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A STUDY OF THE REDEMPTION OF AN ORDINARY & FALLIBLE HUMAN BEING BY THE
INFLUENCE OF PURE LOVE IN GEORGE ELIOT'S *SILAS MARNER*

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ABSTRACT

In *Silas Marner* (1861) the novelist examines how a morbid and depressed soul is redeemed by the influence of pure and selfless love of a child. Silas Marner is essentially a sane and honest man who is betrayed by his close and trusted friend. He is falsely accused of stealing church money, declared guilty by the community and eventually expelled from his village Lantern Yard. Disheartened by this betrayal, Silas withdraws from Lantern Yard and from society almost altogether, moving to Raveloe, where he knows no one and where he can weave at his loom, hoard his earnings, and forget his past. Silas endures this state of withering for fifteen years. Meanwhile he receives another shock when one night his hoarded gold is stolen. The actual moral transformation of Silas takes place when he comes in contact with an abandoned child whom he later baptised as Eppie. Eppie's love and warmth transforms the hard-hearted and self-centered Silas Marner into a caring, loving and sympathetic human being. The child created afresh a link between his life and the lives from which he had hitherto shrunk continually into narrower isolation. In fact, moral regeneration is a basic theme of *Silas Marner*. With the coming of Eppie and with Silas's feeling of instinctive love for her, came also the beginning of his regeneration. This instinctive love was a vital force; and it was this which led to Silas's integration with Raveloe society and to a new religious belief which was accepted to him because it was firmly based upon his life for this fellows.

Key words : Moral regeneration, Moral redemption, Pure love, New religion.

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If in *Mill on the Floss* (1860) George Eliot deals with the moral indecision and dilemma of the sensitive and passionate protagonist, in *Silas Marner* (1861) the novelist examines how a morbid and depressed soul is redeemed by the influence of pure and selfless love of a child. Silas Marner is essentially a sane and honest man who is betrayed by his close and trusted friend. He is falsely accused of stealing church money, declared guilty by the community and eventually expelled from his village Lantern Yard. So an innocent young man is unjustly condemned to solitude and eternal darkness by his fellowmen. His experience smacks of the fact that

there is no just God that governs the earth righteously, but a God of lies that bears witness against the innocent'. (Eliot, Silas 11) When it appears to him that God does not defend the innocent, Silas's religious faith is shattered, and his life seems to have lost all meaning. He suffers from an anguish of disappointed faith. So, it is in this world of dichotomy that Silas lives from the very beginning of the novel.

The rural folks of Lantern Yard usually worship and venerate a favourable change. They try to gamble for salvation by putting a moral question to a lottery that decides the guilt of an innocent man and benefits his betrayer. The author's reflection on this issue is relevant here:

We are apt to think it inevitable that a man in Marner's position should have begun to question the validity of an appeal to the divine judgement by drawing lots; but to him this would have been an effort of independent thought such as he had never known; and he must have made the effort at a moment when all his energies were turned into the anguish of disappointed faith. If there is an angel who records the sorrows of men as well as their sins, knows how deep are the sorrows that spring from false ideas for which one is culpable. (Eliot, Silas 11)

Disheartened by this betrayal, Silas withdraws from Lantern Yard and from society almost altogether, moving to Raveloe, where he knows no one and where he can weave at his loom, hoard his earnings, and forget his past. Though Raveloe's orchards are lazy with neglected plenty and its people live in careless abundance, he feels cut off from the Power in which he had vainly trusted and believes that there is no Unseen Love that cares for him. He shrinks into a lovely insect like existence, working incessantly at his loom. The sect of Lantern yard is a little hidden world withdrawn from the worldly affairs. Silas also withdraws to his hard isolation in Raveloe a place away from bustling life. In this void, the love of accumulating money becomes an all-consuming passion for him. Handling and counting his coins each night is for Silas like the satisfaction of a thirst. As his love for his money grows, his life is narrowed to the functions of weaving and hoarding. He has become a human being without having any relationship to any living soul. Inside his isolated cottage Silas hides himself from his neighbours, and under his floor in a hole he hides his growing hoard of gold -- the product of his own activity. Like an insect spinning its means out of itself, with only, the slenderest nourishment, Silas regresses to the margin of humanity despite his innate virtue. His eccentricities evoke fear and repulsion in the minds of the primitive country people, completing his isolation. Silas's love of gold advocates Eliot's critique of Victorian materialism and the mercantile ethics necessary for higher ends. The gold, in fact, symbolises Silas's transformation from a lively human being to a hard, sterile and insensitive man.

