Victorian Value(s): George Eliot, Sympathy, and Female Counternarratives of "Value" in *Silas Marner*

Marina Aguilar García

Máster en Estudios Literarios y Culturales Británicos y de los Países de Habla Inglesa. Literatura, Cultura, Comunicación y Traducción

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Marina Aguilar García

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Directora:

Prof. Luisa Antón-Pacheco

Máster Universitario en Estudios Literarios y Culturales Británicos

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1. Introduction

Silas Marner holds quite a singular position among the literary works written by George Eliot. Published in 1861 after *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*, it is among Eliot's most popular and extensively read works and yet it seems to remain disdainfully confined to the realm of school readings because of its simple style and strong moral dimension. In truth, *Silas Marner* is apparently a rather simple piece. Located in the rural England of the turn of the century, it narrates the story of Silas, a weaver who is betrayed by his best friend, falsely accused of robbery, and consequently expelled from his native town. Forced to live in isolation in a new community of the Midlands, Silas' life is reduced to weaving and hoarding the gold he earns, which becomes his only companion and the sole target of his affection. He, then, becomes an ostracized miser who is unable to achieve happiness until his gold is stolen and substituted by the support and affection of his neighbors and Eppie, orphaned girl that he adopts.

In a letter written to her publisher John Blackwood before the publication of *Silas Marner*, Eliot herself claimed she hoped he did "not find it at all a sad story, as a whole, since it sets—or is intended to set—in a strong light the remedial influences of pure, natural human relations" (*GEL* III, 175). Indeed, showing the healing capacity that human relations have and the inherent natural goodness that can be found in society, *Silas Marner* stands as a reading with a happy ending that overflows with tenderness. Profoundly humanistic in its approach, the novel shows that money does not suffice when it comes to human emotions and condemns actions stemming from egotism and selfishness, conveying the idea that just as good actions are ultimately rewarded in society, those who act out of evil will be condemned. Thus, *Silas Marner* emerges as a parable that denounces miserly reliance on money and highlights the importance of empathy and mutually-helpful human relations within a small community of the English Midlands. It is, then, a short work primarily concerned with the promotion of what Eliot denominated "sympathy", a notion that she exhaustively expounded on in her essays as well as in her correspondence which can be defined as the purely human capacity to be compassionate with the other and act out of love that she established as the cornerstone of her moral theory and of moral life.

This paper, however, offers a different reading of *Silas Marner* that transcends the notion that Eliot's novel is simply a didactic moral fable that should be read by children in

order to imbue them with the idea that individuals should behave empathetically within society. If one understands it not so much as a timeless moral fable but as a literary piece that originates as a product of a certain time in a certain place—that is, as a cultural product—*Silas Marner* emerges as a central work for the study of the English sociocultural landscape in the mid-Victorian period. In fact, the moral dimension of *Silas Marner*, with its criticism of the dependence on money as well as of egotistic and individualistic behaviors and its promotion of moral rectitude and sympathetic relations, is a criticism of the unbridgeable gap that existed between morality and political economy in Victorian society by the time Eliot wrote her canon. As this study will demonstrate, the novel shows Eliot's opposition to the ideas of economic profit, extreme individualism, and *laissez-faire* underpinning Victorian narratives of political economy that came at the expense of moral and affective concerns in public matters. Thus, *Silas Marner* belongs to a body of literature produced in the mid-nineteenth century that became a reflection and a reaction against the transformation of ethical codes that England had undergone from the early years of the century, a process in which the meanings of "value" were wholly altered in the Victorian collective unconscious. While the official narratives of a deeply patriarchal state promoted an idea of "value" that was exclusively economic, morality and human feeling were removed from the public sphere and relegated to the realm of the "feminine" and the domestic. Vindicating the harmonization of the moral and the economic through the figure of the miser, *Silas Marner* stands against patriarchal discourses and evinces to what extent Eliot opposes the very core of Victorian patriarchal narratives, using morality as a locus of authority and challenging the dominant discourse by emphasizing the role that those "feminine" aspects have in the creation of non-dysfunctional social models.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is, first, to bring to light the political subtext set at the core of the novel, analyzing how *Silas Marner* is a reflection and a criticism of the transformation of ethical codes that took place as a result of what Harold Perkin denominates the English "Moral Revolution" in *The Origins of Modern English Society* (2002). Second, it aims at exploring how Eliot responds to those new Victorian values by developing her own counternarrative of "value" in which morality, affection, social relations, and economy are inseparable, thus locating Eliot within a broader context of female writers that similarly used fiction as a way of reacting against patriarchal ideological discourses. And third, it seeks to

evince to what extent Eliotean moral theory can exert a sociopolitical impact if located in the appropriate context, which serves as a way to empower her moral discourse, bring to light the feminist subtext that it hides, and understand more comprehensively the literary canon produced by George Eliot throughout her career.

And despite its thematic richness and subversive potential, *Silas Marner* stands out from the rest of Eliot's works in that it has taken decades of academic criticism to take it seriously, often regarded as a simple work that was too lightweight to deserve the serious analysis that other "major" novels written by Eliot did receive. In fact, early criticism tended to praise *Silas Marner* on the basis of its simplicity. In "The Novels of George Eliot" (1866), for instance, Henry James saw in Eliot's novel a pervasive simplicity that he understood as the basis of its exceptional quality. He located *Silas Marner* in "a higher place than any of the author's works" and highlighted its "simple, rounded, consummate aspect, that absence of loose ends and gaping issues, which marks a classical work" (482). Analyzing the novel more comprehensively in 1913, Edwin Fairley called it a "flawless piece of work" (222), "complete in design and admirable in construction" (221), but his observations were similarly unobservant of the thematic richness of the novel. The tendency to praise *Silas Marner* in terms of its simplicity continued until well into the twentieth century. F. R. Leavis' *The Great Tradition* (1948) encapsulated the ideas of decades of criticism determined to regard Eliot's work as a simple yet highly satisfying moral reading. He called it "that charming minor masterpiece" that was "modestly conscious of its minor quality" and stressed the highly persuasive moral content of what he judged a moral fable (46-47).

From the second half of the twentieth century onwards, criticism on *Silas Marner* has reassessed its apparent simplicity, acknowledging the value of *Silas Marner* not only aesthetically but also thematically and approaching the novel from multiple perspectives. What is more, with the emergence of New Historicism and other theoretical approaches that placed value on the historical context of literary works, *Silas Marner* began to be integrated into the sociohistorical context in which it was produced. Q. D. Leavis was among the first to actually observe its historical dimension in *The Englishness of the Novel* (1984), locating *Silas Marner* in the broader context of the Industrial Revolution in England. In particular, she noted how through the figure of Silas "the dire effects of the Industrial Revolution are examined" (282), arguing that—inasmuch as it is set in the turn of the century in England—

the novel displays the contrast between a civilization that was vanishing by the time Eliot wrote her novel and a new social model that rejected the very existence of "the old order" (284). Leavis draws a key parallel between *Silas Marner* and those Victorian novels with a powerful social subtext, claiming that Eliot's novel dwells on the same aspects that "all the serious Victorian novelists had on their minds, inheritors as all these novelists were … of that earlier ethos of Cobbett's humane Radicalism and Carlyle's appeals to conscience" (300).

These observations are certainly a turning point in the criticism directed towards *Silas Marner*: they inaugurated a tendency that placed the industrial capitalist context in which the novel was written at the center of the discussion. However, the apparent simplicity of the novel resulted in many of these approaches being paragraph-long discussions in essays that explored a variety of topics.[1] And still, there remains a perceptible scarcity in the amount of research done on the ideological weight of *Silas Marner* that Q. D. Leavis had already observed back in the 1980s.

With the rise in the academic interest directed towards Victorian cultural studies that aim at exploring the values, ideologies, and conceptualizations of life of a category—the Victorians—that is often too reductive, *Silas Marner* in particular and Eliotean moral theory in general have been used as primary sources for these purposes. This approach mainly indebted to the studies of Ilana M. Blumberg in "'Love Yourself as You Love Your Neighbour': The Limits of Altruism and the Ethics of Personal Benefit in *Adam Bede*." (2009) and "Stealing the 'Parson's Surplice' / the Person's Surplus: Narratives of Abstraction and Exchange in *Silas Marner*" (2013), where she reflects on the ideological alterations of the nineteenth century as well as Eliot's dissenting response to them. With them, Dinah Birch's article "'What is Value?': Victorian Economies of Feeling" (2012), which is extensively used in this paper, has also contributed to shed light onto this dimension of the novel, even though her article is concerned with *Silas Marner* only secondarily. M. K. Newton's *Modernizing George Eliot* (2010) also offers one of the most comprehensive analyses of Eliot's novel in this light that has been particularly useful for the development of the thesis of this paper.

