

<p><b><i>The Silent Mariner: Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" as an intertext of George Eliot's <u>Silas Marner</u><sup>(1)</sup></i></b></p>	<p><b>By Magda Mansour Hasabelnaby</b></p>
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"Each text refers back differently to the infinite sea of the already written, where texts greatly overlap and radically influence each other. This is the so-called intertextuality" (Barthes qtd. in Selden 76)

## I

Delving deep into the wide ever-changing sea of "the already written", this paper attempts to probe into the moments where a novel, Silas Marner, by George Eliot, merges with a poem, namely, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. As such the paper belongs to a group of intertextual studies, which following Kristeva's reading of Bakhtin, views any text as: "a mosaic of quotations" , or as "the absorption and transformation of another [text]" (Kristeva 37). "Intertextuality", Michel Gresset points out, "extends in scope all the way from the 'operative repetition' of one single word to the use of a whole book as an 'inter-web'

of meaning" (4). Gresset cites Faulkner's subtle quotation of the verb "to fade" taken from Keats's "Ode to Grecian Urn" as an example of the former extreme, and Joyce's extended use of the Odyssey in *Ulysses* as the best example of the latter(4). The intertextual diffusion of the whole of Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner" in Eliot's Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe<sup>2</sup>, could be placed closer to the latter extreme.

The novel about Silas the weaver is in itself, to use Roland Barthes's metaphor for intertextuality, "a fabric woven of bygone quotations" Generalizing on the phenomenon, Barthes views intertextuality as "a prerequisite for any text":

Every text is an intertext; other texts are present in it, at variable levels, in more or less recognizable forms . . . Every text is a new fabric woven out of bygone quotations. Scraps of code, formulas, rhythmic patterns, fragments of social idioms, etc. are absorbed into the text and redistributed in it, for there is always language prior to the text and language around it (qtd. in Gresset 4).

When did George Eliot read *The Ancient Mariner*? Did she feel moved by this romantic poem to the extent that made her consciously or perhaps subconsciously attempt to write her own version of *The Rime*? Was she striving to overcome “*The Ancient Mariner*” as a great precursor poem? These are stimulating questions but they fall outside the interest of this paper which does not belong to this brand of intertextuality designated as “revisionist” or “antithetical criticism” and developed by Harold Bloom in the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> Although Bloom has embraced the concept of intertextuality, he has compressed it to a relationship between a text and one particular precursor text, between a poet and one major predecessor. This paper, however, doesn’t endeavour to reveal the secret of Silas Marner by describing, in Bloomian fashion, its act of origination from Coleridge’s masterpiece, nor does it hope to reduce Eliot’s rich text to an act of Oedipal anxiety whereby Eliot vents her jealousy of Coleridge’s accomplishment by misreading, rewriting, and perhaps distorting his poem. Rejecting the Bloomian paradigm, the paper conforms to Barthes’s directive that

“intertextuality cannot be reduced to a problem of sources and influences; it is a general field of anonymous formulas whose origin is seldom identifiable, or unconscious or automatic quotations given without quotations marks” (Gresset 4). By linking the two texts by Eliot and Coleridge to each other, as well as to other cultural and mythical elements<sup>4</sup>, this paper attempts to apply the broader paradigm of intertextuality where a text works by absorbing and destroying at the same time many other texts of intertextual space (Kristeva qtd. in Culler 118). This intertextual space, argues other critics, includes literary as well as non-literary material. In The Pursuit of Signs, Jonathan Culler insists on “the intertextual nature of any verbal construct” (101).

Though the paper is mainly interested in what Gresset calls “an anastomosis which connects two texts”(4), the study is not only meant to be persuasive with regard to the intertext(s) discussed, but it is also intended to ratify Culler’s dictum “that one can often produce heat and light by rubbing two texts together”(131). The light produced in the process will not

only further illuminate George Eliot's novel with the discovery of a hidden intertext, but the intertext itself will probably shine anew. Newer texts, as Philip Thody ably argues, cast doubt on the value systems on which the original works are constructed. Examining intertextuality and myth in Tom Stoppard and James Joyce, Thody asserts that "neither Homer's *Odyssey* nor Shakespeare's *Hamlet* can ever be read in quite the same way again"(87).

