

A Study on *Silas Marner*; Regaining the Past

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1. Introduction

In *Silas Marner*, both Silas, who is the main character, and his contrast, Godfrey, are trying to erase their past lives. As we know very well, time goes by from the past to the future. So if we had no past, which is the basis of the passage of time, it would mean that there exists no present nor future. However hard we may try to erase our memories of the past, it is impossible for us to jettison them. In fact, Silas's memories come back every time he goes through some significant experience. As for Godfrey, he is always threatened by the possible revelation of his past life. Because he needs to hide the blunder of his past, he ends up having to face it all the time. So he cannot completely neglect it. Here, we are going to find out how both Silas and Godfrey come to reconcile their past lives.

2. Silas's case

Silas is falsely accused of theft by a close friend, who works to ruin him, in Lantern Yard. He leaves there for Raveloe without clearing himself of the doubt. In fact, he flees to Raveloe, where there is no connection to his home, Lantern Yard. Naturally, we can regard Lantern Yard as the place which is connected to his old memories. But he cuts off his past by moving to Raveloe. Nevertheless, it is impossible to live a life without past. Therefore his life in Raveloe is neither a stable nor a spirited one because he is neglecting the past life. As is shown clearly, Silas lives alone without any fellowship with his neighbours and is completely immersed in his work of weaving and in storing away the guineas. His life assumes a sense of monotony and it is far indeed from being a humane life. His life is described in terms of that of an insect or as being like a part of an instrument:

He [Silas] seemed to weave like the spider, from pure impulse, without reflection. (64)¹

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. (69)

In this section, we cannot find any humane nature in Silas but can see that he is a mechanical being and like a machine itself. It is surely difficult here to find any human feelings, warmth of heart, interaction between living human beings and anything about human life.

However, some incidents, which seem to show that his humane nature has not been totally

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lost, happen from time to time. One day he sees a woman suffering from the terrible symptoms of heart-disease and dropsy, and he remembers his mother who had the same symptom as the woman. And then he eases her suffering with a medicinal herb.

He [Silas] had inherited from his mother some acquaintance with medicinal herbs and their preparation—a little store of wisdom which she had imparted to him as a solemn bequest. (57)

Both the incidents which happen to Silas and his reactions to them have the roots in his past life. Besides, it is definitely true that Silas inherits his mother's knowledge. And, in another case, when he accidentally breaks the brown pot, which has been his silent companion for twelve years,

Silas picked up the pieces and carried them home with grief in his heart. The brown pot could never be of use to him any more, but he stuck the bits together and propped the ruin in its old place for a memorial. (69)

Although the broken pot is no longer of use, he keeps it for memory's sake. This fact describes Silas's nature suggesting that he cannot treat his longtime familiar things harshly. In other words, he cannot cut off the love for his long-cherished things regardless of their reasonable usefulness. He ensures the bonds between the old things and himself before he replaces them with new ones. The old things precede the new ones. This fact can be applied to the idea of time; the past precedes the present and the future. So we can consider that Silas, in truth, possesses the attitude that he does not, cannot, ignore the past.

Silas seemingly cuts himself off from his past life through moving from Lantern Yard to Raveloe. However, his memories of the past come back bit by bit in spite of himself. He receives them unconsciously instead of shaking them off. This means that he is piling up the memories of the past one by one. And at the same time, it means that he potentially has the ability of restoring his past before the arrival of Eppie. Although Eppie's arrival is not the only cause of his restoring the past, it reminds him of his sister and leads to a "hurrying influx of memories" (168). And his memories come back to him gradually as it is shown in the followings.

... there was a vision of the old home and the old streets leading to Lantern Yard—and within that vision another, of the thoughts which had been present with him in those far-off scenes... he had a dreamy feeling that this child was somehow a message come to him from that far-off life: it stirred fibres that had never been moved in Raveloe—old impressions of awe at the presentiment of some Power presiding over his life.... (168)

Therefore Silas comes to take the past more concretely.

And it brings with it a fellowship with his neighbours. Because the money and the loom are lifeless things, there is not any interchange between Silas and them. On the other hand, Eppie is always full of spirit, and there are always actions of one side and reactions of the other side between Silas and Eppie. In short, there is interaction between the two. As life with Eppie, who is at the center of it, goes on, Silas enters into the circle of the neighbours. Although it is true that he lives with the memory of his fellows in Lantern Yard, he builds up firm new fellowship in his life in Raveloe. Through the interaction with people around him, Silas regains his humane nature and at last recovers "a consciousness of unity between his past and present".

...as, with reawakening sensibilities, memory also reawakened, he had begun

to ponder over the elements of his old faith, and blend them his new impressions, till he recovered a consciousness of unity between his past and present. (201-02)

Therefore it can be said that Eppie helps Silas restore the past and helps him join the circle of his neighbours.

