



PROJECT MUSE®

Three: Loss, Anxiety, and Cure: Mourning and Creativity in Silas Marner

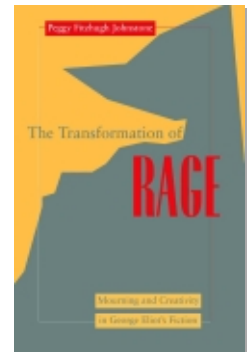
Published by

Johnstone, Peggy Fitzhugh.

Transformation of Rage: Mourning and Creativity in George Eliot's Fiction.

NYU Press, 1994.

Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/15789.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/15789>

Loss, Anxiety, and Cure: Mourning and Creativity in *Silas Marner*

After the completion of *The Mill on the Floss* in March 1860, Eliot and Lewes took a trip to the Continent, which Eliot described afterward in a letter as “one of those journeys that seem to divide one’s life in two by the new ideas they suggest and the new veins of interest they open” (*Letters* 3:311). It was on this trip that Lewes suggested the idea of writing a historical novel based on Savonarola’s life in medieval Florence. Eliot responded with alacrity and immediately began her research there, in preparation for the writing of *Romola* (Haight, *Biography* 326). She and Lewes had particularly looked forward to the time alone together away from England because of an imminent change in their personal lives: Lewes’s son Charles, who had finished his schooling in Switzerland, was to come live with them; thus Eliot was to become a parent for the first time. Upon their return from the Continent, Charles moved into their home at Holly Lodge in Wandsworth. He soon obtained a civil service job at the Post Office—a circumstance that necessitated the family’s household move into London, so that he could be closer to his office. The decision to live in London constituted something of a sacrifice for Eliot, who disliked urban life; but she wanted to provide a home for Charles at this stage. In the process of finding a suitable house, the family moved first, on September 24, to Harewood Square; three months later they finally settled in a house in Blandford Square, “which we have taken for three years, hoping by the end of that time to have so far done our duty by the boys as to be free to live where we list,” as Eliot wrote in her journal in December (qtd. in Haight, *Biography* 334).

Eliot explains in her journal that the idea of writing *Silas Marner*

“thrust itself” upon her shortly after the September move, during the time when she was preparing to write *Romola* (*Letters* 3:360). She wrote her editor, John Blackwood, that the story “came to me, quite suddenly, as a sort of legendary tale, suggested by my recollection of having once, in my early childhood, seen a linen weaver with a bag on his back” (382). The writing advanced “slowly and interruptedly” (360), however, until the move to Blandford Square. As Eliot noted in her journal on December 31, once *The Mill on the Floss* was finished, 1860 had not been a productive year: “Distractions about our change of residence have run away with many days, and since I have been in London my state of health has been depressing to all effort” (368). Gordon Haight, stressing Eliot’s malaise, languor, and “intense sadness” during this time, attributes her frame of mind to her “equivocal marital state” (*Biography* 338). Indeed, Lewes had investigated the possibility of obtaining a divorce abroad, but to no avail. Eliot insisted in a letter to a friend that “I am not sorry. I think the boys will not suffer, and for myself I prefer excommunication” anyway, for its “freedom from petty worldly torments” (*Letters* 3:366–67). Despite her social ostracism, she nonetheless “held [herself] under all the responsibilities of a married woman,” taking her role as stepmother to Lewes’s sons seriously. She wrote to one friend in January 1861, “I begin, you know, to consider myself an experienced matron, knowing a great deal about parental joys and anxieties” (373).

Once the family was settled in London, Eliot’s writing went very quickly, and *Silas Marner* was completed by March 4, 1861. Like her first two novels, it was a financial success, and as Haight reports, nearly all the reviews at the time were favorable (*Biography* 342), although critics in the twentieth century have tended to underestimate the importance of the work. Perhaps in view of Eliot’s account of its sudden inspiration, which had interrupted her work on *Romola*, and in view of the novel’s brevity, modern critics have tended to regard *Silas Marner* as “uncharacteristic,” as Rosemary Ashton expresses it (*GE* 49), and have typically treated it as an interruption on the path toward the writing of her major works. From a psychoanalytic perspective, however, the very fact that this novel seems to be a departure from Eliot’s usual practice is a compelling reason for giving it attention. My purpose in this chapter is to examine the personal factors that surrounded Eliot’s composition of the work and to account for the novel’s genesis by relating its concern with the theme of betrayal to the pain of losses that Eliot had repressed.

