
The Crisis of Ethics in Victorian Britain: A Critical Analysis of *Silas Marner* by George Eliot

Maurice Gning

Department of English, Faculty of Arts & Humanities, Gaston Berger University, Saint-Louis, Senegal

Email address:

maurice.gning@ugb.edu.sn

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Abstract: This paper is a reflexion on the morality of the Victorian society as reflected by the British Writer, George Eliot, in her novel *Silas Marner* (1861). Set in England in the early years of the 19th century, Eliot's novel offers a complex view of the ethical landscape of the UK in the era of Industrial Revolution. Using a Christian approach of ethics, the study examines how the advent of industrialization fosters a new mentality among Victorians, engendering therefore a crisis of ethics. The analysis concludes that the state of mind of most nineteenth-century British people is incompatible with the rigid Christian-based moral standards set by Queen Victoria (1837-1901) to maintain a high morality in a period where the UK is a world reference in nearly all domains of life. Though given much importance in the Victorian era, at least in appearance, religion is no longer reliable to be source of moral standards. This reality leads first to a crisis of faith that implies existential and social consequences as can be observed with the novel's protagonist, Silas Marner. It also brings about a general moral crisis essentially illustrated by the immoral and or selfish attitudes of certain characters. Such a crisis, which paradoxically starts in the church, can be traced both in the family private space and in the public and broader space of the society. The crisis of morality also manifests itself through the multiplicity of personal, secular and relative ethical positions that are most of the time contradictory, making then living together quite a difficult matter. The foregrounding of the Victorian moral disaster in *Silas Marner* does not however overshadow Eliot's successful attempt to suggest new ethical lines that would be more adequate in the secular and industrialized age.

Keywords: Ethics, Crisis, Victorian Society, Materialism, Christianity, George Eliot, Silas Marner

1. Introduction

The Victorian society was full of paradoxes. This fact was commonly known as the Victorian compromise. Indeed, the UK under Queen Victoria (1837-1901) became the world leading economic power thanks to her vast empire and the Industrial Revolution. In almost all domains of life, considerable positive changes were noted. Yet, that society faced serious problems such as a high rate of unemployment, violence, disease, mortality, striking poverty, child labour, and woman discrimination, to list but a few. All these evils, which mainly the working class was confronted with, had one major name, injustice, and one main source, a crisis of ethics.

As defined by the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, ethics refers to "the moral principles of a particular tradition, group or individual" [1]. These moral tenets are based on a

common belief system shared by a community. They are social laws. They determine the right action to do and the bad one not to do. In this regards, ethics is not different from morality. Its ultimate aim is to control the behaviour of people in a given society for a peaceful living together.

Since the Middle Ages, Christianity provided the western societies with the moral principles on the ground of which they attempted to regulate the conduct of people. This Christian ethics requires believers to live in obedience to the will of God as revealed by the Holy Scriptures and mainly by the teachings of Jesus-Christ. Frame defines Christian ethics as "what the whole Bible teaches us about which acts, attitudes, and personal character traits receive God's approval, and which do not" [3]. The Victorians found in Christianity the source of their moral standards. Xiao contends that "to understand their moral concern, we have to have a close look at their religious condition" [11].

The cornerstone of Jesus' teachings and the central message of the Bible is love. Saint Paul reminds us of the centrality of love in Christianity: "even if we could master all truth, without love, we would still be nothing" [13].

The Victorian moral values revolve around this basic Christian principle. Believing in strict Christianity as a puritan, Queen Victoria hoped to be able to tackle the social problems of her society by setting a strong morality founded on Christian love. This moral standard is summarized in the lines below:

The new moral standard set by the Queen was part of trying to find solution to the severe social problems. But what exactly does this morality involve? Morality, strict etiquette came hand in hand. It may remind us of the 'code of chivalry' as both ideological systems required helping the less fortunate (at least hypothetically) and proper behaviour. Proper etiquette – set of rules and expectations from birth to death- required the use of flower language when speaking about sexuality. It was said to be profane to say certain words out loud or in public. Some example of flower language which we can take as coded message between young men and women: Apple blossom: preference, Basil – hatred, calla lily – feminine beauty, Pansy – you occupy my thoughts etc. However Victorian ethics also included prudery and the respect of patriarchal family [15].

The advent of the Industrial Revolution and the expansion of the rationalist thought prior to it brought a major change in the mentality of British people and westerners as a whole, specifically with regard to the issue of ethics. The capitalist spirit of the Victorian age, with its exclusive interest in money, material and social status, imposed a new morality that is in full contradiction with the strict Christian ethics of the period. The phrase "double standards" is often used to refer to this paradoxical coexistence between the stern Christian moral standard and the prevailing low morality which is an increasing violation of the first one. *Silas Marner* (1861) by George Eliot is one of the most famous British novels that remarkably picture this crisis of Victorian ethics. Grounded on a Christian approach of ethics, this paper attempts to examine how Eliot's *Silas Marner* portrays the crisis of morality in Victorian Britain.

