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Final Thesis

George Eliot's "Felix Holt, the Radical": a Portrait of an Age in Transformation

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Introduction

The Victorian age has been most known as a period in which England underwent great change. During this era Britain transitioned from a rural, agrarian society to an urban and industrialized one, aided by the introduction of groundbreaking new technologies such as the railway and the steam engine. Religion underwent a deep crisis, Protestantism fractured in different doctrines and the advent of important scientific discoveries questioned many religious truths. Several reforms began to give voice to the people, resizing the influence exerted by the aristocracy. The working class and women organized in mass movements to advocate for their rights. The 19th century was also known as the great age of the novel. The steam printing press, and various methods of publishing, such as the serialized one, widened and engaged the reading public. Many Victorian authors addressed such changes in their works, reflecting on cultural and moral concerns. George Eliot was amongst such authors, renowned for her insightful social commentary, realism and depth in characterization, her novels deal with people grappling with the challenges of this newfound world order.

The present dissertation will focus on *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866) one of the mature works of George Eliot, written on the cusp of another major Reform and in a period of social discontent. Set in the aftermath of the Great Reform Act of 1832, *Felix Holt* investigates the consequences and effects of the great changes that Britain was experiencing, both from a private and from a public perspective. Through a retrospective approach, Eliot explores the historical and political context of the 1830s in an attempt to better understand contemporary issues, such as the socio-political unrest and the moral debates. Blackwood commented on the novel "such a picture or rather series of pictures of English life, manners and conversation was never drawn. You seem to hear the people speaking.".[1] Eliot

[1] William Blackwood, as cited in G. Eliot, *Felix Holt, the Radical,* Lidia Mugglestone (ed.), London: Penguin Books, (1866), 1995, p.vii

employs the characters as conduit for exploring moral and ethical dilemmas and how such issues differ depending on personal as well as social conditions.

The dissertation engages with the novel by drawing from in-text evidence, contemporary reviews as well as retrospective analysis. Its aim is to defend why *Felix Holt* holds a significant role in the panorama of Victorian literature, despite it being considered one of the weakest novels by George Eliot. By exploring the characters' development both in the personal and public sphere, as well as the issues that they face, this dissertation proposes a reading of the novel as a poignant representation of the confusing and uncertain period between the 1840s and the 1860s in Britain. Eliot deals with a series of core issues of that era, such as political matters, working class franchise, the rejection of the past, industrialization, new moral values, and women's suffrage. She does not attempt to offer any solution to such problems, but rather she seeks to put them all in dialogue and study their interaction, as well as how they affect people with different backgrounds and personal issues.

The first chapter of the dissertation will provide an account of the life of George Eliot, with the aim to shed light on the unorthodox life that the author led, as well as to acquaint the reader with the unconventional individuals that influenced her choices, thought, and works. The first section also intends to illustrate how the changes that underwent the 19th century influenced Eliot's personal life, as well as her beliefs and writings. Victorian society and mentality highly affected her social role and relationships, and consequently, also her private life and her figure as an author. The second chapter of the dissertation focuses on an historical account of the decades from 1830s to 1860s, with the intention of portraying a clear panorama of the socio-political vicissitudes of that period. In such section are also present some essays from Thomas Carlyle and John Stuart Mill, which illustrate the stance of the intellectuals of the age on contemporary issues. If the first chapter is meant to investigate the personal sphere of an individual – although an unconventional one – in the 19th century, the second chapter aims to

offer an insight into the public sphere of the Victorian age, the external conditions that influenced such changes. The third chapter of the dissertation investigates the novel *Felix Holt, the Radical*. The chapter is divided into three sections, each investigating a core topic of discussion of the intellectuals of the Victorian age, namely politics and morals, the importance of the past and women's rights. This section investigates how such topics have been explored and addressed by Eliot through her characters, their vicissitudes, and choices. The purpose of the aforementioned section is to demonstrate that Eliot managed to represent the spirit of the Victorian age and the changing flux that had invested both the private and public sphere of 19th century society. This feat was achieved by intertwining in a conversation the different viewpoints and beliefs of the age, including her own perspective, without the intent to turn the novel in her own socio-political manifesto.

With the aim to contribute to the scholarly discourse surrounding Eliot's work and its significance in Victorian literature, this dissertation will attempt to navigate the intricate threads that connect *Felix Holt* with the broad tapestry of the Victorian society and intellectual debate.

1. George Eliot, the life

George Eliot was the pen name of Mary Anne Evans or Marian Evans. Well-read in several subjects, such as philosophy, science, and theology,[2] she provided a significant contribution by translating several German authors into English, most notably *The Life of Jesus* by David Friedrich Strauß, and by editing articles and reviews for the *Westminster Review* from 1851 to 1854. As a novelist, she was most notably known for her ability to voice universal truths, the conflict between intellect and emotions, philosophical and political ideas.[3]

To fully understand her thought and personality and, for the purpose of this dissertation, the reason why she ultimately decided to write *Felix Holt, the Radical,* and why those social and individual themes became the scope of the novel, it is necessary to delve into her life and understand the full breadth of the life experiences she underwent, the intellectual figures she encountered, her relationship with the Victorian society and her involvement with social matters.

1.1. Mary Anne, Warwickshire

Mary Anne Evans was born on November 22, 1819, in South Farm near Nuneaton, Warwickshire, in the English Midlands.[4] Mary Anne was the third child of Robert Evans's second marriage to Christiana Pearson, the daughter of a local mill-owner, who had already borne him a daughter, Chrissey, and a son, Isaac.[5] Little trace remains of Mrs Evans, but we do have a full portrait of Mr Evans from Mary Anne's letters and journals. Robert Evans was a pragmatic man, for whom Mary Anne had always nurtured great admiration and devotion, she described him in one of her letters as someone who "raised himself from being an artisan to be a man

[2] V. Dodd, *George Eliot: An Intellectual Life*, London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1990, p.1
[3] Ibid., p.1
[4] R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, London: Faber and Faber Ldt, (1996), 2013, p.13
[5] Ibid., p.12

whose extensive knowledge in very varied practical departments made his services valued through several counties".[6] Robert Evans managed farms with a firm hand, he was a conservative who strongly believed in the Tory concept of "Church and State", though his strong sense of social justice often had him face his landowner to defend the sufferings of the tenants. The wide range of responsibilities that he had as a land agent spoke miles of his skill and character. It is because of Robert's position that Mary Anne had the chance to live in close connection with the Midlands' countryside, one that she always looked back with fondness and joy.[7]

Along with the whole family, they moved in 1820 to Griff House, between Nuneaton and Bedworth. Mary Anne's half siblings Robert and Fanny left when she was young to work in a nearby estate, while Chrissey was sent to a nearby boarding school, Isaac was her playmate, and it is with him that she developed the closest relationship. George Eliot herself reminisced in one of her letters how, since an early age, she had an "appetite for reading" and she was prone to "building castles in the air".[8] Mary Anne was lucky enough to receive formal education, from age five to nine she joined Chrissey at Miss Lanthom's school in Attleborough, from age nine to thirteen she attended Mrs Wallington's school in Nuneaton, and it is here that she made her first close friend, Maria Lewis, the Irish Governess, a figure with a pivotal role in Mary Anne's childhood and adolescence and to whom some of Mary Anne's earliest letters are addressed to. During her school years Mary Anne excelled in her classical education, she learned Greek, Latin and French. She displayed wit and intellect, but also an uncompromising moral severity, talent in English composition and interest in romantic and sentimental verses, which she transcribed in her notebooks along with religious verses, which reflected the influence of Maria Lewis. In those years she was particularly fascinated by Scott's

[6] George Eliot to Charles Bray, 30 September 1859, *George Eliot Letters*, III, 168, as cited in Ibid., p.12
[7] Ibid., p.13
[8] George Eliot to Maria Lewis, 16 March 1839, *GEL*, I, 22, as cited in Ibid., p.17

historical novels and narrative style.[9]

Mary Anne grew up in contact with a variety of types of faith and of worship,[10] dissent was strong in the Midlands, an area that hosted chapels for every kind of dissent. If during the years at Mrs Wallington she came to know Maria Lewis's evangelicalism, from age thirteen to sixteen Mary Anne attended the religious Baptist atmosphere of Misses Franklin's school, where she was exposed to a quiet, disciplined belief.[11] This religious heterogeneity was reflected also in her family, where Robert Evans was a traditional Anglican, suspicious of the Roman Catholics, and of dissenters, while his own brother and his wife had embraced Methodism, her aunt was a Methodist preacher.[12] As a result of this, Mary Anne's religion in her adolescent years was severe and self-denying, she was a strong Calvinist with clear cut ideas.

In 1835, when Mary Anne was aged sixteen, she left school to come home to a series of household emergencies. Her uncle had got into debt, her father had taken ill while away for business and her mother's health was slowly deteriorating. After a long period of suffering, Christiana Evans died on 3 February 1836. Chrissey became the new mistress of the house; Isaac came back to help their father with the business and Mary Anne helped her older sister to run the household. A mere year later Chrissey married, and Mary Anne took the role of mistress of the house and embraced the first of many name changes, Mary Ann.

From 1837 to 1841 Mary Ann remained deeply committed to her religious beliefs, although the visit for a fortnight of her Methodist aunt Elizabeth encouraged Mary Ann's beliefs towards a more gentle and tolerant Arminian turn.[13] She dutifully attended to her chores as mistress of the house but engaged

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[9] Ashton, *op. cit*, pp.20-21
[10] Ibid., p.20
[11] F.R. Karl, *George Eliot: Voice of a Century*, W.W. Norton, 1995. p. 31
[12] Ashton, *op. cit.*, p.20
[13] *Arminianism* is a theological movement of Protestantism that attempted to moderate the Calvinist principles of predestination. It asserted that God's sovereignty and human will could be compatible. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, created the branch of Wesleyan Arminianism. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Arminianism". Encyclopaedia Britannica, 20 Nov. 2023,

also in praying, reading of many biblical scholars and religious debates with her two role models, Maria Lewis and Elizabeth Evans. Despite her strong religious convictions compelling her to distrust imaginative fiction, she found herself captivated and enjoying reading many secular authors such as Shakespeare, Scott, Wordsworth, and Byron. Over time, probably also owing to the private lessons of German and Italian that she had started taking, Mary Ann also branched to explore the modern literature and culture of the continent, approaching the works of, among others, Goethe, Schiller, Tasso, and Cervantes.[14] Her reading was becoming wider although still deeply rooted in religion.

In 1840 her brother Isaac got married, it was resolved that their father would retire, Isaac would take his place and would move to Griff House with his wife, while Robert Evans transferred to a new house with Mary Ann, the latter felt bitter about the decision, feeling evicted from the home she had known all her life.[15]

1.2. Mary Ann, Coventry

In 1841, Mary Ann moved officially to Foleshill, in Coventry, with her father. She was closer to Chrissey and Fanny, her two sisters, and was not far from Griff House. The area was evangelical and dissenting, much like Warwickshire, and in this new environment Mary Ann was able to strike new friendships, most notably with the Hennells and the Brays. It is in Coventry that she underwent one of the most pivotal changes in life, a crisis in her religious belief that would petrify her friends and culminate in January 1842 with a rejection of Christianity as practiced by the Church of England.

Between 1842 and 1843 Mary Ann befriended Charles Bray, a wealthy ribbon manufacturer, a philanthropist and social philosopher, along with his wife, Cara

https://www.britannica.com/topic/Arminianism Accessed 2024, January;
Ibid., p.25
[14] Ashton, *op. cit.*, p.31
[15] Ibid., p.34

Bray née Hennell, and her siblings Sara and Charles Hennell. It is this meeting and friendship that fostered Mary Ann's departure from her conservative religious and political views. In particular, a book by Hennell precipitated Mary Ann's scepticism towards certain Christian dogmas. In his *Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity,* published in 1838 after two years of thorough investigation, Charles Hennell methodically analysed the Gospels to ascertain substantiating evidence to support the supernatural and miraculous essence of Christ. Ashton offers a possible explanation as to why this work resonated to such a degree with Mary Ann, maintaining that its success resided in the optimistic and non-destructive approach of Hennell's *Inquiry.*[16] In the progressive and free-thinking Brays she recognized the same questioning some aspects of Christianity, and she found in their Rosehill house a haven where to converse with its visitors over ideas, issues and authors, such as Strauss and Feuerbach who are worth mentioning as they would be prominent readings for Mary Ann. The Rosehill circle prided itself of eminent members such as John Chapman, Herbert Spencer, George Combe and his wife, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Harriet Martineau, all figures that would become significant for Mary Ann.[17]

On 2 January 1842 Mary Ann refused to go to church. His father reacted with coldness and requested to her brother Isaac to discuss matters with her to prompt her to reconsider. However, with a strength not unlike her father's but with conciliatory tones, Mary Ann explained how her convictions would remain unalterable, while pleading for understanding.[18] She was fractured between her intellectual integrity and her beloved father. Her appeal failed and Robert Evans put to lease their house as he refused to continue staying there.[19] The support of the Brays and of her brother played a crucial role throughout that period, the Brays cheered her on whereas Isaac welcomed her at the Griff and interceded with their

[16] Ibid., p.38
[17] Ibid., p.40
[18] George Eliot to Robert Evans, 28 February 1842, *GEL,* I, 129 and n., as cited in Ibid., pp.44-45
[19] *GEL,* I, 129n, 131n, as cited in Ibid., p.43

father for a peaceful resolution. Father and daughter ultimately reconciled in May, Mary Ann addressed Mr Evans's request for the adherence to societal norms and agreed to attend church on the understanding that she was able to retain her freedom of thought and allowed back to Foleshill. The "Holy War" had finally ended.[20]

In October 1842 Mary Ann met Elizabeth "Rufa" Brabant, while the latter was visiting the Brays. Rufa would marry Charles Hennell in 1843, and subsequently Charles would persuade Mary Ann to take over Rufa's translation of Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (1835-36), as she was the most qualified candidate out of the members of the Rosehill circle to successfully accomplish the task, since she was extensively learned in biblical studies, history, and German.[21] The translation proved to be incredibly challenging for Mary Ann, both from a linguistic standpoint, as she had to translate not only from Strauss's German but also from his Greek and Hebrew, and from an intellectual perspective, as his method was exhaustive and led to repetition. Mary Ann executed her job meticulously, after over two years, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (1846) was published, greatly affecting religious thought in England. Through the Brays, during this time Mary Ann further expanded her social circle and travelled to London, the Lake District and Scotland. In June, Sarah Hennell observed that Mary Ann was "[growing] better and wiser every time [she saw] her".[22]

In June 1846 Charles Bray bought the radical newspaper *Coventry Herald* and encouraged Mary Ann to cooperate in the project. She contributed anonymously with many articles and reviews, thus embarking in her writing career. Despite her thriving intellectual life and her strengthening friendship with John Chapman, Mary Ann was deeply troubled by her father's declining health. She would nurse him and read to him Scott aloud, but seeing her father suffer without respite took

[20] George Eliot to Cara Hennell Bray, *GEL*, I, 138n, 133, as cited in Ibid., p.45
[21] R. Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, London: Faber and Faber Ldt, (1996), 2013, p.48
[22] Sarah Hennell to her mother, 20 June 1847, GEL, I, 236, as cited in Ibid., p.62

a toll on her, to such an extent that, towards the end of his illness, she wrote to Sarah Hennell "My life is a perpetual nightmare".[23] On the evening of May 30, 1849, the doctor stated that Mr Evans would not live until the morning, Mary Ann wrote in fear to the Brays one of her best-known letters:

> What shall I be without my Father? It will seem as if a part of my moral nature were gone. I had a horrid vision of myself last night becoming earthly sensual and devilish for want of that purifying restraining influence.[24]

Although her father had put limits to her open-mindedness and freedom, she was frightened by a life without him. In the cited letter Mary Ann draws a parallel between his repressive role and that of God, both figures that limited freedom and liberty, yet of which absence would result in the absence of ethical foundations, increasing the risk of succumbing to sin. Mary Ann depicts a scenario where the unlimited human freedom cannot coexist with ethical life. Her father's passing away meant for Mary Ann a terrifying end, but also a new beginning.

The inheritance left by her father allowed Mary Ann to live independently for some time, and she accepted the Brays' invitation to join them in their European tour, although she was exhausted and prone to fits of weeping. While the Brays returned to England in 1850, Mary Ann stayed behind in a pension in Geneva as she wanted to regain strength before determining the course of her life. In Geneva she befriended the Durade family and dedicated herself to reading, maths, and playing the piano. In March 1850 she returned to England, her temporary stay at the Griff with her brother Isaac cemented in her a feeling of alienation, which induced her to move to London. In early 1851 Mary Ann officially moved to 142 Strand.

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[23] G. S. Heaight (ed.), *Selections from George Eliot's Letters*, New Haven, Yale University Press, (1987), p. 52
[24] Ibid., p. 54

1.3. Marian, 142 Strand, London

The Chapman residence at 142 Strand was an intellectual hub for many progressive intellectuals, free thinkers, and scientists. There, Mary Ann had the chance to consolidate many noteworthy friendships that she had entertained at Rosehill and to form new ones, several connected to radical causes. To Chapman and her London friends, Mary Ann was known with the more cosmopolitan name Marian.[25]

At 142 Strand Marian was living quite the unorthodox life. She lived in an environment where she was habitually surrounded by men. Encouraged by Chapman, Marian published with success some articles and reviews. The two grew gradually closer and were rumoured to have been entertaining an affair. Chapman, however, was married and had already a mistress, Elizabeth Tilly. The evident affections that he nurtured for Marian prompted disagreement and tension in the residence, thus Marian decided to return to Coventry in March 1851. During her brief stay in her childhood countryside the two continued to exchange correspondence, where Marian proved to be an invaluable friend and adviser.

During the Spring of 1851 the negotiations between Chapman and W.E. Hickson went underway to buy the *Westminster Review.* The magazine was founded by James Mill and Jeremy Bentham in the 1820s and for many years had boasted an excellent reputation, but in the 1850s its revenue and quality were declining.[26] The acquisition of the *Westminster Review* was significant not only for Chapman, but also for Marian, who was offered the position of assistant editor. She came back to London in September as Chapman finalized the purchase of the magazine, and from that moment on they would jointly manage the *Review* without any emotional entanglements. Marian thrived in the intellectual environment, discussing with fellow liberal thinkers about various topics, and proved to be a knowledgeable advisor and editor.

[25] Ashton, *op. cit.*, p.80
[26] Ibid., p.81

On October 3, 1851, at one of the social gatherings at 142 Strand, Marian met Herbert Spencer, the most radical thinker of the circle. The two were the same age, came from the same background, and had an immediate understanding. At the time he was the sub-editor at the *Economist* and had just published a book by Chapman, which applied Darwin's theory of evolution to morality and freedom.[27] In the months to come, the two grew closer together, and were frequently seen in each other's company. Yet, if Marian was harbouring romantic feelings and had even started contemplating marriage, Spencer only nurtured profound admiration for her. In 1853 he wrote that "the greatness of her intellect conjoined with her womanly qualities and manner, generally [kept him] by her side most evening".[28] She thus resigned to withdraw her affections for Spencer, and the two remained close friends for life.

Spencer was not the only pivotal male figure that she encountered in 1851. On October 6, Marian made the acquaintance of George Henry Lewes, arguably the most important man in Marian's life alongside her father. Lewes had recently befriended Spencer, and both were contributors to the *Westminster Review,* it had been merely a question of time before the two met, and curiously, they crossed paths for the first time in a bookshop. They later met again in multiple occasions, initially always with Spencer acting as a connecting link, until one day Lewes remained behind to converse with Marian.[29]

Lewes was living quite an unorthodox life, he was married to Agnes Lewes née Jervis, but it was not a happy marriage. Agnes Lewes had begun a long-lasting affair with Lewes's best friend Thornton Hunt. Initially, Lewes had accepted this liaison, but by 1851 he was becoming increasingly discontented with it especially since, to exacerbate the circumstances, Agnes was pregnant with Thornton's second child. It was a bleak moment in Lewes's life, as he was trapped in a shattered

[27] Ibid., p.91
[28] Herbert Spencer to Edward Lott, 23 April 1853, H. Spencer, *Autobiography,* I, 395, as cited in Ibid., p.97
[29] Heaight, op. cit, pp.77, 108

marriage.[30] Since he had consciously registered two of Thornton's children as his own,[31] he was considered complicit in the adultery, and he was thus precluded from legally divorcing Agnes. As of 1851 Agnes had a total of three children with Lewes and two with Hunt, but the number would increase in the years to come. It is in this bleak period that he met Marian.

G.H. Lewes was a remarkable man, a poet, a journalist, a novelist, a free and radical thinker. Fluent in French, German and Spanish, he had been an actor and was a drama critic, but fundamental was his enthusiasm for psychology and philosophy, most notably his interest in and engagement with positivism and Darwinism. He contributed occasionally to the *Westminster Review,* and had founded with his friend Thornton Hunt the *Leader,* a radical magazine. Lewes shared with Marian a fascination for German literature, Comte's positivist philosophy, in particular his notion of "religion of humanity". Their differences strengthened their relationship and brought balance in both.[32] It is thus unsurprising that from 1852 Lewes's name began appearing with increasing frequency in Marian's letters; this time, her love was deeply requited. It is not known when the two became lovers, but in January 1853 Marian decided to move out of 142 Strand to live on her own, away from the scrutiny of the residents of Chapman's lodgings, while Lewes, weary of his marital situation, had been living alone for a year.[33]

At the end of 1853 Marian communicated Chapman that she wanted to resign from her role of editor at the *Westminster Review*, but she had accepted the task of translating Ludwig Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christenthums* (1841), *The Essence of Christianity*, for Chapman's Quarterly series. Feuerbach was easier for Marian to translate than Strauss, its content more agreeable.[34] Feuerbach's religion

[30] Ibid., p.107
[31] Asthon, *op. cit.*, p.87
[32] Ibid., p.106
[33] Ibid., p.103
[34] Ibid., p.109

of humanity significantly shaped Marian's view of Christianity, Ashton cites a pivotal excerpt that encapsulates Marian's belief quite effectively:

> The relations of child and parent, of husband and wife, of brother and friend – in general, of man to man – in short, all the moral relations are per se religious. Life as a whole is, in its essential, substantial relations, throughout of a divine nature. Its religious consecration is not first conferred by the blessing of the priest.[35]

Feuerbach's view of marriage as a bond of love that that did not need a religious ceremony to make it sacred, understandably resonated with Marian, whom in 1854 was contemplating the possibility of openly living with Lewes as partners in Germany. In the summer of that year, after conferring with both Bray and Chapman about her intentions, she left for Weimar with Lewes, who was headed to the continent to research for his biography on Goethe.

1.4. Marian Lewes, Europe and London

In Europe Marian and Lewes lived very frugally, as he had to provide financial support to Agnes since Thornton refused to do so, for this reason Marian was very grateful to Chapman when he offered her to write some pieces for the *Westminster.* During their months in Germany, they both dedicated time to writing, not only reviews and essays, as Lewes made considerable progress in his biography of Goethe and Marian began translating Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics*. On the continent they were serene, they were partaking in a flourishing intellectual society and Lewes's German friends had welcomed Marian as his partner without questions.

Nevertheless, their choice of living together as an unmarried couple while still regarding each other as husband and wife was deemed disreputable by Victorian society. Consequently, when rumours of their relationship reached

[35] L. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, London, Chapman, 1854, p.271, as cited in ibid., p.109

England, several of Marian's friendships were severed or stained. Cara Bray and Sarah Hennell disapproved of it, not only because the Brays had disliked Lewes from the very beginning and had expressed it explicitly, but also because the two sisters felt disappointed since Marian had not trusted them with this aspect of her life. Charles Bray and George Combe proved strongly hypocritical as they condemned Marian's relationship whilst holding different standards for themselves, an extramarital relationship for them was acceptable if it was a man entertaining it, and in secret. Her friendship with the Brays became stagnant, only after several years did the relationship with the Coventry trio warm once more. Barbara Bodichon and Bessy Parkes instead had no problem with the elopement, they only feared that Lewes would leave Marian, and for this reason they did not trust him. The Carlyles, for how radical and freethinking they presented themselves to be, understood the circumstances and the reasons behind their choice but did not accept Marian in their circle.[36] The worst was unfortunately reserved for her relationship with her brother Isaac, which fell apart completely. However, at that time, Isaac was unaware about the predicament.

Upon their return to London, the couple was fully aware of the situation awaiting them. They understood that Marian would be the one to bear the brunt of the consequences. Once Marian received the confirmation that Lewes would never go back to live with Agnes and that their relationship had ended, as much as it was possible, the two moved together in a house in Richmond.[37] The forced social isolation allowed Marian time to read Greek dramatists, in 1856 she wrote a rapid succession of reviews for both the *Leader* and the *Westminster* and several essays and articles, among which are worth mentioning *German Wit* on Heine, on Ruskin's *Modern Painters III,* and her most famous *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,* her writing showcased an unprecedented sharpness and cleverness, her confidence as a writer and intellectual had grown as a result of her union with Lewes.

[36] Ibid., p.115-134
[37] Heaight, *op. cit.*, p.137

Furthermore, with her extensive knowledge of the works of Heine and Goethe, and her translation work, Marian was along with Lewes, the leading interpreter of German culture in Britain.[38] Although her social life was not thriving, not all friends had deserted her, Rufa Hennell, Bessie Parks and Barbara Leigh Smith were among the bold women who kept by her side, while her relationship with John Chapman was flourishing and Charles Bray, while he did not share her choices, kept writing to her. On July 20, 1856, after extensively writing for various magazines and finishing her article on Riehl, she writes in her journal "I do not remember ever feeling so strong in mind and body as I feel in this moment. I am anxious to begin my fiction writing".[39] Lewes had long seen the incredible wit of his partner and had encouraged her to try her hand in fiction numerous times. When, on 22 September 1856, she began writing *The Sad Fortunes of Reverend Amos Barton*, she had Lewes's full support and encouragement. Lewes himself found the publisher for Marian's first work, it was John Blackwood, the editor of the *Edinburgh Magazine.* On November 6, 1856, he sent the anonymous manuscript to Blackwood saying that it had been written by a friend of his. Blackwood immediately identified the abilities of the author and published the work in two parts anonymously. A year later, the necessity to attribute a name to the "Author of Amos Barton" became impossible to overlook. In 1857 Marian Lewes decided to coin her pen name, driven by diffidence that her work would succeed but also by her desire to have her work acknowledged on its merits rather than overshadowed by her scandalous figure and relationship,[40] thus George Eliot, the writer, came to life.

Regarding the choice of her name, John W. Cross reports the letter that she sent to John Blackwood announcing her pseudonym, while also documenting the explanation that Marian gave Cross for her choice:

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[38] Ibid., p.155
[39] *George Eliot Journal*, 20 July 1856, MS Yale, as cited in ibid., p.159
[40] Ibid., p.164

> Whatever may be the success of my stories, I shall be resolute in preserving my incognito, - having observed that a nom de plume secures all the advantages without the disagreeables of reputation. Perhaps, therefore it will be well to give you my prospective name, as tub to throw to the whale in case of curious inquiries; and accordingly I subscribe myself, best and most sympathising of Editors, yours very truly, GEORGE ELIOT.
>
> I may mention here that my wife told me the reason she fixed for this name was that George was Mr Lewes's Christian name, and Eliot was a good mouth-filling, easily pronounced word.[41]

1.5 George Eliot, the writer

In 1857 officially began George Eliot's career as a writer with the anonymous publication of the series of tales titled *The Sad Fortunes of Reverend Amos Barton*, *Mr Gilfil's Love Story*, and *Janet's Repentance*. Lewes told Blackwood that these stories would depict "the actual life of our country clergy about a quarter of a century ago; but solely in its *human* and not at all in its *theological* aspect".[42] Since the very beginning George Eliot had made Feuerbach's religion of humanity the core of her fiction.

While Marian's career was beginning with great premises, family troubles began around the spring of 1857, while Marian was writing *Janet's Repentance*. One of Chrissey's children had died of typhus and both Chrissey and her daughter had contracted the disease. Although this provoked great anxiety in Marian, she stated that because of the distance she could not come and visit. The greatest source of anguish, however, became her brother Isaac. In May, Marian decided to inform her half-sister Fanny Houghton and Isaac about her relationship with Lewes in a particularly carefully worded letter:

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[41] J.W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals*, London, William Blackwood and Sons, 1885, I, pp.430-431

[42] George Henry Lewes to John Blackwood, 6 November 1856, *George Eliot Letters*, II, 269, as cited in Ashton, *op. cit.*, p.167

My dear Brother,

You will be surprized, I dare say, but I hope not sorry, to learn that I have changed my name, and have someone to take care of me in the world. The event is not at all a sudden one, though it may appear sudden in its announcement to you. My husband has been known to me for several years, and I am well acquainted with his mind and character. He is occupied entirely with scientific and learned pursuits, is several years older than myself, and has three boys, two of whom are at school in Switzerland, and one in England. […]

I remain, dear Isaac,
Your affectionate Sister

Marian Lewes.[43]

If Fanny responded kindly, Isaac never replied, the solicitor of the Evans family did it in his stead, stating that Isaac could not write to her in a "Brotherly spirit"[44] and that he was most hurt as he had not been informed that she had gotten married. Marian responded to the letter with honesty, stating that although her marriage was not legalized, it was still a union of love. Predictably, Isaac's reaction was not positive, he demanded her sisters to stop writing to Marian and he ceased all communication with her. They would not speak to each other until much later in life.

