⁸²

In the first paragraph of the novel, after stating her purpose in writing this novel, Eliot takes the reader into a specific workshop, the one of a Mr Burge, to a specific place, Hayslope, and in a specific time, the summer of 1799. C.A. Martin stresses the importance of that particular year, as it “signals [...] the consolidation of British political and economic supremacy after the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815”, which subsequently led Great Britain to its “urbanisation, technical innovations in manufacturing and transportation, and the

¹⁷⁸ G. Eliot, “History of Adam Bede”, in C. A. Martin (ed.), *Adam Bede, cit.*, p. 483.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ I. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, Berkley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1956, p. 15

¹⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 22-23

¹⁸² G. Eliot, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

growth of the middle class and the reading public”.¹⁸³ Moreover, the 1799 setting brings a life-like effect, but also history into the novel and moves the story. As a matter of fact, as C.A. Martin points out, “Arthur’s absence from Hayslope and Windsor” is connected to the real-life event of the Loamshire Militia, which was “transferred to Ireland to maintain order after the 1798 rebellion, freeing up the regular army to fight the French”, thus Arthur is “[kept] away until after [Hetty’s] trial in Chapter XLIII”, and moreover, “[t]he war against Bonaparte also gave the author a plausible reason for Arthur’s removing himself from Hayslope after the trial and sentencing”.¹⁸⁴

According to Eifrig, Eliot’s “own narrative of 1799 is surrounded by this deeper past, which lives not only [for example] in the objects in the store room of the Hall farm, but in the lives and memories of the community in which the story takes place”, therefore, “*Adam Bede* is not about the characters who occupy its foreground, but about the community of which they form only a part, a moment”, and “[t]his is what makes it a ‘historical novel’, even though it has so little connection with any event we might label as history”.¹⁸⁵ Because it is difficult to faithfully depict the past as the author has not actually lived through that period, Eifrig points out that to George Eliot it is through the representation of the spirit of the past that a writer may be able to accurately depict the past one has not a proper knowledge of, “[a]nd truth about the past is most importantly conceived of when the community is engaged in some part of its story” that are in this novel “the funeral, the coming of age, celebration, the trial, and the wedding”.¹⁸⁶

Moreover, in the activities the community of Hayslope take part in, Avrom Fleishman notices also some “naturalist passages”, in particular in “the communal festivities celebrating the coming of age of” Arthur Donnithorne, “the grandson and heir to the local lord of the manor”, as “[a]ll classes are put in their place, from the gentry at the top [...], professionals [...] and tenant farmers (the yeomanry) in the middle, down to the agricultural laborers” and where “[t]here [is] a clear separation between dining ‘upstairs with the large tenants’ and dining with the hoi polloi ‘in the cloisters below’”, but also where “[t]he landowners are [even] differentiated by generation”, and this kind of “content and narrational approach approximate that of the social sciences”.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³ C. A. Martin, *op. cit.*, p. ix

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. xii-xiii

¹⁸⁵ G. McGrew Eifrig, “History and memory in ‘Adam Bede’”, *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 76, n. 2/3, 1993, p. 414

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ A. Fleishman, *op. cit.*, pp. 99-100

In addition, according to C.A. Martin, “historical awareness” is important in Eliot’s novel and it is “signalled in the narrator’s role as oral historian”, and therefore she inserts “superstition [as] part of oral history”, which could be noticed, for example, in the Chapter IV of the novel, where while Adam is working on a coffin which had been commissioned to his father, he perceives the sound of a ‘willow wand’, which Lisbeth Bede explains that it is believed by the folk to be sign of someone dying, which is something that eventually becomes true in the story, since a bit later the Bedes find out that their father and husband had died returning home from a tavern.¹⁸⁸

3.1.3 Lifelike depiction of the main characters in *Adam Bede*

Besides these realist features, Eliot employs specific stylistic strategies to render her characters more lifelike.

Let us take Adam, the protagonist of the story. Adam is a good man, but he is not the epitome of goodness. As George R. Creeger points out, Adam is “[i]ntelligent, diligent, trustworthy, loyal”, but he is also “wrathful, [...], stern, [...], unyielding, [...], harsh, [...], hot and hasty [...], intolerant, [...] and essentially humorless”.¹⁸⁹ As a matter of fact, after his father’s passing, Adam himself admits that

“Ah, I was always too hard” [...] “It’s a sore fault in me as I’m hot and out o’ patience with people when they do wrong, and my heart gets shut up against ‘em, so as I can’t bring myself to forgive ‘em. I see clear enough there’s more pride nor love in my soul, for I could sooner make a thousand strokes with th’ hammer for my father than bring myself to say a kind word to him”¹⁹⁰

But despite these qualities and flaws, at the beginning of the story, according to Creeger, Adam is “not yet a man”.¹⁹¹ Eventually, his growth starts after the tragic passing away of his father, who dies alone next to a bridge while returning home drunk. Adam is regretful of his temperament, and wishes to have behaved differently towards his father, although he doubts

¹⁸⁸ C. A. Martin, *op. cit.*, p. xiii

¹⁸⁹ G. R. Creeger, “An Interpretation of *Adam Bede*”, *ELH*, vol. 23, n. 3, 1956, p. 232

¹⁹⁰ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, *cit.*, p. 182

¹⁹¹ G. R. Creeger, *op. cit.*

that he would have done so in the past, being him unaware of the tragedy that would eventually strike his family.¹⁹² As the narrator says

He had not been able to press his father's hand before their parting and say, "Father, you know it was it was all right between us; I never forgot what I owed you when I was a lad; you forgive me if I have been too hot and hasty now and then!" [...] "It seems to me now, if I was to find father at home to-night, I should behave different; but there's no knowing – perhaps nothing 'ud be a lesson to us if it didn't come too late. It's well we should feel as life's a reckoning we can't make twice over; there's no real making amends in this world, any more nor you can mend a wrong subtraction by doing your addition right."¹⁹³

According to Creeger, "[t]he function of old Thias Bede is [...] precisely that of revealing the extent of his son's hardness", and "[t]he same true of Arthur" as "[t]oward both men Adam is unforgiving, and even when he repents of his severity, the repentance is futile because it reflects no genuine increase in his capacity for sympathy", but "[t]he reason" of Adam's harshness towards both his father and Arthur "is that Adam is not fully involved emotionally with either" of them, and for this reason, Adam "can neither participate in their plight nor understand it".¹⁹⁴ Therefore, what Adam needs in order to properly understand his father and Arthur, Creeger points out, is indeed to get involved emotionally towards other people, and this kind of involvement comes from "his relationship with Hetty", in which Adam cannot be rational and unbiased towards Hetty, as it is "passion which overmasters him" and thus is subjected to great sufferings because of Hetty, in particular once he discovers her affair with Arthur, and her pregnancy and infanticide.¹⁹⁵

But due to the consequences of his passion for Hetty and the subsequent pain Adam has to go through, Creeger maintains, he can finally mature, and thus he eventually stands by Hetty during her trial and this decision enables him to finally understand the sufferings of the others, but it also leads him to be forgiving of Arthur.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹² G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, *cit.*, pp. 182-183

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ G. R. Creeger, *op. cit.*, pp. 232-233

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 233

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 233-235

Hetty, too, may be considered one of the most interesting characters of Eliot's novel. Hetty is extremely beautiful, but as Creeger points out, hers "is a false beauty, for it conceals in [her] case [...] a core of hardness".¹⁹⁷

According to Creeger, "Hetty's hardness is that of childish or at best adolescent egocentricity", since "all the people and events have value or significance only as they impinge upon the narrow circle of her own life" and "in failing that, they are of no importance"¹⁹⁸. Moreover, Creeger maintains, Hetty "cares little about Hall Farm, and although dutiful toward her aunt and uncle, she exhibits no real affection for them" and "Totty, who serves so well as a measure of Mrs Poyser, is an equally good measure of Hetty's inability to love – anyone besides herself, that it".¹⁹⁹ As a matter of fact, Eliot writes about her

Hetty did not understand how anybody could be very fond of middle-aged people. And as for those tiresome children, Marty and Tommy and Totty, they had been the very nuisance of her life – as bad as buzzing insects that will come teasing you on a hot day when you want to be quiet.²⁰⁰

What is more, the narrator describes her as someone cold and that does not have any motherly feelings towards those who are little and defenceless:

The round downy chicks peeping out from under their mother's wing never touched Hetty with any pleasure; that was not the sort of prettiness she cared about, but she did care about the prettiness of the new things she would buy for herself at Treddleston fair with the money they fetched.²⁰¹

Her aunt even compares her to a peacock, being her so vain and, what is more, Mrs Poyser affirms to be of the idea that actually Hetty's heart is "as hard as a pebble".²⁰² Despite her vanity, another aspect which characterizes Hetty is her materialism. As a matter of fact, according to Creeger, "[e]ven her love for Arthur is tinged with" egoistic interests, as "in [Arthur]", Hetty "finds [...] the objectification of her day-dreaming desires, but these in turn

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 227

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 228

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 140

²⁰¹ Ibid., p. 141

²⁰² Ibid.

are the projection in fantasy of her own ego, sexually translated”, and therefore, what she feels for Arthur Donnithorne, the old squire’s nephew, and successor, is more “the objectification of her day-dreaming desire”.²⁰³ Her love is basically linked to the life he could give her, which is the life she dreams of,

[a]nd [her] dreams were all of luxuries: to sit in a carpeted parlour and always wear white stockings; to have some large beautiful ear-rings, such as were the fashion; to have Nottingham lace around the top of her gown, and something to make her handkerchief smell nice, like Miss Lydia Donnithorne’s when she drew it out at church; and not to be obliged to get up early or be scolded by anybody.²⁰⁴

According to Enrica Villari, “Hetty’s hardness and her lack of sensitivity for the lives of the others are linked in the novel to the signs of the modernity which has burst into the life of the otherwise traditional rural community of [Hayslope]”.²⁰⁵

But, Creeger maintains that “[m]uch of the tragedy – or catastrophe – of both Hetty and Arthur springs from the fact that they are wilful children performing adult actions in an age which is not golden” and “all of this Dinah recognizes when, early in the story, she tries to prepare Hetty for the possibility of pain in life, for the necessity of leaving her adolescent dreamworld, of growing up”, but “Hetty remains deaf” since “her world has never given her any evidence of the existence of suffering”.²⁰⁶

Therefore, Creeger maintains, there is “[s]mall wonder that Hetty’s awakening has traumatic force”, as “[w]hen she learns that in a letter that from Arthur of his determination to bring their affair to an end, all vitality is drained out of her”.²⁰⁷ “Hetty’s suffering”, Creeger points out, “is subsequently compounded by the knowledge that she is pregnant” and the “[d]read of disgrace and censure forces her to flee Loamshire, and in doing so she leaves for the first time a garden world and enters a wasteland”.²⁰⁸ As a matter of fact, desperation takes over her when once she reaches Windsor she finds out Arthur away to Ireland for his military duty,

²⁰³ C. R. Creeger, *op. cit.*

²⁰⁴ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, *cit.*, pp. 90-91

²⁰⁵ E. Villari, “<<Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult>> Adam Bede e il realismo di George Eliot”, in *Studi sul Sette-Ottocento offerti a Marinella Columi*, S. Fornasiero and S. Tamiozzo (ed.), vol. 1, 2015, p. 258 [translation mine]

²⁰⁶ C. R. Creeger, *op. cit.*, pp. 228-229

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 229

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

[Hetty] had quite lost her way in the fields [...]. She walked through field after field, and no village, no house was in sight; but *there*, at the corner of this pasture, there was a break in the hedges; the land seemed to dip down a little, and two trees leaned towards each other across the opening. Hetty's heart gave a great beat as she thought there must be a pool here. She walked towards it heavily over the turfed grass, with pale lips and a sense of trembling [...] There was it, black under the darkening sky: no motion, no sound near. She sat down her basket, and then sank down herself on the grass, trembling. [...] She was wary, hungry. There were some buns in her basket [...]. She took them out now, and ate them eagerly, and then sat still again, looking at the pool. The soothed sensation that came over her from the satisfaction of her hunger, and this fixed dreamy attitude, brought on drowsiness, and presently her head sunk down on her knees. She fell asleep.²⁰⁹

But her rest does not do much to restore her from her fatigues and worries. As a matter of fact

When she awoke it was deep night, and she felt chill. She was frightened at this darkness – frightened at the long night before her. [...] She began to walk about that she might get warm again, as if she would have more resolution then. O how long the time was in that darkness! The bright hearth and the warmth and the voices of home, - the secure uprising and lying down, - the familiar fields, the familiar people, the Sundays and holidays with their simple joys of dress and feasting, - all the sweets of her young life rushed before her now, and she seemed to be stretching her towards them across a great gulf.²¹⁰

The narrator maintains that “[t]he horror of this cold, and darkness, and solitude – out of all human reach – became greater every long minute: it was almost as if she were dead already, and knew that she was dead and longed to get back to life again”.²¹¹

But tragedy strikes once she has given birth to her child and that dreadful experience is narrated by Hetty herself once that Dinah comes to meet her the night before her execution,

²⁰⁹ G. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 345-346

²¹⁰ Ibid. p. 346

²¹¹ Ibid.

“I was so very miserable, Dinah...I didn’t know where to go [...] I daredn’t go back home again – I couldn’t bare it. I couldn’t have bore to look at anybody, for they’d have scorned me. [...] And then I got to Stoniton, and I began to feel frightened that night, because I was so near home. And then the little baby was born, when I didn’t expect it; and the thought came into my mind that I might get rid of it, and go home again. [...] I long so to be safe at home. I don’t know how I felt about the baby. I seemed to hate to hate it – it was like a heavy hanging round my neck; and yet its crying went through me, and I daredn’t look at its little hands and face. But I went on to the wood, and I walked out [...] I came to a place where there was lots of chips and turf, and I sat down on the trunk of a tree to think what I should do. And all of a sudden I saw a hole under the nut-tree, like a little grave. And it darted into me like lightning – I’d lay the baby there, and cover it with the grass and the chips. [...] I *couldn’t* cover it quite up – I thought perhaps somebody ‘ud come and take care of it.”²¹²

According to Creeger, “[t]he effect of Hetty’s ordeal is to externalize the hardness which hitherto has been concealed”, and “[a]lthough at first her pregnancy had brought about a sudden burgeoning of ‘womanliness’, when she bears the child and then (if unintentionally) kills it, she turns emotionally almost to stone”.²¹³

“Most of the Loamshire world”, Creeger maintains, “is appalled by the hardness Hetty exhibits, seeing how it has made something inhuman of her”, but “[f]ew of them realize [...] how much they are implicated in her condition; nor can any of them actually help Hetty, since they are unwilling either to forgive or comfort her”, although only “Dinah, the outsider from Stonyshire, where forgiving love can exist because suffering is known, is able to restore Hetty to humanity – a better humanity, at least, than that with which she had been endowed by her own world”.²¹⁴

Despite being reluctant at first to confess her horrific crime, according to Creeger, once Dinah turns to reciting a prayer, Hetty’s stony attitude melts and she is finally able to confess all of her dreadful experience, thus being also able to “regenerate”, meaning that she can finally ask Adam for forgiveness, but also be forgiving of Arthur, although she would not be able to

²¹² Ibid., pp. 405-407

²¹³ C. R. Creeger, *op. cit.*, p. 230

²¹⁴ Ibid.

return to her old life as a new woman, since she is sent away in the colonies, where she would die some years later.²¹⁵

Even Arthur Donnithorne is an interesting representation of human flaws. J. R. Reed defines him as the “epitome of the British gentleman, especially as represented by the squirearchy”.²¹⁶

“When we first meet him”, J. R. Reed maintains, “Arthur is at the height of self-contentment and greatly pleased with himself on the day of his majority” and he also “decks himself out of his military regimentals to appear at his manliest”, and moreover, he seems to be excessively praised for his qualities from his community.²¹⁷ J. R. Reed maintains “[t]hat Arthur is represented as a ‘phony’ officer” and this is relevant as “[t]he military figure in the nineteenth-century British literature is a strange contradiction, for he is, especially as an officer, distrusted as a sexual predator” and “at the same time [...] he is respected for his discipline, obedience, and self-control in all things military”.²¹⁸

“Throughout the century”, according to J. R. Reed, “the British army officer in his striking red uniform with all of its ornaments [...], was regarded as sexually dangerous to sober folks, especially the parents of young ladies” and “by those same young ladies”, although “the stereotype of the military officer changed from early to late nineteenth century”, since “[i]n the early decades the military officer [was] viewed as a gentleman, but one who play[ed] by a different set of rules than those acknowledged by civilians” as “[h]e is allowed greater latitude in his amusements, whether this involves the turfs and other forms of gambling or flirtation and worse with women” and moreover, “[h]e is likely to be more aggressive than his civilian counterpart and inclined to feel slights to his honor more quickly”, while by the later part of the century there were more “favorable picture[s] of the recommended model of the military officer” and a “tendency toward the amelioration of the representation of” this figure.²¹⁹

According to J. R. Reed, “Eliot exploits the stereotypical model of aggressive and sexually supercharged masculinity to Arthur’s disadvantage, chiefly by subverting the convention” as “[w]hat makes the stereotypical officer so formidable is the understood assumption that he is physically capable of battle and will risk his life”, which “is what his uniform symbolizes” and “Arthur is not a trained warrior”, therefore “[h]e is not [...] a genuine

²¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 229-231

²¹⁶ J. R. Reed, “Soldier Boy: Forming masculinity in ‘Adam Bede’”, *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 33, n. 3, 2001, p. 269.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 270-271

officer” since he “lacks the external or internal discipline of the military officer while fulfilling the stereotype of the seducer”.²²⁰

“Arthur”, J. R. Reed maintains, “seems to possess all the best features associated with the ideal of the gentleman – he is high-born, well-bred, good-looking, courteous and generous-hearted”²²¹. As a matter of fact, as also David Carroll points out, Arthur “desire[s] to create a harmonious Arcadia without pain and suffering [with as many inhabitants of Hayslope]”, and, “he enjoys performing deeds of kindness” since he “enjoys bestowing favours – like the promotion of Adam – which bring him approval and which advance his own interests” although “this identity is only secure only as long as Arthur’s pleasures and other people’s approval coincide”, and “[w]hen they don’t, as in the seduction of Hetty, he has to conceal his actions, thereby cutting his impressionable nature off from the source of its moral constraints”.²²²

Therefore, according to J. R. Reed, what “Arthur lacks [are] those features that will come, during the nineteenth century in England, to represent the true gentleman – strength of will, self-restraint, and consideration for others over oneself” and, moreover, “Arthur’s good qualities, unfortified by sturdy moral attributes of character, actually betray him and transform him into the villain of the narrative of which he had hoped to be the hero”, and “Eliot achieves this disclosure by situating Arthur in relation to other male models of the narrative, the most of which are Adam and Seth Bede and the Reverend Adolphus Irwine”.²²³ As a matter of fact, J. R. Reed maintains, that what Arthur lacks is selflessness and almost saintly goodness which characterises both Rev. Irwine and Seth Bede and this “lapse from [a] gentlemanly conduct” is particularly highlighted in “is his seduction of Hetty Sorrel”, in which he “giv[es] way to desire” and because of “his very status as a gentleman and soldier” it could be argued that “Arthur’s position is even more culpable than it first appears” as it was his “duty [...] to spare the unfortunate [Hetty] so awestruck by his situation in life”.²²⁴

While “on the gentlemanly side scale, Arthur is contrasted unfavorably with Mr. Irwine” and Seth Bede, J. R. Reed maintains that “on the physical side he is contrasted unfavorably with Adam Bede”, although differently from Arthur, Adam “is able to control his impulses far better than” the former can.²²⁵ Therefore, J. R. Reed argues, “Adam’s skill, strength and discipline” make him “[stand] out as the model of the soldier as gentleman”, while

²²⁰ Ibid., pp. 271-272

²²¹ Ibid., p. 273

²²² D. Carroll, *George Eliot and the conflict of interpretations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 85-86

²²³ J. R. Reed, *op. cit.*, pp. 273-274

²²⁴ Ibid., pp. 274-275

²²⁵ Ibid., p. 276

it is as if “Arthur represents a sort of mock soldier, one with all of the heroic appearance but none of the heroic behavior of the military stereotype”, as he “has failed in the area of self-discipline and has thus fallen into the stereotype of the sexually unlicensed soldier rather than the disciplined military man”, as his affair with Hetty shows.²²⁶