2. The Crisis of Faith

Christianity is inseparable with western culture. This is what Kurti means when he states: "the very existence of that society is built upon religious principles derived, in particular, from Christianity" [7]. If the Christian roots of the West are undeniable, the reality of its dechristianization is equally obvious. In fact, in Western countries today, there is a dramatic shift away from Christianity, a worrying decline in belief in God.

The spiritual decaying has many causes. The wind of revolutionary changes that swept away the old aristocratic institutions in France (the Monarchy and the Church) as a result of a more freedom demand (the French Revolution of 1789), added to the development of the spirit of rationality in

Europe in the same period, ended up discrediting and rejecting any form of authority, mostly the transcendental one. In *The Age of Reason* (1794), even though he did not deny the existence of God, the English and American thinker, Thomas Paine, castigated all institutionalized churches and the Bible that he considered as pure human inventions meant to maintain man in the bond of subjugation. Besides, Robbins explains that the crisis of faith is caused "firstly, by the powerful assault on the divinity of Semitic literature by the Germans; and secondly, by recent discoveries of science, which are hastily supposed to be inconsistent with our long-received convictions as to the relations between the Creator and the created" [14].

These scientific theories are precisely what led most Victorian British intellectuals to doubt and cast off religion. They lost faith in God, specifically "after the publication of *The Principles of Geology* (1830-33) by Charles Lyell and later *On the Origin of species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) by Charles Darwin" [16]. These biologists sustained in fact theories about the origin of man that openly contradicted Christian teachings.

Eliot was part of those spirits that questioned religion. About Darwin's seminal book, she wrote this: "It will have a great effect in the scientific world, causing a thorough discussion of a question about which people have hitherto felt timid. So the world gets on step by step toward brave clearness and honesty!" [5]. Having received a strict religious education from the age of 9 to 16, Eliot eventually lost her Christian faith (Evangelicalism), precisely after joining an intellectual circle¹ that critically made an "*Inquiry into the Origins of Christianity*"². Her translation into English of German works that openly questioned the foundation of Christianity, such as David Strauss' *Das Leben Jesu*³ (1835) and Ludwig Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christenthums*⁴ (1841), also much influenced Eliot. In a letter to her father, with whom she was in conflict over the question of religion, Eliot, alluding to Christian Scriptures, wrote:

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. In thus viewing this important subject I am in unison with some of the finest minds in Christendom in past ages, and with the

¹ In 1853 Mary Ann became assistant editor of *The Westminster Review*, a liberal paper founded by Jeremy Bentham and which gathered the most radical philosophers of the age. This allowed Eliot to meet and befriend many great influential intellectuals like John Chapman, Francis Newman, Herbert Spencer, Harriet Martineau, Florence Nightingale, and John Stuart Mill. Another great thinker George Henry Lewes, whom she later met and lived together with as husband and wife until his death in 1878, had also a major influence on her.

² The title of a major deconstructive work by the famous theologian Charles Christian Hennell (1809-1850) first published in 1838 and that had a major influence on Eliot.

³ *The Life of Jesus*

⁴ *The Essence of Christianity*

majority of such in the present (as an instance more familiar to you than any I could name I may mention Dr. Franklin) [9].

The crisis of faith did not only affect intellectuals. It touched all segments of societies, as is further illustrated in the following lines:

As the Sea of Faith ebbed, the intellect lay naked to all the winds of doubt with nowhere to stand firm. In an age overpowered the will to believe; and the mind was left, without ethical sanction, to its own divided aims. Without a hard heart, man may easily go astray to inner bewilderment, just as Empedocles did. It was under such mind state that Arnold wrote his famous lines: "Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born [...]". The dead world being the world of orthodox beliefs and certainties, the one not yet born may come from the world of scientific truths and demythologized religion [11].

The crisis of religion and of certainty inevitably brings about another crisis: that of ethics. The reason is simply that the norms of good conduct or the standards of behaviour (ethics) had been determined by Christianity since the Middle Ages when this religion was still the leading institution which westerners individually and collectively identified with. The disbelief in God leads then to a kind of moral emptiness or an ethical void⁵. For Ratzinger, "the power of morality has not kept pace with the growth of science, indeed, it has rather diminished" [10]. George Eliot's *Silas Marner* largely reports on that diminished morality or crisis of ethics underpinned by the loss of faith.

