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(Re)memory and (Re)construction: Imaginatively Constructing Histories in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and George Eliot's *Silas Marner*

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'As the child's mind was growing into knowledge, his mind was growing into memory… his soul… into full consciousness' (Eliot 114)

Both Toni Morrison and George Eliot engage with the difficult histories of *Beloved* (1987) and *Silas Marner* (1861) through imaginatively constructing places and people. Places, true to historical reality, have problematic pasts: *Beloved* is filled with sites of slave history, while village life in *Silas Marner* reflects the difficulties of nineteenth-century wartime England. Due to their problematic pasts, Morrison and Eliot reconstitute places, though in opposing ways. Eliot recasts her villages as liminal spaces, distant from the past. In contrast, Morrison draws history closer by integrating place into her narrative structure. Both authors imaginatively construct characters to redefine personal histories and to reconnect with shared histories. Additionally, this essay argues that Eppie and Beloved generically represent the interface between imagination and history. Eppie's characterisation engages with romance tropes in an otherwise realist text. Similarly, Beloved embodies both the Gothic 'return of the repressed' and a reincarnated slave baby, yoking together the imaginative and the historical. Both authors' use of genre conventions works in unison with their reconstructions of place and people to imaginatively engage with history in *Beloved* and *Silas Marner*.

Places in both texts reflect the problems of historical reality. The shadow of slavery is omnipresent in *Beloved*: '[n]ot a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief' (Morrison 6). Morrison's assertion blends individual trauma with collective pain, for the use of accent ('ain't') implies personal experience, while the statement supports a universal truth—that every house contains a 'dead Negro's grief'. Her anthropomorphic treatment of place strengthens links to slavery, regarding 124 as a 'person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits' (35). The house re-enacts the physical out-workings of slave pain; place embodies past trauma. Morrison extends Beloved's slave history to the Reconstruction era of the 1870s, referencing the violence of white supremacist groups: '[e]ighteen seventy-four and whitefolks were still on the loose… eighty-seven

lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky' (212). The specificity of both place—'Kentucky'—and time—'[e]ighteen seventy-four'—grounds the narrative in historical truth. In contrast to Morrison's specificity, Eliot situates her villages in a generalised past, '[i]n the early years of this century' (4). She nevertheless scrutinises early nineteenth-century village life in England:

> It was still that glorious war-time which was felt to be a peculiar favour of providence towards the landed interest, and the fall of prices had not yet come to carry the race of small squires and yeomen down that road to ruin for which extravagant habits and bad husbandry were plentifully anointing their wheels. (19–20)

Catherine Belsey argues that Eliot's use of irony in *The Mill on the Floss* is 'no less authoritative because its meanings are implicit rather than explicit' (qtd. in O'Gorman 125), the same is true of *Silas Marner.* Eliot's description of 'glorious war-time' is ironic, as *Silas Marner* is likely set during the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815), when farmers benefitted from the inflated prices of domestic goods due to banned French imports (Eliot 183). Although there is no overt authorial intrusion, Belsey demonstrates how Eliot's irony and contextualisation point to a single interpretation—here, a critique of poor farming practices. By using a 'privileged, historic narration which is the source of coherence of the story as a whole' (Belsey qtd. in O'Gorman 124), Eliot allows her readers to construct a comprehensive history. Although both authors take critical approaches, they reflect different historical realities in their constructed places. Morrison engages with a specific slave past; Eliot criticises a more generalised nineteenth-century England.