Meanwhile, in 1858 the three tales had been reprinted in a single volume titled *Scenes of Clerical Life,* which was welcomed with enthusiasm and reviewed most positively. In particular, stand out Dickens's and Jane Carlyle's generous reviews. The positive comments regarding the *Scenes* proved fundamental for Marian, who in October 1857 had started writing her first novel *Adam Bede*. For more than a year Marian exchanged correspondence with Blackwood, who proved a patient, clever and skilful editor. He encouraged her and nurtured her talent, to the extent that a heartfelt friendship started to blossom between the two, and in

[43] George Eliot to Isaac Evans, 26 May 1857, Heaight, *op. cit.*, pp.169-170
[44] Ashton, *op. cit.*, p.183

February 1858 Marian and Lewes decided to unveil to him the truth about George Eliot's identity. Considering the several references to people and events in the Midlands found in the stories, Blackwood had already a strong suspicion about the identity of his author, but he kindly and respectfully kept silent until Marian was ready to share her secret. Although Blackwood was worried that Marian's social position might hinder her career and sales in the future, unlike other good friends of Lewes, he introduced Marian to his wife. In 1858, only four people knew about Marian's pseudonym, namely herself, Lewes, Blackwood, and Herbert Spencer – whom Marian had told in secret during a London visit and who did a poor job of keeping the find for himself.

Between 1858 and 1859, between the increasing curiosity of the public about the author behind the series, and the suspicion that the writer was originally from Nuneaton cementing with the passing of the time, a certain Joseph Liggins came forth announcing himself as the author of the *Scenes.* Although Lewes and Marian initially laughed off the claims, Mr Liggins would become one of the biggest sources of anxiety and frustration for Marian. It was also becoming harder to keep the secret from her friends, who kept recognising her wit and touch in George Eliot's words, together with her dislike and fear of falsity and rumours, she was ultimately compelled to give hints to confirm their suspicions without disclosing the full truth.

On March 11, 1858, Blackwood was sending back to Lewes his review of the first thirteen chapters of *Adam Bede*. In his commentary, he combined both slight critique and praise, and expressed a mild apprehension regarding the direction in which the plot appeared to be directed. In April, Lewes and Marian travelled once more to Germany for Lewes's research, he was writing *Physiology of Common Life* (1859), while Marian was writing the rest of *Adam Bede.* There they spent three months and, although they were both frequently ill and the climate was dreary, they were able to enjoy social life again, meeting with numerous intellectuals and scientists and going to the theatre. In Dresden they visited an art

gallery full of Flemish and Dutch painters that left on Marian a strong impression, even referring to them in the renowned chapter XVII of *Adam Bede.*

In 1859, *Adam Bede* was published not on the *Blackwood's Magazine* but as a book, as both Marian and Blackwood agreed. The novel proved successful, *The Times* dedicated a three-column review stating that it was "a first-rate novel, and its author takes rank at once among the masters of the art",[45] while Jane Carlyle commented: "I found myself in charity with the whole human race when I laid it down".[46] Undoubtedly, George Eliot had handled a conventional story in an unconventional way, displaying great sympathy for humankind and their faults. However, the happiness was quickly dampened when the issue of the Liggins claim resurfaced in light of the new novel. Lewes had to come forth with an official written denial in the name of George Eliot that was published in *The Times.* The issue however did not abate, more people surfaced with claims in defence of Liggins, Geoge Eliot had to send a second statement to the papers, but once more it proved futile. At the end of June, Marian and Lewes resigned themselves to lift the anonymity as it was the last viable option to close the Liggins matter once and for all. Knowing that Charles Bray would quickly spread the word, Lewes wrote to him to unveil their precious secret. Slowly the rumors began to die down, although some accused them to have fabricated Mr Liggins to attract popularity and others still questioned their claims.

At the beginning of 1859, another source of misery struck Marian's life, her sister Chrissey's health was worsening by the day. Nobody had notified Marian about her sister's health since all communication had ceased under Isaac's request, it was Chrissey herself who wrote to Marian knowing that she was dying. The sisters never managed to see each other one last time, as Chrissey died in March 1859. A bright light were instead the reactions of Marian close friends, Cara and Sara Bray who, though initially with cooler tones, congratulated with their friend

[45] Heaight, *op. cit.*, p.201
[46] Ashton, *op cit.*, p.211

for her acheivement. Cara went to visit Marian and Charles Bray announced that he had read the novel twice. The warmest reception was given by Barbara Bodichon, who was abroad at the time but had recognised her dear friend Marian within the lines of *Adam Bede.*

In January 1859 George Eliot began working on her next novel, she wanted it to include inundation as a topic and had begun researching it, the novel would be titled *The Mill on the Floss.* Despite that, all the turbulence, grief and anxiety of that period caused George Eliot to begin and finish another short story, *The Lifted Veil* (1859), a tale whose theme was completely different from the one of her previous work. Marian defined it "worrying and disturbing", the love and sympathy represented in *Adam Bede*, presented only its unhappy and darker tones.[47] She had drawn inspiration from the pseudosciences popular in Victorian England and from the European cities that she had visited, generating frightening gothic tones and a discussion of morally dubious but highly imaginative scientific experiments on human life. The tale seemed a nightmareish version of the humankind described in her previous work.

In July the Leweses briefly went to Swizerland, Lewes had the occasion to visit his sons, who had begun getting closer to Marian and, prompted by Lewes, had started addressing her in their letters as Mother. In the meantime Marian did research on mills and rivers for her novel and stayed with the Congreves, who were their neighbours in Wandsworth, where the Leweses had officially moved to in February 1859. Richard Congreve was one of the leading disciples of Comte, while Marian had become close friend with Maria Congreve, the daughter of the doctor that had attended Robert Evans in his last days and also one of the few that never disavowed Marian and often welcomed her in their house.

The Leweses were also having disagreements with Blackwood, Marian had not sent him what she had written of the novel so far and although Blackwood had

[47] Ibid., p.219

given her a generous offer for her novel, he had suggested serializing the story anonymously on the magazine. Marian had taken the news badly as she had correctly sensed that Blackwood was fearing the repercussions of publishing something by Marian Lewes, now that the secret had been unveiled. Many other publishers had made offers to George Eliot, Dickens included. Polite but cool letters were exchanged between Blackwood and Marian, the former feeling annoyed that she was entertaining other offers, but also worried that she would accept them. In the end Marian decided to explain her hurt feelings in a letter to Blackwood, saying that she was disappointed by his proposal of anonymity for the new novel, but also by how Blackwood had handled the Liggins matter, she felt like Blackwood no longer wished to publish her. Blackwood answered the next day, explaining his case and proposed to meet as soon as possible. They met and reconciled in December, Blackwood left the Leweses' household with the first half of *The Mill on the Floss.*

After much tumult, the novel was published on 4 April 1860, it was immediately welcomed and, although it was less successful than *Adam Bede,* it included the rights for a German and Dutch translation.[48] The *Mill on the Floss* was more autobiographical than her previous novels, the parallels between Maggie and Tom, and Marian and Isaac were undeniable, but with different endings, Maggie is sanctified and forgiven, while Marian is still awaiting for her brother's approval. In the novel traces of Darwin's theory of the *Origin of the Species* (1859) can be found, as well as the influence of Greek tragedy. The *Mill* was particularly appreciated by Marian's female friends, who felt close to Maggie's suffering and her constricted traditional passive role, as it touched their private experiences.[49] The Leweses celebrated the publication with a three months long trip to Italy, of which Marian wrote lenghty recollections in her journal. They visited Rome, Naples, Florence and then Venice. It is in Florence that Marian was struck by the

[48] Ibid., pp.227-233
[49] Ibid., p.239

seed of an idea for a new novel, *Romola* (1863), the only one of her novels which is not set in England. She was also working on *Brother Jacob* (1864), which was not published until much later and under a different editor, since Marian was still affected by Blackwood's dislike for *The Lifted Veil.* On the journey back to England they stopped in Switzerland to retreive Lewes's eldest son, Charles, for whom Anthony Trollope had secured a favorable position in the Secretary's department of the Post Office.

On November 28, 1860, Marian writes in her journal "I am engaged now in writing a story, the idea of which came to me after our in this house, and which has thrust itself between me and the other book I was meditating. It is '*Silas Marner, the Weaver of Raveloe*'".[50] The novel was finished on March 10, after only four months of writing. The novel tells the story of Silas Marner, a lonely weaver that discovers a new life, a sense of community and shared humanity through a child, Eppie. Wordsworth's poetics are at the forefront of the story, to the degree that an excerpt of his poem *Michael* (1800) prefaces the novel. At its core can also be found Comte's religion of humanity and Carlyle's "Natural Supernaturalism". *Silas Marner* would become Marian's dearest, it was written with less despair than any other novel, it had generated no misunderstanding with Blackwood and the reviews focused on the book and not on the social figure of Marian.[51] *Silas Marner* received positive reviews and greater sales than any of her previous works. Several critics later wondered whether Marian was pondering on her childless marriage through Silas's tale. In April the Leweses headed back to Florence as Marian wanted to further her research for *Romola,* which had been interrupted by *Silas.*

Romola proceeded very slowly, preoccupation over Lewes's health was hindering the progress, he was constantly ill and losing weight at alarming speed. Still, he kept cheerful, he did not show any signs of doubt nor his lows, knowing that his beloved Marian was prone to self deprecation and depression and needed

[50] Heaight, *op. cit.*, p.253
[51] Ashton, op. cit., p.253

someone that would stand strong by her side. Her research seemed neverending, to the point that Lewes himself was worried she would never start writing and that her novel would turn into an encyclopaedia rather than a story.[52] Marian finally began writing *Romola* on 1 January 1862, however in her journal she records the whole period as her most miserable, plagued by headaches and several days in which she could not write anything. The novel was serialized in the *Cornhill Magazine* from July 1862 to August 1853. It was not published by Blackwood as Marian had, after much thought, accepted George Smith's incredibly generous offer. Although Blackwood privately complained about her choice, with her he was a model of courtesy and politeness, which made Marian regret not choosing him. *Romola* unfolds against the backdrop of real historical events in the Italian Renaissance, exploring themes of love, betrayal, and political intrigue. The novel was flatly received by the general readership, the flaws that Lewes had glimpsed had proven right, a core issue was that the story and its characters were too far removed in both time and space from the readers and, to compensate for this distance, the plot was pervaded by historical clarifications that made the reading slow and heavy.

The Leweses did not leave England after the publication as they had always done, but rather decided to invest their earnings in a house of their own. On August 21, 1862 they bought the Priory, on the outskirts of Regent's Park. They were now able to entertain more house parties and their social circle grew considerably. Another positive development came from Charles and Thornie Lewes who, despite both facing challenges throughout the year, had ultimately experienced positive changes in their work situations. The Lewes boys were growing closer and fonder of Marian, who had happily taken on the role of stepmother and had started calling them "ours". In the spring of 1864 the amiable but troublesome Thornie had left for Natal to look for a career, while in June Charles sent news of his engagement.

[52] Ibid., p.255

In April 1864 Garibaldi came to England and the Leweses went to see him interact with the crowd and to hear the working class present their representatives to him in the Crystal Palace. In August 1864 Lewes's health was declining, after months where both were suffering of headaches and general weakness, by September Marian started working on *The Spanish Gypsy* (1865), another suffered writing, to the extent that in February Lewes took the work away from her because she had become too affected by it.

Under Trollope's persuasion, Lewes had assumed the role of editor of the *Fortnightly Review* which, under his guidance, became a magazine affiliated with progressive thinking in all fields. Marian also contributed with reviews, all signed George Eliot. It is worth bearing in mind that her attitude towards progress, although positive, was more conservative than Lewes's. Ashton states that George Eliot had not altered her stance from what she had conveyed in her essay *The Natural History of German Life* (1856) and she provides a precise recapitulation of Marian's belief by writing "while it would be foolish to attempt to halt progress by putting back the hands of the clock, it was equally fatuous to pretend or suppose that dawn was broad midday".[53] On March 29, 1865 Marian reports to have started writing *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866). The idea of the novel came to life in concert with many other factors such as Marian's involvement with the progressive *Fortnightly Review*; her concern with the hardships suffered by the ribbon weavers in Coventry; her interest in the ideas spread by the Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini, who believed that demoracy and national self-determination would bring pace to a country shaken by internal conflicts, though Marian did not share his violent methods and for this reason she and Lewes were cautious in supporting his cause;[54] but, above all, the political and social condition of contemporary England, the decadal parliamentary debate over reform and the events prior the election of 1865. As she had done for her previous novels she did quite a lot of research and,

[53] Ibid., p.280
[54] George Eliot to Mrs Peter Alfred Taylor, 1 August 1865, Heaight, *op. cit.*, p.302

as it had with *Romola,* progress went slowly, although not as bleak. After the election, the liberals Russell and Gladstone became Prime Minister and Leader of the House of Commons respectively. Both were advocates for a second Reform Bill, which finally passed in 1867. George Eliot had chosen a topic that could not have been more relevant.

Felix Holt, the Radical was published in the summer of 1866, despite the positive reviews the sales were lackluster, for which Blackwood blamed the political unrest. *Felix Holt* is set just before the passing of the first Reform Bill and discusses the momentuous political and social change that had happened in the recent history from a restrospective viewpoint. Within the story George Eliot managed to blend social issues with individual issues, displaying how major national events inevitably shape also the personal sphere. Although the character of Felix attracted a lot of criticism because was deemed not credibly embodied, the portrait of a country life was again expertly depicted. The timeliness of *Felix Holt* was proven time again by the riot in Hide Park that erupted in July.

In the second half of the year Lewes's health experienced a setback and he was forced to abandon the editorshop of the *Fortnightly Review.* For his sake, the couple undertook many travels in the ensuing months, at the end of 1866 Lewes health had improved enough to make a slight detour in Spain to help Marian with her research for the *Spanish Gipsy,* which she had resumed writing. Upon their return in England in March 1867, the debate over the new Reform Bill was disrupting the country and John Stuart Mill was openly and deafeningly defending the rights of women and asking an extension of the franchise that would include all citizens. Some of Marian's friends assumed that she would have advocated for the women's suffrage, owing to her unorthodox relationship with Lewes, and how it affected her in the social sphere, but also because Marian had expressed some feminist ideals in her books. Marian however baffled everyone by taking a conservative stance, probably due to her cautious attitude towards the general extension of the franchise. Instead, she advocated for equal education between men

and women, just as she had advocated the education of the newly franchised working class. In November Blackwood asked her to write for his magazine an address directed at working men regarding their new responsibilities with the reformed franchise, and he suggested signing it as "Felix Holt". Although reluctantly, she wrote *Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt* which was published in the *Blackwood's Magazine* in January 1868.

The Spanish Gipsy was finished in April 1868, it was a dramatic poem written mainly in free verse. It received lukewarm reviews, its sales were slow although overall not bad, but it could not be considered a success. Almost a year later we find in her journal the first mention of *Middlemarch* (1872) her best known novel. At the beginning of 1869 the Leweses decided to take another long trip to the continent, precisely in Italy, since the precarious health of Lewes's mother and the news about Thornie's mysterious condition made them assume that they would not be able to travel for quite some time. In Rome they crossed paths with the banker John Cross, who became a frequent visitor of the Leweses' household and later their financial advisor. Upon their return to England the Leweses met Henry James, although during unfortunate circumstances as Thornie was experiencing a flare of his condition and was in unberable pain. Thornie had arrived in England back home a couple of weeks before and had been diagnosed tubercolosis of the spine, his condition seemed to occasionally improve but he could barely move and was often administered morphine to lessen the pain. After months of hope, despair and pain, he died peacefully on 19 October 1869. Of that day Marian's journal records "He was a sweet-natured boy – still a boy though he had lived for 25 years and a half. [...] This death seems to me the beginning of our own".[55] The Leweses left soon later to retreat and mourn their son in the quiet of Surrey.

During Thornie's illness Marian's production had proceeded slowly, although in June she had written *Brother and Sister* (1869), eleven connected

[55] George Eliot's Journal, 19 October 1869, *Ibid.*, p.368

sonnets that are worth mentioning for their theme, which denotes Marian's preoccupation with family and familial relationships. In the last weeks of October she had begun *The Legend of Jubal* (1870), another long poem where she gave voice to her fear of not being able to write something that would live up to her past acheivements and even expressing the irrational doubt whether she was the one who wrote her past novels. The Leweses were soon travelling again, they left for Germany where Lewes undertook more research for his *Problems of Life and Mind* while Bertie sent news from Natal that he was engaged to be married. In the summer of 1870 Marian wrote the dramatic poem *Armgart*, which discussed "the woman's lot". Towards the end of the year, she resumed writing a story that dealt with the same concerns and by December she had written a hundred pages about her "Miss Brooke". The story ultimately merged with other storylines that she had already composed, namely that on Lydgate, and eventually became *Middlemarch*. In March Marian recognised that she had too much content and that her customary three-volume publication would not have sufficed. The length of the novel started to become a growing source of anxiety for Marian. Lewes wrote to Blackwood to discuss a solution, suggesting eight paperback instalments published every two months, the editor agreed to try. The eight parts were published from December 1871 to December 1872, as the instalments were made available to the public, people began to realize the greatness and magnitude of the novel, and Blackwood's prophecy that the work "will be one of the events by which 1872 will be remembered",[56] came to fruition.

Once again, through *Middlemarch* George Eliot manages to present the kaleidoscope of humanity with its sympathy and prejudices, and has the reader understand these characters and their actions. Henry James praised this skill of hers in his review:

[56] John Blackwood to George Eliot, 31 December 1872, *George Eliot Letters*, V, 352-353, as cited in Ashton, *op. cit.*, p.316

> All these people, solid and vivid in their varying degrees, are members of a deeply human little world, the full reflection of whose antique image is the great merit of these volumes. How bravely rounded a little world the author has made it -- with how dense an atmosphere of interests and passions and loves and enmities and arrivings and failings, and how motley a group of great folk and small, all after their kind, she has filled it, the reader must learn for himself. No writer seems to us to have drawn from a richer stock of those long-cherished memories which one's later philosophy makes doubly tender. There are few figures in the book which do not seem to have grown mellow in the author's mind.[57]

In *Middlemarch* various themes blend together, such as social issues, medical matters, unhappy marriages, and the position of women. In this period Marian began supporting a rising number of women who, owing to the new legislations, now were able to pursue an education and a career. The Leweses also supported medical and social reform and, probably due to the significant earnings they had registered through *Middlemarch*, they were among the most generous donors of 1873.

With the new year, the Leweses left the country, while in Fontainebleau the idea for a new novel slowly came into existence, at its core was the Jewish subject. In the summer Marian delved in a long and challenging research for her new novel, which led them to Germany and France. Because of the daunting nature of her subject, Marian grappled with work and was frequently disheartened, it did not help that both Leweses were once more suffering from poor health.

In January 1874, the first volume of Lewes's *Problems of Life and Mind* was published after years of work, the second volume was published at the beginning of 1875. 1874 and 1875 were rather uneventful for the Leweses, Marian kept reading and researching for her novel and Lewes worked on his own project, both in between bursts of ill health. In June 1875 Bertie Lewes died, leaving his wife and two children, who thankfully found in their parents-in-law a steady rock to rely

[57] H. James, *Middlemarch A Review,* 1873, Available at: https://www.complete-review.com/quarterly/vol3/issue2/jameshmm.htm. Accessed 2023, October

on, while George Lewes himself suffered from a near fatal paralysis in December, his health had steadily decayed for some years.

Daniel Deronda was published in eight instalments between February and September 1876. Marian had found inspiration for Gwendolen Harleth in her memories of Geraldine Leigh, Byron's grandniece, at the gambling table, while her understanding of the orthodox Jewish aspect portrayed in the character of Mordecai was largely influenced by her friend Emanuel Deutsch, who had also provided her with Hebrew lessons and who had died of cancer in 1873. Unlike *Middlemarch*, which was criticized for its strong melancholic tone, *Daniel Deronda* ends with a positive vision of the future, although one outside of British society. Undoubtedly, if this novel made many Jewish readers feel represented with a great inward grasp, it also made the English readers somewhat uncomfortable. In June 1876 the Leweses left for Switzerland again to recuperate. In 1877 the third volume of *Problems of Life and Mind* was published, Marian and Lewes suffered from kidney stones and decaying health respectively, still they managed to entertain a social life, meeting Princess Louise, and Richard Wagner among others. At the beginning of 1878 universities opened their degrees to women, both Marian and Barbara Bodichon celebrated the news. In May George Eliot began working on a collection of essays, *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, her last work of fiction.

George Lewes's health kept deteriorating, in the summer he suffered from cramps, fever, headaches and sudden bursts of pain, although he kept his characteristic joviality and fulfilled his duties as Marian's agent. In autumn his condition took a turn for the worst and by 25 November he was in agony. He died on November 30, 1878, with his loved ones nearby. Marian was so distraught she could not attend his funeral, intellectuals all over Europe mourned the loss, and many wrote to Marian to share her grief and express their closeness. Regarding George Henry Lewes, Heaight writes "It is impossible to overestimate the debt

English literature owes to GHL",[58] Ashton states "[he] had been the chief creator of happiness for Marian and of an environment in which she was encouraged, against heavy odds, to write her novels under the name of George Eliot".[59] He was an exceptional man, not only as George Eliot supporter, beloved, and agent, but also by making significant contributions as a journalist, critic, philosopher, and scientist, which proved fundamental for both his contemporaries and successors.

Marian embraced the responsibility of finishing posthumously Lewes' lifework *Problems of Life and Mind* using Lewes' notes, as a tribute to her beloved husband. She finished the last two volumes in 1879. Several physiologists reached out to Marian to offer their support and express how fundamental Lewes's research had been for them, which inspired her to establish the George Lewes Studentship in Cambridge, open to both men and women.

1.6 Mary Ann Cross, the final years

In the months following Lewes's death Marian lived in a quiet retirement. In 1880 she began to receive her closest friends, the first being John Cross. He had begun reading Dante's *Divina Commedia* and she helped him with Italian. Slowly she started growing fond of him. There are inconstant records of this period, letters were destroyed, the journal entry dated 3rd October 1879 only reads "Tears, tears."[60] and then almost unexpectedly, in a letter signed "Beatrice" to John Cross, dated 16th October 1879, Marian writes "I cannot bear to sadden one moment when we are together, but *wenn Du bist nicht da* I have often a bad time. It is a solemn time, dearest" .[61] Sometime later, Cross asked her to marry him. Marian anguished over the decision, as Cross was twenty years younger, but primarily worrying about how others would react to the news: in particular, Lewes' friends,

[58] Heaight, *op. cit.*, p.495
[59] Ashton, *op. cit.*, p.365
[60] Heaight, *op. cit.*, p.517
[61] Ibid.

her friends, their intellectual circle, but also the acquaintances and the readers. Marian had nobody in which to confide and grappled extensively over the decision. On October 29, 1879, John Blackwood died, he had been another pivotal figure in Marian's life, an old friend and supporter. When Marian received news about his condition, he wrote to Charles Lewes saying:

> He will be a heavy loss to me. He has been bound up with what I most cared for in my life for more than twenty years and his good qualities have made many things easy to me that without him would often have been difficult…[62]

Although Marian felt affection for Cross, her love for Lewes was something else entirely, and part of her longed to be buried next to him, a desire that heightened with the added grief of Blackwood's death.

In 1880 Marian went to Waybridge to stay with the Cross family and when she came back, she reported in her diary that the marriage had been decided. We are not privy to what finally made her reach her resolve, on 6 March 1880 Marian married John Cross. Marian and Charles Lewes – who had been affectionately understanding towards his stepmother, and even accompanying her to the altar – gave the news to their closest friends and family, which all responded warmly. News also reached her brother Isaac, whose approval Marian had awaited all her life, and on May 17, 1880, he wrote her his congratulations and signed it "Your affectionate brother".[63] In her answering letter, Marian expresses her love for her brother and for the first time on paper she enacts her last name change by signing it "Always your affectionate Sister, Mary Ann Cross".[63] Marian had come a full circle and returned to her childhood Christian name coupled with her lawful husband's surname.

Marian and Cross left for their honeymoon and visited France, Italy, Austria, and Germany. They returned to England in July 1880, Cross had been ill during the trip, and they went to Witley to rest. Marian's health began to worsen.

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[62] Ibid., p.519
[63] Ibid., p.536

Her condition did not improve in autumn, Bessie Belloc née Parkes and Herbert Spencer visited her in December.

George Eliot died on 22 December 1880, passing suddenly during the night. In the previous weeks her health had declined and, although her marriage with Cross was not unhappy, she had long wished to reunite with Lewes. She was buried next to him, as her wish. Many important Victorian figures came to her funeral but, amongst the attendees, the most noteworthy presence was surely that of Isaac Evans, who had come to mourn his beloved sister.[64]

[64] O. Browning, *Life of George Eliot*, pp.138-139, as cited in Ashton, *op. cit.*, p. 381

2. Historical Framework

Felix Holt, the Radical (1866) is George Eliot's most political and history-bound novel. In an attempt to shed light on why this novel, set in the 1830s, had been so timely published in 1866, this dissertation will dwell on an historical overview of England in the years surrounding 1830s and 1860s. Aided by a couple of essays from prominent thinkers of the time, this chapter will attempt to paint a general picture of the socio-political situation of that period, with the purpose of strengthening the connections that this dissertation will attempt to draw between the two decades and their issues.

Firstly, there is the need of a brief explenation as to why the refom acts of 1832 and 1867 are considered such poignant events. The controversial and deeply frightening issue about the reform act of 1867 had been that the British ruling class had believed that the 1832 reform act had been a singular and one-time event, so much so that the reform had been named "The Great Reform Act", marking it as a turning point from the past to modernity. However, the act turned out to be part of a wider picture of gradual transformation that would change Britain drastically from the beginning to the end of the century.[65] 1832 was seen by the ruling class and aristocracy as the year in which England and British society had inevitably started to decline, when their power and status began to dwindle and the industrial middle-class began their social climb. The purpose of this historical insert is to pinpoint the key instances and characteristics of this transformation – which in those years had seemed at times gradual and imperceptible, and at times epochal – with a focus on the connection between issues that seemingly resurfaced, although in different shape, decades later.

[65] H. Kingstone, "The Two Felixes: Narratorial irony and the Question of Radicalism in Felix Holt and "Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt", *The George Eliot Review Online*, 44: 2013, pp.42-49, p.42

2.1. The Historical Panorama of early Victorian England and the Great Reform Act of 1832

Before dwelling on the 1832 Reform Act, to understand fully its impact, it is necessary to rewind a couple of years and determine the events and the social situation that preceded the Act itself. Two major events of the 18th century that happened abroad, more specifically in France, had major consequences on 19th century England, those events are the French Revolution and the Napoleonic War.

The French Revolution had shaken the foundations of all European states, a considerable number of people reacted to it with joy, celebrating the change and the revolution itself, but most were terrified by the conflict and the social change it brought. At the time, William Pitt the younger was the Tory Prime Minister. In England, Pitt's political adversaries cheered to the prospect of a revolution, thinking back to what the 1688 Glorious Revolution had brought. With them poets, intellectuals, and radicals, such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, joined the celebrations for the fall of the Bastille. Edmund Burke was instead one of the first that looked at the new French social order with distrust and even fear, certain that it would have heralded tyranny and misgovernment.[66] This enthusiasm for a new social order was not limited to intellectual circles but spread also among the middle and lower classes, which founded a number of societies that encouraged representation in the government and demanded lower taxation and fewer working hours. This movement, which encouraged revolution, was driven and encouraged by Radicals. However, it was short-lived as it soon hit a setback for several reasons. Firstly, the radical societies were enthusiastic but a small minority; Secondly, the established order managed to implement some of the Radical slogans and causes, making these small societies obsolete; and, last but not least, in France the situation had turned violent with bloody repressions and massacres, many young Englishmen

[66] A. Briggs, *The Age of Improvement 1783-1867*, (1959), Bologna: Il Mulino, (1959), 1993, Translated by Davide Panzieri, pp.150-151

began to fear similar consequences and decided to abandon or even condem the cause. The latter also prompted the established government to adopt a strong policy of repression.[67]

From 1805 to 1815 Europe was ravaged by the Napoleonic wars, and England felt its impact too. Although industrialization continued its progress unflinchingly, England suffered some crises, especially in the first years of the 1810s, such as a limitation in its maritime commerce, high inflation and taxation to meet the expenses of the war. It was in those years that the conservative ideas that Burke had first presented in the 1790s began to spread among other intellectuals, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Sir Walter Scott – to cite a few – adopted and adapted Burke's ideals, with which George Eliot agreed to a high degree. In these same years the Radicals Bentham and James Mill theorized Utilitarianism and the concept of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number". Both Mill and Bentham believed that political reform was necessary as the British institutions were obsolete. The development of Bentham's democratic ideals went hand in hand with the last stages of the Napoleonic wars and outlined a clear parting from the old concept of Paine's Radicalism, which now had taken an intellectual and democratic form.[68] In the first years of the 1800s there was also some unrest among the population regarding political matters, ideals of reform began to spread, elicited by the widespread misery of years of bad crops and inflation that the war had caused. Between 1811 and 1812 the Luddite movement was born, one of the first labour movements of the 19th century, which protested, even through sabotage, against the use of machinery in the textile industry and for an increase in salary. [69] The memory of the misery suffered throughout the war overtook the feeling of victory after the battle of Trafalgar.