Another character who represents human imperfections and biases in the novel is Dinah Morris. At the beginning of the story, according to David Carroll, she “strives towards a selfless, spiritual identification with suffering humanity”, so much so that that her “selflessness is so extreme that she appears as a pale, disembodied spirit living through other people and their troubles”.²²⁷ In this respect, David Carroll points out, Dinah may “[represent] the opposite” of Hetty, who instead, “is the natural, instinctive self seeking its own pleasure, the quintessence of the golden world of pastoral, nature in all its ‘self-engrossed loveliness’” but it may be argued that “[t]he two women are juxtaposed and contrasted in the novel in various ways”, in particular “in the two bedroom scenes”, where “Hetty [is] disguising herself as Dinah, and [...] Dinah [is] substituting herself for Hetty in Adam’s dream”.²²⁸

“One might expect” from this particular scene, according to Jon Singleton, “that Hetty serves here as a foil for Dinah, whose authentic inner virtue seems to be demonstrated by the fact that she is studying her Bible while” in the meantime, “Hetty is strutting and preening in her room”, but, still, “the narrator subtly links the two girls’ self-centered modes of searching signs of meaning”.²²⁹ As a matter of fact, Jon Singleton maintains, “Dinah studies scripture, as Hetty studies the mirror – to know herself better”, but “[i]n its own way, her practice is no less foolish, egocentric, or arbitrary than is the way a lover jumps to conclusions about a beautiful girl’s character”, since, “[l]ike the lover, Dinah finds in the Bible what she aspects to see”.²³⁰

“Dinah”, Jon Singleton points out, “displays the same egocentric arbitrariness while searching for God’s leading regarding Seth’s and Adam’s marriage suits” and this kind “narrative strand is reintroduced at regular intervals throughout the novel, making the problem of discerning God’s will for the individual life leap in great arcs over the mundane acts of love-making, kowtowing, and the guilt-hunting that lie in its shadow”.²³¹ As a matter of fact, Jon Singleton maintains, “[t]wice Dinah interprets her intense passion for ministry as a sign not to marry Seth” and “[e]ven after her heart turns toward Adam, Dinah distrusts her own feelings

²²⁶ Ibid., pp. 277-280

²²⁷ D. Carroll, *George Eliot and the conflict of interpretations*, cit., pp. 75-76

²²⁸ Ibid., p. 76

²²⁹ J. Singleton, “Malignant faith and cognitive restructuring: realism in ‘Adam Bede’”, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 39, n. 1, 2011, p. 241

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid., p. 241

and ‘must wait for clear guidance’”, although, “[t]his attempt at objectivity is futile” as “[t]he only evidence she can imagine that would disprove the ‘guidance’ of the emotions that have always shown her the way would be the disappearance of those emotions”.²³² “In the end”, Jon Singleton argues, “it is the *absence* of any divine communication that she finally chooses to accept as a message from God” and “[t]he failure to prove a case false does not prove it true, however, and”, thus “Dinah’s ultimate marriage to Adam is tainted by a slight sense that she has compromised her spiritual principles”.²³³

Therefore, Jon Singleton points out, “[i]n these ways the narrative gradually demonstrates that even earnest Christians like Dinah cannot prevent their desires from shaping their perceptions of God’s word and will” and “[i]n doing so it suggests that religious acts of interpretation tend to be just as shortsighted and egocentric [...] as the scattered musings of churchgoers on their walk home from church”.²³⁴

Moreover, according to David Carroll, in her initial self-abnegation “Dinah is living in a dream in a dream world, cut off by her selflessness from the reality around her”.²³⁵ As a matter of fact, David Carroll points out, Dinah “has no roots and will make no plans for the future” and “[w]hether she is suffering the anguish of creation groaning and travailing, or reposing in her more contemplative moments, she is inevitably absorbed ‘in thoughts that had no connection with the present moment or with her own personality’” and therefore, “[s]uch self-abnegation becomes a self-indulgent dream”, since “[w]ithout selfhood she cannot relate to individuals in their temporal immediacy” and “she has first to place them in the perspective of her timeless vision of suffering humanity”.²³⁶

According to David Carroll, “Dinah is vividly aware of a world of suffering and the master-plot of salvation, but is imperceptible about its particular manifestations in time and space” and as a result, “[s]he occupies simultaneously a spiritually timeless world and the immediate present”, but she “is cut off from this world, and like her fellow Methodists, relies for her understanding of it on inner promptings, the drawing of lots revelations by dreams and visions, and opening the Bible at hazard” although “the received wisdom of Hayslope provides a resistant medium to [Dinah’s] visions” and “[o]nly when they lose their confident grasp of their rustic reality, does she take on substance for them”.²³⁷ Therefore, according to David

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ D. Carroll, *George Eliot and the conflict of interpretations*, cit., p. 79

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid., p. 80

Carroll, “Dinah embodies a suffering vision of the world, but without a life of her own she does not suffer”.²³⁸

3.1.4 Sympathy and morality in *Adam Bede*

Through Dinah Morris it could be argued that Eliot tries to deal with a topic which is extremely important to her, but also relevant for her moral realism, which is sympathy. Foster Pyle maintains that to Eliot “[s]ympathy is the imaginative impulse that, transcending the egotism and renouncing the desires of self, promises to bridge the epistemological and ethical gap between self and world”, therefore it may be considered a process held within oneself which, sustained by imagination, “might create [...] a genuine spirit of community, a sustained and sustaining sense of ‘enlarged life’”, since “sympathy and imagination” enable people to “extent [their] consciousness”.²³⁹ Pyle maintains that “sympathy assumes its most completely personified form with the character of Dinah Morris “ as she “throughout *Adam Bede* is so closely and consistently associated with the figure of sympathy that we come to see her not only as its agent but as its very embodiment” and therefore, from the beginning she “is called on to display and exercise sympathy”.²⁴⁰ In particular in the passage of the two bedrooms, Pyle points out, where while “[looking] out the bedroom window which ‘gave her a wide view over the fields’, she begins to consider ‘all the dear people whom she had learned to care for among these peaceful fields’” and then she subsequently “moves from this synoptic view of her community to the interior ‘presence of a Love and Sympathy’ that transcends what is worldly available”.²⁴¹ According to Pyle, “[t]his passage is [...] important” as “it demonstrates about the organic work to be performed by the narrative figures of sympathy” and therefore it is through “the ‘presence of a Love and Sympathy’” that “Dinah can fulfil her religious mission of tending to the spiritual concerns of her community” and “extend ‘care’”.²⁴² But “the sympathy invoked in the passage does not describe an activity or process”, Pyle argues, as here “Sympathy” “is [...] a proper name, an allegorical presence invoked ‘in solitude’” and therefore “[b]y allegorizing the terms of ‘Love and Sympathy’, the novel demonstrates that the means by which the novel constructs values, a phenomenology of subjectivity invested in the form of characters, is a rhetorical effect of such personifications as ‘Sympathy’”.²⁴³ Pyle

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ F. Pyle, “A Novel Sympathy: The Imagination of Community in George Eliot”, *NOVEL: A Forum on fiction*, vol. 27, n. 1, (1993), pp. 6-7

²⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 9-10

²⁴¹ Ibid., p. 10

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid.

maintains that “[t]he successful operations of a narrative would thus be to conceal its rhetoricity, to disguise personification, to make ‘sympathy’ appear as if it were not an allegory but a process” and moreover, as “the narrator gives no indication that we are to read the passage as anything other than an affirmation of Dinah’s feelings of ‘Love and Sympathy’” and because the “‘Divine Presence’ is [...] registered ‘in solitude’”, this “leads [...] to Dinah’s serious misinterpretations of both [Hetty’s] situation and the Scripture”.²⁴⁴ As a matter of fact, Pyle argues, despite trying to “[interpret] the lines” she is reading from the Bible and in the meantime trying to “console Hetty”, Dinah “[listens] to the wrong ‘inward voice’ and [misreads] the Scriptures” and this leads Hetty to close her heart to her cousin, thus proving “a failure of sympathy in a character such as Dinah” and it also “marks dramatically the limits and failures of sympathy to establish ethical interpretation and judgement within the movement of the plot”.²⁴⁵ According to Pyle, “[s]ympathy’s failure has important consequences at the level of the plot” as it leads to “Hetty’s refusal of [Dinah’s] sympathetic appeal, [...] her eventual succumbing to the seductions of Arthur Donnithorne” and “inexorably to her eventual banishment from the community of the novel” and therefore, “[s]ympathy must fail at the level of the story [...] – the progression of events, the actions of the characters - for the plot to proceed and a narrative *discourse* of sympathy to be established” as “no individual character in Eliot’s novels can make sympathy work” and thus “the effective work of sympathy must be assigned – ‘transferred’ – to the act of narration itself”.²⁴⁶

Although Dinah Morris is often considered the main sympathetic character of *Adam Bede*, R. E. Sopher argues that Seth Bede, despite being “perhaps *Adam Bede* most perplexing peripheral character” and “secondary within the plot of the novel, the values that he embodies are by no means trivial in George Eliot’s ethical vision”.²⁴⁷ As a matter of fact, according to R. E. Sopher, Seth’s “ambiguous role [...] raises questions about both the conjunction of ethics and gender in George Eliot’s fiction and about the problem, both ethical and structural, in sorting out minor and major characters”.²⁴⁸

R. E. Sopher maintains that “Seth Bede occupies an uneasy place both within the plot of the novel and within George Eliot’s larger ethical and creative projects” as “[i]n Seth, George Eliot explores the possibility of sympathy being embodied in a male character” since “[h]is

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 11

²⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 11-12

²⁴⁷ R. E. Sopher, “Gender and sympathy in ‘Adam Bede’: the case of Seth Bede”, *George Eliot – George Henry Lewes Studies*, n.62/63, 2012, p. 1

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

role in the plot is marginal, and consists primarily of his being an obstacle – but a minor one – to Dinah and Adam’s marriage”.²⁴⁹ “For this reason”, R. E. Sopher points out, “one can assume that Seth’s primary function within the story is to help delineate Adam’s character, both by way of contrast and as object of several of Adam’s defining actions” and “moral progression”, being “Seth [...] as morally admirable as Adam, but in very different ways”, and, although “[t]he two brothers both represent ethical striving [...] the kinds of ethics they represent are far from identical”.²⁵⁰ As a matter of fact, R. E. Sopher maintains, “[t]heir virtues are described as complementary, rather than as antagonistic, philosophies” as “Adam’s virtues, especially at the beginning of the novel, consist primarily in devotion to a personal moral code that elevates justice and a strong work ethic”, while “Seth’s virtues, in contrast, do not spring from an explicit code, despite his devout Methodism, but, rather, from a gentle and forgiving attitude toward other people”, and therefore, “[i]n the initial description of the two brothers, Seth’s gentleness emerges as a counterpoint to Adam’s hardness”.²⁵¹

According to Sopher, Eliot’s “attitude toward Seth suggests ambivalence on her part as to whether or not sympathy, and an ethic based on sympathy, is compatible with masculinity” as Seth’s “sympathy [...] [seems] incompatible with sexually desirable masculinity like Adam’s”.²⁵² As a matter of fact, “Seth’s character and characterization”, R. E. Sopher argues, “seem to exist primarily to highlight Adam’s essential traits, particularly his difficulties in reconciling sympathy with moral code based on hardness and restraint”²⁵³.

Moreover, according to R. E. Sopher, “Adam’s strength also emerges as the more negative hardness that is apparent in his relationship to his father, while Seth’s corresponding weakness can be seen more positively as compassionate gentleness”, and therefore, “Seth’s body itself, [...] seems to reveal his difference from Adam, the most striking part of that difference being that Seth is both mentally and emotionally weaker than his brother”, and “[b]y describing Seth in this way, George Eliot accentuates Adam’s vitality and virility, while implying that Seth is less manly than his brother”.²⁵⁴ “George Eliot’s portrayals of Seth”, then, according to R. E. Sopher, “ultimately link the sympathetic, or other-regarding, virtues with the feminine and the self-regarding virtues, like integrity and (self-)discipline with the masculine”.²⁵⁵ “That moral and physical are linked”, R. E. Sopher points out, “emerges in the

²⁴⁹ Ibid. pp. 1-2

²⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 2

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Ibid., p. 5

²⁵³ Ibid., p. 6

²⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 6-7

²⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 7

similarities between Adam's and Seth's physical differences and their personal ones", and "[b]y linking moral traits with physicality, George Eliot also raises the possibility that moral characteristics are to some extent innate and suggests that Adam's integrity and Seth's gentleness are [...] inescapable" and "[t]his raises the question as to what extent moral growth is truly possible, of ethical are innate, as evidenced by the ways in which they are inscribed on the physical body", and moreover, "[i]t might also be read as suggesting that nature itself works to multiply and balance the virtues that makes ethical communal life possible", although, "[a]t the same time, this might be read as a pathetic fallacy".²⁵⁶ As a matter of fact, according to R. E. Sopher, "George Eliot might be projecting the moral on the physical to strengthen the sense of unity and coherence in the novel's characterisation", but "[i]n either case, the physical signs of difference between the two brothers have the effect of widening the gap between their respective virtues and failings".²⁵⁷

What is more, R. E. Sopher points out, "[t]he narrative robs Seth of personhood by implicitly comparing him to the dog Gyp, making explicit parallels in Adam's treatment of both", although "Seth is also compared to other animals elsewhere in the novel", like for example when he is compared to a lamb by Wiry Ben, and these comparisons "[n]ot only [...] [dehumanize] Seth, but [...] also [infantilize] him", but they also "[show] that Seth is often the target of men's jokes and yet does not necessarily defend himself against these jokes" and this besides "show[ing] his gentle, forgiving nature [...] it also shows that others regard him as inferior, as a safe target for teasing, and suggests that he is not invested in asserting his identity or masculinity".²⁵⁸

Moreover, R. E. Sopher argues, "in [various] [...] passages about Seth" in the novel, "the narrator alludes to nineteenth-century stereotypes about femininity, namely [...] ignorance, and innocence in matters of romance", but also "the subjugation of the self in relation to the loved others, as well as tearfulness and emotionality" and "[b]y feminizing Seth in this way George Eliot both de-naturalizes gender and brings gendered representations of sympathy under pressure without altogether rejecting the gendering of sympathy as feminine", thus "creat[ing], in Seth, a male character who displays qualities traditionally ascribed to women".²⁵⁹

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 7-8

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 9

R. E. Sopher points out that “[w]hile the narrator urges sympathy for Dinah and Seth, it is more in the interest of promoting sympathy for ordinary people in general, and in her novel in particular, than it is about Seth or [...] even Dinah” and therefore, Seth “becomes an object by which the narrator can demonstrate her own sympathy”, since his “generous sympathy actually aligns him with the sympathetic narrator”.²⁶⁰

According to R. E. Sopher, Seth’s “commitment to spirituality [...] also informs the ways in which [his] gender can be interpreted” since “[f]or the Victorians, the relationship between gender and spirituality or religion was in a flux, largely because both gender and religion themselves were coming under pressure and themselves in flux”, in particular due to the fact that during that period “religion was increasingly domesticated” thus becoming “increasingly associated with women and the private sphere”, but also due to “movements like Charles Kingsley’s muscular Christianity attempted to create and enforce connections between masculinity and religion” and therefore, “[g]iven this context, it becomes clear how Dinah’s preaching was both a possibility and source of unease for many members of the community”, and “[s]imilarly, it shows how Seth’s devout informs, in ways that are sometimes contradictory, the way in which his gender can be read”.²⁶¹

According to R. E. Sopher, “[l]ike his spirituality, Seth’s emotionality seems to feminize him”, as “[h]is emotions, unlike Adam’s, are bodily and therefore legible to other characters”, and moreover, “Seth is [...] associated with Victorian femininity in [various] concrete ways”, in particular when “he is shown doing housework” and these associations “with stereotypical femininity” in Seth are “further heightened by the [...] comparison [...] to a military man, which Seth is most certainly not”, thus, “[i]n juxtaposing housework with military service, and bringing them together in the figure of Seth, George Eliot challenges not only how his gender might be interpreted but also, how and why masculinity and femininity become associated with certain cultural practises”, thus also “suggesting the constructed nature of gender itself”.²⁶²

“However”, according to R. E. Sopher, “Seth’s brand of sympathy does not seem to be what Eliot has in mind as ideal”, since “[s]ympathy, for [her], is an ethical process that requires not only gentleness, but also, a thoughtful way of relating to others” and as “[i]t must be a matter of choice to be truly ethical, rather than a reflexive way of relating to the world”, then “it is Adam, not Seth, who carries away the rewards – Dinah, professional success, children –

²⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 10

²⁶¹ Ibid., p. 11

²⁶² Ibid., pp. 11-12

that are denied Seth”.²⁶³ “Seth’s characterisation and fate thus”, R. E. Sopher maintains, “suggest George Eliot’s ambivalence about sympathy – or at least, sympathy that manifests itself in primarily passive ways – as a sufficient basis for ethical life”.²⁶⁴

3.1.5 Allegory in *Adam Bede*

According to Glenda Sacks, *Adam Bede* could be considered “an anthropologically realistic account of rustic life in the form of a Feuerbachian allegory” and the reason why she maintains that “George Eliot’s novel can be read as an allegorical commentary on Feuerbach’s revolutionary ideas about Christian love, spirituality and sexuality” is because of Eliot’s adoption of “allegorical conventions such as fable, personification and myth” and thus “[t]he resultant form of the novel can be seen as a series of nesting narratives” such as “realism, fable, myth and allegory, each contained within, yet at times separate from each other”.²⁶⁵

“A form of allegory”, Glenda Sacks maintains, “is the beast fable in which animals talk and act like humans they represent and George Eliot fills the narrative of *Adam Bede* with scenes that collapse the boundaries between human and animal behavior” and these traits belonging to beast fables are found in the “detailed descriptions of animals and human in [Eliot’s] narrative” in particular “in the chapter [...] in which she describes the Poyser family on their way to church” that in the “next paragraph” is contrasted with “the sleeping farmyard animals in the same familial terms” as “[t]he black and white, light and dark color scheme that permeates the paragraph describing the human family with their red and black clothing is mirrored [...] in the description of the sleeping animals”.²⁶⁶

“In the fantasy of fables and fairy tales”, Glenda Sacks maintains, “men and animals interact and covers” and “[s]imilarly the depiction of relationships between animals and men in *Adam Bede* verges on the fantastic in Chapter Twenty-One in which Bartle Massey regards his dog Vixen as a substitute wife”, and where, in many ways Vixen is given human traits, as for example in Bartle Massey’s “conviction that Vixen deliberately deceived him when he saved her”, but also in “the very human reactions of Vixen to her master’s voice”. goes further than just outward description”, as Bartle Massey.²⁶⁷

²⁶³ Ibid. p. 13

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ G. Sacks, “The shock of the new: allegory and realism in Adam ‘Bede’”, *George Eliot – George Henry Lewes Studies*, n. 48/49, 2005, p. 76

²⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 82

²⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 83-84

Moreover, according to Glenda Sacks, “Vixen is the allegorical equivalent of another female in the novel, Hetty, who could also be described as a ‘sly hypocritical wench’”, although allegories between Vixen and Hetty may be found also for example in the passage where Vixen “is saved at the last moment from murder by drowning by Bartle” which “allegorizes Hetty’s last minute reprieve from hanging by Arthur Donnithorne”, but also in the way both the dog and the girl feel same, the former “about her deception of Bartle”, while the latter in her embarrassment in “tell[ing] Adam about her pregnancy”.²⁶⁸ “However”, Glenda Sacks argues, “unlike Hetty, Vixen holds the moral upper ground because she nurtures her ‘babbies’ whereas the supposedly morally superior human Hetty, murders her’s” and “[a]lthough Vixen cannot speak as do the animals in beast fables, her name ‘Vixen’ describes the coquettish character of Hetty and the dog’s supposed ability to deceive and manipulate Bartle is analogical to Hetty’s deception” of Adam and Arthur.²⁶⁹ Moreover, Glenda Sacks maintains “that in the sexually repressive Victorian milieu of the novel, the sexual debauchery of a dog provokes the same sense of shame and outrage that a fallen woman is seen to deserve”.²⁷⁰

