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George Eliot and the Notion of Sympathy in *Silas Marner* and *Middlemarch*

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Introduction

> No more interesting subject could present itself than that of a young woman from the provinces, living in the Victorian times, who broke with convention in more ways than one. […] With her formidable intellect, her wide-raging knowledge of languages, literatures, philosophy, and science, she was the greatest woman of the century.[1]

As Rosemary Ashton notices in her critical biography of George Eliot, the life and career of this Victorian novelist are among the most unconventional and admirable ones in the social context of the 19th century novel. Needless to say, the first time I heard about George Eliot I was soon fascinated and intrigued by the story of this author that chose a male pseudonym to publish her novels and that remained faithful to her intellectual beliefs, even when that caused the disapproval of her family.

Born in 1819, Mary Ann Evans was able to become George Eliot thanks to her unconventional intellect and thanks to the people who recognised her genius. In the Victorian society women were believed to be subaltern to men and did not have many privileges: hence, the division of domestic responsibilities would confine women to the house and leave them financially dependent on men.[2] Having received a formal education and having the opportunity to access the intellectual circles of Coventry, Mary Ann could escape the conventionally imposed life of the obedient housewife and was able to find independence through her writing activity, eventually becoming George Eliot.

Reading Eliot's novels and proceeding in their critical study, I found her notion of sympathy and the critical discussion about it to be intellectually and morally engaging. Indeed, if her notion of sympathy is almost universally acknowledged to be the major force behind her novels, the debate about what Eliot really meant for "sympathy" is still open today.[3] This may be due to the fact that more modern terms such as "empathy" have entered the English language after Eliot's time and have been considered to be suitable enough to represent Eliot's notion of sympathy.

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[1] R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, London: Faber and Faber Ldt, (1996), 2013, p. XII.

[2] S. Vaid, "Ideologies on Women in Nineteenth Century Britain, 1850s-70s.", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 20, no. 43, 1985, pp. WS63-WS67, pp. WS64-WS65.

[3] C. Jones, *George Eliot's Sympathy and Duty: The Nature and Function of Sympathy and Duty in George Eliot's Fiction in relation to Nineteenth-Century Theories of Egotism, Altruism and Gender and Twentieth-Century Feminist Object-Relations Theory*, Hull: University of Hull, 2001, pp. 1-324, p. 1.

However, this simplistic identification of Eliot's "sympathy" with the modern term "empathy" does not take into consideration all the philosophical reflections and the aesthetic, moral purposes that instead the concept of sympathy appears to convey in Eliot's novels. In fact, as Greiner explains, the modern term "empathy" appeared for the first time in 1909 in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* and, translating the German concept of *Einfühlung,* described as "a way for the ego to gaze upon itself and transport itself into the minds and bodies of others".[4] According to this definition, in an empathic experience with the other the individual enters and shares the other person's feeling completely. However, according to Keen, this emotional fusion is entirely omitting the degree of detachment between the individual and the other that the contemporary accepted meaning for "sympathy" involves.[5] Therefore, maintaining Eliot's original use of the term "sympathy" throughout the whole research, this dissertation will analyse the philosophical origins of Eliot's sympathy and will aim to detect its peculiar shades of meaning, bearing in mind that it might cover aspects of both the contemporary terms for emotional sharing, namely, "sympathy" and "empathy".

Given that the personal life of this unconventional Victorian woman is essential for regarding George Eliot as one of the greatest Victorian novelists and also for comprehending the origin of her "doctrine of sympathy", the first chapter of this dissertation presents a detailed account of Eliot's personal life. Going through the major events and steps that lead Mary Ann Evans to become George Eliot the writer, I will take into consideration the most influent people in her life and clarify how their presence influenced her artistic choices and way of thinking. For documenting this research and for accurately reconstructing the author's intellectual and personal growth, Rosemary Ashton's critical biography *George Eliot: A Life* has been consulted together with Eliot's letters which can be found in John W.H. Cross's and in Gordon Haight's collections.

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[4] D. R. Greiner, "Thinking of Me Thinking of You: Sympathy versus Empathy in the Realist Novel", *Victorian Studies*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2011, pp. 417–26, p. 418.

[5] S. Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 4.

As it appears through the reading of her letters, it was thanks to the meeting with her lovers and friends that Mary Ann Evans could grow as a woman and advance in her personal studies. Indeed, thanks to George Henry Lewis and other intellectual acquaintances that suggested her the reading of Strauss, Feuerbach and Spinoza, Mary Ann could combine her passion for languages and translation with her intellectual and philosophical interests. In the second chapter of this dissertation her translations of Strauss's *The Life of Jesus,* Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* and Spinoza's *Ethics* will be analysed and compared to Eliot's own ideas to better understand how these works were interpreted by Eliot and how they contributed to her notion of sympathy. Through *The Life of Jesus*, Eliot's ardent interest and deep understanding of religious matters will be seen in the process of critically questioning Strauss's method as well as reconsidering her own dogmatic faith. Then, Eliot's approach and deep commitment in translating *The Essence of Christianity* and the *Ethics* will be considered as a way to discover a new religion and a more tolerant morality that prioritise the good of whole human community and that evaluate the relationship with the others.

Finally, the role of sympathy will be analysed in the third chapter of this dissertation to understand how sympathy acts in Eliot's novels and whether it is possible to describe it as a transformative energy. In order to do so, I examine the characters of Silas Marner, the protagonist of the homonymous novel, and of Dorothea Brooke, one of the main characters in *Middlemarch*. Beside the emotional impact of their stories, Silas and Dorothea have been selected because, despite the differences in the structure, the plot of their stories, and in their characterisation, they are both observed in their sympathetic and emotional learning processes. If it is possible to find any similarities between the sympathetic experience of the old weaver and that of the young, middleclass lady, these common elements may be used to identify some typical features of Eliot's notion of sympathy and, therefore, have a more accurate understanding of it.

Chapter 1: George Eliot the woman

To better understand the unconventionality and originality of George Eliot the writer it is essential to consider George Eliot the woman. Even though George Eliot herself chose her *nom de plum* to avoid her reputation to be associated with her fiction, it is undeniable that her personal experience influenced her writing and the creation of her characters. Some critics would tend to see, for example, her father's attitude clearly portrayed in the character of Adam Bede[6] for his stubbornness and plain, straightforward speaking. Similarly, the religious dissent which Eliot witnessed in the Midlands during her childhood and her scepticism about religious creed are mirrored in characters who do not have a conventional relation with religion, such as Dorothea in *Middlemarch* and Silas Marner in the homonymous novel. For these reasons, in this first chapter of my dissertation I will analyse the most significant encounters and life experiences which most influenced and helped George Eliot the woman becoming George Eliot the writer.

1.1. Childhood in Warwickshire: Mary Anne

Mary Anne Evans – the real name of George Eliot – was born on 22 November 1819 at Arbury Farm in Warwickshire. Coming after her older siblings Christina and Isaac, she was the third child of Robert Evans and his second wife Christiana Pearson. Robert Evans was the manager of the large estate belonging to the Newdigate family and for this reason Mary Anne spent her childhood in the countryside which she would nostalgically and affectionately describe later in her novels. Soon after Mary Anne was born, the whole family moved from South Farm to a large brick house, known as the Griff, in a neighbouring area of the estate. This would be Mary Anne's home until her father's death.[7] Thank to her father's position, Mary Anne had the chance to access the library estate and showed her passion for reading fairly soon, especially appreciating the heroic novels by Water Scott and, when she did not spend time with her playmate Isaac, she indulged in her fantasies and demonstrated a vivid imagination.

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[6] Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

[7] Ibid., pp. 10-12.

> When I was quite a little child, I could not be satisfied with the things around me; I was constantly living in a world of my own creation, and was quite contented to have no companions that I might be left to my own musings and imagine scenes in which I was chief actress. Conceive what a character novels would give to these Utopias. I was early supplied with them by those who kindly sought to gratify my appetite for reading and of course I made use of the materials they supplied for building my castle in the air.[8]

1.1.1. Education and religion

Mary Anne was lucky enough to receive a formal education: she first went with her brother Isaac to the school run by Mrs Moore, just off the road where they lived, and then with her sister Christiana, attended a boarding school in Attenborough.[9] Even though it is not clear why her parents chose to send their children to a boarding school, it might be recognised that since state education was not regular this was a way for middle-class parents to ensure children would receive the best education possible. In 1828, Mary Anne and her sister changed school again and were sent to Miss Lewis's school in Nuneaton.[10]

Throughout these years of education, Mary Anne not only showed her ardent wit and intellectual acumen but also displayed a characteristic trait of her personality that would make her become a great woman and novelist. Once Mary Anne became emotionally attached to her new teacher, Miss Lewis, she dedicated all her intellectual energy to the religious creed of this beloved figure.[11] She already displayed "the artist's and the woman's impulse to identify herself with the object of her sympathies".[12] Indeed, living among the evangelicals with a strong Puritan tendency and guided by Miss Lewis, Mary Anne became familiar with enthusiastic, religious, and ascetic ideas that would commit her to believe in predestination and in the aberration of useless leisure. Therefore, she devoted her time to appropriate readings, which would not encourage her fantasies but enhance her sense of self-sacrifice and devotion.[13]

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[8] George Eliot to Maria Lewis, 16.03.1839 in J. W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life: As Related in Her Letters and Journals*, Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1885, pp. 40-43.

[9] R. Ashton and K. Thomas, *George Eliot*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 2.

[10] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life,* cit., pp. 1-22.

[11] J. Bennett, *George Eliot, Her Mind and Her Art,* London: Cambridge University Press, (1948), 1966, p. 8.

[12] Ibid., p. 9.

In 1832 Mary Anne attended Mrs Franklin's school and the life among the Baptists strengthened her self-denying sense. However, in 1835 Mary Anne had to leave the school and go back home as her mother was severely ill. The closeness with her brother Isaac did not make her forgot the evangelical lessons of her teachers and, even though she never officially converted, Mary Anne was so convinced of her faith that disapproved of the practice and the creed of her Methodist aunt, who would preach among the Arminians.[14] The religious discussions and the stories that her aunt Sam told her would later surface through her novels, as the story about a girl who committed an infanticide giving the inspiration to George Eliot's first very successful novel, *Adam Bede*.

1.1.2. Mary Ann at the Griff

Mary Anne's mother died in 1836 and caused much pain to all the family. Even though Mary Anne could recollect but little of the relationship with her, the most notable mother figures in her novels appear to be caring and thoughtful towards others. Once she left school in December 1835, Mary Anne was again at home with her brother and sister. Soon after Christina married, Mary Anne became the mistress of the house and changed the spelling of her name into Mary Ann,[15] as to demonstrate her change of responsibility in the house at Griff.

During these years, Mary Ann was still strongly religious, and she started reading work of intellectuals who discussed the religious controversy about the church's authority. Even though her moral severity should have stopped her from reading heroic and fantastic novels, she could not help but preferring, for example, Scott, Byron and Shakespeare's work to religious fiction.[16] She slowly started realising that self-repression was not the right way to become virtuous and gradually appreciated again the modern culture, finally reading English secular literature and also European works by German intellectuals such as Goethe and Schiller.[17] She also started learning Italian and German taking private lessons at home with her language teacher Joseph Brezzi and, after a few months, she was able to translate poems in both languages.[18]

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[13] Ibid., p. 6.

[14] Ibid., p. 11.

[15] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life,* cit., p. 24.

[16] Ibid., p. 36.

Despite the serenity found in her studying, Mary Ann had to look for a new house for herself and her father when her brother got married and went to live at the Griff. She and Mr Evans moved to Foleshill, near Coventry, in 1841.

1.2. Mary Ann in Coventry

1.2.1. Mr Evans

To George Eliot the woman, Mr Evans was one of the most influential figures as an ethical model. Mary Ann had observed his management of the estate and described her father as a very pragmatical man. Even though he was cautious in favouring the social reforms that were proposed at that time, Robert Evans was never obsequiously submitted to the Newdigate family but showed a strong sense of social justice and fair play. For example, he asked the rich family to return the percentage of the rent to his tenants for the poor wheat crop of 1834.[19] He was not deeply religious but, being fond of traditions, would regularly go to church and respected the practices of the Anglican church.[20]. With him, Mary Ann had an affectionate but not always easy relationship. Once they moved to Foleshill, Mary Ann took care of him while they were living together but at the same time could not feel free to express her ideas, especially regarding religious matters.[21]

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[17] Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

[18] Ashton and Thomas, *George Eliot,* cit., p. 2.

[19] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, cit., p. 15.

[20] Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

[21] N. Henry and G. Levine, *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 25-26.

1.2.2. The Brays and the intellectual circles

When they moved to Foleshill, Mary Ann got acquainted with the Brays, a wealthy middle-class family who was involved in the ribbon manufacturing industry and lived near the Evans. She regularly visited them at Rosehill and soon did she become a very close friend of Charles Bray. His wife Cara and his sister Sara also became her closest female friends, and invited the young Mary Ann to join their intellectual group.[22]

The author of the *Philosophy of Necessity* (1841) and an admirer of the pseudo-science of phrenology, Charles grew up as a Methodist but abandoned his faith for embracing the determinist philosophy and the world of science. According to the account of Charles Bray on George Eliot, besides the description of her unconventionality, he remarked her interest in Hennell's *Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity*. In this book, published in 1838, Hennell examined the life of Jesus Christ and aimed to question the reliability of the foundations of Christianity. Mary Ann's ardent interest in this book suggests a different attitude toward her grounds of belief, showing also that a certain degree of scepticism was growing within her and that soon led her to consider herself as an agnostic. Her meeting with the Bray family and their intellectual circle, therefore, coincided with an inner questioning of her religious faith that had already started in Mary Ann's mind. And, as it was already displayed during her childhood, even in this situation her natural tendency was not that of displaying an arrogant snobbishness in judging the others' opinion, but actually she would embrace emotionally and logically understand the ideas of those she estimated and trusted the most.[23]

The fervent intellectual environment of Coventry and her friendship with Charles, Cara and Sara Bray helped Mary Ann to leave her limited sphere of action and enlarged her critical thinking. In their Rosehill house, the Brays[24] invited many eminent men who would exchange ideas and speak their mind freely. In this way, Mary Ann could compare her own thoughts with the ones of intellectuals of that time and grew confident about her new vision on religious matters. Among these philosophers, politicians, philanthropists and journalists, John Chapman and Herbert Spencer are worth to be mentioned as they would become very influential for Mary Ann at a later stage of her life.

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[22] Ashton and Thomas, *George Eliot*, cit., p. 2.

[23] Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

[24] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, cit., p. 53.

1.2.3. The Holy War

In January 1842, Mary Ann refused to go to church for the very first time.[25] Her father's reaction to her rebellion was cold and distant, and hoped her brother Isaac could induce her to change her mind. Mary Ann's position was firm as she clearly wrote in one of the letters addressed to her farther:

> I regard these writings as histories consisting of mingled truth and fiction, and while I admire and cherish much of what I believe to have been the moral teaching of Jesus himself, I consider the system of doctrines built upon the facts of his life and drawn as to its materials from Jewish notions to be most dishonourable to God and most pernicious in its influence on individual and social happiness.[26]

Although Mary Ann expressed her own ideas while maintaining a very affectionate tone towards her father, Mr Evans put to lease their house in Foleshill as he did not want to live with Mary Ann anymore. Mary Ann was deeply divided and sincerely tormented by the idea of choosing between her intellectual honesty and the love for her family. As she explained to her friend Sara, even if she could have started a new life and found a new employment in Leamington, there was "but one woe, the one of leaving her father".[27]

Luckily, after she spent some time at the Griff with Isaac and thanks to the mediation of her brother, Mary Ann eventually reconciled with her father who gave up the idea of letting of their house. Realising the importance of social conformities for Mr Evans, Mary Ann attended the mass again but she did not betray her intellectual honesty and agreed with her father that she would preserve her freedom of thought.[28]

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[25] Ashton and Thomas, *George Eliot,* cit., p. 3.

[26] GE to Robert Evans, Foleshill, 28 February 1842, in G. S. Haight, *The George Eliot Letters*, London: Yale University Press, 1954, vol. I (1836-1851), p. 128.

[27] George Eliot to Cara Hennell Bray, ND.01.1842 in Cross, *op. cit*., pp.84-85.

Overcoming this tension with her father, which Eliot herself would later define as "the Holy War",[29] she was to be the mistress of Foleshill and regularly attend the intellectual meetings with the Brays. It was during one of these meetings that Mary Ann met the daughter of Dr Brabant, Rufa Brabant. Secretly engaged to Charles Hennell, at that time Rufa was translating Strauss's *Life of Jesus* and, despite having met Strauss himself and being familiar with Hennell's work, she gave up the task and passed it on to Mary Ann.

In his *Life of Jesus* (1835), Strauss investigated all the Gospels' accounts and thoroughly explored all the critical interpretations and historical explanations to eventually conclude that all the biblical stories belonged to a mythical tradition which then was theologised.[30] This book, which will be examined in detail in the next chapter, was not easy at all for Mary Ann to translate. It did not only present challenges from a linguistic point of view, but it also was ideologically demanding since the method of the philosopher would always consider any aspect under a "mythical approach", which to Mary Ann was not infallible.[31] It took over two years for her to translate Strauss's work and, just before the translation was finished, Mary Ann's father became ill. She told the Brays she was "Strauss-sick – it made [her] ill dissecting the beautiful story of the crucifixion, and only the sight of [her] Christ image and picture made [her] endure it".[32] In 1846, the translation was eventually published anonymously in three volumes by John Chapman and Mary Ann received 20 pounds for the work.[33]

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[28] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life,* cit., p. 56.

[29] George Eliot to Cara Hennell Bray, ND.02.1842, in Cross, *op. cit.,* pp. 88-89.

[30] G. Eliot, *Selected Essays, Poems and other Writings*, A. S. Byatt and N. Warren (eds.), London: Penguin, 1990, p. 445.

[31] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life,* cit., p. 63.

[32] George Eliot to Sara Hennell, 26.01.1846, in Cross, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-112.

[33] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life,* cit., p. 63.

1.2.4. Mary Ann's first trip to Europe

In the years between the translation of *Life of Jesus* and her father's death, Mary Ann assiduously spent time with the Brays and went on trips with them, first to the Lake District and then in Scotland ending in Edinburgh. During this time, she also amplified her secular readings – such as Goethe's and George Sand's works – and began to develop some critical opinions on the novels she was reading.[34] She published her first review of Jules Michelet's and Edgar Quinet's works on Christianity and the Jesuits on the *Coventry Herald* in October 1846. This radical newspaper was bought by Charles Bray who encouraged her to write more articles with progressive ideas.

Despite her active intellectual life and the new interesting friendship with John Chapman, Mr Evans's declining health preoccupied Mary Ann and she spend many months nursing him at their house in Foleshill. During this period, she also had severe headaches and displayed anxiety issues that, even though not new as she suffered from them before, led her to consult a doctor. Affectionately standing by her father but worn out by his pain, Mary Ann reflected on what her life would have become without him:

> What shall I be without my Father? It will seem as if a part of my moral nature were gone. I had a horrid vision of myself last night becoming earthly sensual and devilish for want of that purifying restraining influence.[35]

For Mary Ann, her father's death would have marked the end of her restrictions, and from these words it seems that she felt as if part of her moral nature might be disappearing to let space to some undiscovered and "devilish" traits of her personality.

Mr Evans's death left her a considerable amount of money which allowed her to live independently for a period of time, and Mary Ann decided to join the Brays and accompany them in a continental journey. Pursuing her cultural studies and taking part to social entertainments, she spent eight months by herself in a pension in Geneva to recover and decide what to do next in her life. She came back to Coventry in November 1850 and started to consider a new life in London. The first encouragement came from Chapman who proposed her to anonymously write a review about an important religious issue for the *Westminster Review.* Mary Ann accepted and the unknow young writer caught the attention of many readers with her first review, published on Chapman's newspaper in January 1851.[36]

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[34] Ibid., p. 73.