## II

To start with the titles, even before opening the two books, "Silas Marner", which stands for the name of the novel's protagonist, rhymes almost identically with Coleridge's title which is also a description of the poem's protagonist. The stark parallelism, can automatically direct the reader's inner cultural gaze to Coleridge. The pleasure of recognizing correspondence gradually gives way to further analysis of resemblance between the two titles. *Silas*, a proper name which resonates with an adjective "*silent*", matches the adjective *Ancient* in Coleridge's title. The similarity in the second halves of the two titles *Mariner* and *Marner* is so striking that it

requires no comment. The title therefore carries an implicit reference to prior literary discourse, and to an earlier poetic tradition.<sup>5</sup> This reference invites certain presuppositions right from the start and modifies the way in which the protagonist and the whole novel must be read. The title of Eliot's novel could therefore be considered a sign of external intertextuality, an example of those "unconscious or automatic quotations given without quotations marks" which Barthes sees as "a prerequisite for any text". The fact that Eliot quotes Wordsworth in an epigraph is another evidence of building romantic poetry into one of the intertexts of Silas Marner. The inscription on the title page of the novel reads:

A child, more than all other gifts  
That earth can offer to declining man,  
Brings hope with it and forward looking  
thoughts.

'Michael' William Wordsworth

This time, however, the extract is explicitly documented as 'Michael' by William Wordsworth.

Though some critics exclude conscious allusions from the field of intertextual studies (Penuel x), the epigraph from Wordsworth has tempted Robert H. Dunham to explore the “Wordsworthianism” of the novel in an essay entitled “Silas Marner and the Wordsworthian Child”. In this essay, Dunham claims that:

[L]ike Wordsworth and the other Romantics, George Eliot’s artistic use of the child is inseparable from her belief that an exhilarating and ennobling alternative reality awaits those who are able to free themselves from bleak habits of custom and convention (658).

While focusing on the overwhelming presence of Wordsworth in Silas Marner, Dunham’s study refers to Coleridge’s “The Ancient Mariner” as well as to such later works as Carlyle’s Sartor’s Resartus and to J.S. Mill’s Autobiography, as texts which share a narrative of “conversion and spiritual rebirth out of soul-blinding crisis” (648). But while Dunham’s study only hints at affinities between Coleridge’s poem and Silas Marner, the

present study attempts a detailed examination of the intertextual encounter between the two texts.

The functioning of Coleridge's poem in Eliot's novel, its emergence as an intertext, is not however to be found primarily in the affinity between the titles, or in a verbatim quotation from Coleridge's twin poet Wordsworth. The study is more concerned with deeper levels of intertextuality whereby the two texts are revealed as incorporating "identical fragments of the large anonymous, all-pervasive subtexts of a common culture and a common ideology" (Bleikasten 50-51).

Both Eliot's Marner and Coleridge's Mariner are aged travelers whose first appearance in the text is both mysterious and appalling. They both shock the reader and literally scare the other characters in the novel/poem. Both are out of place, weird and somehow ghostly. Their misery stands in sharp contrast with the world of feasting and merriment enjoyed by the people around them. The wedding guest justifies his reluctance to hear the Mariner's tale by saying: "The guests are met, the feast is set/ May'st hear the merry din"(180). Raveloe, the world



in which Eliot places Silas Marner is not different "[P]urple-faced farmers jog along the lanes or turn in at the Rainbow [inn]; homesteads, where men supped heavily and slept in the light of the evening hearth, and where women seemed to be laying up a stock of linen for the life to come" (13).

Coleridge's mariner is "ancient", his experience transcends time and place, and his appearance is marked with the "long grey beard" and "a skinny hand" which fit his physical weakness and old age. Silas Marner is similarly drawn as both physically weak and ancient. In the opening passage of the novel, Eliot places him in the *crew* of linen weavers: "pallid undersized men, who, by the side of the brawny country-folk, looked like the remnants of a disinherited race"(1).

