

The importance of the  
theme of duty in  
george eliot's novel  
silas marner essay  
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**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

There is much evidence in the novel to show that duty is an important theme. There are various forms of duty illustrated and each main character has a duty to fulfil. George Eliot illustrates this through the characters and plot presented. Some characters are able to fulfil their duty and others aren't. Duty means showing consideration and responsibility for others. There are some characters that follow duty with this meaning, love and care there are others who think duty is irrelevant. A duty is a function that we have to follow, and a moral obligation to others.

This is all true for this novel, but also it means to show kindness, generosity, and respect for the community, traditions and family. Godfrey is unable to do his duty; he neglects his wife, Molly, and his daughter Eppie. Molly has been abandoning Eppie. Dunstan Cass avoids his duty toward his brother Godfrey. Nancy Lammeter does her duty towards Godfrey and her family. Silas carries out his responsibilities for Eppie however Godfrey does do some duty to Eppie by supporting her financially and practically after deciding to neglect her. In this novel, the people are divided into two groups, those who neglect duty and those who honour it.

Characters who neglect duty include the Cass family, the community at Lantern Yard and especially William Dane. Dunstan who doesn't follow his duty and is always after his father's inheritance. He is selfish and greedy. He cares about no-one except himself: "Dunstan, whose nature it was to care more for immediate annoyances than for remote consequences, no sooner recovered his legs, and saw that it was over with Wildfire, than he felt a satisfaction at the absence of witnesses to a position which no swaggering

could make enviable. ” This shows he felt happiness that nobody saw what happened to Wildfire.

He blackmails his brother so that he can have his father’s inheritance instead of helping him out: “ I might get you turned out of house and home, and cut off with a shilling any day. I might tell the squire how his handsome son was married to that nice woman, Molly Farren, and was very unhappy because he couldn’t live with his drunken wife. ” Dunstan is a cunning, devious and lazy person who avoids his duty for personal gain. Godfrey the eldest and most handsome son of the Cass family also abandons his duty to win over his love. He makes the mistake of marrying Molly, and still wants to marry someone else.

Although Godfrey looks brave from the outside he cannot face up to the public disgrace of what he has done. When Godfrey is asked by the Squire about Nancy and has the chance to clear everything up he can’t bring himself to mention it and insists he must speak to Nancy himself. On this occasion he overlooks his duty to speak the truth due to his fear of being disinherited. After Molly’s death Godfrey is showing a selfish and ignorant side to himself. He wants Molly to be dead so that he can marry Nancy: “ there was one terror in his mind at that moment; it was that the woman might not be dead.

He knows that the child in Silas’s arms is his own daughter and ignores her: “ who’s child is it? I don’t know – some poor woman who has been found in the snow, I believe. ” Godfrey duty is to look after the child and speak the truth, he neglects his duty. Godfrey doesn’t visit the child often: “ the wide open

blue eyes looked up at Godfrey without any uneasiness or sign of recognition. " He decides to marry Nancy and leave his child in Silas's hands. There are many people who run their lives by trusting chance to make everything work out all right in the end. Chance offers a cover up for every slippery activity they are involved in.

George Eliot reminds us that whatever actions you do now, you will suffer the consequences later on in life: " the seed you sow can only produce its own kind of fruit. " A pointer to later events in the story. Godfrey's mentality is similar to that: " let him neglect the responsibility of his office, and he will inevitably anchor himself on the chance, that the thing left undone may turn out not to be of the supposed importance. Let him betray his friends' confidence, and he will adore that same cunning complexity called Chance, which gives him the hope that his friend will never know.

Here we see that Godfrey is not completing his duty so that he can try to escape the situation. Molly has been avoiding her duty to her child. She has felt neglected, bitter and intrigued because of Godfrey and got addicted to opium. She spends all her money on the drug rather than the betterment of her child. However Molly has been neglecting her daughter: " the little one, accustomed to be left to itself for long hours without notice from its mother. " Before Silas moved to Raveloe he was at Lantern Yard where he was engaged to Sarah and was a member of a religious sect.

William Dane his best friend is a man who knew nothing about duty. William has framed Silas into murdering and theft, William has become a crafty, evil, greedy and manipulative man. William has stolen the money and placed the

empty bag at Silas's home. Silas has lost faith in God and moved out of town. William later marries Sarah. Characters who honour duty include Silas, Eppie, Lammeter family and Winthrop family. Silas Marner who is the main character in this novel honours duty even though it means that he loses out.

There are various examples in this novel to portray that Silas has been honouring his duty without minding the consequences that come with it. When Silas is been accused by William of theft, and knew that William was the cause of this he kept quiet and suffered what came along. He was also unaware that Sarah has married William. When he comes to Raveloe people believe that Silas has a cure and he so could have easily traded on peoples hopes of cure for money: " Silas might have driven a profitable trade in charms as well as in his small list of drugs; but money on this condition was no temptation to him.

He spoke the truth and obeyed his duty. People later started to blame him for their illnesses and were afraid he was looking at them with an evil eye. He can easily retaliate and make money but he instead takes no interest in them. After the theft in Silas's home, Silas is in despair, madness, his heart leaping violently, in terror and can't bear the terrible truth; his suspicion falls on Jem Rodney. However Jem is not to blame and Silas immediately accomplishes his duty by apologising to him. After the death of Molly a child arrives at the doorstep of Silas's home.