[35] George Eliot to Charles and Cara Bray, 30.05.1849, in Cross, *op. cit.,* pp. 165-166.

1.3. London: Marian

1.3.1. Intellectual and love life

Before Mary Ann arrived in London in January 1851, she was indeed coming from a very turbulent period of her life and, as the correspondence she had with many friends confirms, she did not only mention her eagerness for exercising her intellectual faculties but also described a strong need she felt to receive and give affection.

> The only ardent hope I have for my future life is to have given to me some woman's duty – some possibility of devoting myself where I may see a daily result of pure calm and blessedness in the life of another.[37]

With this emotional need and personal desire, in January 1851 Mary Ann moved to No. 142 Strand House in London, where the owner, John Chapman, gave her a room. The house, which was previously a hotel, was advertised to host any London visitor who would come for the occasion of the Great Exhibition in that period. Many intellectuals lodged at the house of the radical editor and, as some critics[38] remark, Chapman's house was for this reason the London equivalent of the Bray's house in Coventry. When Mary Ann arrived there, she was able to meet many of the intellectuals she had previously met in Coventry and extended her acquaintance with other important freethinkers such as Herbert Spencer, Sigmund Freud, August Comte, and many others associated with the radical cause. To mark this important step of her life as she did previously, Mary Ann changed the spelling of her name into Marian.[39]

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[36] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life,* cit., pp. 82-90.

[37] George Eliot to Cara Hennell Bray, 04.12.1849, in Cross, *op. cit.,* pp. 194-195.

[38] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life,* cit., p. 94.

John Chapman's residence was lively not only for the intellectuals that visited it but also for the two relationships he held under the same roof: Chapman lived *en ménage* with his wife Susanna and his mistress, Elisabeth Tilly.[40] He was described as a very handsome man who was passionately attracted to women[41] and who behaved as a kind philanthropist, though financially precarious. Thanks to his liberal views, many progressive and freethinkers would address him to publish their books which would not have been welcomed by other editors. To give more space to the radical ideas of his clients, Chapman bought the declining *Westminster Review* in 1851.[42]

1.3.2. John Chapman and the *Westminster Review*

Thanks to his support, Marian was able to publish some articles in other local newspapers. Even though she initially only wished to have an independent life as a translator, her prospects were about to change since her reviews were appreciated and the cultural events attended with Chapman were increasing as well. Her relationship with him seemed to be changing too, becoming less formal. Although nothing is mentioned in Marian's letter at that time, some critics report the turmoil that was caused by Chapman's two lovers due to his attentions for Marian. Even though there is no clear evidence to state that sexual intercourse happened between the two, Chapman's wife and mistress who believed in the affair took join action[43] to distance Marian from Chapman. On the 24th of March of 1851, Marian left the N.124 Strand to go back to Coventry.

Marian and Chapman kept writing to each other their correspondence and eventually agree to maintain a professional relationship. During his negotiation to buy the *Westminster Review*, Chapman asked Marian to become the editor of the newspaper and she accepted the job requesting, nevertheless, her anonymity. Before returning to London to 142 Strand in October 1851, she agreed also to write regularly reviews of newly published works.[44]

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[39] Ibid., p. 95.
[40] Bennett, *op. cit*., p. 45.
[41] Eliot, *Selected Essays*, cit., p. X.
[42] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life,* cit., p. 96.
[43] Ibid., p. 100.

While working for the *Westminster*, Marian met even more intellectual and radical thinkers of her time. She flourished in this intellectual atmosphere: she did not only share her views on politics, religion and art with the leading liberal thinkers but, thanks to her tact, she also became a knowledgeable adviser for the publication of their written pieces.[45]

1.3.3. Herbert Spencer

Among all the people, Marian soon met these two eminent men who were suitable candidates to write articles on the *Westminster*. During one cultural soirée, she met Herbert Spencer, who was one of the most radical intellectuals and a fervent supporter of Darwin's theory of evolution, which he would apply to sociology and ethics. He worked as subeditor at the *Economist* and had a very similar background to Marian's. Spenser was also a very good friend of George Harry Lewes, the editor of the *Leader* who Marian met in person shortly after her meeting with Spencer.[46]

Her intellectual and love life once again crossed. Marian and Spencer spent much time in each other's company, attending evenings at the theatre or walking in the park, and rumours about an alleged engagement were circulating. However, if Marian was thinking about marriage assuming that her companion was too, Herbert Spencer had a completely different opinion and did not correspond the feelings of the future novelist. Despite the mutual agreement of remaining friends, Marian could not help but declare her feelings once again:[47]

> I want to know if you can assure me that you will not forsake me, and that you will always be with me as much as you can and share your thoughts and feelings with me. If you become attached to some one else, then I must die, but until then I could gather courage to work and

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[44] Ibid., p. 102.
[45] Ibid., p. 96.
[46] Ibid., p. 105.
[47] Ibid., p. 111.

> make life valuable, if only I had you near me. I do not ask you to sacrifice anything – I would be very good and cheerful and never annoy you. But I find it impossible to contemplate life under any other conditions. […] I suppose no woman ever before wrote such a letter as this – but I am not ashamed of it, for I am conscious that in the light of reason and true refinement I am worthy of your respect and tenderness, whatever gross men or vulgar-minded women might think of me.[48]

This extract from one of her letters does not only confirm Marian's tendency to become affectionate to those she admired the most intellectually, but also shows a sensitive, passionate and warm heart. The fact that she would accept to remain a close friend to Spencer, who remained a bachelor for whole his life, remarks a great control of herself and an outstanding capacity for understanding of other feelings and empathise with them.

1.3.4. George Henry Lewes

After this unfortunate love episode, luckily it did not pass much time for Marian to find her lasting love. In the letters she wrote to her friends Marian indeed soon changed the focus and mentioned George Henry Lewes more frequently. Lewes was not much appreciated by the Brays for the scandal associated to his marital life. Indeed, he had three children with his wife Agnes, who had two more children by her affair with Thornton Hunt, another intellectual of their circle. By the time his wife was expecting the second child, Lewes could not divorce her as they lived in an open marriage and he had already acknowledged Hunt's first baby. Therefore, he could just accept the situation with disagreement.[49]

Brought up in London and then in France by his mother, Lewes became an active participant of the London literary life in the 1830s, becoming co-editor and chief literary critic of the *Leader*. he had written many pieces about the European theatrical scene and two novels. By the time he met

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[48] GE to Herbert Spencer, Broadstairs, 16? July 1852, in G. S. Haight, *The George Eliot Letters*, London: Yale University Press, 1978, vol. VIII (1840-1870), pp. 56-57.

[49] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, cit., pp. 114, 118.

Marian, Lewes was working on the biography of Goethe and visited Marian to update her about his research. In October 1852 his article of Goethe's life appeared in the *Westminster Review*.[50]

Even though there is not much evidence to state exactly when their relationship started as Marian could not openly talk about it for the Lewes's marriage situation, it is probable that they became lovers in the Spring 1853. Soon after, Marina decided to leave No. 142 Strand and found a new accommodation in Cambridge Street, London. Similarly, Lewes left his home and went to live in a friend's flat to continue his work.[51]

At the same time, Marian was thinking of giving up the editorship of the *Westminster Review* but agreed to translate another work from a German freethinker: Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1841). This time the task was not as hard as in the case of the *Life of Jesus* and Feuerbach's religion of humanity seemed to perfectly agree with Marian's thinking. The translation was published with her name on it in 1854 by Chapman. In arranging the publication, Marian's tone was more pragmatic and decisive than before: this is probably due to the beneficial and supportive presence of the person next to her, G.H. Lewes, who, from then on, took her interests at heart and advised her wisely in her work and negotiations.[52]

1.4. Becoming George Eliot the writer

1.4.1. Marian Lewes in Germany

Once Feuerbach's translation was due to be published and Marian was free from her editorial duties at the *Westminster Review*, the couple decided to go and openly live together in Weimar, Germany. This trip was mainly planned for Lewes to carry out his biography of Goethe but at the same time it was an opportunity for him and Marian to start their life together away from the London gossip and be welcomed instead in a more openminded society.[53] Marian indeed communicated her plans to

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[50] Ibid., p. 115.

[51] Ibid., p. 116.

[52] Ibid., p. 120.

[53] Ashton and Thomas, *George Eliot,* cit., p. 14.

Charles Bray and John Chapman but did not tell the news either to her closest female friends or to her family. And, as she did before to mark some new phases in her life, she changed her name into Marian Lewes.

While Lewes worked on his biography of Goethe, Marian was happy to support his research and worked on critical reviews commissioned by Chapman. In addition, it was during her staying in Germany that Marian first read Spinoza's *Ethics*. Lewes had an agreement with his editor Bohn to translate Spinoza's work but passed the task to Marian in November 1854 since she was much more familiar with translations. This philosophical work, which unfortunately was not published due to misunderstandings between Lewes and his publisher, was one of the most influential for Marian's novelistic production and thought as it posed the necessity for sympathy and social duty as the main goals for humanity.[54]

1.4.2. G. H. Lewes's influence and support

Despite their productive and happy life in Germany, the rumours of the Lewes's life together made the scandal spread in London. Marian's anxiety worsened and, once back in England in 1855, she had to accept the coldness of her dearest friends who did not support their union. Additionally, both Marian and Lewes had to work hard to solve financial problems. Luckily, Marian could count on Chapman's commissions that assured her a regular income.[55]

Thanks to her assiduous work and the love of her companion, Marian's writing grew more confident, and the success of her critical reviews gradually consolidated. And, as it can be seen from Marian's *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* published in October 1856,[56] her attention shifted to fiction and its aesthetic form. In this review, Marian criticises the idealistic stories written by upper-middle class female authors as products of falsehood which were only capable of introducing their readers

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[54] Ibid., p. 15.
[55] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life,* cit., pp. 155-156.
[56] Ibid., pp. 164-166.

"into very lofty and fashionable society".[57] To her, these unrealistic novels failed to describe reality faithfully and clearly displayed their authors' "poverty of brains"[58] when representing the life of humble people just to satisfy the taste of readers of the same social class. For their unfaithfulness in descriptions, snobbish style and moralising tendency, Marian believed that these novelistic products did not have the qualities which connote a good novel. Ten days after writing this review and supported by Lewis, Marian began to write *The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton*, the first story of her first novelistic collection *Scenes of Clerical life.*[59]

Even though they were not socially approved, Marian and Lewes were really happy together, sharing the same interests, and genuinely caring for each other's health, which was from time to time attacked by strong headaches and, in the case of Marian's, anxiety. According to Lewes's biographers, their union was of a precious kind: "the closeness of their relationship, their tender understanding of each other were unfailing. It's hard to think of a marriage, legal or illegal, that lasted so well and with fewer hiccups".[60] The daily routine settled during their stay in Germany would vary just a little for the rest of their lives: they would work together in the mornings and spend their time walking or visiting museums in the afternoons. In their evenings, if not visited by friends, they would spend time reading out loud Goethe or Shakespeare.[61]

The unconventional shared union with Lewes and his encouragement were also essential for the rise of George Eliot the writer. Although initially he was not sure she possessed the dramatic power needed for fiction and worried about her health, Lewes demonstrated selfless devotion to Marian and supported her in writing fiction. Once she won her own resistance and proved herself more than capable, Lewes contacted John Blackwood to negotiate the publication of an unknown author.[62]

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[57] Eliot, *Selected Essays*, cit., p. 141.

[58] Ibid., p. 142.

[59] Ibid., pp. 178-179.

[60] B. R. Rilett, "The Role of George Henry Lewes in George Eliot's Career: A Reconsideration", *George Eliot - George Henry Lewes Studies*, vol. 69, no. 1, 2017, pp. 2-34, p. 3.

[61] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life,* cit., p. 146.

[62] Rilett, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

1.5. George Eliot the writer: career, marriage, and death

1.5.1. The enigma of George Eliot

Lewes was fundamental not only to help Marian stipulate contracts with her editors, manage her finances and schedule but, most importantly, to foster the mystery of her authorship when she decided to adopt her *nom de plume.*[63] The main reason behind Marian's choice of secrecy was, of course, to prevent her work to be judged on her reputation and the scandal which was surrounding herself and her partner. Additionally, Marian did not believe she could succeed as a writer due to her very high standards and, therefore, a pseudonym would have sheltered her from shame and failure, which she could not bear after the burden of the public scandal.[64] After the success of her first story, she chose her pseudonym: "George" to honour her "husband", George Henry Lewes, and "Eliot", which was "a good mouth-filling, easily pronounced word".[65]

The choice of the publisher was also connected to Lewes as he started to work for the *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1843. John Blackwood was an honest and reliable businessman who could deal with his writers with tact and patience. When he received the manuscript written by "a friend" of Lewes's, he was soon impressed and wished to publish it without waiting to see the rest of the stories.[66] Marian's confidence improved a little and she started to trust herself and the new publisher. However, it was not until February 1858, that Marian met Blackwood and openly revealed herself as the author of *Amos Barton*. Even though he might have discovered the secret longer before, Blackwood kept silent and became one of her most trusted people.

Keeping her identity not-so-easily hidden, George Eliot's stories of *Amos Barton*, *Mr Gilfil's love story* and *Janet's Repentance* showed sympathy, psychological depth, and historical accuracy which soon suggested to her closest friend the likely identity of the author.[67] *Scenes of Clerical Life* was published by Blackwood in January 1858 in two volumes. In the following year, *Adam Bede* was published and gave George Eliot an immediate success. As a confirmation of the supporting role of G.H. Lewes in her life, George Eliot dedicated this novel to her dear "husband".[68]

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[63] Ibid., p. 2.

[64] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, cit., p. 183.

[65] George Eliot to John Blackwood 04.02.1857, in Cross, *op. cit.*, pp. 348-349.

[66] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, cit., p. 185.

[67] Ibid., p. 193.

Rumours about George Eliot's real identity were spreading, and Mr Liggins was believed to be the author of *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede*. Since he could have requested the earnings from these novels, Marian and Lewes decided to reveal that Marian Evans Lewes was the author behind the pseudonym of George Eliot.[69] For the revelation of her identity and the disclosure of her relationship with Lewes to her family, Marian's headaches increased and so did her general "malaise".[70] These episodes, which today would be possible to associate with "psychic angst" [71] and depression, never left the talented author, but thanks to the support of Lewes who shielded her from the outer world's pressures and to her trustful publisher, George Eliot the woman could establish her career as George Eliot the writer.

1.5.2. George Eliot the novelist and G.H. Lewes's death

Even though Eliot's career as a novelist started quite late in her life as she was almost 40 years old, her talent and ability were soon acknowledged and Marian, together with Lewes, was admitted in society again. After *Adam Bede*, the life of George Eliot continued quietly, alternating continental trips with Lewes to periods of extensive writing production. *The Lifted Veil*, a short story, was published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1859 and in 1860 *The Mill on the Floss* was printed in three volumes; next to her production of essays and reviews that Eliot continued to write up until 1865, her novelistic production includes *Silas Marner, the Weaver of Reveloe* (1861), *Romola* (1863), *Felix the Holt the Radical* (1866), *Middlemarch: a Study of Provincial Life* (1871-1872) and *Daniel Deronda*

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[68] Ibid., p. 204.
[69] Ibid., p. 203.
[70] George Eliot to Sara Hennell, 26.12.1862, in Cross, *op. cit.,* p. 296.
[71] B. McKay, "George Eliot and Psychosomatic Illness: A Footnote to the Biographies", *DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska – Lincoln*, 2014, p. 33.

(1876). In addition, she also wrote *Brother Jacob* (1864), a short story, and experimented with poetry with *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868) and with *The Legend of Jubal and other Poems* (1874).[72]

Around 1864, George Eliot was already very rich and lived in her new house in London, known as the Priory. There she invited authors and intellectuals who could find an adviser for their writings and a lively freethinking society. As it was mentioned before, Mr and Mrs Lewes went on many European trips to Germany, Austria, France, and Italy, also for researching the documentation of George Eliot's novels. Unfortunately, the health of both was deteriorating[73] and the couple spent their last summer together in their country house at the Heights in 1878. After returning to London where he kept himself busy in the role of George Eliot's agent, G. H. Lewes died on 30 November 1878. Marian was deeply distraught for the death of her husband but found a reason to live in the revision and publication of his last work, *Problems of Life and Mind*, which was printed in May 1879.[74]

1.5.3. Mary Ann's marriage and death

The last part of George Eliot's life, as some critics[75] have noticed, is characterised by some strange facts and unclear circumstances. After Lewes's death, Marian was struggling to carry out her social duties but dedicated herself to keep the memory of her husband alive also contributing to the project of funding a studentship at Cambridge in honour of Lewes's work for science. To be able to finance this project, Marian had to officially change her name as she needed Lewes's surname to access their back account: she eventually signed herself as Mary Ann Evans Lewes.[76]

Even if she avoided company for the first period of her mourning, she eventually started to accept some close friends visiting, and the first one to reach her was John Cross. He helped her in the management of her finances and, since Cross was interested in Dante, Mary Ann helped him in studying the *Divina Commedia*. Many letters of that period were lost or destroyed but one is left in which a 60-year-old Mary Ann declares her affection for the beloved 20-year-younger Cross, who was there to take care of her. Cross wanted to marry her, but Mary Ann agonized in consenting, especially for the scandal that it would create not only among her friends and family, but also in all the people that until then had admired her work. She declined at first and in 1879 managed to get one very last work published, *Theophrastus Such*, thanks to the support of her dear friend and publisher Blackwood. Blackwood too died in October of the same year and Marian only wished her life to be over too.[77]

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[72] Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. XV.

[73] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, cit., p. 387.

[74] Ibid., pp. 395-396.

[75] F. Marucci, "Il romanzo ideologico e sperimentale di George Eliot e di Meredith entro il 1870", *La Storia della Letteratura Inglese*, vol. III, tomo II, parte IV, Firenze: Le Lettere, 2003, pp. 773-930, p. 806.

[76] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, cit., p. 398.

It is not clear what made Marian change her mind, but she eventually married John Cross on Thursday 6 May 1880 at St George's, Hanover Square.[78] Mary Ann notified her legal marriage to her brother Isaac, who had not talked to her until then due to her illegal union with Lewes. She signed the letter as Mary Ann Cross, combining her childhood name with her new surname.

While the newly married couple travelled through Europe for their honeymoon, a strange accident happened at the Hôtel de l'Europe in Venice. Cross fell in the Gran Canal from one of the windows of the hotel and was rescued by the doctors there. Rumours spread about this accident and whether it was for a rejection on Mary Ann's side or for Cross's derangement, it is still not known.[79]

Not many months passed that the new couple was living together that both Cross and Mary Ann's health worsened: after a severe throat infection and a long kidney disease, George Eliot died on 22 December 1880 at the age of 61. Because of her sentimental life, George Eliot was not buried in Westminster Abbey, and now rests next to Lewes in Highgate Cemetery.[80]

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[77] Ibid., pp. 400-401.

[78] Ibid., p. 403.

[79] Marucci, *op. cit.*, p. 806.

[80] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life,* cit., p. 413.

Chapter 2: George Eliot's philosophical influences

The second chapter of this dissertation will focus on the analysis of the most inspirational philosophical works which supported Eliot's novelistic production and contributed to her original elaboration of the concept of sympathy. Eliot was regularly in touch with the philosophers of her time and her intellectual, theoretic attitude led her to read the works of European philosophers in the original language. For this reason, it is important to consider this author as a well-rounded, active intellectual, knowledgeable of science, history, politics, religion, art, and social matters.[81] Among all her interests and critical writings, Eliot's translations of Strauss's *The Life of Jesus,* Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* and Spinoza's *Ethics* deserve much attention as they shaped her system of belief by challenging her linguistically and engaging her critically.