The protagonist in each text passes through a three-phase journey of crime, punishment, and absolution. In both texts, the journey takes place within another physical journey. Silas Marner moves from an industrial city of religious fundamentalism, ironically named Lantern Yard to a village of luxury, merriment, and abundance,

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Raveloe. The name Raveloe is also telling: A rave is a very large dance for young people, which takes place in large empty buildings, sometimes without the permission of the owner. The first part of the name of the village, therefore connotes ecstasy, while the second part qualifies this ecstasy as "low". The combination reflects the carnivalesque, and the down-to-earth nature of the people among whom, Silas, the misanthropist, decides to live.

This journey from Lantern Yard to Raveloe in Silas Marner, is Eliot's novelistic version of the exotic sea-voyage in Coleridge's poem. In both texts, therefore, we have a fabula within a fabula whereby the physical journey in each of the texts embraces and echoes an internal quest for absolution which can only be achieved through crime and penance.

The crime of Coleridge's Mariner is the killing of the albatross, which is portrayed by Coleridge as a beneficent sea-bird which has spiritual connotations:

At length did cross an albatross:  
Through the fog it came;  
As if it had been a Christian soul,

We hailed it in God's name (191).

The mariner kills the albatross and Penance immediately follows. The ship undergoes horrifying hardships, and the mariner experiences a deep sense of guilt symbolized by the dead albatross hung around his neck. His suffering and his alienation are portrayed in agonizing details. After shooting the albatross, and in his thirst and agony, he sees a figure of a skeleton ship with a crew of two: Death and Life-in-Death. Death and Life-in-Death cast dice for the ship crew and Life-in-Death wins the mariner.

Following this, the mariner experiences utter loneliness, until, one day, he watches crawling water snakes, admires their beauty and "blesse[s] them unaware". The moment he blesses the water-snakes is "the self same moment [he] could pray". Love has redeemed him: He is finally forgiven and the albatross "fell off and sank/Like lead into the sea"

A similar pattern could be traced in Eliot's Silas Marner. Silas, a naïve religious fundamentalist, refuses to defend himself against a false accusation of theft, claiming

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that "God will clear [him]"(10), even if he remains silent. Committing such crimes of ignorance and silence against himself, Marner is punished: He is proven guilty by the drawing of lots, a form of gambling reminiscent of the dice game in the "Ancient Mariner". Severer penance takes place in the form of loneliness as Silas Marner lives a withdrawn *life-in-death* in a stone cottage . . . near the village of Raveloe, and not far away from the edge of a deserted stone-pit.

Marner's suffering increases with the robbery of his gold. His loneliness, and Life-in-death continues, until one day a baby girl toddled into his cottage. In an epiphanic moment parallel to that of blessing the sea-snakes, he "pressed [the baby] to him, and almost unconsciously uttered sounds of hushing tenderness" (112). Blessing the sea snakes "unaware" is paralleled in the novel with Silas's unconscious utterance of love for the child. This child, Eppie, brings hope and healing through awakening Silas's soul to natural beauty, and reuniting him with both his past and his community. And just as on blessing the sea-snakes in "The Rime", the

albatross falls into the sea; by adopting Eppie, Marner's hard feelings, loss of faith and loneliness fell off and crashed deep down into the stone pit.

### III

Although the same stages of crime, penance and forgiveness, which make up "The Ancient Mariner", have been traced in Eliot's novel Silas Marner, each of these stages are colored in the novel by the fact that Eliot is a female writer of fiction, whereas Coleridge is a male writer of poetry. Relevant to this endeavour is David Duff's call for an integration between genre theory and the theory of intertextuality; "More work", he suggests, "needs to be done on the relations between genres, and on the different ways that genres can combine . . . intertextuality theory can help us to map the semiotic force fields that are created when different sign-systems intersect or merge" (68-9). Gender as well as genre intersect and merge in the present intertextual encounter.

Critical interpretations of Silas Marner have often focused on the crimes leveled against Silas, rather than on those committed by him. The text itself is the reason for

this focus, since it foregrounds Silas as victim, first of a false accusation of theft, of the betrayal of his closest friend and his fiancé, and then, fifteen years later, of the robbery of his gold fortune which is all he has in Raveloe. But the text also allows us to see these crimes in a different light. They can be seen as punishment for earlier crimes, which Silas had silently perpetrated in the text.

