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The Nature of Fathers, Family and Fetishism in Silas Marner

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'The truth of the fetish resides in its status as a material embodiment' (William Pietz)

In her novel *Silas Marner,* George Eliot explores the nature of fathers, family and fetishism. Eliot employs realism in her novel to intricately depict the life of Silas Marner, a reclusive weaver, and later the relationship that brings him back to society; fatherhood. Through an omnipresent and sympathetic narrator, readers are shown the domestic bliss that Silas resides in with Eppie, his adoptive daughter, in chapter 16. This bliss is disrupted by Eppie's biological father who looks to Eppie to fill the void in his own family, regarding her as a replacement for their childlessness. This essay argues that Eppie's personhood is challenged, and her choice of family reflects this intended lack of identity; she has to decide between Godfrey Cass, her father by nature, and Silas Marner, her father by love.

Eliot employs realism to imbue richness into her depiction of ordinary human feeling, and relationships between working-class characters. One of the strengths of realism was its ability to focus on a wider social range of topics, as it brought attention to previously untold settings and demographics that were not idealised through the portrayal to a broader audience. Eliot is able to 'depict the life of the poor in a strikingly new way' through the novel's form in treating the working class with the same gravity that historically upper classes would have received (Carroll 142). *Silas Marner* depicts the eponymous reclusive weaver of Raveloe, and his gradual return back into society through the help of the little girl that he adopts. Chapter 16 is positioned after a substantial amount of time is advanced, using a temporal technique called 'explicit ellipsis' as a narrative device, and readers are introduced to the relationship between Silas and his daughter Eppie in a wholly new context (Genette 106); 'sixteen years after Silas Marner had found his new treasure on the hearth' (Eliot 137).

Realism is significant in its ability to create 'the possibility of community and the potential to make new worlds' (Morris 162). The narrator's focus on the dramatic representation of the everyday details Silas' various tragedies, but also represents beauty in

the everyday, the bliss that has permeated his life as a result of adopting Eppie. New worlds are made through the expansion of Silas' life in Raveloe as he becomes involved in the local community, and creates new relationships for himself after his previous solitude. Eliot thus shapes the reader's sympathies towards Silas' plight through both her employment of realism and her compassionate narrative voice.

Eppie and Silas' relationship is depicted through a third-person omniscient narrative voice that engages in free indirect discourse, providing an insight into the thoughts of the characters and creating an intimate bond between the character and reader, whilst protecting the versatility of third-person narration. Free indirect discourse implants the thoughts of the characters that are being described within the narration, which does not break the flow of the narrative voice. This can be seen when Eliot writes that Eppie 'surely divines that there is some one behind her who is thinking about her very particularly, [...] else why should she look rather shy, and take care not to turn away her head from her father Silas' (Eliot 138). The sentence is long, and the structure mirrors the stream of consciousness within Eppie's own head, as she navigates through her thoughts and actions while being knowingly perceived by Aaron, a boy her own age and Dolly Winthrop's son. This is also evident in the narrator's use of phrases such as 'She surely' and 'else why should she', taking on a personal and conversational tone which gives the impression of intimacy and inclusion (138). The reader is introduced to Eppie as an adult, and sees how she has learned to employ intentional efforts to capture the attention of Aaron romantically, in a profoundly human way. Through the omnipresent narration, Eppie's humanity and intentions are made clear with the use of free indirect discourse; her deliberate acts of demureness charm Aaron, and the way she murmurs to her father coaxes Aaron to find a possible avenue to enter the conversation. Eppie plays an active role through her dialogue, and her sense of personhood

is established when she subtly expresses her invitation to Aaron. The narrator eloquently chronicles the courtship of Eppie and Aaron through their omniscience, while also adding their own personal style when addressing the reader.