2.1. Strauss: *The Life of Jesus*

David Friedrich Strauss was a German theologian and biblical critic known for his scholarly work, *Das Leben Jesus*, which was published in 1835. George Eliot redacted the English translation of this book, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined,* which was published anonymously in 1846. Strauss's work is considered one of the milestones of 19th century religious debate and at the time of its publication was seen as one of the most controversial books for its content and the author's ironic style in the treatment of the religious matter.[82] Soon after the publication of his book, Strauss was relieved of his teaching post of theologian at the university of Tübingen: the text did not respect the conventional norms of analysis of the evangelical stories and proposed an alternative reading of the evangelical narratives to a larger audience than the academic theologians. For the German conservatives, theologians were the only people entitled to access these kinds of critical readings:

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[81] J. Rignall, "Philosophy", *Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000, p. 301.

[82] E. Linstrum, "Strauss's 'Life of Jesus': Publication and the Politics of the German Public Sphere." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 71, no. 4, 2010, pp. 593-616, p. 594.

if the "uneducated" public had reached these controversial interpretations, scepticism for Christianity could have compromised the social order.[83] It was only later in the 20th century that, thanks to more liberal thinking, Strauss's work was accepted and appreciated by the intellectual community.

Strauss's *The Life of Jesus* is listed among the Higher Criticism works which aimed to investigate and interpret the biblical documents critically and historically. In *The Life of Jesus*, Strauss examined every episode of the four Gospels and aimed to find the historical truths about the accounts of the life of Jesus. Identifying the unhistorical facts as myths coming from the Jewish tradition,[84] Strauss noted a disposition in the ancient world to "see God as the immediate cause of every change in nature or the human mind".[85] According to him, this attitude was due to a limited knowledge of science and had to be abandoned in the modern world. Embracing the Kantian investigative technique, Strauss methodically used the mythical interpretation to explain the events narrated in the Gospel.[86]

> The exegesis of the ancient church set out from the double presupposition: first, that the gospels contained a history, and secondly, that this history was a supernatural one. Rationalism rejected the latter of these presuppositions, but only to cling the more tenaciously to the former, maintaining that these books present unadulterated, though only natural, history. Science cannot rest satisfied with this half-measure: the other presupposition also must be relinquished, and the inquiry must be made whether in fact, and to what extent, the ground on which we stand in the gospel is historical.[87]

Through Strauss's philological and historical analysis, the arrival of the Magi, the Massacre of the Innocents and the Resurrection were considered as products of early Christian mythological imaginations while the appearances of the risen Christ were considered as episodes of hallucination. By so doing, Strauss did not mean to undermine the substance of the Christian faith as he believed it was independent from the historical accuracy of the biblical accounts. However, he could not believe in a supernatural God and, rejecting the Christian myths and symbols, trusted that faith should be placed on conceptual thinking alone.[88] Drawing his conclusions, Strauss offered a new way to interpret the role of Christ and of humanity:

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[83] Ibid., p. 607.

[84] Rignall, "Strauss, David Friedrich", *op. cit*., p. 403.

[85] D. F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined,* G. Eliot (trans.), London: Edward Chapman and William Hall, 1846, p. 70.

[86] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, cit., p. 62.

[87] Strauss, *op. cit.*, p. X.

> This is the key to the whole of Christology, that, as subject of the predicate which the church assigns to Christ, we place, instead of an individual, an idea; but an idea which has an existence in reality, not in the mind only, like that of Kant. In an individual, a God-man, the proprieties and the functions which the Church ascribes to Christ contradict themselves; in the idea of the race, they perfectly agree. Humanity is the union of the two natures – God became man, the infinite manifesting itself in the finite, and the finite spirit remembering its finitude.[89]

In this passage humanity is seen as religion's centre of attention and the God-man of Christianity is substituted by the veneration of the human race. While the belief in the accounts of New Testament was lost on the basis of the historical accuracy, the human species with its faculties of reason and thought were exalted.

2.1.1. George Eliot and *The Life of Jesus*

When she was offered to translate *The Life of Jesus,* Eliot, who had previously studied the Bible as a fervent Evangelical*,* was deeply involved in the reading of critical texts belonging to the tradition of the demythologization of Christianity, such as Hennell's *Inquiry Concerning the Origin of the Christianity* (1838). And by the time she accepted the translating task, Eliot had already changed her religious opinions and communicated to her friends her fervent keenness for the serious work she decided to engage in.[90]

The Life of Jesus appealed to Eliot for the wat it discarded the rituals and the dogmas of Christianity. In a letter she wrote to her father during her "Holy War", she seems to share Strauss's views about the divine authority of the Old and New Testaments:

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[88] Rignall, "Strauss, David Friedrich", *op. cit.*, p. 403.
[89] Strauss, *op. cit.*, vol II, p. 895.
[90] George Eliot to Sarah Hennell, ND.06.1845, in Cross, *op. cit.,* pp. 105-106.

> I regard these writings as histories consisting of mingled truth and fiction, and while I admire and cherish much of what I believe to have been the moral teaching of Jesus himself, I consider the system of doctrines built upon the facts of his life and drawn as to its materials from Jewish notions to be most dishonourable to God and most pernicious in its influence on individual and social happiness.[91]

However, if Strauss's ideas appealed to Eliot, she could not agree with him completely. His method, for example, was applied too extensively for Eliot, rendering the structure of the text repetitive over the nearly 1500 pages.

> I am never pained when I think Strauss right but in many cases I think him wrong, as every man must be in working out into detail an idea which has general truth but is only one element in a perfect theory – not a perfect theory in itself.[92]

Eliot was sceptical about universal systematizations and, therefore, would not welcome favourably Strauss's systematic attempt to explain in an all-embracing theory the episodes of the Gospel.[93] Additionally, because he followed the dogmatic idea of the Hegelian metaphysics too strictly, Strauss did not comply with the role of a true historian as he did not explore the instructive aspects of myth.[94] Instead of interpreting the New Testament texts and searching for the existential questions at the base of the creation of biblical myths, Strauss left the religious material deconstructed without understanding its eschatological context or its authenticity.[95] Despite presenting these weaknesses from the standpoint of history, which made her "Strauss-sick"[96], *The Life of Jesus* helped Eliot to realise the importance of myth to inform human needs and emotions. To her, myth constitutes the base to create continuity within a community by preserving values across generations and extending the web of human relations. Rejecting myths not only prevents to understand human conception of life but can also lead to isolation.[97] Using both the intensity of classical myth and the symbolism of the Christian mythology in *Middlemarch*, through the character of Mr Casaubon Eliot seems to convey her scepticism about Strauss's method and its misinterpretation of the deep sense of myth. The knowledgeable and studious husband of Dorothea was entrapped in his philological work trying to find "the Key to all mythologies" using an outdated method possibly evoking Strauss's one.[98] Since his imagination could not find the connection between the present and the past, and could not comprehend the cultural, existential conditions that gave origin to myths, Casaubon was blind to the present state of humanity and, as a result, appears to be a character fundamentally separated from the rest of the community.[99]

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[91] George Eliot to Robert Evans, Foleshill, 28 February 1842, in G. S. Haight (ed.), *op. cit.*, vol. I (1836-1851), p. 128.
[92] George Eliot to Sara Hennell, ND.08.1845 in Cross, *op. cit.*, p. 108.
[93] Rignall, "Philosophy", *op. cit.*, p. 301.
[94] Rignall, "Strauss, David Friedrich", *op. cit.*, p. 403.
[95] V. A. Harvey, and D. F. Strauss. "D. F. Strauss' 'Life of Jesus' Revisited", *Church History*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1961, pp. 191-211, pp. 206-207.
[96] Cara Hennell Bray to Sara Hennell, 14.02.1846, in Cross, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

Overall, the translation of *The Life of Jesus* was very demanding for George Eliot not only for its linguistic challenges but also, as already mentioned, for Strauss's scrupulosity in applying his mythical method. Nevertheless, it was for Eliot a starting point to access German philosophical translations and the steppingstone to her elaboration of the concept of sympathy. Indeed, Strauss's vision of the human species as the core of religion helped George Eliot find in humanity her lost faith in Christianity. Eight years later, Eliot would further develop this new faith in humanity while accomplishing her second translation, *The Essence of Christianity* by Feuerbach.

2.2. Feuerbach: *The Essence of Christianity*

The German philosopher and anthropologist Ludwig Feuerbach was one of the major exponents of the German theological movement known as Higher Criticism. He started his philosophical studies as disciple of Hegel at the University of Berlin and once he took the distance from his mentor he interpreted his master's thinking in a more radical and revolutionary way, by relativizing Christian dogmas. He graduated and worked for the University of Erlangen but, soon after one of his first writings, *Gedanken über Tod und Unsterblichkeit* [*Thoughts on Death and Immorality*] (1830), his career as a professor was abruptly interrupted. He lived and studied for almost all the rest of his life in Bruckberg with his wife and died in Reichenberg on 13 September 1874.

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[97] G. Beer, *Darwin's Plots: evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 166.
[98] Rignall, "Strauss, David Friedrich", *op. cit.*, p. 403.
[99] B. Swann, "Middlemarch and Myth", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 28, no. 2, 1973, pp. 210-214, p. 211.

His most notable and revolutionary work which deeply influenced George Eliot's thinking is *Das Wesen des Christentums*, [*The Essence of Christianity*]. Published in 1841, this work asserted man to be the object of his own thought and reinterpreted religion as the simple consciousness of infinite. In the first section of his book, Feuerbach discussed the "true or anthropological essence of religion" and considered God as a projection of man's nature and needs. In the second part, analysing the "false or theological essence of religion" Feuerbach rejected the Christian dogmas, highlighting Christian materialism. His position appealed to George Eliot who rejected any form of dogmatism and instead favourably welcomed Feuerbach's tolerant approach to humanity. Eliot decided spontaneously to translate the text when G.H. Lewes first suggested the reading to her. Her translation, which was published in 1854 displaying her real name Marian Evans, remains today the definitive English version of Feuerbach's work.[100]

2.2.1. Feuerbach: the anthropological essence of religion

In the Preface to the *Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach declared the aim of his new philosophy and explains the basis of his anthropological, materialistic method to interpret religion. He stated that his intention was far from inventing a new reality and specifically wished to "unveil"[101] the present existence. Identifying his role with that of an interpreter and a listener, Feuerbach built his new philosophy not dealing with abstract ideas but, attaining to "the fact itself",[102] made "a real being, the true *Ens realissimum* – man"[103] the principle and centre of his new philosophy.

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[100] Rignall, "Feuerbach, Ludwig", *op. cit*., p. 111.

[101] L. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, George Eliot (trans.), London: *Edward Chapman and William Hall*, 1854, p. 5.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Ibid., p. 6.

Rejecting transcendental explanations to read reality and applying the materialistic method to interpret religion, Feuerbach dedicated the first part of his book to the analysis of the "anthropological essence of religion". Once re-established the predicative relation of subject and object, which were misplaced in religious dogmas, God was not seen as the creator of man: according to Feuerbach's projection theory, God is the illusory abstraction of the perfect qualities of human nature.

> Religion, at least the Christian, is the relation of man to himself or more correctly to his own (and, to be sure, subjective) essence, but the relation to his essence as to another essence. The divine essence is nothing other than the human essence, or better, the essence of humanity, purified, freed from the limits of individual humans, and made objective, that is, contemplated and worshiped as another, as the human's own essence distinguished from him. All determinations of the divine essence are therefore human determinations.[104]

To Feuerbach, God is a product of human imagination: projecting their subjective qualities to the level of perfection into this ideal object, that is God, men considered it to be different and outside themselves. For the German philosopher, neither the Second person (which is God revealing) nor God himself could be the principle that originated the world: being the Second person identical to God, they both were of an abstract nature and, therefore, could not have been the origin of the real, concrete world.[105] According to Feuerbach, in order to have a clearer and conscious vision of the world, men need to become aware of their personal limits and, leaving their egoistic isolation, count on their fellow humans to actually see beyond the so-believed imperfect human limitations.

> The consciousness of the world is the consciousness of my limitation; if I knew nothing of the world, I should know nothing of limits: but the consciousness of my limitation stands in contradiction with the impulse of egotism towards unlimitedness. […] My fellow-man is the bond between me and the world. I am, and I feel myself, dependent on the world, because I first feel myself dependent on other men. If I did not need men, I should not need the world. I reconcile myself with the world only through my fellow-men. Without other men, the world would be for me not only dead and empty but meaningless.[106]

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[104] Ibid., p. 34.
[105] Ibid., p. 114.
[106] Ibid., pp. 116-117.

A single human being needs other fellow creatures to recognise that the divine traits which were worshipped in God actually belong to the human nature. This process of coming to true self-consciousness, as H. W. Frei points out, did not only help Feuerbach disclose the wholeness of the human race but also revealed the secret identity of God and man:[107] *Homo homini deus est.* [108]

2.2.2. Feuerbach and the importance of the human species

According to Feuerbach, since the human nature is divine and "the true sense of Theology is Anthropology*"*[109], to believe that God is different or greater than humanity derives from embracing a "false or theological essence of religion". To explain the reason behind God's creation, Feuerbach defines religion as the shelter from human anxieties and frustrations:

> God springs out of the feeling of a want; what man is in need of, whether this be a definite and therefore conscious or an unconscious need, that is God. Thus the disconsolate feeling of a void, of loneliness, needed a God in whom there is society, a union of beings fervently loving each other.[110]

Resolving Christian mysteries such as the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation as essentially coming from a human need, Feuerbach saw in human love the possibility to fulfil this human want of God.[111] In his view, human togetherness not only helps human awareness of their divine nature but also improves the condition of the whole species. For this reason, Feuerbach encouraged men to leave egotistic attitudes to embrace instead altruistic behaviours. Describing the fellow-feelings of love and friendship as the most natural and essential for humans, Feuerbach inaugurated his new Religion of Humanity: thanks to the other members of the species, men go beyond their own individual limits.

> The other is my thou, – the relation of being reciprocal, my alter ego, man objective to me, the revelation of my own nature, the eye seeing itself. In another I first have the consciousness of

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[107] H. W. Frei, "Feuerbach and Theology", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 35, no. 3, 1967, pp. 250-256, p. 252.

[108] Feuerbach, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

[109] Ibid., p. 7.

[110] Ibid., p. 105.

[111] Rignall, "Feuerbach, Ludwig", *op. cit.*, p.118.

> humanity; through him I first learn, I first feel, that I am a man: in my love for him it is first clear to me that he belongs to me and I to him, that we cannot be without each other, that only community constitutes humanity.[112]

Thus, love becomes the saving energy that constitutes and preserves humanity. Through love, man declares himself in need of others and, looking at his fellow men, becomes aware of the species which has evolved from the difference of the sexes. From this point comes Feuerbach's consideration of sexual love not as an act to shrink from but as the wonder that "present the species, the perfect man"[113] and rejects once for all the need of confirmation from a religious minister.

Without the need of a dogmatic faith and instead enforced by the belief in human love, Feuerbach insisted on reconsidering the uniqueness of individuals as important for the whole of human species. Rejecting the Christian doctrine of the universal sinfulness of men, which sees all men alike in sin and therefore only focuses in the achievement of individual perfection, Feuerbach presents human sinners with their flaws and imperfection as peculiar components of the perfection of humanity.

> Here is entirely wanting the objective perception, the consciousness, […] that men are required to constitute humanity, that only man taken together are what man should and can be. All men are sinners. Granted: but they are not all sinners in the same way; on the contrary, there exists a great and essential difference between them. […] In the moral as well as the physical and intellectual elements, men compensate for each other, so that taken as a whole they are as they should be, they present the perfect man.[114]

The human capacity to compensate for each other's faults ends humanity's self-alienation and redirects human gratitude, love and sympathy to real entities: real people as mothers, fathers, lovers and friends.[115]

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[112] Feuerbach, *op. cit.*, pp. 208-209.

[113] Ibid., p. 206.

[114] Ibid., pp. 205-206.

[115] M. Harris, *George Eliot in Context*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 217.

2.2.3. George Eliot and Feuerbach

When she was about to leave for Germany with G.H. Lewes, George Eliot had already started to translate Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*. Feuerbach's ideas of love and duty between human beings completely corresponded to Eliot's own views and in his vision of marriage as a "free bond of love" Eliot could find a congenial definition of her union with Lewes.[116] Her fervent and enthusiastic agreement with Feuerbach's religion of humanity led her to translate his text. If compared to Strauss' work, *The Essence of Christianity* was for its translator much easier to interpret linguistically and more concise in the content.[117] To her friend Sara Hennell Eliot confessed that, even though she found some faults in his phraseology, she entirely agreed with the principles of Feuerbach.[118] Indeed, his materialistic method and rejection for abstraction were much appreciated by the novelist as it was finally possible to move the attention from the idealistic world of dogmatic creed, which she had already rejected, and point it to the real, concrete system of human values and meanings.

Moreover, the Feuerbachian re-evaluation of humanity inspired George Eliot's conception of sympathy. Although she has never conceived of an organised system of thought or openly conformed to conventional philosophical principles, the artistic work by George Eliot the writer cannot be separated from the philosophical knowledge and thinking of George Eliot the woman. For this reason, to do full justice to her work, her original idea of sympathy can be compared to the philosophical sources which inspired its creation.[119]

2.2.4. George Eliot's Sympathy and Feuerbach's influence

According to many critics such as Deeds Ermath, Gatens and Pyle, Feuerbach is crucial to understand George Eliot's writings and to correctly interpret the role of sympathy in her novels. Feuerbach's transposition of divinity from God to the human species was congenial to Eliot, as she declared in one of her letters to a friend:

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[116] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, cit., p. 126.

[117] Ibid.

[118] George Eliot to Sarah Hennell, London, in Haight, *op. cit.,* vol. II (1852-1858), p. 153.

[119] M. Gatens, "George Eliot's 'Incarnation of the divine' in 'Romola' and Benedict Spinoza's 'Blessedness': a double reading", *George Eliot - George Henry Lewes Studies*, no. 52/53, 2007, pp. 76-92, p. 77.

> My books have for their main bearing a conclusion […] without which I could not have cared to write any representation of human life – namely, that the fellowship between man and man which has been the principle of development, social and moral, is not depended on conceptions of what is no man: and the idea of God, so far as it has been high spiritual influence, is the ideal of a goodness entirely human (i.e., an exaltation of the human).[120]

For Eliot as for Feuerbach, the faith in humanity finds its highest expression in the universal bond that connects human beings and helps them to see the others not as enemies but as the receivers of human love and duty. Eliot shared Feuerbach's view of the dependence of human beings on one another and believed that human happiness and the full development of an individual personality relied on mutual love and service.[121]

Building her own ideas on these existential aspects, Eliot perceives sympathy as "the imaginative impulse that, transcending egotism and renouncing the desires of self, promises to bridge the […] gap between self and the world".[122] Subsuming the modern concept of empathy, which consists in the capacity to feel the feelings of others, sympathy effusively grows in Eliot's novels: for this reason, despite all the differences between her stories, her individual characters are observed in the process of learning how to achieve sympathy, going beyond their own self to eventually reach a higher condition of altruism.[123] In declaring the object of her novelistic production, Eliot's words echo the centrality of humanity as principle of Feuerbach's philosophy.

> I at least have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this peculiar web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe.[124]

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[120] George Eliot to Hon. Mrs Ponson, 10.12.1874, in Cross, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

[121] Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

[122] F. Pyle, "A Novel Sympathy: The Imagination of Community in George Eliot", *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1993, pp. 5-23, p. 6.

