The Theme of Alienation in *Silas Marner*

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*Silas Marner*, though gradually being rehabilitated from its dreadful fate as a required "classic" for adolescents, is nevertheless still to the rear in due appreciation among the novels of George Eliot. *Middlemarch* continues to command the bulk of critical attention, and no doubt rightly. It is an imaginative achievement of a very high order, but this should not prevent wider recognition of the specific contributions toward its creation by its slighter predecessor.

The tendency is to regard *Silas Marner* as something of an exception in George Eliot's fiction. While admiring her customary merits of stylistic control, deft characterization, and sensitive realistic evocation of provincial England, commentators have generally located the distinctive quality of the book in its formal perfection, "fairy tale" simplicity, and overt, almost systematic symbolism—qualities they find less conspicuous in the bigger novels. They have looked upon it, in other words, as a delightful branch or inlet rather than as part of the mainstream of George Eliot's art. Yet the contention here will be that *Silas Marner* does in fact belong to that mainstream, and in particular is important to the development of the author's vision of tragic life, so impressively projected in *Middlemarch*.

Not that *Silas Marner* is a tragedy. Certainly the main contour of the second half and the ending are of an opposite nature; but the portions describing Silas' exile, loneliness, and deprivation are dark-hued indeed. One feels that at least in these pages George Eliot

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was experimenting with a tragic mode. In a letter to John Blackwood she said, “I have felt all through as if the story would have lent itself best to metrical rather than prose fiction, especially in all that relates to the psychology of Silas; except that, under that treatment, there could not be an equal play of humour.” 1 Though in some of her shorter poems George Eliot did essay humor, the implication in this context is that poetry might have heightened the tragic aspect of Silas’ plight. As it is, the first two chapters have a sustained somber tonality oddly different from almost anything in her previous novels.2

Take, for example, The Mill on the Floss, published a year before Silas Marner. It too, if hardly a thorough-going tragedy, has definite tragic colorations. On the whole, however, it conforms to the traditional “comic” or optimistic orientation of the English novel, with the underlying predication of a stable world, wherein the individual is placed in coherent relationship to his society. Whatever the flaws in that society, the fundamental values by which it exists are never seriously questioned. Maggie inhabits a relatively integrated world in which she may be an insurgent but not an alien. At times confused and rebellious in her hazy aspirations for a better life, she is always presented as a member of her society, whether in its favor or disfavor. She acknowledges its authority and does not dispute its right to punish her.3

Nor does one feel, as with Hardy, any deep sense of disharmony between the laws governing society and those governing the universe beyond it. The agnostic, humanistic basis of George Eliot’s outlook encouraged the assumption that obstacles to the ultimate improvement of civilized life must come from no source but man himself. Altogether the novel lacks the element of universal mystery

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2 The language foreshadows the “poetic prose” of Felix Holt. Frederic Harrison remarked about that novel. “Can it be right to put the subtle finish of a poem into the language of a prose narrative? It is not a waste of toil? And yet whilst so many readers must miss all that, most of them even not consciously observing the fact, that they have a really new species of literature before them (a romance constructed in the artistic spirit and aim of a poem) yet it is not all lost. I know whole families where the three volumes have been read chapter by chapter and line by line and reread and recited as are the stanzas of In Memoriam” (GE Letters, IV, 284–285).
3 See, for example, the gipsy episode, where Maggie is disenchanted from her romantic notions about a free nomadic life. The chapter is significantly titled, “Maggie Tries to Run Away from Her Shadow.” Also notice her closeness, even bondage, to her family; her unhappiness whenever separated from them, and her reluctance in disgrace to leave town.
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and ineluctable power so pervasive in classic tragedy. The implacable general laws with which individual wills there fatally collide are not, in *The Mill on the Floss*, given adequate presence or dimension. The embodiment of “law” in the narrow morality of people like the Dodsons, or in the conscience of Maggie, inevitably reduces its tragic potential because these social and ethical forces are too clearly located and defined. Maggie’s struggles with instinctive ideas of rectitude and her heart’s desires, her longing to be loved and at peace with the world, are not related to larger universal, or even social, conditions, until the flood; and that remains an awkward effort to introduce extra-human powers scarcely evident before it strikes. Many sincere, plausible, and ingenious justifications for the flood have been advanced; but despite a symbolic aptness, the impact upon most readers is more of contrivance than of synthesis with Maggie’s history. Robert Speaight well sums up its tragic invalidity: “It is an unhappy accident, but it is not a necessary doom.”