Eliot's novel is about the story of Silas Marner. The religious sect in the town of Lantern Yard of which he is a remarkable member falsely charges him with money theft before excommunicating him. Silas loses his faith in God and in man. He leaves Lantern Yard to find refuge in the village of Raveloe where he is regarded with much suspicion as a stranger. Silas does not either seek to have any contact with the villagers. Instead, he is plunged in a solitary work as a weaver, which permits him to gain money. He remains unhappy despite his new wealth that serves him almost nothing apart from the shallow pleasure of mechanically counting it on a daily basis. However, a happy event totally changes the fate of Marner: a "fatherless" little girl, whose mother (Molly) passes away, wanders in Marner's cottage. He adopts the little girl that he names Eppie after his dead mother and sister. Eppie opens up a new happy world for Marner who is now accepted by the villagers and regarded with much consideration. Silas regains his faith in man and in God. He and Eppie live happily in Raveloe.

The story of Marner can be read as an account of a loss and gaining back of faith. Faith is then central in the novel, as it was in Victorian Britain. Hence the vital place that the church occupies both in Lantern Yard and in Raveloe. Talking about Raveloe, the narrator asserts: "It was an important looking village, with a fine old church and large

churchyard in the heart of it..." [2]. Dolly Winthrop, Silas's benefactress and Eppie's godmother and future mother-in-law, her son Aaron Winthrop who will later become Eppie's husband, and Mr Macey, the parish clerk, are among the most religious figures of the village. They keep trying to convince Silas to join the church. In Lantern Yard, Silas was "early incorporated in a narrow religious sect [...] known to itself as the church assembling in Lantern Yard; he was believed to be a young man of exemplary life and ardent faith..." [2]. Even William, Silas' close friend who eventually betrays him by dishonestly accusing him of theft and later marrying his fiancé, is described as "a shining instance of youthful piety" [2]. However, behind this apparent piety lurks a deep unease that the narration gradually unfolds.

In displaying some realities of the religious sect in Lantern Yard, the narrator reveals certain strange considerations, which can be read as an obvious attempt by Eliot to satirize religious beliefs. The cataleptic fit Silas is victim of at a prayer-meeting is, for example, quickly interpreted by all brethren, including Silas himself, as an expression of spirituality, despite the absence of "any spiritual vision during his outward trance" [2]. Besides, "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" [2]. It is evident that Silas's trance, that finally becomes frequent even after he loses faith in God, has nothing to do with spirituality.

The dogmatic interpretation of Silas's crisis by the community members and their reluctance to find a medical explanation for it crystallises the long conflict between religious truth and scientific one. From a rationalistic perspective, it can be seen as the opposition between the darkness of dogma and the light of reason. The fact that believers hold something to be true while it proves to be scientifically false is strange, but understandable. However, it is much more incomprehensible that the same thing be interpreted in quite opposite ways by the same people on the basis of the same belief. This is actually what happens with Silas's trance. William "observed that his trance looked more like a visitation of Satan than a proof of divine favour, and exhorted his friend to see that he hid no accursed thing within his soul" [2]. Marner is now viewed as a devil by the same people who looked upon him as a saint. This unbelievable reversal of things is made possible by a contradictory religious interpretation of one single fact. This poses then the question of the reliability and danger of religion which, after all, is based on unverifiable truths (dogmas) and mere subjective interpretations of facts and words.

The dramatic irony of this situation is that the reader, unlike the members of the church assembly, knows quite well that William's accusation is entirely false. William is the very perpetrator of the theft he is blaming Marner for. His managing to have the rest of the assembly league with him against Marner, on a basis of a pure lie that takes the form of

⁵For more information about this issue see my article entitled "The Ethical Void or the Parody of Western Modernity in Golding's *Lord of the Flies*" [4]. It can be consulted online: <http://www.regalish.net> Numéro: 6, décembre 2020 / ISSN 2520-9809.

a religious truth, sufficiently lays bare the ridiculous and dangerous nature of religion. This is probably one of the reasons why Eliot regarded Christian dogma as immoral. The narrator ironically castigates the injustice that lots of people undergo because of false ideas, dogmatically held as unquestionable truths: "If there is an angel who records the sorrows of men as well as their sins, he knows how many and deep are the sorrows that spring from false ideas for which no man is culpable" [2].

Satan is truly present in this assembly not through Marner, as William seeks to make people believe, but through the wickedness, falsehood and hypocrisy, in one word the anti-Christian morality of William himself. The devil is also represented by the lack of discernment of the other brethren, "these supposedly religious people" [8] who blindly believe William.