[1] The number of essays which mention *Silas Marner* almost anecdotally is endless. Some instances used in this paper include those written by Richard Menke, Joseph Childers, John Kucich, Dermot Coleman, and Ruth Livesey.

This is, therefore, the body of criticism from which this paper comes into being and to which it aims at contributing with a more comprehensive discussion of the novel and its sociohistorical context, a discussion that is divided into six sections, including this introduction. Section 2 provides a survey on the ideological context in which the novel was produced that is imperative before delving into the analysis of *Silas Marner*, paying careful attention to the variety of voices that existed in nineteenth-century England and relying on some primary sources that include John Stuart Mill, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, and Samuel Smiles. Then, the essay begins its exploration of *Silas Marner*, first focusing on the ethical and aesthetic principles that rule Eliotean fiction according to her own essays in order to understand how Eliot's fiction manages to deal with the problems of her Victorian present without explicitly locating her novels in the Victorian Period, which facilitates bringing to light the historical dimension of *Silas Marner*. Section 4 analyzes the novel more closely in order to explore how in *Silas Marner* Eliot makes a criticism of the changes brought about by industrial capitalism and of the patriarchal narratives of "value" based on capital, individualism, and *laissez-faire* that were unobservant of moral, affective, and social concerns. Section 5 studies how the social model that Eliot promotes in *Silas Marner* stands as a "feminine" alternative to the dysfunctions of her contemporary capitalist society thanks to the role that Eliotean sympathy plays in the enhancement of its social fabric. Then, a final section is dedicated to conclusions and some final considerations on the topic.

Consequently, this paper is a study of culture inscribed within the dynamics of cultural materialist criticism, which Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield define in their foreword to *Political Shakespeare: Essays on Cultural Materialism* (1994) as an approach based on "a combination of historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis" (vii). It is a cultural materialist reading of *Silas Marner* inasmuch as it ascribes the same importance to the text and to the context, thus trying to recover "its histories" (vii) without neglecting the actual analysis of the text, but also because it does have a political commitment that combines feminist and Marxist perspectives and acknowledges the subversive potential that writings like *Silas Marner* have if read from a particular perspective. What is more, as the following chapters will show, this study is ultimately about a tension between two "structures of feeling", which Raymond Williams defines in *Marxism and Literature* (1977) as "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt", i.e., ways

of understanding life that are “explicit and recognizable in specific kinds of art” (132, 135). In this case, one is patriarchal and dominant and one “feminine” and subversive. The following discussion is precisely about embracing *Silas Marner* as a response against the structure of feeling of a patriarchal and dysfunctional *status quo* and about placing value on the political and feminist subtext that is set at the core of this historically undervalued novel.

2. Reshaping Value(s): the Nineteenth-Century Mind and its Dissent

George Eliot published *Silas Marner* in 1861, but the novel—covering a time span from the 1790s to the 1820s—is set at the turn of the century, "in the days when the spinning-wheels hummed busily in the farm-houses—and even the great ladies … had their toy spinning-wheels of polished oak" (Eliot 3). This time frame that is depicted from the very first lines of the novel as remote, distant, and even unknown from the standpoint of the reader, who is provided with information about the "peasants of old times" (4) so as to introduce them into the idiosyncrasies of this rural society that had been left behind a couple of generations ago. Indeed, Eliot must have known that early readers of *Silas Marner* would have invariably felt a sense of distance between their present and the one depicted by the narrative, even if she merely goes back in time some decades to locate her story.

This sense of difference between the past and the present that the novel conveys is a result of the fact that Silas' story is set in the early years of what has been often called the "Great Divergence", a critical period in the history of England during which the country underwent a profound transformation that would eventually make it emerge as an industrial culture and as a modern capitalist society by the time Eliot wrote her canon.[2] Indeed, during the last years of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth in England, there took place a "process of transition from an organic or agriculturally based economy reliant on handicraft, to one based on manufactures and machine production" (Hilton 3), a process traditionally known as First Industrial Revolution. While the country was slowly but steadily becoming the workshop of the world, capitalism—which according to Marx's *Capital* (1867) had been on the rise since the last third of the eighteenth century (390)—installed itself in England and a new Platonic conception of reality emerged at the macro level of society in which the ideal world meant the success of the capitalist system.[3] As Harold Perkin points out, "the ideal citizen for the bulk of the middle class was, naturally, the capitalist, and the

[2] The term "Great Divergence" was originally coined by Samuel Huntington in *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996) to refer to the process whereby the Western world established itself at the center of technological, political, and socioeconomic progress by the mid-nineteenth century. More recently, Boyd Hilton has used the term to approach the socioeconomic alterations that took place in England as a result of the First Industrial Revolution. This essay is therefore closer to Hilton's usage of the phrase. For further information on the Great Divergence in these terms, see Hilton 2-23.

[3] More concretely, Marx refers in this context to a period of massive transformations brought about by the ascent of capital: "an avalanche of violent and unmeasured encroachments. Every boundary set by morality and nature, age and sex, day and night, was broken down. Even the ideas of day and night, which in the old statutes were of peasant simplicity, became so confused … Capital was celebrating its orgies" (390).

ideal society a class society based on capital" (182). During the first decades of the nineteenth century and even more importantly in the years of the mid-century, there was an almost fanatical devotion of capital and economic progress: "Capital was the chief benefactor of society, the parent of all progress" (183).

Since the attainment of the ideal society depends on the triumph of the capitalist subject, the idea of competition becomes a key aspect, together with the notion of extreme individualism. According to the narrative that is set in the first years of the Age of Capital, men should work their own path to success, being faithful to a work ethic that would eventually pay off in the form of economic profit both for the individual and for the nation. Samuel Smiles' words in *Self-Help* (1859) rightly summarized this narrative, claiming that "national progress is the sum of individual industry, energy, and uprightness, as national decay is of individual idleness, selfishness, and vice … then it follows that the highest patriotism and philanthropy consist … in helping and stimulating men to elevate and improve themselves by their own free and independent individual action" (3).

This improvement that Smiles refers to was, however, not developed in abstract terms: "it was individual competition, the competition of flesh-and-blood men for wealth, power and social status" (Perkin 182). Thus, inevitably, the new ideology that was established in the first decades of the nineteenth century, based on extreme individualism, competition, and *laissez-faire*, was born hand in hand with early skeptics and even detractors. In *Past and Present* (1843), Thomas Carlyle's critique of this newly industrialized capitalist England, he described it as a "Mammon-Gospel, of Supply-and-demand, Competition, *Laissez-faire*, and Devil take the hindmost" (183). Similarly, John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) criticized "those who think that the normal state of human beings is that of struggling to get on; that the trampling, crushing, elbowing, and treading on each other's heels, which form the existing type of social life, are the most desirable lot of human kind" (189). The realm of fiction also reflected the early concerns for the type of society that industrial capitalism was breeding. The so-called Condition-of-England novels—highly characteristic of the decade of the Hungry Forties and still popular in the following decade—explored the injustices, inequalities, and social dysfunctions of a society based on industry, capital, and individual profit. Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, or the Two Nations* (1845), Charles

Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854), and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855) are quintessential representations of the spirit that permeated this genre.

Even so, by the 1850s the new "Gospel" of Capital, in Carlylean terms, was flourishing; it became the ideological blueprint of the Victorian Era and was consequently established at the core of the Victorian Project in a process fostered by the Protestant background of the country. Carlyle certainly made a point in comparing capitalism with a gospel; in fact, economic success had strong religious connotations too. God was believed to be on the side of those who succeeded economically and it was generally thought that such success was determined by God's will. As Max Weber points out in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), worldly activities were understood in Protestant faith as "a task set by God" (39) and, hence, "the fulfillment of the obligations imposed upon the individual" by Providence, "inevitably gave every-day activity a religious significance" (40). Capital, individual success and profit, consequently, became not only objects of worship but an extension of God's will.