To convey a more genuinely tragic vision of life, George Eliot had to suggest vaster, less easily discernible or accessible sanctions and powers than Maggie’s conscience or the petty tyranny of St. Ogg’s society. She had to find a way of portraying characters ill-attuned to the ruling conditions of the world, a way of putting more inscrutability into the operation of human destinies. This mysteriousness need not be entirely cosmic; it could also suffuse intricate social relationships. It must, however, be handled otherwise than in *The Mill on the Floss.*

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4 As W. J. Harvey says, “The novels lack any supernatural or metaphysical framework; George Eliot is concerned solely with man’s moral struggle in this world. . . . In other words, although we may be *ultimately* governed by a non-human necessity, by the movement of atoms or by genetic patterns, human beings are rarely concerned with such ultimates. There is plenty of room for manoeuvre in the foreground. Much more obviously, we are directed and conditioned by social pressures of various kinds, yet this denies neither us nor George Eliot’s characters the opportunity of making moral choices, of taking decisions. . . . So we are limited by our social canvases, yet within these limits we are free” (*The Art of George Eliot* [London, 1961], pp. 47, 50).

5 *George Eliot*, The English Novelists series (London, [1954]), p. 57. Barbara Hardy puts it differently. “But the theme is the theme of tragic personal division, and the final resolution in the death which brings them together as life could never do, merely emphasizes their relation as brother and sister. It is this relation, rather than the formal opposition of two ways of life, which is prominent throughout the book partly because of a relative absence of structural relations to point the moral in the other characters, partly because it is the most personal of George Eliot’s novels. . . .” (*The Novels of George Eliot* [London, 1959], p. 84).
The opening paragraph of Silas Marner indicates one possible, if severely limited, direction in its neat balance of realism and quasi-supernaturalism:

In the days when the spinning-wheels hummed busily in the farmhouses—and even great ladies, clothed in silk and threadlace, had their toy spinning-wheels of polished oak—there might be seen, in districts far away among the lanes, or deep in the bosom of the hills, certain pallid undersized men, who, by the side of the brawny country-folk, looked like the remnants of a disinherited race. The shepherd’s dog barked fiercely when one of these alien-looking men appeared on the upland, dark against the early winter sunset; for what dog likes a figure bent under a heavy bag?—and these pale men rarely stirred abroad without that mysterious burden. The shepherd himself, though he had good reason to believe that the bag held nothing but flaxen thread, or else the long rolls of strong linen spun from that thread, was not quite sure that this trade of weaving, indispensable though it was, could be carried on entirely without the help of the Evil One.6

George Eliot commences by setting the story in a vaguely distant past, but simultaneously qualifies any aura of strangeness by associating the age with a practical domestic activity. Within this temporal frame, she moves from the sheltered farmhouses and upper-class estates to the exposed outskirts of civilization, where the occasional wanderers of as yet unspecified occupation are seen in sharp contrast to the natives. Their comparison with the “remnants of a disinherited race” bears mysterious allusive connotations, but the structure of the simile suggests that they are really not such Ahasuerian exiles. Moreover, in the context of the sentence, they would seem to have some connection with spinning. Intimations of the occult aroused by the dog’s barking at the silhouette against a wintry sunset are dispelled by the prosaic interpretation. The focus next shifts to the shepherd’s apprehensions about the figure and his mysterious bag, and again the rational explanation is offered, the grounds for any supernatural reality being transferred to rustic superstition.