[67] Ibid., p.154
[68] Ibid., p. 201
[69] Ibid., p. 204

With the end of the war in 1815, the new government led by Liverpool faced several challenges. The end of the conflict meant no immediate improvement in the condition of the working classes. Peace had arrived but along with it came a fall in urban employment, rapid demobilization, and a heavier burden of indirect taxation than before. The term "Radical" spread like wildfire among the population in the post-war period, Liverpool's government had issues that urged tackling, the most urgent regarded corn.

The Corn Law of 1815 prohibited the importation of corn into Britain unless British corn reached a set price. This measure was a consequence of a government comprised mostly of landowners, who moulded laws for their own interest. Irish landowners were the first to protest these measures, but their voices were drowned out by their British competitors that asked for protectionist laws in the aftermath of the war. These laws were passed by the government, although a great number of workers, economists and wealthy industrials argued for free trade: an approach that would have been more beneficial to the whole country, but would not have safeguarded the interest of the landlords.[70] As it was made once again clear that the government only worked in favour of the land-owning aristocracy, Radicals raised anew to argue for a Parliamentary reform. Docks began to open and close depending of the fluctuation of the price of corn, and after a couple of years discontent began to rise steadily. The issue of the Corn laws will drag on for several decades, exacerbating drastically until their repeal in 1846.

As previously stated, the return to peace did not mean an immediate improvement in the living conditions of the working class. In 1816 and the beginning of 1817 misery and poverty were widespread in the countryside and in almost all industrial areas. A Lancashire Radical, Samuel Bamford, stated that "whilst the laurels were yet cool on the brows of our victorious soldiers [...] the elements of convulsion were at work amongst the masses of our labouring

[70] Ibid., p.230

population".[71] The economic climate improved between the summer and autumn of 1817 and continued on to 1818, but 1819 was one of the worst years of the 19th century. Working class distress, anger and strain were rising steadily and took a clear political form. It is in the years between Waterloo and Peterloo that Britain had come closest to a social revolution, although there was no sign of ever reaching the form that it took in France twenty-five years earlier. The main impulse between this socio-political agitation had been protests of factory workers, which had gained momentum, lamenting factory conditions, wages, and work hours.

During the summer of 1819 the mass meetings and political demonstrations were increasing in frequency, quantity, and volatility, but it was Peterloo that lighted the spark. On 16th August thousands of workers from Manchester and nearby areas gathered to listen to the preachings of Orator Hunt and to further their Radical campaign for a legal minimum wage and the repeal of the Corn Laws. The magistrates, apprehensive about an uprising of an angry mob, sent the cavalry to disperse the crowd. The presence of armed forces escalated the situation and a struggle followed. Eleven people were killed, while hundreds were wounded. The government added to the tension by congratulating the magistrates for their prompt and efficient measures. Still, this crisis led neither to a civil war nor to the revolution that many high-class citizens feared. Ultimately the fiery discontent went back to a low simmering as the economic conditions improved again and unemployment fell.

Many reform movements emerged between the 1820 and 1825, but popular political momentum hit a setback in favour of religious reform. Methodist revivals surfaced all over the country as well as trade unions. Still, living conditions were not optimal, wages were low, and the price of food was too high. With the repeal of the Combination act in 1824, trade unions began to rise suddenly in all industrial fields. The more structured approach of the trade unions allowed workers to organize more effectively, thus a great number of strikes were arranged. The

[71] S. Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical*, 1844, vol. 1., p.6, as cited in *Ibid.*, p. 235

reaction of the local magistrates to these gatherings and actions continued to be harsh as the core fear remained that of an incontrollable insurrection. For this reason, the year later, Parliament approved a new law that limited the freedom of strike. However, by 1825, the tendency had turned back towards a more political approach, and this tendency remained unchanged until the climax of the 1832 Reform Bill. In 1825 the Stockton and Darlington Railway opened.

Among the higher class, opinion was completely different. Protected and privileged by the Government, they denied any guilt of the ruling class for the misery and appalling living and working conditions of the lower classes, rather they blamed the working class for being deluded and fooled by agitators. However, not all those who supported the government shared these views, some stressed the importance of social progress, one that would go hand in hand with the progress of industrialization. A new phase in English politics began when Liverpool understood the necessity for change, and a more liberal approach was implemented.[72] Peel became home secretary and began working to a major revision of criminal law, Canning undertook a new foreign policy and Huskisson proposed a revision of the commercial system that included free trade of the corn. Times were changing and Liverpool understood the necessity to keep up. Liverpool's approach alarmed the country gentlemen as the old-fashioned industrialists, who were afraid that he would damage their interest in favour of the workers'.

When in the autumn of 1825 England experienced bank failures, bankruptcies and the stock exchange collapse, Huskisson and his policy was blamed. People showed a propensity to blame the Government for the privations they were suffering, and the Government began to be painted as a villain. Although Liverpool's Government had undertook reforms, they had not satisfied those who called for parliamentary reform and more radical measures. In this same period John Stuart Mill contributed to the spread of Benthamite ideas of utilitarianism

[72] Ibid., p.244

among the middle classed and the working men of London. The so-called "march of intellect" was unpopular with all those, especially aristocrats, who believed that education was socially dangerous. This mentality was aided by two prejudices, one against industrialism and the other against these new liberal doctrines of political economy.

Liverpool died in 1827 and after a brief period with Canning as his successor, the Duke of Wellington became Prime Minister. English politics had become incredibly complicated, and economic hardships widespread. For this reason, Wellington's mandate did not last long. Still, Wellington and his solidly Tory cabinet contributed to Britain's path towards progress as with the enacting in 1829 of the Catholic Emancipation Act, although it was done out of mere necessity. In 1828 the Catholic question had in fact become a pressing matter as the threat of a nationwide rebellion in Ireland took a more critical turn. Wellington had to stand against his Tory supporters to carry out the bill, but to his support came instead Radicals and some Whigs, while Tories allied themselves with the other Whigs to stop the bill from passing. The act admitted Irish and English Catholics to Parliament and a smattering of public offices. The Emancipation Act was important from a symbolic point of view rather than for its content, movement was afoot, and this was the first sign. In June 1830 George IV died and with him the royal veto against Grey as Prime Minister. In September the Liverpool and Manchester Railway was opened officially, with the aim of connecting the textile areas of Manchester with the port of Liverpool. When Wellington in a public speech announced that as long as he held any position in government, he would have stood in absolute resistance to any reform proposal, he lost all the support of Radicals, Whigs and moderate supporters.[73] Later he resigned, and Grey became Prime Minister under the alliance of all those who disagreed with Wellington.

The return of the Whigs to power meant that reform had become inevitable,

[73] Ibid., p.262

although its shape was not yet clear. Grey was a conservative, and he approached the reform from this angle. He admitted that he had not prepared a specific plan and at the time he was sceptical that a comprehensive Reform Bill could be achieved in his lifetime. Grey's ministry was composed almost entirely of members of the aristocracy and of peers, there were only three commoners. However, they were ready to accept political innovations as they understood that either the privileged groups of British society embraced adaptation and change, or innovation would turn incontrollable and change irrevocably the existing social order. Tories were not of the same idea, as they believed that a parliamentary reform would lead to a national catastrophe. However, during the debates over reform, both parties agreed on the danger of democracy, as the public could not be trusted as they were not "rational" as the higher classes.[74] The key issues that needed to be tackled with the reform were essentially three: the representation in parliament, the criteria for the franchise and the corruption during electoral campaigns. Parliament was divided in two houses, the House of Lords, whose members came from hereditary nobility and church leaders, and the House of Commons, which were elected with the limited suffrage.

The issue of representation in parliament was connected to a re-distribution of the population from rural areas to cities, coupled with an increase of the population, both consequence of the industrial revolution. As a result, densely populated cities like Manchester had no MPs while rural towns, that had diminished in size, upheld their representatives. These parliamentary boroughs with a small electorate acquired in the 18th century the title of rotten boroughs. The adjective rotten denounced that the electorate had suffered a long-term decline and was now too small to have a representative in parliament. Since the voters had become so few, they were incredibly susceptible to control. Votes were either bought for money, favours or acquired under threat. Similarly corrupt were pocket

[74] Ibid., p.272

boroughs, meaning areas that were effectively controlled by a single person, usually an influential employer or a local landowner. Under election times, a wealthy patron would pay up the local landlord to install his own tenants, who would do the landlord's bidding either for favours or under threat of eviction or repercussions. In such boroughs the lack of secret ballot and their dependence on the "owner" of the borough made it so that elections were always rigged. The local landowner would win the seat in the House of Commons for himself or give it to his peers or friends or even sold the seat for money or other benefits.

The issue of corruption has already been generally sketched in the previous paragraph. The problem with how the election campaigns were fought arose from the fact that the votes were cast in the open, meaning that the candidates would know who opposed them. With this method a tenant was not free to vote his landlord's opponent. In larger constituencies candidates often resorted to bribery, offering contracts of jobs, cash, food, and beer. It was also not uncommon to employ gangs that would intimidate or attack the opponents or even kidnap supporters of their rivals for the duration of the campaign.

The third but key issue was the qualification for franchise. To vote in the counties the male citizen had to own property that was worth at least 40 shillings. This qualified roughly 10% of a county population. The qualification for the franchise for the English borough seats instead was markedly different depending on the borough. In some almost all adult male homeowners could vote, in others only a handful. There were six different types borough franchise: the first was Scot and Lot, the male citizen could vote if he paid his share of taxes; the second was Potwalloper, if the citizen did not receive any alms or relief it meant that he was wealthy enough and could vote; the third was Freeman, a status that could be inherited; the fourth was Corporation, meaning that the members of the borough corporation could vote; the last was burgage, where vote was tied to the ownership of plots of land, these were the seats most vulnerable to corruption. The qualification for franchise impeded the working classes from voting, as most of

them lived in miserable conditions, but it also strongly limited the industrial middle class. The data was equally appalling, out of the 202 British constituencies only 7 had more than 5,000 voters, while 56 had less than 50.[75] But if voting for the MP was difficult, standing for election was even harder. Members of parliament needed to have an income of £600 a year for county seats and £300 a year for borough seats. Between the property qualification and the cost of treating the electors during the campaigns, only wealthy gentlemen could afford to run for parliament.

Public opinion was incredibly focused on the Parliamentary question, Grey understood that resisting reform or satisfying the demand only partially, would have meant jeopardizing the authority of the Government. Still, the journey for the bill's approval was incredibly tortuous. Its drafting was entrusted to a small committee which would have done its best to satisfy all reasonable demands and remove all reasons for complaint that the opposing party could have raised. The bill was framed as an effort to end corruption but the main issue the committee faced was deciding which constituencies would lose and which would secure representatives and what voting qualifications would include the middle classes without creating entirely popular constituencies.

The Bill's content was kept secret until 1st March 1831. Russell, one of the members of the committee, spoke of turning the House of Commons into:

> a body of men who represented the people, who spring from the people, who have sympathy with the people and who can fairly call upon the people to support their burdens in the future struggles and difficulties of the country.[76]

It became clear that the Bill was venturing much further than what had been anticipated. The first draft submitted was indeed quite revolutionary: Russell proposed to disfranchise boroughs with less than 2,000 inhabitants and limit the franchise of other boroughs with the population under 4,000, most of either of these were rotten or pocket boroughs. The vacancies created would be filled with

[75] M. Brock, *The Great Reform Act*, 1973, London: Hutchinson & Co., p.20
[76] Briggs, *op. cit.*, p.273

new representatives for boroughs that had experienced a drastic increase of the population and the counties, while the remaining vacancies were not to be filled.

The Tory opposition firmly defied the draft, deeming it highly revolutionary and too dangerous. The key points of their opposition were three, namely they feared that the influence would pass from the landed gentry to the industrial areas actively overturning the natural state of English society based on rank and property; that the House of Commons would be placed too much in the hands of public opinion; and that this measure would only prelude more measures that would involve other institutions, such as the Church or the Monarchy. Whigs were accused of threatening the nation's order and safety. Tory criticism was quite exaggerated as the extension of the franchise was quire moderate and limited, and the landed gentry was still represented, even more than before as the franchise was extended in the counties too. This new organization had been fuelled by the desire to have fair representation in Parliament for the manufacturing areas, to bring attention to the problems of the rapidly changing Victorian society and quench the need for reform.

Four attempts were required to pass the reform. The first time the Bill was blocked in the House of Commons. It passed the second reading in the on 22nd March 1831. However, the majority was so small that it could not see through to the common law and was abandoned. On 22nd April the King dissolved parliament, the choice for reform was now up to the unreformed electorate. Elections were fought uniquely around the question of Parliamentary reform. The force of a public opinion that demanded reform allowed Grey to gain a solid majority in Parliament.

During the elections it became clear that society was united in the demand for reform but divided on the actual content of said reform. Radicals wanted a thorough change, a stop to the misery suffered by the working class and equal rights. The mercantile and industrial associations wanted direct representation to safeguard their interests, the middle class was eager for change. Despite the reluctance of the landed gentry, Grey managed to gain a solid majority in

Parliament. The third attempt saw the Bill pass the House of Commons with a landslide victory, but in the House of Lords it was defeated again. This time the rejection caused public outrage. Threats of violent mobs and revolution started to crackle in the air, thousands of people went to the streets to gather and protest. Lord John Russel wrote "It is impossible that the whisper of a faction should prevail against the voice of a nation".[77] In Bristol people held the city hostage for three days, in Nottingham people were killed and in London the Radical leader called for mobilization.

On 12th December 1831 Russel offered a third draft of the Bill. It was a revision of the first, which safeguarded seats, kept a higher number of smaller constituencies, simplified the qualifications for franchise and allowed freemen in boroughs, if resident, to maintain their franchise. The Bill passed again the Commons, but the Lords were an unknown variable. Grey decided to pressure the Lords by threatening the Lords that he would have asked the King to create enough new peers to carry the bill. The Lords surrendered and approved the bill with a majority of only nine votes. However, the fight was not over as a Tory member proposed a motion to modify some clauses of the bill and the Parliament was at stalemate again. Social division flared once more and a strong discontent towards the Tory party began to spread. Ultimately, the bill passed after months of debate and public unrest because of the King's intervention.

Despite what the British elite had feared, no catastrophic event followed the passing of the Reform Act of 1832. On the contrary, some deemed the whole aftermath quite underwhelming, rather expecting a more thorough reform. Arguably, the main achievement of the Bill was the redistribution of seats. Regarding the qualification for franchise, for the first time women were formally disqualified from voting, as the term "male" had entered the bill; the new £10 qualification effectively priced out working class people from voting; the middle

[77] Ibid., p. 286

class was gradually readmitted "on the basis of respectability", meaning only when the political and social elites deemed that they could use their vote wisely; while small landowners, tenant farmers and shop keepers were now included in the franchise.[78] As of 1832, one Englishman in five had the right to vote, the electorate had increased of 50%. However, pocket boroughs, corruption, and rigged voting in the counties, still constituted a problem. Overall, the bill was important for what it symbolized, namely the potential for people organized in a political movement to enact significant change.

In the following years, Grey's Government fell. The new reformed parliament was Whig again, led by Lord Melbourne. Radicals did not manage to achieve a significant number of representatives in the newly formed government, but the spark of radicalism never wavered, and they kept rallying for widespread national alphabetization and instruction, the inclusion of women in the franchise and further change in the established government. Some reformers preached Bentham's ideas and asked for a reform that would grant "the greatest happiness for the greatest number". Parliament worked through several other reforms that attempted to solve major 1830s issues, the most notable was the Poor Law of 1834, which aimed to centralize the existing system of poor relief. Workhouses were established as means of relief and relief was provided only to those who could not work. The law was criticized by Radicals, Tories, and most of the population for its harsh treatment of the poor.[79]

[78] M. Bragg, *The Great Reform Act,* In Our Time, BBC Radio 4, November 2008, Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00flwh9 , Accessed 2023, October
[79] Briggs, *op. cit.*, p.315

2.2. The opinion of intellectuals in the early-Victorian age

To further understand the continuous movement of socio-political thought of the Victorian age, the present dissertation will offer the opinion of different intellectuals regarding contemporary society. This part of the chapter will elaborate on the thought of Thomas Carlyle, by discussing his most famous essay *The Sign of the Times* (1829) and of John Stuart Mill, by addressing his essay *The Spirit of the Age* (1831). These essays were chosen for the widespread response they created when they were first published and in the following years. Moreover, the former focuses on the individual in the context of the first decades of the 19th century, while the latter focuses on society as a whole and contemporary theories of society. In addition, Eliot and Lewes were close friends of Thomas Carlyle and knew Mill, we can thus assume that she was familiar with their beliefs and even shared them to a degree. It was in relation to their critique of philosophical speculation that Eliot formulated her decision to write novels.[80] *The Spirit of the Age* was also selected with the aim to carry out in the following part of the dissertation a comparison with one of Mill's later works. As a matter of fact, later in his life Mill rejected the opinions he had expressed in *The Spirit of the Age*, and elaborated his new, and diametrically opposed, thought in *On Liberty* (1859).

Mill and Carlyle had become friends for a period, only to continue down different paths due to divergence in opinions. Mill was more in agreement with French philosophy, while Carlyle with German philosophy. They were both Radicals, both had been influenced by Saint-Simonianism and Benthamism, although ultimately, they took distance from both. Dodd stated that "As Mill refined the public role of Radicalism in the press, Carlyle defined radicalism privately and idiosyncratically, as a personal creed.".[81] Both Carlyle and Mill wished to fasten philosophical thought to issues of life, to prevent it from straying

[80] V. Dodd, *George Eliot: An Intellectual Life*, London: MacMillan, 1990, p.63
[81] Ibid., p.55

into abstraction and conceptual thought. In the 1830s, they tried to evolve philosophical foundations for theories of reform to give direction to social change.

2.2.1. The Sign of the Times (1829), by Thomas Carlyle

Thomas Carlyle had observed that the age had undertaken a utilitarian character, attempting to cope with spiritual problems through mechanical attempts. It is the Industrial Revolution coupled with the Methodist revival of the 1820s that had derived a collaboration between Evangelicalism and Utilitarianism which in turn had generated the mechanical approach. The ethical and social imperatives raised by religion were dealt through a calculus of pleasure and pain. In his essay Carlyle criticizes this mechanical turn and calls for a serious inspection of the "signs of our time" to understand fully the changes that England and its citizens were undertaking. To aid this understanding he depicts the various innovations of the scientific and spiritual field and illustrates the various characters and ways of thinking of people of the early Victorian era.

The essay focuses on an analysis of how people have become engrossed in a mechanical way of life and have abandoned a dynamic approach. Carlyle characterized his age not as an "Heroical, Devotional Philosophical or Moral age, but above all others, the Mechanical Age",[82] and states that men are not capable anymore of living in the present, but rather they look back at the past or to the future. He highlights a tendency to the latter approach, with the creation of a frenzied and panicked plethora of prophecies about the future, which are nothing but dangerous as they hide what lies clearly at hand. These fearmongers seem to forget that England has been proclaimed to have been undergoing a crisis since the outburst of the French Revolution. Carlyle however points out that the problem of contemporary age is that many elements that Englishmen have thought as

[82] T. Carlyle "The Sign of the Times", in G. Himmelfarb, *The Spirit of the Age, Victorian Essays*, London, Yale University Press, 2007, pp.31-49, p.34

established, have instead undergone change, such as the repeal of the Catholic act and the Corn Laws. People's answer to change has always been great terror and doom prediction, in equal manner, contemporaries feared that society as they knew it was going to end in 1829. Change seemed inevitable and appeared to spark a chain reaction of other transformations. Admittedly, those who feared a ripple effect of change had been in a way correct, as there has been for England no century full of continuous evolution and innovation as the Victorian age. For this reason, the 19th century could be described with multiple epithets, although ultimately Carlyle settled for Mechanical age, as it was the introduction and spread of machinery and industrialization, that had sparked change and progress in England.

The Mechanical Age is characterized by speed, efficiency, and an attitude towards the outside world which fosters the perception of everything as merely means to an end. Undoubtedly this brought also positive connotations, such as an improvement of the conditions of life, however, Carlyle denounces that machinery creeped in the spiritual realm and "Men have grown mechanical in the head and in the heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavour, and in natural force, of any kind".[83] Politics have equally taken a mechanical outset, as they focus on practical external factors. Carlyle states that while it is true that reform is needed and the outcries for a change in legislation cannot be ignored, contrary to what Benthamites and Utilitarians had preached, the happiness of the citizen does not depend on external circumstances defined by the Government, and it is not correct to suggest that once the executive is in check then human happiness cannot but follow.[84] Thus the methods proposed to achieve happiness are nothing but practical and mechanical, the moral, religious and spiritual condition of people have lost their primacy to the physical and economical.[85]

[83] Ibid., p.36
[84] Ibid., p.38
[85] Ibid., p.39

Danger lies in the fact that man, is not merely Mechanic, but also Dynamic. People are getting used to such Mechanical approach and now it seems that the Spiritual could never have been but Mechanical, but up to not long ago it was not the case. Carlyle openly refers to Bentham when he argues that while an approach of check and balances may work with ethics and morality, it cannot work with happiness.[86] The *Felicific Calculus* is a reductive approach to the complexity of human nature. Carlyle then further explains the paradox of a man-made Mechanism that is the driving force of men, effectively generating a circle that keeps turning. The spiritual and the Dynamic should lead and guide, but their role has been stolen. The Mechanic has been dealing with issues that do not belong to its realm and, as a result, men have lost their belief in the invisible.[87] Its clearest consequence is that only the material and immediately practical are the pivotal concerns of the contemporary age. Carlyle states "This is not a Religious Age.".[88] Such statements do not imply that Carlyle calls for a hegemony for the Dynamic, rather he advocates for a balance between the two. He equally warns that an excess of the Dynamic gives rise to "idle, visionary and impracticable approaches, Superstition and Fanaticism".[88]

The essay calls for a change of direction. All abstract values have turned into their practical counterpart, hard work is no longer considered noble and true but valued in terms of strength. Everything that is of interest must be tangible, and in turn, true good does not lie anymore within but without men. It is undeniable that the society is experiencing progress, but so are the spiritual maladies, fuelled by an unwise approach and view of Nature. Carlyle does believe in change and believes that this unrest is nothing but a consequence of this need for change. He writes that political freedom is nothing but the first step towards a higher freedom,[89] but ends the essay with the statement "the only solid, though a far slower reformation is what each begins and perfects on *himself*".[89]

[86] Ibid., p.40
[87] Ibid., pp.42-43
[88] Ibid., p.43
[89] Ibid., p.49

2.2.2. George Eliot and Thomas Carlyle

George Eliot's first direct reference to Carlyle's work dates to a letter written to Miss Lewis in October 1840, yet it is possible that she read his works earlier than this.[90] Eliot's reading of *Chartism* (1840) was especially poignant as it refined her sense of social change and introduced her to advanced social theories before she had the chance to meet the Brays.[91] It is likely that it is through Carlyle that she first encountered Radicalism.[91] When quoting *Chartism* in her letters, Eliot also spoke of the individual's duty to mankind, the need for individual improvement for the progress of society, with the understanding that the contemporary age was a critical period.[91] A belief that accompanied her throughout her life.

Eliot had been particularly interested in Carlyle's attempt to link philosophy with politics. Together with Mill, Carlyle had uncovered the inadequacy of the philosophical basis of English radicalism, stating that it was in such inadequacy that stemmed the failure of English radical movements, praising instead French notions of radicalism. The events of the 1840s harvested Eliot's interest in political theory and she turned to Comte. Eliot returned later in her years to the earlier works by Carlyle, and although she disagreed on some of his arguments, she was still an admirer. Carlyle was confident that the study of history would provide explanations for contemporary problems and found political solutions in the English past rather than in contemporary social models. It may be also for an affinity to this philosophy that Eliot decided to comment on 1860 by setting *Felix Holt* in 1830.[92]

As for a more specific connection between the essay and the novel, there are several similarities. The sense of doom perceived and described by Carlyle in his essay can be equally perceived through the pages of *Felix Holt*. The reader can sense that something drastic and dramatic is about to happen, and the day of the

[90] Dodd, *op. cit.*, p.76
[91] Ibid., p.77
[92] Ibid., p.144

election is felt as some kind of Armageddon date.[93] Indeed, the tense and volatile atmosphere will shatter and outburst with the mob scene. As British citizen feared but also anticipated reform, the townsmen of Treby Magna fear and anticipate the day of the election, prophesising the outcome while few focus on what lies at hand.

A focus on personal improvement is central not only in Carlyle's *The Sign of the Times,* but in Eliot's work too. Carlyle was sceptical about the transformative power of legislation; he defined liberty in apolitical terms and so did Eliot.[94] Esther's whole storyline deals with personal improvement, and to a degree, so does Felix's. Neither *Bildung* can be ascribed to legislative reform, it is merely personal, although it is sparked by social matters. One could also argue that Harold Transome is a representation of Carlyle's Mechanical man. Harold rarely deals with anything that belongs to abstraction, such as the beautiful or the religious, he is much more focused on practical matters, such as dealing with his lands and conducting his campaign. It is possibly for this reason that he seems blind to his mother's pain, and why Esther ultimately chooses Felix over him. One might argue that if Harold represents an excess of the Mechanical, Felix represents an excess of the Dynamic, as he appears full of abstract ideals but seems to fail in their concretization.

2.2.3. The Spirit of the Age (1830), by John Stuart Mill

The term "Spirit of the Age" had previously appeared in William Hazlitt *Der Geist der Zeit* (1805), but long before him the term had made its first appearance in an essay by Hume where he described the Enlightenment. Unlike Hume, Mill discusses an age of transition, of intellectual anarchy, where "Mankind has

[93] P. Fitzhugh Johnstone, "Fear of the Mob in Felix Holt." *Transformation of Rage: Mourning and Creativity in George Eliot's Fiction*, NYU Press, 1994, pp. 111–31, p.116
[94] Dodd., *op. cit.*, p.145

outgrown old institutions and old doctrines, and has not yet acquired new ones",[95] where the march of intellect had spread superficial knowledge but not wisdom nor virtue. This early essay displays a Benthamite and Utilitarian influence in its confidence that it is through the institutions that man can reach happiness. Mill will leave behind his Benthamite beliefs in later years, going as far as rejecting it completely, for the same reason, he will not include this essay in his later collection *Dissertations and Discussions* (1859).

Mill begins his essay stating that England is experiencing an age of transition, and such movement has been so incremental and subtle that it has been noticed only recently when the consequences of this change have started to show themselves. One of these consequences is that people are soundly asking to be governed differently.[96] Mill, as Carlyle, stresses the importance of understanding and focussing on the present, as it is the present that holds the keys to the solution. He observes that old ties and old confines have disappeared to leave space to new bonds and boundaries. However, since these new connections have not developed yet, mankind feels unmoored, which gives birth to affliction.[97] Europe has already achieved great change in government, while Britain is lagging behind, anchored to old institutions, afraid of change. Although Mill praises intellectuals that embrace transformation, he clarifies a difference between those who want innovation because they believe there is a need to adapt to the times, and those who instead are convinced that innovation is due because they believe the old ways to be wrong and contemporary men to be more learned. Mill strongly disagrees with the latter, he points out that the masses are indeed overall more educated, but it is superficial knowledge. Moreover, old ways are not wrong in an absolute way, but rather they are not fit anymore for contemporary issues and needs. This obsolescence is not the issue, rather it is the lack of a new philosophical, political, or social doctrine

[95] J.S. Mill, "The Spirit of the Age", in G. Himmelfarb, *The Spirit of the Age, Victorian Essays*, London, Yale University Press, 2007, pp. 50-79, p.53
[96] *Ibid.*, p.51
[97] *Ibid.*, p.52

to take its place. The essay points out that in this age of transition the intellectuals and instructed have seen their authority nullified, the multitude thus finds itself without a guide and society is exposed to errors and danger as everybody attempts to judge for themselves. Private judgement is the new resource of humanity, but it is highly fallible.

If there is no authority to hold the truth, and it is up to the individual's discretion, it is quite easy to fall into erroneous opinion. Society thus lacks a guide to follow and falls prey to generalities or visionary beliefs. The only way to get out of this state is through authority, "the presumptuous man need authority to restrain him from error: the modest man needs it to strengthen him in the right".[98] According to Mill, the mass should allow those who are learned to guide them, as reason can guide men up to a point, where it will instead suggest to fall back upon the authority of more educated minds. The question that follows is where can this authority be found? Earlier ages had bodies of received doctrine, but this one lacks it as there is no unanimous agreement. What must happen is thus a change in the whole framework of society. Moral and social revolution should be undertaken to leave fertile ground for the creation of a new order and new authority. It is certainly fearful to have a change in institutions while there are no fixed principles to guide decisions and people are unable to trust themselves or others, but it is necessary to get out of the stalemate.