Thus, England underwent a profound revolution during the nineteenth century. The frenzy of economic changes and technological advancements, together with the alterations in the social landscape that they brought about and the highly religious connotations that underpinned the system, were the perfect breeding ground for the emergence of a new "structure of feeling", in the words of Raymond Williams, that left an imprint on the collective ideology of the English, and, in particular, on the ethical codes upon which the society of the pre-capitalist society was grounded. Dinah Birch has dealt with this alteration in her thought-provoking essay "What is Value? Victorian Economies of Feeling" (2012), where she explores how the profound changes undergone by England in the Age of Capital altered the meaning of the notion of "value" in the collective unconscious: "From an economic perspective, value is a quantifiable measure of worth or quantity as determined by a standard of equivalence. From a social viewpoint, value has a powerfully ethical resonance, and it is concerned with the merits of abstract principles, or codes of behavior" (31). "Value" refers to the worth of something in a marketplace, but it also points to the intangible idea of a moral behavior; it refers to the capacity that individuals have to behave within society according to some moral standards that are socially regarded as righteous and exemplary. This concept, thus, can be equally economic and social. On its first level of meaning, "value"

is primarily concerned with an idea of economic profit; on the second, it is inseparably connected with ethical, social, and affective concerns that go beyond the material and have a key role in the consolidation of a strong social fabric. And, as Birch points out, its two meanings can converge or "stand in direct opposition" (31). In a context in which the idea of economic profit stands among the quintessential traits of this society, the ethical and moral resonances of the concept of "value" simply vanish into thin air.[4] In this new landscape, "value" was not a matter of moral duty or rectitude anymore; it was a concept that overflowed with economic connotations standing at the kernel of the Victorian socioeconomic order.

The development of industrial capitalism was, hence, parallel to what Harold Perkin denominates a "Moral Revolution, that profound change in the national character which accompanied the Industrial Revolution" and took place between 1780 and 1850 (231), giving birth to a whole new set of ideas in the Victorian collective imagination. This new "structure of feeling", in the words of Raymond Williams, radically separated the two meanings of "value", locating them in two separate spheres. Moral and affective concerns were removed from the public agenda—now fully focused on the attainment of the capitalist ideal—and transferred to the domestic realm and, hence, to women.[5] Feeling and morality became inextricably bound to the "feminine" and thus emerged a dialectical opposition between the public and the domestic, the economic and the moral, the manly and the feminine. Even though women were regarded as physically and intellectually inferior to men, they were always deemed superior to them morally. Thus, this narrative excluded women from the public sphere and confined them to the domestic, since they were thought as naturally unable to participate in the public sphere. And so "man does rough work in the open world, [while] woman is protected in the home from all danger and temptation" (David 15), where she—the so-called "angel in the house"—must stand as the perfect exemplar of tender

[4] John Stuart Mill noted how the morality of a given society always emanates from the interests and feelings of the controlling social ranks, claiming that "wherever there is an ascendant class, a large portion of the morality of the country emanates from its class interests, and its feelings of class superiority" ("On Liberty" 92). In this respect, Stephen Collini reminds us that the existence of a "dominant sensibility" does not mean that it is exclusive, but that "its dominance would be acknowledged by the fact that those who did not share it necessarily stood in some defensive, deferential, or antagonistic relation to it" (63).

[5] Thackeray's words in *The Newcomes* are quite illustrative in this respect: "to appeal to the affections is after all the true office of the bard; to decorate the homely threshold, to wreathe flowers round the domestic hearth" (860).

sentimentality, purity, morality, and righteousness.[6] Thus, the "duty of affect", in the words of Isobel Armstrong, became a "substitute for political change" ("Msrepresentation" 24) that excluded women from the public sphere, while the masculinized power structures and political economy remained alien to ethical and moral concerns in their construction of modern narratives of "value".

However, from the second half of the century onwards and by the time Eliot produced her canon, the Victorian Project and its commitment to the Gospel of Capital had already been proved to be a source of dysfunctions in society. Most of the traits of the Victorian mind were regarded as problematic, especially by authors whose sensibilities and ethical codes were shaped in the early years of the century. There emerged, thus, more thinkers whose ideological positions vindicated the necessity to create a social model in which feeling and political economy did not stand in opposition in order to prevent further dysfunctions.[7] But more importantly, the flaws of the social model gave women writers the opportunity to challenge the dogmas of the Victorian socioeconomic order. Using the same tools that the patriarchal system had endowed them with, some women writers turned the dialectics around and reflected in their fictions their own counternarratives in which they advocated for the harmonization of the two meanings of "value" that had been divided into separate spheres. Women writers embraced the affective concerns that male centers of power had disdainfully relegated to the domestic realm, endorsing a social model observant of moral concerns that became a source not only of ideological dissent but also of gender resistance and a threat for the established patriarchal discourses.

Of course, the *status quo* was quick to downplay these positions, regarding them as feminine outpourings of irrational sentiment even if they were supported by some men too. One of them, John Ruskin, whose ideas had considerable influence on Eliot, published in 1862 his four-essay collection *Unto This Last*, in which he criticized the gap that existed between Victorian political economy and moral and affective concerns, which he calls "social affection" (6): "Among the delusions which at different periods have possessed themselves

[6] Similarly, John Tosh claims that "the city and the market-place were now perceived to be alienating and amoral, and the home came into sharper focus as the emotional mooring of homo economicus" (81).
[7] As Birch points out, there was a debate that became particularly significant by the 1860s and 1870s between "those who advocated the potential value of sentiment or feeling in a social, public, or political context" and those who stood for the "hard laws of economic or social necessity" for whom feeling and morality were out of the equation (37).

of the minds of large masses of the human race, perhaps the most curious—certainly the least creditable—is the modern *soi-disant* science of political economy, based on the idea that an advantageous code of social action may be determined irrespectively of the influence of social affection" (17). Ruskin advocates for the merging of the two notions of "value", suggesting that "to be 'valuable', therefore, is to 'avail towards life'. A truly valuable or availing thing is that which leads to life with its whole strength. In proportion as it does not lead to life, or as its strength is broken, it is less valuable; in proportion as it leads away from life, it is unvaluable or malignant" (99).[8] Economic value, then, must not be the sole target of human action. Instead, he believes in a notion of "value" that is much more multidimensional, a value that must be translated into life in the form of "multiple loyalties, responsibilities and bonds" (Birch 33).

Ruskin's essay was quite provocative at the time. The response that his essay received on the part of the *Saturday Review* is quite illustrative in this respect, claiming that Ruskin had degraded himself as a man "reproaching his country and insulting his neighbours with querulous female virulence" (qtd. in Birch 36). The review goes so far as to say that "it is intolerable that a man . . . should be able to avail himself of the pages of one of our most popular periodicals for the purpose of pouring out feminine nonsense . . . upon so grave a subject as political economy" and downplays Ruskin's words claiming that "the world … is not going to be preached to death by a mad governess" (36-37).

Indeed, Ruskin's endorsement of social and affective concerns within the context of political economy was an open attack on the foundations of Victorian society. Other dissenting voices, however, chose different vehicles to convey their ideas more subtlety. For women writers such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot, fiction became the realm where they could articulate their ideas more freely.[9] Vindicating the harmonization of the affective and the economic, their literary productions

[8] Ruskin's argument in his understanding of "value" is etymological in its origin: "It were to be wished that our well-educated merchants recalled to mind … their Latin schooling,—that the nominative of *valorem* (a word already sufficiently familiar to them) is *valor* … *Valor,* from *valere*, to be well, or strong … —strong, in life (if a man), or valiant; strong, for life (if a thing), or valuable" (99).

[9] Indeed, in his exploration of the concept of "liberal guilt" in the fictions of major Victorian novelists, Daniel Born notes that Victorians "held enormously hopeful convictions about both the epistemological validity and the transformative possibilities of art" (2). For further information on the social role of literature in this period, see Rachel Ablow, who claims that "the nineteenth century [was] a moment when, insofar as the novel was believed to be good for anything, it was believed to be good for making readers feel" (298).

created female counternarratives of "value" by emphasizing the importance of those aspects that were confined to the realm of the domestic. Morality, thus, became a locus of authority for these women as the flaws of Victorian society became more evident. As the analysis of *Silas Marner* will show, these new female narratives opposed male systems of discourse and promoted a moral regeneration of society that was usually seen in terms of a harmonious and cooperative relationship between the individual and the collective that downplayed the role of capital in society and placed value in the importance of purely human relations.

3. Moral Fable or "Moral Realism"?: Eliotean Ethics and Aesthetics in *Silas Marner*

Approaching Victorian fiction from a new historicist perspective, Catherine Gallagher argues in her canonical work *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction* (1985) that it is almost impossible to make a distinction between the novels produced in the Victorian Period and the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution in England. Gallagher claims that, during this period, "industrialism gave not only a new content but also a new shape to English cultural and intellectual life, creating, merging, and rearranging its constituents" (xi). Similarly, Joseph Childers has more recently claimed that "a neat separation of industrialism and the novel is nearly impossible in the years between 1832 and 1867", since "each looked at the other for models of effecting and controlling as well as understanding change" (77-78).

