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The Dimension of Human Possibilities in *Silas Marner*

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Abstract: The article envisages a thought-provoking direction for the future, juxtaposing but not blending the theory of possible worlds and the concept of space applied to literature. It brings new methodologies to the forefront of current research, reading "Silas Marner" (1861) by George Eliot as a landscape of the Self, a construction of a possible world for an old-fashioned way of life. The theory of possible worlds was originally introduced in philosophical logic and has gradually gained interdisciplinary ground, namely in literary and cultural studies; hence the article analyses "Silas Marner" in the light of this theory, discussing the places where the novel develops like dimensions of human possibilities of ways of life and like metaphors of dynamic generation of story worlds and of emotion. Looking into the construction of cultural landscapes and contexts of experience, the article discusses how identity and the way Silas interacts with others provide meaning and develop a sense of belonging. Underpinned by the notions of place and space that inform people's identity and develop bonds, the critical analysis reaches the conclusion that in the plurality of distinct worlds and in the relation to physical environment, one finds in the novel dimensions of the individual through patterns of belief, preferences, feelings, values and aspirations.

Keywords: Possible Worlds, Landscape, Identity, Belonging, Experience

Introduction

Throughout the years, many themes have been brought to light in the analysis of *Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe*. In 1948, for example, F. R. Leavis considered "That charming, minor, master-piece,...a success of reminiscent and enchanted re-creation: *Silas Marner* has in it, in its solid way, something of the fairy tale" (1962, 60). These words have set the tone for the critique of the novel, as well as for its romantic vision provided by the epigraph written from Wordsworth's pastoral poem "Michael" (1800). *Silas Marner*, a charming, minor work in the vast gallery of novels by George Eliot, is, notwithstanding, a unique representation of a world before the Reform Bills. In the Introduction to the 1967 edition, Q. D. Leavis wrote: "There are so many meanings in *Silas Marner* that it is surprising there was room in such a short space for them all; it is a feat to have wrapped them up with such neatness, charm, poetry and wit" ([1861] 1967, 42).

Silas Marner has always been considered a little jewel of Eliot's provincial life, a representation of the old, Shakespearean, organic Merry England of the Midlands, in opposition to the Dissenting, Radical, and industrialized Northern town of Lantern Yard. The title character is a friendless weaver who has arrived in Raveloe after having been accused of robbery in his hometown. Distant from everyone, he only cares for his gold until he finds little Eppie abandoned at his doorstep. Eppie is Silas' light into humanity and the turning point in the plot. The novel takes the reader from the metropolitan life into distinct rural scenes and characters where experience, as a process of learning, creates the dimension of human possibilities for the subject and the community. Money, social class, loss of humanity and faith, to name only a few, are important issues which have been discussed during the years (Thale 1959; Carroll 1992, 2013), but space has never been discussed like an "epitome of direct relations, of face-to-face contacts" (Williams 1984, 17).

This study aims at reading *Silas Marner* juxtaposing but not blending two main theoretical approaches: the theory of the possible worlds which has been appropriated throughout the times

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from modal logic to deal with problems of literary fiction, and the theory of space and place proposed by the geographer Doreen Massey (1994, 2005, 2008). As far as the former is concerned, we can refer to pioneering scholars in the 1970s like the philosopher David Lewis and the literary critic Thomas Pavel, who “traced the border shift and ontological split and fusion of possible worlds in cultural landscape from a broad historical perspective” (Zhang 2010, 144). This theory was later developed by such scholars as Doreen Maitre (1983)—mapping a typology of fiction, Umberto Eco (1984)—connecting the modalities of textual interpretation with the problem of possible worlds, Ruth Ronen (1994)—suggesting new criteria for the definition of fictionality and proposing a radical rethinking of fictionality in general and fictional narrativity in particular, and Lubomír Doležal (2000)—doing an unprecedented examination of the notion of fictional worlds, focusing on the fictional universes projected by literary texts and drawing “on possible worlds theory to illustrate the ontology of literary fiction and modal categories of fictional worlds” (Zhang 2010, 143–144). Marie-Laure Ryan is another crucial critic in the development of the theory of the possible worlds (1991, 2006, 2013; Ryan, Foote, and Maoz Azaryahu 2016), contributing to the interdisciplinary approach to fictionality and narrative, as well as to the concept of space and narratology.

The possible worlds theory illustrates the ontology of literary fiction and modal categories of fictional worlds. Umberto Eco (1984) distinguishes between levels of literary worlds: the actual, the textual, and the sub-world of characters, focusing on the interaction between the textual worlds and those constructed by the reader. The possible worlds theory is “the literary and narratological counterpart of the parallel universes in physics” (Ryan 2006, 643), and offers literary theory two concepts that serve to enlighten textual semiotics (Ronen 1994). The first is the metaphor for “world,” which describes the semantic domain projected by a text; the second is the concept of modality which describes and classifies the various ways in which object and events that constitute the semantic domain exist. In fact, the possible worlds in fiction are only possible because they are non-actualized in the actual world (Ronen 1994).