However, a third person omniscient narrator is also capable of foreshadowing events and character intentions to the reader, which other characters are unaware of. Godfrey Cass' investment in the wellbeing of the village weaver and his adopted daughter appears to be out of the good of his heart, but through the narration and parallel narrative structure of the novel, readers are conscious that that is not the case. The dramatic irony of Godfrey's actions at this point of the novel, such as 'the oaken table and three-cornered oaken chair [...] they had come, with the beds and other things' being provided for Silas and Eppie, is evident as these donations are viewed as charity, and not Godfrey's sense of 'a father's duty' (141; 133). Readers are made aware of the presence of Godfrey in the extract, and his subtle mannerisms that hint at his care for Eppie, for example when he and his wife Nancy 'turned round to look for the tall aged man and the plainly dressed woman who are a little behind' (137-8). Eppie's importance to Godfrey is visible in how he seeks her out, and how he has provided for her in the past. However, the gravity of these movements are only made clear through the narration of the novel, where his own story is told in tandem to Silas', of his first marriage that resulted in Eppie, and all of the actions leading up to her adoption. Silas and Godfrey's pathos towards Eppie are detailed through the narrative voice, and this becomes significant further in the novel, when Godfrey comes to claim what he views as rightfully his.

Eliot utilises the concept of fetishism to convey the importance that the hearth that Eppie was found on has to Silas all these years later, however fetishism also applies to Godfrey's relationship with his daughter. Fetishism in this context refers to the imbuement of an inanimate object with a power greater than others, and is explored explicitly in the novel

with regards to Silas' faith. However, Godfrey and Nancy regard Eppie as less of an individual with agency, and more of an idealised solution to their childlessness. In the final line of the extract, 'The gods of the hearth exist for us still; and let all new faith be tolerant of that fetishism, lest it bruise its own roots.', it recalls the first line of the extract, which states that 'Silas Marner had found his new treasure on the hearth' (142; 137). The hearth has a symbolic significance to Silas, as it was where he found his daughter, and this has imbued the location with non-material value. It has historical significance as a symbol of domesticity and family life, tracing roots back to Hestia, the Greek goddess of the family and the home, whose name means 'hearth' (Kajava). Fetishism is a recurring concept in *Silas Marner,* as one of the reasons that Silas left Lantern Yard was to escape the gods that were native to that area and their watchful eye. A power is attributed to the land itself, similarly to the power attributed to the hearth. This mirrors Godfrey, however the fetish in this case is Eppie herself. In Silas' care, Eppie was given the opportunity to be a person, she was raised and her specific characteristics were nurtured by Silas, and she became a treasure. However, to Godfrey, Eppie represents a way to repair the gap in he and Nancy's family, and fix their childlessness, removing her of any independent identity. Godfrey may be her biological father, but he sees her as a way to make up for the fact that he cannot have children, and he comes back to claim her, which is explicitly shown when he says 'I've a natural claim on her that must stand before every other' (169). Eppie existed in Godfrey's field of view, but was never given the chance to be a person, only a rendition of his previous sins, and later a way to fill the 'blank' and 'void' in his life (158-9). She is the material embodiment of the lack in his life, and a last resort for Godfrey and Nancy as they cannot accept their childlessness. This sense of ownership is starkly contrasted with Silas' feelings of love, as Godfrey says 'we should like to have Eppie', whereas Silas replies with 'why didn't you say so sixteen year ago, and claim

her before I'd come to love her' (168-9). The dichotomy between 'have' and 'love' ultimately demonstrates the opposing feelings that both of Eppie's fathers have towards her, and Eppie chooses to remain with Silas who views her as family, rather than Godfrey who views her as a fetish, at the end of the novel.

What does it mean to be a father? Eliot employs realism to carefully explore two very different paternal figures, and their respective relationships with their daughter. The effect of an omnipresent narrative voice is a lack of bias in the telling of the story, and leads to the truth being portrayed: a reflection of the passing sixteen years of familial bliss. Eppie is forced by Godfrey to make a decision about which family to choose, while simultaneously assuming her place within his family. His treatment of Eppie as a commodity to fill the gap in his life, a mere fetish, reduces Eppie's personhood. Silas, on the other hand, actively encourages Eppie's right to decide her future, and views her as his beloved daughter. Godfrey's attempt to lay his claim onto Eppie is ultimately useless, as the question of her parentage is indisputable; Silas is her family, and her father.

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