

The triangular silas manner



As a result of betrayal, Silas Marner of George Eliot's so titled novel becomes a man in body without incurring any of the duties normally associated with nineteenth century working class adults. Eliot creates these unusual circumstances by framing our title-hero so it appears to his comrades that he has stolen money. Thereby, she effectively rejects innocent Marner from his community and causes him to lose his fiancé. At this pivotal moment in Marner's life, just as he is about to assume fully the role of a man, depended upon as such by his neighbors, future wife and probable children, he is excised and does not successfully complete the transformation. Accordingly, he moves on to a new place, Raveloe, with the same carefree lack of responsibility as a boy, who is clearly unable to act like the man he seems he should be. By denying Marner the possibility of a traditional family from the start, Eliot immediately brings forward the question of family values. A question that she answers in the course of her novel. Jeff Nunokawa, in his essay *The Miser's Two Bodies: Silas Marner and the Sexual Possibilities of the Commodity*, claims that Eliot "simply" shows "support for family values" (Nunokawa 273), and that she "encourages" them through her narrative (Nunokawa 290). As evidence, he cites quotations from the text that paint, as he puts it, "men [living] without women... in a barren region" (Nunokawa 273). Adeptly, he points to Eliot's line, "The maiden was lost... and then what was left to them?" (Nunokawa 273). Furthermore, Nunokawa goes on to label the moral implications of the novel as those of a "blunt dichotomy," saying that Eliot hands her reader "the evil of the gold" in direct contrast to "the goodness of the child [Eppie]" (Nunokawa 274). I do not disagree with Nunokawa's easily supported primary claim that men who lack women in Silas Marner are not happy. However, I do not think that Silas Marner's

endorsement of family values is nearly as straightforward as Nunokawa makes it out to be. In fact, Eliot's stance on the family unit is three-pronged. Nunokawa's reduction of *Silas Marner* to a "dichotomy" ignores the middle ground that Eliot ultimately recommends as the key to a life with a happy ending. In order to demonstrate this, I must first show that none of the families in *Silas Marner* (with the exception of Silas' own) are totally happy. In accord with Nunokawa, I will start with the uncomplicated melancholy of Squire Cass' male-only family. Eliot candidly tells her reader that "Red House [the Squire's residence] was without the presence of the wife and mother which is the fountain of wholesome love and fear in parlour and kitchen" (Eliot 22). Immediately, Eliot prepares her reader for an unhappy, incomplete group of inhabitants. The only scene between father and eldest son is both awkward and unkind, showing the attitude of life within the motherless house. The one scene in the novel between two brothers, Godfrey, the eldest, and his next younger brother, Dunsey, mocks the notion of "brotherly love," depicting it as actually blackmail via brotherly knowledge (Eliot 24). The brother-scene calls to mind the next well-respected family in Raveloe, the Lammeters. The complementary sister-scene takes place between the two daughters of this clan, Nancy and Priscilla. Their interaction is as ridiculous as the interaction between Godfrey and Dunsey was perverted. It likewise mocks the sibling communication by twisting true familial feelings into something other. Where the Cass' 'brotherly affection' comes out of a deeper hatred and mistrust, Eliot depicts the Lammeters' 'sisterly affection' as purely superficial. Nancy "will never have anything," explains Priscilla, "without I have mine just like it, because she wants us to look like sisters" (Eliot 91, emphasis added). The focus for

them is on what family tie they appear to have, not on what they actually have. In addition, as a whole, the Lammeters' lack the "wholesome wife and mother" just as the Cass' do, for Mrs. Lammeter "died afore the lasses were growed up," Mr. Macey tells us (Eliot 49). Even when Priscilla grows up to be a self-sufficient maid looking after her father, her happiness still doesn't peak and she feels that she is missing children. "I could ha' wished Nancy had had the luck to find a child," she tells her father, "I should ha' had something young to think of then, besides the lambs and the calves." (Eliot 175). Although she and her father live as the same sort of harmonious couple as Marner and Eppie, they are admittedly not as happy. Godfrey's own two families are no exceptions to this trend; each contains serious problems. He completely rejects his first wife, an opium addict, and his daughter. Then, Godfrey's second wife, Nancy, is mostly barren (save a dead one) and he cannot happily reconcile himself to that gap, as Nancy tells her sister. Nancy's own contentment is marred by her husband's distress and too much free time. The most they can achieve is "the quiet mutual gaze of trusting husband and wife" (Eliot 168). The family value is there, but it does not create an enviable scene. Dolly and Ben Winthrop's household is the only fully intact family pictured in *Silas Marner*. Clearly, Eliot means for it to represent that unison as their youngest son, Aaron, is pictured sitting on each of his parents' laps at different points in the narrative. First, in a sort of Jesus-Mary pose at Marner's house, a "'pictur of a child'" (Eliot 82), and then as father with son "between his knees" at the Red House (Eliot 101). However, Dolly, this well-balanced, devoted, dutiful mother, like all the others, does not feel entirely satisfied. "If it wasn't a sin to the lads to wish 'em made different," she tells Marner, "I should ha' been glad for one of 'em