Such devices are not particularly original and contribute only superficially to the story’s tragic substance. They help generate a preparatory mood, but do not in themselves provide the conditions for a tragic world. The local peasantry may feel awe and mystery, but George Eliot as narrator plainly repudiates any share in their

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6 Quotations are from the Limited Editions Club edition (London, 1953).
crude superstitions. From sentence four to the end of the para-
graph, she delivers a little treatise on vulgar errors that lays the
blame squarely on ignorance and insularity.

In that far-off time superstition clung easily round every person or thing
that was at all unwonted, or even intermittent and occasional merely,
like the visits of the pedlar or the knife-grinder. No one knew where
wandering men had their homes or their origin; and how was a man to
be explained unless you at least knew somebody who knew his father
and mother? To the peasants of old times, the world outside their
own direct experience was a region of vagueness and mystery: to their
untravelled thought a state of wandering was a conception as dim as the
winter life of the swallows that came back with the spring; and even a
settler, if he came from distant parts, hardly ever ceased to be viewed
with a remnant of distrust, which would have prevented any surprise if
a long course of inoffensive conduct on his part had ended in the com-
misson of a crime; especially if he had any reputation for knowledge, or
showed any skill in handicraft. All cleverness, whether in the rapid use
of that difficult instrument the tongue, or in some other art unfamiliar
to villagers, was in itself suspicious: honest folks, born and bred in a
visible manner, were mostly not overwise or clever—at least, not beyond
such a matter as knowing the signs of the weather; and the process by
which rapidity and dexterity of any kind were acquired was so wholly
hidden, that they partook of the nature of conjuring. In this way it came
to pass that those scattered linen-weavers—emigrants from the town
into the country—were to the last regarded as aliens by their rustic
neighbours, and usually contracted the eccentric habits which belong
to a state of loneliness.

But if George Eliot discredits supernatural mystery, she at the
same time recognizes mystery of an intellectually more acceptable
sort. In the sense of discontinuity or of disconnection she perceives
a common experience with tragic possibilities on a level of actual-
ity surpassing the comprehension of the unenlightened country-
folk. If the rustic mind was inclined to detect in discontinuity the
external agency of the Evil One, she sees it rather as an illusion
wrought by the circumstantial limits of knowledge and by the
submerged internal processes of society. Beneath the slightly con-
descending irony of her rationalism in analysing peasant supersti-
tion, she insinuates a further irony, that in truth the world is
mysterious. In more sophisticated societies, the boundaries of
knowledge are extended and may be translated into terms other
than geographical, but there persists the same wonder, so to speak,
about “the winter life of the swallows,” the same helplessness before
the hidden yet humanly determinable origins of things and events. We seldom know enough that could be known at the moment when it would do most good. As George Eliot writes elsewhere, "there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life, from the time when the primeval milkmaid had to wander with the wanderings of her clan because the cow she milked was one of a herd which had made the pastures bare."  

Tragic force in *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* seems to derive from a peculiar combination of spiritual and social alienation and the often obscure social interactions that nourish or intensify it. I have suggested that in *The Mill on the Floss* this combination was lacking. For all the range and depth of social observation, one misses the sense of *process*, the proliferous entanglement of circumstance that with the uncritical passes for Destiny, and that can wear down or destroy the individual who challenges its power. In *Silas Marner*, George Eliot succeeded in selecting and organizing precisely the ingredients required for her special concept of tragedy. Even though she developed her materials inversely toward a happy conclusion for Silas, the weaver is her first full study of alienation, anticipating the subtler, more complex treatments of the theme in such characters as Harold Transome and Dorothea Brooke.