In so doing, I will draw on the writings of Sigmund Freud, the studies of contemporary psychologists on obsessive-compulsive behavior, and the research of John Bowlby and Margaret S. Mahler on early child development, as well as the work of George H. Pollock and others on anniversary reactions as manifestations of unresolved mourning. In the process, I will demonstrate the way in which Eliot's fiction writing constituted her constructive response to her sense of loss.

In *Silas Marner*, the isolated life-style of the protagonist is presented as a long-term reaction to a series of painful losses that had occurred fifteen years earlier. As a result of his betrayal by his best friend, William Dane, Silas had been unjustly accused of theft, cast out of his religious sect, and rejected by his fiancée, Sarah, who then married William. Having left the urban community of Lantern Yard, Silas came to live alone as a weaver in the rural village of Raveloe. Emery's Freudian study of *Silas Marner* focuses on the "repression of feelings associated with a disguised or revived Oedipal conflict" (58) in the love triangle involving Silas, Sarah, and William. My own study extends Emery's insights by illuminating, in the light of contemporary psychoanalytic findings, the pre-oedipal dimension of Silas's relationship with his loved ones. My use of Bowlby's and Mahler's studies of the behavior of children under age three in relation to their mothers thus reflects the shift in emphasis in psychoanalytic theory since Freud.

In Raveloe, without a sense of connection to family, friends, or community, Silas's work has lost its purpose. His weaving becomes "an end in itself . . . [a] bridge over the loveless chasms of his life," which is reduced to the "unquestioning activity of a spinning insect." His money, formerly "the symbol of earthly good," also becomes important for its own sake. Feeling the gold coins "in his palm" and looking at "their bright faces" every evening becomes his greatest pleasure (64, 65).

After he is robbed of the gold coins that had come to mean so much to him, Silas develops the habit of opening the door and "looking out from time to time," as though he hoped to see or hear of his money: "It was chiefly at night, when he was not occupied in his loom, that he fell into this repetition of an act for which he could have assigned no definite purpose, and which can hardly be understood except by those who have undergone a bewildering separation from a supremely loved object."

Silas would look out “not with hope, but with mere yearning and unrest” (166).

Eliot’s presentation of repetition as Silas’s reaction to the loss of a “supremely loved object” anticipates Freud’s elaboration of the concept of the repetition-compulsion. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes the repetitive game of “disappearance and return” invented by a toddler, age one and a half, in response to separations from his mother. Freud then explains the connection between the toddler’s repetitive game and an adult’s compulsion to repeat, which is a response to “narcissistic injury,” or to painful experience which the mind interprets as loss of love. The aim of the repetition is to make the passive experience active, or, in other words, to “master” it (18:12–22).

Freud had come to see the child’s separation from the mother as a primary factor in the origin of anxiety (16:406–7). In one of his late works, *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* (1926), he explains his view that anxiety is the reaction to the danger of loss; that the pain of mourning is the reaction to actual loss; and that defense is a mode of dealing with both anxiety and pain (20:128, 136–45, 153). John Bowlby, the contemporary British psychoanalyst, takes these insights from the last stage of Freud’s career as his point of departure in his own three-volume work on *Attachment and Loss*. Following Freud’s idea that childhood trauma causes disturbances in later life, Bowlby regards the young child’s separation from the mother as traumatic within the definition proposed by Freud (1:10, 11). He also explains in his discussion of separation anxiety in young children that when the mother, or attachment figure, is missing, not only fear and anxiety, but also anger, are aroused (2:25–30). A vicious circle can thus be set in motion when the child feels hostility as a result of separation from the attachment figure, and then feels afraid of losing the attachment figure as a result of this hostility (254).

Eliot’s portrayal of Silas as feeling “no resentment, but only pain” at William’s accusatory behavior, quickly followed by his feeling of “anxiety” over the possible loss of Sarah’s love (58), suggests the close connection between anxiety over impending loss and the defensive process of repressing anger. Silas’s fear of losing attachments renders him unable to assert himself against William, who had played the dominating role in their friendship. In the account of the events leading up to his departure from Lantern Yard, Silas’s “impressible self-doubting nature” and “trust-

ing simplicity” are contrasted with William’s “over-severity towards weaker brethren” and self-assurance (57). Unwilling to admit any hostility toward his close friend, Silas complies too easily with William’s theft of his fiancée. Throughout the novel, Silas is portrayed as a gentle person, incapable of hurting others. After Eppie, the orphaned toddler, enters his life, “he trembled at a moment’s contention with her, lest she should love him the less for it” (186). His decision to rear her “without punishment” (189) is part of his pattern of disallowing any negative feelings toward loved ones for fear of losing them. In an ongoing circle, the fear of loss of love, or separation anxiety, itself provokes the aggressive impulses that must then be denied.