[123] M. Carlson, "Famished Tigress: Sympathy and the Other in George Eliot's Fiction", *George Eliot - George Henry Lewes Studies*, 2010, *58/59*, pp. 61-76, p. 68.

[124] G. Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial life,* R. Ashton (ed.), London: Penguin, 1994, p. 141.

Eliot's elaboration of sympathy draws also on another Feuerbachian idea, i.e. the uniqueness of the individual. Alterity is indeed exalted in Eliot's notion of sympathy through the invitation to exchange with the others and accept their conditions. Like Feuerbach, Eliot openly encourages the acceptance of diversity in her novels and sees a double necessity raising from this acceptance of the other: welcome their circumstances and act on the basis of this approval.[125] For this reason, the individual interaction with the community becomes one of the most important themes in Eliot's novels. Her stories provide a detailed account of the human society in which the dramatic action takes place: Eliot's characters are enclosed in the social structure like the soil encloses the roots of a growing plant[126] and the drama usually springs from the inability of an individual character to adjust their personal desires to the social milieu.

Thanks to the influence of *The Essence of Christianity*, Eliot's notion of sympathy evolves into an essential element for men and women to become more human: its representation becomes the aim of Eliot's novelistic production and not only does it answer to her aesthetic principles but it also actively involves her readers in the altruistic domain of mutual understanding and support.

> The only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings is, that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring, human creatures.[127]

Besides the humanistic contribution of Feuerbach's philosophy to Eliot's sympathy, it is also essential to consider the implications that sympathy has on moral and ethical grounds. Thus, Spinoza's *Ethics,* which is the third translation carried out by George Eliot, will be analysed in the next part of this chapter.

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[125] E. Deeds Ermarth, "George Eliot's Conception of Sympathy", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1985, pp. 23-42, p. 26.

[126] Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

[127] George Eliot to Charles Bray, 05.07.1859, in Cross, *op. cit.*, pp. 95-96.

2.3. Spinoza: *Ethics*

Known as one of the most important exponents of Rationalism of the 17th century, Benedict de Spinoza was a Jewish-Dutch philosopher born on 24 November 1932 in Amsterdam. His family had moved to Amsterdam to escaped from Portugal due to the religious intolerance of the Inquisition. Thanks to the religious tolerance of the Dutch government, Spinoza's family could live free of charges in the Jewish community of Amsterdam where Jews from all over Europe found shelter too. Spinoza grew up in this multicultural environment and attended the all-male school of Talmud-Torah. Since Spinoza's father was a successful merchant, after his studies Spinoza joined the family business with his brother and soon became familiar with the mercantilist mentality.[128] During his twenties, Spinoza also began teaching classes in Sabbath school and for the first time he was investigated for heresy. He was initially accused of doubting the historical accuracy of the biblical accounts, but the case was soon discharged. He left Amsterdam in 1661 for a short period of time and, once he came back, between 1654 and 1656 he worked in Van den Enden's school and also learnt the art of making lenses.[129] It is probable that in that period Spinoza had already started questioning his faith: one of his teachers was acquainted with Isaac La Peyrére, author of the book *Prae-Adamitae*, which was soon condemned in the Netherlands for his heretical views about the Bible. Even though there is no proof of a direct contact between La Peyrére and Spinoza, La Peyrére's ideas would appear later in Spinoza's works and are also believed to be the cause of Spinoza's excommunication in 1656. Even though the precise accusation behind Spinoza's serious excommunication remains still debated today, the philosopher was formally excluded from the Jewish community but managed to keep in contact with some of its members and actively took part in the religious debate of that time.[130]

Leaving Amsterdam permanently in 1670, Spinoza moved to the Hague where he lived until his death and devoted his leisure time to his studies. In the same year, his first important work,

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[128] R. H. Popkin, "Benedict de Spinoza", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 17 February 2022. Available at: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Benedict-de-Spinoza, accessed 2022, April.

[129] A. Wolf, "Spinoza", *Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 2, no. 5, 1927, pp. 3–19, p. 8.

[130] Popkin, *op. cit.*

Tractatus Theologico-Politicus [*Theological-Political Treatise*] was published anonymously in Latin. In this work which combines biblical criticism with political and religious philosophy, Spinoza openly criticised the Calvinist interpretation of the Bible which he believed was only used by the Calvinists to obtain the victory in the political conflict of that time. In addition to this, for its naturalistic approach to the interpretation of the Bible and its liberal position on freedom of speech and print, the *Tractatus* was condemned by the Church and banned in the Netherlands in 1974. Even though Spinoza had to prevent any further publication to avoid persecution,[131] his writing activity did not stop. Among all his writings, his masterpiece remains the *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata* [*Ethics*]. Structured in five chapters which develop Spinoza's argument in geometrical form, the *Ethics* aimed to provide an account of reality as a whole and to contextualise human existence within that new larger reality.[132] The biblical critique started in the *Tractatus* was further developed in the *Ethics* introducing a new idea of God: far from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, Spinoza's God coincided with everything that exists, that is, Nature.[133] Finished by 1675, the text initially circulated only among the philosopher's friends who suggested Spinoza to postpone its publication for its ground-breaking ideas as it would have caused even more controversy that the *Tractatus*.[134] The *Ethics* was eventually published after Spinoza's death in 1677 and during Eliot's time it was still studied and discussed in the intellectual circles.

Through G.H. Lewes, Eliot came to know Spinoza's works and first read his *Tractatus.* She began to translate this text around 1849 but did not complete the project as she believed she needed a deeper knowledge of the philosopher's life and way of thinking.[135] After some years and thanks to Lewes's intercession, in November 1854 Eliot started the translation of Spinoza's *Ethics* and eventually completed the work in February 1856. Unfortunately, her translation was never published as Eliot was not able to find a financial agreement with Henry Bohn, the publisher of Bohn's

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[131] Wolf, *op. cit.,* p. 10.

[132] J. T. Cook, *Spinoza's 'Ethics': A Reader's Guide*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2008, p. 16.

[133] Ibid., p. 17.

[134] Popkin, "The period of the Ethics of Benedict de Spinoza", *op. cit.*

[135] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, cit., p. 84.

Philosophical Library.[136] Nevertheless, Spinoza's *Ethics* proved to be very influential to Eliot the novelist.

2.3.1. *Ethics*: God and the human affects

The first part of the *Ethics* is dedicated to the study of Spinoza's idea of God: Spinoza defined God as consisting of "infinite attributes, every one of which expresses an eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists".[137] Further developing this idea, the Spinozian God eventually coincides with Nature and existence in general since "whatever is, is in God, and nothing can exist or be conceived without God".[138] The human species belongs to God as all the other species: displacing them from their favourable anthropocentric position, human life obeys to the same universal laws as all the rest of Nature. Offering this completely new vision of God, Spinoza implicitly criticised the theology of the Judeo-Christian tradition and considered any human representation of God as a simple projection of human imagination.[139] Once stated that God is the reality which "necessarily" exists, for Spinoza it logically can be concluded that "everything that exists follows necessarily from that nature in accordance with the laws of that nature".[140] From this central idea of God, Spinoza developed all the rest of his work showing the moral implications that this new conception of reality can have for human lives.

Spinoza's philosophical attitude towards human passions can be considered as one of the most innovative and significant contributions. Theorising the identity of the body and the mind the second part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza provided a conceptual basis for developing a new consideration of emotions. Considering the body and the mind as two different ways of experiencing and knowing one reality, in the third part of the *Ethics* Spinoza did not condemn emotions as irrational instincts to be tamed by ethical judgment but instead he developed, as Cook defines it, a “systematic science of emotions” to better understand them.[141] Considering “human actions and appetites as if the subject were lines, surfaces, or solids”,[142] Spinoza applied his geometrical method and considered them as obeying Nature’s fixed, necessary rules.

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[136] B. de Spinoza, *The Ethics of Benedict de Spinoza, Translated by George Eliot*, Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, Thomas Deegan Institut fur Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1981, p. V.
[137] Ibid., p. 9.
[138] Ibid., p. 13.
[139] Cook, *op. cit.,* p. 18.
[140] Ibid., p. 32.

> I have chosen this method on the following ground: There is nothing in existence which can be attributed to a vice in nature; for nature is always the same and is everywhere one; her virtue and power are everywhere the same; […] hence passions such as hatred, anger, and the like, considered in themselves, follow from the same necessity and power of nature as other phenomena; and consequently they have determinate causes whereby they may be understood, and determinate qualities, which are as well worth our study as the properties of any other object on which we are pleased to destine our exclusive attention.[143]

In Spinoza’s geometrical system, human passions and emotions are not to be condemned as vices or laughed at as ridiculous but are to be understood as particular cases of universal laws and considered in their own circumstances. In the fourth part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza proceeded with the categorisation of bodily emotions and passions in primary and secondary affects.[144] From this distinction, the Dutch philosopher also elaborated his own definition of good and evil:

> As to good and evil, they also indicate nothing positive in things considered in themselves, and are simply modes of thought or notions which we form from a comparison of individuals. For one and the same thing can be at the same time good, evil and indifferent.[145]

Conversely to tradition, Spinoza does not see good and evil as absolute concepts: he rejected the standard view of good and evil proposed by the Scriptures as his main concern was not to judge whether an action is right or wrong. Spinoza elaborated his own definition of good considering it as an emotional response towards human preservation:[146] “good is that which we certainly know to be useful to us".[147] From this vision of good as anything that can help men to preserve and sustain their own species, Spinoza identified with evil anything that hinders man from determining and preserving themselves.[148]

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[141] Ibid., pp. 20-21.
[142] Spinoza, *op. cit.*, p. 92.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Cook, *op. cit.*, p. 72.
[145] Spinoza, *op cit.*, p. 155.
[146] Cook, *op. cit.,* p. 82.

2.3.2. Human freedom and natural determinism

After the analysis of emotions in the third part of the *Ethics*, in the final sections of his work Spinoza aimed to research the best ethical life for man and gave a detailed account of how to overcome the obstacles that prevent men to live this fully happy, ethical life.[149] In the fourth part of his work, Spinoza put the attention on the human independence and free will. According to him, depending on the human "active" or "passive" response to the sensations that affect their body, man and women can be seen in a condition of relative freedom or enslaved by their bodily affects. Spinoza defined the inability to restrain passions as the "bondage" of men, whereas he identified true virtue with the rational control of affects that follows human "conatic endeavour" to preserve their being.[150] As far as the human free will is concerned, Spinoza identified with the true free man with the one who acts under the guidance of reason and follows his own determination.[151] This does not mean that this kind of man is fully free: free will for Spinoza is an "empty phrase"[152] as there are always external natural causes that human cannot control. For this reason, natural determinism is inevitable for humans to accept.

Within this deterministic frame, the human struggle for survival, however, was not presented by Spinoza in an individualistic way. For the philosopher, if men can achieve a rational understanding of themselves as part of Nature, they also understand the necessity of going beyond the egoistic questions of self-preservation.[153]

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[147] Spinoza, *op. cit.,* p. 156.
[148] Cook, *op. cit.,* p. 82.
[149] Ibid., p. 84.
[150] Ibid., p. 85.
[151] Ibid., p. 99.
[152] Ibid., p. 63.
[153] Ibid., p. 93.

> Thus there are many things out of ourselves which are useful to us, and are therefore to be desired. Among these none can be conceived more excellent than the things which are entirely accordant with our nature. If, for example, two individuals of precisely the same nature are united together, they compose a double individual more powerful than the single. Hence there is nothing more useful to man than man; nothing, I say, that man can choose more appropriate to the preservation of his being […] and all at once seeking for themselves what is a common good to all.[154]

Living ethically and agreeing with Nature means to act under the guidance of reason perusing the real good for all humanity, that is, the preservation of the whole species.[155] Considering society as central for men's moral life, Spinoza identified the true moral man as the one who rationally dominates his emotions and that is capable of bonding to other human beings to achieve the collective good.

> "It is in the highest degree useful to men to have customs in common, to unite themselves by those bonds which best tend to make all into one, and, in general, to do those things which strengthen mutual amity".[156]

Drawing on Aristoteles and Seneca's vision of man as a "social animal", Spinoza considered cooperation and the fellowship with other humans essential to human life and important also to achieve the highest good, which is the "knowledge of God".[157] If men can understand how Nature works and accept it, they not only can better know God, which is Nature itself, but also live their life happily, finding the "blessedness"[158] and serenity of the soul.[159] This blessedness can be potentially achieved and enjoyed by all men and women: this does not mean that men are supposed to compete against each other to obtain the highest good but they are expected to cooperate and support each other so that they can reach it together. The virtuous man, therefore, is for Spinoza someone who can encourage others to live their lives ethically sharing the same rational vision of the world. According to Cook, this might have been also one of the reasons that led Spinoza to write the *Ethics*: he hoped that others could embrace a rational vision of life and could eventually reach the ethical blessedness.[160]

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[154] Spinoza, *op.cit.*, p. 169.
[155] Cook, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
[156] Spinoza, *op. cit.*, p. 210.
[157] Ibid., p. 89.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Cook, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

2.3.3. George Eliot and Spinoza

Even though there are no specific elements in Eliot's work which can correspond to an exact application of Spinoza's principles, Rignall argues that it is possible to see Spinoza's influence on Eliot's thinking in her treatment of rural life. More specifically, Rignall believes that this can be seen in her novelistic production as well as in some of her critical writings: *The Natural History of German Life*, *Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young* and *Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cumming*.[161] Rignall's thesis is also supported and shared by Gatens, who thinks that Spinoza's anthropological vision of religion could have influenced Eliot's vision of society as "incarnate history".[162] Since this historical consideration of society is expressed in Eliot's review *The Natural History of German Life*, among all the others mentioned by Rignall, I wish to focus on this critical review to better understand Spinoza's contribution to Eliot's mature, critical thinking.

Eliot's long article entitled *The Natural History of German Life* was written between May and June 1856 in Germany, while Eliot was helping G.H. Lewes in his studies. Published on the *Westminster Review* in July 1856, Eliot's article consists of a critical evaluation of the third edition of two books written by the social historian Wilhelm Heinrich von Riehl, *Die bürgerliche Gesellschaft* [*Bourgeois Society*] (1851) and *Land und Leute* [*Land and People*] (1853).[163] Forming the first part of his *Naturgeschichte des Volks* [*The Natural History of the People*], Riehl's works were at the forefront of a new way of considering history: instead of concentrating on the isolated actions of great men, his new historical approach studied and considered also the life of the middle and lower classes. Travelling through Germany, Riehl researched the economic and political development of Germany and analysed them in relation with German history, nature, and language.[164]

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[160] Ibid., p. 94.
[161] Rignall, "Spinoza, Brauch (Benedict de)", *op. cit.*, p. 399.
[162] Gatens, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
[163] Rignall, "Natural History of German Life, The", *op. cit.*, p. 284.

As Byatt notes, Eliot's review does not only show admiration for Riehl's view of history but also reflects on the possible social developments that such historical approach might have for modernity.[165] In the first part of her essay, Eliot valued Riehl's idea of considering history also from the point of view of the "masses" and believed it was extremely important for art and literature to picture the lives of these people realistically and accurately. In so doing, Eliot criticised the unrealistic accounts of the working classes which most social novels of her time represented[166] and emphasised the moral and social function of art:

> Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot. All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the People. Falsification here is far more pernicious than in the more artificial aspects of life.[167]

For Eliot, a truthful, realistic description of social life could encourage social harmony: if art is realistic, it can help fill the gap between higher and lower social classes and, giving a faithful account of the living conditions of "the People", it can become "a valuable aid to the social and political reformer"[168] and improve society. This idea is further developed by Eliot's observation regarding modern legislations.

> If we need a true conception of the popular character to guide our sympathies rightly, we need it equally to check our theories, and direct us in their application. The tendency created by the splendid conquests of modern generalization, to believe that all social questions are merged in economical science, and that the relations of men to their neighbours may be settled by algebraic equations […], none of these diverging mistakes can co-exist with a real knowledge of the People, with a thorough study of their habits, their ideas, their motives.[169]

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[164] Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, cit., p. 171.

[165] Eliot, *Selected Essays,* cit., p. XXI.

[166] Rignall, "Natural History of German Life, The", *op. cit.*, p. 284.

[167] G. Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life," *Westminster Review,* vol. LXVI, pp. 51-79, p. 54.

[168] Ibid., p. 56.

[169] Ibid.

If the "splendid conquests of modern generalization" might appeal to the modern generation, Eliot agreed with Riehl in noticing their unsuitability in the real world: the abstract trait of this generalised theories crushes against "the real knowledge of the People". Endorsing Riehl's reasoning, Eliot too believed that these universal and general reforms had "no validity except on paper".[170] Supporting Riehl's position, Eliot's reveals the reasons behind her realistic aesthetic choice: representing the "natural history"[171] of people means respecting and understanding "habits", "ideas" and "motives" of a specific community. As Gatens stated, Eliot deeply engaged her work with the specificity of ordinary human lot and, renouncing to represent heroic lives, through her modern heroes and heroines found greatness in humbleness: like Spinoza, Eliot aimed to "provide a practical philosophy for everyday life".[172]

Besides confirming her aesthetic commitment to realism, Eliot's review also proves her attention to the interaction of the individual with the community and offers another evaluation of Spinoza's ideas to apply in the modern society. Considering Riehl's account of physiognomies and languages of German people, Eliot compared modernity with the past and laid out an essential difference between "cultivated"[173] modern men and "coarse"[174] peasants.

> A painter who wants to draw mediaeval characters with historic truth, must seek his models among the peasantry. This explains why the old German painters gave the heads of their subjects a greater uniformity of type than the painters of our day: the race had not attained to a high degree of individualization in features and expression. It indicates, too, that the cultured man acts more as an individual; the peasant, more as one of a group […]. In the cultivated world each individual has his style of speaking and writing. But among the peasantry it is the race, the district, the province, that has its style; namely, its dialect, its phraseology, its proverbs, and its songs, which belong alike to the entire body of the people. This provincial style of the peasant is again, like his physique, a remnant of history to which he clings with the utmost tenacity. In certain parts of Hungary, there are still descendants of German colonists of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, who go about the country as reapers, retaining their old

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[170] Ibid., p. 71.
[171] Ibid., p. 70.
[172] Gatens, *op. cit.,* p. 84.
[173] Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life", cit., p. 58.
[174] Ibid., p. 55.

> Saxon songs and manners, while the more cultivated German emigrants in a very short time forget their own language, and speak Hungarian.[175]

From Eliot's analysis, it is possible to notice that while peasants' habits and physical characteristics retain the "historical peculiarities"[176] of their community and do not collapse under the force of the modern "individualisation", these typical historical features seem to "gradually disappear" and tend to be forgotten by modern individuals. This modern tendency to reject the past and its traditions may be associated with the "moral hubris"[177] described by Rignall. "Custom with [the peasant] hold the place of sentiment, of theory and in many cases of affection",[178] whereas cultured modern men act only for their own purpose and lose the sense of the "social vitality"[179] which tradition instead grants to the peasantry. In addition, the political and economic vicissitudes which disregard the community's traditions and moral values are described as influential factors which increase and accelerate this "degeneration"[180] of modernity. In her comment to the part of Riehl's work dedicated to the study of the bourgeoisie, Eliot reflected on the definition that Riehl gave of the word "Philister" and in this way she offered a clear exemplification of the individualistic and selfish tendency which connotates the modern moral decay.