In light of their problematic pasts, Morrison and Eliot recast places and their relationship to history. Eliot seemingly rejects the past when Silas moves to Raveloe, where he undergoes a 'Lethean influence of exile, in which the past becomes dreamy because its symbols have all vanished, and the present too is dreamy because it is linked with no

memories' (13). 'Lethean' references Lethe, one of five rivers in the Greek underworld whose waters induce forgetfulness (Eliot 186); under a 'Lethean influence' Silas loses his sense of personal history. Eliot reimagines places in *Silas Marner* by rendering them unrecognisably 'dreamy': Lantern Yard's 'symbols have all vanished' and Raveloe is 'linked with no memories', leaving Silas in a liminal place, disconnected from history. However, Eliot is critical of Silas' detachment from his history, for while he 'hated the thought of the past… the future was all dark' (14). Reconnection to rather than rejection of the past is encouraged. In contrast to Eliot's re-imagination of place, which distances Silas from his past, Morrison draws history closer by constructing her narrative like a slave home. She 'wanted the reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment… just as the characters were snatched from one place to another… without preparation or defense' (Morrison xii). There is a meta-structure imposed on the narrative itself, an 'alien environment' created for readers. Both Morrison's readership and Silas lose their bearings in their reconstituted places—the former is left 'without preparation or defense' and the latter inhabits a 'dreamy' world. The two environments are, however, radically different. Eliot's reimagined villages are nebulously distanced from the past, whereas Morrison's structural integration of a hostile place sharpens the experience of history.

Both authors further re-evaluate place and history in the absence of physical structures. Place in *Beloved* symbolises an enduring history: '[i]f a house burns down, it's gone, but the place… stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world' (43). Morrison suggests that 'place' has both individual and shared significance, existing 'in [Morrison's] rememory' and 'out there, in the world'. Morrison's own term, 'rememory', reflects the Freudian notion of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*), which is defined as 'nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression' (Freud 241). 'Rememory',

then, resurfaces a 'familiar' slave history in *Beloved*, which has been repressed. Eliot too echoes the Freudian uncanny when describing Raveloe as 'at once occult and familiar' (13). In contrast to Morrison's cyclical 'rememory', Eliot's Lantern Yard reflects a changing historical reality. Silas finds that 'Lantern Yard's gone. It must ha' been here, because here's the house with the o'erhanging window—I know that—it's just the same; but they've made this new opening; and see that big factory!' (158). Eliot juxtaposes Silas' memory of Lantern Yard with the reality of its industrialisation: he recalls that Lantern Yard 'must ha' been here', yet he sees 'that big factory!', acknowledging a changed reality. George Levine contends that realism is 'responsive to the changing nature of reality' (qtd. in O'Gorman 118); *Silas Marner* reflects this awareness. Fundamentally, the altered physical environments of *Beloved* and *Silas Marner* reflect different histories. Morrison uses her 'rememory' of place to assert the continual trauma of slavery, while Eliot reconstructs Lantern Yard to illustrate historical change.

Not only places, but also characters undergo imaginative reconstructions to connect with history. Silas attempts to break free from his 'Lethean influence of exile' (13) in two different ways—weaving and raising Eppie (Cohen 419). Weaving is traditionally a metaphor for writing, an imaginative process. Notably, 'text' etymologically derives from the Latin *textus*, literally a woven thing (Eliot xxvi). However, Eliot considers weaving to be more restrictive than creative, caricaturing Silas as a 'spinning insect' (14). He more meaningfully engages with the past by caring for Eppie: '[a]s the child's mind was growing into knowledge, his mind was growing into memory… his soul… into full consciousness' (Eliot 114). The use of isocolon entwines the developments of Eppie and Silas; the child 'was growing into knowledge' as Silas 'was growing into memory'. This parallel implies that 'knowledge' and 'memory' are necessary parts of 'full consciousness', elsewhere described as a 'consciousness of unity between [Silas'] past and present' (126). Eliot imaginatively

casts parenthood as a means of recovering one's past. Similarly, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan argues that 'knowledge and memory are necessary for the constitution of personal history' (113) in *Beloved*. Denver constructs a self through the double telling of her birth. The first birth is told by an extradiegetic narrator, focalised through Denver's memories; the second birth is told and focalised by Denver as an intradiegetic narrator (Rimmon-Kenan 111). Denver uses her memory (of listening to stories) and knowledge (while storytelling) as an imaginative lever into selfhood, for 'she alone had the mind for it and the time afterward to shape it' (Morrison 92), refashioning her own past. Where Eppie helps Silas reconstitute his personal history, Denver reclaims a self and a past through layered storytelling. Eliot's construction of history is indirect, Morrison's is direct.