He starts to become attached with her thinking that the Gold lost 16 years ago is being replaced by this child. He has fights and arguments to keep her and no one thinks otherwise. After keeping her he carries out his duty to

Eppie, which is her name, with love and devotion. He is asked to punish her which he does till some extent. The love between Silas and Eppie and Eppie and Silas is growing stronger and they become inseparable. Silas always wants what is best for Eppie. Eppie duty is to look after Silas, love him and take care of him.

Silas and Eppie has done there duty: " you see, there was nobody as cared for me or clave to me above nor below. " Eppie wants to marry Aaron and Silas approves of it however Silas doesn't want to be a burden to Eppie and tells Eppie this but Eppie doesn't want to separate with her father and tells Silas that Aaron can live with us. This shows us that there is a lot of love between them two and Eppie is fulfilling her duty. When Godfrey starts to claim on Eppie and tries to complete his duty which he forgot 16 years ago: " I feel now it is my duty to insist on taking care of my own daughter.

I want to do my duty. " Silas is angered but can understand that this maybe a chance for Eppie to live a good life and tells Eppie this: " Eppie, my child, speak. I won't stand in your way. Thank Mr and Mrs Cass. " However Eppie makes it clear that she does not want to go: " Thank you ma'am - thank you sir but I cannot leave my father nor own anybody nearer than him. " Silas does his duty by giving Eppie a chance to decide which path she chooses and Eppie does her duty by staying with her true father, the father who has loved her, taken care of her for the past 16 years.

Godfrey is trying his mighty best to get Eppie by saying that she may visit Silas when she feels right: " it'll always be our wish that you should show your love and gratitude to one who's been a father to you so many years,

but we hope you'll come to love us as well. " Here we see Godfrey trying to do his duty to its utmost by recovering whatever he lost in the past. Eppie who has stood along Silas all this time has no intentions to change: " thank you ma-am - thank you sir, for your offers - they're very great, and far above my wish.

For I should have no delight in life any more if I was forced to go away from my father, and knew he was sitting home, a-thinking of me and feeling lone. We've been used to be happy together every day, and I can't think of 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 cleave to him as long as he lives, and nobody shall ever come between him and me! " Eppie politely rejects their offer and continues to stand by Silas, no matter what is thrown at them, she again follows her duty.

Nancy Lammeter completes her duty by staying with Godfrey even when she finds out that he has married before and already has a daughter. Nancy has a strong character which reflected on her duty: " spirit o rectitude, and the sense of responsibility for the effect of her conduct on others, which were strong elements in Nancy's character. " She was religious and her Sunday thoughts were only on the unhappiness of lack of children. She also makes it clear to everyone that Priscilla is her sister. Priscilla Lammeter the eldest daughter of the Lammeter family follows her duty with honour.

She has no illusions about her own ugliness and treats Nancy all the same even though she is much prettier and feels no jealousy. Although she is not

marrying she completes her duty by looking after her father in difficult circumstances by managing the farm: " she manages me and the farm too. " She is pleased Nancy is happy and she also has a dairy to look after. The Winthrop family led by Dolly has helped Silas tremendously both psychologically when he is facing a trauma about the stolen money and taking care of Eppie so that Silas can concentrate on his work.

She fulfilled her duty honestly and always made sure to Silas that the child liked him the most: " see there said Dolly with a woman's tender tact, she's fondest of you. She wants to go on your lap, I'll be bound. Go, then: take her, Master Marner. " Dolly has also achieved her duty when it came to raising her own children. One of them, Aaron, is going to marry Eppie. As the novel progresses it is made known that those who neglect duty are punished and those who honour duty are later rewarded.

The importance of honouring duty is that you may suffer at the time but will feel no self conscious or guilty that you haven't spoke the truth. You will later be rewarded for your action as seen with Silas, Eppie and the Winthrop family who are blessed with happiness. Silas who has lost faith in God and lost all his gold but always did his duty is shown to have a happy life with his daughter. Eppie who accepted Silas to be her father, at the end gets to marry the man she loves and stays with her father. She has accomplished her duty and was later rewarded.

The consequences of avoiding or neglecting duty is that you may feel happy at the time but will always have a fear that the past may come back to haunt you. By avoiding your duty, problems start to add up and you are later



punished for it, you end up losing out on many things. Godfrey whose duty was to look after Molly, her daughter and forget Nancy was unable to do any of them. He may have got Nancy but has no children. He lost Eppie because he was selfish at the time and all through the novel spends his time escaping from his mistakes earlier.

Dunstan who neglected his duty is found dead. These are examples of people who neglected duty and are punished severely. Through examining the characters who neglect duty and those who honour their duty it is evident that there are those who suffer and those who gain. The consequences of their actions have a deep, lasting effect on their lives and George Eliot obviously wishes to illustrate this view throughout the story, she expresses her own views powerfully through the character and the circumstances.

It can be said that duty is an important and integral aspect of life. After exploring this novel in depth, it can be seen that people who have wealth and status are not necessarily happy but those who honour and fulfil their duty are the most happiest and content in the end. Although Nancy follows her duty she ends up suffering and being punished at the end. The novel can be described as a story between good and bad with a moral message. George Eliot refers to Christianity and religious beliefs to illustrate the concept and importance of duty.