She claimed that the genesis of the book was inspirational: "It came to me first of all, quite suddenly, as a sort of legendary tale, suggested by my recollection of having once, in early childhood seen a linen-weaver with a bag on his back..." (GE *Letters*, III, 382). Not the least important feature of the germinal image is the fact that the solitary figure is a weaver. As such he plies a staple trade, one that the opening sentence stresses is identified with a closely ordered society. But the sentence also juxtaposes to the picture of a busy domestic and communal life a fragmentary glimpse of an unhoused, rootless, stunted, lonely breed of men, who are nevertheless connected with the same occupation as the feminine spinners. Society cannot get along without the weavers, nor could the weavers survive without a society to buy their products. Yet in rural areas the position of these weavers is anomalous. They are both indispensable and distrusted, the very bag containing the stuff for their looms increasing their suspiciousness in local eyes. Business is transacted

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7 *Felix Holt*, chap. iii.
with them almost as if in furtive pact with the Evil One. George Eliot has thus chosen a protagonist whose trade combines the familiar and the strange, whose way of life is both continuous and discontinuous with established society. The whole story is based upon a pattern of these dichotomies.

Silas is equipped with a history of alienation that reaches much further back than his arrival in Raveloe. His whole life has been a series of disconnections. An orphaned impoverished artisan pent in a squalid alley in the heart of a Northern industrial town, his opportunities for social participation have been restricted to a Dissenting sect splintered off by its narrow principles from both the religious Establishment and the surrounding secular world. Even within this tight brotherhood, Silas becomes separated from his fellows by the unaccountable fits, which he refuses to exploit to his advantage. His cramped beliefs, poor education, and ignorance of human nature, together with his natural capacities for affection and faith, conspire to make him preeminently vulnerable to the misfortunes that suddenly befall him. In devastating succession, he is bereft of friendship, fellowship, love, faith in divine justice, home, native town—everything, in fact, that had meaning for him. The disaster is especially radical because his loss is not so much material as spiritual. Silas must learn to live not only in an entirely different region but with an entirely new set of values, or rather with the shards of his old ones.8

In the early ages of the world, we know, it was believed that each territory was inhabited and ruled by its own divinities, so that a man could cross the bordering heights and be out of the reach of his native gods, whose presence was confined to the streams and the groves and the hills among which he had lived from his birth. And poor Silas was vaguely conscious of something not unlike the feeling of primitive men, when they fled thus, in fear or in sullenness, from the face of an unpropitious deity. It seemed to him that the Power in which he had vainly trusted among the streets and in the prayer-meetings, was very far away from this land in which he had taken refuge, where men lived in careless abundance, knowing and needing nothing of that trust, which, for him, had been turned to bitterness. The little light he possessed spread its beams so narrowly, that frustrated belief was a curtain broad enough to create for him the blackness of night (pp. 19–20).

Notice that George Eliot nowhere commits herself to belief in the

8 The incident of the broken pot is symbolic of this.
objective reality of any such superhuman Power (malign, benign, or neutral) as Silas feels has stricken him. The causes of his ruin, she is careful to show, are all naturally explicable, and the source of mystery is his contracted understanding. As Jerome Thale acutely puts it, “What he has lost is not a creed but a sense of the world.”

The contrasts between the religiously and secularly oriented societies of Lantern Yard and Raveloe are explicitly drawn near the start of chapter ii. Lantern Yard, “within sight of the widespread hill-sides,” is an interior, upward-yearning world, physically enclosed by the white walls of the chapel, yet boundless for spiritual aspiration. To Silas the immediate palpable environment matters less than the sounds and rhythms, the hymns and scripture, which by their familiarity have become the surrogates or guarantees of exalted unseen but devoutly trusted realities.

The white-washed walls; the little pews where well-known figures entered with a subdued rustling, and where first one well-known voice and then another, pitched in a peculiar key of petition, uttered phrases at once occult and familiar, like the amulet worn on the heart; the pulpit where the minister delivered unquestioned doctrine, and swayed to and fro, and handled the book in a long accustomed manner; the very pauses between the couplets of the hymn, as it was given out, and the recurrent swell of voices in song: these things had been the channel of divine influences to Marner—they were the fostering home of his religious emotions—they were Christianity and God’s kingdom upon earth (p. 19).

Conversely, in low-lying, wood-screened Raveloe, the church is an exterior to the lounging men, the tempo of life relaxed and meandering, the satisfactions and realities decidedly earthbound.

