

### How does setting influence characterisation in “Silas Marner”?

George Eliot’s “Silas Marner” is set in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Marner is a member of a close religious sect in Lantern yard but is exiled due to being wrongly accused of theft. He escapes to a cottage on the outskirts of Raveloe, a rural village where he lives many years in misery and loneliness till one snowy night he finds an orphaned child and knows it is his duty to look after her. The child, Eppie grows and warms Silas’ cold and bitter heart until his faith and trust in people is restored. Eliot uses in depth descriptions of settings to enhance characterisation and also to portray a change in a character or the mood and atmosphere of the place. Setting is also used as a device to make the reader consider the issue of the industrial revolution, a factor which influenced Eliot’s writing contextually since the book was set in a time when England was growing industrially, and thus once reasonably peaceful places were becoming hosts to an unsightly swarm of factories and buildings. Eliot’s lengthy and meticulously detailed descriptions of idyllic rural scenes suggest a sense of nostalgia and longing Eliot harboured for the country. Eliot knew both the country and the city as she spent her childhood in pastoral Warwickshire but moved to urbanised London in pursuit of becoming a writer. The use of idyllic setting indicates a metaphoric wish of Eliot’s to return to the country and a sense of resentment and hostility she feels towards the industrial revolution and its impact on society.

The village of Raveloe hides complexities beneath its seemingly rural and idyllic façade. Its old fashioned feel and natural qualities emphasise the spirituality of the place but Eliot juxtaposes the idea of religion being important to the village and the “highly-desirable tithes” the farms pay, to question religion and the spirituality of Raveloe. Religion and spirituality teaches the importance of generosity, goodness and caring for others but the idea of tithes being paid to the church creates the feeling that these are given because they are obligatory rather than being given out of the goodness of people’s hearts. Eliot’s sceptical approach to religion has parallels to her own life where being brought up as a Christian she lost her faith and to the dismay of her family refused to go to church. Darwinian theories had an impact on the religious world at this time and people became increasingly more open to challenges and ideas posed to religion. Religious scepticism was aided by this and this maybe this is one of the reasons for the change in Eliot’s beliefs and why she weaves challenges to religion into her writing. The juxtaposition of ideas makes Raveloe seem awkward and flawed therefore giving the people of Raveloe this image; this is of course the case with many of them, the Cass family especially. The Cass family are portrayed as selfish and somewhat aggressive even though they are the squires of the village and are seen to be high up in their social status. The facade of their high standing in Raveloe’s social hierarchy hides the fact they are struggling for money and their family is full of tension and lies. This relates to the way Raveloe is not what it may seem on the surface, as the Cass family are untrustworthy yet are seen to be in a desirable position. These two ideas influence each other to show the complexities and tension in both the village and the Cass family. Eliot uses words such as “snug”, “nestled” to give the village of Raveloe a comforting feel and emphasise the fact that Silas has fled to Raveloe as a place of refuge. These words have connotations of warmth and also relate to the way an animal makes its nest or den in the natural world; this relates to the natural aspects of Raveloe. There is something fundamentally wrong in the way Raveloe is portrayed as a place of warmth for Silas as he becomes increasingly colder with every day he lives there, which shows that there are many problems with Raveloe. The “well-walled orchards” Eliot describes

symbolise protection and seclusion for Silas but also have negative connotations of restriction. Silas has come to Raveloe to escape the restrictions of Lantern Yard but he feels himself unable to escape because Raveloe too cuts him off from the world and makes him isolated. Again, Eliot uses the juxtaposition on the man made walls and the natural orchard to give the reader the impression that nature is being cut off and walled away, this could also relate to the idea that even the most secluded and rural villages are impacted by the industrial revolution by the way the walls have been built. This description shows the huge impact the industrial revolution had on landscapes in the way that it created eyesores for people who weren't used to the huge built up cities. Eliot's clear aversion to the industrialisation of England was a view shared by many people. However, this was not enough since the lure of economic growth was far greater than the desire for the preservation of the landscape. These walls don't seem to belong to the natural orchards of Raveloe and seem out of place, they are almost unwanted outsiders, which symbolise Silas at the edge of the village geographically and socially. The walls could also be a metaphor for Silas in the way that they are cold and hard on the exterior but hide a natural soft and sweet interior, which are the trees in the orchard.

The "old brick hearth" in Silas' cottage is used by Eliot to influence characterisation of both Silas and Eppie and to make the change that Eppie has made to Silas' life even more obvious. The fire begins as being functional and its primary purpose being for cooking rather than radiating warmth and light into the room, which shows the initial mind-set of Silas as a person who is not living for happiness or love but living mundanely and without passion or energy. The use of the fire for cooking also suggests Silas is not looking for any light or warmth in his life nor does he have any, yet the fire is still burning which suggests Silas may have a spark of warmth and hope in his heart which is not currently being used to spread love and light but has the potential to; this spark is ignited by Eppie. When Eppie first toddles up to the hearth, the symbolism and purpose of it changes completely. The fire is now "bright" and "cheerful" which reflects the way Eppie, from her very first moments in Silas' cottage begins to warm his heart with the joy she exudes. The fire no longer has a purpose of cooking but now spreads "lulling" warmth. The "l" sounds in this word help to create a peaceful atmosphere of contentment and provoke the image of a baby being rocked into a serene sleep. Although this word refers to the way Eppie falls asleep, it could also symbolise the calmness Eppie brings Silas. Eliot has created this effect to emphasise Eppie's goodness, sunny disposition and the brightness she brings to the cold and lonely stone cottage. Eliot shows the happiness gained through companionship and love, and how loneliness brings misery and coldness.