“By creating these fable-like scenes where man and ‘converse’”, according to Glenda Sacks, “George Eliot incorporates all the complexities of subterfuge, love, frustration and anxiety that a human relationship would hold”, and thus, “Feuerbach’s foregrounding of sexual love as an aspect of religious marriage is allegorized for a conservative audience in *Adam Bede* in order to add a veneer of respectability to the hidden agenda of sex and sexuality that permeates the plot”.²⁷¹ Due to Victorians’ prudishness and “nurtured innocent and idealized images of mother and wife role in society”, Glenda Sacks argues that this “posed a problem for realist writers who wanted to discourse about sex” and therefore, “[t]he truth-telling function of realism fails when confronted with the heated passions of sexual desires, and” and thus “George Eliot resorts to the use of personification in order to express these illicit emotions as it allowed her to obliquely express that which realism dare not”.²⁷² As a matter of fact, Glenda Sacks points out, George Eliot “[approaches] the sensitive issue of sexual passion between men and women in the story” by adopting numerous terms belonging to “animal and plant kingdoms”, which “are fecund and fruitful, free of the fetters of morality that humans are tied to” and moreover, as “[t]he sexual act itself is not mentioned in the novel, only its consequence – Hetty’s baby [...] [t]he sudden revelation of Hetty’s deed of murder comes as a shock to the

²⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 84

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 84-85

²⁷¹ Ibid., p. 85

²⁷² Ibid.

reader”.²⁷³ As a matter of fact, according to Glenda Sacks, “[w]hile looking for her lover, Hetty, the reader is continually told, is ‘weak and tired’, but this could be because of the strain of walking, traveling and not eating, rather than pregnancy” and a “first hint of Hetty’s pregnancy [is given] when she faints and the landlord comments ‘Here’s a bad business I suspect’, and his wife answers ‘She’s not a common flaunting dratchell’ and that ‘It ‘ud have been a good deal better for her if sh’d been uglier and more conduct’”.²⁷⁴ “The oblique references to ‘bad business’ and ‘conduct’”, Glenda Sacks maintains, “allude to Hetty’s condition in a way that could be easily misinterpreted” as the two terms “could simply be the difficult situation in which the landlord finds Hetty, far away from home, unchaperoned and without much money”, but “Hetty’s sudden production and effacement of an infant without any clearer description of where and when she was impregnated [...] is left to the reader’s imagination”.²⁷⁵ “In absence of any specific allusion to Arthur’s seduction of Hetty”, therefore, Glenda Sacks points out, “the conditions for pregnancy become fuzzy and blurred over” and thus, “[d]espite [Eliot’s] interest in graphic biological details”, the novelist “allows Hetty’s condition to escape her scrutiny and as a result Hetty’s seduction and impregnation becomes [...] ‘a substitute of vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality’”.²⁷⁶

Glenda Sacks argues that “[t]he virile male attention surrounding the beautiful young milkmaid who works in a fecund environment amongst blooming and bushy flowers and fruitful trees allows Hetty’s impregnation to be interpreted as a supernatural event” and therefore, “[t]he effect of this invisible impregnation and resultant pregnancy has mythological undertones, an Ovidian space where nature, animal and [people] engage in sexual encounters” as “[i]n the description of Hetty in the garden, where ‘tall hollyhocks beginning to flower’ and the evening sunbeams ‘pierced through the apple boughs... which rested on her round cheek and neck as if they were in love with her’” in a way “personifies elements of nature in the guise of the lovers ‘caressing’ the beautiful farm girl”.²⁷⁷ “These scene”, Glenda Sacks maintains, “conjures up the multitude of mythological tales in which an especially beautiful human attracts the attention of the gods who in turn transform themselves into animals or elements of nature” so as “to have sexual intercourse with that individual”.²⁷⁸

²⁷³ Ibid., pp. 85-87

²⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 87-88

²⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 88

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

“Even though George Eliot’s novels are mainly situated in the English midlands of her childhood”, Glenda Sacks points out that “cloud-borne angels, prophets, sybils and heroic warriors’ remain imbricated in the text along with her use of mythology, allegorical references and beast fable” and that “[t]he wealth of allusions in George Eliot’s novels were understood and shared by a different types and classes of Victorian readers, from learned literary [people] who shared ‘community of mind’ to people who relied on others to read them”.²⁷⁹

3.2 *The Mill on the Floss*

3.2.1 *Realism in The Mill on the Floss*

“In September 1859”, according to Nancy Henry, George Eliot and George Henry Lewes “traveled to Gainsborough, finding that the town and the River Trent would serve well as models for the setting she had in mind for her new novel”, *The Mill on the Floss*, thus “turn[ing] Gainsborough into St Ogg’s, the River Trent into the Floss and the Idle into the Ripple”.²⁸⁰ “Despite denying, after the publication of *Scenes [of Clerical Life]*, that her characters had originals”, Nancy Henry maintains that Eliot “often felt that she needed to find an original place on which to model the settings of her stories, no matter how much she would then fictionalize those settings”, and “[t]his drawing from life” became, “a consistent feature of her realism as she combined observation of actual places she had visited [...] with research to describe as accurately as possible the original places on which she modeled the settings of her novels”.²⁸¹

Nancy Henry maintains that, although “Eliot was obliged to deny any one-to-one relationship between real people and the character she created in her fiction [...] she clearly based aspects of the young Maggie and Tom Tulliver on Mary Ann and Isaac Evans” and even “the Dodson sisters on her own aunts, the Pearson sisters”.²⁸²

3.2.2 *Inspirations for The Mill on the Floss*

According to Avrom Fleishman too *The Mill on the Floss* be considered “an autobiographical novel”.²⁸³ But besides this “autobiographical context”, Nancy Henry argues that in the depiction of relationship between the Tulliver’s siblings there may be seen “signs of

²⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 92

²⁸⁰ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 112

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Ibid., p. 113

²⁸³ A. Fleishman, *op. cit.*, p. 101

Wordsworth's influence" as it appears to be the recollection of her youth "in the tranquillity of later years", but also because the story that is narrated in the novel seems to draw from Wordsworth's 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey' (1798)" and 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood' (1807), concerning in particular their themes, that are Wordsworth's relation to her beloved sister Dorothea in the former, and the "[focus] on the intensity of [their] [childhoods]" which is instead present in the latter, although Eliot deals more of the sufferings she had endured during her early years, while Wordsworth remembers his childhood's "freshness and joy".²⁸⁴

Nancy Henry maintains that "[t]he most painful sequences of the novel involve Maggie's agonies as a result of Tom's narrow sense of justice".²⁸⁵ As a matter of fact, Eliot stresses how even when they were children "Tom [...] was of the opinion that Maggie was a silly little thing" although he "[s]till [...] was very fond of his sister, and meant always to take care of her, make her his housekeeper, and punisher her when she did wrong".²⁸⁶ Nancy Henry argues that "[t]here is bitterness in the analysis of Tom's limitations, even amidst sympathetic elaboration of the pressures exercised upon him by his family and society", and "[t]o the extent that Tom's character is based on Isaac Evans, it must also have been mingled with a sense of injustice she felt as an adult when her brother acted to cut her off not only from himself but from the other members of her family" too.²⁸⁷

But, "[b]etween autobiography and pure invention", Nancy Henry points out, "lies one of the most distinctive attributes of Eliot's art" that is "the neutralized allusion to other texts", as "*The Mill*'s style of realism integrates historical research – on floods, water rights and the laws governing financial failure – with literary works familiar to many Victorian readers".²⁸⁸

3.2.3 Criticism to the society of that time

A. S. Byatt maintains that Eliot "in *The Mill on the Floss* more than in any of her other books, saw herself engaged in [...] an effort to record local particularities of speech, landscape, custom and morality", which was probably inspired by Wilhelm Riehl's works on natural history.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁴ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 114

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁶ G. Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, A. S. Byatt (ed.), London, Penguin Books, 2003, p. 44

²⁸⁷ N. Henry, *op. cit.*

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 113

²⁸⁹ A. S. Byatt, "Introduction" in A. S. Byatt (ed.), *The Mill on the Floss*, A. S. Byatt (ed.), London: Penguin Books, 2003, p. xvii

George Eliot “follows the history of St. Ogg’s, as Riehl and Niebuhr followed Germany and Rome”, according to A. S. Byatt, “from its Saxon origins through the Civil War to the prosperity of Mr Deane’s warehouses, from the legendary Ogg, son of Beorl [...], who saved the Blessed Virgin in flood-time, to the drowned Maggie Tulliver” and she also “traces the history of religion in the place from primitive myth and legend to the Catholic question under the Duke of Wellington” and moreover, Eliot “uses [...] imagery derived from geological and natural historical observations to characterize the ‘primitive’ nature of the religious views and ‘mental condition of these emmet-like Dodsons and Tullivers’”.²⁹⁰ “It is characteristic of her style”, A. S. Byatt argues, “to compare her limited characters to ‘lower’ forms of animal life, or even plant life, and the industry of the Dodsons and Tullivers”, which “besides being compared to that of the emmets or ants, is also seen as something which will vanish like the ‘angular skeletons of villages of the Rhône’”.²⁹¹

“There is an ambivalence”, according to A. S. Byatt, “about the effects of the effects of the movements of time on individuals and local societies, which is not perhaps immediately apparent” and “George Eliot continues to discuss how the ‘oppressive narrowness’ of the ‘tragic-comic’, ‘old-fashioned family life’ acted on Tom and Maggie”, therefore, “[t]here is a sense of decadence, of lost vitalities, social and cultural, about St Ogg’s life” and “George Eliot sets herself to understand the grown Tom and Maggie by following their growth, and an aspect of this growth which cannot be ignored is their contact with the world’s culture, with the developed arts and sciences and literature which were possibly their heritage”.²⁹²

Avrom Fleishman maintains that “[t]he satirical force of [the] extended accounts of bourgeois narrowness” used by Eliot in her novel “is on a level with Balzac, or with the near-contemporaneous *Madame Bovary*”, and “[w]hat distinguishes it among such exercises in *épater le bourgeois* is Eliot’s keen sense of class distinctions, even within the bourgeoisie”, although “[i]n contrast to the naturalist portraits excursions of the preceding novel these realist portraits among them are integrated into, even determinative of the novel’s action”.²⁹³ As a matter of fact, “in passing from the lower-middle-class or yeomanry status of her parents, through her negative encounters with the rentier aunts and uncles Pullet and Glegg, to romance with the son of a professional, lawyer Wakem”, Avrom Fleishman points out, “Maggie makes an ascent through the class structure as upwardly mobile and as precarious as that of

²⁹⁰ Ibid., p. xxi

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Ibid., p. xxii

²⁹³ A. Fleishman, *op. cit.*, p. 103

Thackeray's Becky Sharpe before her" and "[t]he fact that her advancement is measured in cultural rather than material or status terms", Avrom Fleishman maintains, "makes it no less a social process a no less a disastrous one".²⁹⁴

"At the bottom of this middling hierarchy are the Tullivers", Avrom Fleishman maintains, in which the father's "ungrammatical and accented English [...] betrays his rustic origins", although he wants "an education for his son" in particular "in business dealings", as he is "conscious and resentful of his inferiority among the genteel".²⁹⁵ "The family cultural assets", according to Avrom Fleishman, "are limited to the few books named in Maggie's repertoire" and therefore, "[a] step up from the scene of Maggie's origin is the Pullet household, a country retreat", where uncle Pullet "is an amateur gardener on the less extensive but more intensive scale than his brother-in-law, and his menagerie consists largely of caterpillars, slugs and insects, but his interest in 'natural history' is more intellectual".²⁹⁶

"At the top of this tree sit the Deanes", Avrom Fleishman maintains, where "Maggie has [...] made it into the upper-middle class, at least by temporary acceptance into the Deane household for an extended stay, after two years' reduction in class as a teacher in a 'third-rate school'", and where, moreover, "the Deane's culture [...] is predominantly musical".²⁹⁷

Avrom Fleishman suggests that "from the [cultural and social] account" of Maggie's growth, Eliot seems to "ha[ve] left behind the technique of intercalating extended passages of the quasi-ethnographic description associated with naturalism, which bear only tangential references to plot development or characterization".²⁹⁸

According to David Carroll, "*The Mill on the Floss* [...] is the most anthropologic of George Eliot's novels", since "it traces the natural history of these provincial families and their strange customs" and, moreover, it also "deploys [...] a wide range of analogies and metaphors from classical literature and the natural sciences, but it does it so ironically, as if to establish its own fictional mode in the territory between, traditionally that of the folklorist and anthropologist".²⁹⁹

3.2.4 *The Mill on the Floss as a Bildungsroman*

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 103-104

²⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 105-106

²⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 107

²⁹⁹ D. Carroll, *George Eliot and the conflict of interpretations*, cit., p. 107

But the representation of the “esoteric customs and elaborate rituals” of the Dodsons and Tullivers, David Carroll maintains, makes George Eliot “both [distance] the world of the novel, and then, through the children, [bring] it close as she uncovers its assumptions and values” and “[w]hat is being uncovered is [...] a world-view” and therefore, David Carroll points out, “the narrator as anthropologist is interpreting this way of life itself as an interpretative grid, a collage of pagan and Christian elements, which mediates between the families and their conditions”.³⁰⁰

“Such a stance, which predominates in the childhood half of the novel”, according to David Carroll, “foregrounds the problems of interpretation in quite a different way from *Adam Bede*”, as “[i]n *The Mill on the Floss* [...] the narrator allies [...] with the cultivated reader in the difficult task of decoding this oppressively narrow and eccentric form of provincial life in the more recent past (1829-39)”.³⁰¹ “And there is a second feature of the novel which foregrounds interpretation in a decisive way”, according to David Carroll, and it is that “*The Mill on the Floss* is a critical adaptation of the *Bildungsroman*, and, as such, shows Tom and Maggie struggling to adapt their inherited world-view to the conditions in which they are growing up” and “[w]hat epitomises this most clearly is their desire – expressed as a refrain in the novel – for a ‘key’ to ‘the painful riddle of this world’”³⁰². “As [the] dilemmas [of the Dodsons and Tullivers] crowd in upon the children”, David Carroll maintains, “these two dimensions of the novel are seen to be inseparable”, and moreover, “the family world-views [Tom and Maggie] have inherited [...] is both the origin and the obstacle to their own search for an interpretative key of life”.³⁰³

“The co-ordinates of the children’s world”, David Carroll maintains, “are the respective codes of their parents’ families, the Dodsons and Tullivers” and, as “binary oppositions” were rather appreciated by Victorian writers, such as Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin., George Eliot too “domesticates with sustained irony her fundamental binary opposition in these two provincial families so that the values and assumptions of the Dodsons and Tullivers become the building blocks out of which Tom and Maggie have to construct their world-views”.³⁰⁴ “From a distance, provincial life may appear uniformly and oppressively narrow”, David Carroll points out, but “on a closer look, crucial differences emerge” and “[a]s

³⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 107-108

³⁰¹ Ibid., p. 108

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., pp. 108-109

these are investigated by the narrator, [the latter] undercovers two quite different logics, each of which seeks and fails to control the uncertainties of life”.³⁰⁵

According to David Carroll, “[f]or Mr Tulliver, the mill is the centre of his emotional and imaginative life” and “[i]t links his present existence directly to that prelapsarian state when he was a child within the security of the family, bound by the kind of close personal relationships he still maintains with his sister Gritty”.³⁰⁶ “But his future never materialised”, David Carroll points out, “and the more confusing life becomes, the more his mind harks back to that time of simple, unquestioned verities before the devil, in the shape of the lawyers, began to interfere in the affairs of the world” and “[t]he lawyers are particularly dangerous because the prelapsarian identification of words and things, signifiers and signifieds, has been fractured”.³⁰⁷

“Mr Tulliver is vulnerable”, David Carroll maintains, “because the mill is not only the centre of his emotional life, it is also a piece of mortgaged property” [...] [a]nd it is [...] in the public domain, in that other reality made up of laws, money, debts, and interest rates that he appears so deficient and his enemies so cunning” because “[h]e is a man of ends not means, of metaphoric identification (‘water is water’) not of metonymic accretion”, and, therefore “[t]he more he identifies himself with the absolutes of water, land, and mill, the more unintelligible the contemporaneous, changing, provincial world becomes”.³⁰⁸ Moreover, David Carroll points out, “[h]e has to keep creating in in explanation new enemies”, since “[a]nyone who challenges his predominance is quickly placed in the devilish half of his Manichean universe – lawyers, Dodsons, Pivart, Papists, even Tom and Maggie at different times”.³⁰⁹

“Tulliver is by his very nature unable to accept [the] contradiction inherent in his theory of life”, David Carroll maintains, and “[h]is paralysis is the sign of this impasse from which family memories briefly revive him, only to be superseded by the rages which conjure up further devilish enemies and return him to his living death”.³¹⁰

“For Mr Tulliver, the mill, the water, and the land are co-extensive with his emotional life”, David Carroll points out, and therefore “[h]e has remained in the pre-industrialized, pre-commercial rural world, expressed most vividly in the novel as the pastoral of childhood”.³¹¹ This “concern with objects” according to David Carroll, is common “to both” the Dodsons and

³⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 109

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., pp. 109-110

³⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 110

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Ibid., p. 112

the Tullivers, although “the facticity of the Dodsons [is very different]” from that of the Tullivers, as “[t]heir spontaneous, inner life has all gone into their objects – the teaspoons, the teapots, their bonnets – and congealed there”, and therefore, “they are able to manipulate [their] objects adeptly, according to their family rituals and without emotional complications”, although “[c]ompared to the Tullivers, the Dodsons are practical people with great skills of survival in their changing provincial world”, despite “death [being] their constant concern and topic of conversation”, since “[i]t is the final contingency they are all seeking to prepare for, control, and survive”.³¹² “The practical preparations for death become ends in themselves”, according to David Carroll, and “[i]n a world of solid, valuable objects death has no place” and therefore, “[a]ll the properties will have been observed and death will have become so much a part of the public domain that it will not be experienced as a personal, private experience”, because “[i]f their possessions survive, they will too”.³¹³ David Carroll maintains that while “Mr Tulliver’s failure was his inability to recognise a public world independent of himself; the Dodson failure is the opposite”, that is “the inability to acknowledge the end of the self which has become so completely ritualised and objectified in the public domain”, although “[t]he Dodsons don’t only value material objects” since their “clan” is extremely important to them, and “[t]heir clan is a network of human relationships within which they have clear obligations”, although “these obligations have been externalised to such an extent that the only relations which have any validity are guaranteed blood relationships” and therefore, “[t]he result is a clan system with virtually no emotional validation”.³¹⁴ “What is lacking”, according to David Carroll, “is an infusion of the Tullivers spontaneity and warmth” as “[t]heir only concern is public disgrace”, and “[t]heirs is no Manichean world”, meaning that, “if someone fails, they deserve it”.³¹⁵

Therefore, “Dodsons and Tullivers”, David Carroll maintains, “embody vital but partial truths which, when they meet within the family, proceed to destroy each other”³¹⁶ and “[t]he plotting of the first half of the novel demonstrates this mutual destruction which culminates in the bankruptcy” which “brings upon [Mr Tulliver and his wife Bessy mutual] ‘deadly mortification’”.³¹⁷

³¹² Ibid. pp. 112-114

³¹³ Ibid., p. 114

³¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 114-115

³¹⁵ Ibid., p. 115

³¹⁶ Ibid., p. 116

³¹⁷ Ibid.