In the third part of the essay Mill expands on his theory about the two states of affairs of mankind or the nation, identifying the natural state as "when worldly power and moral influence are habitually and undisputedly exercised by the fittest persons whom the existing state of society affords".[99] If the people that have the best intellectual ability together with the best interest of the community at heart and the capacity to manage said community are put in a position of power, and have the favour of the people they guide, then the optimal social condition is

[98] Ibid., p.62
[99] Ibid., p.64

reached: there is no collision with the order of things and civilization can progress. On the other hand, the transitional state has "other persons fitter for worldly power and moral influence than those who have hitherto enjoyed them".[100] In this state there is no established doctrine as the authorities are not the most competent to serve that role, thus the individual is left to think for themselves and chaos reigns. This state continues until one or several moral and social revolutions are undertaken, then the natural order is established once again, and progress can proceed onwards. Mill then goes on furthering his theory by explaining the two conditions of worldly power, namely, the first, in which the fittest for that rule have been carefully selected and have been appointed to administer the community according to the best ideas of the age;[101] and the second which sees people born and bred into a role. Such people are by no means the fittest, but they are raised and educated to be apt to that role, while others are taught to execute orders. People acquiesce to this configuration because they have confidence in who manages their affairs, as they were trained to do so. It is an entirely circular structure that however holds the seeds for its own dissolution. Inevitably, conditions will change and sooner or later will come a leader that will be unfit to rule and who will be impossible to depose, causing the collapse of society.

By means of such classifications Mill wants to explain the current socio-political situation, to soothe the anxiety for change and to direct in the best way the rumbling need for reform. He clearly draws the connection between what are the conditions of contemporary England and towards what the Englishmen should strive. Through careful wording Mill offers a picture of an England in a transitional stage, that has a governmental organisation that is not fit to rule as has not adapted to the new conditions, since it's made of lords that have appointed themselves to the seat without having the qualifications for such role. Mill sketches a country that is running amok without a proper guide and criticizes the landed

[100] Ibid., p.65
[101] Ibid., p.66

gentry as a class that once held the power and the qualifications to grip such power, but that has grown lazy and secure of their privileges and wealth. This lack of exercise has deadened not only the aristocratic mind but also their virtue. They have become stagnant and enervated. Once versed in business, which made them fit to handle national affairs, the upper classes are now either inexperienced or completely unfit. Their knowledge of life is now little more than the knowledge of a couple of hundred of high-class families, they are ignorant of the world. Most of their opinions are now hereditary, they merely take information and maxims from traditional texts that only cement further their position and privilege. At the same time, the wealth started to get distributed, the middle class ascended, and elementary education allowed the lower class to access to a very low degree to the knowledge that was once prerogative of the wealthier. The distinctions of inheritance are thus getting blurrier and add to the fog and chaos that surrounds society.

Although Mill clearly states that he is not campaigning for the abolishment of hereditary distinctions nor for the working class to access government roles, he does argue that due to such changes of society and external conditions, a reform is nothing but part of the natural progress of society and history. The lower classes can form their own opinion and what is needed is a ruling class that won't lead them astray not only from a practical and economic perspective, but from a moral one too. Mill investigates the conditions of moral influence and argues that society in its natural state has worldly power and moral influence aligned and in agreement.[102] The contemporary age does not experience such harmony, rather people fight under several banners, or have no rooted conviction nor steady opinion. There is the need for a sanctioned opinion, for all to bow to the authority of superior minds and greater knowledge. Mill, as previously anticipated, does not argue for a government composed of aristocracy, but neither of working-class

[102] Ibid., p.76

men, rather he argues in favour of meritocracy. To defend his position, he leads by example Athens and Rome, whose government were rooted in ancient wisdom and the resulting society was among the most flourishing in ancient history. Such example is connected to another core topic of this essay, namely the importance of the past. Mill pinpoints in the outbreak of the French Revolution the source of the Victorian attitude of complete disregard and criticism towards ancestors, the belief that if ancient wisdom falls short then it must mean that ancestors were in the wrong, and not that times have changed, and this wisdom must be adapted and learned from. Mill is a firm defender of the authority of the past, he states that society should revert to this natural state of reverence as these ancient maxims as they are still fundamental part of the present. The contemporary age is awaiting for figures that will hold together wise thinking and wise conduct.

Mill's essay aims to draw attention to the striking differences between the natural state and the contemporary transitional state. Advanced European communities have succeeded after the terrific struggle towards emancipation: reform achieved either victory or toleration. Mill asserts that to emerge from this crisis of transition and enter again the natural state of society that enervated and unqualified high class should be divested by its worldly power, and the most virtuous and best instructed should take their place. He ends the paper by stating that:

> A few months before the first of these papers was written, it would have seemed a paradox to assert that the present aera is one of moral and social transition. The same proposition now seems almost the tritest of truisms. The revolution which had already taken place in the human mind, is rapidly shaping external things to its own form and proportions.[103]

[103] Ibid., p.79

2.3. The Historical Panorama of the mid-Victorian England and the Second Reform Act of 1867

The years following the Great Reform Act were characterised by adjustment. The working class was extremely heterogeneous, as to the same social class belonged factory workers, weavers, shopkeepers, and artisans, all with widely different issues. During the last years of the 1830s many attempts were made to reach a unity of the working class with the aim to create a united front to defend their interests. As a result, trade unions rose in number and in dimensions and became more organized. In February 1834 the Grand National Consolidate Trade Union was instituted with the goal to reunite the different unions with the purpose of cooperation for a common goal. Its complex organisation ambitiously aimed to provide each district with educational, recreational, and social security systems. In the end, however, the project ran aground as each trade union pursued their own interest and the employers, scared of what such a mass coordination could achieve, began forcing workers to leave the unions on penalty of immediate dismissal. The government encouraged legal action to suppress trade unions, and thus the movement turned back to political action.

Between 1837 and 1845 Britain experienced a series of highs and lows. 1837 had been a year of serious recession, the situation saw a moderate revival from 1838 to 1840, but still unemployment and discontent were high. In 1841 recession turned into depression, and a full crisis was hit in 1842. Between 1843 and 1845 the construction of railways allowed for a small reprieve, as it gave jobs to thousands of people and stimulated demand to many industries. By 1846 the old tensions were back and only with the repeal of the Corn Laws England headed towards a slow economic revival that would safely carry the country through the storms of political revolution that was ravaging Europe in 1848. These vicissitudes provided fertile ground for social cleavage. Manufacturers and merchants had earned in 1832 the right to vote so their initiatives were much more effective, even

though parliamentary composition still did not reflect their power in society. The political organisations that represented the working class kept their distance from businessmen and merchants as, being one employer and the other employee, their interested clashed. The middle class was struggling against aristocracy.

The struggle was not limited to the city, in the countryside farmers were miserable as their grievances were not heard by landlords. Moreover, the country landscape was changing with the introduction of the railway and other agricultural machinery. The railway allowed for a cheaper and faster transportation of goods and people, who could now meet in a way that previously had not been possible. In these years a double attitude developed towards progress: a positive one, which saw this material progress as the basis for a more permanent one; and a nostalgic attitude, which expressed a sincere social criticism, identifying past ages as imbued with creative efforts that instead lacked in the contemporary one. These different economic crises raised fundamental questions such as the position of the individual in the new society, the relationship between different social groups and the fate of the nation. Contemporary intellectuals could not find solutions, as they could not fully understand the heterogeneity of the working class. Once again many predicted a revolution, but in the end it didn't happen. Still, the working class was not content and often hungry. Mill denounced that innovation had favoured the middle classes but had not brought yet any great change in human destiny as it had advertised. To worsen the situation, the working class enjoyed nothing that could be called social security, their wellbeing fluctuated from year to year, the cost of living and unemployment would experience highs and lows for reasons beyond their control. The unemployed became dependent on the terrible provisions of the Poor Law of 1834, while trade unions and societies offered vital support. The working class's need for reform took a definite political turn with the establishment of Chartism.

Chartism was a working-class movement that developed from a sense of

betrayal and disappointment towards the 1832 Reform Bill.[104] They had hoped that Britain would have become a democracy, but this hope had been swiped away. In the 1830s the People's Charter started to gather momentum, its core goal was to make the government accountable to the common people. The peak of Chartist activity had been between 1838 and 1850, supported mainly by the working-class but also partially by the middle class. Chartism championed six main points, namely: universal male suffrage, equal size electoral district, voting by secret ballot, no property qualification for members of the parliament, a wage for members of the parliament – since there was no pay only the wealthier cold afford serving – and annual elections. Chartists argued for a democratic reform, but they found the unified opposition of both Whigs and Tories, who were deeply afraid of what it meant involving the working-class in parliamentary decisions because they believed that the common people would not defend property's interest. In 1839 the People's Charter got 1.3 million signatures but the House of Commons did not accept the petition. The Charter was dismissed three times, it was demonstration not only of how little were regarded the issues of the working-class but also of the strength of the middle class. Finding their voices unheard, in 1838 the Chartists began to publicly demonstrate, persevering until 1848. In the end, Chartism began to slowly lose momentum as the Parliament refused to be moved by the movement's mass petition and protests. In addition, internal divisions between moderates and extremists caused internal collapse, and the slight improvement of living conditions ultimately caused the workers to gradually lose interest and turn back to trade unions. In the meantime, the Whigs had gradually become the party that represented the industrial world and the classes that it represented. They embodied liberalism but one that was different from its European counterpart as it covered both the moderate right and the radical left. Still, the Whigs never became representatives of the working classes, who continued to lack parliamentary

[104] Bragg, *op. cit.*

representation.

As for the case with Chartism, another issue that had only been patched in the beginning of the decade came back exacerbated only sometime later, namely the Corn Laws. During the 1838-1839 economic crisis, the Anti-Corn League was instituted, an extra-parliamentary group that championed the abolition of the Corn Laws. Liberalism was gaining traction, and the League believed that Britain should embrace free trade, a policy that would suit both the consumer and the producer's best interests. The League was an alliance between liberals and radicals but, although they both championed the abolition of the tariff on foreign wheat, they ultimately had different goals. The latter to lower the worker's wages, the former to lower the prices of food. The League described their crusade as in contraposition to the oligarchy of the landed gentry and in defence of the industrial middle-class, farmers and workers, thus adding a moral undertone to their political movement. Differently from Chartism, the League had been a successful experiment in organisation and formation of the public opinion. During 1842 strikes and protests were led by the League in view of the upcoming election, its cause had reached the countryside and there it gained more traction as farmers were among the most oppressed categories. The issue of the Corn Laws became time-sensitive with the outbreak of the Irish potato famine, the parliament could not artificially keep up the prices of corn while people were starving.[105] Still, the Irish potato famine was not the only reason that led Parliament to ultimately concede the abrogation. Calculations were made to ascertain that the repeal of the Laws could be favourable to the whole nation, not only from an economic standpoint, but also from a socio-political one. Ultimately Robert Peel, the Tory MP, repealed the Corn Laws in 1846, stating that had been done not to favour the landed gentry nor to favour the industrial class, but rather for the good of the whole nation. The abrogation ended the long conflict between the wealthy classes of the country and those of the city.

[105] S. Rogari, *L'Età della Globalizzazione Storia del mondo contemporaneo dalla Restaurazione ai giorni nostri*, Milano: UTET, 2018, p.30

From 1846 to 1848 Europe had been hit by a harsh economic crisis that provoked diffused unemployment, which caused the first mass mobilisation of the lower class. Many European countries underwent revolutions based on social claims of independentist and nationalist nature. Britain successfully managed to avoid revolutionary upheavals by passing a series of modest reforms during the 1840s, moreover, 1847 initiated free trade in Britain.

The two decades of 1850 and 1860 benefited from a general national peace and wellbeing. The cult of progress had become widespread, and the majority had acquired a positive attitude towards innovation. Its simplest defence being that scientific and technical progress had brought, despite Malthus' projections, not only an increase of the population but also of wellbeing: agriculture was producing great harvests, so much so that the mid-Victorian age had been described as the "Golden age of high farming";[106] the supply of power and the number of machines created a chain reaction between business initiative and technical invention that ultimately made possible the industrial revolution; transportation saw great progress and technical advance stimulated further improvements. The age of machinery had officially begun, but industrialization heightened the differences between industrial and non-industrial areas of the country, although it was still the land that carried the most prestige. To further cement the high role held by science, in the same decade another scientific research upended not only Britain, but the whole world: in November 1859, Darwin's *Origin of the Species* was published, a treatise that would further ground the belief in progress and would change the human perspective not only on Nature but on society as well.

The years that went from the Great Exhibition (1851) to the Second Reform Act (1867) were characterized by an expansion of the economy: prices and wages had raised, unemployment was low, new professions were born. Not only was the economy flourishing but society as well had become more tolerant and dynamic,

[106] Briggs, *op. cit.*, p.448

more non-conformist churches were built, higher and middle class mixed more. Slums did not disappear overnight, rather they kept representing a very miserable and harsh reality. People however were confident that progress and innovation would ultimately lead to the abolition of misery. The main political figure of the time was Palmerston, who ascribed to the success of British society its moderate approach to issues compared to the harsh one of the Continent. Indeed, several reforms were approved, such as one on divorce and another public healthcare, such were small amendments, but they were slowly but surely repairing the fabric of British society. The dissatisfaction with Parliament and the electorate system had dampened but was still present. In the mid-Victorian years corruption during campaigning had become the core issue, multiple petitions were signed to protest rigged elections, the profession of the agent became common. The agent was a figure that would open the door for the candidates through bribery, threats, and favours, both in private and in public. Many contemporary writers discussed the electoral issue in their works, one of them was Trollope, another Eliot. Parliament was presented multiple drafts for Parliamentary reform, but the member's reluctance, in conjunction with a series of weak governments and skirmishes between parties, postponed the issue.

The government's inability to present itself as an authoritative political body caused dissatisfaction to spread, together with a lack of confidence of its effectiveness. Eliot wrote about her father "I was accustomed to hear him utter the word "Government" in a tone that charged it with awe and made it part of any effective religion".[107] The events of the years between 1850 and 1870, in particular the Crimean War (1853-1856), enhanced the role of the press: magazines and papers allowed people more participation on political matters and educated them on said matters. Simultaneously, some Radical groups began to rise and shape politics despite their limited number. Three main branches of Radicalism had

[107] G. Eliot, *GEL*, as cited in *Ibid.*, p.480

survived up to the 1860s namely, Social Radicalism which championed what had been the Chartist goals; Nationalist Radicalism which was militant and conservative; and a bourgeois, logical Radicalism of the Manchester school. The Crimean War fuelled anew Radical attitudes, as hunger and high prices led citizens to ask for the dismantling of higher-class privilege and for common citizens to fill administrative roles. Radicalism experienced a surge when a convergence of events came in succession, namely, Palmerstone died, Gladstone changed flag and began endorsing a parliamentary reform, and British economy halted its progress between 1866 and 1867.

When Gladstone publicly proclaimed himself as a "defender of the *moral* right of responsible working men to the vote",[108] he sparked anew popular agitation in the country. His argument that responsible workingmen possessed the requirements for a proper exercise of the franchise was not to be forgotten and was held at heart by the lower classes. Gladstone however, never encouraged working-class agitations and pressures, rather he praised self-improvement of the single members. As George Eliot, he believed that the individual working-class intellect and character were the key for the socio-political progress of the whole class. Gladstone's statements and political stance was not the only spark that rekindled the embers of political reform: in 1861 American Civil War broke out, and in 1864 Garibaldi came to visit England, while Mazzini was gathering followers in Italy. Lincoln was enumerated as one of the radical heroes as he championed the end of slavery and denounced the British landowners that supported the South, while the English working class stood together in support of the North. Hutton, the director of the *Spectator,* denounced how the lower classes were displaying more sympathy than the higher classes.[109] The decision of the aristocracy to take the side of the South consolidated the popular belief that they were officially unfit to govern, as they had prioritized once again wealth over human rights. Garibaldi gave his speech

[108] Ibid., p.556
[109] Ibid., p.559

in the Crystal Palace to over 20,000 people, he brought to England a different type of Radical thought, which raised again the need and hope for reform. The extension of the franchise to workers seemed officially inevitable, and influential politicians began to publicly endorse it. When Palmerstone, the most influential opposer to the reform, died, Gladstone, Russell, and the Radicals believed it was time to act.

The Tory opposition, with Robert Lowe as its leader, carried three main arguments against reform, such arguments were nearly identical to those raised in 1832. Firstly, that the extension of the franchise would give too much power to ignorant and unqualified people. Tories believed that the only way to improve the lower classes wasn't by extending franchise to include "those who lacked morality" but rather to keep it as a "privilege of citizenship". Lowe believed that with universal franchise people would stop considering it a privilege to exercise.[110] Secondly, Lowe believed that a large measure of Parliamentary reform would have destroyed real leadership in Parliament. Thirdly, conservatives were afraid that reform would give too much power to the working-class to safeguard and act according to their own interests: Parliament would have endorsed a wider free trade, strikes and a war against the aristocracy. The key points against reform were indeed the same as 1830, adapted to the new circumstances, but carrying the same fears. After Palmerston's death Gladstone became the leader of the House of Commons and Russell the Prime Minister – the same man that had been part of the committee for the draft of the Great Reform Act in 1832. In March 1866 they proposed the first draft for reform, it was quite moderate as it lowered of a couple of shillings the qualifications for franchise in both boroughs and county. Radicals believed it too mild while Lowe and his supporters opposed it harshly. Russell and Gladstone made a second attempt with another moderate draft that was met again with strong disagreement. When an amendment that restricted even more the franchise was approved, Russell resigned. The Tory Derby – who, like Russell, had

[110] Ibid., p.563

been part of the committee that had drafted the Great Reform Act – and Disraeli returned to power.

As further proof of the fact that the Victorian age had been characterised by continuous change of thought, belief, socio-political and economic situation, it was the Tory conservative Disraeli, who in the end managed to pass the Second Reform Act, one that ultimately was far more Radical than that proposed by Russell and Gladstone.[111] Disraeli presented himself as a flexible conservative, he realized that the political panorama was changing and to keep the Tories in power they needed the votes of the lower classes. Moreover, the extension of franchise had become an impelling matter. A number of conservatives began to cede and take the side of Disraeli as they felt it was time to end a controversy that had been dragged on for decades.[112] The worsening economic situation came in aid of Disraeli's plan for reform. The Stock Exchange experienced the disastrous "Black Friday" on 11th May, bank rates surged, and riots exploded in most cities;[113] harvests had been ruined by terrible climate and meat prices skyrocketed as a result of an epidemic; cholera broke out again. In Parliament, Derby and Disraeli kept championing reform, slowly more conservatives began to share their reasoning, although the vast majority still feared that extending the franchise would deprive them of all their power and authority. The opposition saw no other option than to open themselves to the possibility of reform when in February Queen Victoria lightly threatened in her speech that measures "without unduly disturbing the balance of political power, shall freely extend the electoral franchise".[114] Derby also warned Tory members that if the reform did not pass, the government would fall. A draft was presented on 18th March 1867, the franchise in the boroughs was to be based on personal rating, meaning that all householders paying their rates and in possession of a residential qualification of two years could vote. The county franchise was to

[111] Ibid., p.567
[112] Ibid., p.569
[113] Ibid., p.568
[114] Ibid., p.570

be based on the qualification of fifteen pounds' income. Among those who were given the franchise were enumerated those who had a university degree, or fifty pounds in government founds, the Bank of England or a Savings Bank, or a membership of learned professions. Parliamentary debates lasted from March to July, and the draft was completely altered. The parties suffered from internal skirmishes, Whigs took conservative stances, Tories voted for radical amendments, and Disraeli used these divisions to proceed with his Reform, which was approved in the House of Commons.

After the first stage of approval, Radicals took a stand and requested amendments that would repeal all restrictions on household suffrage and include lodgers in the franchise. Three radical amendments passed, Hodgkinson's being the most significant as he abolished the distinction between compound householders and personal ratepayers, virtually establishing complete and unlimited household suffrage.[115] John Stuart Mill was participating in the discussion proposing women's suffrage, but it was defeated without much difficulty. Between May and June 1867, in a dramatic turn of events, a member of the opposition proposed a more drastic draft for the reform, which passed with a large majority despite the opposition of Disraeli. The bill retained nothing of the original draft, it was much more democratic than what Disraeli had ever intended, yet he deemed its passing a success. Derby masterfully convinced the House of Lords with compelling speeches, stating that the reform was in the Tories' best interests, and broke a stalemate that had lasted thirty years. After its passing, Derby confessed that believed the Second Reform Bill "a leap in the dark", [116] but he had:

> the greatest confidence in the sound sense of my fellow-countrymen, and I entertain a strong hope that the extended franchise which we are now conferring upon them will be the means of placing the institutions of this country on a firmer basis, and that the passing of the measure will tend to increase the loyalty and contentment of a great portion of her Majesty's subjects. [116]

[115] Ibid., p.576
[116] Ibid., p.578

As for the passing of the Great Reform Bill, despite what contemporaries believed, no drastic nor apocalyptic change followed the extension of the franchise. The issues that Britain had dragged on for thirty years seemed to have finally found a resolve. British citizens of the lower classes had at last found their demands heard. The Reform Act of 1867 doubled the number of franchised men and considerable action was taken against corruption. England was divided between pessimists and optimists. The former, counting among its ranks Carlyle and Lowe, believed that the extension of the franchise to the masses would have destroyed parliamentary institution, made good government impossible, prey of demagogues. What frightened them the most was that it had been a conservative government that had conducted such changes, a testimony that times were indeed changing and unpredictable. The conservative's fear that the lower classes would have been a united front ready to upturn the government would prove unfounded as, just as the middle class had been in 1832, the working-class was divided and heterogeneous in their requests and issues. Ironically, they stood together only to oppose the aristocracy when the latter obstructed their demands for reform: they were effectively more dangerous in unreformed times.[117] Optimists had instead great faith and trust in their compatriots, expressing the same kind of attitude that the aristocracy had had towards the middle class with the extension of franchise in 1832. The working class wanted to preserve order and progress to the same extent as the higher classes, they were no revolutionary.

England had changed drastically from 1830 to 1860, but some issues recurred cyclically, changing slightly because of circumstances, which made the two decades curiously similar in their issues and events. During the 1860s many concerns of the 1830s were solved, but this decade also paved the way for other challenges that were to be solved only later, such as women's suffrage.

[117] Ibid., p.582

2.4. The opinion of intellectuals in the mid-Victorian age

In this section, the dissertation will elaborate on the change of mindset and opinion that English intellectuals underwent from the early-Victorian Age to only a couple of decades later, the mid-Victorian Age. For this purpose, this part of the chapter will elaborate on *On Liberty* (1859) by John Stuart Mill. As mentioned before, the choice of *On Liberty* was purposeful to display to what a degree Mill rejected his earlier Benthamite approach, and thoroughly encompassed radical and liberal thought. For one, he was amongst the very few that championed women's suffrage.

On Liberty (1859) is diametrically opposed to *The Spirit of the Age* (1830). Where *On Liberty* praised freedom of discussion, depicting it as a pivotal requirement for society, and for the emergence of truth, *The Spirit of the Age* instead deemed it as one of the unfortunate characteristics of the "Transitional Age", something that allowed those who did not have qualifications to preach, to discuss truths. Analogously, where *On Liberty* condemns authority as a figure that stands before the individual's ability and freedom to think and discuss, *The Spirit of the Age* instead praised the authority of the cultivated minds as the body that would lead society to its natural state and sanction reason. It is understandable why Mill decided to completely reject his early belief, but they are both pivotal to a deeper understanding of Mill's intellectual development. One that other English intellectuals underwent in a similar fashion. The comparison puts *On Liberty* in perspective of a "spirit of the age" in continuous flux and change.[118]

2.4.1 On Liberty (1859), by John Stuart Mill

Mill expressed in *On Liberty* his concern over the abuse of power that political authority could exercise on the people, together with his fear that moral cohesion could be compelled on individuals in a mass society. He combined classical

[118] J.S. Mill, "The Spirit of the Age", in G. Himmelfarb, *The Spirit of the Age, Victorian Essays*, London, Yale University Press, 2007, pp.56-57

republican fears of the tyranny of a ruler with liberal concerns of the tyranny of the majority in a democratic society. Mill begins his essay by stating the difference between what once was considered Liberty and what Liberty means now.[119] In ancient times freedom meant the limitations that the population put on the government, usually of tyrannical nature, so that it could not harm the citizens. However, with time, society changed as did human affairs, and there emerged the idea that power should be given to an elected government that does not have a lifetime tenure. Such organisation meant that it was the population that governed itself, which raised a new issue, because limiting the power of the government meant limiting the power of the people. Mill warns against this type of reasoning, because in a democratic government, power lies in the majority, which is a sound criterion but does not represent those who are not included in the franchise, those who abstained from voting, and the minority. For this reason, the government of the majority can be just as dangerous and should still be subject to limitations.[120]

The essay proceeds by elaborating on the tyranny of the majority. Such tyranny is not limited to the realm of politics, it extends also to the social realm, when the majority dictates customs and traditions, thoughts, and opinions. The majority succeeds in its dictatorship because individuals prefer to accommodate than stand out, as going again the opinion of the majority requires strength of character and mind. Society thus tends to be tyrannical over the individual, coercing and persuading the individual to acquiesce and uniform to the behaviour and mentality of the majority. Danger lies in the fact that said mentality is not necessarily correct, moreover, those who hold a different and perhaps innovative opinion, that maybe would change society, are marginalized because they do not fit. It is instead important to fight in defence of our own beliefs, and Mill pinpoints Luther and his Reform as the first instance in Western society in which the individual publicly

[119] J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, Ontario: Batoche Books, (1859), 2001, p.6
[120] Ibid., p.8

defended their own opinion and fought the tyranny of the majority.[121]

Mill proceeds by stating that English citizens always feel authority and power as something other, antagonistic, and for this reason people constrain it tightly and look all new legislation with suspicion. The same cannot be said for public opinion, which is as pervasive as power, but whose influence is not as tightly constrained because it is more complicated to pinpoint. The purpose of his essay is to determine when it is legitimate and when it is not legitimate for authority to limit the freedom of the individual. Mill reaches the conclusion that:

> That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection.[122]

and

> The only part of the conduct of anyone, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.[122]

Thus, if the individual wants to damage or harm themselves, it is moral for others to attempt to dissuade them, but the State cannot intervene as they do not cause harm to a third-party. This principle is valid only for mature men and women, capable of understanding and willing, not children nor colonized populations. The essay then defines three liberties that must be safeguarded in a free State, namely the liberty of conscience, meaning the liberty of thought and feeling; the liberty of tastes and pursuits; and the liberty of everyone of gathering in groups, for any purpose not involving harm to others.[123]

Mill fears that society is heading towards an age in which the masses will prevail over the individual. Testimony of this approach is Comtean philosophy,

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[121] Ibid., p.11
[122] Ibid., p.13
[123] Ibid., p.16

where the individual seems to lose all meaning outside of social groups. Mill denounces this attitude. Accordingly, he focuses his essay on freedom of speech and thought. Mill elaborates in his essay that the greatest danger lies not when the Government censors the press, but when the Government and the press unite, generating social pressure that generates conformism in thought, character, and action. Mill came to think that the chief danger of democracy and contemporary society was the suppression of individual differences.[124] It is fundamental to safeguard the opinion of the individual, especially if it differs from that of the masses, for two reasons, namely, the opinion may be true, thus it is in the society's best interest to hear it and defend it; or the opinion may be wrong, and it allows to always put everything in question, never falling prey of the danger of considering something unquestioned absolute truth, by constantly looking for more compelling evidence in defence of what we deem the correct opinion.[125] Error is useful, if not fundamental, as it helps strengthen truth. Only constant debate, exchange of ideas, open mind and plurality of opinion can advance society, as they are means to understand error and correct it.[126]

Scientific development, political innovation and modernity all contribute to a general conformism. For good or ill, in the past, differences between individuals were much starker, for one, class disparity was more definite, and there were many different professions. Mill believes that human progress centres around heterogeneity. Progress sources from original, anarchist and revolutionary ideas, which in turn stem from individuality and free speech. If society is subject to a push towards uniformity, it will ultimately die out.[127] In the third part of the essay Mill elaborates on how individuality and freedom of action is just as fundamental as that of thought. The essay identifies three main sources of uniformity.[128] Firstly

[124] Ibid., p.18
[125] Ibid., p.50
[126] Ibid., p.24
[127] Ibid., p.59
[128] Ibid., p.68

industrialization, which uniformed the means and ways of production, and increasing general wellbeing. As consequence, products are more affordable because they are less expensive and wages are higher, lower classes can now access consumer goods that were once the prerogative of higher classes, thus thinning the disparity between classes. Moreover, the goods are all identical, as a result, people conform by dressing with the same clothes and owning the same items. Secondly, school and education. In the 1800s there was a surge in literacy, more people than ever could access basic education, read, and write. Class disparities based on the level of literacy flattened, lower class could read papers, participate in debates and to political life. However, learning was not entrusted to tutors that educated the single pupil, but rather to state-wide programs, teachers that educated groups of students. Consequently, the educational foundation of people became unified: "general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another".[129] Thirdly, politics. By widening franchise allows more people to participate in political life but also contributes to the spread of a single opinion led by public opinion. It is important to note that Mill does not criticize these three factors but rather warns against their downsides and cautions to take precautions against said shortcomings.[128]

Mill thus encourages and highlights the importance of heterogeneity and freedom of thought and of action. Only those who constantly doubt their choices, their actions and do not conform, can develop, and stimulate not only their own morality and intellect, but also those of others.[130] Mill praises the individual that goes against the current, that chooses to embrace their difference, although he reiterates it must not harm others. For this same reason Mill is a firm defender of women's suffrage, as another source of diverse thought, one that would enrich society as it would offer another point of view. Anti-conformism is fundamental in the contemporary age as Mill argues that the masses that are in a position of power,

[129] Ibid., p.97
[130] Ibid., p.53

and the masses encourage conformity rather than genius. Masses express themselves through public opinion, but if once they were led by qualified, learned men, that is not the case anymore. Contemporary government is mediocre, those who rule are mediocre, the masses govern themselves.[131] Mill thus criticizes democracy as a bearer of general flatness of thought and action, but at the same time he does not offer dictatorship as valid solution, as coercion would impede the constant stream of innovative suggestions that society needs to progress.[132] Still, he believed democracy the best system of government, provided that it encouraged genius, excellence, unique thought and action.