to be a little gell" (Eliot 121). Even here, where family values and togetherness are entirely present, Eliot refuses to grant complete happiness. Not only does Nunokawa's notion that Silas Marner " supports family values" reveal itself to be wrong in the study of nearly all the families Eliot illustrates in the novel, his notion that the novel's message is so dichotomous as to be either ' support or condemns' is also inaccurate. Revealing this requires looking at the more basic elements of the story, which are all, on closer inspection, possess three points, not simply two. The most obvious examples of this are the elements of time and space. The novel is cleanly split into three time frames, based on Marner's habits. The first takes place in his early pre-fallen years, the second covers him as a lonely miser-spider, and the third reveals his happy life with Eppie. Godfrey's life can be split into three parallel parts as well: him as rich boy, him as deceitful husband and father, and him as the societally smiled-upon husband of Nancy. Likewise, three places dominate the psychology of the novel: Lantern Hill (at the beginning and returned to at the end), Stone-pits, and Red House. This is not all. Terence Cave says in his introduction to the Oxford World's publication of this text, that there are " three strands of religious belief in Silas Marner" (Cave xii). These include the obvious two forms of Christianity, the apparent and explicit religions of the townspeople, and village people respectively. Firstly is the " church assembling in Lantern Yard" (Eliot 8), defined by Cave's notes as " a non-conformist sect... of Evangelical Christianity" (Cave 181). Second, the dominant religion in Raveloe that Silas and Eppie are baptized within. And, finally, easily ignored by the critic who want to polarize the novel, is the animistic undertone throughout. " One of the most striking examples... of the animistic beliefs of the villagers," writes Cave, is " the way

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in which Silas' ghostly appearance at the Rainbow... interrupts a discussion about ghosts" (Cave xii). Silas Marner's cataleptic fits are yet another example of Eliot's abstention from dichotomies. During his trances, Marner escapes the typical classifications of what an individual can be, that is, alive or dead, divine or human. Mr. Macey believes that during these occasions Marner's "soul went loose from his body" (Eliot 46). In Macey's opinion, Marner can separate himself from himself without being permanently dead. During his early years in Lantern Yard "it was believed by himself and others that [the trance's] effect was seen in an accession of light and fervour" (Eliot 8). Here, though he is generally just one of the townspeople, he dons a privileged position when he is affected. Even the typically Victorian two-stranded plot is not "dichotomous" in the way Nunokawa wants to pin down Silas Marner. This is because, as Dr. Small said in a lecture on the Victorian novel, there is also a teleological impulse in these same novels. That is, the end brings together the two plots to create a complex, resolving conclusion that is neither one plot nor the other, but rather a third that stands alone and does not have gaps. Most importantly, there are two scenes in the novel where arguments occur, and both of these illustrate the radically three-sided world view Eliot is trying to convey throughout. The first of these scenes takes place in the Rainbow Bar and contains three separate battles, each with like conclusions. At the start of the scene, the men at the bar are disputing about a cow. This ends when Mr. Tookey proclaims, "There may be two opinions, I hope" (Eliot 46). With this, he acquires the agreement of many other fellows present, including Mr. Macey. Almost immediately following, a second argument, concerning the church choir, ensues. The landlord puts an end to this one by echoing Tookey's sentiment, saying, "<https://assignbuster.com/the-triangular-silas-marner/>