And what could be more unlike that Lantern Yard world than the world in Raveloe?—orchards looking lazy with neglected plenty; the large church in the wide churchyard, which men gazed at lounging at

The Novels of George Eliot (New York, 1959), p. 61. Thale underscores the relationship of Silas to George Eliot’s later, more sophisticated aliens. “Silas’s route is like that of the Victorian intellectual—from earnest belief through disbelief to a new, often secular, faith. As psychologist and as student of the new theology, George Eliot saw religion as valid subjectively rather than objectively. For her, our creeds, our notions of God, are true not as facts but as symbols, as expressions of states of mind.” Thus, Silas “new religion is really an acceptance of the prevailing local account of the world. It is a symbol of his sense of integration, of his oneness with himself, with nature, and with his fellow men…” (pp. 61-62).
their own doors in service-time; the purple-faced farmers jogging along
the lanes or turning in at the Rainbow; homesteads, where men supped
heavily and slept in the light of the evening hearth, and where women
seemed to be laying up a stock of linen for the life to come (p. 19).

These details are shrewdly calculated to penetrate the merely visual
differentia of the two places and to reveal their intrinsic spiritual
opposition.

With the advent of Silas in Raveloe, George Eliot has a thematic
precursor of a central situation in Middlemarch—a person living
with the wreckage or confusion of ardent spiritual ideals in a me-
diocre, spiritually atrophied society. The differences are, of course,
many. Dorothea and Lydgate are in a manner trapped by their so-
ciety, whereas Silas is virtually independent of Raveloe, living on
its fringes and for years hardly affecting its consciousness. When
he is finally reached by the community, it acts wholesomely upon
him instead of oppressively. But these and other distinctions aside,
the important thing is that George Eliot was here studying in
simplified and diagrammatic form the mutual relationship of an
indigenous society and an outsider. Middlemarch is a massive,
highly complex variation on the theme of its pilot model. Of con-
siderable interest, therefore, are the methods by which a sense of
disjunction is communicated in Silas Marner.

The village itself is appropriately situated for its function. Nes-
tled in the fertile Midlands and comfortably prosperous, it is still
out of touch with the broader life of England and has long been
sinking into torpid obsolescence. The simple, self-contained struc-
ture of this tiny society enables George Eliot to sketch its principal
stratifications and interrelationships with spare economy and to
polarize two units of roughly comparable narrative weight—a comp-
act social organization and an alienated individual. At the outset,
as I have indicated, George Eliot superimposes upon a background
of ancient inert social stability an antithetical motif of transient
deracination. She then descends from generalities to particulars,
describing the superstitious speculations in Raveloe about the
strange appearance and habits of Silas.

Noteworthy is the absence of the dialogue that fills the Cass
episodes and the period of Silas’ reclamation. During the first fif-
teen years of his stay in Raveloe, he is talked about rather than to;
and the narrator effectively preserves this breach of communication
by never letting the minds of Silas and the villagers join. To the latter, he remains a vaguely sinister enigma whose presence is taken for granted but whose inner character is opaque. For instance, the curing of Sally Oates is first alluded to as a matter for dark conjecture. Later we get Silas’ point of view and learn that his powers and motives have been sadly misconstrued. The abortive result of his benevolent impulse is to deepen the isolation from which he could then have been rescued. Likewise, his history might have brought him sympathy if told to a villager; but it is interpolated for the information of the reader, and sealed off from the knowledge of the community. Silas’ eventual recital of it to Dolly Winthrop is an important milestone in his restoration to a unified existence.