> "What is the strict meaning of the word Philister?" Riehl's answer is, that the Philister is one who is indifferent to all social interests, all public life, as distinguished from selfish and private interests; he has no sympathy with political and social events except as they affect his own comfort and prosperity, as they offer him material for amusement or opportunity for gratifying his vanity. He has no social or political creed, but is always of the opinion which is most convenient for the moment. He is always in the majority, and is the main element of unreason and stupidity in the judgment of a "discerning public." […] We imagine the Philister is the personification of the spirit which judges everything from a lower point of view than the subject demands – which judges the affairs of the parish from the egotistic or purely personal

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[175] Ibid., pp. 57-58.
[176] Ibid., p. 59.
[177] Rignall, "Spinoza, Baruch (Benedict de)", *op. cit.,* p. 399.
[178] Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life", cit., p. 61.
[179] Ibid., p. 68.
[180] Ibid., p. 63.

> point of view – which judges the affairs of the nation from the parochial point of view, and does not hesitate to measure the merits of the universe from the human point of view.[181]

In this excerpt, Eliot intensifies Riehl's definition of a selfish "Philister" by personifying it in the "spirit" modernity: Eliot describes this individualistic consciousness as perceiving itself at the centre of action and incapable of seeing anything else beyond its own reality.[182] This inability of recognising themselves as belonging to larger reality which Eliot saw in some individuals can be related to Spinoza's consideration of humans in their "passive" attitude towards their emotions. For him, being able to rationally control emotions and passions means that men also understand what is most beneficial not for themselves only but for the whole human community. In this way, as Gatens states, Spinoza's ethical recommendation and vision of good as "shared collectively" [183] is clearly expressed in Eliot's statement when she considered the rural traditional life of the peasants as crucial for salvation of modern individualism: "a return to the habits of the peasant life is the best remedy for many moral as well as physical diseases induced by perverted civilisation".[184]

Nostalgically describing the past, Eliot revealed her admiration for past tradition and her implicit disapproval of revolutionary change.[185] Drawing a comparison between languages and morality, she eventually describes the healthy relation that the People should establish between their past and their present life.

> The nature of European men has its roots intertwined with the past, and can only be developed by allowing those roots to remain undisturbed while the process of development is going on, until that perfect ripeness of the seed which carries with it a life independent of the root. This vital connexion with the past is much more vividly felt on the Continent than in England, where we have to recall it by an effort of memory and reflection; for though our English life is in its core intensely traditional, Protestantism and commerce have modernized the face of

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[181] Ibid., p. 77.

[182] M. Gatens, "Philosophy", in M. Harris (ed.), *George Eliot in Context,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 214-221, p. 216.

[183] Ibid., p. 117.

[184] Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life", cit., p. 63.

[185] Rignall, "Natural History of German Life, The", *op. cit.*, p. 285.

> the land and the aspects of society in a far greater degree than in any continental country […].[186]

Recognising the "vital connexion" that the relationship with the past represents for modern generation, Eliot provided her personal outlook on how future generations should use their past to better understand their present selves. Using the metaphor of the seed, Eliot symbolically represented her vision of progress elaborating Spinoza's vision of good politics.[187] Embracing Spinoza's idea that wise governance is expected to ensure that the community is well unified as it is only through it that humans can accomplish good achievements for the species,[188] Eliot also added her consideration of memory and reflection as essential to pass on those traditional moral values that modernity would otherwise forget.

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[186] Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life", cit., p. 70.
[187] Gatens, "George Eliot's 'Incarnation of the divine'", cit., p. 82.
[188] Ibid., p. 81.

Chapter 3: Sympathy in *Silas Marner* and *Middlemarch*

In this third chapter, Eliot's notion of sympathy will be analysed in its narrative realisations, focusing on the characters of Silas in *Silas Marner, the Weaver of Raveloe* and Dorothea in *Middlemarch*. Many critical studies have discussed George Eliot's novels and examined them from many points of view, considering various aspects of the works' composition. Even though there can be some disagreement in their interpretation, critics generally agree that Eliot's "doctrine of sympathy"[189] can be considered as the most powerful creative energy in her fiction.

A few critics have attempted to define Eliot's sympathy and find its essential characteristics. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth believes that sympathy itself is crucial to understand Eliot's works as it affects the author's treatment of social and moral problems. For this reason, in *Eliot's Conception of Sympathy* Ermarth concentrates on studying two of the major ethical and philosophical influences, namely Feuerbach, and Spinoza. In particular, Ermarth maintains that Feuerbach's idea of the I-Thou division is reflected in Eliot's idea of sympathy as "a division in the psyche, a split in consciousness that permits two conflicting views to exist simultaneously".[190] In so doing, Ermarth highlights the importance of sympathy in the life of the human community for Eliot: "the recognition of difference" between the individual and the union with the rest of the people lays at the heart of the creative action in each of her stories and constitutes the "supremely moral act". [191] Similarly, Forest Pyle agrees on this aspect of sympathy essentially connected to the community and additionally defines it as the "medium of resolution" to the contrast between "the inward and the outward" life of an individual. However, while Ermarth believes that this trait of sympathy has little to do with selflessness, Pyle actually defines it as "the imaginative impulse that, transcending the egotism and renouncing the desires of the self, promises to bridge the epistemological and ethical gap between the self and world".[192] Like Pyle, Houghton is another critic that traditionally sustained the selfless feature of

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[189] T. A. Noble, *George Eliot's Scenes of Clerical Life*, New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1965, p. 61.

[190] Deeds Ermarth, *op. cit.,* p. 23.

[191] Ibid., pp. 25-26.

[192] Pyle, *op. cit.,* p. 6.

Eliot's sympathy and listed her among the authors professing the mid-Victorian cult of benevolence. According to Houghton, this cult originated from the necessity of addressing the misery of the working-class people during the industrial revolution showing a sincere "sense of social duty" and an "acute sympathy" for those in pain.[193] For Houghton, Eliot's notion of sympathy could fit with this feeling of pity for those who were either in trouble or in sorrow, however noticing that Eliot's work was distant from other authors' sentimentalism. While "sentimental indulgence of pity and love is self-centred", Eliot's benevolent sympathy necessarily "presupposes a forgetfulness of the self in the recognition of our common humanity".[194]

As it is possible to see, this feature of selflessness is one of the most debated points about Eliot's conception of sympathy. Many critics object to Pyle and Houghton's positions: next to Ermerth who has been already considered, in her critical work about *Silas Marner* Pond explores the communal aspect of sympathy in Eliot's narrative and defends the active role of the subject in its connection with the others. Considering Emmanuel Levinas and Kelly Oliver's philosophical theories, Pond builds her interpretation of Eliot's notion of sympathy and identifies in the act of witnessing the way to establish the self-other connection which sympathy would promote in Eliot's work.[195] Subsequently, Pond challenges the idea that the sympathetic relation requires an individual to completely forget themselves in Eliot's novels: she demonstrates that instead the extension of sympathy does not consist in recognising the sameness in the other but that, by realising the difference between the I and the Thou, there is the possibility for a truer ethical encounter.[196]

Similarly, in his criticism on *Scenes of Clerical Life* Noble sustains that Eliot's sympathy is "achieved through an imaginative extension of the self".[197] According to Noble, sympathy is meant to elevate humans in Eliot's vision, and therefore he discards the trait of selflessness as typical of sympathy as this may obstruct its natural flow: indeed, self-forgetfulness could prevent the reconciliation of the self and the other which is believed to be fundamental for Eliot.

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[193] W. E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870*, New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1957, p. 274.
[194] Ibid., p. 278.
[195] K. A. Pond, "Bearing Witness in 'Silas Marner': George Eliot's Experiment in Sympathy", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2013, pp. 691–709, pp. 692-693.
[196] Ibid., p. 704.
[197] Noble, *op. cit.,* p. 63.

Starting from Noble's reasoning, Jones in her research concludes that "selflessness is a dimension that critics simply add" in interpreting Eliot's work.[198] Jones believes that the selfless trait of sympathy in Eliot's works can be excluded from analysis as Eliot herself saw as a "miserable fallacy" the idea that in the modern world people embrace "the millennial state of altruism, where everyone is caring for everyone, but no one is caring for himself".[199] For this reason, Jones sees the necessity of researching other traits of sympathy rather than selflessness and that much is to be done in order to perfectly answer the question "what is sympathy itself for Eliot?".[200]

Being conscious of the questions raised and debated in the critical tradition about Eliot's conception of sympathy, my personal aim is to investigate how in Eliot's vision sympathy can change people's lives and how sympathy's effusive, transforming energy is capable of creating unconventional modern heroes and heroines. To do so, I will pay particular attention to the personal growth of Silas Marner in the homonymous novel and of Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*. Since both Silas's and Dorothea's stories show their learning experience of adapting to the life of the community, I believe that these two novels can help detect some traits of Eliot's notion of sympathy. More specifically, I aim to interpret what sympathy means in terms of relation between the self and the other and what this might imply for the modern society. Additionally, I will reflect on whether the selfless trait may be attributed to Eliot's notion of sympathy.

Through the narrative voice Eliot often seems to express her own personal ideas.[201] Newton[202] maintains that there is no proof that the narrator coincides with the author herself, and that actually there might have been a strong authorial will to separate the two figures. This separation might have helped establishing "a common set of moral values on purely humanist grounds" that through the voice of an omniscient narrator would sound acceptable to the readers. Additionally, the narrator's interventions can be considered as crucial to understand the author's idea of sympathy because they do not offer only one point of view in telling the story but open up the possibility to see facts from different perspectives, therefore, allowing readers themselves to be more sympathetic with all characters.[203]

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[198] Jones, *op. cit.* p. 5.
[199] Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life", cit., p. 55.
[200] Jones, *op. cit.,* p. 1.
[201] K. M. Newton, "The Role of the Narrator in George Eliot's Novels", *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1973, pp. 97–107, p. 106.
[202] Ibid., p. 102.

3.1. *Silas Marner, the Weaver of Raveloe*

On 12 January 1861, Eliot wrote to Blackwood about "a story of an old-fashioned village life" which came across her plans "by a sudden inspiration".[204] The idea for this story interrupted her work on *Romola* and some months later it would become the second of her three short stories, *Silas Marner, the Waver of Raveloe*. Published in March 1861, *Silas Marner* is a sort of legendary tale, as defined by its author, which is set in the old village of Raveloe at the beginning of the 19th century.[205] After the initial description of the rural life of peasantry in the fertile area of the Midlands which recalls the author's childhood, the narrator introduces the character of Silas Marner, a self-employed weaver who had been living in Raveloe for fifteen years. Previously he had lived in the religious community of the Dissenting in Lantern Yard, a Northern Industrial town, and had to escape the village after being falsely accused of stealing gold from a dying man. Finding refuge in the town of Raveloe, Silas lives a solitary life: having his only living purpose in his weaving activity, he only cares about hoarding money and eventually gains the reputation of a miser.[206] Silas's story is parallel to the one of Godfrey Cass, the son of the old squire of Raveloe. Godfrey is secretly married to an opium addicted woman, Molly Farren, but hopes to start a new life and marry Nancy, the beautiful village woman he is in love with. Unfortunately, Dunsey Cass, Godfrey's elder brother who forced him into his first marriage, torments and blackmails Godfrey threatening to reveal the truth about his secret wife to their father. One day after a bet, Dunsey obtains Godfrey's horse and wishes to sell it to get more money. Due to an accident, the horse gets killed: for his uncontrolled greediness and avidity, Dunsey walks up to Silas's cottage hoping to find the money that are rumoured to be Silas's treasure. In his absence, Dunsay steals all the gold of Silas and when the old weaver finds out about the theft he is in utter despair. At this point of the narration the fate of the old waver crosses Godfrey's: thanks to the arrival of Eppie, the abandoned natural child of Godfrey that Silas miraculously found in his cottage after his golden coins were stolen, Silas's life changes forever. Adopting the child, Silas finds a new life and rediscovers feelings which he had never thought he could experience.[207] This happens because sympathy plays a central role in shaping and changing the characters' lives: this is especially true for of Silas. In this chapter I will attempt to illustrate the most significant steps of Silas's personal development that show the transformative energy of sympathy in reconnecting Silas with the others.

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[203] Ibid., p. 107.
[204] George Eliot to John Blackwood, 12.01.1861, in Cross, *op. cit.*, p. 240.
[205] Rignall, "Silas Marner: the Weaver of Raveloe", *op. cit.*, p. 382.
[206] Ibid., p. 384.

3.1.1. The betrayal: Silas's past in Lantern Yard and his isolation in Raveloe

At the very beginning of the novel, Eliot's narrator describes Silas's life precisely as a "history and a metamorphosis",[208] which already hints to the changes that the weaver undergoes throughout the novel. After a brief description of the life of the peasantry in the countryside of the Midlands, the narrator introduces the character of Silas Marner.

> It was fifteen years since Silas Marner had first come to Raveloe; he was then simply a pallid young man, with prominent short-sighted brown eyes, whose appearance would have had nothing strange for people of average culture and experience, but for the villagers near whom he had come to settle it had mysterious peculiarities which corresponded with the exceptional nature of his occupation, and his advent from an unknown region called "North'-ard." So had his way of life: — he invited no comer to step across his door-sill, and he never strolled into the village to drink a pint at the Rainbow, or to gossip at the wheelwright's: he sought no man or woman, save for the purposes of his calling, or in order to supply himself with necessaries;

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[207] Ibid.

[208] G. Eliot, *Silas Marner, The Weaver of Raveloe*, London: Vintage Books, (1861), 2010, p. 8.

> and it was soon clear to the Raveloe lasses that he would never urge one of them to accept him against her will — quite as if he had heard them declare that they would never marry a dead man come to life again.[209]

Despite having spent fifteen years in the village of Raveloe, Silas is portrayed as a misanthropist in a condition of total isolation.[210] His physical features are perceived by the superstitious villagers as "mysterious peculiarities". Besides Silas's paleness, his "prominent short-sighted brown eyes" and "the exceptional nature", his unknown origins increase the mystery around Silas and widen the gap between him and the rest community. Silas appears as an odd, old man to the inhabitants of Raveloe and his withdrawal from society is total as he does not seek anyone's company. Vice versa, the villagers do not try to reach him: the girls' relief at knowing that Silas would never try to marry any of them confirms this reciprocal avoidance and increases Silas's strangeness in the eyes of the villagers. In this condition of suspicion and inability of understanding the disposition of the other, sympathy cannot show its signs. As in Feuerbach's view, perceiving other people's differences as insurmountable leads to nothing but to the disconnection among humans. For this reason, in this part of the story the human relational web is weak.[211]

At the end of this passage Silas's condition is introduced: his cataleptic fits are described by the narrator as making Silas look like a "dead man come to life again". These fits are to be considered as an important characteristic of Silas as these "moments of absence" take place in narrative points which are crucial in Silas's personal life and rediscovery of sympathy. Moreover, Silas's catalepsy marks the contrast between the weaver's life in Raveloe and his past.[212] While his condition grows suspicion and rejection towards Silas in the villagers of Raveloe, the narrator explains that Silas's fits were instead accepted in the community of Lantern Yard and recalls Silas's previous life experiences.

> His life, before he came to Raveloe, had been filled with the movement, the mental activity, and the close fellowship, which in that day as in this, marked the life of an artisan early

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[209] Ibid., pp. 6-7.

[210] Marucci, *op. cit.*, p. 854.

[211] Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

[212] Deeds Ermarth, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

> incorporated in a narrow religious sect, where the poorest layman has the chance of distinguishing himself by gifts of speech, and has, at the very least, the weight of a silent voter in the government of his community. Marner was highly thought of in that little hidden world, known to itself as the church assembling in Lantern Yard; he was believed, to be a young man of exemplary life and ardent faith; and a peculiar interest had been centred in him ever since he had fallen, at a prayer-meeting, into a mysterious rigidity and suspension of consciousness, which, lasting for an hour or more, had been mistaken for death. To have sought a medical explanation for this phenomenon would have been held by Silas himself, as well as by his minister and fellow-members, a wilful self-exclusion from the spiritual significance that might lie therein.[213]

Silas's life in Lantern Yard is described as diametrically opposite to the condition of hard isolation in Raveloe. The idyllic looking "little hidden world" of the religious community of Lantern Yard seems to welcome Silas and encourage his natural inclination to "movement", "mental activity" and "close fellowship" with others. Silas's catalepsy is charged with "spiritual significance" and, therefore, seen as a gift by the brethren of the Lantern Yard's community. This flashback to the past life of Silas shows that he is not incapable of reaching the others and being part of a community: his "honest and sane" attitude, his loyal friendship with William Dane and his engagement with Sarah confirm that before getting to Raveloe Silas valued the human connection with others and cherished the fellow-feeling that is at the very base of sympathy. Additionally, Silas's "trusting simplicity" and "defenceless deer-like gaze"[214] not only denote Silas's meekness but also show his tendency to notice the best in the other: like Feuerbach's idea of humanity where men compensate for each other's faults, Silas tends to see the good qualities instead of flaws and faults.

William Dane, Silas's best friend, takes advantage of Silas's goodness and will be the one responsible for the sudden change in Silas's attitude towards others. Initially suggesting that Silas's fits were connected to the devil and then falsely accusing Silas of theft, William undermines Silas's web of human connections and destroys his social life in Lantern Yard. Betrayed by his best friend and abandoned by the whole community, Silas is “stunned by despair”:[215] he is unable to believe in the divine justice and loses faith in humanity too. The description of these circumstances previous to the arrival of Silas in Raveloe help interpret Silas’s escape from the community of Lantern Yard and his voluntary withdrawal from the villagers of Raveloe. Because of his wounded soul, Silas seeks protection in his “hard isolation” and when he arrives to Raveloe his trust in humanity has inevitably already “turned to bitterness”.[216]

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[213] Eliot, *Silas Marner*, cit., pp. 8-9.

[214] Ibid., p. 10.

> He hated the thought of the past; there was nothing that called out his love and fellowship toward the strangers he had come amongst; and the future was all dark, for there was no Unseen Love that cared for him. Thought was arrested by utter bewilderment, now its old narrow pathway was closed, and affection seemed to have died under the bruise that had fallen on its keenest nerves.[217]

Words such as “arrested”, “closed”, “died” and “bruise” describe the painful and violent experience that William’s betrayal caused to Silas. His hopelessness is embodied by a future that is “all dark” and his sense of loneliness is emphasised by the personification of an “Unseen Love” that he feels is not looking after him. To describe Silas’s estrangement from the community, Eliot’s narrator presents the Feuerbachian feelings of “love” and “friendship” as apparently dead: the lack of contact with others makes it impossible for Silas to create any affectionate bond and, consequently, to manifest any fellow-feeling.

3.1.2. Silas’s companions: his golden coins and the earthenware pot

Nevertheless, Silas’s natural inclination to sympathetic feelings has not completely disappeared. As Ermarth sustains, Silas’s human faculty to *feel for* others has simply become “dormant for lack of exercise”.[218] Silas’s natural tension to sympathy is still present in his heart as it is proved by the affectionate attitude that he shows towards simple objects, such as his old brown pot.

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[215] Ibid., p. 15.

[216] Ibid., p. 17.

[217] Ibid., pp. 17-18.

[218] Deeds Ermarth, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

> Yet even in this stage of withering a little incident happened, which showed that the sap of affection was not all gone. It was one of his daily tasks to fetch his water from a well a couple of fields off, and for this purpose, ever since he came to Raveloe, he had had a brown earthenware pot, which he held as his most precious utensil among the very few conveniences he had granted himself. It had been his companion for twelve years, always standing on the same spot, always lending its handle to him in the early morning, so that its form had an expression for him of willing helpfulness, and the impress of its handle on his palm gave a satisfaction mingled with that of having the fresh clear water. One day as he was returning from the well, he stumbled against the step of the stile, and his brown pot, falling with force against the stones that overarched the ditch below him, was broken in three pieces. 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.[219]

In this passage, Silas's need for human companionship is manifest in his way of treating the brown jug as if it was a person. The narrator clearly addresses it as a "companion" for Silas and the personification of this "most precious" item is intensified by the description of its active involvement in Silas's daily routine, "landing its handle" and being helpful to him. The "grief" felt by Silas after accidentally destroying his jug and his care in preserving its broken pieces testify Silas's true attachment to this object. As Jones sustains, this means that not only objects may be considered suitable to encourage and exercise sympathy when there is no other form of human contact but that clearly Silas's sympathetic skills are still vital.[220]

Another love-object relation that significantly proves that the sympathetic instinct is simply quiescent in Silas is the attachment developed with the gold earned through the weaving activity. This activity does not only materially enrich Silas but gives him a purpose for living.