“The general ambience in which the children grow up, then”, David Carroll points out, “is one in which life, ‘a painful riddle’, is lived in ‘the maze of this puzzling world’ without any obvious key” and as “Tom and Maggie are hybrids born into a world which believes in the fixity of species [...] [t]heir dilemma, representative in one sense, is acute because of the comprehensive opposition between their parents’ theories of life”.³¹⁸

“This is the reality which Dodsons and Tullivers have divided between [Tom and Maggie]”, according to David Carroll, and “[t]he Dodsons decide early that Tom belongs to their species [...] while Mr Tulliver constantly sees his mother and his sister in Maggie”, thus, “[t]he first difficulty with this is that the Dodson-Tulliver classification contradicts classification by gender”, since “Dodson values are supposed to be transmitted through the women”, while “Tulliver values through the men” and therefore, “Mrs Tulliver [...] wants a Dodson daughter as neat, pretty, and docile as her niece Lucy”, while Mr Tulliver, instead, “wants a son with the skills necessary to run rings round the lawyers – someone like himself [...] with a little more education”, but “[b]oth are disappointed”.³¹⁹

“Nevertheless”, according to David Carroll, “the two families don’t give up easily”, and therefore, “Maggie is tortured in various Dodson ways when she refuses to conform [...] while Tom is sent off to school to his ordeal by Latin grammar, a teaching device compared by the narrator to ‘that ingenious instrument the thumb-screw’” and “[b]oth regimes achieve the opposite of what they intend”, since “[t]he more Maggie is forced into the Dodson mould, the more her Tulliver characteristics of spontaneity and rebellion assert themselves”, and the same is with Tom, too, whose “confident Dodson sense of the factual and the physical is undermined by the conventional and highly abstract education provided by the Rev. Stelling”.³²⁰

“With the family bankruptcy”, David Carroll maintains, “any hope of the children reconciling the opposing sides of their natures [...] is lost”, since “Tom leaves school, puts aside the dreams and ambitions linking him with his father, and hands himself over to the Dodson side of the family to be fitted into the world of commerce”, and he eventually “submit[s] himself to learning the ways of the mercantile world of St Ogg’s”, since “his underlying single motive is eventually to re-possess the mill, the charged symbol of his father’s life, and wipe out the family disgrace”, but thus, “Tom excludes more and more from his life in order to achieve this end”, and “his career becomes a slow and dramatic suicide”.³²¹ “From

³¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 116-117

³¹⁹ Ibid., p. 119

³²⁰ Ibid., p. 120

³²¹ Ibid., pp. 120-121

the opposing elements he has inherited”, David Carroll maintains, “circumstances have required him to combine his strong Tulliver pride with his pragmatic Dodson sense of fact into a formidable combination” but although “[t]he two complementary but restricted sides of his nature fit together,” they “[deny] him the [...] satisfactions of either the Dodsons or the Tullivers”.³²²

“Maggie’s career provides a very different model of the *Bildungsroman*”, David Carroll points out, since being “[c]ut off abruptly by the bankruptcy from her previous memories and satisfactions, Maggie’s ‘conflict between the inward impulse and outward fact, which is the lot of every imaginative and passionate nature’ is exacerbated” and therefore, “[i]nstead of Tom’s concentration of purpose, there is increasing instability and oscillation”, and “[t]his is *her* long suicide”.³²³ “In many ways”, according to David Carroll, “the rhythm of her life is similar to her father’s”, which is “a destructive oscillation between moods of emotional aggrandisement and fulfilment in which reality conforms briefly to the demands of the self”, which are then “followed by moods of despair and fury when these demands are thwarted by an unmalleable world”.³²⁴ “But hers cannot be a simple repetition of her father’s Manichean struggle”, David Carroll maintains, since “[w]ith her passionate Tulliver nature there is a strong sense of external obligations, characteristic of the Dodsons, which denies her any clear-cut victories over the evil principle” and therefore, “[t]he result is that whereas Tom fits together, through abstinence and self-denial [...] Maggie embodies the more positive qualities – Tulliver spontaneous affection and Dodson sense of loyalty – in a life of increasing oscillation” and “[t]hese two versions of the *Bildungsroman*, masculine and feminine, constitute *The Mill on the Floss* even as they deconstruct each other”.³²⁵

According to David Carroll, “the conflict between their parents’ families, which bankrupts and destroys the family at the mill, is internalised in the children’s career”, and “[t]his is what creates the powerful sense of unity and development in the novel” and therefore “[i]n the background of the children’s struggles” there “are the shadowy paradigms of Dodson and Tulliver which are now being re-enacted in more complex permutations”.³²⁶ “What happens, therefore, between brother and sister”, David Carroll maintains, “is a new and more extreme [...] polarisation than the original Dodson and Tulliver conflict” as, “Tom’s self-willed denials create a united but truncated life, while Maggie’s character is continually decentered

³²² Ibid., p. 121

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Ibid., p. 122

by oscillations of clashing elements”, and “[b]ecause of these differences they quarrel with increasing violence, and yet they know that they need each other, that growth into fuller life from their abbreviated childhood cannot be achieved separately” and “[i]t is this which controls the pattern of their lives” as they “again and again [...] drift apart in alienation and misunderstanding only to be reunited with increasing desperation and relief”.³²⁷

“The title of the novel”, David Carroll points out, “underlines both the similarities and conflict in the children’s careers”, since “[b]oth are seeking to recover the mill which has been lost”, Tom by “[i]ntending] on re-possessing it as a piece of property, free of debt”, while Maggie by “seeking to recover the state of unified consciousness which the mill has symbolised since childhood” and “[t]he plotting of the novel”, according to David Carroll, “shows their aims becoming increasingly antagonistic as their quests intensify” as “Tom becomes more single-minded than any Dodson, while Maggie’s inner conflicts are more turbulent than even her father’s puzzlement”.³²⁸

According to David Carroll “Tom submits himself completely and at a great emotional cost to the commercial system which defeated his father”, while “Maggie [...] seeks to recover everything that he has rejected”, that is “the dreams and demands of the self reconciled to the world through a reciprocated love” and, therefore, “[a]fter each attempt and failure to achieve this”, Maggie must return to the mill for security and recuperation”, and “[o]nly from there she can start again”.³²⁹ “After Mr Tulliver’s death”, David Carroll maintains, “these departures and returns take the form of quarrels and reconciliations with Tom”, because “[i]f the present can’t provide the key to the unity she is seeking, then her brother, her complementary half, is the means to the pastoral holism of childhood” and “[t]he first separation occurs when Tom goes away to school and ends with the bankruptcy”, but “[e]ach time they move further apart as they seek their own fulfilments” and “each time it requires a more serious crisis to bring them together until only the final catastrophe of the flood can achieve this”.³³⁰

“From his position of self-denial”, David Carroll maintains, “Tom sceptically observes and judges Maggie’s erratic career” and “[u]ntil the very last, she refuses to accept the truth of the novel’s realism that there is always a discrepancy between inner desire and outward fact”, and while “the Dodsons sought to circumvent it by curtailing the inner life [...] Tulliver [instead circumvents it] by outmanoeuvring the devil’s party which was gaining control of the

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ Ibid., pp. 122-123

³²⁹ Ibid., p, 123

³³⁰ Ibid.

world” and “Maggie uses both methods in various forms, unwilling to accept the impossibility of complete fulfilment”.³³¹

“Unlike Tom”, David Carroll maintains, “what Maggie has not grasped is that ‘renunciation is sorrow’” and although Maggie tries to find key to understand the world in “Thomas à Kempis[‘] [...] *Imitation of Christ*”, she “deploys [the book] to satisfy separately both sides of her nature”, thus “turning the message of renunciation into a precarious means of satisfaction” although “eventually”, Maggie “discovers that [the *Imitations*] [...] offers a ‘clue’ to a life to be lived rather than a formula to be copied”.³³²

“Maggie is now seventeen”, David Carroll maintains, “and this particular state of equilibrium can only be maintained by suppressing the full demands of her nature”, although “Philip, on his re-appearance makes her realise [that] [...] ‘stupefaction is not resignation’”, and “[a]s a result, ‘a doubleness’ creeps between her family loyalty and her friendship with the son of the man her father has cursed”.³³³ “Philip’s attraction”, according to David Carroll, “is that he seems to reconcile in his character the elements previously opposed in her life, the attachment to her brother and the desire for emotional and artistic fulfilment” and, moreover, “[a]s well as his intellectual and artistic interests”, Philip “is gentle, sympathetic, and understanding”, and for this reason, “[h]e would be an ideal replacement for Tom”.³³⁴ “But although Philip offers a seductive synthesis”, David Carroll points out, Maggie “tells him that she cannot reject Tom”, and “[i]t is in these moments of adjournment, through a kind of psychological legerdemain, that Maggie characteristically achieves a brief fulfilment by acknowledging and suspending the discrepancies of her life”, that is “until Tom forces upon her the necessity of choice”.³³⁵

“These choices, under which Maggie ‘writhes’”, David Carroll maintains, “become increasingly unacceptable and anguished because she accepts both the truth and the incompleteness of Tom’s position” and “[w]hereas Tom acknowledges no disparity between conduct and feeling, Maggie stresses the inability of the former to express the latter” and as “[t]hese are the palpable truths, the brother and sister force on each other, and on this occasion it takes the death of their father to bring them together again”.³³⁶

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid., pp. 123-124

³³³ Ibid., p. 125

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ Ibid., pp. 125-126

“After three years of teaching and submission”, David Carroll points out, “Maggie returns to St Ogg’s for the final phase of struggles and temptation”, but “[c]oming under the influence of Stephen Guest, the ‘negative peace’ of her life is disturbed irrevocably as she glimpses the ‘brighter aerial-world’ of her hopes”, and “[a]gain she is seeking balance in a state of unresolved equipoise her loyalty to Tom and her affection for Philip, each compensating for the other’s deficiencies”, thus “creating for herself a world without the labour of choice”.³³⁷ As a matter of fact, according to David Carroll, “Tom’s demands enable [Maggie] to keep at bay Philip’s emotional claims, while Philip provides her with the affection Tom denies”, and “[w]hile the two men neutralize each other in this way, other appetites which they do not include assail and get possession of Maggie”, but “Stephen’s impact is so powerful, because he not only brings the new element of sexual attraction, but he also duplicates, subsumes, and reconciles in his character the conflicting qualities of Tom and Philip”.³³⁸ As a matter of fact, according to David Carroll, Stephen “is strong, influential, and decisive in the world of men, business, and action [...] and, as the son of the firm, he has achieved his position without the grinding effort which has stunted Tom”, and “[a]t the same time, he represents like Philip the world of art and intellect [...] but without Philip’s uncertainty and physical disability” and therefore, “Stephen’s presence briefly neutralises rather than resolves the other’s claims, so that he becomes simply the next stage in the destructive dialectic of Maggie’s career”.³³⁹

“In this final stage”, David Carroll maintains “the concealed desires of both Maggie and Stephen are so intense, and yet their public obligations so clear, that they have to consign their feelings to the twilight world below the level of conduct and action”, so that “they can allow their minds to deceive themselves that nothing is happening” and this “is another form of the ‘adjournment’ of decision and choice at which Maggie has become so expert”, and, moreover, “[t]he growth of their intimacy is a wonderfully dramatised piece of self-deception, as they continually assert their obligations to others while at the same time drifting together, like sleep-walkers in a timeless world without memory or choice” and “[o]f special appeal to Maggie is the fact that [Stephen], who apparently reconciles the clashing polarities of her previous life, is not only attracted by her”, but “he is [also] submissive”.³⁴⁰

“Stephen, in contrast”, David Carroll maintains, “is fascinated by the alternations in Maggie’s moods as she switches her opium dream to resistance when her sense of duty re-

³³⁷ Ibid., p. 126

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 126-127

asserts itself, and back again”.³⁴¹ “In other words”, according to David Carroll, “Maggie’s search for, and inability to find, a ‘key’ to this puzzling world is now recognised as an inability to categorise her”, and “[i]f character is world-view, then this is inevitable” and, therefore, “unable to impose a coherent interpretation upon the world, she is herself uninterpretable”.³⁴²

David Carroll points out that Maggie “bewilders and fascinates the fashionable and snobbish provincial world of St Ogg’s, [...] [s]he challenges [...] the categories upon which its view of the world is constructed, and succeeds in confusing all her friends”, so much so, that even “Tom, Philip, and Lucy misconstrue [their] relationship”.³⁴³

From there everything falls apart. They travel further than they needed in order to come back home in time, but despite this other incident, Maggie is unable to fight back Stephen’s wish to leave their relatives behind, get married and live happily together. As Carroll notices, Maggie and Stephen do not immediately deal with the consequences of their actions that day. As a matter of fact, it is only the following day, as Maggie wakes up at dawn, that symbolically it dawns on her that they need to take action for what has just happened.³⁴⁴ But she is stuck now, because, as Carroll point out, “[s]he is neither able to go forward into an alienated future with Stephen or back to the past to rejoin her betrayed family and friends” although it is in this moment, “[t]hrough this dilemma” that “[Maggie] comes finally to a true understanding of the meaning of renunciation” and moreover, she is finally able to learn that “there is no final interpretative key [to life], that there is always a discrepancy between inner and outer, and that this form of suffering is the meaning of renunciation” and this new understanding is what encourages Maggie to finally speak her mind to Stephen, and despite Stephen being reluctant in letting Maggie go, she “rejects his anthesis between natural law and outward ties”, thus enabling herself to “move beyond the Dodson-Tulliver conflict, which has bedevilled her life, towards a genuine reconciliation”.³⁴⁵ What also Maggie has come to realize, according to Carroll, is that “[d]uty and desire can be grasped simultaneously and, as they come together, they change their natures” and thus “outward claims become inner faithfulness, while emotional desires become loving sympathy” and therefore, whether Maggie decides to stay and marry Stephen or to leave him and return home, both choices mean “painful renunciation” as

³⁴¹ Ibid., p. 127

³⁴² Ibid., p. 128

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 130

³⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 131

“each course of action both fulfils and denies legitimate claims, each victory simultaneously a defeat”.³⁴⁶

The choice she is going to make is her “trial”, according to Carroll, and the decision she takes is an unexpected one, as she chooses to set homeward, and face the community of St Ogg’s, and in particular, her brother.³⁴⁷ But Tom’s reaction to Maggie’s return is not a kind, as he sends her away from their house and tells her how much he despises her behaviour and that he deems her “deceitful”.³⁴⁸ He has been able just recently to redeem the family mill, and as Carroll pinpoints, “[h]e interprets [Maggie’s] liaison with Stephen in the harshest light as another attempt to sabotage his hard-won success”, although “Maggie now needs [the mill] as an emotional symbol of her new life” and therefore, it is as if “Tom [...] in turn, [is sabotaging] her planned life of belated renunciation”.³⁴⁹ Moreover, Carroll also notices how Tom’s lifelong selflessness has eventually “withered all feeling and sympathy”, while Maggie’s “failures have led her the final discovery of true renunciation” and thus Tom’s “rejection [...] prevents [Maggie] putting into practice her sacrifice of expiation”.³⁵⁰

Harsh is also the reaction of the community of St Ogg concerning Maggie’s return. What their attention is focused on, according to Carroll, is not the process of the incidents of the boat trip day, but rather the result of the events of that day, and the result is that contrary to the community’s “assumption”, since Maggie has returned to St Oggs “without a *trousseau*, without a husband”, she has not become Mrs Stephen Guest.³⁵¹ While the community might have been less harsh towards Maggie had she returned as Stephen’s wife, it cannot accept the fact that Maggie has returned alone, according to Carroll, but, despite the possible results of her boat trip, “Maggie is condemned either way” since “if she came back married she could be looked down in her lapse, if unmarried then she must have failed in her scheming” and this attitude towards Maggie shows the “hypocrisies” of the community of St Oggs.³⁵² Therefore, the community has now shunned her and not even the letter Stephen sends to Dr Kenn, the parish of the town, to clear Maggie’s reputation helps, but he warns her,

“But I am bound to tell you, Miss Tulliver, that not only the experience of my whole life, but my observation within the last three days, makes me fear that there is hardly

³⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 132

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ G. Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, cit., p. 503

³⁴⁹ D. Carroll, *George Eliot and the conflict of interpretations*, cit., p. 133

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ Ibid., p. 134

³⁵² Ibid.

any evidence which will save you from the painful effect of false imputations. The persons who are the most incapable of a conscientious struggle such as yours, are precisely those who will be likely to shrink from you on the ground of an unjust judgment; because they will not believe in your struggle”³⁵³

The rumours are circulating now, and no matter what could be said or done to restore Maggie’s character can be effective, since she is going to have forever upon herself those allegations against her. Her mother, though, does not abandon her, and leaves with her when Tom send her away. Even her strict aunt Glegg offers her to come and stay at her house, but also her childhood friend Bob Jakin and Dr Kenn decide to be helpful. Moreover, both Philip and Lucy so not hold any ill sentiment towards Maggie.

3.2.5 *The mixing of realism, myth-making and symbolism*

But, in the end, Maggie reputation cannot properly be restored, and what is more, a letter from Stephen might draw her back into temptation, and therefore, her story ends in tragedy, as she dies during the flood that is affecting St Oggs. Their grievous ending conveys in itself myth, realism and symbolism, according to Carroll, and myth is present here, as their death re-enacts the mythical one of Ogg, although, eventually, it is also the terrible death of a sister and a brother who are taken from a flood, despite in death Maggie and Tom being reunited one last time and cannot be separated anymore.³⁵⁴

Henry also suggests a strong departure from realism on Eliot’s part with the deluge that concludes *The Mill on the Floss*, since the tragic death that Maggie and Tom have to go through has somehow cathartic effects on Eliot. It is as if she was personally leaving behind her former life and her “provincial life”, according to Henry, and artistically she was creating a new “aesthetic beginning”.³⁵⁵ Moreover, according to Henry, Eliot’s prose is becoming “denser and more complex”, although her adoption of a river is perfect to make symbolic allusions, and also it is easier for Eliot to link reality with symbolism, as both actual and mythological rivers are a force of nature, and moreover, by adopting the metaphor of “the fluidity of time and memory” Eliot is able to go back in the past and “remake it in the present”.³⁵⁶

³⁵³ G. Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, cit., p. 516

³⁵⁴ D. Carroll, *George Eliot and the conflict of interpretations*, cit., pp. 137-139

³⁵⁵ N. Henry, *op. cit.*, 2012

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 114

The myth of the great flood which affected St Ogg's in the past has always frightened Maggie since her father told her and her brother about it, and eventually her worst nightmare becomes a reality and her fate. Interestingly, from the beginning her mother fears that at any time she might drown, at that is exactly was somehow prophetically happens to Maggie, according to Henry.³⁵⁷

According to Fleishman the myth in the novel occurs in Eliot's description of the origin of the town, in particular in the memory the community of its patron, Ogg, "son of Beorl", thus giving the town a mythological origin, besides myth being also present in the final pages of the novel, where both Maggie and Tom die in the flood. In a way, it is as if the flood washes away all the sins and troubles which have affected Maggie throughout her life, and also, it eternally reunites the two siblings who in the last period of their lives had distanced themselves due to the incident between Maggie and Stephen and Tom's strictness towards his sister.³⁵⁸

3.2.6 Sympathy and morality in *The Mill on the Floss*

Maggie is the character that conveys the sympathy in the story, not much among the other characters, but in the reader. Maggie is a girl who feels the need to be loved, therefore she always feels conflicted inside. She loves her brother dearly, but Tom is rather cold to her, and tries to dictate over her life, especially after their father's death, when Tom takes up the paternal role towards Maggie. What subsequently happens is that she takes an interest in Philip Wakem, but Tom cannot approve of their relationship because he blames Philip's father for the struggles they had to face, as Mr Tulliver lost his job and after a stroke, his health gradually decaying and he eventually dying. Therefore, Tom takes it upon himself to provide and take care of his sister. But, as Recchio suggests, what also provides sympathy towards Maggie in the novel is "the consistent sense of the discontinuity between Maggie and the story others in the novel construct around her" as sympathy is particularly conveyed in the novel through the rumours and speculations regarding Maggie, which can become rather frustrating as these may be highly misleading and give the wrong idea about a person. Readers may relate to the disheartening consequence of malicious, or even fake, rumours and therefore the attitude Tom, and the community of St Oggs have towards Maggie lead the readers to feel for her, and for this reason, sympathize with her.³⁵⁹ Moreover, according to Recchio, Maggie ends up

³⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 115

³⁵⁸ A. Fleishman, *op. cit.*, p. 102

³⁵⁹ T. Recchio, "Towards a Theory of Narrative Sympathy: Characters, Story, and the Body in "The Mill on the Floss"", *Dickens Studies Annual*, vol. 38, 2007, p. 127

“internaliz[ing] the conflict between her inward condition and external circumstances because her relation to those circumstances is defined in gendered terms and regulated by the men in her life”.³⁶⁰ Being Tom the most influential person in Maggie’s life is, he somehow becomes the “representative of the law, the family, the father”, who constantly tries to control his emotional sister, according to Recchio, although Maggie has always been “resisting of others’ physical control of her whole life”, and Maggie’s rebellious actions can also be noticed even in her childhood, like when she got jealous of her cousin Lucy which then leads her to “[push] [her] in the mud and then [run] away”.³⁶¹ Despite Maggie’s struggles to listen to her brother, she cannot repress herself completely, as Recchio points out, and moreover, while Philip Wakem and Stephen Guest may have also a strong influence on her, Maggie still tries to “resist the determinations of the male desire” in order to “sustain any genuine sense of her integrity in the world”.³⁶² Interestingly, Recchio suggests that Maggie’s “refusal to live others’ stories about her and her partial and flailing efforts to live evokes the situation of most women at the time” and therefore the novel may be seen as a “powerful critique of Victorian patriarchy” that is conveyed the sympathy provoked in the readers.³⁶³

According to A. S. Byatt. Maggie’s initial egoism, which influences all her childhood, seems unintentional, being this selfishness a sort of projection of one’s self. Byatt highlight too how this depiction of Maggie is affected by Feuerbach’s ideology which strongly influenced Eliot’s throughout her life.³⁶⁴ And of Feuerbachian influence seems also to be Maggie’s subsequent moral growth, which to Feuerbach is derived from the acknowledgment of the “difference of others”, according to Byatt. Moreover, this growth of one’s morality for Feuerbach is a “psychological necessity” in order to become “fellow-feeling” when it is rightly adopted.³⁶⁵

What is more, Byatt suggests that there is some kind of paradox in the novels, since while on the one hand with her autobiographical Eliot hinted at showing “that strong and deep roots make good men, that morality is derived from the development of particular family and local affections into abstract conceptions of duty and piety”, while on the other hand, the decisions that she made in reality estranged her from her family.³⁶⁶

³⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 132

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Ibid., pp. 132-134

³⁶³ Ibid., p. 135

³⁶⁴ A. S. Byatt, *op. cit.*, p. xxviii

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., p. xiii

IV Chapter: George Eliot's short stories

Between and after the publication of her early successful novels, George Eliot wrote a set of short stories which were prominently different from *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*, as the novelist distanced herself from the realistic traits which up until that point had characterized her writings.