The disconnection of Silas from society is systematically expressed by contrasting groups of image and metaphor. Despite the bad farming, intellectual somnolence, coarse hedonism, and tacky gentry of Raveloe, the place does have a kind of weedy or overripe vitality, observable in the drowsy impressions of laden orchards, nutty hedgerows, and thick woods. There is a human parallel in the clustered homesteads, cosy domesticity, heavy conviviality, and indolent pace of the natives. Silas, on the other hand, after the austere yet warm communal life in Lantern Yard, where the brethren enjoyed an emotional solidarity through song, worship, and doctrine, is associated with images of death and inorganic nature—withering vegetation, drying sap, the shrunken rivulet in barren sand, stone, iron, and of course the gold. His very appearance mirrors his abstraction from ordinary life: “Strangely 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” (p. 25). Even the sound of his loom, “so unlike the natural cheerful trotting of the winnowing machine, or the simple rhythm of the flail,” is a jarring

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10 Cf. the vital tableau in chapter xvi. “Eppie, with the rippling radiance of her hair and the whiteness of her rounded chin and throat set off by the dark-blue cotton gown, laughing merrily as the kitten held on with her four claws to one shoulder, like a design for a jug-handle, while Snap on the right hand and puss on the other put up their paws towards a morsel which she held out of the reach of both...” (p. 190). Silas’ fits are obviously emblematic of death in life, which is the effect of his abstraction. Even when fully conscious, he resembles “a dead man come to life again” (p. 7).
note in the Raveloe world. After the fiasco with Sally Oates, he renounces his once-beloved excursions for herbs and diminishes to subhuman existence.

Then there were the calls of hunger; and Silas, in his solitude, had to provide his own breakfast, dinner and supper, to fetch his own water from the well, and put his own kettle on the fire; and all these immediate promptings helped, along with the weaving, to reduce his life to the unquestioning activity of a spinning insect (p. 20).

Besides indicating the insect level to which Silas has declined, the simile of the spider has a further significance related to the theme of social discontinuity. Reva Stump has argued that the pervasive web imagery in Middlemarch, when related to the characters of Lydgate, Rosamond, Casaubon, and Bulstrode, is "connected with illusion and egoism rather than with reality and fellow-feeling." In a footnote, she adds that in Silas Marner this imagery "is used to point up the deficiency in Silas' vision. The insular world he creates can be entered only by the child, and she alone can lead him out of it." This interpretation can perhaps be a little amplified, for the web image in Silas Marner happens to be both metaphorical and objective. Silas is an actual professional weaver, but since his disaster his work at the loom has become for him a sterile abstraction instead of a useful social function. For him it serves no purpose except to feed his own unhealthy obsessions. In this respect, he recalls Swift's spider in the Apologue, who, alone in his fortress, spun out of excrement and venom in poisonous "self-sufficiency." Preoccupation with the abstract geometry of the woven cloth leads to the absurd fascination with the geometry of the multiplying piles of gold. Silas is not even linked economically to Raveloe by the money it pays him, because the value of the coins for him does not lie in their negotiability. They are taken out of circulation, and thus with each gold piece the weaver recedes further from contact with human society and meaningful reality. This perversion of values is suggested by an ironic metaphor of organic growth:

But now, when all purpose was gone, that habit of looking towards the money and grasping it with a sense of fulfilled effort made a loam

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that was deep enough for the seeds of desire; and as Silas walked homeward across the fields in the twilight, he drew out the money, and thought it was brighter in the gathering gloom (p. 21).

The second half of the book deals with Silas’ regeneration, showing how his life is rewoven with society and how his work once again acquires a purpose other than as a deadening refuge from despair; and as this occurs, the imagery of sunlight and gardens irradiates and vitalizes the scenes. The elaborate metaphorical substructures of the later novels, which so enrich their tragic dimensions, surely owe something to the experimentation with similar but more exposed techniques in Silas Marner.

The recurrent fits, in addition to making Silas an object of suspicion and aversion, represent chasms of consciousness which permit the seemingly gratuitous intrusion of evil or good. On two widely separated occasions, they mark an apparent disconnection from the past and a resumed continuity, respectively. Silas feels in these involuntary suspensions the manifestations of some controlling Power. Though aware that William Dare has wrongly and maliciously accused him of theft, he regards himself the victim of divine as well as human betrayal. That brief lapse of consciousness breaks for him absolutely the continuity of past and present, and the shock is worsened by his essentially emotional reaction.