In addition, it is also possible to consider that Silas helps himself unite the past and the present through giving Eppie the following two things. Firstly, he gives her the name of both his mother and his sister. Both of them bore the same name, Eppie, as the shortened form of Hephzibah. It means that the name has been inherited through three generations. It is interesting enough that Godfrey also calls his daughter Eppie, as we know that this name was given to her by Silas. When Silas finds her for the first time, she is two years old. The fact that “he [Godfrey] had not seen the child for months past”(171) implies that Godfrey does not care for her. There is no way for us to know whether or not she has a name given by her real father. But at least we cannot find any other name for her than Eppie. Secondly, Silas keeps Eppie’s mother’s wedding-ring for her. He preserves it for a long time for her. The mother’s ring goes to her daughter. These facts mentioned above show that Silas unites the old generation and the new generation. It is needless to say that the movement of the two things from the old generation to the new generation can be compared to the passage of time.

Going back to Lantern Yard to prove his innocence makes it clear that Silas has the will to face his past. Going back there means looking back to his past. Although he finds that Lantern Yard does not exist any more, the will and the action to go back there themselves make for the total recovery of his past. It is here that he completes his recovery. Thus he can surely proceed to his future.

The fact that Eppie marries Aaron may bring a great future to Silas. We should pay attention to the point that Aaron also lives with Silas. This means that life from the past goes on. Actually, Silas and Eppie, who are deeply attached to each other, can live on together without being separated. Besides, it can naturally be expected that Eppie and Aaron will have children. This implies that Silas’s family will continue and be prosperous. As it is mentioned that “there is the emblematic aspect of fruit and flowers,”² Aaron’s being a gardener and making gardens also implies the prosperity of Silas’s family. Aaron plants flowers and roots them in Silas’s garden.

3. Godfrey’s case

Silas restores the past by facing it. By contrast with him, Godfrey neglects the past. Now let us look into Godfrey’s case through examining some examples.

His father, Squire Cass, leaves his tenants indulgent until he is short of money. And when he realizes his situation, he takes the hardest measures on them. The following statement describes Godfrey’s nature properly. “He [Godfrey] was not critical on the faulty indulgence which preceded these fits; that seemed to him natural enough” (119). Although Godfrey is annoyed with his father’s sudden fits, he never thinks about his father’s faulty management at all. In other words, he does not care about the process of things. He does not consider why his father gets fierce or how his father should manage his land. Godfrey’s disposition to rely on chance also shows the same matter. That is, he takes no notice of what he faces now or what is its predecessor, and he expects a lot of the future. This disposition causes the problem with his wife, Molly, and his daughter, Eppie.

He desperately hides his bigamy and makes Molly live apart from him. Even though they have a child, it is hard to believe that there is a bond between them. In fact, he regards the marriage as “a blight on his life”(80) and Molly as an “unhappy hated wife” (175). Therefore it is true that there is no loving bond but rather a feeling of hatred between them. He leaves his wife and child alone and does not take care of them. He makes them live apart from him in order not to reveal his folly of the past and does not go to see them. However hard he tries to erase his past by not seeing them, it only means that he buries the past in an egoistic sense. It does not settle anything and is only a makeshift strategy. The more desperately he hides his past, the more he has to be conscious of it. Nothing is changed. Even though he wants to shake off his past, he does not do so. Basically, he makes no difference at all. So the possibility that his secret will come to be public knowledge is always with him. Then he cannot run away from it. The memories of the past never cease.

Molly is vindictively on her way to Red House, Godfrey’s house, when she dies. However, Eppie remains to be the living proof of Godfrey’s folly in the past. Of course, up to a certain point, no one can reveal his past because Molly dies and Eppie is only a baby. But beyond his knowledge, Molly is still alive in the form of the child Eppie. Although Eppie does not remember her mother, she learns that her mother passed away against a furze bush. So Eppie connects the furze with her mother. Since she wants to be closely connected with it, she replants it in Silas’s garden. Aaron’s statement that “they [the furze, snowdrops and crocuses] won’t die out, but’ll always get more and more”(207), and Eppie’s use of this statement for the reason of replanting are symbolic. Instead of the fact that her mother has passed away, the furze, which reminds Eppie of her mother, increases without ceasing. Actually, the furze has been near the Stone-pit since Molly’s death. At the same time, Godfrey’s past continues to be in his future as well.

In the meantime, the couple, Godfrey and Nancy have no children. If nothing is done, Godfrey’s family name will die out with him. Therefore it is seen as necessary for his family to adopt Eppie in order for the family line to endure. He has had some earlier chances to have her. The most remarkable chance is at the party on New Year’s Eve sixteen years previously. When Silas appeared there with the baby, Eppie, in his arms, Godfrey had never confessed that she was his real daughter nor did he accept her. He does not take any measure to do so in the final count. As time goes by, the love between Silas and Eppie grows. It is very reasonable that she should refuse Godfrey’s offer when he suddenly tries to take her back from Silas. Godfrey’s putting off of the earlier chance has made it difficult now to form a bond with her. At the same time, it causes difficulty in building the future of the Cass family. Godfrey’s neglect of the past consequently leads to Eppie’s rejection.