Taking this into account, it is easy to understand why *Silas Marner* has been so often compared to a guileless moral fable targeted at children, reading it in total isolation from its context and considering that it lacks the historical dimension and contemporary worries that most mid-Victorian novels did have. As Nancy Henry notes, *Silas Marner* is characterized by its "relative inattention to the historical details of time and place" (125). It is clearly located in the past, but the "date of its setting is not precise, and the village of Raveloe, though clearly in the Midlands, does not have a specific 'original'. This vagueness … adds to the novel's universal, archetypal quality" (125). Moreover, the narrative structure of this short novel displays a series of closely-knit events and coincidences ruled by an ever-present poetical justice—"an almost magical coincidence and symmetry of form" (125)—as well as metaphors and a thorough symbolism, all of which make the association with moral and legendary tales almost inevitable and make the novel depart from the broader body of social literature produced in the Victorian Period.[10]

The depiction of Silas is very illustrative in this respect. From the very first pages of the novel, the reader is informed about the mysterious condition that the weaver suffers: a "rigidity or suspension of consciousness which, lasting for an hour or more, had been mistaken for death" (Eliot 9). During these fits that take place all throughout the novel, Silas appears as a man who ceases to be alive only to come back to life again after some time.

[10] For an extensive analysis on the mythical and symbolic dimension of Eliot's novel, see Joseph Wiesenfarth's "Demythologizing *Silas Marner*".

These cataleptic trances are a metaphor of the transformation that Silas will undergo in the story. When he settles in Raveloe after being betrayed by his best friend in Lantern Yard, Silas begins a life of ostracism and alienation from others with the sole companion of his hoarded gold. Even though he is alive, the weaver is presented as a man who could as well be dead because of the emptiness and hopelessness of his life. When Eppie appears, however, there is a symbolic rebirth in Silas that leaves behind his past condition. Thus, Eppie appears to make Silas come back to life again, to take him out of his death-like trance and infuse his days with life. What is more, the golden-haired Eppie comes to Silas as a substitute for his golden coins during the Twelve Days of Christmas, considered in Christianity as the antechamber of the Epiphany that celebrates the coming of God. That means Eppie comes to Silas closely before God makes a tangible appearance in the world incarnated in Jesus. Moreover, she comes on New Year's Eve, which in the collective unconscious always "marks the death of the old and the birth of the new" (Wiesenfarth 226). The symbolic implications of these details make *Silas Marner* emerge as a powerful fable with a moral message. Similarly, the poetical justice that the novel displays further distances it from traditional realism. Dunstan Cass, the antihero of the novel who steals Silas' gold, ends up drowned in a pit that represents the pit that awaits those transgressors who act out of evil. Godfrey Cass, on his part, is punished for not claiming his secret daughter by making him childless once he marries Nancy Lammeter.

And despite all of this, Eliot told John Blackwood that *Silas Marner* "came to me first of all, quite suddenly, as a sort of legendary tale … but, as my mind dwelt on the subject, I became inclined to a more *realistic* treatment" (*GEL* III, 175, my emphasis). Because in fact, the vagueness in its temporal and spatial location, together with its thorough symbolism and poetical justice, do not make *Silas Marner* stand in antagonism with a commitment to reality within Eliot's artistic credo. Indeed, Eliot's approach to realism is highly sophisticated. In her essay "Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: the Poet Young" (1857), she summarizes the ethics and aesthetics that rule her fiction claiming that "the fantastic or the boldly imaginative poet may be as sincere as the most realistic: he is true to his own sensibilities or inward vision, and in his wildest flights he never breaks loose from his criterion—the truth of his

own mental state" (238).[11] In other words, for Eliot realism not so much about a realistic portrayal of the world and the events that take place in it; it is more about making of her writings an extension of her own concerns and sensibilities and about showing her own perspective upon the world. As George Levine puts it, Eliot's realism is "necessarily a kind of authenticity, an honest representation of one's own feelings and perceptions" (7).

This is paramount when it comes to understanding the historical dimension of *Silas Marner*. This approach to realism provides Eliot with freedom in the process of writing because it implies that, when dealing with her concerns about her Victorian present, she does not necessarily have to make a realistic portrait of the Victorian Period the object of the narrative. This is precisely what makes the historical dimension and social commitment of many of her novels—and especially of *Silas Marner*—elusive. While other authors such as Elizabeth Gaskell make a diagnosis of the problems of the Victorian socioeconomic order in such a way that the disruptive nature of the new capitalist culture is practically ubiquitous in the narrative, Eliot has the same target but a different approach that minimizes the role of depictive realism only to emphasize other forms of truth. As a result, Eliot deals with her Victorian present without making a direct portrayal of Victorian society in her narratives. In the case of *Silas Marner*, this allows her to choose the vehicle of an apparently simple moral fable that some mistake for an ahistorical fairy tale to deal with the problems of Victorian society, thus rejecting traditional Victorian methods of capturing reality in fiction and adapting other subtler methods. In *Silas Marner*, then, we have to make the effort to see through this frame to embrace the novel in its full potential.

And since realism is not so much about the reproduction of the reality that the text is focused on, Eliot's fiction often turns to the past to talk about the present.[12] Eliot tends to deal with her Victorian present by means of retrospective temporal settings. As mentioned earlier on in this paper, in *Silas Marner* in particular she goes back to the last years of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth. In this respect, it is interesting to

[11] As Levine reminds us, Eliot's approach to realism parallels George Henry Lewes' idea that "'the antithesis' of Realism is not 'Idealism, but Falsism.' 'Art,' he claims, 'always aims at the representation of Reality, i.e. of Truth.'" (7).

[12] Childers notes that "Eliot's novels, with only a few exceptions, are layered upon a quiet but insistent nostalgia for times that are not infused by the 'spirit of industry.' *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner* (1861), and *Middlemarch* (1872) all comment on industrialization by its relative absence from their pages" (91).

consider James Eli Adams's interpretation that the presence of this agrarian past in Eliotean fiction is primarily Wordsworthian. Adams claims that rural contexts allow Eliot to depict a "truer, more elemental image of humanity" and, hence, that "her realism echoes Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" (190). In other words, rurality serves as a more suitable canvas when it comes to depicting the nature of humanity, the struggles of men and women, and the stories of everyday life because, as Wordsworth himself claims in his Preface, "in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated" (97).

However, this return to the rural past that is especially distinct in *Silas Marner* cannot be reduced to a matter of Wordsworthian influence upon Eliot, even if she acknowledged the fact that her novel would have been especially congenial to the Romantic poet.[13] John Kucich points out that "Eliot's work, throughout her career, dwelt on the breakdown of traditional moral values, and on the quest for an alternative personal and social order" (221). That is, Eliotean fiction emerges first and foremost as an instrument to regenerate society on a moral basis: it is grounded on an attempt to provide society with counternarratives that emphasize the need to recover of those values that had been lost after the years of the Great Divergence and the subsequent Moral Revolution in England. In order to do so, Eliot relies on retrospective temporal settings, going back to an agrarian past where those values that she wants to recover were still operative. And yet this should not be understood as an idealized desire to go back to a time already gone by because, as Ruth Livesey rightly remarks, "George Eliot was quick to condemn the 'aristocratic dilettantism' of social reformers who idealised peasant life and called for a return to the 'good old times'" (91). Indeed, Eliot herself claimed that "to make men moral, something more is requisite than to turn them out to grass" ("Natural History" 144). In other words, her novels do not suggest, with their portraits of the English rural past, that ending with the dysfunctions of the present requires simply a return to an already lost world. Instead, they uphold values that have been lost in the present and convey the idea that it is necessary to integrate them within the irrevocable context of modern society. In this respect, Johnston and Waters rightly note that "Eliot's returns to the past are

[13] See *GEL* III, 382.

always subtle manifestations of her Victorian present, but also move the reader ineluctably into the prospective future" (4).

Ultimately, there is a paramount moral imperative at the heart of her fiction around which everything revolves. According to Eliot in "The Natural History of German Life" (1856), "art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men" (145). Art must always be grounded on the purpose of improving society, inasmuch as "the greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies'' (144). Here, again, Eliot echoes Wordsworth: art has the capacity to extend our sympathies by means of the imaginative act that reading is, making us see beyond the limits of our experience and comprehend reality more empathetically, or, in the words of Eliot: "The only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures" (*GEL* III, 111, original emphasis).[14] Thus, the writer emerges not so much as a creative artist but as a moral guide with a social role or, as Terry Eagleton puts it, as a "novelist-as-moralist" (114).

