

Comteist philanthropy in George Eliot's *Silas Marner*: An evaluation

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Abstract: George Eliot in *Silas Marner* portrays the protagonist as a heroic character who is brave, generous and intelligent. Through this novel, Eliot expresses her desire to create sympathy for the wounded humanity. This is a reflection of the altruistic view of the world proposed by Auguste Comte. This study examines Comte's view of philanthropy in *Silas Marner*. In doing so, this article goes through Auguste Comte's altruism philosophy to analyse *Silas Marner*. This study evaluates the contest of the nineteenth-century European society and the author's intention to depict an ideal physiological state of mind. The characters and plot have been monitored from a very close view to examine each and every move in order to get a clear picture of the society. The findings highlight that 19th century Europe was poverty-stricken, engulfed by socio-economic crises and at the same time however, it was the time of new thought and technologies. In this regard George Eliot in this novel, desires to show a path for humanity to get rid of the sufferings.

Keywords: philanthropy, humanity, Auguste Comte, altruism, human suffering, new thought

Introduction

"I have taken *Silas Marner* as the book in which to study the art of its author because here she is at her best. *Silas Marner* is a short work, but it has abundant interest and less preaching than the later novels" (Fairley 1913, 221). *Silas Marner* is a Victorian novel composed by George Eliot which emphasizes on Christianity, morality and social values. The author provides a very complex setting for the novel. Silas Marner is a weaver who lives in early 19th century England. It was a time when weavers like him made profits by producing handmade goods in England. However, during the 1830s and 1890s industrial revolution came and it caused a massive economic change all over

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England. It was the time when handmade goods were transformed into machine-made products. The technology became advanced and made it easy and quick to produce products like woven cotton. It also allowed a huge number of products to be produced within a short time with less effort. As a result, mills and factories began to grow rapidly throughout England. The transformation was so fast that we can see at the end of the story, the village of Lantern of Yard was completely transformed into a manufacturing hub. This sudden change in Lantern Yard reflects the picture of the whole of England and how the industrial revolution changed the profession of weaving and the life of the weavers like Silas Marner.

However, the most striking dramatic element of the story revolves around the substitution of the weaver's gold by an unwelcome child, Eppie. Regarding the plot's aesthetically and philosophically appealing aspect of justice and moral logic, Shoshana Knapp (1986, 444) asserts,

The events have a perfect symmetry: the loss of one object is matched by the gain of another, and the central substitution is framed by two other crises of trust, the first of which (William Dane's betrayal of Silas) entails a defeat and the second of which (Eppie's loyalty to Silas when she is acknowledged by Godfrey Cass) entails a victory. The arrival of the child Eppie replaces the gold stolen by Dunstan Cass; the love of the adult Eppie repeals the treachery of William Dane. The Cass brothers lose what they stole (the gold) or did not value (the child), and they are punished with interest: Dunstan loses his life, and Godfrey loses his second child and all potential children.

This perfect symmetry of loss and gain underscores that at the core of George Eliot's *Silas Marner* lies a powerful narrative that sheds light on the facets of redemption, selflessness, and the transformative power of altruism. The famous philosopher and sociologist Auguste Comte first coined the term 'altruism'. The idea was to introduce an opposite term of 'egoism'. 'Altruism' is associated with nineteenth-century thinkers who brought their ideas along with the controversial conceptual framework. This conceptual framework aimed at critically analysing ancient questions related to philosophy, religions and ethics. Before this, there was another prevailing term known as enlightenment moralism which had been the manifestation of arguments regarding the relationship between self-serving passion and benevolent ethical emotions. The authors like Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Mandeville realised that all human actions are derived from their self-interest. However, this view did not go uncriticized by scholars such as Joseph Butler who thought that generosity was as basic a principle of human

action as self-interest. Hence, one might interpret *Silas Marner* as a story that upholds an ethical standard in which every action bears its subsequent consequences.