The first crime, which George Eliot subtly hints at, is the severing of the bonds which used to connect him with nature and with his own mother:

He had inherited from his mother some acquaintance with medicinal herbs and their preparation -- a little store of wisdom which she had imparted to him as a solemn bequest -- but of late years he had had doubts about the lawfulness of applying this knowledge, believing that herbs could have no efficacy without prayer, and that prayer might suffice without herbs; so that the inherited delight he had in wandering the fields in search of

foxglove and dandelion and coltsfoot,  
 began to wear to him the character of a  
 temptation (6-7).

Silas Marner had therefore cut himself off from nature and from the maternal, which are both seen in the text as sources of healing and delight. The herbs in Eliot can therefore be seen as the equivalent of the albatross in Coleridge. This bird, argues Diane Long Hoeveler, has traditionally been viewed as a feminine and maternal figure (Hoeveler 152). The albatross “provides nourishment to both the sailors and Nature. While its appearance allows the ship to escape its stagnation” (152). According to Hoeveler, the world of the poem before the appearance of the albatross, had been dominated by masculine power, which is symbolized by the sun and the storm blast:

And now the storm blast came and he  
 Was tyrannous and strong;  
 He struck with o’ertaking wings,  
 And chased us south along (190).

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The sun came up upon the left,  
Out of the sea came he!  
And he shone bright, and on the right  
Went down into the sea (192).

With the appearance of the albatross, Hoeveler rightly concludes, "the negative masculine world is momentarily shattered, and 'a good south wind' sends the boat into 'the white Moon-shine'" (152).

Eliot's herbs are the equivalent of Coleridge's albatross. They are a "solemn bequest", while the albatross is a "Christian soul". They both have a therapeutic function: the herbs cure diseases, while the albatross magically causes the ship to move. Worn around the mariner's neck, the albatross also becomes an agent of healing through suffering. But whereas the albatross is related to the maternal in the poem only on the symbolic level; the herbs, in Eliot's novel, are overtly connected to the maternal, since it was Silas's mother who drew his attention to their "therapeutic" function.

Eliot, thus, plants the natural, and the therapeutic into a maternal context, fleshing out as it were Coleridge's



need to revive the mother through killing her in his text. It is interesting to note here, how Silas exchanged the joy of nature taught by his mother, with that of prayer. At this stage of his journey, he was ignorant of the fact which Coleridge's Mariner reaches at the end of his journey:

Farewell, farewell! but this I tell  
 To thee, thou wedding-Guest!  
 He prayeth well who loveth well  
 Both man and bird and beast.  
 He prayeth well who loveth best  
 All things both great and small;  
 For the dear God who loveth us,  
 He made and loveth all (213-4).

Were the Mariner and Marner aware of this truth at the beginning of their journeys, the former wouldn't have killed the albatross, and the latter wouldn't have deserted his mother's herbs, nor terrorized the small children who huddled outside his window. For *this* is another crime which Silas commits against the maternal (this time the maternal within himself); he is seen scaring the Raveloe children who peep through his window:

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He would descend from his loom, and opening the door, would fix on them a gaze that was always enough to make them take to their legs in terror. For how was it possible to believe that those large brown protuberant eyes in Silas Marner's pale face really saw nothing very distinctly that was not close to them, and not rather that their dreadful stare could dart cramp, or rickets, or a wry mouth at any boy who happened to be in the rear (2).

Silas' weak eyes, which did not enable him to see these children, work in the text as a sign of his spiritual blindness, and I should add here, as a sign of a further blocking out of the feminine and the maternal. Silas's scaring of the children is a repeated act, as the use of 'would' indicates.

Eyes, seeing, looking, and their negative, blindness, are given equal emphasis in both the novel and the poem. Both protagonists possess an uncanny gaze. The ancient

mariner uses this gaze to hypnotize a stranger, a young wedding-guest, "next of kin" to the bridegroom, on his way to indulge in the merriment. Failing to stop the youth using his skinny hand, the Mariner resorts to the fearful power in his eyes, and fixes the youth to listen to his story:

He holds him with his glittering eye  
The wedding-Guest stood still,  
And listens like a three years' child  
The Mariner hath his will (189).