The irony is brought further when the assembly resorts to praying and drawing lots so as to find the real culprit. Strange though it may be, this scene seems to have a biblical source. In fact, after Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus and excluded himself from the 12 Apostles that Jesus had chosen for his public ministry, the 11 others decided to pray and cast lots to designate between Mathias and Joseph another apostle to replace Judas. Mathias was selected after the lots landed on him [13]. The narrator's comments on this peculiar method of establishing truth is quite ironic: "This resolution can be ground of surprise only to those who are unacquainted with that obscure religious life which has gone on in the alleys of our towns" (2).

The lots drawing in Eliot's novel has a negative and dangerous implication, which gives it a parodic dimension if compared to the one undertaken by Jesus' apostles. Indeed, its purpose is to confirm the wrong accusation of theft against a brother and subsequently exclude him from the community of believers. The close link between this strange judicial system and the Calvinist doctrine of Predestination, according to which whatever happens results from God's will, gives a much realistic and bitter aspect to the irony. The fate of poor Marner is hanged to the result of what is clearly a mere bad game of chance, but absurdly considered to be the expression of the will of the all omniscient God.

Religious truth is not only the fruit of a selfish and false interpretation of things, as we have seen with William, it is also established by pure chance (drawing lots). It is thus synonymous with uncertainty and lies. But Marner himself still cannot see this reality. He is blinded by his faith in God. The narrator explains:

we are apt to think it inevitable that a man in Marner's position should have begun to question the validity of an appeal to the divine judgement by drawing lots: but to him this would have been an effort of independent thought such as he had never known; and he must have made the effort at a time when all his energies were turned into the anguish of disappointed faith [2].

Faith snatches away the freedom of thought and intelligence of Marner who is unable so far to realise that all is a plot against him. "God will clear me" [2], he keeps

saying before kneeling "with his brethren, relying on his own innocence being certified by immediate divine interference" [2]. Without surprise, the lot declares the innocent Silas guilty. This is precisely where he totally loses faith in God. He shouts: "There is no just God that governs the earth righteously, but a God of lies, that bears witness against the innocent" [2]. This heart cry is expressive of a deep unease that affects the church itself. The immoral demeanour of most clergymen and the numerous abuses of the Roman Church, which are one of the causes of its fragmentation and the unbelief in Western societies, are fully given expression through this shocking image. Marner and the reader as well discover that religion is a pack of lies or at least can be used, and most often is used, to subjugate and destroy others, as Marxists would say. This discovery is all the more upsetting as religion guarantees the ethical foundation of Marner's society.

3. A General Moral Crisis

Religion is no more efficient and reliable to establish the norms of good conduct, as the church of Lantern Yard rightly proves. The crisis of faith, that absolute value and source of all other values, first brings about a metaphysical and social crisis that is fully embodied in the attitude of Marner. "Poor Marner went out with that despair in his soul (...). That shaken trust in God and man, which is little short of madness to a loving nature" [2]. He first withdraws from the community, then leaves Lantern Yard and finally completely cuts himself off the people in Raveloe where he is newly settled. Just as religion unites a community of believers, the loss of faith exposes the individual to the harsh reality of solitude and emptiness. For, "when God withdraws from the world, and only at such time does man experience himself as "complete emptiness" [11]. Marner experiences this feeling of nothingness theorized by Nietzsche and undergone by characters in what is known as the Theatre of the Absurd of which Beckett and Ionesco are two outstanding representatives.

The loss of faith confronts man with the reality that there are no intrinsic values in the world. "When faith was lost, man was placed in an indifferent universe that provided neither a response to his consciousness nor a sanction to his values" [12]. It is consequently up to the human beings to freely create their own values in a godless universe. Hard work and quest of money, two typical ideals of industrialized Britain, are the exclusive new values that Marner espouses. Such a new disposition of mind makes him an entirely lonely and antisocial being. The repetition of the adjective "own", preceded by the possessive word "his", in the following sentence, better illustrates Marner's loneliness: "Silas, in his solitude, had to provide his own breakfast, dinner, and supper, to fetch his own water from the well, and put his own kettle on the fire; and all these immediate promptings helped, along with the weaving, to reduce his life to the unquestioning activity of a spinning insect" [2]. Marner has not however completely got rid of

his humanism. He is still honest and helpful. His natural and successful attempt to heal the suffering Sally Oates with traditional medicine (he learnt from his mother) and his refusal to be considered as a healer by the poor mothers who bring him their kids to heal are expressive of his intrinsic qualities. "Silas might have driven a profitable trade in charms as well as in his small list of drugs; but money on this condition was no temptation to him: he had never known an impulse towards falsity, and he drove one after another away with growing irritation, for the news of him as a wise man had spread even to Tarley..." [2].

Marner's is more a religious, existential and social crisis than an ethical one. He still draws in his natural goodness some life principles that keep him a good human being, despite his visible asocial attitude. He is rather victim of the ethical crisis that arises inside the church, paradoxically meant to be the guardian of moral values.