> The money had come to mark off his weaving into periods, and the money not only grew, but it remained with him. He began to think it was conscious of him, as his loom was, and he could on no account have exchanged those coins, which had become his familiars, for other coins with unknown faces. He handled them, he counted them, till their form and colour were like

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[219] Eliot, *Silas Marner*, cit., pp. 22-23.

[220] Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

> the satisfaction of a thirst to him; but it was only in the night, when his work was done, that he drew them out to enjoy their companionship.[221]

Like the brown jug, the golden coins become alive for Silas: growing, remaining with him and being conscious of his presence, these coins are personified to represent those human beings that Silas is unable to reach in this phase of his life. The fact that these coins are dear to him as if they were members of his family confirms that these coins are meant to answer Silas's psychological demand for human contact.[222] These coins that are described as capable of temporarily satisfying Silas's "thirst" can be interpreted as the means for Silas to fill the void of his lost faith in humanity and in God.[223] Through his coins, Silas can remember the love and human companionship that he really misses. Moreover, the physical characterisation of Silas describes even more in detail the kind of sympathetic attachment that the weaver would be naturally inclined to develop.

> So, year after year, Silas Marner had lived in this solitude, his guineas rising in the iron pot, and his life narrowing and hardening itself more and more into a mere pulsation of desire and satisfaction that had no relation to any other being. His life had reduced itself to the functions of weaving and hoarding, without any contemplation of an end toward which the functions tended. […] 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. The prominent eyes that used to look trusting and dreamy, now looked as if they had been made to see only one kind of thing that was very small, like tiny grain, for which they hunted everywhere; and he was so withered and yellow, that, though he was not yet forty, the children always called him "Old Master Marner".[224]

Silas's attachment to his golden coins is visceral and Eliot's narrator vividly describes the consequences that this "pulsation of desire and satisfaction" for his precious treasure causes to the weaver. Silas's sympathetic disposition makes him assume some of the typical features of his precious objects: for example, he mechanically bents like the handle of his old jug and his skin becomes yellow like his guineas. If Silas's attachment to his golden coins proves that his relational abilities are still present, it also shows that Silas's need of human contact cannot be substituted entirely by objects. The despair and the pain caused by the betrayal of his dearest people cannot be mended by objects in that condition of isolation: Silas needs to build a connection with other people in order to gain faith in humanity again and feel his sympathetic capacities fully realised.

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[221] Eliot, *Silas Marner*, cit., p. 21.

[222] Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 248-249.

[223] Rignall, "Silas Marner: the Weaver of Raveloe", *op. cit.*, pp. 385-386.

[224] Eliot, *Silas Marner*, cit., pp. 21-22.

3.1.3. The theft: Silas's confusion and despair

Silas's condition of isolation and his odd physical appearance widen the distance between himself and the rest of the Raveloe's community. According to Pond, in order for sympathy to be actively involved in the plot, Silas's choice of living an isolated life had to be reformed.[225]After describing Silas's past life and his present isolation, the narration shifts to the story of the Cass brothers and intertwines it with Silas's story. After extorting Godfrey's horse and accidentally killing it, Dustan Cass intervenes in Silas's life causing him much pain. Careless of Silas's condition and only caring about himself, Dustan manages to find Silas's gold and steals it without being noticed. When Silas goes to his secret place to contemplate his gold, the shock is violent: "the sight of the empty hole made his hear leap violently".[226] Silas's "trembling hands"[227] show his confusion and agitation for having lost the only thing which really mattered to him. Despite being a very tragic moment for the poor man, this can be considered as one of the most important turning points in the novel:[228] Silas's hopes to find the thief forced him to ask for help to the villagers. As sustained by Pond, the villagers' witnessing of Silas misfortunes represent a highly important moment for the manifestation of sympathy.[229] Once Silas tells the story to the people gathered at the Rainbow Inn, the local pub of Raveloe, the waver and the community there found themselves in a new situation.

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[225] Pond, *op. cit.*, p. 694.
[226] Eliot, *Silas Marner*, cit., p. 47.
[227] Ibid.
[228] Pond, *op. cit.,* p. 693.
[229] Ibid., p. 694.

> This strangely novel situation of opening his trouble to his Raveloe neighbours, of sitting in the warmth of a hearth not his own, and feeling the presence of faces and voices which were his nearest promise of help, had doubtless its influence on Marner, in spite of his passionate preoccupation with his loss. Our consciousness rarely registers the beginning of a growth within us any more than without us: there have been many circulations of the sap before we detect the smallest sign of the bud. The slight suspicion with which his hearers at first listened to him, gradually melted away before the convincing simplicity of his distress […].[230]

Sharing his misfortunes with others, Silas breaks out of his isolation and for the first time after many years does he re-establish contact with others: in Feuerbachian terms, the I and the Thou finally communicate again in this scene. Both Silas and the Raveloe's villagers change their attitude towards one another:[231] Silas's desperate call for help touches the villagers and they soon respond to it. Silas's strangeness has not changed into their eyes but the fact that the villagers perceive "the convincing simplicity of his distress" leads them to generously offer help and consolation.[232] Additionally, the fact that the suspicion of the villagers has "melted away" suggests that in this scenario something is effusively changing. This is happening in Silas too: Eliot's narrator describes the "beginning of a growth" from within and, using the plant imagery, metaphorically compares it to the floral sap. This concisely describes the effusive effect that sympathy for Eliot naturally exercises on humans when the fellow-feeling of belonging, being welcomed and of receiving support from others is perceived by an individual. The villager's sympathy towards Silas is embodied by the "warmth" that he perceives in a "hearth not his own"; by the "feeling of presence" of human faces and voices which replace the "familiar faces" of the stolen coins; and by the "nearest promise of help" that easily stirs the natural sympathetic disposition of Silas that was previously quiescent. This new condition of relation with the other and the perception of human contact soften Silas's hard feelings: from this moment on sympathy will openly operate in the narrative and will manifest itself through the clear signs of change in the old weaver.

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[230] Eliot, *Silas Marner,* cit., p. 63.
[231] Pond*, op. cit.*, p. 694.
[232] Ibid., pp. 694-695.

3.1.4. Reconnection: Silas's metamorphosis through sympathy

Silas's tendency to withdrawal remained but "now that he appeared in the light of a sufferer"[233] the villagers' interactions with him increased. Indeed, Silas's misfortunes attracts many people to his cottage to offer him not only consolation but also food and company. Through metaphors of "mysterious openings and of thresholds",[234] the narrator describes Silas's gradual opening to the community and shows a true change in Silas's attitude in receiving people at his place.

> They had to know loudly before Silas heard them; but when he did come to the door, he showed no impatience, as he would once have done, at a visit that had been unasked for and unexpected. Formerly, his heart had been as a locked casket with its treasure inside; but now the casket was empty, and the lock was broken. Left groping in darkness, with his prop utterly gone, Silas had inevitably a sense, though a dull and half-despairing one, that if any help came to him it must come from without; and there was a slight stirring of expectation at the sight of his fellow-men, a faint consciousness of dependence on their goodwill.[235]

The change that the disclosure of his sufferings and the villagers' sympathetic interest in his misfortunes caused to Silas here is clearly described: the weaver is now accepting human compassion from others and is establishing with them a new relationship. Comparing Silas's heart to a locked casket, Eliot's narrator develops a simile that explains the effects of sympathy on Silas in terms of an inner rupture: the self-imposed limitations and the isolated living conditions that prevented Silas to reach others and open to human affection are finally "broken". Despite still feeling a despairing confusion for the loss of his precious gold, Silas gradually starts to consider his neighbours as reliable "fellow-men"[236] and feels that they are the only ones who can lead him out of the "darkness" he has been left in.

Additionally, Silas's own consciousness of needing others and accepting their help shows another aspect of sympathy: Eliot's idea of sympathy is not a mere notion of emotionally *feeling for*

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[233] Eliot, *Silas Marner*, cit., p. 90.
[234] Deeds Ermarth, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
[235] Eliot, *Silas Marner,* cit., p. 91.
[236] Deeds Ermarth, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

others but also constitutes a way of accessing knowledge.[237] As sustained by Suzy Anger, sympathy pushes the individual beyond its own limits and teaches them how to imagine and then understand the other's state of mind. Therefore, according to Anger, Eliot's sympathy is inevitably connected to a notion of "ethical intuitionism" and knowledge of the world: there is not a unique, systematic solution to make moral choices but the "deep seated habit" of sympathetically imaging what one would need in a certain situation is the "only sure guide to right judgment and action".[238] This also implies that, if thinking in this way, individuals may start to consider the world from a different perspective than just their own: in Silas's case, his personal confusion turns into "a faint consciousness" of belonging to a reality that is wider than his limited one and that, more importantly, includes others.[239]

3.1.5. Eppie: Silas's final catalyst for sympathy

This gradual change that the sympathy of the villagers triggers in Silas's disposition finds its "final catalyst"[240] in the character of Eppie, the natural child of Godfrey Cass and his secret wife, Molly Farren. Arriving in Raveloe in the cold night of New Year's Eve to seek revenge on Godfrey, Molly carries Eppie with her and appears at the door of Silas's cottage. The entire scene is described in magical and mystical terms and when Molly collapses in the snow under the noxious effect of alcohol, the golden-curled child enters Silas's cottage. Through the metaphor of the threshold,[241] Eliot's narrator marks another turning point of Silas's story and suggests the great importance that this child has in helping Silas to open his heart. When Eppie reaches Silas's warm hearth, the weaver does not notice her as he is arrested by his cataleptic fit. Once he regains his senses, Silas mistakes the glow of Eppie's golden curls for his lost money.

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[237] S. Anger, "George Eliot and philosophy", in G. Levine (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp.76-97, p. 85.

[238] Ibid., p. 80.

[239] Rignall, "Silas Marner: the Weaver of Raveloe", *op. cit.*, p. 387.

[240] Pond, *op. cit.*, p. 700.

[241] Deeds Ermarth, *op. cit.,* p. 32.

> He leaned forward at last, and stretched forth his hand; but instead of the hard coin with the familiar resisting outline, his fingers encountered soft warm curls. In utter amazement, Silas fell on his knees and bent his head low to examine the marvel: it was a sleeping child – a round, fair thing, with soft yellow rings all over its head. Could this be his little sister come back to him in a dream – his little sister whom he had carried about in his arms for a year before she died, when he was a small boy without shoes or stockings? […] But along with that question, and almost thrusting it away, there was a vision of the old home and the old streets leading to Lantern Yard. […] These 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.[242]

Silas's disappointment in not touching his coins gives way to the "amazement" of finding a new "marvel". Eppie is described as a living treasure which resembles Silas's coins for being a "round, fair thing" with "yellow rings"; however, in contrast with the hardness of the golden coins, the child has "soft" and "warm" features. Silas's second thought is connected to his childhood and the memory of his departed little sister awakes in him loving sensations. These tender feelings that also recall the loving disposition that Silas had previously in Lantern Yard and clearly show how these feeling were not unprecedented but simply hidden in Silas's past.[243] Eppie's arrival helps Silas to find again his caring and sympathetic skills[244] which through "old quieverings of tenderness" gradually come back to the sight of the abandoned, unprotected child. Considering Eppie as a "message" sent to him from an unknown "Power" to replace his lost coins, Silas is naturally guided by the human sympathetic fellow-feeling to take care of Eppie and welcomes the crying child into his arms, "unconsciously utter[ing] sounds of hushing tenderness" to calm her. Thus, sympathy not only manifests itself as a natural instinct in Silas but also shows how essential is the presence of the other – in this specific case, Eppie – for it to be fully and actively manifest.

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[242] Eliot, *Silas Marner,* cit., pp. 126-127.
[243] Deeds Ermarth, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
[244] Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

Sympathy gradually grows and love and affection get strong again in Silas's heart and instead of the disillusioned weaver who could only love his gold, Silas soon appears to be a loving, caring creature: this is proved by his "sudden impulse"[245] to adopt Eppie and by the confidence shown in defending his right to take care of the abandoned child found at his doorstep. While Godfrey does not reveal the truth about the child and selfishly keeps the secret for himself, Silas becomes a caring father that through the love for his daughter gives a new meaning to his life.

Forgetting the pain for his lost gold, Silas fully dedicates his life to Eppie: her adoption can be seen as a way to extend human ties beyond the bond of blood-relation and in this context can be interpreted as the actualisation of Feuerbach's interpretation of love as the self-consciousness of humanity.[246] Being able to appreciate differences between humans and accepting these, in Feuerbach's terms, as part of the whole of humanity consists in the highest form of sympathy and in the true act of love.[247] In Silas's case, his natural acceptance of this child shows the true essence of sympathy which leads him not to care for her for his own benefit but to respond to a deeper human need of belonging to a larger reality than an isolated one, namely, the human species. This means that Silas gains back his lost faith in humanity:

> And now something had come to replace his hoard which gave a growing purpose to the earnings, drawing his hope and joy continually onward beyond the money.
> In old days there were angels who came and took men by the hand and led them away from the city of destruction. We see no white-winged angels now. But yet men are led away from threatening destruction: a hand is put into theirs, which leads them forth gently toward a calm and bright land, so that they look no more backward; and the hand may be a little child's.[248]

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[245] Eliot, *Silas Marner,* cit., p. 131.
[246] Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 250.
[247] P. Fessenbecker, "Sympathy, Vocation, and Moral Deliberation in George Eliot", *ELH*, vol. 85 no. 2, 2018, pp. 501-532, p. 524.
[248] Eliot, *Silas*, p. 150.

Echoing again Feuerbach's religion of humanity again, the narrator here metaphorically explains how humans can find their own salvation in their fellow creatures: the past "white-winged angels" can now be found in real men, women and children. In this way, Eppie can be seen as the child who saved Silas from his own self-destruction: "warming him into joy because *she* had joy"[249] Eppie helps Silas discover again the true, deep essence of human connection, here represented by joint hands. In contrast with Silas's previous lonely, isolated condition, his new life with Eppie is perfused by calmness and brightness and looks forward to the promising future.[250]

3.1.6. Silas and Eppie: reciprocal effects of sympathy

Not only did Eppie's arrival help Silas's sympathetic feelings to remerge but, connecting him with the community, also clearly gave him reason to trust in humanity again. Indeed, Silas's sympathetic dedication and love for Eppie extended also his relationship with the community of Raveloe. The powerful influence of sympathy in drawing human beings close to one another is portrayed in the support that the community of Raveloe showed to Silas for his decision of adopting Eppie.[251] In particular, considering him "an exceptional person",[252] the caring mothers of the village pay visits to Silas with "a more active sympathy"[253] to advise and support him in his new experience of fatherhood. Among these people Silas relies on the kind-hearted Dolly Winthrop, who teaches him how to take care of Eppie. In his relationship with her, it is possible to see how Silas increasingly becomes part of the community and eventually also follows its traditions.[254]

> By seeking what was needful for Eppie, by sharing the effect that everything produced on her, he had himself come to appropriate the forms of custom and belief which were the mould of Raveloe life, and as, with reawakening sensibilities, memory also reawakened, he had begun to ponder over the elements of his old faith, and blend them with his new impressions, till he

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[249] Ibid., p. 143.
[250] Rignall, "Silas Marner: the Weaver of Raveloe", *op. cit.*, p. 387.
[251] Pond, *op. cit.*, p. 700.
[252] Eliot, *Silas Marner*, p. 160.
[253] Pond, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
[254] Deeds Ermarth, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

> recovered a consciousness of unity between his past and present. The sense of presiding goodness and the human trust which come with all pure peace and joy, had given him a dim impression that there had been some error, some mistake, which had thrown that dark shadow over the days of his best years; and as it grew more and more easy to him to open his mind to Dolly Winthrop, he gradually communicated to her all he could describe of his early life.[255]

In this passage traditions are seen as an important element of cohesion for a community: once Silas gets involved in the customs of the village, he can access the sympathetic web that deeply connects all the villagers.[256] Traditions also seem to reawaken the memories of Silas's past: beyond his "reawaken" sensibilities, his old faith is restored. Silas seems here capable of reconciling with his past and, showing more understanding and acceptance than at the beginning of the novel, can also see it in a new light. This allows Silas to gradually share his past life with Dolly and discover the true meaning of friendship.[257]

Silas and Eppie's story also reveals another important feature of sympathy. Receiving love and affection from her father, Eppie easily learns how to reciprocate the "tenderly-nurtured unvitiated feeling".[258] The effects that sympathy creates are therefore bidirectional and benefit both the self and the other. This confirms that truthful sympathetic relations require the self to have the presence of the other. As Carlson states, "the Self needs the Other to fully actualize" and sympathy becomes essential as "it facilitates full humanness".[259]

Saving Eppie from an uncertain destiny, Silas's love never makes her wish to have another father and the truth about her real parents does not question her love for Silas. Her honest attachment to Silas and the deep respect for their life together is proved by the choice she makes when Godfrey reveals the truth about him being her biological father. When Godfrey and Nancy arrive at Silas's cottage disclosing the secret about her birth to the young girl, they offer Eppie to live with them in their house and in wealthier conditions. Eppie's reaction reveals her sympathy towards the distress of Silas and also the true caring love she feels for him.

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[255] Eliot, *Silas Marner*, cit., p. 162.
[256] Deeds Ermarth*, op. cit.*, p. 33.
[257] Pond, *op. cit.*, p. 703.
[258] Eliot, *Silas Marner*, cit., p. 166.
[259] Carlson, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-71.

> Eppie took her hand from her father's head, and came forward a step. Her cheeks were flushed, but not with shyness this time, the sense that her father was in doubt and suffering banished that sort of self-consciousness. She dropped a low curtsy, first to Mrs. Cass and then to Mr. Cass, and said — "Thank you, ma'am — thank you, sir. But I can't leave my father, nor own anybody nearer than him. And I don't want to be a lady—thank you all the same" (here Eppie dropped another curtsy). "I couldn't give up the folks I've been used to". […] "I can't feel as I've got any father but one," said Eppie, impetuously, while the tears gathered. "I've always thought of a little home where he'd sit i' the corner, and I should fend and do everything for him: I can't think o' no other home. I wasn't brought up to be a lady, and I can't turn my mind to it. I like the working-folks, and their victuals, and their ways. And," she ended passionately, while the tears fell, "I'm promised to marry a working-man, as'll live with father, and help me to take care of him". [260]

In this excerpt, Eppie shyness is put aside by the much stronger sympathetic impulse that aims to protect Silas from any harm. Her genuine concern at seeing her father in distress leads her action and, refusing Godfrey's offer, Eppie chooses to stand close to those she could never leave as they constitute the sympathetic web in which she grew up.

Eppie's choice also shows how sympathy works reciprocally between her and Silas, while it is completely missing in Godfrey. Even if across the years Godfrey tried to assist her financially, he only approaches her when the question of marriage and property comes up. As sustained by Jones,[261] Godfrey lacks of sympathy as he clearly prioritises money and property over feelings. Not only does he renounce to his own daughter, but also he demonstrates to be incapable of perceiving Silas's distress and, therefore, fails to recognise and accept the other. Conversely, Silas values Eppie and, loving her as a unique individual, encourages her freedom of choice regarding Godfrey's offer. Silas is also ready to let Eppie choose her own happiness: this would not mean sacrificing his own happiness as in the purest form of sympathetic love her joy would be his own joy. Eventually Eppie freely chooses for her happiness: admitting that she would be uncomfortable behaving like a lady, she sets her own aims for her personal life and naturally wishes to take care of her father.