Although Mill warns throughout the essay about the power of the majority and the masses, he considered the enlarging of the franchise as something both inevitable and positive for the development of humanity. He believed that participation in politics had a morally and politically educative effect on individuals. Democracy offered moral training and encouraged people to develop sympathy for others, as exchange of opinions encouraged identification with one another. Although he believed that everyone should have voice in politics, he argued in parliament for a system of weighted voting, where the level of education would determine how many votes one received. He thought that society should he structured in such a way that people that had genuine expertise on the topic had the largest say. This would have prevented a mob rule and that representatives were qualified individuals.

Mill ends his essay by stating:

> The worth of a State, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it; and a State which postpones the interests of their mental expansion and elevation to a little more of administrative skill, or of that semblance of it which practice gives, in the details of business; a State which dwarfs its men, in order that they may be more docile instruments in its hands even for beneficial purposes—will find that with small men no great thing can

[131] Ibid., p.62
[132] Ibid., p.63

> really be accomplished; and that the perfection of machinery to which it has sacrificed everything will in the end avail it nothing, for want of the vital power which, in order that the machine might work more smoothly, it has preferred to banish.[133]

2.4.2 John Stuart Mill and George Eliot

It is undeniable the difference of thought expressed in Mill's *Spirit of the Age* and *On Liberty.* Still, one might argue that Eliot agrees partly with both essays. It is believed that Eliot first encountered Mill's work through Comte's work, as she described Mill as "at present the chief English interpreter of Comte".[134] Mill introduced Eliot to more radical approaches to social, philosophical, and religious issues.[135] For both, the reading of French revolutionary theory generated a disappointment with the intellectual insubstantiality of English political thought.[136]

In *Felix Holt,* Eliot manages to capture the same chaos and lack of leading authority that Mill denounces in *Spirit of the Age*. Each character is led by private judgement, and each is erroneous in their own profoundly human way. Moreover, some similarities in belief can be observed to a degree between Mill and Eliot regarding the importance of the past. They both maintained that it was erroneous to reject the past and its teachings as something that was altogether wrong. On the contrary, the present is deeply intertwined with the past. A dogmatic approach to the past is indeed flawed, rather one should embrace ancient teachings with the aim to learn and adapt them to current conditions. To a certain extent Mill and Eliot also share their judgement of the landed gentry, the Transomes are enervated in their position of authority just like this essay denounced. Mr Transome matches seamlessly to that description of a landlord that has lost all qualities and faculties to hold the role of power that they inherited, he is now merely a puppet, a shadow

[133] Ibid., p.106
[134] Dodd, *op. cit.*, p.113
[135] Ibid., p.114
[136] Ibid., p.119

of his past self. However, Eliot and Mill can instead be found in disagreement in *The Spirit of the Age,* regarding the path that can lead to happiness. Mill in these early years is still profoundly Benthamite, he believes that the authority is the mean to happiness, it is the duty of government to build an environment in which happiness can be achieved. On the contrary, Eliot believes in individual improvement and sympathy as the ultimate and only road to happiness.

It is in *On Liberty* that Mill and Eliot's thought on individual happiness aligns. Mill states that it is through the free expression of individual thought and action that happiness can be achieved, that the government has no qualms in such achievement. Through said liberty mankind can develop sympathy, as they constantly attempt to understand each other through discussion and confrontation of different ideals, and it is in sympathy that Eliot believes that mankind can achieve happiness. Regarding the issue of franchise Mill and Eliot can be found somewhat agreeing. Eliot never took a stand on women's suffrage, although she amply discussed women's issues and the limitations that society imposed on them. Mill on the other hand defended proudly and openly women's rights to vote and assume roles that had been prerogative of males.

If Mill thus championed universal franchise, Eliot was sceptical and conservative. Her concerns over the inclusion of working men in the franchise are made abundantly clear throughout the pages of *Felix Holt.* The two can be found again in agreement regarding the importance of education, although Mill advocated for universal franchise he still believed in the need for qualified men as representatives, and in the importance of education and literacy as mean of personal improvement. Although both Eliot and Mill defended literature as a potential instrument for social reform,[137] Mill opted for a causational framework that was different than Eliot's. Mill believed that reform would kickstart the individual's self-improvement, stating that "To give people an interest in politics

[137] Ibid., p.312

and in the management of their own affairs was the grand cultivator of mankind",[138] while Eliot defended that, for the wider socio-political reform to be successful, personal transformation had to be undertaken first.[139]

[138] J. S. Mill, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, J. M. Robson and B. Kinzer (ed.), vol. 33 Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988, p. 39, as cited in H. Kingstone, *op. cit.*, p.3
[139] Ibid., p.3

3. Felix Holt, the Radical

In the upcoming chapter, this dissertation will attempt to investigate the core themes of *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866). The object is to present the novel not as Eliot's socio-political manifesto, but rather as a representation of the spirit of the Victorian age and the changing flux that had invested both the private and public sphere of Victorian society.

The earliest information about *Felix Holt, the Radical* is found in George Eliot's journal, where on 29th March 1865 she wrote "I have begun a Novel".[140] The seed of *Felix Holt* had not been the political plot but adulterous relationship between Mrs Transome and Mr Jermyn and its bitter consequences. Information gathered from journal entries indicate that it is not until May, when the debate over the Second Reform Bill had become more heated, that Eliot decided to insert the political plot and set the events in the context of the aftermath of the 1832 Great Reform Bill. For this reason, several critics have categorized the novel as political, and for the same reason others resisted this label. Nevertheless, the original idea of the story underwent great transformation, bringing Politics to the forefront in chapters II and III, transforming Felix into one of the main characters, and giving the Transome affair a new shape.[141]

For this novel, Eliot conducted extensive research which allowed her to familiarize with the period and its issues, as well as to draw connections and key points. The meticulousness of her work emerges from her annotations, where she recorded even laconic and trivial information, most of which never reached the novel itself.[142] However, Eliot did not merely take inspiration from books and articles. As for most of her novels, she drew from her Midlands childhood, incorporating both general Midlands imagery and more specific elements. For

[140] MS Journal, 1861-77, Tinker Collection, Yale University Library, as cited in F.C. Thomson, *The Genesis of Felix Holt*, p.576
[141] Ibid., p,584
[142] Ibid., p.578

instance, the description of the mob in chapter XXXIII specifically references the election riot that she witnessed in Nuneaton in 1832 when she had been merely thirteen years old. The use of her personal experience and memories has been her strongest point in all her novels, and in *Felix Holt,* they helped her avoid the encyclopaedic attitude that had been *Romola*'s greatest fault.[143]

Felix Holt, the Radical tries to give voice to the socio-political tumult and confusion of the 1860s through the investigation of the similar socio-political situation of the 1832. The idea of the novel might have come forth in consonance with multiple factors. Namely, Marian's involvement in the progressive *Fortnightly Review*; her interest with the hardships endured by the ribbon weavers in Coventry; her partial interest with the ideas and campaigns of the Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini; and the moderate political stability which had offered fertile ground for questioning and debate among intellectuals about core moral, social and political themes such as universal franchise, women's rights, and the moral duty of the individual. Undoubtedly, at the forefront was the political and social situation of England.

In May 1865, just as Eliot had finished her preparatory reading of *Felix Holt*, Gladstone argued in a public speech for the broadening of the franchise, because the education of the lower classes had significantly improved and had consequently increased their fitness to vote. In the same year the Tory member Lowe stated: "Once you give working men the votes, the machinery is ready to launch these votes in one compact mass upon the institution and property of this country".[144] And in March 3rd, 1866, the first draft for a moderate Reform Bill was introduced.[145] Sensing fertile ground, Blackwood cleverly pushed for the publication of the novel, identifying its timeliness and relevance.[143] England was

[143] A. Kettle, "Felix Holt, the Radical" in B. Hardy (ed)., *Critical Essays on George Eliot,* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970, p.99
[144] Ibid., p.100
[145] D. Paterson, "Radical Politics in the 1860s: The Writing of Felix Holt", *George Eliot Scholars*, vol. 48, 2017, pp.23-32, p.23

about to embrace another great change and the novel could offer an interesting insight with its 1832 setting and parallelisms.

Felix Holt is an amphibious novel of transition, and as such it has its weaknesses. However, it should not be dismissed as it is part of a larger movement of Eliot's interests and focuses.[146] *Felix Holt* marks the passage from Eliot's early works to her more mature ones, together with a movement that brought industrial England from the periphery to the forefront, and a shift of focus from the study of the individual to the investigation of both the individual in the society and their interconnectedness. The characters are engaged in issues that belong to both their private and public lives. Nevertheless, *Felix Holt, the Radical,* is considered by many one of the weakest novels of George Eliot. Leavis criticized the overuse of legal details,[147] Hardy the insufficient character development,[148] Harvey the clumsy sequence of coincidences,[149] Dallas and many others the character of Felix,[150] Bamber the weak dialectic between Felix and Harold,[151] just to cite a few.

While acknowledging the novel's weaknesses, this dissertation will attempt to illustrate the value of *Felix Holt* as a work that managed to successfully represent the great confusion and mutability that permeated the early-Victorian and mid-Victorian period, together with the conundrum that was widespread among Victorian intellectuals about which ideals, principles and customs should be preserved while entering the new stage of human history, and which instead should be abandoned in the past. Eliot captured and brought in conversation three core themes of Victorian debate, namely 19th century politics and their effectiveness, the importance of the past and women's emancipation, representing how such issues managed to influence both society and the individual.

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[146] R. Speaight, *George Eliot,* London: Arthur Barker, 1954, p.84
[147] F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad,* London, Chatto & Windus, 1948
[148] B. Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot,* London: The Athlone Press, (1959), 2001
[149] W.J. Harvey, *The Art of George Eliot,* London: Chatto & Windus, 1969
[150] D. Carroll, *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage,* London: Routledge, 1971
[151] L. Bamber, "Self-Defeating Politics in George Eliot's Felix Holt", in *Victorian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Social, Political and Cultural Studies,* vol. 18, no. 4, 1975, p.419-435

This chapter will attempt to investigate the aforementioned three core themes of the novel and of the Victorian socio-political conundrum, and how they were discussed in *Felix Holt* in three sub-sections.

3.1. Politics and Franchise

The novel begins in the immediate aftermath of the 1832 Reform Bill. It's set in Treby Magna, one of the towns in the British Midlands "on which the Reform Bill had thrust the new honour of being a polling-place".[152] The Great Reform Bill had in fact redistributed the franchise in the boroughs and counties based on their population number, and the fictional Treby is presented as one of the towns affected by such reorganization. Although hinted at in chapter II with Harold Transome's return to Treby, the political aspect of the novel enters the scene only in chapter III, when the narrator offers a brief synopsis of the history of Treby. Akin to the surrounding countryside, Treby had been affected by progress which "gradually [awakened] in it that higher consciousness which is known to bring higher pains",[153] turning the market-town from a typical rural community where once the Debarrys, the local landed gentry, exerted great influence, to a town embedded in the new economic mechanism of the nation, where manufacturing industry and the work on the mines at the nearby Sproxton are the main activities. Treby had been touched by progress also from a religious perspective, as Dissenters gained stronger voice and presence. The final shove that propelled Treby into the new era had been the Reform, which introduced both the town and its citizens to the world of political affiliation and endorsement, suffrage, debate, rallying and voting. The elections narrated in the novel would not have had the same resonance without all these other factors interacting and exacerbating the event, to the extent that an impending sense of an apocalypse incoming becomes increasingly palpable

[152] G. Eliot, *Felix Holt, the Radical*, London: Penguin, (1866), p.45
[153] Ibid., p.46

as the election day approaches. These public changes affect also the single citizens: without all these conditions aligning, Harold Transome would not have come back from abroad to present himself as a candidate and learn his parentage, Felix would not have had a chance to participate in the political debate and put his ideals to test, Esther would not have confronted with Felix and improved herself, and Mrs Transome and Mr Jermyn would not have faced their past. As the narrator states:

> the social changes in Treby parish are comparatively public matters, and this history is chiefly concerned with the private lot of a few men and women; but there is no private life that has not been determined by a wider public life.[154]

From the point of view of an equal representation of political parties, the novel may seem biased. The title itself might give the reader the impression that the socio-political Victorian context will be investigated favouring the Radical party, but this is not the case. The novel contains representation of all political parties and alignments. The Tory candidate for the seat of North Loamshire is Philip Debarry, descendant of a long generation of landowners, nephew of Sir Augustus Debarry – the rector of Treby Magna –, he is conservative and seeks to safeguard the interest of the landed gentry. The Whig candidates are two, the first is Peter Garstin, the manager of the Sproxton mines and the second is Sir James Clement. The former is said to have better chances at winning because he supports the activities of the new industrial class and the latter is defined by Mr Jermyn as "a poor baronet, hoping for an appointment, and can't be expected to be liberal in that wider sense which commands majorities".[155] The Radical candidate is Harold Transome, who belongs to the landed gentry, much like Philp Debarry, but decided to take the label of Radical in the campaign. Although Felix does not run for candidate and his political ideas do not align with those of Harold, he is another representative of the Radical party. Later in the novel Eliot fittingly inserted the last figure necessary to represent the whole of the Victorian political spectrum,

[154] Ibid., p.50
[155] Ibid., p.41

namely, the trade union spokesman that advances Chartist requests the day of the political rally.

Although these figures are given widely different breadth to express their position and ideas – the Whig candidates for example are almost silent, while Felix and Harold extensively express their position – Eliot manages to represent the whole confusing panorama of British politics. For example, the Whig party was originally meant to represent the interests of the British middle-class. However, during the 19th century, with the advent of industrialization, the middle class underwent fragmentation as the industrial bourgeoisie emerged, rapidly accruing wealth and influence. Eliot represents this fragmentation of the middle class with the double Whig candidacy, as well as the new supremacy of the industrial interest with the withdrawal of Sir Clement from the campaign. Eliot's decision to focus on Conservativism and Radicalism, might be ascribed to the fact that the two were the strongest political voices of the 1860s and 1830s. Her choice to feature two Radicals as main characters may be attributed to the need to investigate what it meant to undergo a Reform – which had been loudly championed by Radicals – and as well as the fact that the Radical party had had a pivotal role in shaping the age. Additionally, the general elections of 1865 had increased the number of Radical MPs. This section of the dissertation will attempt to investigate the characters of Harold and Felix as two political figures that in their private and public sphere not only represent two different types of Radicalism but possibly also a wider movement of the Victorian age.

Harold Transome is introduced to the reader in the first chapter. The reader makes an initial assessment of Harold not through an explanation of his political agenda but rather through his interaction with his mother, which may suggest the secondary role of politics to human relationships. Harold is frank, curt, and proud, he arrives as a hurricane to overturn the established order at Transome Court. He speaks brusquely to his mother, and immediately delivers to her the shocking news:

> "But I shall not be a Tory candidate."
> Mrs Transome felt something like an electric shock.
> "What then?" she said, almost sharply. "You will not call yourself a Whig?"
> "God forbid! I'm a Radical."
> Mrs Transome's limbs tottered; she sank into a chair. Here was a distinct confirmation of the vague but strong feeling that her son was a stranger to her.[156]

Mrs Transome's shocked reaction might be ascribed to her notion of Radicalism, which is linked to the bold Radicalism of the Napoleonic Wars. Radicalism at the time had been harshly criticized because deemed unpatriotic, so much so that in that period Tories referred to Radicals as "Jacobins".[157] She also thinks back to the old-fashioned Radical MP Francis Burdett, who championed Chartist ideals and attacked the British aristocracy. She thus sees his son's political alliance as a disrespectful rejection of his origins and station. However, Mrs Transome is not alone in her befuddlement, the Treby newspaper similarly comments "an example of defection in the inheritor of a family name",[158] while the Tory family friend and Reverend of Treby Sir Maximus Debarry simply reacts in "incredulous disgust" to the news.[159] Equally surprised, but more willing to understand, is Harold's uncle Reverend John Lingon, with whom Harold entertains a lengthy conversation on politics in chapter II. It is through such exchange that Harold's political purposes are thoroughly clarified:

> In the course of half an hour he had brought himself to see that anything really worthy to be called British Toryism had been entirely extinct since the Duke of Wellington and Sir Robert Peel had passed the Catholic Emancipation Bill; that Whiggery, with its rights of man stopping short at ten-pound householders, and its policy of pacifying a wild beast with a bite, was a ridiculous monstrosity; that therefore, since an honest man could not call himself a Tory, which it was, in fact, as impossible to be now as to fight for the old Pretender, and could still less become that execrable monstrosity a

[156] Ibid., p.18
[157] D. Paterson, "The Radical Candidature: Harold Transome's Political Motivation in Felix Holt", *George Eliot Scholars*, vol. 47, 2016, pp.28-35, p.31
[158] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.108
[159] Ibid., p.96

> Whig, there remained but one course open to him. "Why, lad, if the world was turned into a swamp, I suppose we should leave off shoes and stockings, and walk about like cranes"—whence it followed plainly enough that, in these hopeless times, nothing was left to men of sense and good family but to retard the national ruin by declaring themselves Radicals, and take the inevitable process of changing everything out of the hands of beggarly demagogues and purse-proud tradesmen. […] "If the mob can't be turned back, a man of family must try and head the mob, and save a few homes and hearths, and keep the country up on its last legs as long as he can. And you're a man of family, my lad—dash it!".[160]

Through the explanation of the narrator and Harold's own words, it becomes clear that Harold has joined the Radical cause for opportunism. The two traditional parties did not seem strong enough to withstand the wave of change that was sweeping England. Harold wants to partake and defend his interest in the new world order and to do so he must take the Radical label. Many Tories shared the same sentiment as Harold: the party had been too weak to impede the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act, and sensing a decline approaching, several members had joined the side of the reformers.[161] The newfound Tory inefficacy and weakness have been ascribed to a more general movement happening in the Victorian age: the aristocratic families of England were losing the ability and power to defend their interests and position, consequently so were their representatives, which in turn could not defend the interests of the class, creating a vicious circle.[162] Harold's candidacy is therefore symptomatic of the aristocratic old England falling apart, "the Tory oaks are rotting".[163]

Historically speaking, Harold's candidature is not an inconceivable event. Dempster Heming, for example, was a landed gentry that had run with the Radical party for the North Warwickshire seat in 1832.[164] Moreover, in his essay, Paterson

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[160] Ibid., p.34
[161] Paterson, "The Radical Candidature: Harold Transome's Political Motivation in *Felix Holt*", p.30
[162] Ibid., p.28
[163] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.22
[164] Paterson, *op. cit.*, p.29

indicated a strong parallelism between Harold and Benjamin Disraeli, the Conservative Prime Minister that passed the Second Reform Bill in 1867. Such analogy would consolidate the bigger picture of similarities between the conditions of the 1830s and 1860s that Eliot is painting.[165] Disraeli had stood for his whole career on the threshold between Radicalism and Conservativism, swaying between either side depending on circumstances. The only constant had been his strong contempt for the Whig party. Disraeli had at first run parliamentary elections as a Radical candidate: as Harold, he had observed that in 1831 the Tories were facing a great downturn, thus he had enthusiastically embraced radical change. When in 1837 England was suffering an economic crisis and the Radicals began to lose momentum to the Tories, Disraeli promptly switched party, vocally embracing his conservative side. In a turn of events, in 1867 Disraeli endorsed the Second Reform Bill, seemingly switching sides again, endorsing an Act that ultimately was far more radical than what the original draft had intended. However, Disraeli had defended the Reform only to safeguard the interest of the Tory party and his own seat, the details behind his reasoning have been elucidated in the historical section of this dissertation. Harold and Disraeli share several similarities, both embraced the Radical label because neither the Whigs nor the Tories offered a valid opportunity to pursue a successful political career, and both wanted to safeguard the interest of the higher class and the landed gentry.[166] What the Radicalism of these three higher class figures – Harold, Heming, and Disraeli – had in common was its opportunistic nature.

> an inevitable comparison which haunted her, showed her the same quality in his political views: the utmost enjoyment of his own advantages was the solvent that blended pride in his family and position, with the adhesion to changes that were to obliterate tradition and melt down enchased gold heirlooms into plating for the egg-spoons of "the people".[167]

[165] Ibid., p.31
[166] Ibid., p.32
[167] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.411

Harold's approach to his political campaign is rather industrious, practical, and carefully planned. He perfectly embodies the 19th century political approach. He asks Jermyn to look for an agent, he speaks in public places, he personally seeks for support in key players such as his uncle Rev. Lingon and Rev. Lyon, the head of the dissenting community in Treby.[168] Harold's political weaving between individual characters creates a deeper sense of how the individual stories within the novel are not secondary to, but determined by, the wider public life.[169] Harold's choice to approach Rev. Lyon is well thought out, as the clerical man shares his distrust towards Whigs, and dissenters are notoriously more aligned with Liberals and Radicals. Although the two men disagree on some political aspects, it is only Rev. Lyon that reacts positively to Harold's candidacy. They share the same views on political compromise, meaning that, although it had been necessary to pass reform and it may be equally necessary in the future, it is highly dangerous and must be avoided at all cost:

> "I say not that compromise is unnecessary, but it is an evil attendant on our imperfection; and I would pray every one to mark that, where compromise broadens, intellect and conscience are thrust into narrower room."[170]

Although they disagree on some instances, such as the secret ballot – defended by Harold and disapproved by Rev. Lyon – Harold believes that Rev. Lyon could be a good ally and explicitly explains how his endorsement could benefit both in a convincing political statement:

> "I feel some confidence in asking you to use your influence in this direction, Mr Lyon. We candidates have to praise ourselves more than is graceful; but you are aware that, while I belong by my birth to the classes that have their roots in tradition and all the old loyalties, my experience has lain chiefly among those who make their own career, and depend on the new rather than the old. I have had the advantage of considering the national welfare under varied lights: I have wider views than those of a mere cotton lord. On questions

[168] Paterson, *op. cit.*, p.33
[169] Kettle, *op. cit.*, p.104
[170] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.177

> connected with religious liberty I would stop short at no measure that was not thorough."[170]

Paterson emphasises how throughout his campaign Harold adopts a tactic in which rather than clearly expressing his political aims, he carters to the needs and requests of the voters he encounters.[171] In this aspect Eliot expertly represents the modern politician and proves again ahead of her time.[172]

As expounded in the historical section of this dissertation, Victorian political campaign also involved agents and dubious acts of persuasion, such as bribery. Harold adopts the same techniques. Mr Johnson, hired by Mr Jermyn under Harold's request for an agent, bribes Sproxton men by offering them beer and food at the local Inn. While Jermyn is perfectly aware of this activity and its illegality, Harold turns a blind eye relying on plausible deniability. He knows what Mr Johnson services include and, although he is not completely comfortable with it, he knows that it is a necessity to secure himself a substantial electorate. Even though Harold seems ruthless in his campaign, and appears crude in his relationship with people, he is not malevolent. A testament to that is his behaviour when Felix confronts him about Mr Johnson's actions: if Mr Jermyn denies the accusation on the grounds of an absence of proof, Harold instead takes responsibility and faces what he pretended not to see, explicitly asking Mr Johnson to put "an end, as well as you can, to this Sproxton affair".[173]

Harold's chances at winning the elections are supported by historical evidence and a strong political campaign. Until the very end it is not disclosed whether he won, and throughout the novel he is presented as one of the strongest candidates on account of both his clear and organized political approach, and the abundant funds he has at disposal to run his campaign. For this reason, Jermyn and his agent Mr Johnson are very optimistic about his chances, the latter

[171] Paterson, *op. cit.*, p.7
[172] Ibid., p.34
[173] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.189

comments: "As a Radical and moneyed radical, you are in a fine position".[174] Ultimately, however, Harold loses. Carroll situates this failure in a bigger picture consisting of a series of negative events that throughout the novel undermine Harold's self-confidence, such as the discovery of his parentage and Esther's rejection, but at the heart of his failure stands the fallacy of his political philosophy.[175]

The Radicalism for which Harold stands is very limited compared to Felix's.[176] Such insight is offered to the reader during his conversation with Rev. Lingon, in which Harold states "I am a Radical only in rooting out abuses".[177] In 1860 the Radicals will support female suffrage, but Harold does not share the same interest for female emancipation. His opinion on women can be weighed by his thoughts and actions such as his treatment of his mother, of his foreign wife and of Esther. Particularly poignant is his description of a perfect spouse:

> Western women were not to his taste; they showed a transition from the feebly animal to the thinking being, which was simply troublesome. Harold preferred a slow-witted large-eyed woman, silent and affectionate, with a load of black hair weighing much more heavily than her brains. He had seen no such woman in England, except one which he had brought with him from the East.[178]

And

> Harold Transome regarded women as slight things, but he was fond of slight things in the intervals of business; and he held it among the chief arts of life to keep these pleasant diversions within such bounds that they should never interfere with the course of his serious ambition.[179]

Harold's regard of women is clear: he has no interest in their emancipation, he is interested only in them as arm candy and not as creatures with will and thoughts.

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[174] Ibid., p.189
[175] D. Carroll, "Felix Holt Commentaries on the Apocalypse", in D. Carroll (ed.), *George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp.201-233
[176] Paterson, *op. cit.*, p.33
[177] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.43
[178] Ibid., p.344
[179] Ibid., p.175

Similarly, he has no interest in the emancipation of the lower classes, as he never discusses such topic. Differently from Felix, Harold aspires to no higher purpose, his political philosophy is very materialistic, mainly characterized by self-interest and necessity.[180]

Such lack of a higher moral purpose is ultimately Harold's political and personal downfall, exacerbated by his belief that society will change for the better merely through the agency of what he calls "active industrious selfishness".[181] Carroll mentions how by embracing this mindset Harold proves to be his father's son: he inherits from Mr Jermyn practicality and empiricism, both sees the world as passive, for them to use.[182] Harold is in every aspect Carlyle's Mechanical man, focused on the practical and external forces, he has lost sight of all that is related to morals, feelings and spirit, he is incapable of understanding his mother's pain as well as Felix and Esther's higher purposes. He is in all respects the practical, opportunistic, self-made mechanical men praised by the industrial Victorian age.

> His very good-nature was unsympathetic; it never came from any thorough understanding or deep respect for what was in the mind of the person he obliged or indulged; it was like his kindness to his mother—an arrangement of his for the happiness of others, which, if they were sensible, ought to succeed.[183]

Eliot explains the dangers of such self-interested approach in the mob scene, the climax of the novel, where the Sproxton men took their agency and followed Harold's same creed of "active industrious selfishness"[181] to take what they deemed rightfully theirs,[184] resulting in:

> the multitudinous small wickednesses of small selfish ends, really undirected toward any larger result, had issued in widely-shared mischief that might yet be hideous.[185]

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[180] Paterson, *op. cit.*, p.33
[181] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.183
[182] Carroll, *op. cit.*, p.209
[183] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.411
[184] L.W. Horowitz, "George Eliot's Vision of Society in Felix Holt the Radical", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1975, pp. 175-191, p.177
[185] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.320

Horowitz, in her essay, identifies at the root of Harold's behaviour an approach inherited from the Darwinist idea of the "survival of the fittest", as well as the seeds of a morality of self-interest which lays at the core of Capitalism, an economic system that is believed to have begun in 1834.[186] Both Darwinism and Capitalism exerted a strong influence on the socio-economic system of the Victorian age. Through Harold, Eliot cautions against the dangerous consequences of a self-interested vision, which may satisfy the individual but ultimately will only damage the group. Events such as the discovery of his parentage and his defeat at the elections will force Harold to step away from this mentality and accept the much-despised compromise.[187]

If Harold represents the ruling class Radical, focused on its self-interest, who at heart wants to defend the interests of the higher class, Felix represents another type of Radical. In the novel Eliot unearths the contradiction at the root of the two kinds of Radicals common in the Victorian age. Felix is a working-class radical, who wants fundamental change in social organizations, but who is lost in abstraction and philosophical thought. If Harold, Disraeli-like, represents the dangerous Radical figures of the 1860s, Felix is the Radical that Mill and Carlyle amply criticize as equally dangerous to social progress in the 1830s.