That is why in Eliot's fiction in general and in *Silas Marner* in particular one of the most important aesthetic elements is the narrative point of view, which in the case of the *Silas Marner* is key in the articulation of its moral dimension. As mentioned above, Eliot's fiction is always marked by a desire to provide a moral lesson, and she makes sure that the message that she wants to transmit reaches her readers by means of the third-person omniscience. In this type of narrative, the moral narrator—who embodies Eliot's own sensibilities and perceptions—emerges as an all-knowing moral figure who is in possession of the truth. It is this great figure who is a source of epistemological authority that guides the reader through the narrative, offering an insight into the psychological depths of the different characters of the story as well as making the appropriate judgements of their behaviors. As Linda Shires points out in "The Aesthetics of the Victorian Novel: Form, Subjectivity, Ideology", this type of narrative "supposes a privileged epistemological point of view from which both knowledge and judgment can be truthfully and precisely issued to establish consensus among

[14] Note the similarities between Eliot's approach to fiction and Wordsworth's humanist maxim in "The Old Cumberland Beggar, a Description": "That we have all of us one human heart" (267).

implied author, narrator, and reader" (63). Thus, the narrator guides the reader into sympathizing with those characters who abide by the standards of moral rectitude, while it also pushes the reader into condemning those who transgress them, ultimately giving shape to the lesson that the work aims at transmitting.

In 1979, M. C. Hernberg gave a proper name to the ethics and aesthetics that rule Eliotean fiction by referring to George Eliot's "moral realism". Even though Hernberg used this term to refer to Eliot's canon as a whole, perhaps *Silas Marner* is the work that takes "moral realism" to all its grandeur, being committed to Eliot's Victorian reality without being directly located in the Victorian Period and thus complying with the idea that the reproduction of the reality addressed is secondary because truth for Eliot means being true to the sensibilities of the author and conveying a moral message that aims at improving society on a moral basis. As Nancy Henry puts it: "Truth in writing is a form of moral truth" (9). Thus, "moral realism" is Eliot's way of addressing the problems that she saw as deeply embedded in Victorian society, a method that allows her to elude the pessimism and belligerence that would come from more traditionally realistic depictions of that reality and a method that detaches her from other writers who were similarly critical of the culture of capital.

Taking this into account and understanding how Eliotean "moral realism" actually works, it is possible to conclude that *Silas Marner* is equally concerned with Eliot's Victorian present as any other mid-Victorian novel, as well as to say that there is no other option but to see this novel as the product of Eliot's contemporary anxieties and as an attempt to provide a moral alternative to the problems of nineteenth-century English society.

4. "The Old Home's Gone": the Problems of the Gospel of Capital in England

Silas Marner is located in a time when the colonizing wave of capitalism was only beginning to rise in England. Even though by the time Eliot wrote her novel industrial capitalism and the values that were forged with it were a reality in most of the country, in *Silas Marner* she goes back in time and presents a dichotomy between two villages, Lantern Yard and Raveloe, to convey her ethical response to the problems of her present. Eliot presents two different social models: one that would develop into the social model brought about by the capitalistic ideal during the first years of the century and one that is still alien to the economic narratives of "value" discussed earlier on, thus subduing one to the forces of history and keeping the other isolated from the historical reality of England.

Raveloe, the village where the main action takes place, appears as a place that is foreign to the realities of history, closer to nature and to English pagan past. "It lay in the rich, central plain of what we are pleased to call Merry England" (Eliot 6). Located in the Midlands and "still out of touch with the broader life of England" (Thomson 77), the narrative conveys the idea that Raveloe stands in a sort of ahistorical vacuum in which its inhabitants emerge as "remnants of a disinherited race" (Eliot 3). In fact, this "Merry England" seems to be quite far from the changes undergone by the country during the first years of the century as it remains "aloof from the currents of industrial energy" (26). It is still ignorant of the new values that were to be established at the core of English life: "orchards looking lazy with neglected plenty; … the purple-faced farmers jogging along the lanes or turning in at the Rainbow; homesteads, where men supped heavily and slept in the light of the evening hearth" (17). Their modus vivendi certainly stands as an aberration of the spirit of capitalism, for which Weber considered not only "a developed sense of responsibility absolutely indispensable, but in general also an attitude which … is freed from continual calculations of how the customary wage may be earned with a maximum of comfort and a minimum of exertion. Labour must, on the contrary, be performed as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling" (25). In fact, "there were several chiefs in Raveloe who could farm quite badly quite at their ease, drawing enough money from their bad farming … to live in a rollicking fashion" (Eliot 6). Life in Raveloe is quite easy; villagers live without preoccupations but also without effort, in a paradisiacal "careless abundance" (18) that seems almost biblical.

Raveloe villagers are, however, also described as superstitions, ignorant, distrustful, and simple-minded. In Raveloe, foreigners "hardly ever ceased to be viewed with a remnant of distrust" and "cleverness … was in itself suspicious" because "honest folk … were mostly not overwise or clever" (4). And yet the narrative voice is quite benevolent towards these people. In fact, and despite their ignorance and lack of insight, the portrayal of this community is quite positive and the feeling that pervades the narrative—or the idea that the moral narrator wants to transmit—is that these people are naturally good. The inhabitants of this community are closer to the "state of nature" in which Rousseau believed, where individuals preserve their "natural virtue" and remain uncorrupted by society, unencumbered by the constraints of social and political institutions, and fully free to act according to their basic urges (Cranston 298).

Lantern Yard, Silas' native town, must necessarily emerge, then, as the opposite of Raveloe, set in the "unknown region called North'ard" (Eliot 6) that Raveloe people regard with suspicion. If Raveloe remains isolated from historical change, Lantern Yard represents the other side of the coin: it is the receptacle of the historical changes undergone by the country during this period and the reflection of a process of industrialization that would be especially significant in the North and Midlands (Perkin 109). Perhaps from the beginning of the novel there are certain clues that indicate that this community is more prone to the conquest of industrial capitalism than Raveloe is. The religious orientation of this community contrasts with the secular-oriented and hedonistic Raveloe that still keeps alive Celtic traditions such as Whitsun, thus evoking a distant, almost protocultural past. Lantern Yard is defined as a "narrow religious sect" (Eliot 9) in which religion dominates every aspect of life, but in reality, it is no more than a Calvinist society:

> One of the most frequent topics of conversation between the two friends was Assurance of salvation: Silas confessed that he could never arrive at anything higher than hope mingled with fear, and listened with longing wonder when William declared that he had possessed unshaken assurance ever since, in the period of his conversion, he had dreamed that he saw the words 'calling and election sure' standing by themselves on a white page in the open Bible. (10)

Only a full conviction of his being predestined to salvation could allow William Dane to steal money from a deacon and betray his friend, since for those Calvinists who were

confident of their own salvation, "the tremendous pressure of their sense of sin is released" (Weber 59). These Calvinist echoes remind of Weber's idea that "not all the Protestant denominations" seem to have been equally prone to the development of capitalism, since "that of Calvinism … was among the strongest, it seems, and the reformed faith more than the others seems to have promoted the development of the spirit of capitalism" (10).

After his betrayal, Silas leaves his native community and goes to Raveloe, and does not come back for years, until he decides to return with the aim of "revisit[ing] his own country, and find[ing] out if he had been cleared from that false accusation" (Eliot 210). However, when he arrives, the Lantern Yard that he knew is already part of the past: "'The old place is all swep' away' Silas said to Dolly Winthrop on the night of his return; 'the little graveyard and everything. The old home's gone'" (212). His native town had already been colonized at the hands of industrial capitalism. The old gatherings at the church are substituted by gatherings at the factory, which becomes the new center of life: "why, there's people coming out o' the Yard as if they'd been to chapel at this time o' day – a week-day noon!" (211). Everything has been swallowed up by the factory, making Lantern Yard become one more industrial town in the North and, accordingly, a social failure in the hands of the Gospel of Capital. "The old home", as Silas puts it, is gone, but for Eliot, this goes beyond Lantern Yard. The old home also refers to the old values and the social model that existed prior to the Age of Capital which are already in the process of vanishing. Thus, Eliot makes the reader wonder to what extent the economic progress that Victorian society enshrines is actually positive, a question that is present even in the ironic name of this community. Lantern Yard signifies light and evolution: it stands as a beacon of human progress in contrast with the darkness of the primitive past, but the truth that lies behind this light could not be described in bleaker terms.

Within this context of gradual colonization of the values of the past as opposed to the encapsulation of traditional values that takes place in Raveloe, it comes as no surprise that Silas is perceived as a threat by Raveloe villagers. When Silas arrives, he brings the substrate of Lantern Yarn that had eventually developed into industrialization. The weaver, hence, brings capitalism with him to a place where the economy of subsistence is still operative. Although the tragedy of his life has made his work "become for him a sterile abstraction instead of a useful social function", Silas is a professional weaver (Thomson 79). In fact,

"weaving was the single most important English industry in the period of transition to capitalism" (Fisher 6). Rather than embracing the capitalism that Silas could induct in this society, Raveloe people encode it as a menace not in economic but in religious terms, associating his trade with "the Evil One" and claiming that his "demon-worship" allowed him to cure the illnesses of people (Eliot 5). Of course, those who can afford his services in the village welcome him since "their sense of his usefulness would have counteracted any repugnance or suspicion which was not confirmed by a deficiency in the quality or the tale of the cloth he wove for them" (8). But for the rest of villagers who cannot afford his services, Silas represents values that should be distrusted. The consequence is clear. Silas becomes an outcast in the margins of this society because Raveloe villagers are not yet prepared to relate to other cultural contexts, and the only social contact that he has takes place in the form of economic transactions of the fabrics he weaves.