Fear of aggressive impulses is a prominent feature of what psychologists now call the obsessive-compulsive disorder—an anxiety disorder characterized by the sustained experience of repetitive actions and/or thoughts (Insel ix). According to a phenomenological analysis of the disorder, the most common forms of compulsions are washing, cleaning, counting, and checking. Among the many forms of obsessions are repetitive thoughts, doubts, impulses, or images, typically about subjects like dirt and/or contamination, aggression, sex, or religion (Akhtar 342–48).

In *Silas Marner*, Eliot vividly portrays her character’s compulsive behavior. She writes that Silas’s “first movement after the shock [of being cast out of the congregation] had been to work at his loom; and he went on with this unremittingly” (64). She then goes on to delineate the connection between Silas’s compulsive weaving and the development of his obsession for gold. She compares him to men “shut up in solitary imprisonment” who keep track of intervals of time with marks on the wall, “until the growth of the sum of straight strokes, arranged in triangles, has become a mastering purpose.” “That will help us to understand,” she goes on, “how the love of accumulating money grows an absorbing passion in men whose imaginations, even in the very beginning of their hoard, showed them no purpose beyond it.” His “money had come to mark off his weaving into periods, and the money not only grew, but it remained with him” (67). His compulsive actions (“unremitting” weaving during the day and ritualistic counting every night) and his obsession for gold seem to form a tightly bound circuit in which each continually reinforces the other.

In his classic case study, *Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis*

(1909), Freud observed that compulsive actions, felt by a person to be out of his control, represent a "conflict between two opposing impulses" of approximately equal strength, namely love and hate (10:192). He also explains that the precipitating trauma in the obsessional neurosis is remembered but "deprived of its affective cathexis" (10:196); in other words, the traumatic event may be remembered, but strong emotions felt in connection with it are repressed. Contemporary studies of obsessive-compulsive behavior have confirmed Freud's later (1926) insight into the connection between fear of loss and symptoms of anxiety. In his recent psychoanalytic case study of compulsive symptoms that developed during a therapeutic transference, Richard L. Munich concludes that "the timing of each onset and the content of the material served to defend against material associated with separation and loss" (526).

In Eliot's portrayal, it is Silas's sense of abandonment that drives him to turn the gold into a replacement for prior attachments. The coins become his companions: "He handled them, he counted them, till their form and colour were like the satisfaction of a thirst to him." Eliot writes that Silas "*clung* with all the force of his nature to his work and his money" (68; emphasis mine). The more Silas devotes himself to work and money, the more he takes on their qualities. Becoming like an inanimate object himself, he develops a "monotonous craving" for the "monotonous response" of the loom: "His gold, as he hung over it and saw it grow, gathered his power of loving together into a hard isolation like its own (92)." The gold becomes a symbol that contains both the longing and the aggression (Freud's love-hate) felt toward a lost love.

Eliot's portrayal of Silas's cure, in turn, is in keeping with the psychoanalytic model advanced by Otto Fenichel, who explains that "upsetting" and "unforeseen" events can break through the obsessive-compulsive system, and serve as the source of "traumatic cure" of a "compulsive character" (307). In *Silas Marner*, the theft of Silas's bag of gold coins is the unforeseen event that precipitates his cure. At first he cannot believe the gold is really gone; he can feel "only terror, and the eager effort to put an end to the terror" (92). Then, after a search of his cottage convinces him of the reality, he "put his trembling hands to his head, and gave a wild ringing scream, the cry of desolation. For a few moments after, he stood motionless; but the cry had relieved him from the first

maddening pressure of the truth” (93). Later, in a reflective passage elaborating the change in Silas, Eliot writes that Silas’s “disposition to hoard” was “utterly crushed” by his “sense of bereavement” (190). He had lost the symbol which had satisfied his “need for clinging. . . . Now the support was snatched away,” and he was forced to feel all the pain of loss that had earlier been repressed: “He filled up the blank with grief” (129).

The theft of the gold serves as a cure because, as a symbol for prior attachments, it provides Silas with a means of reexperiencing and ultimately resolving earlier losses. The loss of his fiancée had created the need to repeat its pattern in order to resolve it: by leaving his front door unlocked, Silas allows the thief to steal his coins, much as he had earlier allowed William to steal his fiancée. This time, however, he finds a more constructive way to respond to his pain. Instead of isolating himself, he goes out into the community and asks for help. Through talking with others, particularly with Dolly Winthrop, the neighbor who serves the function of a supportive therapist, he slowly reestablishes his sense of connection with others and with his own past. The sense of emptiness felt after the theft of the gold is finally filled by emotional ties, in particular by his relationship with his adopted daughter Eppie. When Marner first discovers Eppie, he thinks, “The child was come instead of the gold . . . the gold had turned into the child” (180). Eliot goes on to elaborate, “The gold had kept his thoughts in an ever-repeat[ing] circle, leading to nothing beyond itself; but Eppie was an object compacted of changes and hopes that forced his thoughts onward” (184).