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[260] Eliot, *Silas Marner*, cit., pp. 191-196.
[261] Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 258-259.

Overall, the recognition and the acceptance of otherness is at the very base of the sympathetic feeling in the novel of *Silas Marner*.[262] The relation with others appears to be the essence of Eliot's notion of sympathy and its beneficial effects prove to have a life-saving effect[263] on those who experience it. Additionally, Eppie's final choice to marry Aaron and to care for her father too supports the idea that their mutual love does not imply selflessness but that sympathetically caring for others means taking care of the other and of one's own self at the same time. As Eliot herself wrote to her publisher, *Silas Marner* really was meant to show "in a strong light the remedial influences of pure, natural human relation".[264]

3.2. *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*

Eliot first communicated to her publisher John Blackwood her will to start a new novel in early March 1867. It was not until 1869, however, that she mentioned *Middlemarch* as the title of her new work. The writing process of this novel was long and complex for Eliot who experienced moments of self-doubt and had to momentarily suspend her newly started project to deal with family problems. After abandoning this first attempt, Eliot began another story entitled *Miss Brooke*: the hundred pages she managed to write became the first ten chapter of the *Middlemarch* we know today. The first three volumes of *Middlemarch* were completed by October 1871 and the rest of the total eight books were published over a period of several months until October 1872.[265]

Considered as George Eliot's masterpiece, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial life* is a multiplot novel that intertwines three main love stories and explores the life of the people in Middlemarch, a rising manufacturing town, in the years immediately before the Reform Bill of 1832.

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[262] Carlson, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-71.

[263] Gatens, "Philosophy", *op. cit.*, p. 217.

[264] George Eliot to John Blackwood, 24.02.1861, in Cross, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

[265] Rignall, "Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life", *op. cit.*, p. 250.

Starting from the story of the young Dorothea Brooke who decides to marry the thirty-year-older Edward Casaubon, Eliot parallelly developed the stories of other characters: Tertius Lydgate, the doctor of the village who marries Rosamond Vincy, an unsuitable wife for himself; Fred Vincy, Rosamond's brother, and his childhood love Mary Garth; and, finally, the story of the prosperous banker Bulstrode whose reputation gets ruined by his fraudulent secret past. In this "web of intersecting lives"[266] where the stories are masterfully connected to one another Eliot managed to show the vital role that sympathy plays in the life of men and women. Among all the characters and stories, in this part of my dissertation I focus on the character of Dorothea Brooke and look at how sympathy contributes to her personal and moral growth. Considering all the steps of her development, my aim is also to demonstrate that sympathy as creative energy eventually helps Dorothea become an unconventional modern heroine.

3.2.1. Dorothea Brooke and her "moral stupidity"

Dorothea Brooke is the first among many characters to be introduced in *Middlemarch*. In the first book, Miss Brooke is described as a middle-class, charming, young woman with a "theoretic mind".[267] She is depicted as eager to know "all the truth about life"[268] and demonstrates to be intelligent and to be capable of having her own opinion when interacting with others. She would also question the conventional beliefs about religion and, therefore, would distinguish herself for an unconventional tendency to rebellion. These features, together with Dorothea's "too unusual and striking" eyes, not only recall the author's personality and physical characteristics for critics like Jones,[269] but especially remark the unconventionality of this female protagonist.[270]

Her preference for Edward Casaubon among other suitors may confirm this. Dorothea rejects the wooing of the young and attractive Mr Chettam and instead shows an interest in Mr Casaubon, who is nearly thirty years older than her and not good-looking at all. The reason behind her fascination for Casaubon is that Dorothea is naturally attracted by his knowledge and "enamoured of intensity and greatness"[271] of his project. During their courtship, Casaubon mentioned to Dorothea his aspiration to complete his great work which consists in finding the "Keys to All Mythologies".[272] Attracted by the importance of his historical, literary enterprise, Dorothea indulges in idealising her marriage to this great knowledgeable man and projects her unrealistic expectations on him, hoping that he might change the world.

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[266] Ibid, p. 253.
[267] Eliot, *Middlemarch,* cit., p. 8.
[268] Ibid, p. 10.
[269] Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 288.
[270] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, cit., p. 9.

> "I should learn everything then […]. It would be my duty to study that I might help him the better in his great works. There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday things with us would mean the greatest things. It would be like marrying Pascal. I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it. And then I should know what to do, when I get older: I should see how it was possible to lead a grand life here – now – in England. I don't feel sure about doing good in any way now: everything seems like going on a mission to a people whose language I don't know; – unless it were building good cottages – there can be no doubt about that. Oh, I hope I should be able to get the people well housed in Lowick! I will draw plenty of plans while I have time." [273]

In this excerpt, Dorothea's words show both her aspiration to greatness and her admiration for knowledge: she is fascinated by things that are "great" and "grand" and wishes to know many things, among which she mentions the "perfectly good". In need of a guide that can help her to address her vocation to goodness, Dorothea naively idealises Casaubon and believes that, thanks to his knowledge, they can discover great things for the good of the world.[274] Echoing Spinoza's vision of a supportive society as well as Feuerbach's belief in a united humanity for the good of the whole human species, Dorothea shows a natural tension to think about the good of others and a propensity to think sympathetically about the condition of the working-class people and, more in general, of those who are less fortunate than her.[275] Her enthusiasm in "building good cottages" shows her compassionate commitment to the social cause and her wish to use her own skills for the common good. In Casaubon, Dorothea sees the possibility of achieving great things that could change the world and make it a better place for everyone. Despite this noble and altruistic intent of hers, Dorothea does not see the true nature of Casaubon but only idealises his personality, basing it on her dreams. The repetition of the personal pronoun "I" indicates that Dorothea centres solely on her own vision of reality: even though she is contemplating the idea of helping others and of marriage, which should involve the idea of multiplicity and duality, Dorothea is entrapped in her own self-focused fantasies and, therefore, she marries Casaubon believing in something unreal.

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[271] Ibid.

[272] Ibid., p. 63.

[273] Ibid., p. 29.

[274] Fessnebacker, *op. cit.*, pp. 518-519.

[275] Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

When the couple eventually marries, instead of the grand life she hoped to have as Mrs Casaubon, Dorothea feels isolated and rejected by her husband who does not involve her in his great work as she hoped. During their honeymoon in Rome, she feels useless and does not see any purpose in her married life but only dull boredom. Dorothea's fantasies crush against reality when she finally realises that her initial expectations about her husband were wrong: "the widely fresh air she had dreamt of finding in her husband's mind"[276] turned out to be "a sort of dried preparation, a lifeless embodiment of knowledge".[277]

Being incapable of communicating and understanding each other, Dorothea and Casaubon have their first argument in Rome only a few days after their wedding: after a long day of research dedicated to his work, Dorothea urges Casaubon to start writing about his findings, which would prove his genius to the world. Casaubon appears disturbed and annoyed by the intrusion: like Dorothea, he is disillusioned about the expectations he had on her. As proved by the proposal letter he addresses to Dorothea, Casaubon could only see in her a possible helpmeet who could devotedly support him in achieving his own goals and meeting his own needs. His inability to love Dorothea as his wife and include her in his work not only does show how superficial the intimacy of the couple is but also confirms that the absorbing interest in his research merely consists in a "self-centred desire".[278] When Casaubon realises the fruitlessness of the results of his long consuming work, his project becomes "his bondage" and clings to it more than ever because he realises he does not have anything else in his life. Casaubon's pompous attitude about the intellectual superiority of his code for interpreting all religions and mythologies isolates him from the rest of the community, both professionally and personally.[279] For this lack of human contact, he cannot see Dorothea as a helper anymore and not even remotely as a fellow creature but only as a rival.[280] For this reason, he does not open up with Dorothea about his inner insecurities but feels threatened by her intelligence and judgment. Moreover, his proud, defensive closure is strengthened by his deep jealousy for Dorothea's new acquaintance with his nephew, Will Ladislaw, who soon shows ardent interest for the young lady.

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[276] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, cit., p. 195.

[277] Ibid., p. 196.

Dorothea fails in making Casaubon disclose his secret and, failing in interpreting correctly Casaubon's discomfort about his work, she does not even suspect that there might be other serious reasons behind her husband's excuses for procrastinating the publication of *The Key to All Mythologies*. Casaubon's irritation to Dorothea's impelling questions about his work confirms that neither husband nor wife can assume the other's point of view.

> The excessive feeling manifested would alone have been highly disturbing to Mr. Casaubon, but there were other reasons why Dorothea's words were among the most cutting and irritating to him that she could have been impelled to use. She was as blind to his inward troubles as he to hers: she had not yet learned those hidden conflicts in her husband which claim our pity. She had not yet listened patiently to his heartbeats, but only felt that her own was beating violently.[281]

In this passage, Eliot's narrator vividly portrays the distance that separates husband and wife. Both characters fail to speak their mind and are unable to communicate: as Dorothea attacks her husband's weakest spot indirectly expressing her disappointment about her married life, Casaubon retreats in his private rooms and does not reveal the failure of his work nor his jealousy about Will. In this situation, Eliot's narrator highlights the necessity for Dorothea to learn how to access the other's feelings showing more "pity" and tolerance. Patience is required in this learning experience: it will take time for Dorothea to understand how to manage her violent impulses that lead her to act without considering the others' state of mind. Casaubon's rigid attitude and inability to open up do not help the young, impulsive Dorothea: as Marks notices, what is missing here is the human connection that the sympathetic feeling and understanding can create between individuals as both characters are concentrated on their own feelings.[282] Dorothea can only listen to her own violent "heartbeats" and Casaubon reacts irritably to protect himself instead of trying to understand his wife unhappiness. Nevertheless, Dorothea shows that change might be possible for herself: her natural inclination to compassion and to self-scrutinization made her feel guilty about the pain she evidently caused to her husband, and she soon starts to realise that there are better alternatives for her than feeling "anger and despondency"[283] for her husband.

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[278] Fessnebacker, *op. cit.*, p. 520.
[279] Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 298.
[280] C. J. Marks, "'Middlemarch', Obligation, and Dorothea's Duplicity", *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2000, pp. 25–41, pp.28-29.
[281] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, cit., p. 200.

> We are all of us born in a moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves: Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it had been easier to her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than to conceive with that distinctiveness which is no longer reflection but feeling – an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects – that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference.[284]

For the very first time Dorothea ponders about her husband's pain and gradually emerges from the condition that Eliot defines through her narrator as "moral stupidity" as she realises her own egotism. According to Marks, Dorothea's own desire to see her husband achieving great things is a form of "selfless selfishness", which for him, consists in a "dangerous kind of egotism".[285] Indeed, by encouraging Casaubon to complete his work, Dorothea appears to be "selfless" but instead she assumes a self-oriented prospective as what she really aims to obtain is her own intellectual development and her own participation in a great enterprise. Thinking only for herself, Dorothea is showing a behaviour that according to Eliot's narrator is common to all humans: believing that the world is there to feed "our supreme self" is easier than perceiving the "distinctiveness" of others and therefore going beyond one's own limited perception. Realising her own kind of selfishness and finally acknowledging that her husband has an "equivalent centre of self" too, Dorothea chooses not to disobey her husband and opts to "devote herself" to him.

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[282] Marks, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
[283] Eliot, *Middlemarch,* cit., p. 203.
[284] Ibid., p. 211.
[285] Marks, *op. cit.,* p. 31.

3.2.2. Dorothea's duty

Dorothea's duteous devotion seems to momentarily draw her closer to Casaubon and to make her change her attitude towards him. Indeed, during a private visit paid by Will Ladislaw, Dorothea appears to be more defensive of Casaubon: when Will provocatively points out not only Casaubon's incapacity to complete his work but also mentions the deterioration that the marriage is causing to her, Dorothea's first real emotional change can be noticed.

> But Dorothea was strangely quiet – not immediately indignant as she had been on a like occasion in Rome. And the cause lay deep. She was no longer struggling against the perception of facts, but adjusting herself to their clearest perception; and now, when she looked steadily at her husband's failure, she seems to be looking along the one track where duty became tenderness.[286]

The first sign of growth can be seen in Dorothea's being "strangely quiet": her young, impulsive temperament seems tamed and changed into a calmer, reflective attitude. Additionally, her initial blindness to real facts is described as gradually adjusting into a "clearest perception". This change of perspective also leads to the conversion of Dorothea's "struggling" into adjustment: thanks to this first matrimonial experience, she learns that interpersonal relationships involve reaching compromises and flexibility. Therefore, becoming less self-centred, Dorothea can see her husband's failure and this gives her a reason to sympathise with him, not to judge him. Once she is able to realise that the union with Casaubon requires acceptance and understanding, for the first time does Dorothea experience true tenderness and pity for her husband's misery.

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[286] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, cit., p. 365.

However, although Dorothea seems to be finally leaving her "moral stupidity" behind as she considers other people's feelings, this does not mean that she starts to truly love her husband or *feel for* him.[287] Casaubon's inflexible disposition and Dorothea's need for human closeness make their two personalities incompatible: acting under the moral idealism of always doing the right thing for her husband is the only way in which Dorothea can see her matrimonial life possibly working. For Eliot, Dorothea's duty in this phase is not moral: her rigidity in applying morality in this way is sterile as it is does not connect her with others. Sympathy needs to intervene in order to counterbalance her strict moral rules and make her duty fully moral.[288] Indeed, according to Fessenbecker, Eliot could not interpret moral actions as a mere matter of "moral algorithms":[289] individuals should not act blindly following a set of moral rules which are believed to be the best principles but be sensitive to the details of specific circumstance and they should not consider just their conditions but also those of the others. Dorothea seems to be subjugated by her own duty and obliged to practice a devotion which is a rational imposition rather than a spontaneous feeling. This self-oppression can foreshadow only a life of service which can be fully experienced provided one engages in helping others. This is confirmed by Dorothea's decision to direct her duty also towards society more decisively than before.[290]

> […] I should like not to have so much more than my share without doing anything for others. But I have a belief of my own and it comforts me. […] By desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don't quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil — widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness

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[287] P. Fessenbecker, *op. cit.*, p. 521.
[288] Ibid., pp. 502-503.
[289] Ibid., p. 501.
[290] G. Letissier, *The higher inward life - Georges Eliot's "Middlemarch",* Paris: Paris Ouest, 2020, p. 91.

> narrower. […] It is my life. I have found it out, and cannot part with it. I have always been finding out my religion since I was a little girl. I used to pray so much — now I hardly ever pray. I try not to have desires merely for myself, because they may not be good for others, and I have too much already. I only told you, that you might know quite well how my days go at Lowick.[291]

Dorothea's aspiration to greatness is redirected to putting other people's needs before herself and thinking less about herself. Her social duty is described as essentially connected to her life: in this phase of her life it appears to be her new religion, which in Feuerbach's terms might be interpreted as religion of humanity. Abandoning her self-centred stand, Dorothea assumes an ardent self-denying attitude which could be associated with the selfless trait that many critics attributed to Eliot's notion of sympathy and that easily recalls martyrdom.[292] In the prelude of *Middlemarch,* Eliot's narrator introduces this idea: mentioning Saint Theresa, the founder of the religious order of the Carmelites, Eliot presents the saint's life as unique and belonging to a heroic past epoque. "Many Theresas have been born who found themselves not an epic life":[293] the narrative voice draws similarities between Saint Theresa's mission and Dorothea's aspiration to duty. However, Dorothea's selfless duty is doomed to fail: in order to achieve a real moral duty, Dorothea needs to let sympathy intervene in her strict moral decisions. Only in this way can she stop her extreme tendency to self-annulment and instead, guided by her sympathetic feeling, act according to her own existential needs and simultaneously help others.[294]

3.2.3. From duty to sympathy

After two years of marriage, Dorothea is still seen in the process of learning how to apply moral rules following not only her sensibility but also her sensitivity. During her husband's illness, Dorothea becomes acquainted with Dr Lydgate and more than once approaches him in order to have a clearer picture of Casaubon's health. With Lydgate, Dorothea soon finds out how to share the desire to help the people in the village as she believes that "there must be a great deal to be done"[295] to improve people's lives in Middlemarch. She expresses her wish to finance the New Fever Hospital which the doctor hopes to manage in order to carry out his scientific research, replacing the old infirmary.[296] In her friendship with him, Dorothea starts to discover the meaning of true human connection and Dorothea's "reviving faith in humanity".[297] During Casaubon's last days and even more after his death, Lydgate shows support and offers help to Dorothea in the difficult process of understanding her husband's pain. Even though she fails to feel true sympathy for Casaubon, Dorothea can sympathise with Lydgate as she can sympathetically perceive "the wholeness of [his] character".[298] Dorothea's different perception of morality under the influence of sympathy can be clearly seen in her strenuous defence of Lydgate's integrity against the rumours about his implication in Bulstrode's fraud.[299]

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[291] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, cit., pp. 391-392.
[292] H. Fraser, "St. Theresa, St. Dorothea, and Miss Brooke in Middlemarch", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, *40*(4), 1986, pp. 400–11, p. 401.
[293] Eliot, *Middlemarch,* cit., p. 3.
[294] Fessenbecker, *op. cit.*, pp. 502-503.

> "I feel convinced that his conduct has not been guilty: I believe that people are almost always better than their neighbours think they are" said Dorothea. Some of her intensest experience in the last two years had set her mind strongly in opposition to any unfavourable construction of others […]. She disliked this cautious weighing of consequences, instead of an ardent faith in efforts of justice and mercy, which would conquer by their emotional force. […] "Mr. Lydgate would understand that if his friends hear a calumny about him their first wish must be to justify him. What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult to each other? I cannot be indifferent to the troubles of a man who advised me in my trouble, and attended me in my illness".[300]

Dorothea's ardent disposition of character shows up again in this passage, but this time it is not to defend her own interests but the good name of her friend Lydgate. Her sympathetic defence is based on her strong sense of "justice and mercy": these two elements seem to constitute the force of her altruistic duty which finally takes into consideration the specificity of Lydgate's case. The "emotional force" which conquers Dorothea reveals that her moral duty is finally counterbalanced by the active participation of sympathy:[301] Dorothea can both think and feel that the action she is performing to defend her friend is morally right. Her genuine conviction that human beings are there to "make life less difficult" and to support each other shows her deep faith in humanity. This is opposed to the "cautious weighing of consequences" which instead leads people to selfishly think about their personal lot not to risk their own comfortable position for the good of others.

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[295] Ibid., p. 438.
[296] Letissier*, op. cit.,* p. 87.
[297] Ibid., p. 86.
[298] Eliot, *Middlemarch,* cit., p. 762.
[299] Fessenbecker, *op. cit.,* p. 525.
[300] Eliot, *Middlemarch,* cit., pp. 733-734.