Silas endures this state of 'withering' for fifteen years. Meanwhile he receives another shock when one night his hard-earned gold is stolen. However, Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth interprets this act of stealing as 'violation of Silas's secret life and forcing him into company'. (Bloom, 19) Even in this state of misery and despair Silas bears no ill will against any one; he does not mind whether the thief is punished or not if only he gets back his treasure. There is hardly any doubt about Silas's essential nobleness. Silas Marner is not a born miser. In him, the passion for gold is shown to be the consequence of the treatment he receives, which blights his essential noble nature. Habit is the second nature, and the miserly habit becomes deep-rooted in Silas; but even the second nature has not the indomitable force which belongs to the instinctive nature. Hence the moral regeneration of Silas is well conceived and is commensurate with his character. Hugh Walker rightly comments, 'if the miserliness of Silas had been instinctive and inborn, the awakening out of it would have been incredible'. (Walker, 529)

Eppie brings Silas back to normal life and happiness. His capacity to feel and reciprocate is roused when he finds the child Eppie, who reminds him of his own little sister. The description of Silas's first encounter with Eppie is delineated with an epiphany which bears a distinct moral message. A softly warm, abandoned child appears as a heap of gold to Silas Marner who is completely absorbed in materialistic world:

The heap of gold seemed to glow and get larger beneath his agitated gaze. He leaned forward at last, and stretched forth his hand but instead of the hard coin with the familiar resisting outline, his finger encountered soft warm curl. In utter amazement Silas fell on his knees and bent his head low to examine the marvel, it was a sleeping child. (Eliot, Silas 96)

Eppie's love and warmth transforms the hard-hearted and self-centered Silas Marner into a caring, loving and sympathetic human being. The child created a fresh link between his life and the lives from which he had hitherto shrunk continually into narrower isolation. Eppie was a creature of endless claims and ever-growing desires, seeking and loving sunshine, and living sounds, and living movements: and stirring the human kindness in all eyes that looked on her.

The presence of Eppie removed the frightening looks of Silas. No child was afraid of approaching Silas when Eppie was near him; there was no repulsion around him now. The love between him and the child has blended them into one, and there was love between the child and the world --- from men and women with parental looks and tones.

Eppie's eagerness to seek new realms of knowledge is well contrasted with Silas's urge to unearth the disjointed portion of his past life. The passage below underlines this:

As the child's mind was growing into knowledge, his mind was growing into memory- as her life unfolded, his soul, long stupefied in a cold narrow prison, was unfolding too, and trembling gradually into full consciousness.(Eliot, Silas 109)

The term 'full consciousness' implies not only an integrated sense of the self based on continuous memory, but also an open, accepting awareness of surrounding social life. Under the influence of Eppie, Silas moves beyond to look at the known circle of people and tries to establish links and ties with neighbours. He learns to open his previously inert feelings into the forms of custom and belief which were the mould of Raveloe life. With reawakening sensibilities, he had begun to ponder over the elements of his old faith, and blend them with his new impressions, till he recovered a consciousness of unity between his past and present. Social isolation and personal disruption are replaced by integration. Silas now began to think of Raveloe life entirely in relation to Eppie; she must have everything good in Raveloe and Silas came to understand this life better than his earlier life. He, so long, unreasonably kept himself aloof without having any communion with the people around him.

Silas's deliverance from social and moral morbidity is summed up with artistic imagination and romantic flavour. Here is the description

In old days there were angels who came and took men by the hand and led them away from the city of destruction. We see no white - winged angels now. But yet men are led away from threatening destruction; a hand is put into theirs, which leads them forth gently towards a calm and bright land, so that they look no more backward-, and the hand may be a little child's. (Eliot, Silas 114)

In chapter sixteen, the narrative resumes sixteen years later. Silas, who is now fifty-five, protected Eppie, who is now eighteen from the lowering influences of village talks and habits and this preserved in her, the freshness which is sometimes falsely supposed, to be an invariable attribute of rusticity. It was so because perfect love can exalt the relations of the least -instructed human beings. She has developed a touch of refinement and fervour which came from no other instruction than that of tenderly-nurtured feelings.