Deprived of social relations and having lost all hope in humanity, Silas spends fifteen years in isolation and takes refuge in the task of weaving to overcome his sense of betrayal and alienation: "his first movement after the shock had been to work in his loom; and he went on with this unremittingly, never asking himself why" (18). As K. M. Newton rightly notes, "Marner's mechanistic life functions allegorically as a commentary on the alienation Eliot suggests permeates Victorian culture" (130). His ceaseless labor is a source of considerable wealth for Silas, but living in ostracism, money does not have a use for him anymore. In the past, he did not love the money but the "purpose" that every penny had, "but now … the purpose was gone" (19). Gradually, because "he cannot see beyond the cycles of project and payment, work promised and work delivered, money owed and money paid" (Fisher 8), the money that Silas earns becomes not only an end in itself but also an obsession: "Marner wanted the heaps of ten to grow into a square, and then into a larger square; and every added guinea, while it was itself a satisfaction, bred a new desire" (Eliot 21). Silas' hoarded gold becomes a shelter that makes him feel safe— since it "not only grew, but it remained with him" (22)—and projection of his affection: "his gold … gathered his power of loving together into a hard isolation like its own" (48). In fact, he attributes human qualities to the gold coins and compares their faces to the faces of people, claiming that he "would on no account have exchanged those coins, which had become his familiars, for other coins with unknown faces" (22).

Silas, then, becomes an allegorical representation of the social model of the nineteenth century in England. Only interested in making and hoarding money, Silas represents the capitalistic ideal—which is no more than a "public form of hoarding, capital accumulation" (Fisher 8)—and embodies the ascent of money in a society in which capital is "an intense center of life and self-recognition" (6). What is more, Silas' behavior comes very close to Marx's description of the capitalist model: "Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets! … Accumulation for the sake of accumulation, production for the sake of production" (742). In fact, his connection with money mimics what Georg Simmel defines in *The Philosophy of Money* (1900) as the "psychological growth of means into ends" (228), a process whereby money as means is psychologically transformed to an end in itself in capitalist societies: "never has an object that owes its value exclusively to its quality as a means, to its convertibility into more definite values, so thoroughly and unreservedly developed into a psychological value absolute, into a completely engrossing final purpose governing our practical consciousness" (232).

Therefore, during these years, Silas represents the patriarchal reliance on the economic isolated from all social and moral concerns. Within this microcosm of capitalist political economy, the male production and individual profit that the system endorses as the basis of social success are accomplished. However, taking individualism to its extreme and turning it into complete ostracism, Eliot makes sure to transmit the broken and defective nature of a social model that is exclusively based on capital, condemning "the abstraction of economic questions in isolation from moral concerns and social realities" (Coit 217). Thus, even though Silas is materially rich, his life is completely meaningless and dysfunctional. The weaver has the first meaning of "value", but lacks the second. He does have the money, but his money does not, in Ruskinian terms, lead to life in the form of social affection. Without human affection and an idea of wealth that transcends the economic, Silas can never achieve happiness. Silas only attains happiness when he transcends the notion of "value" as exclusively economic, and this is where Eliot's notion of "sympathy" comes into play.

5. A Gospel of Sympathy: the "Feminine" Alternative to a Dysfunctional Society

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Adam Smith defines sympathy as a form of practical imagination that allows individuals to know what it is like to be in the place of the other. For Smith, moral codes of behavior emerge from imaginative sympathy because it is able to "carry us beyond our own person" (11) and allows us to locate ourselves in the situation of the other; "we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him" (12).

Smith's ideas on sympathy certainly come in handy when it comes to understanding Eliot's perceptions, who regarded sympathy as the altruistic act of understanding the situation of the other and living side by side with them, and just as Smith, as the cornerstone of moral life. In fact, Eliot dealt extensively in her writings with the importance that sympathetic relations had in society. Many of her letters written to other intellectuals reflect the importance that Eliot ascribed to sympathy. In one of them, written to Charles Bray in 1857, she evinced her "conviction that our moral progress may be measured by the degree in which we sympathize with individual suffering and individual joy" (*GEL* II, 403). Morality emerges from the capacity to locate ourselves in the place of the other, which implies the necessity to forget about our own individuality and blur the limits between individuals, creating an organic society whose members are closely connected and make up a sympathetic whole. Thus, Eliot's philosophy promotes a social model that condemns egotism and self-interest and regards empathy and mutual caring as pivotal for the development of a healthy social fabric.

However, Eliotean sympathy is more than an approach to life marked by a deeply humanist optimism. The narrative of sympathy is implicitly a political act promoting a social model that stands in direct opposition with that of the *status quo*. Eliot's sympathy emerges as the antipode of Victorian ideas of individualism and *laissez-faire* and believes in the power of collective association. In the social model that is forged by sympathy, individuals stand in interdependence inasmuch as they are capable of sharing their joys and sorrows, helping each other and creating, in the words of Eliot, "a common life in which the good of one is the good of all" ("Evangelical Teaching" 96). Thus, Eliot challenges the idea that the success of society and the progress of humanity depend on an individualistic and competitive work ethic that places men in sheer antagonism. The notion of sympathy openly opposes that which had

been defined by Carlyle as a "Mammon Gospel of … Competition, [and] *Laissez-Faire*" (183) and, instead, endorses a social model based on cooperation, mutual help, and empathy in which egotism is the worst crime that individuals can commit.

Affect and morality, therefore, are a sine qua non of functional societies in Eliotean philosophy. This implies that it is impossible to exclude social and affective concerns from public matters because in fact sympathy should stand at the kernel of social life. As a result, Eliot's sympathy is politically operative and economically interventionist, revisiting Victorian narratives of "value" that excluded moral concerns from the public sphere and were fully focused on economic matters and on the attainment of the capitalistic ideal. While the doctrine of capital removed feeling and morality from public social action and transferred them to the homely and the "feminine", Eliot's sympathy evinces the necessity to harmonize the two meanings of "value" again. For her, "value" is more than an economic measure of worth that should be the sole target of human action, it is a concept that overflows with social and ethical connotations, transcending the material and having a key role in the consolidation of a strong social fabric. Indeed, as Ilana Blumberg reminds us, "for George Eliot, a political economy that could not justify itself by moral standards was particularly reprehensible" ("Neighbour" 544). Thus, the notion of sympathy directly revisits the patriarchal ideas that were deeply established in the Victorian collective unconscious as a result of the Moral Revolution, endorsing a social model whose success stems from those aspects that were regarded as typically "feminine" and, hence, as not worthy of having a place in the public landscape.

The necessity to transcend economic forms of "value" is pervasive in *Silas Marner*, an idea that is catalyzed by the presence and later absence of the miser's money. In fact, Eliot's novels very often include money as a fundamental element for the development of the plot, which she uses for the exploration of the moral implications of economic matters. As Dermot Coleman has noted in his essay on the use of money in Eliot's fiction, the use of the economic in her novels "allowed her to test how money can best be reconciled with both individual ethical development and wider concepts of social good" (204) or, in other words, money serves as the instrument to explore how the two meanings of "value" can be harmonized again.

When Dustan Cass steals Silas' money, the miser is deprived of his obsession and hence sinks deeper into unhappiness while all his hopes are drawn towards the possibility of finding his cherished gold. However, the novel conveys the idea that getting back the money would not have brought Silas emotional redemption. His life would have continued to be as dysfunctional as before, further trapping Silas into that endless and obsessive cycle of producing, earning, and hoarding that represents capitalist behaviors. Silas' redemption comes only when economic forms of value are translated into social and moral value. When his gold is stolen, Silas' automatic response is to go in search of aid, "opening his trouble to his Raveloe neighbours … sitting in the warmth of a heath not his own, and feeling the presence of faces and voices which were his nearest promise of help" (Eliot 65). The robbery of Silas´s money marks the beginning of a sympathetic relationship with his neighbors, who try to help him and give him "good-natured and neighbourly" comfort (93) now that he is regarded as a "poor mushed creatur" (91). From this moment onwards, Silas will gradually become integrated into Raveloe society; individualism will be converted into collective association, empathy, and mutual help just as monetary value will be converted into social value.