Imaginative reconstructions link characters to collective histories, in addition to personal ones. Eliot weaves Silas into two shared histories through parenting Eppie. Firstly, Silas bonds with his Raveloe community, as 'his history blent in a singular manner with the life of his neighbours' (Eliot 19). Eliot similarly describes Silas' connection to Eppie, proclaiming that 'there was love between him and the child that blent them into one' (118). The repeated verb 'blent' implies that Silas' integration into communal life is encouraged by his initial fusion with Eppie. The significance of Eppie's name has been noted by Susan Cohen, who argues that by '[n]aming Eppie after his dead mother and little sister, [Silas] resituates himself not only in the community but also in his own lost family' (414). Like Eppie, Morrison's imaginatively constructed Beloved offers a twofold integration into family and collective history. Morrison fuses Beloved and Sethe's faces together in a deconstructed post-modernist chapter: 'now I am her face my own face has left me' (252). Both authors creatively forge links to family history—Eppie is not Silas' biological child, nor is Beloved Sethe's daughter. At best, Beloved is a supernatural being, the ghost of Sethe's baby. Connecting Eppie and Beloved to family history therefore requires a leap of imaginative faith

from the reader. Moreover, Morrison's post-modernist narrative incorporates Beloved into slave history, who 'cannot fall because there is no room to… the little hill of dead people' (249). The experiences of the Middle Passage are focalised through Beloved: she 'cannot fall', situating her in the cramped ship's hold, surrounded by a 'little hill' of dead slaves. An imaginatively (de)constructed Beloved is woven into two histories.

Additionally, Morrison generically yokes together imagination and history. Beloved embodies both a Gothic supernatural being, a 'return of the repressed', and a reincarnated slave baby. This dual tension is best expressed in Paul D's observation that Beloved 'reminds me of something. Something, look like, I'm supposed to remember' (276). On the one hand, Beloved is emblematic of a Gothic 'return of the repressed', a familiar figure that he is 'supposed to remember'. On the other hand, as a reincarnated slave baby, she 'reminds' Paul D of his history as a former slave. Eliot navigates a similar tension between imagination and history in *Silas Marner*. In an otherwise historically engaged and realist text, Eppie signifies Eliot's engagement with an imaginative trope of 'fairy tale and romance princesses' (Eliot xv). She describes how 'the child was come instead of the gold—that the gold had turned into the child' (110), echoing such fairy-tale transformations as those found in the Brothers Grimm's 'Rumpelstiltskin', where an imp spins straw into gold in exchange for a child. The chiastic statement structurally encircles and binds the child and the gold, the real and the romantic. Elsewhere described as a 'blond dimpled girl of eighteen' (122), Eppie is the closest Eliot comes to a pastoral romanticisation. And yet, it is the child of imagination which connects Silas to personal and collective histories. Eliot employs the romance trope as a necessary link to historical reality. Both authors construct a double intersection between imagination and history using character. The tension is explored generically, between romance and realism, Gothic and slave narrative, and symbolically, for the imaginative constructions of Eppie and Beloved connect to wider histories.

In conclusion, both Eliot and Morrison use imaginatively (re)constructed places and people to meaningfully engage with history. As projections into problematic pasts, places are constantly reformulated by both authors, though in differing ways. For Eliot, places reflect a wider historical process, offering an insight into the wartime problems of nineteenth-century England and into a changing historical reality. For Morrison, place resurfaces slave history through 'rememory': it is embedded into the narrative as a meta-structure, highlighting the entanglement of the past with the present. Although concerned with different histories, both authors caution against forgetting the past. Morrison and Eliot construct generically and symbolically imaginative characters to reconnect with personal and collective history. In both *Beloved* and *Silas Marner*, imagination is ultimately used as a productive means of engaging with history, enabling wider links between the personal and the collective, the past and the present, and the reader and the text.

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