Through his connection to the child, Silas also rediscovers his own childhood. His involvement with the strict religious sect at Lantern Yard had caused him to lose sight of his legacy 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.” He had come to have “doubts about the lawfulness of applying this knowledge . . . so that his inherited delight to wander through the fields in search of foxglove and dandelion and coltsfoot, began to wear to him the character of a temptation” (57). Through Eppie, Silas recovers what Brian Swann calls his “true past” as his “childlike vision” is restored (“Mythus” 110, 113). Silas, whose sense of self had depended to a great extent on his environment, finally grows into “a new sense of wholeness”

(Cohen 419), or “into the community and into a sense of continuity with the past” (Shuttleworth 280).

Biographical evidence, along with evidence derived from the patterns in her early fiction, suggests that through writing *Silas Marner*, Eliot was working through losses of her own. Her “intense sadness” before and during the writing of the short novel went beyond any discomfort over her “equivocal marital state,” and beyond any sense of dislocation brought on by her household moves. A more serious (albeit related) matter was her estrangement from her family. Since May 1857, when she had finally notified her brother Isaac of her living arrangement with Lewes, she had been a “complete outcast” from her relatives. Refusing to respond to her letter himself, Isaac had communicated his displeasure through a family lawyer; at the same time, he pressured their half-sister Fanny and their sister Chrissey to send letters breaking off all communication (Haight, *Biography* 233).

Many writers have emphasized the strength of Eliot’s childhood attachment to her brother Isaac—a relationship which, as I suggested earlier, has often been compared to Maggie’s with Tom in *The Mill on the Floss*. Yet judging from the references to her family in her letters, both as an adolescent and as an adult Eliot felt closer to her sister Chrissey, who had recently died, in March 1859. In letters to friends up to that point, she frequently mentions her sister, whereas references to Isaac are relatively rare.

Chrissey had been a beautiful child, and, according to Haight, her mother’s favorite (along with Isaac), whereas her mother “had never been very close to Mary Anne” (10, 21). Nonetheless, Eliot’s letters from her adolescent and young-adult years reflect her ongoing attachment to Chrissey during the period of her life when she frequently had conflicts with Isaac. When Chrissey married in May 1837, a little over a year after their mother’s death, Mary Ann, as she began to spell her name at this time (22), became the housekeeper at Griff. Her references to Chrissey during the early years of her marriage to a struggling “medical officer” (*Letters* 1:4) show the gradual decline of her sister’s life. In her letters, Mary Ann mentions with joy the births of Chrissey’s children in 1838, 1839, and 1841 (1:4, 12, 15, 27, 79). Yet by June 1841, she refers to her sister’s domestic life as “one continued endurance” (95). In October she

expresses sympathy for her troubles: "My dear Sister is rather an object of solicitude on many accounts—the troubles of married life seem more conspicuously the ordinance of God, in the case of one so meek and passive than in that of women who may fairly be suspected of creating half their own difficulties" (117).

Over the years Chrissey's losses accumulated. In May 1842, her third child, only a little over a year old, died. A few years later, in February 1848, a nine-month-old baby boy died of "Hooping Cough and Convulsions" (*Letters* 1:249n). Her father, Robert Evans, died in May 1849. The following August, while Mary Ann was away recovering in Switzerland, Chrissey lost her seven-year-old daughter. Mary Ann wrote that "my heart aches to think of Chrissey with her children ill of scarlet fever—her husband almost frantic with grief and her own heart rent by the loss of this eldest little daughter" (301). Upon her return to England, where Mary Ann reported she felt more like an "outcast" than she had in Geneva (333), she wrote her friend Cara Bray that "dear Chrissey is much kinder than any one else in the family and I am happiest with her. She is generous and sympathizing and really cares for my happiness" (336).