But whereas the Mariner stares at the wedding-guest in order to achieve communication. Silas Marner, a silent wanderer at the opening of the novel gazes at the Raveloe children, who cluster outside his cottage, in order to prevent communication. Eyes in both texts are therefore used symbolically to denote experience and knowledge, or their absence. The glittering eyes of the mariner symbolize vision and the ability to "see" the truth, since the reader meets him at the close of his journey, when he has already acquired wisdom through suffering. On the other hand, the void in Marner's eyes at the early stage of

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his journey, symbolizes his lack of vital experience.<sup>6</sup> "Until Silas acquires a child's wondering vision, he cannot see children. Later in the novel, when Eliot reintroduces Silas his large brown eyes seem to have gathered a longer vision, as if his physical blindness were a condition of his spiritual blindness the one to be corrected by the correction of the other. The blindness phase is however presented by Eliot, in a manner which hardly condemns her protagonist, whom the reader cannot help but pity along with pitying the terrorized children.

Like the ancient mariner, Silas Marner receives his punishment in the forms of loss and loneliness. Yet, whereas in *The Rime*, penance is drawn in a natural and supernatural guise, in the novel, it takes a human form, whereby man, rather than God, becomes the sole agent of punishment. The robbery of Silas's gold is logically accounted for in the text through the details of the subplot. The motives of Dunstan Cass, the robber, and his familial and psychological background, are presented by Eliot in such details which give the robbery, when it happens, a realistic cause-and-effect quality, and which parodies

Silas's own speculations about the robbery as a supernatural event:

*Was it a thief who had taken the bags? Or was it a cruel power that no hands could reach, which had delighted in making him a second time desolate? He shrank from this vaguer dread, and fixed his mind with struggling effort on the robber with hands, who could be reached by hands (41).*

In its realism, therefore, the version of punishment presented in Silas Marner, differs from that of "the Ancient Mariner", where the skeleton ship "comes onward without wind or tide?"(196). In Eliot's version, causality is foregrounded, and the supernatural recedes in the background behind the trees of Raveloe: "this low wooded region, where [Silas] felt hidden even from the heavens by the screening trees and hedgerows" (12), and where it seemed to him that "the Power in which he had vainly trusted" in Lantern Yard "was very far away from this land" (13).

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The loneliness of the Ancient Mariner is imposed on him by an invisible power which causes the death of the crew. "With heavy thump, a lifeless lump/ They dropped down one by one" (198), and the Mariner becomes:

Alone, alone, all, all alone,  
Alone on a wide wide sea!  
And never a saint took pity on  
My soul in agony (199).

Absence of Saints, like those merciful saints in Coleridge's poem, had nothing to do with the loneliness of Silas Marner:

*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 wheel-wright's: *he* sought no man or woman, save for the purposes of his calling (4; emphasis added).

Loneliness, here, is a self-imposed condition which *Silas* inflicted on himself, as the repeated subject-verb structure indicates. The result in both cases, however, is

Life-in-death: Eliot manages to create a life-in-death atmosphere, first, through the name "Silas", which, as already noted, rhymes with silence. Secondly, through her choice of the setting in which she locates her protagonist; "the stone cottage" near "the stone pit" "outside" Raveloe, is also suggestive of a cemetery outside a city. Finally, the fits of catalepsy, which Silas goes through, further epitomize this state of life-in-death.

To sum up, punishment in Silas Marner takes the form of severe loneliness which culminates in a life-in-death state. Yet, unlike the Coleridgean life-in-death, which is saintly, supernatural, and inconceivable; loneliness and life-in-death in Silas Marner is man-made and grounded in a rational, almost scientific basis.

Finally, the last stage of the journey for both Silas and the Mariner, is the stage of healing through the redemptive power of love. Yet again in Eliot, this stage is colored by her vision as a female writer of fiction. The act of blessing the water snakes turns in the novel into the multiple acts of feeding, warming, and pampering a small child.

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[H]e put the spoon into her mouth. Presently she slipped from his knee and began to toddle about, but with a pretty stagger that made Silas jump up and follow her lest she should fall . . . But she only fell in a sitting posture on the ground, and began to pull at her boots, looking up at him with a crying face as if the boots hurt her. He took her on his knee again . . . He got [the boots] off with difficulty, and baby was at once happily occupied with the primary mystery of her own toes (112).