4.1 *The Lifted Veil*

4.1.1 Realism in *The Lifted Veil*

Between the publication of *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*, in July 1859 on the *Blackwood's Magazine*, George Eliot published *The Lifted Veil*, a novella which she wrote with the intention of rendering it a '*jeu de melancolie*', as Helen Small points out.³⁶⁷ Enrica Villari argues that with this novella Eliot decided to deal with something different from her previous "thorough and sympathetic depiction of rural life".³⁶⁸ As a matter of fact, Helen Small

³⁶⁷ H. Small, "Introduction", in H. Small (ed.), *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. x-xi

³⁶⁸ E. Villari, "Introduzione", in E.V. (ed.), *Il velo sollevato*, Venezia: Marsilio, 2010, p. 14

maintains that in *The Lifted Veil* Eliot expresses her “familiarity with depression” from which she had been suffering since her teenage years.³⁶⁹ Moreover, Enrica Villari points out that in the novella a fear of failing is also present, since Latimer is a failed artist. Latimer, thus, also becomes Eliot’s first protagonist who does not come from the rustic past of her previous pieces of fiction, according to Enrica Villari, as he is one of her first characters that live in modernity but who dreams of an epic life and is doomed to be disappointed by his own expectations, and moreover, he is characterized by selfishness, melancholy, and loneliness, and in a way he seems to be prevented from being happy.³⁷⁰

Despite not being a realist tale, the reader may notice some autobiographical references in this novella. As a matter of fact, it could be argued that there are some similarities between Latimer’s and George Eliot’s the family dynamics. One example is the fact that Latimer is born out of a second marriage of his father, and his mother also dies when he is very little, much like Eliot. Even the description that Latimer gives of his father resembles that of Robert Evans, as George Eliot describes Latimer’s father as a “firm, unbending, [and] intensely orderly man”.³⁷¹ Probably, also the jealousy that Latimer feels towards his older brother Alfred are inspired by her relationship with her brother Isaac. As Franco Marucci points out, the similarities between Eliot’s relationship with her brother and Latimer’s with his own are shown in the different characters of the two pair of siblings, Eliot and Latimer being two dreamers, while Isaac and Alfred being more of the pragmatist kind.³⁷²

Besides the autobiographical references present in the novel, other traits belonging to realist novels, are the temporal and spatial references present in the novella, as Latimer cites the date of his death, “20th September 1850”, and moreover, he even cites the places he has visited in his youth, Geneva and Prague, which are also cities Eliot visited throughout her life. But these can be considered the only “realist” elements present in the novella.

4.1.2 Mesmerism and phrenology in *The Lifted Veil*

The themes and atmosphere of this novella fits within the Gothic aesthetics, and Whitney Helms points out also that in it Eliot deals with “clairvoyance, mesmerism, and phrenology”.³⁷³ Helen Small argues that *The Lifted Veil* seems to have been influenced by Mary

³⁶⁹ H. Small, *op. cit.*, p. xxvii

³⁷⁰ E. Villari, “Introduzione”, *Il velo sollevato, cit.*, p. 12

³⁷¹ G. Eliot, *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*, H. Small (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 5

³⁷² F. Marucci, *Storia della letteratura inglese – dal 1832 al 1870 – Il romanzo*, Firenze: Le Lettere, 2003, p. 874

³⁷³ W. Helms, “Aesthetics, Artistry, and Gothicism: George Eliot and “The Lifted Veil””, *George Eliot - George Henry Lewes Studies*, n. 62/63, 2012, p. 50

Shelley's *Frankenstein* as both texts deal with "scientific experimentation with death and life" and "philosophical conflicts" which derive from such experimentations, although in *The Lifted Veil* there also seem to be some similarities with Edgar Allan Poe's 1839 tale 'M. Valdemar', and with James Hogg's 1824 novel *The Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, due to their shared theme of "psychological splitting and doubling".³⁷⁴

According to Small, before writing *The Lifted Veil*, Eliot already had some knowledge of phrenology, as she had read Comte's 1824 *Elements of Phrenology*, and moreover, it could be argued that Charles Bray, too, had been influential for her interest in phrenology, as he strongly believed in this pseudoscience. But she soon distanced herself from this new science, in particular thanks to Lewes, who was rather mistrustful of phrenology, and who even wrote a critique about it in his 1857 *Biographical Dictionary of Philosophy*.³⁷⁵

Besides her knowledge of phrenology, Helen Small maintains that Eliot was also acquainted with mesmerism, as in 1844 she had met W. B. Hodgson, a famous exponent of the mesmeric scientific ideology, and moreover, she seemed also to have probably read Wilkie Collins's articles for the *Reader* that he wrote in 1854 that dealt indeed with mesmerism, although it could be argued that the strongest influence for mesmerism in *The Lifted Veil* is Professor William Gregory's *Letters to a Candid Inquirer, on Animal Magnetism* (1851) in which he reported an experiment that had taken place in Cologne and was about the analysis of the "deep mesmeric sleep" of a male patient.³⁷⁶ What Eliot takes from her research and knowledge on mesmerism is its terminology, and in particular the term "double consciousness", which according to Helen Small is "a sufficiently transparent and malleable term to be able to slip between scientific and non-scientific meanings".³⁷⁷ Moreover, Helen Small maintains, the various descriptive terms and fields which Eliot adopts in her novella "prohibit her readers from perceiving them as rigid old truths or as mere scientific gimmicks".³⁷⁸ Eventually, the final focus on science with the transfusion scene may be understood, according to Small, as a summary of the way this theme has been handled throughout the novella and partly expresses its fear of science and of the extreme consequences experimentations may lead.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁴ H. Small, *op. cit.*, pp. xi-xii

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xviii

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xix

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xxii

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xxiii

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

4.1.3 Gothicism in *The Lifted Veil*

The story begins with Latimer's last moments before dying, and the progression of the story is basically the reminiscence of his life. According to Enrica Villari, Latimer takes the way of narrating his life from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, and this is a way for the protagonist to "dignify" his own story, although there are many similarities between Latimer and Rousseau, being them both orphans of their mothers and having the same sensitivity and both feeling the world around them as hostile. But what differentiates Latimer's story from Rousseau's is the extraordinary events happening in the novella which is conveyed through the clairvoyance Latimer possesses and the revivification episode at the end of the book.³⁸⁰ From his recollections, the reader understands that Latimer has always been an awkward person, but his life takes a turn when he starts having "visions", being struck by moments of clairvoyance. He starts suffering from this after a severe illness that affected him when he was young. It happens first when Latimer's father tells him he is going to take him to Prague. Suddenly, Latimer has a view of the city he has never been to, a sort of vision of how Prague may be,

a city under the broad sunshine, that seemed to [him] as if it were the summer sunshine a long-past century arrested in its course – unfreshened for ages by the dews of night, or the rushing rain-cloud; scorching the dusty, weary, time-eaten grandeur of a people doomed to live on in the stale repetition of memories, like a deposed and superannuated kings, in their regal gold-inwoven tatters. The city looked so thirsty that the broad river seemed to [him] a sheet of metal; and the blackened statues, as [he] passed under their blank gaze, along the unbending bridge, with their ancient garments and their saintly crowns, seemed to [him] the real inhabitants and owners of this place, while the busy, trivial men and women, hurrying to and fro, were a swarm of ephemeral visitants infesting it for the day.³⁸¹

As Franco Marucci points out, this first vision Latimer has an oneiric aura around it, and moreover, these sights which will affect Latimer for the rest of his life are the product of his morbid state of mind and illness, although they also come from his constant daydreaming and daily incidents.³⁸²

³⁸⁰ E. Villari, "Introduzione", *Il velo sollevato*, cit., p. 13

³⁸¹ G. Eliot, *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*, cit., p. 9

³⁸² F. Marucci, *op. cit.*, p. 869

Some time after getting to Prague, Latimer gets acquainted with Bertha Grant, an extremely beautiful woman. He immediately falls in love with her, and apparently, she too has an interest in him, but some time later she gets engaged to Alfred, Latimer's older brother. Despite their engagement, one morning everything changes. Latimer, together with Bertha, is visiting a museum, when at some point, Latimer's attention is caught by one picture in particular. As Latimer himself states,

[That] morning I had been looking at Giorgione's picture of the cruel-eyed woman, said to be a likeness of Lucrezia Borgia. I had stood long alone before it, fascinated by the terrible reality of that cunning, relentless face, till I felt a strange poisoned sensation, as if I had long been inhaling a fatal odour, and was just beginning to be conscious of its effects.³⁸³

And it is in that moment, while he is caught by the disturbing picture of Lucrezia Borgia, that he is reached by Bertha and starts having a vision once again.

Just as I reached the gravel-walk, I felt an arm slipped within mine, and a light hand gently pressing my wrist. In the same instant a strange intoxicating numbness passed over me, like the continuance or climax of the sensation I was still feeling from the gaze of Lucrezia Borgia. The gardens, the summer sky, the consciousness of Bertha's arm being within mine, all vanished, and I seemed to be suddenly in darkness, out of which there gradually broke a dim firelight, and I felt myself sitting in my father's leather chair in the library at home. I knew the fireplace – the dogs for the wood-fire – the black marble chimney-piece with the white marble medallion of the dying Cleopatra in the centre. Intense and hopeless misery was pressing on my soul; the light became stronger, for Bertha was entering with a candle in her hand – Bertha, my wife – with cruel eyes, with green jewels and green leaves on her white ball-dress; every hateful thought within her present to me.³⁸⁴

And the vision Latimer has is of his future with Bertha, where they are married, but they also hate each other with a passion.

³⁸³ G. Eliot, *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*, cit., pp. 18-19

³⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 19

It was a moment of hell. I saw into her pitiless soul – saw its barren worldliness, its scorching hate – and felt it clothe me around like an air I was obliged to breathe. She came within her candle and stood over me with a bitter smile of contempt; I saw the great emerald brooch on her bosom, a studded serpent with diamond eyes. I shuddered – I despised this woman with the barren soul and mean thoughts; but I felt helpless before her, as if she clutched my bleeding heart, and would clutch it till the last drop of life-blood ebbed away. She was my wife and we hated each other.”³⁸⁵

At first, this vision becomes a wish for Latimer, as he wants to have Bertha all to himself, even if she may hate him eventually. In the end, Latimer gets to marry Bertha, as his brother is killed in an accident with his own horse. There is a slight time jump from Alfred’s death. Latimer and Bertha get married, but in the meantime, deeply affected from his elder son’s death, Latimer’s father gets severely ill, and Latimer decides to stay next to him until the end. After his father’s death Latimer realises Bertha’s true nature. She is cold and indifferent. They start to fall out of love with one another. At this point, the vision that Latimer had had at the museum years back, becomes reality. After having insulted Latimer and told him spiteful things, Bertha asks Latimer to get Mrs Archer as her personal maid, to which Latimer agrees. From there Latimer and Bertha fall even more apart. Some time later, Mrs Archer falls severely ill. During this time an old friend of Latimer, Mr Meunier, comes to visit him. Unfortunately, it is while Mr Meunier is visiting that Mrs Archer dies. Being a physician, Mr Meunier tries to revive her through blood transfusion, which was something rather experimental at that time. As a matter of fact, she is revived only for a few minutes, in which she exposes Bertha’s intention to poison her husband. From there on, Latimer and Bertha would stop interacting with one another up until Latimer’s death, which concludes the novella and closes the circle of the story.

As Helms highlights, the novella has “overtly Gothic [...] elements” that Eliot takes from “Gothic literature and pseudoscience” and that can be noticed in particular in her description of the “revivification experiment”, in which much like Mary Shelley’s doctor Frankenstein, Meunier “expresses a macabre desire to defy the laws of nature and transgress humankind’s limits”.³⁸⁶

³⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 19-20

³⁸⁶ W. Helms, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-52

Meunier said quietly, 'She is gone.' He then gave his arm to Bertha, and she submitted to be led out of the room.

I suppose it was at her order that two female attendants came into the room, and dismissed the younger one who had been present before. When they entered, Meunier had already opened the artery in the long thin neck that lay rigid on the pillow, and I dismissed them, ordering them to remain at a distance till we rang: the doctor, I said, had an operation to perform – he was not sure about the death. For the next twenty minutes I forgot everything but Meunier and the experiment in which he was so absorbed, that I think his senses would have been closed against all sounds or sights which had no relation to it. It was my task at first to keep up the artificial respiration in the body after the transfusion had been effected, but presently Meunier relieved me, and I could see the wondrous slow return to life; the breast began to heave, the inspirations became stronger, the eyelids quivered, and the soul seemed to have returned beneath them. The artificial respiration was withdrawn: still the breathing continued, and there was a movement of the lips.³⁸⁷

His experiment on Mrs Archer is indeed intended to be horrific and disturbing, as “Eliot uses dreadful physical descriptions to inform the mood of the scene, and she expects her readers to be shocked not only by the fact that Mrs. Archer has become undead, but also by her slow transformation”, as Helms points out.³⁸⁸

Like all Gothic fiction, Helms argues, Eliot’s novella has a villain who in this case is Bertha, as her “mysteriousness sets her up as an ideal figure to be Gothicised, and it is difficult to ignore the rather conventional methods that Eliot employs to trope Bertha as the villain”.³⁸⁹ As a matter of fact, according to Helms, Bertha’s “orphaned status and foreign name suggest a mysterious ‘otherness’ about her, and her first appearance in the novella [too] is deliberately ominous”,³⁹⁰ and Eliot even describes her as not having “a girlish expression” but instead having sharp features, “pale grey eyes at once acute, restless, and sarcastic”.³⁹¹ Helms maintains that “[f]rom the beginning, Eliot directs our sympathies away from Bertha”, as “her arrival in both the narrative and in Latimer’s life is invasive and sudden”, and moreover, “it is

³⁸⁷ G. Eliot, *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*, *cit.*, p. 41

³⁸⁸ W. Helms, *op. cit.*, p. 52

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁹¹ G. Eliot, *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*, *cit.*, p. 11

clear that she is meant to elicit readerly unease since Eliot primarily characterizes her as a woman who grossly challenges Victorian principles of femininity”.³⁹² As a matter of fact, Bertha is even compared to a “Water Nixie” by Latimer, and this “resemblance” to a “predatory creature”, Helms argues, “depicts [Bertha] as strangely monstrous, and the painful sensation that she arouses in Latimer serves as an obvious warning that he will ultimately suffer by her will”.³⁹³ Her outward appearance is beautiful, but deep down she is purely evil, although only Latimer and Mrs Archer are aware of her spitefulness.

What is interesting to notice, according to Helms, is how the relationship between Latimer and Bertha resembles a Faustian pact, since Latimer is curious to know more about the dangerous and the prohibited side that is hidden behind Bertha’s appealing appearance, thus rendering Bertha the devil of the story. Moreover, Eliot’s decision to cover Bertha symbolically with a veil provides Latimer the excuse to want to peek through this veil and see what hides beneath it.³⁹⁴ As a matter of fact, as Helms points out, the veil symbolizes a “concealer” which is needed in order to cover “sin, [...] guilt, past crimes and future suffering”, which basically are the horrors that surround human existence, and moreover, “[b]y shrouding Bertha behind a veil, Eliot directly reminds us that she should be read as inherently evil, and plays with methods of suspense by shielding and tantalizing readers with the unknown horror that is presumed to be beneath”.³⁹⁵

But Helms argues that Eliot “is unable or unwilling to uphold [Gothic conventions]”, as “she mishandles the moments of suspense by disclosing the secrets at improper times”, in particular when “[r]oughly three-quarters into the novella, suspense is interrupted, and Bertha’s veil is lifted”.³⁹⁶

The dead woman’s eyes were wide open, and met hers in full recognition – the recognition of hate. With a sudden strong effort, the hand that Bertha had thought for ever still was pointed towards her, and the haggard face moved. The gasping eager voice said –

‘You mean to poison your husband... the poison is in the back cabinet... I got it for it... you laughed at me, and told lies about me behind my back, to make me disgusting... because you were jealous... are you sorry... now?’

³⁹² W. Helms, *op. cit.*, p. 53

³⁹³ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55

The lips continued to murmur, but the sounds were no longer distinct. Soon there was no sound – only a slight movement: the flame had leaped out, and was being extinguished the faster. The wretched woman’s heart-strings had been set to hatred and vengeance; the spirit of life had swept the chords for an instant, and was gone again for ever.³⁹⁷

This revelation is anticlimactic according to Helms because it “offers nothing that the text had not already overtly suggested”, and moreover, what eventually “compromises” the Gothic element is the narrator’s need for “the reader’s sympathy”, which in the end takes over the “Gothic pattern”, as Latimer keeps asking his readers for sympathy, so much so, that even his intention to tell his own story now that he is about to die, might seem as his last selfish attempt to plead for the understanding of the others, and because Latimer tells too much, because he is “imprudent, self-pitying, and indiscreet”, he cannot be considered a reliable narrator, and not everything he tells the reader can be trusted.³⁹⁸ Even the image the reader has of Bertha is rendered through Latimer’s eyes rather than from a more impartial point of view, therefore all the devices used, “foreshadowing, exaggerated rhetoric and melodramatic gestures” give the partial point of view that she is the monster of the story and Latimer her defenceless victim.³⁹⁹ Moreover, Helms argues, Latimer’s need for sympathy and subsequent vilification of Bertha betray a certain mean aspect of his character, as he begs for compassion only for himself.⁴⁰⁰ In addition, as Villari notices, what also betrays impartiality is his lack of humility, his idea of being a little superior to the others, which then leads him to distance himself from the others.⁴⁰¹

4.1.4 Sympathy in *The Lifted Veil*

Thomas Albrecht argues that “*The Lifted Veil* implicitly tests the premises of Eliot’s ethics of sympathy through the conceit of Latimer’s telepathic ‘participation in other people’”, and therefore, as he possesses telepathy as well as clairvoyance, he is able not only to see in the future, but also to perceive the thoughts and feelings of others.⁴⁰² Since “by [sympathy, Eliot] means a person’s ability to feel and to suffer with another person” which is conveyed

³⁹⁷ G. Eliot, *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*, cit., pp. 41-42

³⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 56-57

³⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 58

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ E. Villari, “Introduzione”, *Il velo sollevato*, cit., p. 18