In December 1852, Chrissey's husband died, leaving her by this time with six remaining children, "the eldest not yet fifteen years old, the youngest not fifteen months, and with little to support them" (Haight, *Biography* 125). Marian became increasingly concerned about her sister's welfare, and more than once expressed her desire to help her financially. During the following years, as Chrissey struggled to raise her children and find suitable positions for them, she lost another son, "drowned at sea," in 1855 (*Letters* 2:204). In April 1857, she lost another daughter to typhoid fever (314). At that point, Eliot asked Isaac to give Chrissey fifteen pounds of her own income "to spend taking a change of air as soon as she is able to do so"; but in early May, she learned that Chrissey herself was very ill. Later that month, after she had informed her family of her life with Lewes, she wrote her friend Sara Hennell that she cared the most about staying in touch with Chrissey so that she would be able to help her (342), although at the time her financial capacity to help her was very limited (Haight, *Biography* 230).

In February 1859, "in the midst of . . . [the] gratifying reception of *Adam Bede*" (277), she finally received a letter from Chrissey, who was very ill, and who expressed regret that she had "ever ceased to write . . .

one who under all circumstances was kind to me and mine" (*Letters* 3:26). When Chrissey died shortly after, Eliot, who had already written Sara Hennell that "the past is abolished from my mind—I only want [Chrissey] to feel that I love her and care for her" (3:26), wrote: "Chrissey's death has taken from the possibility of many things toward which I looked with some hope and yearning in the future. I had a very special feeling towards her, stronger than any third person would think likely" (38).

During the years that Chrissey's life seemed to be steadily declining, Eliot was slowly finding her way to success. It seems ironic that just at the point when the publication of *Adam Bede* had established her reputation as a writer, her sister's life ended. Chrissey died on March 15, 1859, when Eliot was beginning work on *The Mill on the Floss*, and just as she was approaching the tenth anniversary of her father's death, which had occurred in May 1849. In the light of Bowlby's explanation of the way in which a recent loss, or the anniversary of a loss, or both, can activate repressed feelings of grief for an earlier one (3:152–60), I would argue that Eliot's sense of estrangement from her family intensified her grief (and, especially in light of her own current success, perhaps guilt) over her sister's misfortunes and death—a death which, because of its timing, revived feelings, however long repressed, associated with her parent's death. The intensity of Eliot's sadness during this period, then, could be said to derive not only from her current losses, but from the reexperiencing of unresolved feelings about past losses—the "anniversary reaction" that Pollock describes in his work on mourning (183ff). The return of Eliot's repressed feelings from the past is the "time-specific variant of the repetition-compulsion" that manifests the human mind's unconscious sense of time. Extending Marie Bonaparte's idea that the mind may associate the passing of time with death (442), Mintz explains that the unconscious sense of time emerging in the anniversary reaction may be crystallized out of the anxieties about death (722).

The sibling attachment that is elaborated in *The Mill on the Floss* is only alluded to in *Silas Marner*, but is still at the core of the central character's psychological situation. Moreover, the sibling attachment in both novels is tied to earlier loss. As I have noted in my study of the earlier novel, Maggie finds in Tom a symbolic replacement for both mother and father,

who have proven to be disappointing parent figures. In *Silas Marner*, Silas finds in the golden-haired toddler a replacement for “his little sister [Eppie] whom he had carried about in his arms for a year before she died, when he was a small boy” (168). He tells Dolly in a later conversation that his little sister had been named after his mother, Hephzibah (183). Thus his new love for his adopted child Eppie is linked not only to his lost sister, but to his mother, although it is the sibling attachment that is most clearly remembered.

Eliot’s childhood attachment to her older brother has led critics and biographers to ask questions about her relationship with her mother. In his early *Life of Eliot*, John Walter Cross explains that although Mrs. Evans had been “a very active hard-working woman,” she “became ailing in health,” “shortly after her last child’s birth”; consequently, Chrissey, her oldest child, was sent a short distance away to a school in Attleboro, and Mary Anne and Isaac spent part of every day at a “Dame’s school close to Griff gates” (7). Haight intimates that Eliot experienced a poor relationship with her mother, but he provides no support for his contentions that “her mother’s favorites were Isaac and Chrissey,” and “her mother had never been very close to Mary Anne” (*Biography* 10, 21). It seems that nothing is actually known of her early interactions with her mother. Cross emphasizes the adolescent Mary Anne’s grief over her mother’s death; he makes the statement that “Many references will be found in the subsequent correspondence to what she suffered at this time” (15). Yet Ruby Redinger, explaining that the “letters for the two years following the mother’s death are missing,” concludes that “there is no objective evidence about George Eliot’s memory of her mother” (37, 38). Haight’s discussion of her reaction to her mother’s death notes Eliot’s general “paucity of comment about her mother,” and suggests the possibility of a psychological explanation, although the point is not elaborated (*Biography* 22). I would argue that Eliot’s notable silence on the subject of her mother is the silence of repression of painful affect in response to the loss of her mother—a loss which she associated with the deaths of siblings.