Felix is the titular hero of the novel, but he is by no means the only protagonist. His character is complementary to that of Harold but the two are not in dialectical opposition.[188] Conversely, together they represent the full spectrum of Victorian politics. Felix makes his first appearance in chapter V, but the reader first learns about him through the words of his mother. The parallelisms with Harold are immediately evident: Felix has also recently come back from abroad, as he had gone studying medicine in Glasgow, but he had decided to abandon his father's profession, and in doing so he has caused great misery to his mother.

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[186] Horowitz, *op. cit.*, p.178
[187] Carroll, *op. cit.*, p.209
[188] Bamber, *op. cit.*, p.422

Eliot herself plainly points out the similarities:

> There could hardly have been a lot less like Harold Transome's than this of the quack doctor's son, except in the superficial facts that he called himself a Radical, that he was the only son of his mother, and that he had lately returned to his home with ideas and resolves not a little disturbing to that mother's mind.[189]

Kingstone notes that it is not clear whether Eliot here means "superficially" ironically or not. It is ambiguous whether Felix and Harold are similar only on the surface or, on the contrary, despite their divergence they are ultimately more alike than what it may seem. Maybe both statements are somewhat true. The novel was often deemed ambiguous because of the ironical statements that Eliot issues, as they render difficult to distinguish where she is serious or where she means the opposite. Sometimes the irony is more evident, such as with Denner's creed,[190] but oftentimes it's more cryptic.[191]

Felix is self-righteous, determined and an idealist. He presents himself as a working man, but upon comparison with the Sproxton men depicted in the novel, it becomes immediately evident that he is different. He is, to a certain degree, Eliot's ideal working man.[192] Felix had the chance to educate himself and climb socially, but he has decided to remain loyal to his class, so much so that even his appearance and manners are humble. He is content to make money with his honest work as a watchmaker although he could aspire to a higher income. Kettle states that Felix embodies his stance on class allegiance: if advancement will come through, it will do so as a class, the single individual will not trample the others.[193] Felix is characterized by an intense social responsibility. He does not accept compromise,

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[189] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.51
[190] Ibid., p.27
[191] H. Kingstone, "The Two Felixes: Narratorial irony and the Question of Radicalism in Felix Holt and "Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt", *The George Eliot Review Online*, 44: 2013., pp.42-49, p.44
[192] Leavis, *op. cit.*, p.50
[193] Kettle, *op. cit.*, p.102

neither in his personal life, nor in his principles, nor in political action. For example, he denounces the Radical agent who was persuading the Sproxton men to vote for Harold. Although Harold's success would have ensured the triumph of a fellow party member, Felix is not willing to accept a victory that had been achieved through dubious means.

Felix's severe uncompromising nature surfaces promptly during his exchange with Rev. Lyon, on his first appearance in the fifth chapter. Felix resolutely explains his stance on his father's medicine, and how in Glasgow he was "converted by six weeks' debauchery".[194] Eliot presents his idealism and social projects as divine in nature, Felix has all the higher nobility of purpose that Harold lacked. His conviction in his ideals and methods is ironclad:

> "I've made up my mind it shan't be the worse for me, if I can help it. They may tell me I can't alter the world—that there must be a certain number of sneaks and robbers in it, and if I don't lie and filch somebody else will. Well then, somebody else shall, for I won't. That's the upshot of my conversion, Mr Lyon, if you want to know it."[195]

Rev. Lyon recognizes in Felix his youthful fervour and tries to show the faults in his dogmatism, guiding him towards Felix's much dreaded compromise. For example, Rev. Lyon questions his choice of staying with the lower classes when self-advancement would hand him better opportunities to enact social change. Similarly, he questions the difficulties that Felix might bring onto his mother by choosing to sustain two people with the small income of a watchmaker. Rev. Lyon gives Felix some invaluable advice when he cautions him against his pride and his "too confident self-reliance".[196]

> "my young friend, I am bound, as I said, to warn you. The temptations that most beset those who have great natural gifts, and are wise after the flesh, are pride and scorn, more particularly toward those weak things of the world

[194] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.62
[195] Ibid., p.62
[196] Ibid., p.350

which have been chosen to confound the things which are mighty."[197]

and

> "You yourself are a lover of freedom, and a bold rebel against usurping authority. But the right to rebellion is the right to seek a higher rule, and not to wander in mere lawlessness. Wherefore, I beseech you, seem not to say that liberty is license."[198]

The preacher believes that such attitude coupled with his strong idealism could generate sudden and dangerous fits of passion.[199] His fears will be proven right when Felix throws himself in the mob in the hope to guide it and accidentally commits manslaughter.

Although the greatest part of Felix's conversion will occur because of Esther, it is this conversation that kickstarts the taming of Felix's harsh and intransigent side. As testament to that, towards the end of their dialogue Felix does admits his faults, which he is conscious of:

> "I'm perhaps a little too fond of banging and smashing," he went on: "a phrenologist at Glasgow told me I had large veneration; another man there, who knew me, laughed out and said I was the most blasphemous iconoclast living. 'That,' says my phrenologist, 'is because of his large ideality, which prevents him from finding anything perfect enough to be venerated.' Of course I put my ears down and wagged my tail at that stroking.[200]

Felix's uncompromising nature generates a harshness of judgement that is directed not only towards himself and society in general, but also towards people close to him: his mother and Esther are constantly chastised as they do not live up to Felix's moral ideals. Esther will prove fundamental in rounding Felix's caustic nature, and in helping Felix realize that self-reliance is not the only alternative: ultimately, we are individuals weaved into a society. A testament to that, is the fact that Esther's

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[197] Ibid., p.66
[198] Ibid., p.150
[199] D. Carroll, "Felix Holt: Society as Protagonist", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1962, pp. 237-252, p.239
[200] Ibid., p.67

help, and the help of other members of the community of Treby, will prove pivotal in getting Felix pardoned.[201] Despite the warnings, Felix will learn about the faults of his "too confident self-reliance"[202] when in chapter XXXIII he will over confidently attempt to control his private life by rejecting Esther, and his public life by leading the mob. Carroll praises the parallelism between the events in his private and public sphere as a stroke of genius: both plans disintegrate, causing a double failure. Moreover, while overwhelmed by the mob Felix falls into the same fit of passion against which Rev. Lyon had cautioned him and mistakenly kills a man.

As referenced in preceding sections, Felix differs from Harold not only in his passion but also in his higher moral aims. The radicalism for which he stands is much different than that of the Transome candidate. Emblematic is Felix's statement "A Radical – yes; but I want to go to some roots a good deal lower down than the franchise".[203] The contrast with Harold's parallel statement of Radicalism is jarring. While Harold shapes his political philosophy to carter to the needs of his voters, Felix's is both in line with that of some political parties and in opposition to those same political parties. He has no intention to candidate, rather:

> here Felix changed his voice a little—"I should like well enough to be another sort of demagogue, if I could."
> "Then you have a strong interest in the great political movements of these times?" said Mr Lyon, with a perceptible flashing of the eyes.
> "I should think so. I despise every man who has not—or, having it, doesn't try to rouse it in other men." [204]

He is plagued by the notion that the masses have been so deeply corrupted that any change that is less than substantial would merely perpetuate established corruptions. His fear is that the uneducated and drunken majority of the newly franchised population will be able to perpetually outvote the considerate and

[201] Carroll, *op. cit.*, p.240
[202] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.350
[203] Carroll, *op. cit.*, p.264
[204] Ibid., p.64

attentive minority. The substantial change for which Felix advocates is not legislative nor political change, but rather a moral change, which will stem from education. The clearest statement of his political philosophy is declared in chapter XXX, the nomination day.

> "Ignorant power comes in the end to the same thing as wicked power; it makes misery. It's another sort of power that I want us workingmen to have, and I can see plainly enough that our all having votes will do little toward it at present. I hope we, or the children that come after us, will get plenty of political power some time. I tell everybody plainly, I hope there will be great changes, and that some time, whether we live to see it or not, men will have come to be ashamed of things they're proud of now. But I should like to convince you that votes would never give you political power worth having while things are as they are now, and that if you go the right way to work you may get power sooner without votes."[205]

And

> "Now, all the schemes about voting, and districts, and annual Parliaments, and the rest, are engines, and the water or steam—the force that is to work them—must come out of human nature—out of men's passions, feelings, desires. Whether the engines will do good work or bad depends on these feelings; and if we have false expectations about men's characters, we are very much like the idiot who thinks he'll carry milk in a can without a bottom. In my opinion, the notions about what mere voting will do are very much of that sort."[206]

Felix advocates for change, but he cautions against a change that is merely legislative and political, as that does not mean to wield real power. The first change must stem in human nature and human feeling, Felix advocates for the importance of public opinion and in the education of the masses. He champions a reform of the mind and heart, a renewal of the inner life, of feeling, intellect, and imagination.

As for Harold, Felix's political philosophy does stem from several real-life Victorian counterparts. Generally speaking, a number Victorian intellectuals

[205] Ibid., p.292
[206] Ibid., p.293

shared Felix and Eliot's reservations about the widening of the franchise to include the lower classes, they similarly endorsed the proposal to educate the individuals with the aim of preparing them for a more conscious approach to the elections. Felix's thought bears undeniable similarities with Carlyle's: they both defended the need for a reform that was not merely of the franchise, but rather one that delved deeper. Carlyle asked for a balance between the Dynamic and the Mechanic, denouncing that Victorian men had all but forgotten about spirituality, beauty and feeling. Mill equally calls for the regeneration of the masses through personal improvement, although contrary to Felix, he believed that progress should source from a reform of the institutions.

Many critics point out that the core aspect of Felix's political philosophy is more Conservative than Radical.[207] Indeed, the core statement of Conservative opposition to both Reform Bills had been the fear that the uneducated working classes might lead the country to anarchy and social disorder, but Felix distances himself from the Conservatives as he defends the need for reform, which instead the vast majority of Tories deemed unnecessary. Moreover, he advocates for a major educational reform that would resolve the serious inequalities that would instead remain untouched and unaddressed if the lower classes were to simply join the ruling classes.[208] Hollis believes that through the portrayal of two Radicals that share important traits with Conservatives, namely Harold their interests and Felix their fears, Eliot invites the reader to not fall into a simplistic reading of Radicalism.[209] Moreover, the structure of the novel is built so that Eliot can challenge both Harold and Felix's positions, which further discourages the thought that either of them is expressing absolute truths. Eliot willingly inserts criticism of those Radicals that intend to use the reform simply to secure more power and

[207] H. Hollis, "Felix Holt: Independent Spokesman or Eliot's Mouthpiece?", *ELH*, vol. 68, no. 1, 2001, pp. 155-177, p.159
[208] K.M. Newton, *George Eliot for the Twenty-First Century*, Dundee: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018, p.28
[209] Hollis, *op. cit.*, p.164

wealth, such as Disraeli, but Felix's Radicalism is equally challenged when, during his speech, he is applauded by some passerby Tories. Hollis suggests that such event could indicate that Felix's Radicalism may not be in the best interest of the poor and might be exploited to support someone else's interest.[209] Ultimately, neither of them embodies a perfect political or moral approach.

Harold and Felix allow Eliot to investigate which moral attitude should be safeguarded and passed on in this new age. Dramin draws attention to the Romantic aspect of such ideals and morals.[210] Felix's political philosophy, for example, does appear Romantic coded: Romantics believed that transformation began in man's inner being, through a renovation of mind and heart, that in turn would bring practical and material renovation. Eliot had been greatly influenced by Romantics, in particular by Wordsworth, and Felix does appear to embody Wordsworthian Romanticism. Dramin states that one can see the doctrine of the Preface of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) implemented in Felix's speech: he expresses himself with simple language and praises humble, rustic, humanity as well as human sympathy.[211] Felix follows Wordsworth's program for a reform of the mind and the heart: through him Eliot defends Romantic principles as means to assuage "the determinism and materialism of Darwinian evolutionary theory, the rationalism and the mystification of Biblical New Criticism, the astringency and coldness of the Industrial Revolution".[212] Eliot admires the Romantics and values their defence of humanity's capacity for altruism, as well as their faith in human inner improvement. Still, like Carlyle, Eliot cautions against excesses and praises balance. Despite her endorsement of feeling and inner amelioration, one must not fall prey to pure passion. Eliot employs the dramatized episode of the mob as a cautionary tale against powerful emotions and instinct. Felix's behaviour described as governed by "rapid senses and quick thoughts"[74] ultimately causes him to be

[210] E. Dramin, "'A New Unfolding of Life' Romanticism in the Late Novels of George Eliot", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1998, pp. 273-302, p.274
[211] Ibid., p.277
[212] Ibid., p.293

imprisoned for heading the riot and committing manslaughter. Eliot illustrates how the transformation of society's mind and spirit must include the regulation of such enthusiasm, as intense emotions have the potential to destroy social order and incite working class rebellion, a "mass of wild chaotic desires and impulses".[213]

If Felix is Wordsworthian, Harold might represent the other side of Romanticism, namely that of Byronic nature.

> If Harold Transome had been among your acquaintances, and you had observed his qualities through the medium of his agreeable person, bright smile, and a certain easy charm which accompanies sensuousness when unsullied by coarseness—through the medium also of the many opportunities in which he would have made himself useful or pleasant to you—you would have thought him a good fellow, highly acceptable as a guest, a colleague, or a brother-in-law.[214]

Harold is charming, opportunistic, arrogant, and intelligent. In support of such interpretation, Esther in chapter XLIII, sees in Harold as the Byronic hero against which she had been cautioned:

> She was remembering the schooling Felix had given her about her Byronic heroes [...] his face did look very pleasant, she could not help linking him, although he was certainly too particular about sauces, gravies, and wines, and had a way of virtually measuring the value of everything by the contribution it made to his own pleasure. His very good-nature was unsympathetic.[215]

Dramin furthers the parallelism by highlighting Harold's contempt for Felix which mirrors Byron's contempt for Wordsworth.[216] Eliot criticizes the Byronic approach both indirectly through the display of Harold's personal and public failures, and directly through Felix's words, as he repeatedly chastises Esther for reading Byronic poems stating:

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[213] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.316
[214] Ibid., p.110
[215] Ibid., pp.410-411
[216] Dramin, *op. cit.*, p.290

> "A misanthropic debauchee," said Felix, lifting a chair with one hand, and holding the book open in the other, "whose notion of a hero was that he should disorder his stomach and despise mankind. His corsairs and renegades, his Alps and Manfreds, are the most paltry puppets that were ever pulled by the strings of lust and pride."[217]

Through the figure of Harold, Eliot admits to the appeal of the Byronic ethos and through that of Felix she admits to the allure of the Romantic genius, however the purpose of these characters is to investigate the transformation of consciousness and how it is expanded to those around them.

The political ideologies and behaviours of Felix and Harold might thus be ascribed to a bigger picture of Victorian society and politics. The two men are indeed Radical representatives, but it may be simplistic to merely see them as such. Felix and Harold in their behaviour and political philosophy transcend labels and categorization and represent broader socio-political issues of the Victorian age.[218] Harold represents the rise of the practical, self-made, mechanical man, who is only interested in his own gains and profit and charms others to attain his objectives. His spiritual side has become so sterile that, although he may have no malicious intent, he tramples and misreads others because he cannot understand emotional malaise – such as his mother's misery – or other general emotional movements – until the very end he does not notice Esther falling in love with Felix. Harold appears charming and "a good fellow" but ultimately lacks the core capacity of humanity namely, sympathy. It is worth mentioning that Harold's political behaviour is one that many politicians adopted, not only Radicals, therefore it could be argued that he embodies the modern politician. Through Harold, Eliot is possibly not merely criticizing the behaviour of a specific group of people, but rather a general political attitude that was becoming commonplace in 1865, with Disraeli as representative.

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[217] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.69

[218] N.L. Paxton, "Women's Suffrage and Women's Suffering: 'Felix Holt' and 'The Principles of Biology II'" in *George Eliot and Hebert Spencer: Feminism, Evolutionism and Reconstruction of Gender*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, pp.141-170, p.156

In a similar manner might be understood the figure of Felix: if Harold is the excess of practicality, Felix is the excess of idealism. He embodies the uncompromising idealistic political figures that aspires to grandiose revolutions without fully understanding the ramifications of such radical changes for the nation and for the individual. So focused on improving society Felix loses sight of the consequences of his own actions, how the harshness of his tone hurts Esther and his mother, how his preaching is much more effective on those closer to him, like Esther, rather than the Sproxton men. Through Felix, Eliot may be trying to illustrate how great revolutionary goals might be counterproductive and damaging, as Felix's attempt to guide the mob ultimately resulted in accidental manslaughter and a sentence to imprisonment. Eliot once stated in one of her letters:

> there is nothing in our constitution to obstruct the slow progress of political reform. This is all we are fit for at present. The social reform which may prepare us for great changes is more and more the object of effort both in Parliament and out of it. But we English are slow crawlers.[219]

In *Felix Holt* she might be elaborating on that idea, preaching for evolution rather than revolution. Felix's story represents dangers of a revolutionary approach. Eliot also questions the efficacy of political labels like Radical and Liberal to define adequately a political position, illustrating how those same labels are unreliable index of morality and political philosophy.[220]

Newton and Hollis similarly advocate for a wider interpretation of the characters and of the novel. In their essays both question the established notion defended by many critics that Felix is Eliot's mouthpiece. Just to cite two, Pinney asserts that "as a political thinker Felix is only a mouthpiece for his creator"[221] and Kathleen Blake comments that since Eliot will in 1868 write a non-fictional political essay for Blackwood in which she uses Felix Holt as spokesmen for political views,

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[219] GEL, I, 254
[220] Paxton, *op. cit.*, p.156
[221] Pinney, "Introduction to the 'Address'", p.415 as cited in Hollis, *op. cit.*, p.156

it can be argued that the same is worth in her novel. [222] Newton and Hollis instead encourage the reader to a more a kaleidoscopic interpretation of *Felix Holt*. While not denying the conservativism of Felix's position, Hollis argues that the structure of the novel is built so that Eliot can challenge Felix's position, defending that the critics who noticed issues with Felix's ideals simply noticed something that Eliot willingly inserted.[223] Moreover, many critics seem to gloss over the fact that Harold is equally Conservative, maybe even more Tory, and he equally claims the Radical title. The novel's ability to transcend categorizations and discuss general truths and issues is demonstrated by the remarks made by some of Eliot's contemporaries, such as Blackwood and Harrison. Blackwood had commented that "The book is a perfect marvel [...] Her politics are excellent and will attract all parties. Her sayings would be invaluable in the present debate",[224] while Harrison had written Eliot a lengthy letter stating:

> each party and school are determined to see their own side in it [*Felix Holt,* the novel] -the religious people, the non-religious people, the various sections of religious people, the educated, the simple, the radicals, the Tories, the socialists, the intellectual reformers, the domestic circle, the critics, the metaphysicians, the artists, the Positivists, the squires, are all quite convinced that it has been conceived from their own point of view.[225]

Still, many critics defended the idea of Felix being a representation Eliot's conservative ideals, although it could be debated that even the label of Eliot as a conservative might not be entirely correct. The perception of Eliot as a conservative arises from a sequence of considerations.[226] For example, there was little "Radical" about her as either writer, philosopher and political thinker. As novelist she did not

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[222] K. Blake, *Love and the Woman Question in Victorian Literature: The Art of Self-Postponement,* Sussex: Harvester Press, p. 48 as cited in Hollis, *op. cit.,* p.156
[223] Hollis, *op. cit.,* p.159
[224] John Blackwood to Langford Blackwood [IV, 24 7-48], as cited in *Selections from George Eliot Letters,* G. Heaight (ed.), New Haven, Yale University Press, (1987), p.310
[225] Harrison to Eliot, 19 July 1866, in *George Eliot Letters*, 4:285, as cited in B. Semmel, *George Eliot and the Politics of National Inheritance,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, p.59
[226] Newton, *op. cit.,* p.18

experiment much, nor the content of her fiction was particularly innovative. As an intellectual she was not considered an original thinker but rather influenced by a great deal of intellectuals. Politically she was regarded as a conservative although she did undergo a liberal phase when she was younger. In her later years many denounced her lack of support for many major causes, such as women's suffrage or working-class franchise. Another proof that critics held to defend Eliot's conservativism was that, both in *Felix Holt* and in her other works, she did not express a political alternative to the existing socio-economic system, which is seen as tantamount to accept the status quo.[227] Newton denounces the fallacy of such reasoning, by stating that while it is true that Eliot did not believe that any of the socio-political alternatives proposed by her contemporaries had much credibility, such shortcoming does not indicate that she agreed with the Victorian political and economic status quo, but rather that she could not see any other valid option.[227]

Although Eliot did share some Conservative political stances, it would be erroneous to categorize her only as such, as it would mean erasing a whole another side of her. Most of Eliot's life was characterized by the unconventional and unorthodox: she chose to live her whole life with a married man, she then married another twenty years younger, she defied her father to defend her religious beliefs, she was part of liberal and radical social circles, she was friend of many feminists and much more. K.M. Newton defends the perspective that Eliot subverted the standard assumptions of what is radical and what is conservative: she managed to pour this characteristic in her whole work, as *Felix Holt* itself transcends labels.[226] Another significant reason as for why *Felix Holt* was misread as being supportive of a conservative agenda was that critics largely assumed that Eliot's radicalism ended with the 1848 political revolutions. Newton argues that although later Eliot certainly disapproved retrospectively of her 1848 revolutionary mood, one should not conclude that she abandoned philosophically political radicalism. After 1848

[227] Ibid., p.29

her attitude did change, it became laced with pessimism and scepticism rather than imbued with hope for social change. Still, there were significant continuities, such as her disappointment towards the English working class, which she deemed inferior to the French, as the latter was full of innovative ideas and deeply desired social reform. She believed the British working class selfish and unsatisfied, for this reason, she thought that a revolutionary movement in Britain would be destructive rather than constructive.[228] Newton defends that even within Radical-adjacent views Eliot escapes the binary of either/or, as radicalism cannot traditionally be reconciled with pessimism. Eliot rather uses the narrative of both/and.[229] Though in 1848 Eliot was a hopeful and enthusiastic advocate of revolution, between 1860 and 1870 she was more cautious, aware of the risks and disillusioned about grand political gestures. By setting an aristocratic radical against a working-class conservative Eliot undermines political labels and forces the reader to focus on the real problem, meaning how political decisions influence the personal sphere.[230] If the public and private sphere are connected, what society needs is a change from within, not from without.

Through the character of Felix and the titular novel, Eliot investigates the Reform. Eliot believes that a mere legislative reform would leave major inequalities unsolved, ultimately further endangering the precarious balance of society. In the novel is made clear that the extension of the franchise without social reform would just create a democracy that Eliot could not respect, the reformed electorate would create a government that would not have the necessary skills to bring the socio-economic changes that the Victorian age was in dire need of. Eliot, as Felix, advocates not for franchise, but rather for education. Her support of the education of the working classes is not merely to serve utilitarian ends of a better electorate, instead she believed that the working class should have access to:

[228] Ibid., p.33
[229] Ibid., p.34
[230] Carroll, "Felix Holt: Commentaries on the Apocalypse", p.217

> the treasure of knowledge, science, poetry, refinement of thought, feeling and manners, great memories of the interpretation of great records, which is carried on from the minds of one generation to the minds of another, from which they have for the most part been shut out from sharing.[231]

Differently from Tory Conservatives, she did not believe that working class education could undermine the existing social structure, instead it had the potential to change a society that was rotten to the core. The belief that internal personal reform must anticipate political reform was a commonplace of Victorian intellectual culture. In his book, Spittles argues that Eliot inherited such belief from Wordsworth, as he postulated that, to a certain extent, education was the mean to maintain social order. Spittles then proceeds to expound that Eliot believed didactic education to be the first step of a long process that involved a development of personal potential which had at its core a moral sense, and also involved intellectual maturity as well as an aesthetic sense.[232] Mill similarly defended didactic and moral education in *On Liberty* (1859) as fundamental mean for the progress of society. Carlyle and the Romantics too. Many critics pointed out the great similarities between Matthew Arnold's ideals and Eliot's.[233] Kingstone cites in her essay an article published on July 1862 on the *Scottish Review* by the radical preacher Edward Irving, which stated "while in 1820, men were beginning to tire of the evils of society and of the Church, and to seek for remedies; now, in 1862, they are beginning to tire of the proposed remedies too".[233] Irving denounces a society that has become disillusioned with traditional remedies and wants to find new paths and solutions. Therefore, it could be argued that *Felix Holt* is offering another glimpse into Victorian intellectual thought, not only that of Eliot. Moreover, once again the novel cleverly weaves together issues of the 1830s and of the 1860s, suggesting, as Rev. Irving, that perhaps the approach adopted in 1832 had not been as successful as expected and hoped, and some issues, such as the franchise, had come back with vengeance.

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[231] Eliot, *Essays*, 425 as cited in Newton, *op. cit.*, p.28
[232] B. Spittles, *George Eliot: Godless Woman*, New York: MacMillan Education, 1993, p.96
[233] Kingstone, *op. cit.*, p.2

Although many critics defended *Felix Holt* as proof of Eliot's Toryism it may be therefore simplistic to regard Felix as Eliot's mouthpiece. Kingstone adds that the issue lies also in the necessity to take into consideration George Eliot ironic narratorial style, which renders very complicated to have a clear view about her attitudes and ideals. Everything is purposefully ambiguous. Many statements written in the third person bring forward peculiar and personal viewpoints that have no ties to Eliot's own, such as Denner's Creed.[234] The novel is amphibious in the sense that it can be interpreted in two directions, Radical and Conservative.

Part of what makes *Felix Holt* peculiar is that it defies the expectations of the reform. The shine to which the reform was seen had been long gone, and it had lost its omnipotent aura. The novel was written in a year in which the debate over a new reform was heated, its dangers too real. Eliot embodies perfectly the Victorian "dialectical desire to at once rebel and to belong, to reform and to retain".[235] Both Hollis and Kingstone draw a parallel between the pills sold by Felix's father and the cure-all "Morrison's pill" cited by Carlyle in *Past and Present* (1843). They state that Felix's rejection of the pill is a symbolical parallelism to his rejection of the Reform as some sort of cure-all to all the "ills" of society. Both suggest that reform, like the quack pills, may give the illusion of a some kind of transformative change, but those who believe in it are fools:[236]

> "A fool or idiot is one who expects things to happen that never can happen; he pours milk into a can without a bottom, and expects the milk to stay there. The more of such vain expectations a man has, the more he is a fool or idiot. And if any working man expects a vote to do for him what it never can do, he's foolish to that amount, if no more. I think that's clear enough, eh?".[237]

It could be thus argued that the purpose of the novel is not to show which political party is correct and which one has faults, nor to display bad and good

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[234] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.27
[235] Kingstone, *op. cit.*, p.6
[236] Ibid., p.5 and Hollis, *op. cit.*, p.165
[237] Eliot, *op. cit*, p.292

radicalism. Instead, Eliot might have aimed to display how, because of the transitional character of the Victorian age, no political label is clear cut anymore. All political parties have their faults and their values, but ultimately, the social problems that permeated the age cannot be fixed politically nor mechanically. The need for a second reform in 1860 attests to that. People had believed that the 1832 reform would have been a cure all, but it just postponed a series of issues. First and foremost, Victorian society needs inner change. Eliot does not offer a solution; Hollis and Newton defend that she merely puts in dialogue all key factors and players of 1832 in an attempt to understand contemporary England retrospectively.

If in *Felix Holt* any attempt at successful major social change fails, it is because a feasible solution seems yet too nebulous to grasp. Eliot instead manages to convey successfully how the public and private sphere are interconnected. Felix fails to convert the Sproxton men, as he has no practical political approach and aims for a change that is too drastic. However, he does succeed to convert Esther. Felix had initially rejected personal commitment on the assumption that it would have clashed with his public task. Similarly, politicians make legislations without fully understanding how it will affect the personal sphere of the individual, believing it separate from the wider public sphere. Felix's imprisonment demonstrates that any attempt to reform that tries to modify the social organism without regarding the individual is bound to fail, just like an egoistic claim of the individual that does not consider the community is bound to fail because of its exclusiveness. Eliot grapples with the complications of a social ethic, connected with the idea of a social organism.[238] Ultimately it is the evolution and not the revolution that Felix cultivated in Esther that resulted in real change. Esther defends Felix in court by enacting her newfound sympathy, advocating for Felix's personal nobility, not his principles. She redeems Felix's public persona by offering to the public a picture of Felix's personal characteristics. Her defence and actions

[238] Carroll, "Felix Holt: Society as Protagonist", p.251

illuminate Felix on the possibility of a union of the personal sphere and the public sphere, demonstrating how such union is constructive and fruitful. Through such union, Esther and Felix will become the best version of themselves and create a new society of their own. Still, regardless of what insight the novel might have offered on the pressing political matters of the 1860s, critics tend to agree that the political plot is less captivating and convincing than the Transome plot.