Thus, Eliot places Silas, the dysfunctional capitalist epitome, within the healing context of Raveloe, a society that is still isolated from the values of the Age of Capital where sympathy connects individuals making an organic whole and where mutual helpfulness and affect are still paramount in everyday life. It is in this ahistorical and almost protocultural Merry England in which the two meanings of "value" have not yet been separated because it is still alien to the values of the nineteenth century that Silas is able to achieve happiness. Raveloe heals Silas of his ostracism and unhappy life, reminding him of enjoying the value of the immaterial. But, more importantly, the healing of Silas comes precisely from what Isobel Armstrong defines as a "modality of feminine experience" (*Poetry* 313). It is the power of feeling and moral behavior, the act of helping the other out of selflessness, good-will, and empathy, that brings healing. Only the affective has the power to put an end to the dysfunctions induced by an exclusive reliance on the economic. Thus, happiness in *Silas Marner* stems from what the structure of feeling of the Victorian *status quo* would have regarded as typically "feminine": Silas only achieves happiness when the affective and the

economic merge, and, hence, when those aspects that were ascribed to women enter into the manly dysfunctional sphere that the miser represents.

However, the sympathy of Raveloe villagers is not the only way in which the novel promotes new forms of value. When on New Year's Eve the opium-addict Molly Farren resolves to announce that she is the secret wife of Godfrey Cass and ends up collapsing in the middle of the snowy night near Silas' cottage, her two-year-old daughter makes her way into the miser' home. The child immediately provokes a feeling of tenderness from Silas, who decides to adopt her after her mother is declared dead and her father, Godfrey, does not claim her. From the very beginning of Eppie's appearance, Silas unconsciously understands that the child has somehow come to replace his gold, believing that "the child was come instead of the gold—that the gold had turned into the child" (Eliot 146). As a result, the cold "hard coin with the familiar resisting outline" is substituted by the "soft, warm curls" of a sleeping child (131). In Ruskinian terms, money is literally translated into life and so the gold acquires a surplus value that "transcends material limitations" (Blumberg, "Stealing" 491), a surplus that is not associated with material labor but with a labor that is responsible for producing social relations.

Thus, the sympathetic act of looking after Eppie, loving her, and providing her with everything she needs is what brings true value to Silas' life: "the gold had kept his thoughts in an ever repeated circle, leading to nothing beyond itself; but Eppie was an object compacted of changes and hopes that forced his thoughts onward" (Eliot 149). And, again, it is a typically "feminine" act that brings healing to his life. Silas becomes one of the most successful motherly figures of mid-nineteenth century literature thanks to the help of another woman, Dolly Winthrop, who stands as the perfect exemplar of the spirit of sympathy that Eliot idealized. Dolly is one of the main characters who helps Silas out of his misery, being able to locate herself in the place of the miser and trying not only to give him comfort after the loss of his gold but also to help him overcome it by integrating him more strongly into Raveloe life. With the support and advice of Dolly, Silas learns to take care of Eppie more successfully, raising her according to the customs in Raveloe and claiming that "whatever's right for it [Eppie] i' this country, and you think 'ull do it good, I'll act accordingly, if you'll tell me" (148).

Ultimately, As Nancy Henry remarks, "*Silas Marner* is the story of salvation through the love of a child" (129), a salvation that is anticipated in the novel's epigraph: an excerpt from Wordsworth's "Michael", even if the novel departs radically from the story presented by Wordsworth in 1800: "A child, more than all other gifts / That earth can offer to declining man, / Brings hope with it, and forward-looking thoughts". However, Henry fails when fully ascribing Silas' redemption to Eppie. While Eppie is regarded by Silas as a literal substitute for the gold and as the agent of his salvation, redemption comes equally from the sympathy of Raveloe villagers, from a selfless help that Eliot regarded almost as the raison d'être of life, as she confessed in a letter addressed to Alexander Main: "amid all the considerable trials of existence, men and women can nevertheless greatly help each other; and while we can help each other it is worthwhile to live" (qtd. in Hempton 34). It is, then, this helpfulness that integrates Silas within a society presented as an organic body with a common sap that nurtures every individual, even though at first he does not notice it because, as the narrator mentions, "there have been many circulations of the sap before we detect the smallest sign of the bud" (65).

Of course, not all the characters in the novel are imbued with the spirit of sympathy that prompts the happy ending. In fact, the novel, which is the first instance of Eliot's use of the double plot, displays two narrative threads that run in parallel—the story of Silas and that of the Cass family—, creating a contrast that serves to show the consequences of unsympathetic behaviors. If Silas and his new life with Eppie and Raveloe villagers emerge as the moral core of the novel, Dunstan Cass, the anti-hero of the story who steals Silas' gold, rises as the antithesis of it. In fact, the character of Dunstan lacks psychological insight and appears as an archetype of selfishness that allows Eliot to condemn egotistic behaviors as well as to show the consequences of them. He is presented in the novel as an arrogant and dishonest man only moved by self-interest who lacks any capacity for sympathy. He blackmails his older brother, Godfrey, on the basis of his secret marriage with Molly Farren and forces him to give him money in exchange for his silence. Alien to the spirit of sympathy that is shared by Raveloe villagers, Dunstan's selfishness reaches its peak when he decides that the easiest way to make money is stealing the miser's hoard. Analyzing his behavior closely, it is easy to notice that it does not differ much from the behavior promoted by a patriarchal political economy that excluded feeling from the public sphere. Dunstan acts on

the basis of his individual profit without taking into account further considerations, complying with the state of "trampling, crushing, elbowing, and treading on each other's heels" that Mill perceived in nineteenth-century society (*Principles* 189). In the end, Dunstan pays for his egotism ending up drowned at the bottom of the Stone Pits, where he is found years later with Silas' stolen gold coins.

Godfrey's fate is not as dreadful as his brother's, but it is still far from being the happy ending that the moral characters of the novel achieve. In fact, in the moral continuum that is developed by Eliot in *Silas Marner*, he stands in a position of in-betweenness inasmuch as there is a perceptible will to make the reader sympathize with Godfrey underpinning all comments that the moral narrator makes about him. Godfrey is depicted as a good-natured and "affectionate-hearted" man (Eliot 37) who is, to some extent, a victim of his selfish and manipulative brother, but he fails to comply with the spirit of sympathy all throughout the story because of his will to protect his personal and material comfort as a son of a rich landowner. In Godfrey, egotism and personal profit outweigh affection and sympathetic behavior, which leads him to hide his secret marriage and leave his own daughter unclaimed in a clear act of "moral cowardice" (31). In the end, Godfrey does feel empathy towards Eppie, but he does it the wrong way, believing that just as empathy causes guilt, guilt can be washed away through money. He tries to compensate his wrong-doing by providing Silas with financial support as well as trying to adopt Eppie once she is grown-up, offering her a life of wealth and social position and thus proving that he is clearly unable to fathom the real nature of sympathetic relations by the end of the story. However, Eppie does understand what the true meaning of "value" is, which leads her to reject the economic comfort and high social standing that could be provided by Godfrey and his wife, and thus she decides to stay with Silas, making the "choice to stay among poor folks, and with poor clothes and things" when she would have had "everything o' the best" (204).

Thus, by the end of the novel there has taken place a shift in the center of value: the economic is transformed into the social, the material into the intangible, and the lifeless into the animated, and all thanks to the power of Eliotean sympathy. And it is in Raveloe, this "Merry England" that, unlike Lantern Yard, is still alien to the changes brought about by capitalism and in which ethical values remain encapsulated and uncorrupted, that this restoration takes place. Silas—the capitalist epitome who represented the nineteenth-century

devotion of capital that patriarchal narratives of "value" unobservant of social and moral concerns promoted—eventually achieves a happy life once he is reminded what the true meaning of wealth is and, then, once money ceases to be an end in itself. The appropriate "teleological role of money", in the words of Simmel (233), is restored when Silas' gold is stolen and substituted by the affection of his neighbors and the presence of Eppie. Then, life becomes functional again. In *Silas Marner*, the "feminine" sphere brings healing, downplaying the importance of economic matters and enhancing the role of affection, sentiment, social cooperation, and morality. Sympathy is the "feminine" alternative to the emptiness of a social order based on individualism, *laissez-faire*, and capital devotion. It is Eliot's locus of authority, a concept that allows her to emerge as a moral prophet within the context of nineteenth-century capitalist society.