Literature review

Different academics provide differing perspectives on Eliot's *Silas Marner* illuminating the narrative as a criticism of social conventions and an advocacy of principles centred around the human condition. Hera Kim (2020, 179), for example, argues that Eliot brings back her past from the Lantern Yard not only to criticise Victorian conventions regarding gender roles but also to create a confrontational past and present. In order to do so, Eliot uses Marner's memory of the spectral past that constantly questions and intervenes his gender identity in the Victorian context. Hence, Marner's masculinity should be seen as a critical intersectional collage of temporality and gender role that intervenes the troubling presence of the Victorian binary gender system. The humanistic overtones of the story highlighted by Kim's view of Marner's masculinity as a challenge to Victorian gender standards, aligns with Koumakpai and Barnabe's vision of constructing a society built on the welfare of individuals.

Koumakpai and Oladjehou (2016, 1250) comment, George Eliot, in this novel, is convinced of the great value of human generosity, love, and compassion. It highlights the principles of benevolence and compassion by using many characters. Humanism as a theme of literature can also be seen through religious aspects. In terms of law, many texts have been published in order to safeguard human beings, especially women. The author endeavours to establish a society based on the welfare of human beings. At the same time, she puts an emphasis on the social environment that connects members of the community through conventional values, which are displayed as an incomparable hub of values to uphold the humane development of society.

On the other hand, Anna Lindhe's (2016) study of human compassion as an effective tool in numerous domains of life is connected to Dylan Black's interpretation of *Silas Marner* as a story that transcends generations and explores themes related to human fragility as well as kindness. The novel's importance of dealing with human feelings and attitudes is further highlighted by Black's emphasis on Silas Marner's character being significant on a worldwide scale, which aligns with Lindhe's belief that compassion is

fundamentally necessary. Black (2008) says, “George Eliot’s *Silas Marner* depicts a tale that crosses the boundary of time and it tells us about spiritual downfall and rebirth, of human vulnerability and greed, and of compassion and determination”. Empathy, according to Lindhe, has come out to be a ubiquitous concept in areas ranging from politics, law, and business ethics to medical care and education, to name just a few. Empathy is thought to be beneficial in almost every sphere of life and the lack of it usually creates chaos and anarchy and sometimes it may be related with psychopathy and crime. Several perspectives, including evolutionary ones, are based on the view that empathy is an evolved faculty, vital to humankind’s cooperation and hence survival. In other words, empathy is thus often considered to be useful, indispensable, and even morally good (Lindhe 2016,19).

Kristen A. Pond (2013, 691) finds a curious moment in middle of George Eliot’s novel *Silas Marner*. Marner, when the theft of his gold was discovered, he runs to the Rainbow Inn, the village’s popular gathering place, in order to tell them about the theft and demand justice. According to the scholar, “This is a climactic moment that can be described as the climactic in the plot; as readers, we turn the page with mounting anticipation: how will the villagers react to the strange weaver’s first intrusion into this most sacred of spaces in Raveloe?” Anna Neill’s explanation of the characters’ limited consciousness and repeating history is consistent with Pond’s interpretation of Silas’ entry into the Rainbow Inn. *Silas Marner* is a unique sort of novel, and the readers can read it as a story about the problem of expressing a consciousness with limited capacity for imaginative reach and where all cognitive events are shaped and dominated by the unknown (Neill 2008, 940). In the midst of limited viewpoints, this integrated vision emphasises the importance of particular fresh situations as growth in character catalysts.

One may see Josephine Macdonagh’s examination of hospitality in *Silas Marner* as a mirror of the more general subject of empathy and human values that has been covered by other academics. In her perspective, the act of accepting or rejecting strangers may be linked to themes of empathy and societal inclusion, supporting the notion that Eliot’s writing explores intricate human interactions. Macdonagh (2020, 11) remarks, “What makes the engagement with the idea of hospitality even more pronounced in this work is the fact that Silas’ acceptance in the village is precipitated by his own adaptation to the values of open hospitality”.

Auguste Comte's definition of altruism, which emphasises unselfish concern for the wellbeing of others, can be related to Jo Carruthers' interpretation of *Silas Marner* in connection to the regenerating power of nature and the good influence on love and caring. In the story Eppie is presented as a light of hope and rejuvenation for the despondent and alone Silas. Carruthers emphasises the notion that Eppie restores love and pleasure to Silas's life. He explains,

Silas Marner is full of natural images of growth and vitality that insist that human life needs to have a similar forward trajectory to thrive. Although it is clear that Silas's love for his adopted daughter is the key to his renewed life, the novel also emphasizes the regenerative power of nature and its positive influence on the kind of nurturing care that Silas and Eppie represent (Carruthers 2020, 116).