3.2. The importance of the past

Felix Holt, the Radical (1866), like the vast majority of George Eliot's novels, features a reflection upon the differences between the old rural England and the new industrial England. Such reflections undertake comparisons with the landscape, the daily life of British citizens, and their moral values. However, for the first time Eliot does not find the resolution in a refuge in the past. Although she still believes in the importance of tradition, she looks to the future, suggesting a selective incorporation of the past into the new reality of England. Therefore, *Felix Holt* can be considered a novel of transition which maps Eliot's movement towards the acceptance of the new social order. Semmel in his book ascribes Eliot's reflection on the past and on inheritance, not only to her nostalgia of her childhood Midlands, nor merely to her politically Conservative side, but also to Scott's influence.[239] Both authors, and a number of social theorists such as Comte, had been acutely aware of the great changes that were sweeping society in the 19th century, with the preindustrial era yielding to the modern era. While machinery was redefining daily life, the scientific approach had taken the intellectual Victorian panorama by storm, replacing the theological and metaphysical interest and attitude. A nostalgic feeling of lost heritage pervaded the views of many who, like Eliot, welcomed the modern world but mourned the fact that what had been

[239] B. Semmel, *George Eliot and the Politics of National Inheritance*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp.4-5

familiar had been completely swept away and rejected. Semmel reflects that it may be such ubiquitous sentiment in Eliot's novels that contributed to their popularity.[239]

The Victorian era is the age of ideologies, Mill in both his essays *Spirit of the Age* (1831) and *On Liberty* (1859) discusses such theme. In the former he warns against the dangers of personal opinion, which according to him had become the new intellectual authority of the 19th century, and in the latter, he discusses the importance of never embracing ideologies as absolute truths. Young intellectuals are the main bearers of the Victorian's attitude of revolt against established order, championing a new established system that would cleanse centuries of corruption and mishandling of the nation.[240] They wanted to dismiss the past and saw the future as outmost progress. Eliot, in *Felix Holt,* inserts and investigates this aspect of the Victorian intellectual debate.

Eliot, as many 19th century authors, discussed the importance of the past through the theme of inheritance. This theme often recurred in Victorian fiction in different forms, as it did in Eliot's novels. Semmel states that:

> Her novels discussed inheritance in two principal forms. The first addressed the common meaning of the term, the passing on of goods and property to heirs, which she saw as emblematic of family affections and obligations, a tie binding parents and children. Especially in her later writings she stressed the second, more metaphoric form, namely, the inheritance of the nation's culture and historical traditions.[241]

Eliot believed that industrial England was eliminating the traditional society that she had known as a child in the Midlands: its commercial and financial power was giving rise to a national identity that Eliot deemed mere "bloodless cosmopolitanism".[242] She was experiencing disinheritance from England as a nation, the same disinheritance that she had already experienced from her family

[240] Ibid., p.16
[241] Ibid., p.6
[242] Ibid., p.12

namely, when her father had forbidden her from living with him at Griff House, and when her brother had rejected her and forbidden all her siblings to contact her after the news of her relationship with Lewes. Marian knew very well the consequences of disinheritance and understood the difference between rejecting one's inheritance and observing a duty to the past while shedding its ignoble prejudices.[243] *Silas Marner* (1861) and *Felix Holt* (1866) investigate the circumstances in which an heir would be permitted if not morally compelled to reject their legacy. However, *Felix Holt* takes it a step further, as it connects such reflection to the wider public sphere.

The theme of the conflict between rural and industrial England is immediately presented in the introduction of the novel. Treby Magna and its surrounding area is presented as a town that used to be like Raveloe and Hayslope: tranquil, quaint, and unspoiled. Modernity had entered the community bringing manufacturing work and the roar of reform. To exacerbate the situation, it has also become a polling town, and with it, elections have brought social unrest.

> Thus Treby Magna, which had lived quietly through the great earthquakes of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, which had remained unmoved by the "Rights of Man," and saw little in Mr Cobbett's "Weekly Register" except that he held eccentric views about potatoes, began at last to know the higher pains of a dim political consciousness; and the development had been greatly helped by the recent agitation about the Reform Bill.[244]

The tone of the introductory chapter is quite apocalyptic, many Victorians had regarded 1832 as the turning point after which things had never been the same. By writing of such phenomenon in 1865 Eliot warns against the repetition of a similar crisis and suggests a different approach. Her typical catastrophism is however ironically merged with her desire to investigate the condition of England.

Eliot chooses the device of the coach ride to unearth the implications of the modernization of rural England. The coach accompanies the reader through a

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[243] Ibid., p.23
[244] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.49

journey in the Midlands of 1831, which displays nostalgically what the Victorians had lost to the industrial revolution, or what the higher classes named "destructively new".[245] The coach ride opens an iconic perspective describing the English country. Each of the sketches offered by the narrator and the insights given by the coachmen represent a separate worldview and everyday life, which is invaded by the passage of the stagecoach.

> In these midland districts the traveller passed rapidly from one phase of English life to another: after looking down on a village dingy with coal-dust, noisy with the shaking of looms, he might skirt a parish all of fields, high hedges, and deep rutted lanes; after the coach had rattled over the pavement of a manufacturing town, the scenes of riots and trades-union meetings, it would take him in another ten minutes into a rural region, where the neighborhood of the town was only felt in the advantages of a near market for corn, cheese, and hay, and where men with a considerable banking account were accustomed to say that "they never meddled with politics themselves." The busy scenes of the shuttle and the wheel, of the roaring furnace, of the shaft and the pulley, seemed to make but crowded nests in the midst of the large-spaced, slow-moving life of homesteads and far-away cottages and oak-sheltered parks.[246]

The reaction to the passage is reciprocal, the natives of the area respond to the passage and the passengers react to what they are witnessing. The scene becomes gradually more heterogeneous and with starker contrasts, until it seems impossible to fit them back into a coherent unit: "In these midland districts the traveller passed rapidly from one phase of English life to another".[246] Is not merely a journey through space but also through time. As the reader approaches 1832 and the beginning of the novel, the forces that shaped the beginning of the century become more defined: Catholic emancipation, trade unions, riots.

The coachman is a key figure in understanding the landscape, adding information for the interpretation of the scenery and condition of England.

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[245] Carroll, "Felix Holt: Commentaries on the Apocalypse", p.202
[246] G. Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.7

> The coachman was an excellent travelling companion and commentator on the landscape: he could tell the names of sites and persons, and explain the meaning of groups, as well as the shade of Virgil in a more memorable journey; he had as many stories.[247]

He knows many stories about the people of the area. As he speaks, the reader perceives his confusion and how out of place he feels by the arrival of the railway. His bitterness transpires from his comments. A journey that had begun pastoral ends with a sense of doom "one who had driven his coach to the outermost edge of the universe, and saw his leaders plunging into the abyss".[247] The stories he tells become more worrying as the old certainties are eroded, he acknowledges the introduction of new divisions, criticizing the paradox of some landowners voting in favour of the bill. He denounces a landscape and people that he once was able to read and interpret, and that he cannot anymore. The commentary then shifts from the universal to the particular when Transome Court enters the view. The coachman tells the story of Transome Court and its law-case, but at a certain point his commentary tapers off, and the journey ends in uncertainty. The tragedy that he depicted is "noiseless" and "unknown to the world" and "a mere whisper in the roar of hurrying existence" and the only way to survive it is to live it through, much like Dante could do nothing else but traverse the underworld with Virgil as his coachman.[248] The introduction is a complex inquiry of the Midlands, it is deeply symbolical that the journey ends in uncertainty, moving from unity to fragmentation. Social order and old categories have been overturn and the search for certainties has never been more difficult.

Carroll in his book states that the success of the introduction of the novel is threefold: it masterfully evocates the panorama of the post-Reformed Britain; it represents vividly and finely personal relations and tensions; and most importantly, it links the two, by unveiling patterns that are common to both.

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[247] Ibid., p.8
[248] Ibid., p.10

Eliot was conscious of what she was doing and explicitly invites the reader to see such connections, with her renown statement:

> These social changes in Treby Parish are comparatively public matters and this history is chiefly concerned with the private lot of a few men and women; but there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life, from the time when the primeval milkmaid had to wander with the wanderings of her clan, because the cow she milked was one of a herd which had made the pastures bare.[249]

Reform had gotten rid of many rotten aspects of Victorian society, but at the same time, according to Eliot, it had done so at expense of beauty. The introduction embodies Eliot's mixed attitude, which she will elucidate and develop throughout the novel through the characters of Harold, Felix and Esther, and their respective inheritances.

Harold is presented in the novel as the prototype of the self-made practical man. Horowitz in her essay argues that part of Harold's political and personal failures can be ascribed to his attitude towards what lies in the past.[250] Harold seeks to banish the outdated and corrupted modes of the past, but his political attitude is dangerous as it eradicates the whole lot of traditions and customs without a sufficient understanding of its content and of the consequences of such action. He embodies the attitude of many politicians and intellectuals of the Victorian age, the same that Mill addressed in his *Spirit of the Age* (1830) and falls victim of the same logical fallacy. Harold holds great prejudice towards the past and seeks to innovate because he deems the old ways obsolete and wrong. Harold believes in the superiority of the modern man, but it is this attitude of complete rejection of the past that does not allow him to truly understand his present as well as the grasp and connection that the past holds on the present. Ultimately, he cannot fully be a "new man" until he learns of his past and acknowledges how it shaped his personal story.

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[249] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.50
[250] Horowitz, *op. cit.*, p.178

Harold's past is represented by his mother and her adulterous relationship with Mr Jermyn. By projecting himself only forwards he fails to see evidence that lies in front of him, namely his mother's misery, and his great similarity with Mr Jermyn. Although it would be erroneous to say that Harold is completely blind to his mother's despair, it is also true that because of his rejection of the past, and because of his Mechanical tendencies, he does not understand the depth of her feelings. He is in fact aware that her mother is suffering, but his understanding is superficial, testimony to that is his description of his mother to Esther:

> He thought it well that Esther should know how the fortune of his family had been drained by law expenses, owing to suits mistakenly urged by her family; he spoke of his mother's lonely life and pinched circumstances, of her lack of comfort in her elder son, and of the habit she had consequently acquired of looking at the gloomy side of things. He hinted that she had been accustomed to dictate, and that, as he had left her when he was a boy, she had perhaps indulged the dream that he would come back a boy. She was still sore on the point of his politics. These things could not be helped, but so far as he could, he wished to make the rest of her life as cheerful as possible.[251]

Harold is not a bad man, he is not dishonest, nor does he hurt people on purpose, he is merely the by-product of many different British mentalities, some belonging to the old established order, some others belonging to the modern industrialized England. Although he is governed by opportunism and "active industrious selfishness"[252] when Felix confronts him about the Sproxton bribery he does put an end to it, and he does notify Esther about his change of position regarding the estate, although in a sibylline way. Perhaps he has been changed by Esther's love, or perhaps Eliot managed again to skilfully represent the multitude of behaviours that makes us human. Still, because of his mechanical nature, he believes that concrete things might cheer his mother and improve her mood, but disregarding all feeling and spirituality, for this reason he cannot see that that the only thing that

[251] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.381
[252] Ibid., p.183

might make his mother feel better is sympathy. His rejection of the past generates an ignorance towards the past's ability to have a strong hold on the present: he seeks source of his mother's malaise in something contemporaneous, believing that Mrs Transome is distraught because she cannot run the estate anymore, while Mrs Transome has been carrying her torment for decades.

Another symbol of Harold Transome's past coming back with vengeance is his physical likeness to Mr Jermyn as well as his great diversity from Mr Transome. Although his parentage is only revealed later in the novel, Eliot repeatedly hints to something in Harold's appearance and behaviour that makes his mother uneasy, if not miserable. In the first chapter there are already indications pointing to such resemblance:

> If she had seen him in a crowd, she might have looked at him without recognition—not, however, without startled wonder; for though the likeness to herself was no longer striking, the years had overlaid it with another likeness which would have arrested her. [...]
>
> "How is it I have the trick of getting fat?" (Here Harold lifted his arm and spread out his plump hand.) "I remember my father was as thin as a herring. How is my father? Where is he?"
>
> Mrs Transome just pointed to the curtained doorway, and let her son pass through it alone. She was not given to tears: but now, under the pressure of emotion that could find no other vent, they burst forth. She took care that they should be silent tears, and before Harold came out of the library again they were dried.[253]

And

> "What a likeness!" she said, in a loud whisper; "yet, perhaps, no one will see it besides me."[254]

Mrs Transome sees Mr Jermyn clearly in his son's appearance. As the story unfolds Harold's similarities with Mr Jermyn come to light also in his character and

[253] Ibid., p.16-17
[254] Ibid., p.23

behaviour. He does share much with his mother, but he inherited Jermyn's practicality and empiricism, as well as the bourgeoise industriousness. Another hint about his parentage is offered by the paragon between Harold and his brother Durfey. The latter is presented as deficient and incompetent, he is the legitimate son of Mr Transome, and his ineptitude and eventual death is symptomatic of the exhaustion of the creative power of the British aristocracy: they cannot generate powerful and industrious heirs anymore. Harold has a reckoning with his past in chapter XLVII, despite Mrs Transome's attempts to keep him in the dark by discouraging quarrels and meetings with Mr Jermyn:

> "Let me go, you scoundrel!" said Harold, fiercely, "or I'll be the death of you."
> "Do," said Jermyn, in a grating voice; "I am your father."
> In the thrust by which Harold had been made to stagger backward a little, the two men had got very near the long mirror. They were both white; both had anger and hatred in their faces; the hands of both were upraised. As Harold heard the last terrible words he started at a leaping throb that went through him, and in the start turned his eyes away from Jermyn's face. He turned them on the same face in the glass with his own beside it, and saw the hated fatherhood reasserted.
> The strong man reeled with a sick faintness. But in the same moment Jermyn released his hold, and Harold felt himself supported by the arm. It was Sir Maximus Debarry who had taken hold of him.
> "Leave the room, sir!" the baronet said to Jermyn, in a voice of imperious scorn. "This is a meeting of gentlemen."
> "Come, Harold," he said, in the old friendly voice, "come away with me."[255]

Harold's past cannot be disowned anymore, the evidence is clear before his eyes. Carroll states that owing to Jermyn's final revelation, Harold experiences the tragic relationship between past and present, will and destiny, in the form of the loss of an inheritance and discovery of a new one. He experiences the negative version of the cultural and political inheritance that Eliot discusses in the novel, but he finally truly understands his mother's behaviour. Harold represents the dangers of completely disregarding the past without gaining a proper understanding of it.

[255] Ibid., p.458

After the revelation, his relationship with his mother is not suddenly fixed but George Eliot masterfully built a connection between the two in a way that the reader feels confident in the belief that Harold wholly understands his mother and her actions. In her place, he would have acted the same.[256] Harold can finally offer his mother what she needed all along: sympathy.

Differently from Harold, Felix sees the connection between the present and the past more clearly. This connection is investigated once more through paternal links. Felix is aware of who his father was, namely a quack doctor that sold medicine which was ineffective at best, and dangerous at worst. Felix attends a medical internship in Glasgow, and as he acquires more knowledge on the subject, he understands that his father was wrong. After his discovery, he judges his father from a scientific and medical point of view, and he rejects his legacy. Felix however adopts an interesting stance: he states that his father had good intentions, he was just ignorant about medicine.

> "My father was ignorant," said Felix, bluntly. "He knew neither the complication of the human system, nor the way in which drugs counteract each other. Ignorance is not so damnable as humbug, but when it prescribes pills it may happen to do more harm. I know something about these things. I was 'prentice for five miserable years to a stupid brute of a country apothecary—my poor father left money for that—he thought nothing could be finer for me. No matter: I know that the Cathartic Pills are a drastic compound which may be as bad as poison to half the people who swallow them; that the Elixir is an absurd farrago of a dozen incompatible things; and that the Cancer Cure might as well be bottled ditch-water."[257]

Felix realizes that his father's actions came from ignorance, not from malice, but he recognizes that such modes now are not justifiable anymore, as he has more knowledge and knows the potential harm they can cause. It is knowledge that brings forth this rejection, and this is ultimately what differentiates him from Harold. Felix knows what he is renouncing, and with this knowledge he is able to

[256] R. Speaight, *George Eliot*, London: Arthur Barker, 1954, p.90
[257] Eliot, *op. cit.*, pp.61-62

move in another direction and take different choices from that of his father. Harold instead, rejecting his past blindly, ultimately had grown up to be his father's son.

Felix has a more extensive view of social change because he grasps more clearly the bonds between past and present. Eliot agrees with Rihel's recognition of the organic connections between the past and present of both society and the individual. Horowitz offers a powerful metaphor in her essay: mankind has its roots in the past, and it is only by allowing those roots to stay undisturbed in the ground that branches and fruits can grow, pruning will be necessary and when time has come, a fruit will bear the seed with a new life independent of the root.[258] Felix thus understands what Mill had warned about in his *Spirit of the Age* (1831) namely the dangers of a transitional age without any references nor certainties. Still, Felix, like Harold, fails. He does so because he is blind to another connection, that between individual and society. In the throes of the mob, he acts on impulse and fails to see the consequences of his actions. He is too lost in his lofty goals of universal brotherhood and equality to see how ineffective he is in society.

Horowitz in her essay ascribes Felix's ineffectiveness in society to his status of outsider.[259] On one level this attitude is both his greatest strength and weakness, as it makes him morally superior to the other characters but at the same time it also renders him ineffective. His decision to renounce his private life completely does not allow him to understand how the public and private sphere interact and influence one another. Felix becomes irrelevant to society. As proof to that, the mob ultimately leaves him behind and follows another voice. His stubbornness and arrogance prevent him from noticing that his choice of living outside of society is counterproductive, because it is not a natural state of mankind. Falling in love with Esther is not something that will hinder his ability to become an agent of change, rather it is exactly that which can help him become effectual, even widening his views. The past plays once again a key role: Eliot offers the readers an example of

[258] Horowitz, *op. cit.*, p.178
[259] Ibid., p.180

a man that had similarly believed in keeping his private and public life separate, fearing that the latter would have hindered the former. That man is Rev. Lyon. Rev. Lyon had fallen in love with the French and "unregenerate Catholic"[260] Annette and he had seen occurrence as a catastrophe, because he thought it would have impeded him to carry on his duty as a Dissenting preacher.

> A terrible crisis had come upon him; a moment in which religious doubt and newly-awakened passion had rushed together in a common flood, and had paralyzed his ministerial gifts.[261]

However, although he had for a time abandoned the ministry to devote himself to Annette, it is his choice to love her and raise her child as his own – despite her representing something that his religion and his dogmatic view of did not allow – that brings him real knowledge on both love and religion.

> Strange! that the passion for this woman, which he felt to have drawn him aside from the right as much as if he had broken the most solemn vows—for that only was right to him which he held the best and highest—the passion for a being who had no glimpse of his thoughts induced a more thorough renunciation than he had ever known in the time of his complete devotion to his ministerial career. He had no flattery now, either from himself or the world; he knew that he had fallen, and *his* world had forgotten him, or shook their heads at his memory. The only satisfaction he had was the satisfaction of his tenderness—which meant untiring work, untiring patience, untiring wakefulness even to the dumb signs of feeling in a creature whom he alone cared for.[262]

It is through his love for Annette, that he begins to extend his idea of salvation, one that could include "unconscious recipients of mercy",[263] thus expanding and redefining both his sympathy and his religion. The past can teach and guide when acknowledged, and just like Rev. Lyon's love changed him, Esther's love will transform Felix from detached demagogue to husband, father and teacher,

[260] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.84
[261] Ibid., p.80
[262] Ibid., p.89
[263] Ibid., p.90

redefining his social and political enterprise. It is by entering and living inside a community, learning from his peers, that he can truly understand what change is needed. Felix learns this the hard way in the middle of the mob. His *Bildung* follows a path from a position of outsider to a definite place and function inside a community.

Esther's plot is considered by many to be the most complete and interesting one. Differently from Harold and Felix, she does not fail, and this is because she learns throughout the novel to consider both connections, between past and present, and individual and society. She is inserted into the community; she follows conventions and even some stereotypes. She lacks sympathy, which can be ascribed to the general tendency of the age but also to her Byronic reading, which fosters egoism. During their first encounter, Felix shatters all her certainties and values, criticizing her quite harshly. From then on, Esther begins to question her attitude and ideals, and her *Bildung* begins. Like Felix's, Esther's development is laden with religious imagery, the narrator describes it as "painfully growing into possession of higher powers".[264] For such reasons it may be more apt to call it a "conversion". By choosing Felix, Esther chooses a role in society that can express a higher morality.

As for Harold and Felix, Esther's reckoning with the past comes through her paternal inheritance. Eliot had asked the jurist Frederic Harrison to help her craft the plot of the Transome inheritance so that it would be flawless and credible from a legal point of view. Throughout the novel Rev. Lyon investigates the identity of Esther's father and, after a series of improbable coincidences and mistaken identities, he comes to learn that Esther is the daughter of Maurice Christian Baycliffe, who had been falsely imprisoned as a result of Mr Jermyn's devices to ensure to the Transomes a hold on the estate. The whole plot revolves around the legal stratagem of the entail, which allowed for a land to be ceded from a grantor

[264] Ibid., p.228

to a grantee, however, if the grantee failed to have any heirs, the property would go back to the grantor. In the novel, John Justus Transome had ceded the lands through an entail to his son Thomas Transome, and the remainder had been given to the Bycliffes in fee. While John Justus was still alive, Thomas had sold – without his knowledge – the base fee to the Durfeys. Until Tommy Trounsem, the last of the Transomes, was alive, the property was lawfully of the Durfey-Transome – of which Harold was the supposed heir – but at Tommy's death, the original entail made by John Justus would be void while the Baycliffe's claim to the property would become valid.

The Transome estate and its proper ownership raise profound problems in the small community of Treby. The estate is a symbol of old England, its complex past, its confusing present, and uncertain future. The entail is a plot device that allows Eliot to investigate the myth of social transition, the *fil rouge* that connects the old England with the new.[265] The Baycliffe heir is key in the novel's investigation of social transition because it's the heir themselves that can break or strengthen the connection with the past by choosing to renounce or accept the estate. Esther's struggle to decide what should be done with her inheritance is symbolic of the Victorians struggle to decide what to do with ancient ideals and the established order. Such problem has been faced by Harold and Felix too, although they had adopted two different approaches. Esther, learning from Felix's preaching follows his footsteps: both decide to acknowledge their inheritance, but they only accept what aligns with their moral values.

Esther's decision is more symbolic than Felix's because of what her inheritance and her choice represents. Transome Court is the old order, with its corruption, faults, and obsolescence, but it is also representative of the England for which Eliot feels deep nostalgia, a simpler time, characterized by a greater focus on morals, feelings, and spirit. The discovery of Esther's parentage and her choice are

[265] Horowitz, *op. cit.*, p.182

fundamental elements for a constructive discourse of the importance of the past. If Esther had married Harold, then the Durfey-Transomes would have regained the legal ownership of the estate. Alternatively, if Esther had remained an unknown heir or if she had forfeited her claim, then the Durfey-Transomes would have retained their claim to the estate, albeit unjustly. In both scenarios, there would have been a linear continuity between the past and the present, and the novel would have upheld the traditional social order and customs, rejecting any form of social transition. Esther instead asserts her right to her inheritance, taking an active role in its handling. In alignment with her newfound principles and priorities, she distributes her due accordingly. She leaves most of the property to the Durfey-Transomes, arranges annuities for Mr Lyon and Mrs Holt to live comfortably, and she keeps two pounds a week for herself and her family.

> I think even of two pounds a week: one needn't live up to the splendor of all that, you know; we might live as simply as you liked: there would be money to spare, and you could do wonders, and be obliged to work too, only not if sickness came.[266]

Esther enacts Eliot, Mill, Arnold and many other Victorian intellectuals' wish for the Victorian society, namely, to take from the past the need to build a new kind of future, leaving the prejudices and corruption behind. In her essay, Horowitz expounds that by ending the entail Esther manages to sever herself from the control of the past, but also accomplishes the most significant step forward for social change by deciding to recognise her inheritance and leave part of it to the Transome, a family that is instead stuck in the past.

Esther's storyline depicts one of the conundrums of Victorian society: new conditions and needs have arisen and the mechanical succession of past and present does not allow the new generation to evaluate what should be the attitude towards the present and the value of the past. In a society that is so dynamic and dominated

[266] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.474

by speed the conditions are never the same and revaluation is fundamental. Society needs Esther-like individuals, an heir that stops, reassess, and then decides what human values they want to safeguard, and which part of their inheritance would allow them to do so. Esther reclaims her inheritance but uses it to pave the way for her future, one that is in direct opposition with the established order and values represented by Transome Court. It is a future governed by sympathy and fellow feeling, a union of mankind that starts from the smallest unity found in society, namely family. For Eliot the idea of sympathy was associated with a sharing of the traditions and family inheritance, she shared the Comtean notion that moral progress relied on the extension and fortification of bonds of sympathy.[267] Her husband J.W. Cross remarked that Eliot's "great hope, for the future" was in "the gradual development of the affections and the sympathetic emotions", rather than in "legislative enactments" and "party measures".[268]

The union of Esther and Felix is highly symbolic for multiple reasons. They represent the change in society that may be creative for a new order, a change that is separate and indifferent to legislative enactments but rooted in human sympathy and feeling, in morals that consider the new circumstances, which protects a kernel of the inheritance of the past and employs it to build a better future, aware of what has been left behind. The creative power of such union is also highlighted by the fact that both heirs of the Durfey and Transome families are characterized by imbecility, thus suggesting that due to inbreeding into the same social class the aristocratic bloodline has exhausted all its potential to generate people that have the capabilities to take moral, social and political responsibilities. It has been already investigated how Harold possesses creative impulse because of his paternal side, but it could be argued that a similar heterogeneity in parentage, education and behaviour has allowed Felix and Esther a similar creative energy. Felix and Esther's

[267] Semmel, *op. cit.*, p.12

[268] J.W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life*, 3 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1908), 3:316-17; the three volumes of the *Life* form vols. 23-25 of the Warwickshire edition of *The Writings of George Eliot,* as cited in B. Semmel, *op. cit.,* p.13

union is symbolical also because both belong to in-between classes. Felix has the intelligence and education of the middle-class, but he was born in the lower class and there he seeks to remain in an act of class allegiance, but he also displays an aristocratic gentlemanliness:

> "There is something greater and better in him than I had imagined. His behavior to-day—to his mother and me too—I should call it the highest gentlemanliness, only it seems in him to be something deeper."[269]

Esther was of both British landowning aristocracy and of French birth, but she is raised in the lower class. It may not be a coincidence that Esther is half French, as Eliot believed that the French working class was better equipped for social change as it was less selfish and sensual than the British, testimony to that were the Revolutions that had occurred on French soil. Eliot seems to suggest that it is through heterogeneity, exchange, and mobility that both the individual and society progress, not through stasis and dogmatic acceptance of traditions and customs.

Felix Holt is a deemed a transitional novel also because Eliot does not end it with the characters taking refuge in the ways of Old England, rather they take a step towards the future. To live solely according to values and rules of the past generations means to live like Mrs Transome, stuck in a loop of her own making, unable and unwilling to see beyond her past. It is not merely from the inheritance of Transome court that a new life begins, but also from a new mindset and a new kernel of society. The legal plots belong to the higher-class mode of controlling those around them, but also what the passage of time and new conditions might bring, in a constant effort of preservation and safekeeping of their own advantages and privileges. In the end, the legal plot does fall apart from the inside, the legal framework is dismantled because of its own rules and intricacies, and the characters manage to find a life of their own despite the limiting conditions imposed upon them. Just like Eliot herself managed to carve out her own space and happiness in

[269] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.228

a society that limited and rejected her. It is in this novel that Eliot truly focuses on the relationship between society and the individual and she does so by also investigating how the acceptance of absolute and conventional values and customs has repercussions not only on the public sphere but also on the personal.

Esther's connection with the past, however, is not merely represented by her Transome inheritance but also by her filial relationship with Rev. Lyon, which instead she never renounces. Such bond represents Eliot's emotional connection to her Midlands childhood. While Eliot's attachment to the past may be merely ascribed to her political Conservativism, Pinney argues that it is also connected to her religion of feeling, namely her belief that the vital principle is strength of feeling.[270] Although there is no blood relation between Esther and Rev. Lyon she never renounces him as her father because between the two of them a bond of sympathy and affection has consolidated over the years. Old and familiar objects are not cherished because they are better or have superior value, but rather because they are something that has gained affection, and it is such affection that gives meaning to life.[130] Esther cherishes Rev. Lyon as her father because of what he meant for her as a parental figure, although by renouncing it and acknowledging Maurice Christian Baycliffe she would have ensured her dream of a life as a lady. It may be argued that Rev. Lyon's teachings and example provided fertile ground for Felix's morals to root. Eliot agreed with Wordsworth on the importance of childhood experiences: as a child the feelings are stronger and thus it is inevitable that childhood experiences will be laden with stronger emotions and will be remembered more intensely in the future.[130] Pinney argues that for Eliot memory becomes the fundamental mean to maintain continuity between past and present, but most importantly to achieve self-discovery, to determine duties and privileges. Whichever potential benefits Esther might have achieved by reclaiming her Bycliffe father, she did not bargain her affections for her adoptive father, Rev. Lyon.