This lengthy quotation is meant to show the details in which Eliot describes Silas's *motherly* reception of the baby. For it is this reception which constitutes Eliot's unique (re)vision of "the spring of love" which "gushed" from the Mariner's heart when he saw the water snakes. The curt "O happy living things! No tongue/Their beauty might declare" (201) is replaced in the novel with the detailed daily chores of mothering. While the Mariner had no tongue to declare the beauty of the sea snakes, Marner had a tongue to name the child Eppie after his dead sister whom he used to love and care for, and more importantly



he had hands to lift her to his bosom, and to feed and warm her.

To sum up, George Eliot's Silas Marner is a novel which, like Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner", celebrates the redemptive power of love. The novel, or the experiment, as Eliot once called her novels<sup>7</sup>, *can* be read as a (re)vision of the poem. Silas Marner in fact seems to have absorbed and transformed "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". Its realism, in addition to its feminization of the mariner's experience, constitutes the main features of this transformation.

If Silas Marner echoes "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", even seems on occasion to quote it, it is clearly also because both the novel and its multiple intertexts<sup>(8)</sup> incorporate identical fragments of the huge unidentified subtexts of a common mythology. The likeness between Marner and the Mariner is therefore not simply a matter of chance encounter, no more than it is one of influence. It has much to do with established modes of perception and interpretation, very much to do, in particular, with the long-lived myths of spiritual regeneration.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> An earlier draft of this paper was read at Ain Shams University International Symposium: "New Readings of Old Masters", Cairo, Egypt, March 2003.
- <sup>2</sup> A passing reference to the resemblance between the two texts is found in Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot, edited by John Rignall. "There is clearly a connection," reads the Coleridge entry in the Companion, "between the eponymous hero of *Silas Marner* and Coleridge's *Mariner* as the name suggests" (55).
- <sup>3</sup> In his controversial book The Anxiety of Influence, Bloom suggests that the writing of all poets involves the rewriting of earlier poets which always inevitably entails a kind of misreading that allows the later writer's creativity to emerge. Bloom's revisionary ratios are modeled on Freudian defense mechanisms: While ardently seeking his originality, the belated poet includes elements of his great precursor's work -- many of which are themselves distortions of this work.
- <sup>4</sup> Some critics go as far as to claim that "the notion of intertextuality opens all cultural facts and artifacts (sic) to the internal exchanges between them" (Parisier Plottel and Charney qtd. in Penuel) Arnold M. Penuel cautiously enumerates the components of intertextual studies as "sources, influences, imitation, mythology, archetypes, allusions, words, ideas, plagiarism, self-plagiarism, and presuppositions."
- <sup>5</sup> Comparing a novel with a poem calls attention to what David Duff sees as a conflict between intertextuality and genre theories. The two concepts, he claims, have often pulled in opposite directions (54). Yet within Kristeva's theory, the concept of

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genre, though not abandoned entirely, is assigned a more marginal position than it does in that of Bakhtin (55). Roland Barthes, however, has asserted that "the intertext . . . does not recognize any division of genre" (qtd. in Duff), a view which lends supports to the argument of the present study.

<sup>6</sup> "Rufus Lyon", the quixotic dissenting minister in George Eliot's later novel Felix Holt is also nearsighted, as Richard Conway observes in his comparison of the two works.

<sup>7</sup> Eliot wrote to Dr Joseph Frank Pane, "But my writing is simply a set of experiment in life - an endeavour to see what our thought and emotion may be capable of - what stores of motive, actual or hinted as possible, give promise of a better after which we may strive" (Letter, VI, 216).

<sup>8</sup> Many intertexts have been identified in Silas Marner; various critics have particularly explored legend in the novel. Ralph Stewart sees Rumpelstiltskin as the most closely analogous fairy tale to Silas Marner. Other tales linked to the novel are "Sleeping Beauty," "Cinderella," and "Prince Darling" (Stewart 61). See also "Silas Marner and the new Mythos" by Brian Swann, , and "Demythologizing Silas Marner" by Joseph Wiesenfarth.

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