Given that Silas' well-being is positively and regeneratively impacted by Eppie's presence and affection, this metamorphosis may be understood as a manifestation of altruism. She positively impacts his general wellness by helping him to overcome his emotional and self-imposed seclusion. Comte's theory of altruism advocates for people to put other people's needs ahead of their own, as seen by Eppie's unselfish treatment of Silas throughout the book. Her manners and behaviours exemplify the selfless idea of behaving in the interests of others before oneself. Silas' selfless love and concern for Eppie are an example of the kind of deeds that benefit the community at large as well as Silas.

In addition, Carruthers' reference to the natural progression and liveliness depicted in the novel, is consistent with Comte's view that societal peace and collaboration are essential to the advancement of mankind. When people unite in a spirit of mutual assistance and kindness, the regenerative force of nature may be understood as a metaphor for the potential for human growth and advancement. Thus, a community built on collaboration and altruism may prosper and advance as a whole, just as Eppie's presence revitalises Silas.

Methodology

This study follows a qualitative approach regarding data collection and analysing data. The aim of qualitative research varies with the disciplinary background, such as a psychologist seeking to gather an in-depth understanding of human behaviour and the reasons that govern such behaviour. Qualitative methods examine the why and how of decision-making, not just what, where, when, or "who", and have a

strong basis in the field of sociology to understand government and social programs. This study intends to analyse the novel *Silas Marner* written by George Eliot in order to find out the presence of altruism. The study is also reliant on some secondary sources like books, articles, research papers and internet sources.

Research questions

Throughout the procedure of this study, this research follows a close textual reading of Eliot's *Silas Marner* focusing on the two open-ended questions in order to find a productive outcome from the whole effort. The questions are associated with the objectives of this research that helped reach the ultimate goal. These questions have been answered on the basis of the plots and contexts portrayed in *Silas Marner* by George Elliot. The questions are:

1. How is altruism depicted in *Silas Marner*?
2. How does altruism play a significant role in solving bigger human problems?

Presence of Comte's philanthropy in *Silas Marner*

The novel *Silas Marner* by George Eliot is a story of a weaver who can be defined as a miser and a misanthropic. He, unfortunately, loses his stash of gold however, a baby girl comes into his life who has bright golden hair. The weaver has an intense love for the child and this love can be defined as 'altruistic love'. According to Vaillant, altruism is "vicarious but constructive and instinctually gratifying service to others."

Usually, altruism is thought to be complete selflessness like the humanitarian works of Mother Teresa or Silas Marner to adopt an orphan Eppie. But altruism is a much more complex idea as it is associated with altruistic love. The biological father of Eppie is Godfrey Cass who conceals his identity as he marries the woman he loves after the death of Eppie's mother. It is clear that Cass does love his daughter and has no intention to abandon her completely as we see him giving Silas and Eppie some gifts.

The author of *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins ([1976] 2006, 60) thinks it is natural that Cass loves his biological child, and he gets an evolutionary advantage by supporting Eppie to propagate his genes. On the other hand, Silas has no such advantage as he is not the biological father of Eppie. He feels intense love for this golden-haired adopted child which is nothing but altruistic love. Eliot describes:

“Ah,” said Dolly, with soothing gravity, "it's like the night and the morning, and the sleeping and the waking, and the rain and the harvest—one goes and the other comes, and we know nothing how nor where. We may strive and scrat and fend, but it's little we can do after all—the big things come and go wi' no striving o' our'n—they do, that they do; and I think you're in the right on it to keep the little un, Master Marner, seeing as it's been sent to you, though there's folks as thinks different. You'll happen be a bit moithered with it while it's so little; but I'll come, and welcome, and see to it for you: I've a bit o' time to spare most days, for when one gets up betimes I' the morning, the clock seems to stan' still tow'rs ten, afore it's time to go about the victual. So, as I say, I'll come and see the child for you, and welcome. (Eliot [1861] 1999, 135).