To people accustomed to reason about the forms in which their religious feeling has incorporated itself, it is difficult to enter into that simple, untaught state of mind in which the form and the feeling have never been severed by an act of reflection. We are apt to think it inevitable that a man in Marner’s position should have begun to question the validity of an appeal to the divine judgment by drawing lots; but to him this would have been an effort of independent thought such as he had never known; and he must have made the effort at a moment when all his energies were turned into the anguish of disappointed faith (p. 17).

He is unable to make a rational response to the experience and to seek out a new basis for coherence in his shattered beliefs. Flight to Raveloe completes this vacuum of existence. “Minds that have been unhinged from their old faith and love, have perhaps sought this 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” (p. 18).
The effect on Silas of his second crucial seizure, during which Eppie crawls into the cottage, is different but also dependent upon an emotional response. The sight of the child curiously revives old memories of a happier time, casting a frail lifeline of hope back to the past. From then on, the texture of his life is rewoven, and he comes to recognize that the great rift between past and present had existed more in his embittered imagination than in reality. There is much that he still cannot understand, but he can again have trust in a benevolent unity to the world. After Dolly Winthrop’s eloquently inarticulate musings on Providential design, he replies,

Nay, nay, . . . you’re i’ the right, Mrs Winthrop—you’re i’ the right. There’s good i’ this world—I’ve a feeling o’ that now; and it makes a man feel as there’s a good more no he can see, i’ spite o’ the trouble and the wickedness. That drawing o’ the lots is dark; but the child was sent to me: there’s dealings with us—there’s dealings (p. 196).

So the two fits at the beginning and end of Silas’ desperate years signify a superficial discontinuity of experience that masks a deeper actual continuity, individual and collective.

Interestingly, Dunstan Cass does not steal the gold while Silas is in a trance, as might easily have been arranged. Instead, George Eliot devises a painstaking account of why Silas was absent from home and the door unlocked. It is arguable that she was relieving the excess of coincidence a little, but in a semi-legendary tale of this sort, coincidence is not very bothersome. A better explanation, I think, is that at this moment Silas and the society of Raveloe begin at last to converge. More specifically, the destinies of Silas and the Cass family intermesh and subsequently operate upon one another in remarkable ways. During the crucial fits, Silas is the passive recipient of bad fortune and good, whereas in this intermediate crisis he is conscious and active. The episode illustrates the far-reaching web of social interaction that often produces baf-

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12 "The thoughts were strange to him now, like old friendships impossible to revive; and yet 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 quiverings of tenderness—old impressions of awe at the presentiment of some Power presiding over his life; for his imagination had not yet extricated itself from the sense of mystery in the child’s sudden presence, and had formed no conjectures of ordinary natural means by which the event could have been brought about” (p. 149).
fling consequences—“that mutual influence of dissimilar desti-
nies,” as George Eliot once phrased it.\(^3\) While Silas has been in
the village at an unwonted hour, Dunstan has been in the cottage
for the only time in his life and without any prior acquaintance
with the weaver. The result is a mystery with incalculable repercus-
sions. For Silas, the discovery of his loss brings greater desola-
tion and discontinuity than ever. He does not realize that the
catastrophe is really salvation. Injury to him by a Cass is soon fol-
lowed by a compensatory “gift” from a Cass. George Eliot em-
phasizes that because of Silas’ altered habits since the robbery
Eppie gets into the cottage instead of freezing to death outside.
The deadly gold is replaced by the living child, the sight of whom
reunites Silas with the past. The how and why of all this, so mys-
terious to the weaver, has its rationale in the affairs of certain
people hitherto total strangers to him.

