



Idealisation of Female Characters in *Silas Marner*

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Abstract. In the Victorian period, the role of woman gained more attention from the society than in the past. In the literature creation of this period, the images of women, especially the idealisation of them, were carefully delineated by the authors, which provoked the discussion of what an idealised woman should be like. George Eliot, as a female and one of the most famous authors in the Victorian period, showed her unique understanding about this topic in her works. This paper focuses particularly on one of her greatest works, which is *Silas Marner* [1], to analyse how Eliot depicted idealisation in her female characters and how this idealisation is influenced by the society background of that period. The analysis integrates various concepts including industrialization, marriage, and determinism to help interpret this practice, as well as social background, description in other literature writings and George Eliot's private life to further the explanation. It will focus on three characters in *Silas Marner*: Nancy Lammeter, Dolly Winthrop, and Eppie. At the end of this paper, the discussion comes to the contribution of this idealisation to the literature creation and how it affects the perception to the females from the Victorian period as well as the current society. The paper aims to clarify the characteristics of women and endows more understanding of women to help pursue gender equality.

Keywords: Idealization · Female · Victorian Literature · George Eliot · *Silas Marner*

1 Introduction

The discussion about female roles is important in major aspects of life and research nowadays. It is important to highlight that in the Victorian period, the society's perspectives about women are intertwined with the delineation in literature works and influencing each other. This paper focuses on explicating the idealisation of female characters in a novel written by Victorian female writer George Eliot, called *Silas Marner*. The discussion considers the condition of Victorian period as well as the literature within it, the characteristic of George Eliot as a female writer, and the analysis of three main female characters in the book one at a time. In conducting the discussion, this paper aims to figure out how and why these female characters are idealised, and its possible influence on the society. This research will present how literature at that period is constructed by the influence and encourage the thinking about female roles through the literature and historical past.

2 Review of the Literature

2.1 Idealised View of Woman in Victorian Period

Social Background

Issues of gender was a heated topic among Victorian society. In this period, Britain was transforming by the industrial revolution, and this practice led to profound influence on the idealisation of women [2]. Changes to the work and living give impetus to the alteration of people's perceptions of the roles of the two sexes. This generation put a new gender ideology forward: women were confined to the "private sphere", involving the home and the fireplace, while men's field was defined as "public sphere", which concerned with business and politics [3]. This propaganda did limit women's access to various activities and opportunities, but it also prevented women from engaging in heavy labours and exploitation from the street.

Marriage

Marriage, as the merging of the two sexes, symbolized a great importance in the idealisation of women. Lord Kames expresses his view toward marriage as "a contract still more important, as the happiness of one's whole life may depend on it" [4], which illustrates that marriage is a binding contract between men and women which means stability and happiness especially for women [5].

"The Angel in the House"

The most famous idealised female figure of the Victorian era is probably from a narrative poem by Coventry Patmore – "The Angel in the House" [6]. His first wife Emily, who died in 1862, was the basis of the poem's protagonist. In this poem, readers can find a woman who sees it as her own pleasure to please her husband; who is too gentle to tell her husband that he has committed a sin, and often takes that sin as her own because it oppresses her beloved. She is "a dependent wife who maintains a domestic haven with little interest or activity in the larger world outside her home, husband and children" [7]. Her "unselfish grace, gentleness, simplicity, and nobility" shapes her not only as an idealised woman but an angel on earth [8]. Nina Auerbach comments on this poem's great impact, deliberating it as "a convenient shorthand for the selfless paragon all women were exhorted to be, enveloped in family life, and seeking no identify beyond the roles of daughter, wife, and mother" [9].

Queen Victoria

As this paper is discussing the "Victorian" era, the importance of Queen Victoria's role can not be overlooked. She was in harmonious relationship with her husband Albert and lived with her children which largely outnumbered the children in the normal families in Balmoral Castle, which is a place filled with luxury but homely surroundings. Her focus on family, motherhood and decency makes her a symbol of the femininity and domesticity

in the late-19th century [1]. This emphasis on the feminine role in the domestic sphere reinforces the stereotype on the idealisation of women.

Determinism

An important concept which is engraved in the Victorian culture is called determinism. It suggests that all events are determined by external forces and therefore humans can not have the possibility to obtain free will. When an individual is born a woman, she is destined to do what a woman “must” do. An instance of the religious determinism is within the Authorised Version of the Bible, which is the most broadly used translation in the Victorian era. The following two excerpts show how woman’s fate is formed by God [10]:

23 And Adam said, this is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman because she was taken out of Man.

(Genesis, Chapter 2)

16 Unto the woman he [God] said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband; and he shall rule over thee.

(Genesis, Chapter 3)

These quotations suggest that woman will always be secondary to man because she originates from a man’s body, and her life should be concentrating on pleasing her husband and giving birth to the children to contribute the family. This allusion to female obedience and reproductive destiny again shapes the concept of idealization.