The ethical crisis of the church heralds a general moral crisis. It is significant that the family, which is the basic unit of both the church and of the society, be the second place in the novel where the values crisis is illustrated. Indeed, after William and the church members of Lantern Yard, the other serious ethical problems are exemplified by the Squire Cass family in Raveloe whose home is referred to as The Red House. The richest and most respectable family of the village, the motherless Cass family is a money-driven one where love is entirely absent. The relation between the old Squire and his two children Godfrey and Dunstan, also called Dunsey, are mechanical and conflicting. "The sweet flower of courtesy is not a growth of such homes as the Red House" [2]. They are in permanent conflict with one another, specifically over a question of money. The rent money (hundred pounds) - paid by the tenant Fowler and belonging normally to their father - opposes Godfrey and Dunstan. The father threatens to expel his two sons from the Red House, after Godfrey reveals him how he and Dunstan "embezzle" that money: "I'll turn the whole pack of you out of the house together, and marry again: I'd have you to remember, sir, my property's got no entail on it" [2]. Mr Lammeter, the father of Nancy (Godfrey's girlfriend and future wife) "had been talking with Godfrey about the increasing poor-rate and the ruinous times" [2].

No one better than Dunstan embodies these "ruinous times" about which "the old gentleman" complains. Actually, Godfrey's younger brother is so sadistic a person. He is described by the neighbours as "a spiteful jeering fellow, who seemed to enjoy his drink the more when other people went dry" [2]. He is jealous of his brother Godfrey and uses any means to harm him. He maliciously drags him to an undignified marriage with Molly, a lower class and drug addicted woman. Dunstan then constantly blackmails his brother who is afraid that his father Squire Cass should discover that secret marriage. "He (Godfrey) had long known that the delusion was partly due to a trap laid for him by Dunstan, who saw in his brother's degrading marriage the means of gratifying at once his jealous hate and his cupidity" [2].

The Victorians attached much importance to the notion of

"family", "honour", "respectability", "hard work", "perfectibility", and "religious conformity". They also valued the role of women in the hearth both as housewives and mothers. "The fountain of wholesome love and fear in parlour and kitchen" [2], the woman was responsible for keeping a successful household. The knowledge of these realities enables one to have an insight into the depth of the crisis undergone by this motherless high social class family whose two sons are "kept at home in idleness" [2].

At the basis of the ordeal of this family is a morality question. The breakdown or weakness of moral laws, what Durkheim calls anomie, is a reality in this countryside. The narrator specifies that "Raveloe was not a place where moral censure was severe" [2]. In the absence of moral regulations or true love, there can be no exact family code shared by the family members. As a result, everyone acts according to their own interest, irrespective of any moral consideration.

This situation makes any form of solidarity impossible within both the family and the society. Thus, the central ethical crisis noted in the church of Lantern Yard and in the Cass family is quite observable at the level of society. It cannot be otherwise since the same people either in the church or in the family daily interact with the rest of the society. They bring into the society the counter values of these private spheres that do no longer fulfil their socialization role.

The good-natured Silas Marner is, for example, victim of Dunstan's unscrupulous nature. He steals in fact all the savings (money) of Marner, the only thing the poor man desperately clings to and enjoys after he loses all faith in God and in man. Godfrey is then right when he says about his younger brother: "he'll never be hurt - he is made to hurt other people" [2]. This second major loss undergone by Marner is another tough experience that almost drives him mad, as the following passage illustrates:

But now the fence was broken down - the support was snatched away. Marner's thoughts could no longer move in their old round, and were baffled by a blank like that which meets a plodding ant when the earth was broken away on its homeward path. The loom was there, and the weaving, and the growing pattern in the cloth; but the bright treasure in the hole under his feet was gone; the prospect of handling and counting it was gone (...). The thought of the money he would get by his actual work could bring no joy, for its meagre image was only a fresh reminder of his loss; and hope was too heavily crushed by the sudden blow..." [2].

Marner's feeling of helplessness after he is deprived of his gold (his fence and support), is as appalling as his loss of faith in God. This is a proof that wealth, like blind faith, cannot be a real rampart against the vagaries of life. Moreover, the deep despair that the money loss has driven Silas Marner into is suggestive of people's exaggerated love for cash in this period of victorious capitalism. Money is the new god that has replaced the Christian one. This is nowhere better illustrated than in Lantern Yard where, later, the church strangely disappears to be replaced by a big factory. The rise of the capitalist spirit of the Victorian age

corresponded also to the waning of Christianity. This reality, which Disraeli refers to as the “ascendant materialism” and the “disturbance of mind” [11], is what Eliot attempts to voice behind the important change noted in Lantern Yard.