It is a commonplace that the double plot in *Silas Marner* was
something of an innovation for George Eliot, but it has not been
sufficiently noted that this feature plus the alienated character
comprise the basic tragic ingredients of her later novels. In *Felix
Holt* and *Middlemarch*, she was profoundly concerned with trac-
ing the hidden ligatures and labyrinthine processes of human so-
ciety, and with the tragedy that often ensues from the “mutual in-
fluence of dissimilar destinies.”\(^4\) If the outcome for Silas is serene,
under other circumstances it could well have been wretched. The
point is that the double plot is used less for the sake of variety,
parallelism, or contrast than to explore the actual workings of
society, especially the minute reticulation of influences.

At the time of the theft, the quality and values of Raveloe are
represented by the Casses. The Squire is the “greatest man” around
and sets the standard for the good life with his abundant feasts.
But in his pursuit of pleasure he neglects husbandry and the farm
is slipping toward ruin, temporarily averted by the precarious
bounty of wartime prices. Furthermore, since the death of his wife

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\(^3\) *Felix Holt*, chap. iii.

\(^4\) “The double plot of *Felix Holt* emphasizes the variability of human growth,
and regeneration and failure are put together to make a story with two endings.
In *Middlemarch* there is again the multiplication of successes and failures, and the
result is a novel with an extraordinary sense of expanding life. The double plots
of *Felix Holt* or *Wuthering Heights* or *Anna Karenina* are highly rigid pieces of
parallelism compared with *Middlemarch*, where the structure has its effect of human
generalization and differentiation, but avoids the stiffness of symmetry” (Barbara
the house has become rundown and gloomy; his sons are quarrelling amongst themselves and going to the bad. The real social center of Raveloe is thus not Red House but the Rainbow, a status confirmed by the frequent patronage of the Squire himself. And it is to the Rainbow that Silas runs for help after the theft. The effect of that visit is to enlist the sympathy of the villagers, "beery or bungling" as their demonstrations of it may be. At any rate, not only does Silas begin to be drawn into the community but his troubles, like those of Wordsworth's Cumberland Beggar, kindle some feeble glow in the mouldering better natures of the rustics. However, the influence of Silas upon any general elevation of the quality of Raveloe life should not be exaggerated. The major reciprocal influences are between Silas and Godfrey Cass.

Silas' second errand for aid is on behalf of another person, and he goes to the domestic center of Raveloe, Red House (itself a kind of "rainbow" with its Blue Room and White Parlour). He there touches momentarily the world of Godfrey Cass, whose daughter becomes his savior. Godfrey in deciding not to acknowledge the child and to leave her in the keeping of Silas helps the weaver to renewed life; but he also changes the course of his own life. He reforms, marries the efficient Nancy Lammeter, and restores the farm to stable prosperity. Red House, and in fact the whole village, seem to recover a bloom that had turned sere in the early chapters. Offsetting these benefits, Godfrey remains childless, unable to transmit his new affluence through a direct heir. And as a consequence of his expanding economy, the pit is drained, disclosing Dunstan's skeleton and the gold. The family has long been bound to Silas by a secret debt—a debt which Godfrey now finds must be repaid not merely with the gold but with the loss of his child and the probable extinction of his line. Silas has been to him both a benefactor and an unwitting Nemesis.

Thus by combining the theme of social and spiritual discontinuity with the double plot, George Eliot approached a means of expressing her concept of tragic life. Instead of referring to some cosmic or metaphysical source for the sense of mysterious power, she implanted it in the organism of society itself. Tragedy occurs when the well-intentioned individual acts in ignorance or defiance of the intricate web that binds his moral behavior to that of the collective society; and the resultant tragic experience consists in the feeling of disconnection from the roots of one's beliefs and as-
sumptions about what the world is like. Silas is therefore a tragic figure insofar as his narrow piety prevents an adequate response to the patent injustice done him, and insofar as his response is a feeling of utter alienation. In *Silas Marner*, the relationship of individual discontinuity and social continuity is examined in rather too schematic or didactic fashion. It all works a little too slickly to pass for objective reality. But in *Felix Holt*, still experimentally and with uneven success, and in *Middlemarch*, triumphantly, George Eliot mastered the techniques and language introduced in her “legendary tale.”