It is natural to give the factor of class as one of the obstacles to Godfrey regaining possession of Eppie. Originally, she had belonged to the upper class because she was his ‘real’ daughter. However, as she lives her life with Silas without knowing of her true birth status, she becomes one with the working class people. And she ends up thinking that to be a lady is ‘unreal’ for her. She lives with labouring people and it means that she is in the same class as them and lives the same kind of life. Therefore it is impossible for her to change into a lady. And she says, “I shouldn’t know what to think on or to wish for with fine things about me, as I haven’t been used to” (234).

Next, let us investigate Nancy’s case. By contrast with Eppie, she has continued to be in the upper class since she was born.

Nancy, used all her life to plenteous circumstances and the privileges of 'respectability,' could not enter into the pleasures which early nurture and habit connect with all the little aims and efforts of the poor who are born poor.... (233)

This shows that she cannot think empathically of the people who belong to a different class from her own.

Through investigating both Eppie's and Nancy's case, we can see that we do not have any class consciousness when we are born, but it grows gradually and becomes rooted firmly in one's mind when growing up. Consequently, it is not easy to abandon the long-fostered class consciousness and to change suddenly into other class and way of life. Because Godfrey puts off his confession that he is the real father, Eppie's love and class consciousness develop unexpectedly in another direction. The following statement by Silas is right to the point.

...repentance doesn't alter what's been going on for sixteen year. Your [Godfrey's] coming now and saying "I'm her [Eppie's] father" doesn't alter the feelings inside us. It's me she's been calling her father ever since she could say the word. (231)

As it is shown above, the love between Silas and Eppie has been through a process of development for sixteen years. But there is no process which joins the past and the present between Godfrey and her.

It is quite interesting that Godfrey's appearance also indicates that he is out of time's progress. Everything changes as time passes by. But he does not change much. Even though the fact that he is forty years old, he "is not much changed in feature from the Godfrey Cass of six-and-twenty (195)" "in spite of the Time, who has laid his hand on them [the upper class people in Raveloe] all (195)."

4. Salvation

Nevertheless, a little salvation is given to Godfrey. In George Eliot's letter to Blackwood, who is her publisher, it is implied; "It [*Silas Marner*] sets in a strong light the remedial influences of pure, natural human relations," and "The Nemesis is a very mild one."³

It is too late for Godfrey to get Eppie back, but he does get Nancy. A bond of affection has united them since their marriage. As it is clearly shown in the following quotation, he loves her even with the problem on his heart.

Since he [Godfrey] had married her [Nancy] with that secret on his heart, he must keep it there to the last. Whatever else he did, he could not make an irreparable breach between himself and this long-loved wife. (219)

Although their own baby passes away, they live together and love each other. Godfrey himself admits this and says, "I got *you*, Nancy, in spite of all" (237) when he loses hope of getting back Eppie. Nancy is his greatest support throughout his life. The reason why he cannot tell her his secret is because he does not want to ruin the relationship with Nancy.

... he [Godfrey] had not moral courage enough to contemplate that active renunciation of Nancy as possible for him: he had only conscience and heart enough to make him for ever uneasy under the weakness that forbade the renunciation. (174)

As is shown above, he has moral weakness in him. Nevertheless, he cannot give her up. He wants to be with her instead of bearing and suffering the big problem in his mind. It is true that his love for Nancy has been consistent from the past. This is obviously different from Eppie's case. He compensates Eppie for the past with nothing, suddenly tells that he is her real father,

and makes a vain attempt to regain her. What he realizes he has gained and can have is Nancy, and we can regard her as the salvation given him.

5. Conclusion

For the reasons stated above, we can declare the two things to be true.

Firstly, we cannot regain what is lost immediately. It takes quite some time to make up for the loss. Silas makes it up well and at last wins not only firm love but also a happy future. He is not alone any more. He is in a lively human circle. On the other hand, Godfrey does not make any proper effort to deal with the problem and ends up not being accepted as a father by his real child. He cannot even attend Eppie's wedding ceremony because he has to go away to another town "for special reasons"(242). This shows clearly that he cannot get into the circle to which Silas and Eppie belong. As we know, a wedding is the ceremony of union.

Secondly, it is necessary to have the receptive attitude when we recover the past. As for Silas, he accepts the return of his memories instead of rejecting them. Besides, he takes in things which are recommended as good by his neighbours. He takes in and affectionately brings up Eppie from the time when she is a baby, and is ultimately accepted as her father. Godfrey, on the contrary, refuses his great chance to get Eppie back, and does not take any proper measures to bring himself to the way he wishes. He has not accepted her in the past and now it is his turn to be refused. However, George Eliot offers some chance of redemption to Godfrey because he is able to accept Nancy. He has built up a strong bond with her for fifteen years.

Works Cited

1. Eliot, George. *Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe*, ed. Q. D. Leavis. 1967. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985. 64. **All further references to this work appear in the text.**
2. Leavis, Q. D. ed. Notes. *Silas Marner*. By George Eliot. 1861. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985. 263.
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