⁴⁰² T. Albrecht, “Sympathy and Telepathy: The Problem of Ethics in George Eliot’s “The Lifted Veil””, *ELH*, Summer, vol. 73, n. 2, 2006, p. 439

through art in its representation of “the experiences, thoughts and feelings of a great variety of different characters” that “‘extend’ our sympathy for other people and for humanity”, thus “producing an ethical response in us”, Albrecht maintains that, despite being in a way “a stand-in for the artist” and “hav[ing] access to the thoughts and feelings of others”, Latimer “does respond according to Eliot’s prescription”, as “he feels neither sympathy nor affection”, but rather “boredom and contempt”.⁴⁰³ According to Thomas Albrecht, “[t]hrough Latimer’s ‘hard indifference’ to the sensations and emotions of the people around him, *The Lifted Veil* dramatizes a crisis for Eliot’s ethics of sympathy” as “Latimer’s misanthropic responses to other people suggest a less stable relation between art and ethics than the one necessitated by Eliot’s theory”.⁴⁰⁴ Albrecht maintains that “Eliot herself alludes to this more unstable relation in a line she wrote to [...] Charles Bray at the time of the novella’s composition, “If art does not enlarge men’s sympathies, it does nothing morally”, and it may be argued that this statement could have “at least two ways to read [it]”, as it could mean either that “Eliot maintains art can be morally effective by enlarging our sympathies”, or that by using a double negative Eliot is possibly implying “that art is morally inefficient because it does not enlarge our sympathy”, and this is “a more pessimistic assessment which Latimer’s experiences would seem to confirm”.⁴⁰⁵ But Albrecht argues that “Eliot acknowledges and resolves this predicament at the level of the plot” as “[i]n order to defend her ethical theory against the implications of Latimer’s narcissism, she stages a conversion narrative in which Latimer makes an unexpected transition from antipathy to sympathy”, and Eliot does this by “project[ing] Latimer’s antipathy onto another character, namely Bertha Grant”.⁴⁰⁶ Albrecht maintains that “[t]his projection allows [Eliot] to delineate and to demonize the antipathy more distinctively (using the convenient figure of a transgressive woman), and then, at a symbolic level, to expel it” and “[t]he initial step in the expulsion of Bertha Grant and of the antipathy she represents is the moral conversion Latimer undergoes on the evening of his father’s death”, as Latimer feels for the first time “sympathy for another human being” exactly on this sorrowful occasion.⁴⁰⁷ According to Albrecht “Latimer’s conversion to sympathy at his father’s death leads directly to his first clairvoyant insight into Bertha’s mind” as she “[u]p until this point in the narrative, [...] has remained a ‘fascinating mystery’” and therefore the “terrible moment of complete illumination” he experiences right after “his communion with his dying father [...] directly

⁴⁰³ Ibid., pp. 347-439

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 440

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

reveals to him Bertha's 'scheming selfishness' and her 'repulsion and antipathy harden[ing] into cruel hatred'".⁴⁰⁸

At some point, some time before the passing away of Latimer's father, Albrecht points out, there is an "exchange of looks between" Latimer and Bertha, where "Latimer sees and recognizes" in "Bertha's gaze [...] not so much [her] inner self, but rather the way in which *she sees him*", which "closely resembles the way in which he had earlier seen the people around him", that is "as miserable, pitiful and as fundamentally disconnected from one another".⁴⁰⁹ In doing so, Albrecht argues, "Eliot [is projecting] the antipathy away from Latimer and onto Bertha", who is thus "[exposed] as Latimer's double" and this transition of antipathy from Latimer to Bertha, moreover, enables Eliot "to protect her ethics of sympathy from the implications of Latimer's antipathy" as "[b]y projecting that antipathy onto Bertha, Eliot leaves Latimer [...] free to convert to sympathy", although even "[t]he subsequent redemption of Latimer in the plot signals the current redemption of Eliot's literary ethics". During this particular event of the novella, Bertha becomes Latimer's double.⁴¹⁰

Moreover, Eliot defines Bertha's misanthropy even more distinctively, since "[w]hile Latimer's misanthropy is exonerated in the plot by the oedipal and social pressures to which he is continually subjected, [...] Bertha is an image of antipathy as pure, absolute and evil", being her the stereotypical Victorian *femme fatale*.⁴¹¹

Albrecht suggests that in these two characters there is a division into two surrogates on Eliot's part, in which she puts "goodness" onto one surrogate (Latimer), and "meanness" onto the other surrogate (Bertha), although the ethical conflict present in *The Lifted Veil* rather than being a strife between "antipathy and sympathy", is rather a conflict "between an ethics based on similarity and those based on difference".⁴¹² Albrecht argues that there is a certain interest on Eliot's side in the theme of "knowledge", in this case, in the knowledge of the "consciousness" of the others, their feelings and thoughts, which in the novel is conveyed through Latimer's telepathy, from which he "[gains] access to someone else's mind".⁴¹³ Moreover, to Eliot this "appreciation of another person's consciousness [...] is made possible by art", and interestingly, in the novella "the initiation into the moral knowledge" is represented

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 441

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 442

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Ibid., p. 443

⁴¹³ Ibid., pp. 443-444

visually, since Latimer realizes Bertha's coldness in the moment when he "sees" himself in her own mind.⁴¹⁴

In the novella Eliot also adopts various metaphors related to prose, writing, reading, texts and languages to refer to Bertha, thus comparing her to "a text that must be deciphered or read", according to Albrecht. Thus by adopting both the visual and textual metaphors to refer to Bertha, she is rendered as an enigma that Latimer and the reader are trying to understand, although at times the two types of metaphors overlap as the two are not fully analogous and therefore interfere with each other.⁴¹⁵ This kind of metaphorical approach may be interpreted, according to Albrecht, as enabling Eliot to represent Latimer's inability to see through Bertha, despite him being able to see through the outward appearance of other people, although this condition is kept until the "veil" covering Bertha is lifted, but then, Latimer's "potential arbitrariness and unreliability" are shown.⁴¹⁶ Therefore, by rendering Bertha as a complex text, Eliot enables Latimer to justify his own observations of Bertha as "his own approximations of that otherness", according to Albrecht, meaning that both the reader and Latimer understand his limitations, as he is not fully capable to see through Bertha, despite his telepathic abilities.⁴¹⁷

Albrecht points out that there is indeed an epistemological issue regarding metaphors, as they are arbitrary and subjective. This is then linked to the moral issue, since "metaphors are always *one's own* figures for the other" and therefore they are based on analogies and similarities, not differences, and in addition, they even contrast with Eliot's ethical beliefs, which promoted understanding and closeness to one's feelings and thoughts and those of others.⁴¹⁸

Moreover, even the "telepathy" that Latimer possesses would literally mean that he could perceive also what is distant from him, and because telepathy is related to something "extrasensory", in order to render it understandable for the readership, Eliot needs to adopt the various aforementioned metaphors, according to Albrecht.⁴¹⁹ But eventually, the issue that rises from Latimer's inability to fully grasp the "otherness" may also be linked to the ethical dilemma of the novella, which is, that theirs is an "inability to face the other as other", according to Albrecht, and therefore there may be an impossibility to delineate ethics through

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., p. 444

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., p. 444-445

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 445-446

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., p. 446

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 450-451

⁴¹⁹ Ibid. p. 451

differences, and the only way to connect with the struggles and joys of others is through similarities, sympathy, which literally translates into “feeling together with”.⁴²⁰

According to Rae Greiner, instead, through *The Lifted Veil*, George Eliot challenges the traditional, philosophical concept of “sympathy” which was strongly connected to the concepts of “identification” and “knowledge” and which in literature was conveyed through the adoption of the omniscient narrator.⁴²¹ As a matter of fact, Greiner argues that one of the most relevant failures of “omniscience” is in the “egoism” which arises from omniscient characters who “[assume] that everyone else shares their feeling and opinions”, thus trying to “control over others’ thoughts”, which inevitably undermines sympathy’s purpose of understanding and sharing others’ feelings and thoughts, and Eliot, through her life-like depiction of her characters, “questions the extent to which omniscience might forestall rather than encourage fellow-feeling”.⁴²² Greiner maintains that, in particular in *The Lifted Veil*, “the tension between sympathy and omniscience is readily recognizable”, as “[s]ympathy is as serious a concern here” due to “[Latimer’s claim that] he [is] telling his story in hopes that someone will feel sympathy for him once he is dead”, although he is often considered as “unsympathetic and unreliable”.⁴²³ But it is not simply his selfish require for sympathy that thwarts the readers’ understanding towards him, which also subverts the aim of sympathy, Greiner argues, but rather precisely Latimer’s clairvoyance, his omniscience, that inevitably prevents him from sharing others’ joys and sorrows, as he already “[knows] what others think and feel”, thus “sympathy is unavailable to him”.⁴²⁴ Therefore, Greiner maintains, “it isn’t the ‘narrowness of our knowledge’ preventing us from fellow-feeling” as “sympathy is impossible in the presence, not absence, of that knowledge” and, thus, *The Lifted Veil* seems to suggest “that omniscience is the murderer of sympathetic fellowship”, and moreover, while we usually “[assume] that getting to know what goes on inside other people’s heads is [...] the surest guarantee of our sympathy with them, that the more we know the better we can sympathetically identify with them”, Eliot, instead, “had reservations about the degree to which such intimacy with others’ thoughts prompted ethical responses in us”.⁴²⁵ Therefore, Greiner argues that to Eliot it is

⁴²⁰ Ibid., pp. 452-453

⁴²¹ R. Greiner, “Sympathy Time: Adam Smith, George Eliot, and the Realist Novel”, *Narrative*, vol. 17, n. 3, 2009, pp. 291-292

⁴²² Ibid., pp. 300-301

⁴²³ Ibid. p. 305

⁴²⁴ Ibid., pp. 305-306

⁴²⁵ Ibid., p. 306

imagination, rather than knowledge, that enables sympathy, as knowledge would prevent us from striving to understand what others are feeling and thinking.⁴²⁶

4.2 Silas Marner

4.2.1 The original idea for *Silas Marner*

In 1860, after having published *The Mill on the Floss*, and after having set for a trip to Italy and decided to take Italian history as the subject of her following novel, Eliot reported on her journal that another story had come up to her mind. The idea came to her mind “by a sudden inspiration”, David Carroll maintains, and as Eliot wrote to her publisher Blackwood in an 1861 letter, this idea was “suggested by [her] recollection of having once, in early childhood, seen a linen-weaver with a bag on its back”, and then this recollection became her short novel *Silas Marner*.⁴²⁷ According to Carroll, *Silas Marner* is the “link” between her “early novels and her late[r] [ones]” as “it seems to belong to [her] earlier rural fiction and yet it cuts across [Eliot’s] plans for *Romola*”, the novel which she was working on when the weaver of her childhood crossed her mind.⁴²⁸

4.2.2 Between rustic realism and myth-making

At first to her the story appeared as a “legendary tale”, although subsequently she felt “inclined to a more realistic treatment” of her memory and, David Carroll argues, the novel seems indeed to “embod[y] both legendary [...] and [...] realistic” features.⁴²⁹ Although Eliot showed through this novel her talent for myth-making, her readership and the critics were more “impressed” by her “rustic realism”, which had become one of her distinctive writing features due to her previous pieces of fiction, according to Carroll. However, some critics like Richard Holt Hutton and Richard Simpson noticed that *Silas Marner* had more in itself than simply rustic realism.⁴³⁰ As a matter of fact, for Hutton the novel “in its own way” dealt with the “controversies of mid-Victorian England”, as modernity with its innovations and ideas influences a world that belongs to past beliefs and superstitions. On the other hand, Simpson notices that while Eliot in the novel “seems to sympathize [...] with a variety of religious beliefs that she [...] rejects”, it turns out as “only a temporary expedient [as] in time the shell of Christianity will fall away and reveal the true inner substance, the feeling that it has been

⁴²⁶ Ibid., p. 307

⁴²⁷ D. Carroll, “Introduction”, in D. Carroll (ed.), *Silas Marner*, London, Penguin Books, 2003, p. viii

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., pp. viii-ix

safeguarding”, and moreover, he even considers “the double plot of the novel as a means of explaining away [...] the workings of Providence”.⁴³¹ According to Carroll, both Hutton and Simpson, though “[i]n their different ways [...] recognized that *Silas Marner* was a contribution to a current Victorian debate about the nature of belief and [...] the status of myth or sacred story in the modern world.”⁴³² In addition, Carroll maintains that to Eliot too “[r]eligious beliefs, world-views, myths and legends, all represent stages in the progress of the intellect, a means of understanding the past and speculating about the future”.⁴³³

Silas Marner “explores the origins of folk myth in a rural community at the beginning of the nineteenth century”, David Carroll notices, pointing out that “[t]here [is an] anthropological side” of the story which is brought up by the everyday life of the community of Raveloe.⁴³⁴ This community is set in a distant space and time, thus “providing the narrator [...] with vestiges and remnants of a distant past to be deciphered”, but “beyond these echoes [of the distant past], there are vestiges of an even more remote, mythical past to which the novel reaches out”.⁴³⁵

What is more, David Carroll maintains that the novel presents various “mysterious gaps and uncertainties”, and it is as if “[b]eyond Raveloe [there] is an inexplicable region from which strangers manifest themselves like apparitions, or into which people disappear without explanation”.⁴³⁶ David Carroll points out that Eliot develops this mysterious aura that surrounds the novel through “the double plot of Silas and Godfrey Cass” where their “social divisions” render their “interconnections [...] minimal and mysterious”.⁴³⁷ Also, the “sixteen years” gap between the first part of the novel and the second, according to David Carroll, conveys the mystery of the story.⁴³⁸ Moreover, the way Silas is depicted functions as a means of keeping the story cryptic. As David Carroll maintains, the fact that Silas is a weaver makes him look as an “alien” in the eyes of the community of Raveloe. What influences the judgement of the people of Raveloe are their beliefs and suppositions rather than a true knowledge and understanding of weavers and, in this case, Silas. To strengthen the narrow idea that the community of Raveloe has of Silas, at some point Eliot even compares him to a spider who constantly weaves its web, much like the weavers in their profession. To add to Silas’s

⁴³¹ Ibid., pp. xi- xii

⁴³² Ibid., p. xii

⁴³³ Ibid., pp. xii-xiii

⁴³⁴ Ibid., p. xiv

⁴³⁵ Ibid.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., pp. xiv-xv

⁴³⁷ Ibid., xv

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

peculiarity, the people of Raveloe are also wary of his standoffish attitude. Not only does his sceptical temperament, but also his cataleptic fits emphasize the community's distrustfulness towards him, thus farther distancing Silas from them.⁴³⁹ B. K. Martin argues that these gaps in Silas's story would make his story "fall apart", and for this reason, it is Godfrey's story that "fills many of the gaps that the story of Silas leaves open", in particular concerning the loss of Silas's gold and the arrival of Eppie.⁴⁴⁰ Therefore, B. K. Martin argues, "through the Godfrey plot [Eliot] has spared her novel from the serious weakness of *deus ex machina*" that would have resolved the incongruities within the plot on the novel, and thus, "[t]he result is the appearance of unity without artificiality, the novel's artifice being contained and concealed in a subplot sufficiently different in structure from the Silas story [...] to allay critical suspicions".⁴⁴¹

4.2.3 The parallel stories of Silas Marner and Godfrey Cass

Avrom Fleishman, as well, argues that there are various plots within the novel. The first plot is concerned with Silas's journey from his "loss of faith" after he is falsely accused of theft by "his Dissenting community" of Lantern Yard, to his departure and his new life in Raveloe, and "his subsequent redemption from avarice and isolation through love and caring for a child more-or-less literally left on his doorsteps".⁴⁴² In Silas's growth it is interesting to notice how love for other people is what actually saves him, and that more than losing faith in the divine, Silas has "lost faith in [...] its beneficence" according to Avrom Fleishman.⁴⁴³ The secondary plot, instead, focuses on "Godfrey Cass's redemption" that is achieved, differently from that of Silas, that is "through [Godfrey's] acknowledg[ement] [of his] past sins of commission and omission" concerning his first marriage to Molly, as Fleishman points out.⁴⁴⁴

It could be said that Silas and Godfrey's stories are parallel, but there are some common aspects which they share with one another. As David Carroll points out, unlike "the community which relies on its shared beliefs [and] the mixture of superstition and religion which finds expression in their public rituals", Silas and Godfrey "experience a series of sudden dislocations which makes them reject and revise their ways of looking at the world".⁴⁴⁵

⁴³⁹ D. Carroll, *George Eliot and the conflict of interpretations, cit.*, pp. 143-144

⁴⁴⁰ B. K. Martin, "Similarity Within Dissimilarity: The Dual Structure of *Silas Marner*", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 14, n. 3, 1972, pp. 487-488

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 488

⁴⁴² A. Fleishman, *op. cit.*, p. 108

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁵ D. Carroll, *George Eliot and the conflict of interpretations, cit.*, p. 146

Moreover, their development is combined with “disruption”, and the gradualism of the story with “catastrophism”, according to David Carroll, as throughout the novel both Silas and Godfrey have to face with enormous and distressing changes, which destabilise the status quo the two of them have reached up until some point in their stories, thus having to suffer from “catastrophes” which make them grow as individuals.⁴⁴⁶

David Carroll maintains that “[t]he parallel careers of Silas and Godfrey originate in contrasting systems of belief”.⁴⁴⁷ As a matter of fact, Silas comes from the community of Lantern Yard, which is strongly influenced by Calvinistic Dissent. But his faith and trust in his original beliefs are broken primarily by the person he considered as his closest friend, William Dane, and then subsequently by the community itself. In point of fact, at the beginning of the story, Silas is wrongly accused of having stolen the money of the parish from the recently dead deacon who Silas was keeping vigil. Silas is unable to defend himself, as his cataleptic fits make him unsure whether he had fallen asleep during his vigil or not. Moreover, his pocket-knife, which he had lent to Dane, has been found near the dead’s body, thus making it even harder for Silas to prove his innocence. As a matter of fact, the true culprit of the theft, Dane, used both Silas’s catalepsy and the pocket-knife to shield himself from possible accusations, and to put the blame on Silas. Betrayed by his former friend, Silas has also to endure the judgement of his community, who eventually deems him guilty,⁴⁴⁸ but not through an impartial and just trial, but through the casting of lots, thus leaving him completely “mystified”, as Avrom Fleishman points out, and as Silas “[gives] God the primacy in human affairs, he loses his faith,⁴⁴⁹ and even blasphemes, stating that to him there is “no just God that governs the earth, but a God of lies, that bears witness against the innocent”.⁴⁵⁰ After these painful events, Silas leaves Lantern Yard and a new phase of his life begins in the “rural and easy-going world of Raveloe where excessive spirituality is as unwelcome as too-regular church going”, as David Carroll points out.⁴⁵¹ In Raveloe Silas becomes obsessed with work. That becomes his main focus and concern, and moreover, the money he receives for his job becomes his sole joy, his “aim in life”, according to David Carroll, as there are no other purposes Silas thinks he could pursue.⁴⁵² He becomes more and more isolated from the other people and more and more attached to his money, enjoying counting every night all the coins he has been able to save. But

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 148

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 148-149

⁴⁴⁹ A. Fleishman, *op. cit.*, p. 108

⁴⁵⁰ G. Eliot, *Silas Marner: the Weaver of Raveloe*, D. Carroll (ed.), London, Penguin Books, 2003, p. 14

⁴⁵¹ D. Carroll, *George Eliot and the conflict of interpretations, cit.*, p. 149

⁴⁵² Ibid.

this newfound balance is not going to last long for Silas. As a matter of fact, one night, the very first night Silas leaves momentarily his house unattended, a thief intrudes his house and steals all his guineas. This is the first time Silas's story intertwines with Godfrey's, as the thief is Dunstan, Godfrey's brother, as David Carroll points out. Once again, desperation overcomes Silas, but this time he is not deserted. As a matter of fact, as soon as he finds out about his stolen money, he reaches out for his fellow parishioners, who immediately try to come to his help. What follows is a series of investigations and conjectures, although not properly well-founded, but the effort the community of Raveloe puts in helping the defenceless weaver, leads Silas to open up again to other people, although he only gradually lets them in.

A third phase of Silas's life thus begins, which is also marked by the appearance in Silas's life of a little girl with golden hair. At first, he believes that the baby's hair are his guineas who have finally returned to him, then seeing that it is a little girl, he is quite bewildered and thinks that maybe his money has indeed returned in the shape of a golden-haired child. What is more, this little girl reminds him of his little sister, whom he had taken care of in his younger years. He even names the baby as his little sister Eppie. Eppie becomes the second link Silas has with Godfrey Cass, as he is her biological father. But besides being another link to Godfrey, Eppie also represents Silas's connection to the outside world. As a matter of fact, thanks to this little girl, who is rather lively, Silas is led outside his misery and isolation, and his life turns for the better thanks to her and he is the happiest person he has ever been in fifteen years of his life at Raveloe.