Dorothea's sympathetic moral commitment to Lydgate encourages him to explain his apparent implication in Bulstrode's fraud and to reveal his matrimonial difficulties.[302] Convinced of his innocence and understanding the pain that an unhappy marriage can cause, Dorothea offers consolation to Lydgate and promises him to clear out his reputation both to Middlemarch and to his wife, Rosamond. The connotation of Dorothea's sympathetic disposition is portrayed by Eliot in Lydgate's perception of her:

> As Lydgate rode away, he thought, "This young creature has a heart large enough for the Virgin Mary. She evidently thinks nothing of her own future, and would pledge away half her income at once, as if she wanted nothing for herself but a chair to sit in from which she can look down with those clear eyes at the poor mortals who pray to her. She seems to have what I never saw in any woman before — a fountain of friendship towards men — a man can make a friend of her. Casaubon must have raised some heroic hallucination in her. I wonder if she could have any other sort of passion for a man? Ladislaw?".[303]

Dorothea's heart is enlarged by the experience of the sympathetic feeling, and she is compared to the figure of the Virgin Mary, the most pious and merciful woman in the Catholic religious system. Dorothea's pious and heroic disposition to self-sacrifice is still strongly represented by Lydgate's words: this seems to exalt her and make her unreachable to earthly passions.[304] As suggested by the

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[301] Fessenbecker, *op. cit.,* p. 525.
[302] Ibid.
[303] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, cit., p. 768.
[304] Fraser, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

"heroic hallucination", Dorothea's initial aspiration to greatness does not seem to have left her entirely but only to have assumed a more human tendency. It will be only through the final stage of her sympathetic learning process that Dorothea will abandon this idea of greatness permanently: for Eliot, this can only happen with Dorothea's understanding of true love, which she eventually experiences with Will Ladislaw.

3.2.4. From sympathy towards love

Dorothea's exclusion of a second marriage was peremptory after Casaubon's death. The sadness and the inner struggle that the marital life had presented to her were something Dorothea would not want to repeat: she decided to adhere to a life "which looked so flat and empty of way-marks",[305] where the love of a partner was not contemplated. Nevertheless, after her husband's death, Dorothea began considering her relationship with Will Ladislaw in a different light: Casaubon's jealousy towards his young nephew was expressed in the codicil annexed to his will, where Casaubon denied his fortunes to Dorothea in case she would marry Will. Outraged by her husband's betrayal, Dorothea started to consider her friendship to Will as an attachment of a different sort.[306] Up to the moment when she offered help to clear out Lydgate's reputation, her consideration of Will was "very simply a part of her marriage sorrows".[307] Nevertheless, when Dorothea goes to pay a visit to Rosamond to redeem the doctor's reputation, she finds herself in a very embarrassing and painful situation. Seeing Will and Rosamond together and knowing of the difficulty in Lydgate's marriage, Dorothea inevitably thinks of a love affair between the two. The violent and painful reaction she has upon reconsidering her relationship with Will not only makes her realise her love for him but also provokes in her a difficult inner struggle against her own selfish instinct.[308] Sympathy, however, softens her first reaction of “jealous indignation and disgust”[309] and rationally leads her to consider that the situation does not involve only her but the others too.

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[305] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, cit., p. 773.
[306] Moretti, *op. cit.*, p. 920.
[307] Ibid.
[308] Fraser, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

> She began now to live through that yesterday morning deliberately again, forcing herself to dwell on every detail and its possible meaning. Was she alone in that scene? Was it her event only? She forced herself to think of it as bound up with another woman’s life - a woman towards whom she had set out with a longing to carry some clearness and comfort into her beclouded youth. […] The dominant spirit of justice within her had once overcome the tumult and had once shown her the truer measure of things. All the active thought with which she had before been representing to herself the trials of Lydgate’s lot, and this young marriage union which, like her own, seemed to have its hidden as well as evident troubles — all this vivid sympathetic experience returned to her now as a power: it asserted itself as acquired knowledge asserts itself and will not let us see as we saw in the day of our ignorance. She said to her own irremediable grief, that it should make her more helpful, instead of driving her back from effort.[310]

Dorothea’s fight against her own selfish tendency is tough: she “forces” herself to reach that “truer measure of things” which go beyond her youthful selfish tendency. Seeing her destiny intertwined with that of another woman and understanding that Rosamond’s pain might be the same as the one she had felt in the past, Dorothea appears to abstain from judging others and actually demonstrates her true moral strength.[311] This “vivid sympathetic experience” of *feeling for* others leads Dorothea out of her initial “moral stupidity” and finally makes her pass the moral test of sympathy. Accepting her own “irremediable grief”, she feels and knows what is right to do.

Resuming all the energies after a sleepless and tormented night, Dorothea meets Rosamond with a truly open heart to tell her the truth about Lydgate. Repressing her own pain, she wishes also to forget her own heartbreak for Will: this, however, is impossible. At this point of the novel the two ladies are completely overthrown by the sympathetic fellow-feeling and connected as never before.

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[309] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, cit., p. 788.

[310] Ibid., pp. 787-788.

[311] H. F. Adams, “Dorothea and ‘Miss Brooke’ in Middlemarch”, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 39, no. 1, 1984, pp. 69–90, p. 88.

> Dorothea, completely swayed by the feeling that she was uttering, forgot everything but that she was speaking from out the heart of her own trial to Rosamond's. […] And she had unconsciously laid her hand again on the little hand that she had pressed before. Rosamond, with an overmastering pang, as if a wound within her had been probed, burst into hysterical crying as she had done the day before when she clung to her husband. Poor Dorothea was feeling a great wave of her own sorrow returning over her — her thought being drawn to the possible share that Will Ladislaw might have in Rosamond's mental tumult. She was beginning to fear that she should not be able to suppress herself enough to the end of this meeting, and while her hand was still resting on Rosamond's lap, though the hand underneath it was withdrawn, she was struggling against her own rising sobs. She tried to master herself with the thought that this might be a turning-point in three lives — not in her own; no, there the irrevocable had happened, but — in those three lives which were touching hers with the solemn neighbourhood of danger and distress.[312]

Despite Rosamond's initial diffidence against Dorothea, the latter's gentleness and openheartedness overcome Rosamond's hardness and melt it into relieving tears. As seen in *Silas Marner*, sympathy is presented in the form of a liquid, be it tears or "waves of sorrow", which emotionally overwhelms the characters. The two ladies are seen in the act of sharing the same pain: the physical connection that happens when their hands touch seems to activate a chemical process where the pain of one becomes the pain of the other. Touched by Rosamond's expression of sorrow, Dorothea suffers too and inevitably struggles against her tendency to consider such pain as her own private and exclusive feeling; moral choices are not easy to make but at this point of the narration Dorothea is seen as capable of dominating her narcissistic tension and she can clearly realise what the terrible consequences her selfish actions could cause to the lives of three other people.[313] The connection that Dorothea feels with these three other fellow humans is "a solemn neighbourhood": her heroic mission seems to consist once again in fully sacrificing herself for the good of others. However, as previously seen in *Silas Marner*, the individual should not disappear or nullify itself as sympathy is essentially based on the reciprocal relation between the self and the other. Rosamond's explanation about her friendship with Will prevents Dorothea's self-nullification and, once Rosamond also reveals Will's true love for Dorothea, Dorothea is naturally led towards a reconciliation with him. Sympathy plays a twofold role here: not only does it suggest the right moral choices, but it also helps the plot develop in favour of Dorothea.[314] Her idea of love and matrimonial life can finally change: Dorothea discovers love as the purest form of sympathetic fellow-feeling and the furthest sentiment from egotism. Her love for Will makes her bare her own pain for the sake of his happiness and it also proves itself capable of prevailing over the evil codicil drafted by Casaubon with the intention of ruining their union. When Dorothea meets Will after the clarification with Rosamond, the two lovers still struggle to understand each other's feelings fearing they might be going against the accepted precepts established by strict morality and public opinion. Nevertheless, this time sympathy intervenes in their decision and counterbalances their moral strictness. After declaring his love to Dorothea, Will is about to leave since his economic situation does not allow him to offer Dorothea the standard of life which other people would expect. Sympathy releases Dorothea's irresistible emotion:

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[312] Eliot, *Middlemarch,* cit., pp. 795-796.

[313] Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

> "Oh, I cannot bear it — my heart will break," said Dorothea, starting from her seat, the flood of her young passion bearing down all the obstructions which had kept her silent — the great tears rising and falling in an instant: "I don't mind about poverty — I hate my wealth." In an instant Will was close to her and had his arms round her, but she drew her head back and held his away gently that she might go on speaking, her large tear-filled eyes looking at his very simply, while she said in a sobbing childlike way, "We could live quite well on my own fortune — it is too much — seven hundred a-year — I want so little — no new clothes — and I will learn what everything costs".[315]

Sharing Will's true and honest feeling, Dorothea cannot control herself anymore. Sympathy, appearing in the form of "great tears", frees Dorothea from her own oppressive tendency and finally releases her love for Will. Thanks to its sympathetic, mutual understanding, their love clearly contrasts the worldly egotism which had connoted Dorothea and Casaubon's marriage. Against all

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[314] Marks, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

[315] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, cit., pp. 811-812.

Casaubon's predictions, Dorothea rejects all his money and welcomes love in a very simple and "childlike way" instead. She also seems to revive an old part of herself which had to be obstructed during her first marriage: the love that binds her to Will can reconcile the past and the present Dorothea, avoiding self-repression while doing good to others. Marriage this time brings along the good qualities of both wife and husband: with the encouragement of Dorothea, Will becomes an "ardent public man"[316] who fights to reform the life of the poor and Dorothea, finally feeling the nearness of a loving husband, can help and support him in improving other people's lives.

Accepting the love of Will who has no pompous, great aspiration of changing the world, Dorothea finally stops to chase greatness and discover that even small, humble actions can make the difference in the daily life of those in need. In this way in Eliot's novel sympathy creates a modern heroine out of Dorothea.

> A new Theresa will hardly have the opportunity of reforming a conventual life, any more than a new Antigone will spend her heroic piety in daring all for the sake of a brother's burial: the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is forever gone. But we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas, some of which may present a far sadder sacrifice than that of the Dorothea whose story we know. […] Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tomb.[317]

As the narrator explains in this passage, in the modern world ancient heroes and heroines, such as Saint Theresa or Antigone, cannot exist because the "medium" through which they obtained their glory is no more to be found in modernity. This is the reason why in this novel Dorothea, as a modern heroine, needs to find her greatness in humbleness: the adjectives of the phrases such as "no great channels", "unhistoric acts", "hidden life" and "unvisited tombs" suggest that the "greatness" which fascinated Dorothea at the very beginning of the novel is here replaced by the humbleness of ordinary life.

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[316] Ibid., p. 836.

[317] Ibid., p. 838.

Moreover, Dorothea's free choice to marry Will does not only confirm that she has learned to see greatness in humble things such as her married life, but also that she has learned to accept and love the other. In so doing, Dorothea is not renouncing to her own individuality, but she has extended her own self to reach others. This diffusive effect of sympathy that sees an "expansion of the self" in Dorothea is metaphorically described by Eliot's narrator through the image of the innumerable channels of the river Cyrus. Belonging to a series of "totalising metaphors" that through the whole novel recalls the image of a web that interweaves the destinies of all characters, this image of infinite linkage is believed to convey the final message behind the complexity of Eliot's novel. As Jones suggests, *Middlemarch* might be interpreted as a representation of a natural ecosystem[318] where everything is connected to everything else. The interdependence of all characters shown in the plot and the fact that a single action of a person can influence the life of others shows Eliot's opinion on how important it is for an individual to learn how to live in relation with the community. Conclusively, from the author's point of view sympathy can be interpreted as pricelessly valuable as it can create the conditions for all individuals to live in harmony with the others and, caring both for the individual and the human community, would eventually help to preserve the whole human species.[319] Knowing that many anonymous people had humbly sacrificed their lives for making the present life better, not only does reinforce the idea of a new kind of humble, modern heroes but also may help Eliot's novel and notion of sympathy become a cause of reflection for her modern readers.

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[318] Jones, *op. cit.,* p. 291.

[319] Ibid., p. 293.

Conclusion

The idea of sympathy as the emotional disposition to *feel for* others, constituting the very base of human relationships, was central to George Eliot's life and work. In my dissertation I have shown how she experienced and interpreted it personally, as well as intellectually and creatively in her translations and novels.

Through the letters and articles I have traced her evolution as a writer, whose personality was sensitive and affectionate, yet rebellious and proud personality. Her relationships with her family, teachers, friends, and lovers showed that her personal connections often involved a further development of her intellectual studies. As seen in the analysis of her translations of Strauss's *The Life of Jesus*, Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity,* and Spinoza's *Ethics,* not only did Eliot question her religious faith but also truly engaged in considering sympathy as a fundamental condition for human relations and as a possibility for a new faith in humanity. Indeed, starting from Strauss's abolition of dogmatic creeds, Feuerbach's vision of the "anthropological essence of religion" helped Eliot to consider the human fellowship as the highest expression of a new system of human moral values where love and duty are its fundamental principles. In translating Spinoza's *Ethics* and elaborating his ideas, Eliot widened her view of morality, conceiving of it as a bridge towards others and critically reflected on its social importance. In so doing, she demonstrated to be deeply aware of the differences between the morality of the past and of the modern society: as she noticed in her article *The Natural History of German Life*, while sympathy is valued by the sense of community and by the moral integrity deriving from the traditions of the past, it is threatened by the moral "relaxation" of the present.

Drawing on these considerations, the central role of sympathy as a transformative and creative energy flourishing from pure human connection with the others has been highlighted through the literary analysis of *Silas Marner* and *Middlemarch.* Even though these two novels present structural and narrative differences, they present similarities which can help draw some conclusions about Eliot's notion of sympathy.

First, in both novels sympathy appears to intervene as a remedy to the characters' tendency to isolation and unfeelingness. Silas's voluntary seclusion and Dorothea's aspiration to greatness may be interpreted as signs of the modern tendency to individualism that Eliot exemplified also through the figure of the Philister in her article *The Natural History of German Life*. The presence of the community and the relation with the others change the destinies of the two protagonists: authentically connecting with other individuals and truly *feeling for* them, Silas and Dorothea save themselves from the loneliness of a secluded life. Through their sympathetic experiences, the initial individualistic self of the two protagonists realises to be part of a bigger reality than their own and inevitably enlarges itself. In their experiences of fatherhood and bridehood, Silas and Dorothea respectively learn the same moral lesson: "the Self recognises its doppelganger in each Other it encounters".[320]

Second, being based on the ethical recognition and acceptance of the other, sympathy requires adjustments and effort to the self: making altruistic moral choices does not always appear easy for Silas and Dorothea but they gradually learn how to exit their own personal stand. Once Silas and Dorothea discover the true meaning of human fellowship through their relationships with Eppie and Will, love in its full form of acceptance and care for the other appears to be the final stage of their emotional learning processes.

Ultimately, even though sympathy can be considered to have its existential reason in the relationship with the others, it never implies that the characters need to renounce to their identity in their encounter with the other. Sympathy does not correspond to selflessness and does not require self-forgetfulness: sympathy instead seems to be able to balance and reconcile the care for the others with the individual search and need for happiness and self-accomplishment. This is clearly exemplified by the reciprocal, beneficial effect that sympathy brings along in each relationship: in the two novels by Eliot, Will's honest love and inclusion of Dorothea in his social mission and Eppie's wish to live and take care of Silas even after being married show that the happiness of the other becomes the happiness of self.

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[320] Carlson, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

The ethical implications of sympathy for Eliot's contemporary readers

Overall, Eliot's vision of sympathy as a transformative energy that can regenerate human relationships and encourage humans to be "more human" with one another not only contributed to make her become one of the greatest and most popular Victorian novelists, but also allowed her art to maintain itself as a valuable moral message also for today's readers.

Among the contemporary critics that have researched on the impact that literary sympathy can have on readers and its real-life implications, Suzanne Keen states that the Victorians believed in the moral consequences of novel reading and that the novelist's success or failure depended upon their capacity of creating characters that could invoke sympathetic reactions in their readers. If this led in many cases to the production of many didactic and sensationalist fictions, Eliot's novels were very successful because through their character's psychological realism readers' sympathy was expanded as if they were experiencing them in the real life.[321]

> My artistic bent is directed not at all to the presentation of eminently irreproachable characters, but to the presentation of mixed human beings in such a way as to call forth tolerant judgment, pity, and sympathy. And I cannot stir a step aside from what I feel to be true in character.[322]

Thanks to the realistic mindset, the genuine personality, and the humble life of characters such as Silas and Dorothea, Eliot moved her readers towards her own notion of good, never requiring any specific real-world action but leaving to each individual the moral responsibility of choosing how to act concretely for the good of others.[323]

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[321] Keen, *op. cit.,* pp. 52-54.

[322] George Eliot to John Blackwood, 18.02.1857, in Cross, *op. cit.*, pp. 349-350.

[323] Carlson, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

Even though Keen herself states that a direct connection between reading about good action and performing it in real life cannot be scientifically proved yet, it is undeniable that through her notion of sympathy Eliot hoped to contribute to her readers' moral development and that for this reason today's readers may as well value and benefit from the moral lesson of the sympathetic experiences described in her novels applying it to the contemporary world.

This is true especially if one considers that the human web of relationship and the support of the community that Eliot evaluated in her novels have revealed to be fundamental to face and overcome the social changes and challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic presented to today's society. The restricting measures that were implemented by governments to contain and slow down the spread of SARS-CoV-2 deeply changed and affected people's lives: being unable to go to work, to school or to any other public place, for the first time in decades people experienced the consequences of isolation, and confinement that lockdowns, social distancing, and quarantines caused to the life of every individual. As reported by the United Nations, Covid has severely attacked society at its core: the impossibility of having normal social interactions, perform traditional rituals, and the inability to support and take care of those who were suffering has deeply shaken society and severely affected people's lives, habitual ways of communication, and economy.[324]

Picturing and detailing the damages caused by the absence of human contact and then describing how sympathy itself could be implemented to heal and connect society, Eliot showed a deep understanding of the nature of human relationships and also foreshadowed a solution to the problems of the contemporary world. Indeed, if the spread of Covid-19 has led to social distancing, it is especially thanks to the channels of collective human cooperation and support that were activated during the sanitary emergency that it has been possible to gradually overcome the threat of the virus.[325] For instance, the several initiatives of fundraising that were devoted to support financially the national health care systems and the raising demand coming from citizens to take part in the volunteering campaigns show that people felt "a greater sense of connection" during this challenging time and wished to contribute as they could to help others. Moreover, the same fellow-feeling and altruistic behaviour, which seem to recall the essential features of Eliot's sympathy, were visible in those responsible citizens that observed the "stay home" advice in order to protect the most vulnerable ones and especially in the heroic service that the healthcare professionals relentlessly provided throughout the whole pandemic. Their commitment and service to the community through great, humble, loving gestures and daily care contributed to save the lives of many people. Acting for the "growing good of the world", these modern heroes demonstrate how it is still important today to look after the others and cherish the human community.

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[324] United Nations, "Everyone included: social impact of Covid-19", *Department of Economics and Social Affairs – Social Inclusion*, 2022. Available at: https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/everyone-included-covid-19.html, accessed 2022, July.

In the post pandemic panorama, sympathy may prove to be a particularly beneficial condition of mutual support that can help healing and strengthen the "web of human connections" that was put under such a pressure. For example, the G20 "whole-of-society"[326] approaches identify the union of the community as the essential factor to foster the healing process of mental health conditions that saw a rise in the post-covid period. Similarly, the community works as a form of service, the solidarity and charitable associations that are united by the common feeling of helping the others remark the fact that modern humans may still need to listen and learn the lesson that Eliot's literary sympathy developed in her stories. And, at the same time, it can make readers realise that modern heroes are indeed those who try to make the world a better place for everyone through small acts of kindness and humble solidarity.

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[325] H. Siddique, "Covid has connected the UK communities and spurred volunteering, report finds", *The Guardian*, 28.02.2021. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/28/covid-has-connected-uk-communities-and-spurred-volunteering-report-finds, accessed 2022, July.

[326] G20, "COVID-19 and the Need for Action on Mental Health – Policy Paper", *Ministero della Salute*, 2021. Available at: https://www.salute.gov.it/portale/documentazione/p6_2_2_1.jsp?lingua=italiano&id=3124, accessed 2022, July.

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