In this era of Industrial Revolution, money is the new absolute value on the basis of which people think and act. With the exception of Marner who decides to honestly earn his living through hard work (weaving), most of the characters, chiefly William, Dunstan, and the Old Squire have no moralities when it comes to gaining money. This fact accounts for the unethical realities such as lies, plot, selfishness, intolerance, cruelty, hypocrisy, corruption attempt, and theft that are common in the novel and which the novel’s main protagonist is essentially victim of. Money is consequently at the heart of the ethical problems that pervade the novel. Yet, not all moral issues directly revolve around it.

4. The Prison of Egotism and the Opposition of New Ethics

The crisis of ethics in Eliot’s novel manifests itself in different ways. Some of her characters show other moral weaknesses that are not primarily money-related. The eldest son of Squire Cass is a case in point. Though he keeps complaining about the disreputable attitude of his brother, Godfrey’s conduct is symptomatic of a serious moral crisis. Described as “a fine open-faced good-natured young man” [2]. He proves to be too selfish. He is obsessed with two main things. The first one is to keep his unfortunate marriage with Molly secret, as the latter - with whom he has a daughter (Eppie) – belongs to a lower social class. In this stratified 19th-century British society that attaches much importance to the issue of social class, Squire Cass’ eldest son is willing to get rid of this shameful marriage. The second preoccupation is to marry the beautiful and respectable Nancy. Such concerns lead him to think and act in quite a self-interested, contradictory and immoral way. For instance, he is secretly relieved when he hears the news of Molly’s death. Molly dies on her way to the Red House where the Cass family is holding a party on the occasion of the First Year’s Eve. She wanted to publicly disclose the secret of her marriage with Godfrey in front of all the family and their guests including Nancy. The death of Molly is liberating for Godfrey since it offers him the opportunity to marry Nancy.

Another death at which Godfrey implicitly rejoices is that of his own brother. Now that Dunstan is dead, Godfrey feels free to tell his new wife Nancy about his unfortunate marriage and confess to her that he is the true father of Eppie. Godfrey’s decision to unveil this information to his wife is not fortuitous. Actually, he is unable to have a child with Nancy. In disclosing the secret, he hopes to convince Nancy of the necessity and legitimacy of taking back the daughter that he somehow immorally rejected.

Though his attitude is condemnable, Godfrey is

different from his ill-natured brother. He is not entirely short of ethics as his brother is. The only problem is that he seems to have adopted an ethics that is quite inconsistent with the traditional non-selfish Christian morality based on the principle of the love of neighbour. Indeed, he likely espouses the utilitarian ethics of Bentham premised on the idea that an action is good when it increases happiness and is bad when it decreases it. His words and actions are guided by a firm will to avoid pain and maximise pleasure, regardless of other people’s interests. He thus violates Bentham’s basic ethical principle that “it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong”. For Godfrey, the right thing is what exclusively benefits him, not others. He is obsessed with the possible negative effects that his own decisions may have on him. Ratzinger’s theological thought can help us better grasp Godfrey’s consequentialist, selfish, and anti-Christian morality:

In a world based on calculation, it is the calculation of consequences that decides what is to count as moral or immoral. And so the category of the good, which Kant had put front and center, disappears. Nothing is good or evil in itself, everything depends on the consequences that can be foreseen for a given action. [10].

The calculation state of mind prevents Godfrey from actually assuming his responsibility, as he is confronted with various choices. He is for example reluctant to tell the truth of his marriage to his father and to Nancy lest he should respectively lose his respectable social status and the possibility to espouse the woman of his dreams. Instead of telling his father the truth about the rent money that Dunstan is unable to pay back, after Godfrey imprudently lends it to him, he prefers to have Dunstan sell his own horse to pay back the money. The horse accidentally dies and Dunstan too, obliging Godfrey to confess the fact to his father. The latter flows into a rage and threatens to expel him from his home. For his personal interest, he does not hesitate to attempt to deny poor Marner his entire happiness, his reason to live, by trying to snatch away Eppie from him. Eppie refuses to be separated with Marner and then rejects Godfrey’s adoption proposal. His marriage with Nancy, partly made possible thanks to the death of Molly, does not fill Godfrey with the expected joy as they are childless.