On the other hand, parallel to, though different from, Silas's story, we have the story and growth of Godfrey Cass. Godfrey comes from an upper-class family, since his father is a Squire.⁴⁵³ He is brought up, together with his brother Dunstan, in a strict way, and, as Carroll points out, he and Dunstan "have responded in contrasting ways" to their father's "indulgence and harshness".⁴⁵⁴ As a matter of fact, Godfrey is "good-natured but irresolute", while Dunstan tends to be more "active and cunning" than his brother.⁴⁵⁵ Carroll maintains that Godfrey and Dunstan may be considered the Silas Marners and William Dances of Raveloe, although, more than believing in a divine force, the two Casses believe in Chance. As for the similarities between Silas and Dane with Godfrey and Dunstan, they are both mistreated by the people who are closest to them, since Dane, besides leading the community of Lantern Yard to believe that Silas is a thief, eventually even marries Silas's betrothed, Sarah, while Dunstan has framed his

⁴⁵³ Ibid., pp. 151-154

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 155

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

bother in the past into marrying Molly, a dissolute woman who is even addicted to opium. Dunstan has taken advantage of his brother's weaknesses so as to be able to blackmail him when he needs it.⁴⁵⁶ But despite these differences between the two brothers, David Carroll argues that the two are indeed interdependent, since Dunstan at times functions as Godfrey's agent, and moreover, he "expresses [Godfrey's] illicit desires".⁴⁵⁷ In addition, what also renders them "complementary characters" is their "*doppelgänger* relationship" expressed through their constant "using and blaming each other".⁴⁵⁸ Chance too, seems to strongly influence their lives. As a matter of fact, it seems as if chance brings Dunstan to Silas's house after his day of business has gone completely wrong. He was unable to sell Godfrey's old horse, and what is more, the poor beast even died by accident after a fit of rage from Dunstan. Looking at Silas's house from afar, he comes up with the idea to intrude the house and take all the money that he is able to find. Luckily for Dunstan, Silas at that moment is not at home, thus his robbery is made easier for him, and after having taken two bags full of guineas, he disappears into thin air.

The disappearance of both the money and Dunstan marks an important shift in the lives of Silas and Godfrey. While Silas finds solace and support in the community of Raveloe, Godfrey, having his brother out of his life, is finally free from his oppressor. No one suspects that the disappearances of both Dunstan and the money are connected, and life goes on in Raveloe, with people not taking too much heed to Dunstan's disappearance, as they all seem to suppose he has gone away in order not to face his family for his last failed activity. Chance seems to favour Godfrey, when another extraordinary event happens which may ruin his reputation and life, and that is the apparition of both Molly and Eppie. Molly comes to Raveloe seeking revenge as she wants to destroy her husband's life, but she reaches the town on New Year's Eve, and due to the cold, she dies of hypothermia. Eppie, finds refuge from the cold in Silas's house. For a moment, before knowing about his wife's death, Godfrey wishes she would be gone, and his wish becomes reality. Once again, Chance seems to be agreeable towards Godfrey. As a matter of fact, with Molly's death and Silas's immediate fondness towards Eppie, Godfrey seizes the opportunity to get rid once and for all of the last obstacle to reaching his dream of marrying the woman of his life, Nancy Lammeter. He does not acknowledge either

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 155-156

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 156

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

Molly or Eppie, and thus, Godfrey keeps the secret of his past marriage to Molly and of his fatherhood to the child that Silas has taken under his roof and eventually marries Nancy.⁴⁵⁹

David Carroll maintains that “[a]t this moment, Godfrey is about to initiate his second, fifteen-year phase, the reverse of the first, as Silas’s rescue from his fifteen-year isolation begins”.⁴⁶⁰ As a matter of fact, although apparently his renunciation of his fatherhood might seem the perfect solution for all of them, while Silas is indeed very happy in growing old with Eppie and in taking care of her, Godfrey is happily married to Nancy, but they do not have any children together. Moreover, as Carroll points out, there are some misunderstandings and disagreements between husband and wife. As a matter of fact, Godfrey suspects that their childless marriage may be a punishment for his past sins and for having abandoned Eppie, and from time to time he offers Nancy to adopt her, but to her it would not feel right to opt for an adoption.⁴⁶¹

But then Dunstan’s body is found, and Godfrey is forced to confess everything since, “Godfrey’s growing sense of order and retribution now turns into a full confession and acceptance of an omniscient divine power”.⁴⁶² Once he tells the whole truth to Nancy, she suggests taking Eppie in and bringing her up as the distinguished young lady that she is supposed to be, as she comes from a family of squires. But when they go and visit Silas and Eppie, telling them about Godfrey’s fatherhood and their intention to raising Eppie, Silas strongly opposes, claiming that because Godfrey had refused to acknowledge her sixteen years before, he had lost his claim on her, and, what is more, that it was Silas the one who had named her, therefore, despite not being related by blood, the two were actually father and daughter. Here, then, it is Eppie’s turn to decide for her future, either to stay with Silas or leave with her biological father and step-mother, but she kindly refuses the offer the Casses make her, and stating,

“I can’t feel as I’ve got any father but one” [...] “I’ve always thought of a little home where he’d sit i’ the corner, and I should fend and do everything for him: I can’t think o’ no other home. I wasn’t brought up to be a lady, and I can’t turn my mind to it. I like the working-folks, and their victuals, and their ways.”⁴⁶³

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 156-157

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 157

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 158-159

⁴⁶² Ibid., p. 159

⁴⁶³ G. Eliot, *Silas Marner: the Weaver of Raveloe*, cit., p. 173

The second part of the story parallels the first one, as it is now Godfrey's turn to grow and "to reconcile the passive reliance on chance of his early life with its opposite, his belief in a fixed order and nemesis, neither of which have brought him his daughter" as David Carroll suggests.⁴⁶⁴ What is more, what both Silas and Godfrey learn at the end of the novel is that "neither [of them is] allowed to go back into the past, pay off their debts, clear up their mystery, and start again", since even Silas wishes to go back to Lantern Yard and fix the wrongs of the past cannot be fulfilled, as Lantern Yard "has disappeared".⁴⁶⁵

4.2.4 Fabulous traits in *Silas Marner*

Carroll notices that "in the novel [...] there are a few crucial fabular events" thus enabling Silas's story to be also seen as a tale with a moral.⁴⁶⁶ Silas, after having been mistreated and having blasphemed, has to move away from his hometown, but he has become harsher, surly and wary, and now his sole joy is the money he gets from his job, thus falling once again. But he is punished, and his precious money is stolen from him. He understands he was wrong in being so focused on his isolation and his guineas, and in his struggles, he is able to open up to other people. Thus, once he has understood his mistakes, he is rewarded by having returned his money in the shape of a golden-hair child, who becomes the sole joy of his life, and who helps him out of his misery and isolation.

Godfrey's story, instead, has more realistic tones, as it is shown in his struggles with his strict father and mean brother, but also in Godfrey's faults and limitations, which have led him to marry a dissolute woman, but also to renounce his own child.

According to Carroll Viera, though, "[t]he dichotomy between the legendary Silas plot and the realistic narrative about Godfrey is not absolute".⁴⁶⁷ As a matter of fact, with "Eppie's arrival, most of the scenes involving Silas are strongly grounded in [...] realistic detail[s] [...] used to describe activities at the Red House or the Rainbow".⁴⁶⁸ Moreover, Viera maintains that Eliot conveys realism even through irony in the scenes concerning Silas's parenthood and his interaction with the people of Raveloe,⁴⁶⁹ and that "[t]he inclusion of such scenes" is much needed as "without them, conversely, the novel would [have] almost certainly lost its realistic

⁴⁶⁴ D. Carroll, *George Eliot and the conflict of interpretations*, cit., p. 164

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 165

⁴⁶⁷ C. Viera, "'Silas Marner' And George Eliot's Unrealistic Narratives", *Interpretations*, vol. 14, n. 1, 1982, p. 33

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 34

import by being reduced to a more fundamental base”.⁴⁷⁰ Viera maintains that “[i]t is the episodes in the first part of the novel, rather than the Silas plot as a whole, that give the novel its legendary aura”.⁴⁷¹

4.2.5 Sympathy in *Silas Marner*

Carroll Viera points out some similarities between *Silas Marner* and one of her previous “non-realistic writings”, i.e. *The Lifted Veil*. Both Silas and Latimer are afflicted by peculiar illnesses, they both are nostalgic of their childhood, and they both at some point in their lives isolate themselves.⁴⁷² Both Latimer and Silas show “moral limitations” as they symbolically have suffered “visual deficiencies”.⁴⁷³ On the one hand, “Latimer had been physically blind during a period of his childhood”, while “Silas is repeatedly described as short sighted”.⁴⁷⁴ But there is one aspect in which they do indeed differ, and that is the sympathy they are able to raise in the readers. As a matter of fact, Viera maintains that in *The Lifted Veil*, at the end of his story, “Latimer shows no inclination for [sympathy], displaying instead a decided preference for remaining a miserable biped or a vulture crying dolefully for more carrion”.⁴⁷⁵ In *Silas Marner*, on the contrary, the “amalgamation of [the] legend and realistic narrative [...] the blending [of] realistic episodes [...] with the legendary fabric and create tentative bonds with the reader”.⁴⁷⁶

But Silas is not only able to raise sympathy in the reader, but he himself seems to be able to sympathise with others. At first it does not seem so, as his standoffish attitude pushes his neighbours and all the people of Raveloe away. But B. K. Martin maintains that “what Silas lacks is the opportunity to exhibit [...] sympathy, on account of the isolation imposed upon him by past misfortune and community prejudice”.⁴⁷⁷ Silas’s eventual sympathetic attitude, therefore, is more “a change of situation, rather than a change of heart or mind”.⁴⁷⁸ As a matter of fact, once his isolated world is disrupted by Eppie’s arrival, Silas is finally able to bond with the community Raveloe as well.⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

⁴⁷² Ibid., pp. 36-37

⁴⁷³ Ibid., p. 37

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 38

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁷ B. K. Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 483

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 482

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

Even Godfrey Cass has some sympathetic traits in him, and “his capacity for sympathy is established early in the novel, mainly through a contrast between him and his brother”, being Dunstan “the antithesis of sympathy”.⁴⁸⁰ Even Godfrey’s relationship to his first wife Molly leads readers to sympathize with him, especially in his helplessness concerning her addiction to opium, and moreover, even the passage where Molly reaches Raveloe shows that “[h]er desire to disclose their marriage is represented as a senseless hunger for vengeance, while Godfrey’s stated refusal to acknowledge her as his wife is ascribed to a ‘fit of passion’”.⁴⁸¹ B. K. Martin argues that “[f]urther compassion for Godfrey’s plight is invited by the unlikelihood of his father’s behaving sympathetically” towards him, especially in the passages where Godfrey “debates whether to confess his secrets” where we find “[present] the contrast between the irascible parsimony of the old man and the scrupulousness of Godfrey, caught between the desire to be truthful and the awareness that his father would hardly treat him justly”.⁴⁸² B. K. Martin maintains that in depicting Godfrey “as a victim” Eliot seemingly risks to make her novel “collapse [...] into melodrama”, in particular in the passage where Godfrey rejects Eppie, but the novelist is able to make the readers still sympathize with him “by surrounding Godfrey with implacable foes”, like Molly, “by relegating any moral residue from Godfrey’s behaviour to a category [...] which the author labels as ‘moral cowardice’[,] and [...] by rhetorically coloring the instances of Godfrey’s moral cowardice so as to reduce his blameworthiness further”.⁴⁸³ Godfrey’s “moral cowardice”, has been shown various times throughout the novel, especially in his desire to confess his secrets to his father, but because the old Squire would seemingly behave unjustly towards his son, then “[t]he issue of [Godfrey’s] ‘moral cowardice’ [...] becomes more practical than ethical”, and therefore, when Godfrey’s morality is put to the test during the New Year’s Eve celebrations, the “earlier instances of [his] cowardice serve” as a means of grasping the decisions he makes during that event.⁴⁸⁴ As a matter of fact, when he is faced with the arrival of both his wife and daughter, Godfrey is put in a dangerous position, especially regarding the acknowledgment of Eppie, because she, differently from Molly, might be saved, but while his decision to “[refuse] to identify his child” is highly deplorable, his “reactions to [Eppie]”, his “internal struggles”, and “self-reproach” show that Godfrey’s consequent choice “is ascribed to moral cowardice, rather than want of sympathy”, as his evaluation of “the possible outcomes for the child” and his wish “to do what he can to aid her”,

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 483

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., p. 484

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Ibid., pp. 484-485

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 485-486

as well, display that “his decision by no means reflects a want of sympathy”.⁴⁸⁵ Therefore, B. K. Martin argues that “Godfrey’s error regarding Eppie appears wholly practical rather than moral”, and “even his misestimation of the relationship between Silas and Eppie in the latter chapters [may be] classified as ignorance”.⁴⁸⁶ Godfrey’s story, “[u]nlike the story of Silas [...] is unified by a plot of knowledge, the principal change in being his realization of the impracticability of giving up Eppie”, as his re-evaluation “of his daughter renders rather short-lived the joy he feels when he gives her up”.⁴⁸⁷

Moreover, B. K. Martin argues that the way in which Eliot depicts Godfrey functions as a set-up to Silas, and his character “is [...] developed to be appraised on the same basis as Silas”, in particular concerning sympathy, since “what happens to Godfrey in the novel reinforces that ethic and indirectly strengthens the admiration intended for Silas”, and, in addition, “[b]ecause [Godfrey] remains sympathetic to the needs of others, and because his desire for Eppie is partly a desire for someone else to love and aid”, it shows that what links Silas and Godfrey “is their shared trait of sympathy”, although “Godfrey remains sufficiently distinct from Silas [...] to broaden the validity of the premises underlying the progress of Silas”, which balances the story of the novel, especially concerning “[t]he view of human aspiration”.⁴⁸⁸

Kristen A. Pond argues, instead, that *Silas Marner* may be considered as “Eliot’s most provocative experiment in redefining nineteenth-century understandings of” sympathy, as it “[questions] the efficacy of sympathy dependent on identification”, as in this novel Eliot seems to argue that “sympathy can be extended without first understanding the other”.⁴⁸⁹ As a matter of fact, K. A. Pond maintains that, in order to create “conditions for [an] ethical extension of sympathy”, there is a need to “exchange of stories”, which is a “practice” that “establishes an approach to the other that does not view difference as something to overcome” since in the stories there is an affirmation of “what is unique in the other”, and therefore, an exchange of stories may be considered as “an encounter with difference”, a preservation of difference, which “no longer aims for understanding or recognition”, and which then enables sympathy to “flow out of and around difference rather than devolve into assimilation or estrangement”.⁴⁹⁰ K. A. Pond defines as “[w]itnessing [...] [this] ethical extension of sympathy”, which “moves

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 486

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 487

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 489

⁴⁸⁹ K. A. Pond, “Bearing Witness in ‘Silas Marner’: George Eliot’s experiment in Sympathy”, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 41, n. 4, 2013, pp. 691-693

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 697

away from the necessity of reaching an understanding toward simply dwelling in the presence of a shared story”, and in *Silas Marner* it is the scene in the six chapter, where Silas reaches the Rainbow Inn asking for help after having been robbed of his money, that “generates sympathy” as “the villagers are no longer struggling to understand Marner”, but “rather, they are intent on bearing witness to his story”.⁴⁹¹ During this scene, finally “Marner has found something beyond the curious, objectifying faces of the boys, and the villagers now have a story through which they begin to feel for him as a fellow sufferer”, and thus “each [sees] the other now in relational terms” since “the villagers are Marner’s ‘nearest promise of help’ and Marner becomes someone who needs the villager’s assistance”.⁴⁹² “Witnessing describes sympathy that depends on an act, the generous, welcoming stance in a face-to-face encounter in which the other shares [their] story”, K. A. Pond maintains, and therefore, “[t]he villagers’ act of witnessing indicates a recognition of this centrally human activity and they extend their help and sympathy, not because they now understand Marner, but because he has finally given them something to respond to”.⁴⁹³ But despite this first sympathetic approach between Silas and the community of Raveloe, K. A. Pond argues that the villagers’ sympathy towards Silas is still “flawed because [they] are more interested in telling Marner how to improve his situation by adopting their own practices than they are in listening to him share his own values and beliefs” and therefore, “Marner cannot fully accept their sympathy because to do so would be to lose himself in their desire to make him into a model Raveloe citizen”.⁴⁹⁴ In order to extend Silas’ sympathy towards the others, K. A. Pond maintains, Eliot introduces Eppie, the “golden-haired child who appears magically at Marner’s fireside”.⁴⁹⁵ At first it is hard for Silas to understand Eppie, as it is represented by Eliot also through the analogy of Silas’s sight being ‘blurry’ concerning his vision of Eppie. However, according to K. A. Pond, with the passing of days, Silas is able to see Eppie in a clearer way, meaning that he is able to understand her better, and therefore, “[t]he progress of Marner’s ability to sympathize is measured by this ability to acknowledge the way Eppie exceeds his understanding and to allow her mysteriousness to exist alongside his own”.⁴⁹⁶ Moreover, while “Eppie represents the interruption of the other in Marner’s story”, she also “has the opposite effect on the villagers [...] by actually making Marner intelligible to them”, as “[t]he villagers’ ability to understand

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 699

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 700

Marner's 'satisfactions and difficulties' produces their willingness to engage with him" and since "understanding precedes sympathy" then, it may be argued that "[t]his moment represents [...] a retreat from Eliot's radical experimentation with sympathy extended to an unknowable other", but Eliot tries to reprise it by "underscor[ing] Marner's strangeness in subtle ways, such as the gender reversal that becomes evident through Marner's role as mother to Eppie", thus not fully integrating Silas in the conventions of the community and society of Raveloe.⁴⁹⁷ Therefore, K. A. Pond maintains that "[w]hat makes Eliot's experiment in sympathy so compelling is the way she refuses to present sympathy as something innate, natural, or easy", and although she "dramatizes the struggle to feel for those who are different in the pages of *Silas Marner* [...] she also presents readers with a strategy to engage this struggle", that is "bearing witness", which "provides a needed cautionary impulse toward a sympathy that dominates the other, but also a hopeful vision for a sympathy that embraces the other".⁴⁹⁸

4.3 *Brother Jacob*

4.3.1 "The fable of a rogue confectioner"

After *Silas Marner* George Eliot wrote *Brother Jacob* (1864), which may be considered one of her most distinguished short stories. Helen Small deems it a "witty fable" which may be considered as "a sharp rebuke to a recurrent charge from Eliot's detractors that she had no sense of humor", as "[i]t is a wonderfully irreverent portrait of a man who has not a shred of Eliot's moral sensibility about it".⁴⁹⁹ As a matter of fact, David Faux, the protagonist of this short story, is a person "who steals his mother's guineas in order to pay his way to the West Indies where he hopes to find a princess gullible enough to be charmed by his bandy legs, sallow complexion, and timid green eyes" so as to obtain all her money and wealth, but once David "[finds] no one so desperate in the Indies, [...] [he] resumes his abandoned trade as a cook until he earns enough [...] to pay his way back to England", where he takes up the name of Edward Freely and "sets up a confectionery shop in the small rural town of Grimworth and proceeds to corrupt the domestic morals of the town's womenfolk, gradually drawing them away from" their homely duties, while impoverishing "their husbands' purses".⁵⁰⁰ Despite his deplorable behaviour, Helen Small points out, "[h]e is on the way of becoming a respected townsman", as

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 700-701

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 703-705

⁴⁹⁹ H. Small, *op. cit.*, p. xxx

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. xxx-xxxii

he is about to marry “pretty Penny Parley”, the daughter of a landowner, but he does not remain unpunished for his transgressions, because “he meets his Nemesis in [...] his idiot brother Jacob, whose passion for guinea-like lozenges leads him to find out his ‘sweet-tasting’ brother’ and innocently expose him to the townsfolk”.⁵⁰¹

4.3.2 An unconventional fable

Looking at the story of *Brother Jacob*, it seems that it presents more fabulous traits than *Silas Marner*, since David, the protagonist, much like the protagonists of conventional fables, sets off from his hometown to make fortune elsewhere, in this case in the colonies.⁵⁰² It could be argued that it is precisely this reference to the West Indies which may give some sort of realism to the story, but the way in which David’s story then develops resembles a fable, although not properly a conventional one. As a matter of fact, despite David being the protagonist of the story, he does not possess the selflessness nor the high morality of the hero of the fables.⁵⁰³ He even deceives his defenceless brother Jacob in order to be able to steal his mother’s guineas,

‘Hush! hush! said David, summoning all his ingenuity in this severe trait. ‘See, Jacob!’ He took the tin box from his brother’s hand, and emptied it of the lozenges, returning half of them to Jacob, but secretly keeping the rest in his own hand. Then he held out the empty box, and said, ‘Here’s the box, Jacob! The box for the guineas!’ gently sweeping them from Jacob’s palm into the box. [...]

David, seizing the opportunity, deposited his reverse of the lozenges in the ground and hastily swept some Earth over them. ‘Look, Jacob!’ he said, at last. Jacob paused from clinking, and looked into the whole, while David began to scratch away the earth as if in doubtful expectation, When the lozenges were laid bare, he took them out one by one, and gave them to Jacob.