2.2 George Eliot and Her Women

Eliot is the second highest-paid British writer in the 19th century, only after the greatest writer of the Victorian period - Charles Dickens. However, as a woman benefited so much from the society, her attitude towards her heroines is questioned by many critics who claim to be feminists. They censured Eliot for restricting her women from choosing their own lives or fulfilling their ability towards both the society and themselves [11]. *Adam Bede* is a good example, for Dinah Morris submissively accepts this decision and gives up preaching on the village green when the Methodist Church announces to her that women no longer have the right to speak the word of God in public [12]. A character in *Middlemarch* named Dorothea, gives up a fortune, and marries Will Ladislaw who eventually becomes a local politician with limited prospects [13]. Zelda Austen’s argument is one of the prominent one, which criticising that it’s a huge disappointment that Dorothea’s opportunity to live “beyond the provincial domestic confines of a Middlemarch” is killed by Eliot, and “[t]he particular anger against George Eliot rises from her failure to allow this freedom for her heroines even though she achieved it for herself” [14].

But unlike her characters, Eliot did manage to overcome her personal dilemma with her own effort. She worked only as an editor for a literary journal for a few years in a tiny boarding house, which is also the publishing house. What made her the forsaken one of the society was her 25-year relationship with a married man, which largely violated social conventions. However, she succeeded in literary writing, which won her not only financial independence, but also a reputation as a popular intellectual novelist [15]. However, she had never claimed to be a feminist. There were many public campaigns

in 1850s, 60s and 70s aiming to improve women's situation, but she never paid any real attention to them. What may be more questionable to the feminists is that she doubted whether women need to vote. When her friend founded a women's college in Cambridge, she donated a certain amount of books and money, but the consequences caused by women's participation in education appear to be a huge concern to her, which is an obvious paradox considering her own experience, so she was much engaged in this activity than other women the same circle [16].

To her role as a novelist, Eliot gives her own interpretation. Her task, she believes, is to be an "aesthetic, not [a] doctrinal teacher" [11]. Rather than unrealistically encouraging women to overstep social constraints, she felt it was more important to appeal to "social sympathy", which is to sympathize other people's struggle. This may as well related with her experience in American and French Revolution. In these actions she learned that rapid and radical change might abandon certain people who were not on the track of such historical progress and even worse, undermine the social fabric.

While Eliot's third novel *Silas Marner* seems to be the one in which gender issues need least emphasis, how she portrays these female characters in her novels and endows hidden meaning is still worth considering. Several characters are idealised by Eliot in certain ways within a Victorian conception as well as her own appreciation of women.

3 Analysis

3.1 Nancy Lammeter

The closest one to the perfect woman of that era in this novel is this Lammeter lady. In Chapter 11, her beauty is constantly emphasized. When she seems to be in the farthest position from prettiness which was "seated on a pillion, and attired in a drab joseph and a drab beaver-bonnet, with a crown resembling a small stew-pan", she is still "thoroughly bewitching in that costume", and the bloom on her cheeks made "its highest point of contrast with the surrounding drab" to highlight her beauty [1]. Even it is her belongings which can be regarded away from her body were "of delicate purity and nattiness: not a crease was where it had no business to be, not a bit of her linen professed whiteness without fulfilling its profession". For her own person, "it gave the same idea of perfect unvarying neatness as the body of a little bird" [1], and "there was no sort of coiffure that could make Miss Nancy's cheek and neck look otherwise than pretty" [1]. Nancy obtained particular qualities of a lady without the background of high-level education – "high veracity, delicate honour in her dealings, deference to others, and refined personal habits" [1]. She was born in a wealthy family in Raveloe, with a father who thinks highly of thrift, moral rectitude, and hard work. Early in Chapter 3, her significance as an idealised family figure is already stressed. Other people in the village give Nancy a highly positive comment that if she by chance married Godfrey Cass and became Red House's hostess, than "there would be a fine change", for people in the Lammeter family "never suffered a pinch of salt to be wasted, and yet everybody in their household had of the best", and Nancy will be "a saving to the old Squire".

What is fascinating is her attitude towards Godfrey's advances. From one aspect, her judgement of Godfrey's conducts and disapproval of his weakness within his character made her decide not to marry a man with such a style of life in the first place. This is a

good indication that Eliot appreciates independent woman who can make her judgements and decisions by herself, but Nancy ends up as Ms. Cass makes the idealization of the character more in line with “scientific determinism”. This term is explained by Allan in his paper “On the Real Differences in the Minds of Men and Women” [17]:

Every normal woman desires to be married, and yearns for children, although from a sublime deceit (also characteristic of feminine nature) she professes indifference and unwillingness to fulfil the great end of her existence. A feigned disinclination to celebrate the nuptial rites, and a simulated repulse, which increases the desires of the male, is common to almost all females of the higher mammalia, and constitutes another very remarkable point of resemblance between the human species and other animals.