According to Ryan (2013), the fictional text enables the construction of a plurality of possible fictional worlds, which can be mapped as the representation of an essential structure (Massey 2005), allowing hence that one experiences not only the spaces and the places, but also the perspectives and the horizons, the nature and culture, in short, the shared world of the individuals. The invention of a shared space of experiences, product of George Eliot’s consciousness and creative capacity, allows the readers to imagine it as a possible world of relations and of experiences to the extent that, as Eco explained, a narrative text is “a machine for producing possible worlds” (1984, 246). Massey considered space as an outcome of interactions and interrelations, where the cornerstone of her theory—relationality—helps to support this critical approach to the novel. One maps things to feel their structure and to understand the DNA of reality; by tracing the literary geography of Raveloe one makes visible a connection (Moretti 1999) which allows us to see important status indicators in the human relations. Space is an integrant part of any novel, where diverse cartographies can be found as codified practices bound to knowledge and to power, according to Lefebvre (1991), a critic who insisted on the importance of considering not only what can be called a geometry of space, but also the practices lived and the symbolic meaning of the spaces. Ryan’s opinion is that “space intersects with narrative in two principal ways. On the one hand, it can be an object of representation, on the other, it can function as the environment in which narrative is physically deployed, or to put it differently, as the medium in which narrative is realized” (2016, 1). By bringing these two approaches together, the understanding of human spatial experience will be deepened and a greater insight into the narrative theory of possible worlds will be yielded.

Cultural Landscapes

In *Silas Marner*, we find a landscape of the dominant class, as well as a landscape of the lower class. These landscapes are not, unlike Jane Austen's novels, "socially selective landscapes" (Williams 1993, 169); they do not have a unity of class or use of language. On the contrary, they are socially different, within the Victorian frame of mind. The fictional world of Raveloe is a metaphor for a dynamic generation of story worlds and of emotional experiences of all elements, which are "an inseparable part of a complex whole" (Williams 1961, 63).

Massey takes the view that, "If space is indeed the product of interrelations, then it must be predicted upon the existence of plurality" (2005, 9). In fact, in the plurality of distinct worlds, one finds in the novel dimensions of the Self developed in relation to physical environment, through patterns of belief, preferences, feelings, values and aspirations. All these are elements in solution in a space "created out of the vast intricacies, the incredible complexities, of the interlocking and the non-interlocking, and the networks of relations at every scale from local to global" (Massey 2008, 80). Raveloe is a network of local relations based on social and human indicators. In "On writing Portable Place: George Eliot's Mobile Midlands," Ruth Livesey argued that *Silas Marner* "asks us to look to the small movements, or micro-mobilities, that thread us into everyday belonging to a place" (2017, 7).

Looking into the construction of cultural landscapes, the way Silas interacts with others provides meaning and experience and develops a sense of belonging. Place and space inform people's identity and develop bonds, as place identity underwrites personal identity, Hauge (2007) explains. One must find the knots that tie together spaces and places with people and understand how landscapes can be understood as a process in which social and subjective identities are formed. Massey argued, "There is no getting away from the fact that the social is inexorably also spatial" (2008, 80). An important point to remember is the concept of sense of place which, in Ryan, Foote, and Azaryahu's words, refers "to the affective, emotive bonds and attachments people develop or experience in particular places and environments on a variety of scales" (2016, 7).

According to Yi Fu Tuan (1977) the landscape is not only nature, but also humanity. Natural spaces are human spaces and in them authors and characters organize a world of meaning. To acknowledge that the human space is socially created is to acknowledge that it is composed of interrelated subjects and objects empowered by a social agency in a landscape that represents a complex system of power relations. Susen (2013) sheds light on the issue, elucidating that all the social space is the product both of its physicality, and thus, exists in a realm of factuality and actuality, and of its cultural environment, therefore, being relevant in the realm of validity. Massey (1994) expounds on the socially constructed spaces as human spaces whose existence is contingent with the practices of their inhabitants. The activities and social relations bear a special form and location which connect communities in a vast net of intricate and complex relationships. Furthermore, Massey adds that the relations we develop with our surroundings create and establish a sense of belonging, meaning and security, where space is "the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity" (2005, 9).

The Representation of Space

The representation of space is a codified practice connected to power and to knowledge and has a core role in the production of fictional literary spaces and their respective representations. Space is "a product of interrelations" (Massey 2005, 10), and a product of representation where the characters experience everyday life. Raveloe is, as Livesey argues (2017), a static landscape, a village isolated from a world at war and from the modernity of the nineteenth century. The first pages of the novel draw the closed circle of experience of the community, creating an