The final 'moral drama' of the novel takes place when Godfrey Cass, the natural father of Eppie comes to Silas's cottage to claim his daughter from Silas.' The altercation between Godfrey and Silas enunciates two differing views of fatherhood. George Eliot demonstrates how Godfrey's assumptions based on the natural law of biological paternity are defeated by Silas's appeals to a moral law that transcends it. Though Silas appeals to a superior Divine Authority in resisting Godfrey's offers, he ultimately refuses to speak for Eppie. Silas identifies a moral authority that supersedes natural and civil law in Eppie's case: 'God gave her to me because you turned your back upon her and He looks upon her as mine-, you've no right to her'.(Eliot, Silas 144) In spite of his desperate desire to keep her, Silas submits himself finally to Eppie's will saying, 'Eppie, my child, I won't stand in your way', (Eliot, Silas 145) and later reminds Godfrey that he will not bargain with him for the child he loves. In this way, Silas shows that he has freed himself from the delusion that originally prompted him to possess the foundling instead of his lost gold.

However the growing dependence of Silas upon Eppie's love has come to cancel Godfrey's claim. Eppie rejects Godfrey's claim in the words:

We have been used to be happy together every day, and I can't think of no happiness without him. And he says he'd nobody in the world till I was sent to him, and he'd have nothing when I was gone.

And he's taken care of me and loved me from the first, and I'll cling to him as long as he lives, and nobody shall ever come between him and me.. I can't feel as I've got any father but one. (Eliot, Silas 146)

Eppie's decision to stay with Silas, once again reaffirms his faith in human relation and bondage arising out of sheer love and affection 'Since the time the child was sent to me ... I think I shall trusten till I die' (Eliot, Silas 148)

Jan Jedrzejewski rightly comments : 'The contrast between Silas and Godfrey is indeed central to the novel's message : the example of Godfrey qualifies the idealism of the allegorical fable of Silas's moral redemption without undermining its essential humanist vision. Grounded much more firmly than Silas in the realistically presented context of his family background and his social and economic circumstances, Godfrey is not only the novel's most profound psychological study but also its most telling example of George Eliot's skeptical but compassionate understanding of the complexities of human nature'. (Jedrzejewski 55)

In fact, the moral principle should be the basis of all human relations. Above all, George Eliot, in this novel, has shown that rural life may hold pernicious realities, however Silas Marner comes close to a heavenly vision of the rural world as a garden containing benevolent nature, a comfortable life, a gradual change within a framework of permanence and order, and most importantly, loving community. Thus this novel is meant to 'set in a strong light the remedial influence of pure, natural human relations' (Eliot, Silas 149) and 'qualified redemption of ordinary and fallible humanity'.(Eliot, Silas 149)

In fact, moral regeneration is a basic theme of *Silas Marner*. With the coming of Eppie and with Silas's feeling of instinctive love for her, came also the beginning of his regeneration. Whatever little of human affection had remained in his heart now began to be lavished upon Eppie. It was primarily because the gold had already been lost. This instinctive love was all that had remained with Silas; but this was a vital force; and it was this which led to Silas's integration with Raveloe society and to a new religious belief which was acceptable to him because it was firmly based upon his love for his fellows. This belief was not an escape from, but an acknowledgement of, the disparity between an individual and an alien universe. And so at the end of the novel we find the author re-establishing the value of religion. However, this very religion was carefully been re-evaluated and established as an exaltation of the human being.

Silas's love for Eppie, as it developed, slowly gained religious overtones which added up at the end of the novel to a complete trust in a new God. At the centre of this new religion is the love of one's fellow human being. Dolly Winthrop provides the answer to all Silas's question about why he had unjustly been treated at Lantern Yard. Dolly's answer is that the powers above know what is best for human beings. Dolly feels convinced that there is an order in the universe which human beings can surely perceive on certain rare occasions even though the universe is, on the whole, mysterious and inexplicable. Dolly believes in a loving but mysterious God; and Silas, in his final words in the novel, expresses a trust in an orderly universe, this trust being inseparable from a love of one's fellow beings. This trust in an ordered universe is George Eliot's final position in this novel; and this trust, as achieved by Silas Marner, constitutes the regeneration of Silas himself.

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