Eliot uses nature to influence the reader's view of Eppie. Eppie is placed in the metaphorical setting of a lush and dense garden where she plays among the buttercups with the sun shining down on her. A semantic field of words such as "flowers", "petals" and "sunshine" so the reader associates these things with Eppie and therefore thinks of Eppie as natural, beautiful and something that is pure and innocent and unchanged by the man made complications of this world. Here the "sunshine" and "buttercups" relate to Eppie's kind, radiant nature and golden curls. Additionally the materialistic imagery which once described Eppie's curls as Silas' gold has now changed and the curls are buttercups which are non materialistic and natural. Eliot uses this technique to show the change in Silas' attitude and character; he is no longer ruled by his gold but now looks to non-materialistic things for happiness. The plants in the setting are associated with growth and therefore youth, which gives Eppie a quality of innocence and potential to flourish into something beautiful. Moreover, this

garden metaphor is a proleptic marker for the garden that Eppie and Silas decide to create so this metaphor has a dream-like quality but simultaneously seems real and if it is meant to be and fits with Eppie's nature perfectly.

In the way Eppie brings about a change to Silas' cottage and Silas himself, Nancy Lammeter similarly has this effect on the Red House and Godfrey Cass. At the beginning of the book, the Red House is a dark and uninviting place. The house is full of men, Squire Cass and his sons. Eliot has shown the influence of this masculinity in the way she describes the Red House. The walls are "decorated with guns, whips, and foxes' brushes" which are all objects associated with aggression and hunting which relates to the primal instincts of animals. The instincts of animals are rather like those of the Cass family where every man is for himself and there is little compassion or regards to morals. The family seem to see these garish hangings as trophies or badges of honour in the way they "decorate" the walls with them as if they were some work of art, which shows they are proud of these objects and therefore their masculine instinct to hunt. Again the fire is an important element of the setting to describe the characters. Eliot describes Godfrey standing with his back to the fire in the "dark wainscoted parlour". The fire symbolises Godfrey in the way that his basic nature is fairly kind and well meaning and with the right guidance could grow to become warm and bright like the fire but the fact he has his back to the fire shows he is not willing to open his heart to such warmth and is turning his back on happiness. This idea is juxtaposed with the "dark wainscoted parlour" which symbolises Dunstan Cass. Dunstan Cass is selfish, cold hearted and ruthless. The darkness embodies his sinister personality in the way it has connotations of death, uncertainty and emptiness. Because we can see nothing when we are in darkness we assume Dunstan is too like this and his soul is loveless and emotionless. Eliot makes it clear that the Red House is lacking a female presence in the way she makes the setting so obviously masculine and isolated. Eliot uses the two females Nancy Lammeter and Eppie to bring charm and life to the places, which are devoid of it, which indicates the importance of feminine qualities in a household. Before Nancy comes to live in the Red House the place was without "the fountain of wholesome love" which a mother figure brings. The metaphor of the fountain symbolises the vital need for love and compassion in a household like water is needed for survival; without this we wilt and become weak. The imagery of the fountain paints a picture of fresh, pure water gushing out from a rich fountain, which shows how a mother is gushing with nurturing love and how desperately in need the Red House, is of this. The fact the house is desolate of this love has made its inhabitants cold and bitter, much like the way Silas becomes miserable because of his loneliness and isolation. The change to the Red House when Nancy lives there is evident and therefore Godfrey's character is reformed and good. The place has a softer feel from the way Eliot uses sensory input to describe the scent of the room with "lavender" and "roseleaves". These two scents relate to the natural world and therefore to goodness and purity and of course Nancy Lammeter possesses these elements and has spread them to the house and the people who live there. Nancy's purity has influenced the Red House because everything is now clean and polished as opposed to the gloom that once lurked in the house. Godfrey's character has also cleaned up and become less sinister like the once dark house, which shows both Nancy and his setting have influenced him. Eliot is trying to show again the development of this character into a good person due to the influence of another person.

I feel Eliot deals with setting in a thoughtful way which best describes the characters in that setting. Not only does the setting influence the characters but the

characters also influence their settings for example the way in which Nancy turns the Red House around. Eliot uses a variety of effective techniques such as metaphors to show the links between the characters and settings, and the journey these characters go on and here the reader gets a better sense of what it is like to be these characters and the way that they might change. Eliot's also shows the importance of companionship and how people influence each other with in depth description of settings, which help to stress a main idea of the book; love a vital ingredient of happiness.