When Eliot was about sixteen months old, her mother gave birth, on March 16, 1821, to twin boys, who died when they were ten days old. After that, her mother “had not been well”—a circumstance which probably explains the development of her intense attachment to her older

brother Isaac, "the dominating passion of her childhood," as Haight describes it (6, 5). Eliot's mother, who, as it seems to me, was virtually missing in her daughter's life after that time, then died when she was sixteen. The timing of the deaths was such that they occurred during critical stages in Eliot's development: the deaths of the twins occurred during a time when a child is still dependent on her mother's reliable presence for her own developing sense of her self; the death of her mother, during Mary Anne's adolescence, occurred at a time when early childhood stages are revived as part of the process of working toward adult identity.

Like Bowlby, Margaret S. Mahler has studied the behavior of infants and young children in the context of their interactions with their mothers. She is best known for her ground-breaking work, *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant*, which describes in detail what she calls the "separation-individuation process"—a process, as explained by Paul Stepansky in his introduction to Mahler's memoirs that "denotes the series of stages marking the infant's gradual intrapsychic 'separation' from the mother and correlative understanding of himself as a distinct individual in a world composed of other equally distinct individuals" (xvii). Mahler's use of the term "separation" is thus different from Bowlby's. Whereas Bowlby emphasizes the negative effects of the child's too early and/or prolonged physical separations from the mother, Mahler's "separation" refers to the normal intrapsychic developmental process that is prerequisite to identity formation in all humans, both male and female.

Mahler characterizes the separation-individuation process, which she says begins during the fourth or fifth month and continues to the thirtieth or thirty-sixth month, as involving four subphases: the first, a "hatching" process of differentiation and the development of body image; the second, a "practicing" process of learning to move away from the mother by crawling and walking; the third, "rapprochement," beginning about the middle of the second year, involving the development of language and the beginning of gender identity; and the fourth, the consolidation of individuality and the beginnings of emotional object constancy (*Birth* 52, 65, 76, 109). Thus it can be argued that it was toward the end of the second, or "practicing" subphase, that circumstances caused Eliot's mother to withdraw from her—a possibility that

is also suggested by Bowlby's studies of the adverse effects on the surviving children of mothers who have lost babies: sometimes there is a failure to respond to one or more surviving children, and sometimes outright rejection (3:123).

Mahler emphasizes the importance of the "rapprochement crisis," which she believes occurs at 18–20 or 24 months and beyond (in Eliot's life, the period immediately following the deaths of the twins), and which may result in an unfavorable fixation that interferes with later development (*Birth* 95, 107). It is a crisis "made more poignant by the coming together of the three main anxieties of childhood: namely, fear of abandonment (fear of object loss), fear of loss of love, and, in particular, castration [or mutilation] anxiety" (144).

If Eliot's early childhood after the twins' deaths was indeed "dominated" by her passion for her brother, then the fact that she was sent to a boarding school at age five involved a double loss—of both mother and brother. Haight writes of this time in 1824 that "Mary Anne never forgot her suffering . . . and her fears at night" (*Biography* 6). Although there seems to be little information regarding the period of her life that immediately followed, Haight mentions that her brother, who was attending a different school, began to grow away from her, and that Mary Anne was forced to turn to books for solace (7). He then describes the way others saw her by 1827: as "a very serious child" whose "unusual gravity" prompted the older girls to call her "little Mamma"; a child who did not like to be "made untidy," who suffered from "night terrors," who was "sensitive" and "easily reduced to passionate tears," and who came to be known for her preference for adults over children (8).

These traits are very much in keeping with Mahler's descriptions of pre-oedipal children who show signs of longing for their absent mothers. Mahler describes the "low-keyedness," a solemnity approaching depression, of children during the second subphase, when their mothers are absent from the room—a condition that can extend "beyond its normal place in the practicing subphase" (*Birth* 74, 161). She mentions one child who, identifying with his older brother (apparently as a substitute for the mother), would feel lost and stare into space when the brother was absent (174). She also describes children whose sign of longing for the mother takes the form of a preference for adults, and others whose symptoms include sleep disturbances. Finally, she writes of one child

whose combined separation and castration anxieties were reflected in his need to have everything “in place, in order, and complete” (179).