From this description of the author, the question may come to our mind whether the love and affection of Silas for Eppie is totally unconditional. This golden-haired little girl gives Silas meaning of life and brings a feeling of joy for him. She also helps him get a social life in Raveloe, where they live. Eliot describes:

The gold had asked that he should sit weaving longer and longer, deafened and blinded more and more to all things except the monotony of his loom and the repetition of his web; but Eppie called him away from his weaving, and made him think all its pauses a holiday, reawakening his senses with her fresh life, even to the old winter-flies that came crawling forth in the early spring sunshine, and warming him into joy because she had joy (Ibid, 140).

Silas sets an example of altruistic love by adopting Eppie and raising her as his own child. Although he has no desire for worldly possessions in exchange for adopting the beautiful child, he gains love, joy and true meaningful life. Love is such an emotion which is invaluable and cannot be purchased with worldly properties however; it makes us affluent in true sense and gives us a reason to live for. Thus, altruism is not selfless sacrifice for anyone. It brings a much bigger gift for our life than our material possessions and enriches our life in many ways. Altruistic love provides benefits for both the sides who give and receive it and so we cannot define it as a total selfless act of human being.

George Vaillant ([1977] 1998, 91) in his book, *Adaptation to Life*, suggests that “It is not thought less of yourself, it is thought of yourself less” which paves the way for sublimation. It is natural that we think of our interests however, at the time of thinking of others in an altruistic way, it brings positive outcomes for all of us. This brings a unique kind of love which is a love for humanity in the world. Altruistic love can bring peace and happiness in the world and can be

the solution to many problems that we face in the modern era as Vaillant believes, “The reliable presence of people who love us facilitates our perception and tolerance of painful reality [like Silas Marner] and enriches our lives” (Ibid, 28). The world will no longer be engulfed by hatred and war if altruism takes a place in our mind.

Silas Marner is a demonstration of both ‘egoist’ and ‘altruist’ human behaviour which are exposed through the actions and thoughts of the characters. The egoists are the people who have morality based on their personal interest and they tend to perform such duties that bring material pleasure and temporary rewards. In the words of the author:

So, year after year, Silas Marner had lived in this solitude, his guineas rising in the iron pot, and his life narrowing and hardening itself more and more into a mere pulsation of desire and satisfaction that had no relation to any other being. His life had reduced itself to the functions of weaving and hoarding, without any contemplation of an end towards which the functions tended. The same sort of process has perhaps been undergone by wiser men, when they have been cut off from faith and love—only, instead of a loom and a heap of guineas, they have had some erudite research, some ingenious project, or some well-knit theory. Strangely Marner’s face and figure shrank and bent themselves into a constant mechanical relation to the objects of his life, so that he produced the same sort of impression as a handle or a crooked tube, which has no meaning standing apart. (Eliot [1861] 1999, 19).

On the other hand, an altruist desires to have pure happiness of the soul by thinking about the welfare of others without any material gain. The author in this novel intends to address the existing prejudices of society with a view to the enlightening society. Eliot dreams of a world where avoiding social responsibility brings misery and pain; however, carrying out responsibility like Silas's adoption of the child Eppie is the way of true happiness which cannot be compared with worldly possessions.

This study intends to analyse the characters and their actions of the novel *Silas Marner* to draw a line between the individuals who avoid responsibilities and the people who adopt responsibilities to get the world view of the author. There is also another group of people according to Hardy who acknowledge that they have the responsibilities offered by life, but they don't actively perform the duties. Eliot divides *Silas Marner* into three distinctive parts and all three parts refer to three different stages that a society must go through according to the author- theological, metaphysical and positive which

are obviously influenced by her reading of Comte. This division also corresponds to the journey of Silas "from superstition, through infidelity to faith".