We already know with Aristotle since the Greek Antiquity that doing bad deeds leads to failed goals and causes frustration and unhappiness. This doctrine of consequences also called Nemesis or Karma, the unavoidable consequences of one’s actions, is one of the moral principles of Eliot that she draws from the intellectual and religious landscape of her time. Godfrey’s suffering and failure to fulfil his dreams emphasize thus the limit of his ethical stand. His attitude is determined by his consequentialist ethics that makes him a slave of the others and of the facts that he is so fearful of. The omniscient narrator of Eliot’s novel links the unhappy situation of Godfrey less to fate than to his bad choices resulting from what he/she calls his “natural irresolution and moral cowardice” [2]. “He had made

ties for himself which robbed him of all wholesome motives and were a constant exasperation” [2]. Godfrey himself finally recognizes his faults at the end of the novel’s last chapter but one. He blames himself for not being true to Nancy, for being a fool and confesses that he “had no right to expect anything but evil” [2] in his marriage. Within the framework of an intercultural dialogue, Godfrey’s burden could be explained in the light of this wolof⁶ saying according to which «do raggal daf lay gaagn», literally meaning “whatever you dread will harm you”.

The other difficulty for Godfrey is that he and his wife hold contradictory ethical positions. The end of the commonly shared Christian ethics opened the path to a multiplicity of new ethics. It is then no surprise that “George Eliot endows each of her novels with inflexible and complex religious and moral ideas” [12]. Most of these complex moral ideas are essentially secular ones. Unlike the transcendental Christian ethics that is God-centred and Bible-centred, they are exclusively man-centred. Henson makes the following observation: “The disappearance of an absolute ethical role model cast doubt over the concept of an objective morality external to humanity, or even external to the individual” [19]. Because morality has lost all absolute nature, it becomes quite a relative and questionable truth. The inability to agree on the criteria of a good and a bad action implies *de facto* a serious communication problem.

The diversity of ethics is in consequence a sign of ethical crisis and source of difficult social cohabitation. The opposition between Godfrey and Nancy over the question of the adoption is an outstanding proof of such a crisis. Godfrey grieves for not being able to have a child with Nancy, while the latter finds it difficult to bear her husband suffering from something, she thinks, he could normally accept. “Nancy’s deepest wounds had all come from the perception that the absence of children from their hearth was dwelt on in her husband’s mind as a privation to which he could not reconcile himself” [2].

Unlike her husband with his altered utilitarian and consequentialist ethics discussed above, Nancy adopts a deontological ethics drawn from different sources including the Greek stoic thought, her Christian background, the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant and the ethical intuitionism that postulates that moral truth can be known intuitively. Ethical or moral intuitionism was, alongside the utilitarianism of Bentham, one of the most well-known moral approaches of Victorian Britain.

Nancy invites her husband to be stoic and accept their childlessness with which he is much concerned: “My trouble would be gone if you resigned yourself to the lot that’s been given us” [2]. This spirit of resignation recalls that of Eliot in front of the long illness of her father whom she attended to as a motherless young girl. Nancy’s position concerning the issue of adoption is in line with her own convictions that she holds as resolute principles:

Her opinion were always principles to be unwaveringly acted on. They were firm, not because of their basis, but because she held them with a tenacity inseparable from her mental action. On all the duties and properties of life, from filial behaviour to the arrangements of the evening toilet, pretty Nancy Lammeter, by the time she was three-and-twenty, had her unalterable little code, and had formed every one of her habits in strict accordance with that code. She carried these decided judgements within her in the most unobtrusive way: they rooted themselves in her mind, and grew there as quietly as grass. Years ago, we know, she insisted on dressing like Priscilla, because ‘it was right for sisters to dress alike’, and because ‘she would do what was right for sisters if she wore a gown dyed with cheese – colouring’ (...). It was one of those rigid principles, and no petty egoistic feeling, which had been the ground of Nancy’s difficult resistance to her husband’s wish [2].

This passage indicates that Nancy has both an intuitionist and Kantian conception of morality. For her, the idea of right is established intuitively. It is self-evident and is inferred from no belief system, no school of thought, but rather from the moral and natural faculty of the individual. The right thing to do, the voice of consciousness, is also a matter of moral obligation, what Kant calls the “categorical imperative”. This moral duty must be accomplished with full conviction that it is the best thing that the free rational individual has to do. Hers is an ethics of deontology, that is an ethics not based on self-centred interest, but on moral duty. It is rightly on this basis that she rejects her husband’s selfish ambition to adopt Eppie: “Dear Godfrey, don’t ask me to do what I know is wrong: I should never be happy again. I know it’s very hard for you – it’s easier for me – but it’s the will of Providence” [2]. There is a good dose of Christian faith in the way Nancy conceives ethics, as illustrated by her reference to Providence. The reasons she advances to sustain her position concerning the adoption prove it more:

To adopt a child, because children of your own had been denied you, was to try and choose a lot in spite of Providence: the adopted child, she was convinced, would never turn out well, and would be a curse, to those who had wilfully and rebelliously sought what it was clear that, for some high reason, they were better without. When you saw a thing was not meant to be, said Nancy, it was a bounden duty to leave off so much as wishing for it [2].