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud gives examples of how the compulsion to repeat operates in the lives of adults —like “the man whose friendships all end in betrayal by his friend” or “the lover each of whose love affairs . . . passes through the same phases and reaches the same conclusion” (24). The adult compulsion to repeat also seems to characterize the pattern of Eliot’s response to losses in her family. Haight records that when Eliot’s mother died in 1836, her adolescent religious zeal “increased,” and was accompanied by a determined self-denial (*Biography* 22). Her response to her father’s death thirteen years later repeated the pattern, although in the latter case it involved an intense interest in Thomas à Kempis, whom she admired for his emphasis on “renunciation” (67). Eliot seems to have reenacted the loss of her parents by temporarily identifying with an ideal that would then necessitate further loss.

A similar compulsion to repeat links Eliot’s fiction to her reaction to Chrissey’s death. Eliot’s creation of the golden-haired toddler Eppie reflects her mind’s attempt to rework the period of her childhood when she first experienced the loss of her mother that followed the deaths of her twin siblings. The idealized Eppie, who represents both sibling and mother to Silas, can also be seen as a symbol of Eliot’s idealized self, reunited with mother, father, and siblings, all represented by Silas. As Eppie brings back to Silas “a dreamy feeling, [with] . . . old quiverings of tenderness—old impressions of awe at the presentiment of some Power presiding over his life” (168), so she provides for Eliot a means of re-creating the symbiosis with the lost mother that Mahler believes it is part of the human condition to crave (*Birth* 227).

Yet at the same time, in *Silas Marner* (which was completed in March 1861, the anniversary month and year of the deaths of the twins in 1821), the need to leave the mother and the past is also dramatized. When Eppie’s mother, a drug addict with no remaining capacity to care for her child, dies, the child shows no sign of fear. With “the ready transition of infancy” (like Mahler’s infants in the second subphase, practicing to move away from the mother by crawling and walking), Eppie turns easily from her dead mother’s body; starting out on “all fours,” she rises to her feet and toddles toward the light gleaming from the door of Silas’s

cottage (165). She is soon discovered by Silas, who cares for her, is allowed by the villagers to keep her, and then raises her “without punishment.” Eppie and Silas continue to maintain their close attachment even after she grows up and marries a young man from the village. Thus, at the same time that *Silas Marner* expresses Eliot’s wish to be reunited with her family, it also expresses her wish to separate painlessly from her deceased mother (in the sense of leaving behind her grief over her loss), and to find a new, lasting love.

In *The Mill on the Floss*, George Eliot shows Maggie repeating—in her relationship with her brother Tom, and then with other men—her sense that she is rejected by her parents and society. Although Eliot apparently intends to arouse sympathy for Maggie when Tom casts her out for stealing their cousin Lucy’s fiancé, what comes through is Maggie’s ongoing provocation of him. Contrary to Eliot’s conscious intentions, the text shows that Maggie, like Silas, brings about her own exile. The same could be said for Eliot herself, whose choice of Lewes was bound to provoke the wrath of her relatives. She foresaw their reaction well enough; she had waited nearly three years after the fact before telling her family of her decision to live with Lewes, because “their views of life differ in many respects from my own” (*Letters* 2:349).

Eliot’s ambivalence toward her family is expressed in letters long before Lewes came into her life. As early as the letter to Cara Bray written after her return from her trip to the Continent following her father’s death, she adds to the expression of her preference for Chrissey, “But I am delighted to feel that I am of no importance to any of them, and have no motive for living amongst them” (1:336). After the break with Isaac, she wrote Sara Hennell that “I dare say I shall never have any further correspondence with my brother, which will be a great relief to me” (2:364). Such comments belie her later assertions that “I cling strongly to kith and kin though they reject *me*” (5:74). Even some ambivalence toward Chrissey is suggested by the timing of the disclosure of her liaison to her family: she learned of Chrissey’s serious illness in early May 1857 (8:169); her letter to Isaac was dated shortly after, on May 26, at a time when she knew so little about Chrissey’s condition that she had to ask Isaac “whether she is strong enough to make it desirable for me to write her” (2:332)—hardly a time to risk losing touch with her. Moreover, the letter was written very close to the twentieth

anniversary of Chrissey's wedding date, May 30, 1837, and close to the anniversary of their father's death twelve years later, on May 31, 1849. Although (judging from the written record), Eliot's poor timing was not deliberate, it may well have reflected unacknowledged resentment felt at the effect her sister's marriage had had on the course of her own young single life, as she became solely responsible for her father's care.