The Calvinist community of Lantern Yard is the representative of 'egoism'. This community has been formed based on the fear of God and strong trust on the supernatural power of prayers. This unquestioned belief on supernatural power can be so destructive for a society which is shown by the actions of William Dane. Dane betrays Silas and by doing so he ignores his responsibility to the community and to his best friend because of fulfilling his material desire to marry Sarah. Eliot depicts two types of conflicts regarding human interest—the conflict between performing or ignoring duties and the conflict between religious belief and religious practice in the same context. Sarah, the fiancé of Silas and William Dane, his friend of him both abdicate their God-given responsibility 'to love others as much as you love yourself'. The irony of fate is that Silas trusted these people by investing love. Silas does feel that the love of his fiancé for him is decreasing. However, it is also the reality that at Lantern Yard charge of theft against Silas was brought by William Dane and Silas's membership was solemnly suspended.

This psychological dilemma establishes religious beliefs as an inflexible moral code which hardly cares about human feelings. Therefore, adopting this moral code paves the way for further immorality and corruption as we see the Lantern Yard community does not accept the change of feeling of Sarah for Silas and so, Dane goes for dishonest means to fulfil his desire. Eliot shows the reader a contrasting picture to the egoist and self-centred community of Lantern Yard by presenting altruistic morality of the Anglican church of Raveloe. The Anglican Church is not founded based on strict empirical application of the biblical texts. Rather, it is formed based on 'fountains of love and divine faith' and it guides people spiritually to provide them with true comfort of soul. As the author describes,

During this discursive address Silas had continued motionless in his previous attitude, leaning his elbows on his knees, and pressing his hands against his head. Mr. Macey, not doubting that he had been listened to, paused, in the expectation of some appreciative reply, but Marner remained silent. He had a sense that the old man meant to be good-natured and neighbourly; but the kindness fell on him as sunshine falls on the wretched—he had no heart to taste it, and felt that it was very far off him (Eliot [1861] 1999, 85).

Such differences according to Eliot accounted for the wellbeing of the community. The character of Squire Cass is considered to be a responsible man who carries out his responsibilities to the neighbours. However, Squire Cass begins to ignore his familial duty after the death of his wife. The villagers think,

Raveloe was not a place where moral censure was severe, but it was thought a weakness in the Squire that he had kept all his sons at home in idleness; and though some licence was to be allowed to young men whose fathers could afford it, people shook their heads at the courses of the second son, Dunstan, commonly called Dunsey Cass, whose taste for swopping and betting might turn out to be a sowing of something worse than wild oats (Ibid, 23).

However, eldest son Godfrey Cass does not consider it to be the kindness of his father. Godfrey Cass has been presented as a young man who is selfish and weak, contrasting the altruistic behaviour of Silas Marner.

Godfrey's was an essentially domestic nature, bred up in a home where the hearth had no smiles, and where the daily habits were not chastised by the presence of household order. His easy disposition made him fall in unresisting with the family courses, but the need of some tender permanent affection, the longing for some influence that would make the good he preferred easy to pursue, caused the neatness, purity, and liberal orderliness of the Lammeter household, stunned by the smile of Nancy, to seem like those fresh bright hours of the morning when temptations go to sleep and leave the ear open to the voice of the good angel, inviting to industry, sobriety, and peace (Ibid, 32).

His habit of ignoring the truth and escaping from reality makes him a reluctant egoist who avoids his duties to his first wife and her child. He is too cowardly to reveal the existence of them to his father and he is unable to admit his fatherhood when he sees the child in Silas' arms at the Red House party. Godfrey's escaping mentality is completely revealed when he disowns his daughter Eppie and at the same time he fears that Eppie's mother might be alive. According to David Carroll this is the central point of the novel which provides a turning point in the lives of both Godfrey and Silas. Silas' fifteen years of misery and isolation during the time of worshipping gold instead of God, comes to an end when he decides to adopt Eppie. At the same time, it gives Godfrey a 16 year long deceptive period in his life since he feels free to marry Nancy Lammeter. Additionally, the selfishness and moral apathy exhibited by Dunstan Cass stand in stark contrast to the generosity demonstrated by Silas and Eppie. It is evident from his

stealing of Silas' riches that he had no respect for the adverse effects that his actions would cause to live. People around Dunstan experience pain and sorrow as a result of the events that he sets off. To the altruism and moral principles that Silas and Eppie represent, his actions stand in sharp contrast.