‘Hush!’ he said, in a loud whisper, ‘Tell nobody – all for Jacob – hush – sh- sh! Put the guineas in the whole – they’ll come out like this!’⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., p. xxxi

⁵⁰² V. Propp, “Thirty-One Functions”, in M. Tatar (ed.), *A Norton Critical Edition: The Classic Fairy Tales*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1999, p. 386

⁵⁰³ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁴ G. Eliot, *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*, cit., p. 55

By deceiving his poor brother, David is turned into a villain, as in one of Vladimir Propp's "functions" it is "[t]he villain [who] attempts to deceive his victim in order to take possession of him or his belongings", because here the only character deceiving another character is David, who is trying to fool his poor brother Jacob who is getting in the way of David's struggle to hide the guineas he has just stolen from his mother in a fortunate moment when nobody was at home.⁵⁰⁵

The story then proceeds in a conventional way, since, much like the protagonists of traditional fables, David, once he has made certain of having hidden well the money he needs, is finally able to leave for the colonies, although, he will be unable to acquire the prosperity he was dreaming of when he was in Great Britain, and therefore he is forced to return home, and come back almost to his previous life as a confectioner, and this once again differentiates him from the common heroes of the conventional fables, as he has not properly acquired anything new.⁵⁰⁶ This time, he does not come back to his hometown, as he moves to another town, Grimworth, where he changes his name, and through his experience in the West Indies, he is able to lure the people of Grimworth, especially the women, as he has fabricated an appealing story around himself which hardly represents the truth, and he even vaunts a fortune coming from an uncle in the Colonies. Once again, here David's role as the "hero" of the fable is reversed, as he resembles more of a false hero, as he is lying to his fellow citizens about his own identity and what he has actually done in his past and in the colonies. His status of villain/false hero is kept eventually as he at the end is "exposed" by his Nemesis, his brother Jacob.⁵⁰⁷ As a matter of fact, Jacob was looking for his brother in order to tell him about their father's death and their inheritance, but once he finds his brother, Jacob destroys everything his brother has built around himself up until that time. Thus David is finally rewarded, "punished" for his misdeeds, much like the villains of fables, and he has to leave Grimworth and his dreams of glory are disrupted by the person he did most wrong.⁵⁰⁸

Therefore, *Brother Jacob*, may be deemed as the least realistic of George Eliot's early novels and short stories, as despite having a broader worldview due to its reference to the colonies, it still presents some fabulous traits, even if it is not a fully conventional fable, particularly in the villainous traits David possesses, which overturn his role as the hero of the story.

⁵⁰⁵ V. Propp, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 387

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

4.3.3 Nemesis and morality in *Brother Jacob*

Franco Marucci argues that in *Brother Jacob* there is a lack of “that *sympathy* which Eliot always bestows” to both her good and bad characters “indiscriminately”, although it is precisely for this reason, for David’s unrepentant attitude, that he deserves to be punished, thus giving the story a moral end.⁵⁰⁹

Melissa Valiska Gregory argues, instead, that it is “the figure of the nemesis [that] proves an important narrative device for illuminating the moral implications of one’s conduct”, and what is more, the figure of the nemesis may be considered as “a central preoccupation of Victorian narrative”, as it “is raised by nineteenth-century writers persistently, if obliquely, in relation to the psychology of British colonialism”.⁵¹⁰ As a matter of fact, M. V. Gregory maintains that “[e]ven in its most generic form, the return of the unexpected nemesis often provides the energetic centre of many mid-Victorian narratives”, since “the inevitable reentry of previously repressed or banished characters drives the plots of some of the most famous Victorian novels” like, for example, “Magwitch’s return in Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1860-1861)”.⁵¹¹

According to M. V. Gregory, the reason why the figure of the nemesis was essential “for those nineteenth-century novelists especially concerned with foregrounding the theme of moral responsibility” is due to the fact that “[t]he nemesis plotted return suggests that all human actions carry inescapable moral consequences, consequences which are exposed particularly when the actions of a former life or identity are unexpectedly brought to bear on the present”, and thus, “[t]he narrative dynamics of the nemesis [...] closely resemble the Gothic energies of repression and return, but with a subtle and crucial difference” since “the mid-Victorian nemesis [...] is inherently bound to social and ethical considerations”, and therefore, it “works as a particular and important narrative tool for Victorian writers preoccupied with questions of moral accountability”, because “the unexpected nemesis reveals the inevitable and powerful repercussions of human agency”.⁵¹²

M. V. Gregory maintains that “[t]his concern with agency and accountability, and its attendant dynamics of displacement and apprehension, absence and return, have strong affinities with the political forces and cultural anxieties surrounding nineteenth-century British

⁵⁰⁹ F. Marucci, *op. cit.*, p. 876

⁵¹⁰ M. V. Gregory, “The Unexpected Forms of Nemesis: George Eliot’s ‘Brother Jacob’, Victorian Narrative and the Morality of Imperialism, *Dickens Studies Annual*, vol. 31, 2002, pp. 281-303, pp. 281-282

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 282

⁵¹² *Ibid.*

imperialism”, as “[t]he sudden appearance of a character from the past who forces a moral reckoning, and who reveals that one’s past mistake always emerge to disrupt one’s present life, has a particular cultural resonance when it comes to ideology of imperial domination”.⁵¹³

Gregory argues “that the literary trope of the nemesis provides mid-Victorian writers with a metaphor and narrative structure for posing, if only indirectly, profoundly troubling questions about the moral integrity of imperial authority”, and therefore, “[a] closer look at this narrative device [...] both enlarges our understanding of the range of literary responses to the Empire”, and moreover, it “considers, more generally, how a formalist literary approach might be productively conjoined with the analysis of imperial dynamics so crucial to the literary and cultural criticism of the Victorian period over the past two decades”.⁵¹⁴

Therefore, M. V. Gregory maintains that *Brother Jacob* may be considered as “a story that exposes the moral evasions which sustain colonialism through a nemesis figure, thus strongly suggesting a connection between the tropes of mid-century literary narrative and a moral critique of imperial ideology”, and moreover, although “Eliot returned to the idea of the nemesis throughout her career, [...] ‘Brother Jacob’ is distinctive” as it puts “explicit attention to the colonies, insofar as it prominently satirizes England’s bourgeois ignorance about its own imperial space”.⁵¹⁵

According to M. V. Gregory, “the Indian Mutiny of 1857-58”, which destabilised “British faith in the Empire”, might have influenced Eliot in her writing of *Brother Jacob*, since it may give an “interpretation of [the short story] as a text with the capacity for illuminating the relationship between mid-Victorian literary narrative and colonial psychology”.⁵¹⁶ M. V. Gregory argues that “[w]hile there is no way to tell whether the Mutiny and the urgent questions it raised regarding imperial authority and British failure were actually in the forefront of Eliot’s consciousness as she composed ‘Brother Jacob’”, still, its “story [...] resonates with suggestive allusions to the Empire, and invites a close scrutiny of the ignorance and selfishness that underscore colonial domination”.⁵¹⁷

M. V. Gregory maintains that even before writing *Brother Jacob*, Eliot had already dealt with issues concerning imperialism, in particular in her review of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Dred* (1856), in which she states “her basic disapproval of slavery”, although this kind of behaviour was not unusual among Victorian upper- and middle-classes, since in Great Britain

⁵¹³ Ibid., pp. 282-283

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., p. 283

⁵¹⁵ Ibid.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid., p. 284

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

slavery had been abolished in 1834.⁵¹⁸ In her review, M. V. Gregory points out, “Eliot implores her readers to remember that the worst part of slavery is the resentment and the violence it breeds among the subjugated” as “[t]he ‘most terribly tragic element in the relation of the two races’ [...] is ‘the Nemesis lurking in the vices of the oppressed’”, and “[w]ith ‘Brother Jacob,’ Eliot continues to associate the nemesis with race, but also situates the trope within a narrative with strict imperial resonances”, besides also “further [intimating] that the nemesis’ return promises a moral reckoning both just and profoundly unsettling”.⁵¹⁹

According to M. V. Gregory, *Brother Jacob* “clearly reveals Eliot’s ‘disapproval of imperialistic exploitation’” as her “fable revolves around the downfall of an unscrupulous confectioner [...] who uses wildly exaggerated stories about his trip to the West Indies as a form of social leverage, there is, certainly, no question that the story satirizes the problem which often attends British colonialism”.⁵²⁰ M. V. Gregory maintains that “Eliot’s censure of the moral logic that undergirds colonial power structures surfaces in both her description of David’s attitude toward the colonies and in her representation of the unenlightened Grimworth citizens”, although Eliot is particularly disapproving of the town’s ignorance as they blindly believe everything David tells them about the colonies, thus even showing moral failure as they do not even try to question whether the stories they are hearing are true or mere inventions.⁵²¹

“But ‘Brother Jacob’ cannot be read as a direct political challenge to imperial ideology”, Gregory argues, “for Eliot’s story contains troubling ambiguities which thwart its functioning as a simple allegory about ignorant townspeople who learn a clear moral lesson”, and in particular because “[h]er final observation that Jacob is ‘an admirable instance of the unexpected forms in which the great Nemesis hides herself’ implies that we are often blind to the agents of our undoing” which is “a profoundly troubling idea in a mid-Victorian imperial world in which colonial authority and control depend on knowing where the threats lie”.⁵²² Therefore, “Eliot’s story both exposes the arrogance of colonial psychology and acknowledges it as a moral problem, but also betrays a decided ambivalence at the thought of being called to account for this moral failure”.⁵²³ Gregory argues that “[w]hile most fables feature wise and virtuous parties contrasted by bad ones [...] Eliot portrays David’s nemesis, his idiot brother Jacob, as threatening and possibly even dangerous”, and thus “her dubious depiction of the

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., p. 285

⁵¹⁹ Ibid., p. 287

⁵²⁰ Ibid., p. 288

⁵²¹ Ibid., pp. 288-289

⁵²² Ibid., p. 293

⁵²³ Ibid.

thuggish and stupid Jacob foregrounds the more unsettling aspects of the trope”.⁵²⁴ Gregory maintains that “Jacob, who remains somewhat unlikable [...] despite his role as moral agent, implies that the force which exposes hypocrisy is not always rational or deliberate”, and “[e]ven more disturbing, it is not always civilized”, and therefore, “[a]s a nemesis, Jacob embodies qualities which suggest that morality does not always coincide with superior intellect, and this rather disconcerting idea corresponds to a broad cultural anxiety”, felt during that period, “that perhaps the social authority of the empire was not, after all, based on an inherent moral and cultural superiority”.⁵²⁵

M. V. Gregory argues that “[t]hough Jacob is English, Eliot strongly aligns elements of his character with the Victorian stereotype of the primitive” and this might be considered “an association that encourages a reading of the literary nemesis within the wider context of mid-Victorian imperialism”, and moreover, “Eliot not only compares him to Caliban”, as “Jacob is as thrilled with his lemon lozenges as Caliban with Trinculo’s wine”, “but her decision to make Jacob an idiot [...] reveals a startling participation in an existing mid-nineteenth-century discourse which drew explicit connections between idiots and colonized natives”.⁵²⁶ M. V. Gregory maintains that Jacob’s depiction strongly resembles “nineteenth-century stereotypes of Africans”, in particular in his “hyper-physicalized body [...] his unnatural strength [...] his exaggerated body and face” but also in his “unnatural craving for sweets”.⁵²⁷

M. V. Gregory argues that “either through her deliberate construction or unconscious adherence to the dominant images of mid-Victorian culture, Eliot portrays David’s personal nemesis as a virtual embodiment of nineteenth-century black stereotypes”, which “invites broader speculation about the nature of nemesis as it relates to colonial psychology”.⁵²⁸

“If reading ‘Brother Jacob’ as a text which aligns the literary nemesis with colonial conflict contributes to our larger understanding of the relationship between narrative and imperialism in the mid-nineteenth century”, Gregory maintains, “then, Eliot’s association of the nemesis [...] with imperial themes also indicates that perhaps Victorian novelists do not always ‘continually reinforce’ [...] British colonial power”.⁵²⁹ As a matter of fact, according to Gregory, “Eliot’s satiric representation of David Faux’s West Indian tales actively lampoons the self-serving use of the colonies [...] which many postcolonialist readings continue to

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

⁵²⁵ Ibid.

⁵²⁶ Ibid., pp. 293-294

⁵²⁷ Ibid., p. 294

⁵²⁸ Ibid., p. 295

⁵²⁹ Ibid., p. 296

assume is the primary role of the colonies in Victorian fiction”.⁵³⁰ “But those Victorian novels which align the dynamics of repression and return with a moral inquiry into the nature of British imperialism”, M. V. Gregory argues, “endeavour to move beyond simple affirmations of imperial authority”, and also “Eliot’s use of a racialized nemesis suggests a view of Victorian narrative in which some writers struggle to come to terms with a pervasive cultural ideology with extremely troubling moral implications”.⁵³¹

Gregory maintains that “Stephen Arata observes that fin-de-siècle Victorian narrative often expresses a fear of colonial invasion” and “[p]erhaps if fin-de-siècle fiction focuses on the returning Other as an object of fear, a figure whose potential for claiming justice is subordinated to the destruction it brings” it could then mean that “the mid-century nemesis of ‘Brother Jacob’, and of some other mid-century Victorian novels, rests more precariously between the idea of justice and ruin”.⁵³² M. V. Gregory argues that “[t]he use of this moral trope in the 1850s and 1860’s indicates one way that Victorian writers struggles to come to terms with imperial rule and its attendant assumption of British cultural supremacy”, and moreover, “[t]he nemesis was not always treated as an opportunity to consider the moral implications of colonial psychology, but its persistent association with the Empire suggest that, at least for a while, it functioned as an important device for raising ethical concerns about imperial ideology”.⁵³³

Therefore, Gregory maintains that “[t]he complex tension exhibited by Eliot’s use of nemesis metaphor, [...] which both invites and fears a moral consideration of imperialism, loses its moral dimension as Victorian writers increasingly articulated race relations through [...] Gothic tropes” such as “imprisonment and loss”, thus “creating narratives which describe colonized subjects as nemeses only in order to affirm imperial domination”.⁵³⁴ But “[b]efore this reaffirmation of imperial authority in late-Victorian narratives,” Gregory argues, “Eliot’s ‘Brother Jacob’ suggests that mid-Victorian narrative considered the possibility [...] that colonial domination bore serious consequences”, as “Eliot’s implicit link between the nemesis trope and imperial ideology intimates to her readers that Britain’s perception of itself as morally and culturally superior is inherently unstable and fundamentally vulnerable to moral criticism”.⁵³⁵ “This acknowledgement lends more depth to the persistent view of mid-Victorian

⁵³⁰ Ibid.

⁵³¹ Ibid.

⁵³² Ibid., p. 297

⁵³³ Ibid.

⁵³⁴ Ibid., p. 299

⁵³⁵ Ibid.

imperial narratives as either validations of imperial authority or thoughtless expressions of imperial fear”, M. V. Gregory argues, and therefore, “[t]he mid-Victorian nemesis, if only temporarily, creates in Victorian colonial narrative and opportunity to consider the moral and social ramifications of imperial rule”, thus, “[p]erhaps it is no surprise that Eliot the moralist took this opportunity, and her portrayal of Brother Jacob metaphorically evokes the possibility of imperial failure and uneasily intimates the justice of colonial rebellion”.⁵³⁶

⁵³⁶ Ibid.

Conclusion

In this dissertation I have examined George Eliot's exceptional life, and how her personal experiences influenced her as a writer.

I have explored Eliot's aesthetic and literary ideas as they shaped her earlier pieces of fiction. Her early novels while following Eliot's concept of moral realism, as shown by the depictions of limitations of the characters of *Adam Bede*, and the siblings dynamics of *The Mill on the Floss*, present some exceptions, as for example the mythologic ending of the Tullivers' siblings at the end of *The Mill on the Floss*.

It may be also noticed that after her strong appeal to truthfulness in *Adam Bede*, Eliot wrote about mesmerism and phrenology in her next piece of fiction, *The Lifted Veil*. Very few realistic traits are present in this short story, as it focuses more on Latimer's visions and culminates with the revivification experiment at the end of the short story. The Gothic traits of this short story strongly contrast with the realism of *Adam Bede*, and also the broader world-view of the European setting of the *The Lifted Veil* further distances Eliot for the rural setting of her previous short stories and *Adam Bede*, which had become a prominent feature of her writing.

The Lifted Veil may be considered an exception in George Eliot's writing career, as she would not return to Gothicism in her following pieces of fiction. As a matter of fact, with her next novels, *The Mill on the Floss* and *Silas Marner*, she returns to her initial rural settings, although in both these novels some mythological and mysterious traits are present. In *The Mill on the Floss*, it is through the legendary story of St Ogg's and the Floss that myth is conveyed. In particular the Floss has a powerful symbolic function, as in the end it washes away all the past mistakes of both Maggie and Tom and reunites them forever.

In *Silas Marner*, instead, there is mystery that comes for Silas's past, which is unknown to the community of Raveloe, and it is enforced by Silas's job as a weaver, which modernity and industrialization were swiping away. But also the mysterious forces which are working around Silas, and his cataleptic fits, enforce the fairy-tale aura around him, although Eliot eventually adjusts it through the realistic story of Godfrey Cass.

Differently from *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner* presents some fabulous traits. Silas's loss of faith and subsequent isolation seem to be punished through the loss of his comforting coins, although he has a chance to prove what he is really like when his gold symbolically returns to him in the shape of a golden-haired baby girl, for whom he instantly

feels a strong fondness. Thus the apparently unfriendly Silas finds the true value of life, and is able to reveal his sympathetic side to the community of Raveloe.

Even more fabulous than *Silas Marner*, is Eliot's next short story, *Brother Jacob*, where Eliot's appeal to truthfulness is at the minimum, if only for the reference to the colonies, which may be considered as the only realist trait of the short story. Thus, Eliot further distances herself from her previous rural settings, although the British country is still present in David Faux's hometown and the town he moves to once he returns from the West Indies, to Grimworth. But the way the story unfolds has nothing of the rustic realism of Eliot's previous fiction, as David remains unrepentant of his misconduct, he does not want to acknowledge his limitations, and up until the end, he is willing to do anything in his power to achieve his own goals. He does not remain unpunished, though, as his reward comes from the person he did wrong the most, i.e. his brother Jacob. It is precisely in David's colonial adventures and his final reward that his story resembles a fable, more than a story of rustic realism such as that of *Adam Bede*.

Even Eliot's concept of sympathy changes throughout her earlier pieces of fiction. In *Adam Bede* sympathy is conveyed through Dinah Morris and Seth Bede, who, although differently, display sympathetic traits in their approach towards the people around them. Dinah's sympathy comes from her Methodist beliefs and her abstraction of the momentary sufferings of the others, which brings her closer to people, although she cannot fully 'suffer with' others. Seth Bede's sensitivity and piousness, instead, render him the most selfless character in *Adam Bede*, thus he eventually gives up on proposing to Dinah, and remains a bachelor by the end of story, gladly helping his brother and sister-in-law in raising their children.

In *The Mill on the Floss*, instead, sympathy is conveyed through Maggie Tulliver, who constantly feels for the others although, by doing so, she is never truly able to make peace with what she indeed wants. Even the way Maggie is treated by the community of St Ogg's conveys sympathy towards Maggie, as whichever choice she might make, will always make the community criticise her, thus bringing the readers close to Maggie due to the relatable daily struggles that anyone must face to defy conventions.

As we have noticed, *The Lifted Veil*, instead, challenges the assumption ~~premise~~ that sympathy comes from knowing and sharing the others' sorrows and joys, as Latimer from his telepathy only receives boredom. Therefore, it may be argued that sympathy is not properly something innate, but a struggle, and activity to understand the others' feelings and thoughts, which would then bring us closer to other people.

Silas Marner, instead, challenges the idea of sympathy coming from mutual feeling and understanding. As a matter of fact, despite misunderstanding one another, Silas Marner and the people of Raveloe, are not brought together ~~not~~ by some shared sorrows or thoughts, but through the sharing of their different stories, which do not have to be communal, but bared, despite our mutual differences.

Brother Jacob is in some way the most eccentric of Eliot's earlier novels, besides not presenting Eliot's distinctive rustic realism, it does not present any kind of sympathetic concept, as it does not have a proper sympathetic character either.

This increasing distancing from her moral and rustic realism may show a change in interests on George Eliot's part, as she would write about history and Europe in her later novels, a change which can indeed be noticed in Eliot's growing inclusion of European settings, still present in her earlier pieces of fiction. Also her increasing distancing from her earlier notion of sympathy, particularly in *The Lifted Veil*, and even more so in *Brother Jacob*, may prove a shift of focus in the topics she wished to deal with as she grew older.

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