Certainly Eliot's new life with Lewes had allowed her to find her identity as a fiction writer—a vocation which flourished under “the inspiriting influence of his constant encouragement” (Haight, *Biography* 369, quoting Edith Simcox). Moreover, her life of alienation from family and society simply allowed her the time she needed to write. Perhaps *Silas Marner* expresses Eliot's own “ready transition” from familial attachments to her new relationship with Lewes. It may also express her positive reaction to her new role as adoptive mother to Lewes's stepson, Charles—who perhaps like Eppie might serve as “an object compacted of changes and hopes that forced [her] thoughts onward” (184). By contrast, as seems evident in the tragic course of her life, her sister Chrissey did not find a way out of her apparent identification with the mother who lost babies, became ill, and died. As Chrissey observed in a letter to Isaac only two months before her own death, “I was 45 Monday—only 2 years younger than my Mother when she died” (*Letters* 8:222). Bowlby's studies of adults who have lost parents in adolescence and who suffer illness or breakdown as they approach the age of the parent's death (3:158) suggest that the timing of Chrissey's own death may have been influenced by her state of unresolved mourning over the loss of her mother; and by implication, that it was Eliot's use of her intellectual and creative gifts that defended her against the possibility of her own early demise.

Toward the end of *Silas Marner*, Silas returns to Lantern Yard to try to talk to the minister of his old congregation. He wants to ask some questions about the past, in particular about the “drawing of the lots” [the method the congregation had used to determine his guilt], and tell him “about the religion o' this countryside, for I partly think he doesn't know on it” (238). When he arrives in town and looks around, he discovers that “Lantern Yard's gone.” As he tells Dolly Winthrop upon his return to Raveloe, “The old home's gone; I've no home but this now. I shall never know whether they got at the truth o' the robbery, nor whether Mr. Paston could ha' given me any light about the drawing o'

the lots. It's dark to me, Mrs. Winthrop, that is; I doubt it'll be dark to the last" (240-41). Silas feels that he has been wronged in some way that he will never understand. His sense of loss, more than simple grief, is a mix of feelings, even including moral outrage. Yet he concludes that from now on, Eppie's presence will give him "light enough to trusten by."

Silas and Eppie, as unlike each other as they appear to be, are characters who mirror one another. The change in Silas's psychological state is dramatized not only in his story, but in hers. Eppie, the idealized character, does easily what Silas, the realistically portrayed character, accomplishes only with great pain; she acts out literally what Silas must do indirectly, through a process of symbolization. Eppie readily turns away from her dead mother, while Silas is forced, only when his gold coins are stolen, to turn away from the "dead disrupted thing" which had satisfied his need for "clinging" (129). The scene in which Eppie walks away from her mother is juxtaposed with the scene in which Silas repeatedly goes to the door to look for his lost gold, his "supremely loved object"; thus the two characters are brought together on the basis of their shared loss. Moreover, just as Eppie acts out what Silas needs to do, so Silas feels the pain that Eppie denies. Through the interaction of the mirroring characters, the novel makes the connection between the act of separation and the pain of loss. *Silas Marner* is among other things, then, a story about the pain of separating from maternal attachment.

If it is true, as I have argued, that Eliot was engaged in her own struggle to work through a too early and abrupt loss of maternal closeness, then her own mind, in "thrusting" upon her a story which would enact the process she needed to relive, provided her with an indirect, symbolic means of getting at painful material from her past. According to Freud, the repetition-compulsion that is observable in children's play can also be observed in artistic creation. "Artistic play" is a means of "making what is in itself unpleasurable into a subject to be recollected and worked over in the mind" (18:17). Like Freud's toddler, dramatizing his mother's departure and return by flinging his toy out of sight and pulling it back again, Eliot could attempt to master her pain of loss by writing a story that would dramatize her mother's disappearance (the theft of Silas's gold and the death of Eppie's mother) as well as her return (the attachment between Silas and Eppie).

Eliot is also like Freud's "patient" who "cannot remember the whole

of what is repressed” and “must *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience” (18:18). Through writing a work of fiction, Eliot could, like the patient in a therapeutic transference, enter into a fantasy in which she could reenact repressed feelings toward prior attachments. Through the interconnecting stories of her mirroring characters, Eppie and Silas (whose psychological situation is in turn mirrored by the leading characters in the Cass family subplot), the painful feelings that had previously been denied could be reconnected to the traumatic loss; thus the repressed pain could be confronted indirectly. When Silas returned to Lantern Yard to ask questions about his past, he came to realize that some things would remain “dark”; similarly, in her own descent into the “unrememberable and unforgettable realm” of her mind (Mahler, *Birth* 226), Eliot could not recover lost details of her infancy. She could, however, repeat the process of losing and regaining her mother indirectly, through the writing of her fiction, as often as necessary to master her sense of loss. In the inspiration to write *Silas Marner*, her mind had thrust upon her a work of art that illuminates as it enacts its own progress toward self-healing.