Silas takes responsibility for Eppie when she is a helpless child having no one to look after. When Silas falls sick in his old age Eppie finds it her responsibility to take care of him. However, Godfrey chooses a childless marriage which turns out to be a bad decision and he confesses, "I wanted to pass for childless once, Nancy-I shall pass for childless now against my wish". Eliot wants to show the difference between taking and escaping responsibility. The way that Godfrey chose will make him bear the bitter consequences for a long time. The author depicts the egoist characters in this novel as disrespectful and narrow-minded. Godfrey ignores his responsibilities with a view to keeping a peaceful environment in his father's house. His brother Dunstan too abandons his responsibilities to live an easy life with little effort. Dunstan has no regret as he misappropriated the rents and blackmails his brother. Therefore, Dunstan appears to be an extremely immoral man according to the morality standard of Eliot and so he faces the most disgraceful punishment. The author feels it is her authorial responsibility to ensure justice to subjugate the evil.

Silas adopts Eppie but he does not know anything about parenting. In this circumstance, Dolly Winthrop appears with a helping hand to teach him how to take care of a child. Dolly guides Eppie to be christened and clothed and in this way, she teaches Silas about the personal and social welfare of a child. This altruistic behaviour comes from her simple faith as follows, "eh, there's trouble i' this world, and there's things as we can niver make out of the rights on. And all as we've got to do is to trusten, Master Marner – to do the right thing as fur as we know, and to trusten ... as it must be so" (Ibid, 158).

She does not need a conscious effort to be altruistic; rather, her understanding of right and wrong comes from her instinct and she performs her duty naturally. As Dolly discusses the life events of Silas, it helps Silas to accept his present life. Being the judge of the characters Eliot tries to ensure that all of them get punishment or reward according to their actions. In doing so, she presents the picture of a society which is divided into several parts- people adopting responsibility. Silas is immensely rewarded in the long run as he

carries out his social responsibility as a human being by taking care of Eppie as he himself asserts,

Eh, my precious child, the blessing was mine. If you hadn't been sent to save me, I should ha' gone to the grave in my misery. The money was taken away from me in time; and you see it's been kept—kept till it was wanted for you. It's wonderful—our life is wonderful." Silas sat in silence a few minutes, looking at the money. "It takes no hold of me now," he said, ponderingly—"the money doesn't. I wonder if it ever could again—I doubt it might, if I lost you, Eppie. I might come to think I was forsaken again, and lose the feeling that God was good to me (Ibid, 181).

However, the reward is not something material. The gift he gets is much more than material possession and it provides him with true peace and contentment. On the other hand, Godfrey Cass is punished with childlessness for his decision to escape his responsibility. Eliot creates a moral framework in the world she created in the novel in order to demonstrate a simple justice system of the nature of action and reaction. Eliot intends to show the interdependence of the people of the society and how the adoption of responsibility brings about a positive outcome and the vice versa brings suffering in the long run.

Conclusion

Silas Marner presents hoards of gold which are stolen, and the time was obviously a historical period when the industrial revolution was taking place in Europe and paper money was replacing the coins and metals. This novel has an ethical message to humanity which is influenced by the great thinkers of the 19th century like August Comte, Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx. This novel associates 'abstraction' of gold with the modern economy where 'giving' and 'sharing' has little cost but it produces realistic values which benefit the whole society. George Eliot presents a historically relevant ethical story based on humanity and social sympathy. The author places human relations over material possessions in terms of achieving true peace of mind. Silas Marner loses his gold, but he gets the golden-haired little girl Eppie and Eppie fulfils his life with love and compassion. Silas takes care of Eppie as an orphan, and he is rewarded for this selfless deed. The great thinkers of the 19th century thought social sympathy and the sharing of wealth can bring peace in the world. The tendency of exploiting the workers in the factories and benefitting a small group of people during the industrial revolution played a major role in creating discrimination and mistrust in the society which is still

prevailing in the 21st century. Humans are yet to be freed from the exploitation of the social elites. Therefore, *Silas Marner* as a moral fable influenced by August Comte's theory of altruism has a universal appeal.

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