there's two opinions; and if mine was asked, I should say they're both right" (Eliot 46). Of course, though these characters, Tookey, Macey and the landlord, declare the seemingly mutually exclusive rightness of two contrary claims, in reality they are asserting yet a third opinion — that of perspectivism. The third heated discussion which takes place that night is over the existence of ghosts, which is interrupted by a physical manifestation of that same middle ground, a shocked Silas Marner, looking with "strange unearthly eyes" like an "apparition" (Eliot 53), and yet simultaneously quite real and alive, painfully so. Like the first two battles, this third ends with the middle ground triumphing; both sides are right, and the angle that is able to point that out is most right. Since this is how the arguments of the Rainbow bar end internally to the novel, this may reasonably be the end by which Eliot herself wants her readers to be convinced. This three-part argument scene is almost precisely mirrored in the later scene of outright argument between Eppie's two fathers which takes place in Stone-pits. In this, even Eliot's implied blocking (were her work ever to be staged) creates the triangle. Foremost is the marked point of Eppie standing between her two fathers. She must leave enough space for them to see each other and be on plane, but not move too far. She is closer to Silas, even holding his hand during her second monologue. Likewise Eppie serves as the central point in the triangle created between herself and the two offering themselves as traditional parents, Godfrey biologically and Nancy as the mother she never had. Godfrey monologues his wants, Marner comes back with his own, but just as their fight is billowing, Eppie takes the stage and undermines them both by acknowledging all their feelings and trumping them with her own. Her feelings coincide with those of Marner but

do not tell Godfrey he is wrong. Like the solutions in the Rainbow, the deciding factor does not take an already proposed side but rather carves out a space between the two. Appropriately, during her speech, Godfrey's " eyes were fixed on the floor, where he was moving the end of his stick, as if he were pondering something absently" (Eliot 167). Thus, he creates a perfect triangle with his own image, as if bodily regretting his weakness as only one of three fully developed and reasonable points. My essay fulfills the first rhetorical question of Nunokawa's *The Miser's Two Bodies*, " What could be simpler than Silas Marner's support for family values?" (Nunokawa 273), insofar as it argues for a singular (and therefore " simplistic") understanding of what Eliot condones, that is, deliberate choice, specifically in relation to family. However, I hope that I have made clear that I do not think Eliot is simply " supporting" family or condoning it across the board. She does not only say that family will make you happy, while gold will make you sad, she instead condemns any drifters and floaters who take what they get, riding on chance. That is why Dunsey, " I've got the luck" (Eliot 28) is the ultimate scoundrel. Similarly, Nancy and Priscilla give their lives over to what they look like — their attractiveness, rather than their minds, determines whether they'll marry. Priscilla seemingly counts herself as lucky to be " ugly" (Eliot 148). Mr. Lammeter allows his chance-controlled daughter to " manage" him entirely and thus is vicariously ruled by the villain (Eliot 147). Nancy refuses to adopt because she has not happened to become successfully pregnant. Molly does opium in the cold, dark snow without considering the consequences her action will most likely have on her or her daughter. Godfrey hopes for the happenstance deaths of his wife and brother. Dolly does not have a daughter. The entire chapel of Lantern Yard disappears,

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maybe because of its reliance on the chance procedure of pulling lots to determine Marner's guilt at the start of the novel. All have arrived at their positions due to acting either impulsively or according to pre-set expectations they would not challenge. Hence, none of them achieve full happiness regardless of whether or not they have families. The only heroes, the ones who reap the benefits of "nobody could be happier than we are" (Eliot 176), are the conscious decision-makers — Silas Marner and Eppie, each of whom Eliot places in unusual situations so as to allow them opportunities to make real choices. And, neither of whom chooses the traditional, biologically determined family. Marner stays a responsibility free hermit until he takes on Eppie in a revelatory moment and Eppie chooses her foster father above her biological one though both have rightful claims on her. Perhaps Eliot "supports family values" but that is a secondary message to the less traditional message that one must choose one's family to begin with. This message is not just an extreme in a two-sided relationship, for it is the middle ground between its own two opposites, which include the possibilities of not having a family at all and going with the one you are biologically given. Silas Marner is not a tale of black and white, right and wrong, it is more complex and aims to depict at least three angles — if not more that I have, as of yet, failed to unravel. Bibliography Carroll, David, "Reversing the Oracles of Religion," Casebook Series on George Eliot, Ed. R. P. Draper. London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1977. Cave, Terence, "Introduction to Oxford World Classic's Silas Marner" (see following entry for details.) Eliot, George. Silas Marner. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. Nunokawa, Jeff, "The Miser's Two Bodies: Silas Marner and the Sexual Possibilities of the Commodity," Victorian Studies, 1993, Spring, v. 36. pp. 273-390.