Silas Marner makes emphasis on Eliot's idealization of those "who act out of love, sympathy, affection or devotion" and who build up "the moral good of humanity" (Hempton 26) with their individual actions. Deeply influenced by Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), which claimed that "man has his highest being, his God, in himself" (281), Eliot understood God as the imagined, external projection of the highest human values.[15] This anthropocentric approach to religion is key when it comes to understanding Eliot's moral in *Silas Marner*. Because if moral standards are actually human and morality is inherent to humankind, there could still be an alternative to the moral degeneration that those dissenters of the nineteenth-century mind perceived in their society. In the case of Eliot, that moral alternative was based on sympathy. In the social model that Eliot promotes in *Silas Marner*, the Gospel of Capital and the dysfunctions that go with it are, therefore, substituted by the Gospel of Sympathy, which is the basis of a successful social fabric and gives the ideal social model presented in the novel, Raveloe, "the sense of presiding goodness and the human trust which come with all pure peace and joy" (Eliot 168).

[15] In fact, *The Essence of Christianity* was translated into English by George Eliot in 1854, leaving a deep imprint in Eliot's humanist philosophy, as reflected in her essays: "The idea of God is really moral in its influence—it really cherishes all that is best and loveliest in man—only when God is contemplated as sympathizing with the pure elements of human feeling, as possessing infinitely all those attributes which we recognize to be moral in humanity" (Eliot, "Evangelical Teaching" 96).

6. Conclusions

Silas Marner contains a historical dimension that is worthy of further analysis. Embracing this dimension means understanding Eliot's novel not simply as a timeless moral fable that denounces miserly reliance on money and highlights the importance of empathetic behaviors, but as a key literary piece for the study of the sociocultural landscape of mid-Victorian England.

The aim of this paper was to prove that the moral dimension of *Silas Marner* is in fact a criticism of the idiosyncrasies of the nineteenth-century mind as well as a response to the patriarchal narratives of "value" based on economic profit, individualism, and *laissez-faire* that underpinned the social model of the Victorian Era and excluded social, affective, and moral matters from the public sphere, relegating them to the realm of the "feminine" and the domestic. In order to do so and because this paper was inscribed within the dynamics of cultural materialism, the first section in the body of this paper was dedicated to an extensive survey on the ideological context in which *Silas Marner* was produced. This section was instrumental in the development of the thesis of this paper, in that it offered an insight into the variety of voices that existed in nineteenth-century England as well as into the development of the dominant narratives of "value" which some dissenting voices confronted.

With this in mind, the next section approached *Silas Marner* from a formal point of view, exploring the ethical and aesthetic principles that define Eliotean fiction in order to prove that—regardless of what it might seem at first sight—this novel is equally committed to Eliot's Victorian present as any other mid-Victorian realist novel. Locating *Silas Marner* under the umbrella of "moral realism" demonstrated that for Eliot fiction is not so much about the realistic reproduction of the world that the text explores, but about the truthful representation of the writer's own sensibilities and about the development of a moral dimension that aims at improving society on a moral basis. Thus, this approach gives Eliot freedom to deal with her Victorian present without necessarily making the dysfunctions of Victorian society ubiquitous in the narrative.

Then, it was possible to answer the question of how in *Silas Marner* Eliot actually reflects the transformation of ethical codes that the English collective unconscious had undergone during the nineteenth century. In a context in which the status of England as a capitalist industrial culture was already a reality, Eliot shows her dissent by going back to the

years when the colonizing forces of capitalistic values were just beginning to rise and when these same forces were still alien to those rural areas of the Midlands that she knew so well. She creates two fictional locations, Lantern Yard and Raveloe, that become epitomes of very different social models and serve to present the turn of the century in England as a time of transition and profound change. While Lantern Yard is subjected to the forces of history and hence presented as a social failure at the hands of capitalism, Raveloe is presented as a non-dysfunctional social model that is isolated from the values of the Age of Capital. However, the analysis proved that it is in Silas that Eliot articulates the political subtext of the novel most powerfully. Through the figure of the miser, Eliot makes an allegorical representation of the social model of the nineteenth-century, criticizing the patriarchal reliance on the economic isolated from all social and moral concerns and highlighting the defective nature of a social model that is exclusively based on the devotion of capital.

And as much as Eliot makes a criticism of the dysfunctions that these new values bring with them, she also presents an alternative to them that is based on sympathy. Placing the capitalist epitome within the healing context of Raveloe, Eliot conveys the idea that happiness can only be achieved when the reliance on the economic that the patriarchal *status quo* promotes is overcome. In *Silas Marner*, it is that which would have been regarded as typically "feminine" that brings healing and redemption. When Silas' gold is stolen and substituted by the sympathy of his neighbors and by the unconditional love of a child, Silas transcends the notion of "value" as exclusively economic and life becomes functional again. Sympathy is Eliot's "feminine" alternative to the problems of the Victorian socioeconomic order, a notion that brings healing downplaying the importance of capital in society and enhancing the role of affection, sentiment, moral integrity, and social cooperation.

In his essay "The Passing of the Great Figure" (1909), Ford Madox Ford referred to George Eliot claiming that "she desired that is to say, to be an influence: she cared in her heart very little whether or no she would be considered an artist" (qtd. in Levenson 55). Regardless of whether we agree or disagree with Ford, this quote is perhaps the best way to encapsulate the spirit that lies behind *Silas Marner*. It might be, apparently, a simple, short, and straightforward tale that even children can read and understand, a novel without aesthetic complexities that many may regard as lacking artistic aspiration, but the value of *Silas Marner* lies precisely in the message that it puts forward and in the moral commitment that

permeates its pages. Because in fact, as this study demonstrated, Eliot's novel contains a subtext that is much more powerful than the simple moral that has been traditionally attached to it.

It is widely known that George Eliot did not openly support the feminist cause, and even if she excelled in depicting women's intellectual capacities, feelings, aspirations, and frustrations, only very rarely did she portray in her fiction women characters able to overcome gender roles and social conventions just as she did throughout her life. As a result, Eliot's canon is very often acknowledged as being permeated by gender conservatism and by a strong sense of resignation as regards the patriarchal *status quo* and the position that men and women have within it, what Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert call a "feminine anti-feminism" (466). However, the findings of this study lead us to reconsider such assumptions. As this analysis aimed at demonstrating, the moral dimension of *Silas Marner*—and Eliot's moral theory, for that matter—certainly contain a feminist subtext that we need to empower, a subtext that stands in direct opposition with the dogmas of Victorian masculinized power structures grounded on the idea that it was possible to sustain over time a socioeconomic model in which morality and political economy were located in two different spheres. Indeed, at the sight of a culture that was not very far from collapsing, Eliot made of her writings a tool to promote a regeneration of society based on those moral values that she, like Rousseau, considered to be inherent to humankind, showing the problem that might arise from most of the traits of the Victorian mind and understanding this culture as something that had already gone wrong.

Even though it is rarely understood as such, we can conclude that *Silas Marner* belongs to a body of literature produced in the Victorian Era by women who did not identify themselves with the structure of feeling of the patriarchal *status quo*. Using morality as a locus of authority, these women vindicated the necessity to harmonize the moral and economic dimensions of "value", creating their own counternarratives that placed value on the importance of morality for the consolidation of a functional social fabric. Of course, because of the length of this paper, this analysis was focused on *Silas Marner* in particular and Eliotean moral theory in general, yet it would be not only interesting but also necessary to extrapolate these ideas to other works written by Eliot, similarly exploring the ideological substrate that they share and thus analyzing more comprehensively how Eliot articulates a

dissenting counternarrative in her whole canon. What is more, the findings of this study necessarily encourage us to read this novel not in isolation but in relation to other literary works, further exploring the productions and ideas of other women writers that similarly challenged these patriarchal dogmas with their writings. Because in fact, the studies that approach their literary productions in terms of ideology are scarce. What did these women have in common? How did they articulate their counternarratives in their fictions? Exploring the writings of women in these terms, i.e., understanding them as receptacles of ideological dissent and gender resistance, will give us information about their ideological positions and about how women in particular felt as regards mainstream Victorian values.

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, this analysis was ultimately about a tension between two structures of feeling, i.e., two ways of understanding life. And now that it is impossible to imagine our modern society without the omnipresence of the capitalist socioeconomic order and now that economics is a matter of figures, abstractions, and mathematical calculations, we see that the structure of feeling that eventually imposed itself was the one that these women disapproved of. Then, the final conclusion to be drawn from this paper is to consider to what extent the message that Eliot puts forward in *Silas Marner* is still operative for the readers of today. Because a practical application of Eliot's moral message does not mean to put an end to capitalism but to understand that, within the irrevocable context of capitalism, it is necessary to keep certain moral standards uncorruptible and to keep in mind that there is more to life than economic wealth. The idea that *Silas Marner* conveys is that the double meaning of "value" must not be forgotten in modern societies. Economic value should always be accompanied by social and moral value and only when money is translated into life can it become actually *enriching*.

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