What at first sight seems to be a personal and rational conception of ethics is indeed an expression of belief. Even if she does not clearly admit it, Nancy roots her “unwavering principles” in Christian morality “imperfectly understood”. This is besides the conviction of the narrator who declares:

It might seem singular that Nancy---with her religious theory pieced together out of narrow social tradition, fragments of church doctrine imperfectly understood, and girlish reasonings, on her small experience – should have arrived by herself at a way of thinking so nearly akin to that of many devout people whose beliefs are held in the shape of a system quite remote from her knowledge [2].

One of the systems of thought which Nancy’s way of

6 The most spoken local language in Senegal that serves as a lingua-franca in the country

thinking is near to is Kant's moral philosophy. But, as the narrator specifies, this philosophy is far beyond her knowledge. That is why the moral thought she develops seems to be rather a parody of Kant's ethics which the German thinker defines as an imperative duty, freely and entirely assumed by the rational agent, regardless of any external authority, be it transcendental or not.

Despite her rectitude and a firm will to stick to her principles, Nancy does not have a clearly defined ethics. Her confused and childish arguments aiming at convincing Godfrey not to try to adopt a child can be interpreted as a tragic need of the individual to find a clear moral standard in a world that does not offer any. The individual is then reduced to cling to various fragments of old value systems so as to attempt to build a personal ethical code that can in no way be reliable and commonly accepted.

Eliot's seems to be reproducing here Spinoza's conception of morality whose *Ethics* she translated into English in 1856 as she was living in Germany with her lifelong companion George Henry Lewes. Spinoza believes that moral values do not exist in themselves. They are mere matters of subjective considerations. "There is nothing", he writes, "in a natural state which is by common consent good or bad, since every man in a natural state consults his own advantage alone" [18].

The tragic situation in which both Nancy and Godfrey find themselves is their inability to realize that what they consider to be absolute truths, for which they are almost ready to lay down their lives, is in fact constructed and thus relative and personal values. Had they been able to be aware of that, they might have lived happily in a total complicity despite being childless. Commenting on *Silas Marner*, Jones relevantly points out "the absurdity of the way in which people emphasize their certainty of uncertain facts" [6]. If Marner has won the battle that opposes him to Godfrey, by managing to keep Eppie, it is partly because experience has taught him to construct a flexible and more appropriate moral creed. Indeed, "one's moral code is fashioned largely as a result of past experience" [17]. Marner trusts no system of values and holds nothing as undisputable certainty. He draws in his natural goodness, honesty and sympathy, the secret of his success in a post-Christian and a post-ethical world. Marner's wisdom seems to reflect that of her creator who has grown allergic to doctrines and rigid morality. Rather than the intellect, Eliot, as a positivist, considers feelings like sympathy and love to be the true basis of a viable ethics. These ethical principles, Eliot believes, must in no way be founded on any belief in the supernatural. They must rather result from the sense of unconditional brotherhood between all human beings. This is one of the conclusions that one can draw from the humanistic scene that closes Eliot's novel.

5. Conclusion

The Victorian society portrayed by Eliot in *Silas Marner* is in deep crisis. The realities of the Industrial Revolution have made its social structures, particularly the church, obsolete and inoperative. It is through the captivating and much

sarcastic story of Marner and the Christian sect of Lantern Yard that Eliot aptly lays bare the too weak foundation of religion. In doing so, she voices her personal religious scepticism, but also the secular spirit of her age.

The other serious problem that Eliot alludes to, especially through the account of Marner's profound religious disillusionment, metaphysical and social crisis, is the moral vacuum resulting from the collapse of faith. Because it is unreliable and infected with the virus of materialism and all the evils pertaining to it, religion is unable to keep ensuring a moral mission in the money-oriented Victorian society. This is also and mostly echoed by the absence of clear social rules even in traditional areas like Raveloe where the social effects of the Industrial Revolution are supposed to be less felt. In underlining the moral and social crisis that affects the most respectable household of Raveloe, the Squire Cass family, Eliot implies that the Victorian family too, after the church, is doomed to fall apart under the weight of the materialist spirit that is taking away the last vestiges of Christian ethics.

The collapse of the two basic units of the society, the church and the family, where social values are inculcated in the individual, is indicative of the end of the collective consciousness⁷. It paves the way for selfishness and a general social disorder. The egotistic and anti-Christian morality of Godfrey, the immorality of his brother, Dunstan, and William Dane, the assumed ethical convictions of his wife, Nancy, built on fragments of non-mastered thoughts, their inability to reconcile their relative ethical stands; all these are evident signs of the Victorian ethical crisis. Yet, in the middle of this moral chaos, Eliot, as a moralist, humanist, and optimistic writer hints at great possibilities to put the Victorian ethical clock back on time.

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