Nancy’s rejection towards Godfrey in this case seems to be a “feigned disinclination”, which aims to arouse a stronger desire within him. Despite being described as a woman who would never marry that man no matter what happened, and having made up her mind, her face flushed when Godfrey came to help her out of the carriage. Her heart was already agitated when she sat between the Squire and Godfrey, but it was only the “instinctively neat and adroit” actions that saved her from being exposed. When she was asked to dance with Godfrey, she even let herself through with a valid reason. This “feigned disinclination” is actually encouraged in the Victorian period as the idealised view of women and regarded as a property of female attractiveness.

If one has to know the flaw of Nancy as an idealised woman, her infertility would be the only breakthrough. But this may be Godfrey’s punishment for failing to take responsibility for his ex-wife and child. Even more surprisingly, when Nancy learnt the truth about Eppie, instead of blaming Godfrey for the deception, she regreted that she did not learn the truth sooner to atone for her responsibility to Eppie and the lack of children in her family. Her care for her husband and her ability to run the household had far exceeded the previous void of the Red House due to the absence of women, and these qualities even made her the pillar of this community.

3.2 Dolly Winthrop

Fiehn regards Dolly as Ms. Lammeter’s working-class equivalent [15]. In a way, this is justified, given the similarities in their characteristics. Ms. Winthrop was as both loving and beautiful as Nancy. She was no less capable of taking care of her household than a rich girl. She was one of the first to reach out to Silas after his money was stolen, and she brought the goodwill from the community. Dolly was happy to offer her help when Silas stumbled upon Eppie and took her as his adopted daughter, advising in raising the child and preparing what the little girl needed. She understood Silas’s desire to be the person Eppie loved most, so she deliberately kept her distance while helping foster care. She still integrated into the family in this situation and acted as a mother figure to Eppie. Her presence filled the absence of adult woman in the Silas household, much as Nancy has achieved in the Red House.

Dolly and Nancy are both religious. Dolly kept persuading Silas to go to church, thinking it would favour his living. She discussed religion with Silas and, for the most part, showing her devotion most of the time, even though there was much in her faith that she could not understand. Nancy’s religion impeded her adopting a child that didn’t belong to her. Acknowledging that Eliot herself no longer go to church at the age of 20,

we don't know her exact attitude towards these character's religious beliefs, but the fact that Silas accepted the advice of Dolly eventually to take Eppie to the church, which integrates them more into the community, shows that this practice do led to a positive result, thus idealising the character in a traditional Victorian way.

The main difference between them is their ability to have and care for children. Not only did Dolly take good care of Eppie, but also gave birth to a wonderful, healthy boy named Aaron. Nancy lacked the fertility, and at the meantime failed to take Eppie back to the Red House family. From this aspect, Dolly's idealisation was more complete with her contribution to the domestic sphere than Nancy.

3.3 Eppie

Eppie's birth can not be related with nobleness and fortune. She was the child of a coward father and a mother who was addicted to the drugs. However, this dark past did not detract from her role as the spiritual support of Silas's household. She broke through Silas's circle of self-pity and linked his life to the world outside. Eppie's presence made Silas be accepted by other people again. No one in the community considered him to be a weirdo since then, instead they saw him as a father who worked for the family. Silas, for his part, had eventually broken free from his inner shackles and began to care about others. Eppie was Silas's light, the hope that he will continue to live as a human being.

When Eppie first gained the ability to use her body freely, she showed disobedience to Silas. She was too naughty and often broke the "rules" that Silas had set for her because Silas spoiled her so much. It was during these actions that Eppie sensed the deep love that Silas had for her, and when Godfrey came to take her back to her original family, she chose to remain loyal to her foster father. Under such conditions, she grew into a confident young woman with a mind of her own, and in the end accepted Aaron's proposal to greet a happy life.

4 Conclusion

Through analysing these female characters of *Silas Marner*, there is no difficulty to see George Eliot's appreciation of their qualities and significance. She mainly praises their role as pillars in the structure of their own families and their ability to manage the domestic affairs. The idealisation of these roles through Eliot is mostly Victorian, focusing on their abilities based on the stereotypes. Her delineation is largely affected by the social background of that period, including the social expectation of women and how they are usually defined as "ideal". But at the same time it is also evident that she appreciates qualities such as the independent thinking of her characters. Eliot's ambivalence in her mind is presented here, results from her personal experience and her unique role as one of the few female writers. It is more worthwhile to analyse the aesthetic effects of appreciating these idealisations and to extract from them the good qualities of these characters, which are still useful in the context of the quest for gender equality nowadays. In analysing more of these classical literature workings in the future, more practice to help justify women's role will reveal and remind us how great effort was made in the past to achieve nowadays situation and what we should do in the future to further help the society in this topic.

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