[270] T. Pinney, "The Authority of the Past in George Eliot's Novels", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1966, pp. 131-147, p.140

However, it would be erroneous not to consider the share that Esther's newfound moral values had in her choice. Rejecting the inheritance was done also in observation of her duty. Similarly, she rejects Harold because Felix is not only object of her affections but also represents her responsibility and ethical values. In Eliot's novels, the ideal condition is that in which duty and affection coincide.

The inheritance plot was a common narrative stratagem of Victorian novels; however, Semmel argues that Eliot was unique in inserting in such stratagem a political metaphor, liberal as well as conservative, interconnected with many other meanings, namely biological, spiritual, ethical, religious, emotional.[271] She tried to offer a debate that included love and affection for the national tradition as well as openness to a world of cultural pluralism that still regarded human sympathy and fellow feeling.

3.3. The woman question

The 1860s witnessed a great display of feminist political activity. Petitions were drawn to give women a fuller role in Victorian society. Momentous change was happening in legislation, employment, education, public power, and private attitudes. However, such movement made its first appearance in the 1830s, when feminist and anti-feminist pamphlets and essays emerged. The question gained traction when the 1832 Great Reform Act added the specification of exclusive male franchise for the first time to the English law. As a result, it sparked a debate that would last decades, but that was particularly poignant in 1865 at the eve of a new Reform that could potentially repeal such addition. In 1865 many feminists began to press heavily for the extension of the franchise to include women, Chartists and several Radicals supported such claim. One of their most vocal advocates had been John Stuart Mill, who in 1866 presented in parliament a petition organized by

[271] Semmel, *op. cit.*, p.135

Eliot's friend Barbara Bodichon and signed by 1,499 women, among which many friends of Eliot. Still, the Second Reform Bill kept the specification of exclusive male franchise, but the impetus towards woman's franchise had not been quenched.

In her representation of the Victorian panorama Eliot could not exclude the woman's question. As for the debate over Radicalism and Reform, the historical dates are poignant: *Felix Holt* is set at the beginning of the feminist movement and the novel is written in a period in which the movement had gained significant traction. Eliot one more time reflects retrospectively on a core issue of the 19th century, namely the woman's question, trying to understand the contemporary situation by investigating the first signs and instances of the movement. As for the debate over Reform and politics Eliot does not take a clear stand, rather she integrates into the discussion all opinions and stances, in an attempt to understand rather than to find a solution. Many critics have found it difficult to come to terms with some of the views on women that Eliot stated in her essays and articles as well as her lack of open support of feminist causes. In *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* (1856) she harshly criticizes women authors, almost heartlessly, in a way that troubled many feminist critics. However, Newton states:

> Eliot is seldom a comfortable writer. It is for her one thing to have sympathy with women writers who are at disadvantage by lack of cultural opportunities and male prejudice, but it is another to set aside critical judgement in assessing their work.[272]

Namely, Eliot criticizes women writers for their work, not for their gender. She does attack the conventional assumption that women's writing is intrinsically inferior to men's. As writers, women can be equal to men, Eliot criticizes the fact that many women do not even attempt to such goal, but she is also conscious that women are bound by their lack of cultural and educational opportunities.

Eliot's letters provide proof of her unsure position regarding the women's

[272] Newton, *op. cit.*, p.22

question. In the written exchanges she often contradicts herself, defending first a stance, then another, or she expresses herself in sibylline tones. In 1853 she writes to Clementia Taylor "Enfranchisement of women only makes creeping progress; and that is best, for woman does not yet deserve a much better lot than man gives her".[273] But in 1867 she backtracks and states "on the whole I am inclined to hope for much good from the serious presentation of women's claims before Parliament".[274] A month later she chastises Sara Hennell for her defence of women's suffrage:

> I proceed to scold you a little for undertaking to canvass on the Women's Suffrage question. Why should you burthen yourself in that way, for an extremely doubtful good? I love and honour my friend Mrs Taylor, but it is impossible that she can judge beforehand of the proportionate toil and interruption such labours cause to women whose habits and duties differ so much from her own.[275]

In her 1855 essay on Wollstonecraft and Fuller she writes:

> On the one side we hear that woman's position can never be improved until women themselves are better; and, on the other, that women can never become better until their position is improved—until the laws are made more just, and wider field opened to feminine activity [...] we want freedom and culture for woman, because subjection and ignorance have debased her, and with her, Man.[276]

Eliot agreed with Wollstoncraft that education was the key for women's emancipation, as it would allow them to pursue more professions, which in turn would make them economically independent and not bound to marry for support. She also agreed in the condemnation of the idea of women being fit for nothing else but motherhood and housework, although Eliot defended the right to choose

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[273] GEL, II, 86, as cited in B. Zimmerman, "Felix Holt and the True Power of Womanhood", *ELH*, vol. 43, no. 3, 1979, pp.432-451, p.436
[274] GEL, IV, 366, as cited in Ibid.
[275] Heaight, *op. cit.*, p.335
[276] Eliot, *Essays*, 205, as cited in Newton, *op. cit.*, p.25

conventional roles if the woman wanted so. Eliot criticized the idealization of women, the sentimental exaggeration of their portraits. Although it is true that she never vocally supported feminism, it would be wrong to say that she never participated to any degree to the movement. Eliot in fact did get involved in funds and projects, especially those that ensured women's education. Her attitude is probably best explained in her letter to Mrs Jane Nassau Senior, the first woman to be appointed Inspector of Workhouses and Pauper Schools:

> I feel too deeply the difficult complications that beset every measure likely to affect the position of women and also I feel too imperfect a sympathy with many women who have put themselves forward in connexion with such measures, to give any practical adhesion to them. There is no subject on which I am more inclined to hold my peace and learn, than on the "Women Question". It seems to me to overhang abysses, of which even prostitution is not the worst. Conclusions seem easy so long as we keep large blinkers on and look in the direction of our own private path. But on one point I have a strong conviction, and I feel bound to act on it, so far as my retired way of life allows of public action. And that is, that women ought to have the same fund of truth placed within their reach as men have; that their lives (i.e. the lives of men and women) ought to be passed together under the hallowing influence of a common faith as to their duty and its basis. And this unity in their faith can only be produced by their having each the same store of fundamental knowledge. It is not likely that any perfect plan for educating women can soon be found, for we are very far from having found a perfect plan for educating men. But it will not do to wait for perfection. I write these hasty words to show you that I valued what you said to me. But do not let any one else see this note. I have been made rather miserable lately by revelations about women, and have resolved to remain silent in my sense of helplessness. I know very little about what is specially good for women-only a few things that I feel sure are good for human nature generally, and about such as these last alone, can I ever hope to write or say anything worth saying. If I were called on to act in the matter, I would certainly not oppose any plan which held out any reasonable promise of tending to establish as far as possible an equivalence of advantages for the two sexes, as to education and the possibilities of free development.[277]

Eliot understood that the "woman's lot" was miserable, but she was equally

[277] Heaight, *op. cit.*, p.367

convinced that every method that would attempt to rectify such condition would ultimately only worsen it. Feminist threatened the most fundamental elements of social order such as marriage, motherhood, and feminine character. The conundrum of the women's question is indeed specular to that of the franchise of the working classes, however in this case Eliot had been the revolutionary and radical woman that had defied and lived against societal norms, and she was aware of the consequences of such choices. For this reason, she distrusted the drastic changes that feminists were championing, once again defending an evolution rather than a revolution.

The government was reluctant to support the requests of the feminist movement for the same reason it was reluctant to include the lower classes in the franchise: they feared that uneducated and unprepared women would be led by their dissatisfaction to demand rights they were not equipped to handle. Eliot equally believed that the suffrage would not solve all problems while, as for the lower classes, she believed in the power of education. In the 1860s the debate over women's education acquired increasing urgency, as it was linked to the question of women's cultural, social, and political status, as well as their potential intelligence. Eliot did not see education as means to escape the domesticity, rather as a tool that would give the opportunity to women to pursue self-development, leading them to a greater sensitivity and sensibility of any role they chose to perform, whether the traditional role or one that defied their gender role. In Eliot's mind true education is not merely academic knowledge, but rather includes also broad cultural and moral terms.

Felix Holt is situated at the turning points of the English feminist movement, written in 1865 and set in 1832. From 1865 the feminist movement began to embrace a more organized approach to its political activity, and from 1832 the women's question had started to gather momentum. For this reason, Zimmerman states that it would be simplistic to consider *Felix Holt* as merely a novel discussing male politics: it would mean erasing two key figures, that of Mrs Transome and of

Esther Lyon, which could arguably be considered as the main characters of the third part of the novel. Esther and Mrs Transome have parallel but complementary storylines, which in turn work in parallel but in contrast to the plot of the male politics. The female plot lines elevate the novel's structure to a much more complex interconnectedness. Many critics have asserted that the Transome storyline is much more compelling than the political one, Kettle in his essay states "The political part of the book seems incidental to the Transome's drama, which could have been dealt without the introduction of the theme of Radicalism as anything but a trivial matter".[278] It is accepted by many that the female storylines are more emotional engaging than the male ones. In the novel Eliot investigates the role of women, their virtues and how they can be either misused or put in service of society and of women themselves. At the same time, Eliot manages to skilfully portray Mrs Transome's misery which is linked to her role as wife, mother and woman. George Eliot sexual politics are rooted not in the similarities but rather in the differences between genders, emancipation and equality will be reached not by trying to make the male and female similar but rather by acknowledging the differences. The women's lot in life is harder than men's, and that is an undeniable fact.

Speaight and Leavis, like many other critics and intellectuals, believe that Mrs Transome is the most successful character in *Felix Holt.*[279] With her character, Eliot ventured to study an area that she had never approached, namely the country gentry. However, despite it being new territory, she does so masterfully. Perhaps it is exactly because Mrs Transome belongs to the gentry, a class that Eliot did not cherish like the lower working class of the Midlands, that Eliot manages to portray her with an impartial pity that makes the character even more solemn.[279] In creating Mrs Transome, it is merely Eliot's imagination, not her memory, at work. Mrs Transome is introduced to the reader with similar solemnity and gravitas, her description is outstanding in its vividness:

[278] Kettle, *op. cit.*, p.106
[279] Speaight, *op. cit.*, p.86

> She had that high-born, imperious air which would have marked her as an object of hatred and reviling by a revolutionary mob. Her person was too typical of social distinctions to be passed by with indifference by any one: it would have fitted an empress in her own right, who had had to rule in spite of faction, to dare the violation of treaties and dread retributive invasions, to grasp after new territories, to be defiant in desperate circumstances, and to feel a woman's hunger of the heart forever unsatisfied. Yet Mrs Transome's cares and occupations had not been at all of an imperial sort. For thirty years she had led the monotonous, narrowing life which used to be the lot of our poorer gentry; who never went to town, and were probably not on speaking terms with two out of the five families whose parks lay within the distance of a drive. When she was young she had been thought wonderfully clever and accomplished, and had been rather ambitious of intellectual superiority [...].[280]

Mrs Transome's description does not contain irony, her situation is presented with complete objectivity though with moving sympathy. Such sympathy, however, lacks self-pity and self-indulgence.[281] The price paid by Mrs Transome for her sin does not need a moralist's emphasis. She is presented as a woman with strong will and stoic attitude, weighted down by the ineptitude of her husband, the imbecility and rakishness of his elder son and a series of lawsuits. "Proud, energetic, intensely Tory and intensely bitter",[282] are the words that Kettle uses to describe her. Mrs Transome's bitterness has grown overwhelming over the years, and it is gradually revealed to be bound to her secret, namely that Harold has not been fathered by the incompetent and weak Mr Transome, but by the audacious and assertive lawyer Mr Jermyn.

To cope with her miserable lot Mrs Transome has built over the lonely and merciless years the illusion that when her clever and handsome second son Harold comes back, order will be established once again, and everything will be well. Not only will wealth come back to Transome Court, but also honour and joy. However, Harold's return shatters Mrs Transome dream, even before Harold has the chance to utter any word Mrs Transome comes face to face with her past as, with age,

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[280] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.28
[281] Leavis, *op. cit.*, p.56
[282] Kettle, op. cit., p.101

Harold looks strikingly like Mr Jermyn. Harold does not bring back the established order, rather foreign habits, a radical candidacy, and a son with dubious origins. It would be erroneous to fault Harold of willingly hurting his mother. On the contrary, he is not consciously unkind or unscrupulous, he merely has no understanding of what kind of person his mother has become not what is her burden. He has no sense of the past, which is instead where his mother is trapped.[283] Eliot manages to illustrate and convey perfectly Mrs Transome's emotions, she is constantly afraid: Harold arises in her strangeness and terror, so much so that the reader feels that uneasiness too, although they do not understand the reason. Her fear is something that many Victorian women can relate to. Through Mrs Transome the reader truly understands how much a woman depends on a man's whims and can also recognize how some women might turn to manipulation to ensure themselves safety and protection.

> A woman's love is always freezing into fear. She wants everything, she is secure of nothing. This girl has a fine spirit — plenty of fire and pride and wit. Men like such captives, as they like horses that champ the bit and paw the ground: they feel more triumph in their mastery. What is the use of a woman's will? — if she tries, she doesn't get it, and she ceases to be loved. God was cruel when He made women.[284]

Mrs Transome translates the language of love into that of power. For her, life is a constant struggle for power. In a world in which all advantages have been given to men, women may enjoy merely brief glory through mastery in their role of wives and mothers. Eliot uses "mastery" repeatedly in the novel, especially in instances that involve Harold, Mr Jermyn and Mrs Transome, to symbolize power in its egoistic form.[285] Mrs Transome's meaning in life is the command and exertion of her will, it is all there is left to her, this is part of her miserable "woman's lot".[286]

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[283] Ibid., p.102
[284] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.374
[285] Zimmerman, *op. cit.*, p.440
[286] Leavis, *op. cit.*, p.57

Zimmerman argues that in Mrs Transome Eliot poured all the anger and bitterness that society made her feel for her own sexual misconduct, voicing her answer through Mrs Transome, who has no impulse towards repentance.[287] Supposing this reading correct, it would explain the reason why so little irony or moral commentary is directed towards Mrs Transome, why she arises such sympathy despite her egoism, and why her misery seems so vivid.[287]

As Harold arrives, she slowly loses her grip on all things she had control over, first the estate, then Harold himself, then her past, then she gets gradually alienated from her family: Mr Transome is afraid of her, her nephew despises her, and Harold is fonder of Mr Transome. Arabella Transome's gradual ossification into passivity is hinted at through associations with objects. It begins with Harold's arrival:

> Mrs Transome had been in her bloom before this century began, and in the long painful years since then, what she had once regarded as her knowledge and accomplishments had become as valueless as old-fashioned stucco ornaments, of which the substance was never worth anything, while the form is no longer to the taste of any living mortal.[288]

It progresses throughout the book and resurfaces in her interaction with Esther:

> "My dear, I shall make this house dull for you. You sit with me like an embodied patience. I am unendurable; I am getting into a melancholy dotage. A fidgety old woman like me is as unpleasant to see as a rook with its wing broken. Don't mind me, my dear. Run away from me without ceremony. Every one else does, you see. I am part of the old furniture with new drapery."[289]

Leavis and Carroll both regard Mrs Transome as a study on Nemesis,[290] namely the divine retribution sought against people guilty of hubris, which might

[287] Zimmerman, *op. cit.*, p.443
[288] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.30
[289] Ibid., p.432
[290] Leavis, *op. cit*, p.55 and Carroll, "Felix Holt: Society as Protagonist", *op. cit.*, p.250

befall the culprit or its descendants.[291] Indeed, one might argue that Nemesis befalls not only Arabella Transome but also Harold Transome. Such approach is validated by the fact that Eliot had been reading Greek Tragedy in the same period of composition of *Felix Holt,* and she had reported in her journals and letters a fascination with the tragic *topoi* and structure.[292] Leavis and Carroll's reading seems validated by the following lines in the novel:

> no sooner did the words "You have brought it on me" rise within her than she heard within also the retort, "You brought it on yourself." Not for all the world beside could she bear to hear that retort uttered from without.[293]

Jones instead defends that what Arabella Transome endures is more human than what the attribution to a study of Nemesis would allow.[294] Mrs Transome suffers because she is a mother that has put all her hopes for happiness in a son that cannot comprehend her, who has begun an enterprise that completely differs from what she had envisioned, who looks like her lover, and who seems to have lost all that made him her son. She suffers the indifference and insolence of a man that maybe she once loved or received love from. She is bound to a husband that she deems worthless, who is mildly afraid of her. She has a nephew that is the result of a marriage with a slave, and who is brown. She has withstood for years the burden of running the household, the land and maintaining her secret. All in hope that one day all would have been worth it, that her son would be back, and like a saviour would gift her pride for all she endured. But in the end, this never happens, she is stuck and passive. Mrs Transome has no great sin, no great tragedy, she simply experiences human life.[294] Her portrayal is incredibly moving, but as Jones states "not tragic, as tragedy requires the protagonist richer imaginative awareness of what is happening to him [...] and Mrs Transome response to what she endures

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[291] Unknown, *Nemesis - Examples and Definition of Nemesis*, Literary Devices, 2018, https://literarydevices.net/nemesis/ , Accessed December 2023
[292] GEL, IV, 300-302, as cited in Heaight, *op. cit.*, p.318
[293] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.115
[294] Jones, *op. cit.*, p.55

is just static and passive."[294] Maybe, Mrs Transome is disappointed in Harold simply because she is his mother, and she wanted something from him he could not deliver.

> The mother's love is at first an absorbing delight, blunting all other sensibilities; it is an expansion of the animal existence; it enlarges the imagined range for self to move in: but in after years it can only continue to be joy on the same terms as other long-lived love—that is, by much suppression of self, and power of living in the experience of another. Mrs Transome had darkly felt the pressure of that unchangeable fact. Yet she had clung to the belief that somehow the possession of this son was the best thing she lived for; to believe otherwise would have made her memory too ghastly a companion.[295]

Jones' reading of Mrs Transome's plot aligns with Eliot's mature poetics, namely her search for a community of sympathy and a belief in a movement from egoism to altruism, from selfishness to compassion. Mrs Transome's condition and consequences are thus depicted with directness "this is human nature; this is the fact and these are the inexorable consequences".[296] Ultimately, Mrs Transome's dictatorial and stern façade conceals vulnerability, tenderness and pain.

> If she had only been more haggard and less majestic, those who had glimpses of her outward life might have said she was a tyrannical, griping harridan, with a tongue like a razor. No one said exactly that; but they never said anything like the full truth about her, or divined what was hidden under that outward life—a woman's keen sensibility and dread, which lay screened behind all her petty habits and narrow notions, as some quivering thing with eyes and throbbing heart may lie crouching behind withered rubbish. The sensibility and dread had palpitated all the faster in the prospect of her son's return; and now that she had seen him, she said to herself, in her bitter way, "It is a lucky eel that escapes skinning. The best happiness I shall ever know, will be to escape the worst misery."[297]

The novel exposes more than the egoism and pretences of two ladies, it denounces a vicious cycle: since women are bound to drawing rooms and kitchens,

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[295] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.23
[296] Leavis, *op. cit.*, p.57
[297] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.30

the only outlets for such egoism are petty despotism, sexual conquest, and maternal control.[298] Women's power lies in their ability to aid or deter men's lives from having any nobility. Mr Johnson states in the novel that:

> "if you'll believe me, sir, one-fourth of the men would never have voted if their wives hadn't driven them to it for the good of their families."[299]

In the same vein, Felix says:

> "That is what exasperates me at your making a boast of littleness. You have enough understanding to make it wicked that you should add one more to the women who hinder men's lives from having any nobleness in them."[300]

And continues:

> "I can't bear to see you going the way of the foolish women who spoil men's lives. Men can't help loving them, and so they make themselves slaves to the petty desires of petty creatures. That's the way those who might do better spend their lives for nought—get checked in every great effort—toil with brain and limb for things that have no more to do with a manly life than tarts and confectionery. That's what makes women a curse; and life is stunted to suit their littleness."[301]

Eliot questions the possibility for women to exert power for good and to join men as responsible participants in society if their education and prospects are restricted to what is deemed socially "proper" acceptable to the traditional role of the "angel of the house". The faulty Victorian female education is to blame for misguiding Mrs Transome into thinking that her only choices are sexual fascination, maternal power, and a petty exertion of her will in small idiosyncrasies regarding the management of the estate, what the narrator names "her 'ways' which must not be crossed".[302] Female education similarly misguided Esther into the belief that the life of a lady is all she could aspire to.

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[298] Zimmerman, *op. cit.*, p.441
[299] Eliot, *op. cit.*,
[300] Ibid., p.122
[301] Ibid., p.124
[302] Ibid., p.30

Eliot offers an insight on the content of Mrs Transome's education in chapter I. It is superficial knowledge, whose primary function was firstly to make her more attractive to the men who courted her and secondly, to equip her to adeptly navigate the complexities of drawing-room gossip and gatherings.

> When she was young she had been thought wonderfully clever and accomplished, and had been rather ambitious of intellectual superiority—had secretly picked out for private reading the lighter parts of dangerous French authors—and in company had been able to talk of Mr Burke's style, or of Chateaubriand's eloquence—had laughed at the Lyrical Ballads, and admired Mr Southey's Thalaba. She always thought that the dangerous French writers were wicked and that her reading of them was a sin; but many sinful things were highly agreeable to her, and many things which she did not doubt to be good and true were dull and meaningless.[303]

Mrs Transome does not fully understand what she had read, she is prejudiced towards French authors without fully understanding the reason, her knowledge is perfunctory, she admits reading "the lighter parts". Although the novel is set in 1832, the issues experienced by young Mrs Transome are the same that many other young women were experiencing in the England of the 1860s. Moreover, the few educated women faced another issue, namely that society did not take them seriously: they are subject to a constant patronizing attitude even when they are admitted being intelligent.[304] Such is the case of Esther, who is undoubtedly learned, privy to a level of education that was not accessible to all, but who is patronized by Felix and later at Transome Court, by Harold. Eliot denotes how Mrs Transome's education narrowed her vision, reinforced her prejudices, and imprisoned more securely into her misery, moreover her knowledge has become obsolete.[305] Her character represents the worst possible outcome of such teachings.

> Mrs Transome had been in her bloom before this century began, and in the long painful years since then, what she had once regarded as her knowledge

[303] Ibid., p.29
[304] Spittles, *op. cit.*, p.99
[305] Paxton, *op. cit.*, p.147

> and accomplishments had become as valueless as old-fashioned stucco ornaments, of which the substance was never worth anything, while the form is no longer to the taste of any living mortal.[306]

If Arabella Transome might represent the damage of the Victorian attitude towards women, it could be argued that Esther Lyon instead represents Eliot's hope for female emancipation. At the beginning of the novel, she is represented as a beautiful woman that has genteel aspirations and who is fascinated with Byronic heroes. Esther dreams of becoming a lady, has aesthetic dreams of luxury and beauty. It seems that her reading of Byron and romantic heroes has sharpened her egoistic attitude, fuelling her aspirations, and blinding her before her father's heartache. She looks down on both her current condition and her father and does not seem to be aware how her aspirations have generated in her an impossibility to express any sympathy, especially towards her father.

It is Felix's influence that shatters Esther's genteel ideas and guides her towards a different life goal. Without Felix kindling her conversion she would probably have chosen Harold, blinded by the luxury and manners of Transome Court. However, such conversion is not achieved by Felix's influence alone. It could be argued that Mrs Transome and Rev. Lyon also played a role in Esther's newfound morals and principles, each providing a "vision".[307] Rev. Lyon narrates his personal history to Esther, revealing details about her mother Annette. He confesses what to him was a moment weakness and error, which instead was a significant display of sympathy.

> her mind seemed suddenly enlarged by a vision of passion and struggle, of delight and renunciation, in the lot of beings who had hitherto been a dull enigma to her. And in the act of unfolding to her that he was not her real father, but had only striven to cherish her as a father, had only longed to be loved as a father, the odd, way-worn, unworldly man became the object of a new sympathy in which Esther exulted. Perhaps this knowledge would have been less powerful within her, but for the mental preparation that had come

[306] Ibid., p.30
[307] Carroll, "Felix Holt: Society as Protagonist", *op. cit.*, p.251

> during the last two months from her acquaintance with Felix Holt, which had taught her to doubt the infallibility of her own standard, and raised a presentiment of moral depths that were hidden from her.[308]

Mrs Transome instead provides a cautionary tale to what such "middling delights" might result into

> Esther found it difficult to speak. The dimly-suggested tragedy of this woman's life, the dreary waste of years empty of sweet trust and affection, afflicted her even to horror. It seemed to have come as a last vision to urge her toward the life where the draughts of joy sprang from the unchanging fountains of reverence and devout love.
>
> But all the more she longed to still the pain of this heart that beat against hers.[309]

Esther's conversion thus stems from education but greatly develops through displays of sympathy or lack thereof. It is through a contrast with Esther that Eliot manages to underline Mrs Transome's egoism and its consequences, as well as a woman's potential. Both women had initially believed that the assertion of power through rank or sexual fascination could have secured them a "warm, comfortable, interesting life",[310] but Esther throughout the novel acquires more knowledge of life, morals and sympathy, and understands that by accepting Harold's proposal she would have become slave of his "moral mediocrity" just as his previous wife had been slave of his wealth.[311] Felix helped her to aspire to something better.

By showing Esther's *Bildung* and Mrs Transome's gradual ossification, Eliot introduces another issue connected to women's emancipation, namely the influence of society and men. In the novel there are four key male figures that play their role in the emancipation – or lack thereof – of Esther and Mrs Transome, namely, Rev. Lyon, Mr Jermyn, Harold, and Felix. How they behave with women is

[308] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.252
[309] Ibid., p.470
[310] Ibid., p.365
[311] Zimmerman, *op. cit.*, p.445

symptomatic of who they are as men.[312] Mr Jermyn is presented as a successful, arrogant, and handsome lawyer. The reader perceives him as malicious and dubious because he generates uneasiness in Mrs Transome, although the reason is explained only later in the book. Jermyn's manipulation of Arabella Transome's shame concerning her affair and Harold's illegitimate birth exemplifies the morally corrosive effects of a legal and socio-economic system that enforces a double sexual standard which deems female adultery as reprehensible while overlooking male adultery.[313] Eliot was aware of such issue first-hand, as she had been subject to backlash for decades for her relationship with Lewes, while Lewes was left relatively unscathed. Eliot represents such double standard in the contrast between Mrs Transome and Jermyn's memories of their affair, their confrontation in chapter XLII is particularly pivotal. Jermyn is not afraid to use the affair as a leverage to obtain what he wants, he knows that the consequences for him will be minimal, their secret has been for him a bargain chip that he has held close for years only to use it at the right time. When Harold begins to actively obstruct him, Jermyn goes to Mrs Transome to collect his debt. She talks as if the affair was merely her fault, while he is emotionless throughout the whole exchange, expressing only scorn towards her and frustration when she does not comply. His betrayal is a mere consequence of a society that ensures male privilege, and eventually Mrs Transome airs her misery:

> "You can't withdraw them. Can a man apologize for being a dastard?—And I have caused you to strain your conscience, have I?—it is I who have sullied your purity? I should think the demons have more honor—they are not so impudent to one another. I would not lose the misery of being a woman, now I see what can be the baseness of a man. One must be a man—first to tell a woman that her love has made her your debtor, and then ask her to pay you by breaking the last poor threads between her and her son."
> [...]

[312] Carroll, *op. cit.*, p.243
[313] Paxton, *op. cit.*, p.148

> "But now you have asked me, I will never tell him! Be ruined—no—do something more dastardly to save yourself. If I sinned, my judgment went beforehand—that I should sin for a man like you."[314]

Jermyn has become insensitive, he is the result of a social and moral system that defines kinship in patriarchal terms and that assesses love by determining if it makes a good bargain, and such belief has been instilled into Harold too.

Harold Transome as soon as he arrives takes all agency from his mother's hands, relegating her to the role of a pretty figurine, to ensure more freedom for himself to enact changes in the estate.[315] He treats her condescendingly, he is surprised that she managed the estate alone for so many years, then he appoints such success to Jermyn. Harold relieves his mother of her role of manager, presenting such decision as a favour that he is doing to her, as not to stain her in an exercise of intellect that she is not meant to partake in because prerogative of men. He relegates her to her designated role as caretaker, as grandmother.

> "Ah, you've had to worry yourself about things that don't properly belong to a woman—my father being weakly. We'll set all that right. You shall have nothing to do now but to be grandmamma on satin cushions."[316]

Harold looks at women as if they were possession, he says that he does not like them opinionated but rather he looks for beauty. If Felix's first interaction with Esther has them discuss Byron and its moral function, Harold instead compliments Esther's appearance: "he was under some admiring surprise at her appearance and manner.".[317] Felix is interested in her intellect and her potential, Harold in her beauty. Harold seeks to turn Esther, like his mother and his first wife, into another of his possessions. The conversation they have in the drawing-room of Transome Court is particularly telling.

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[314] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.401-402
[315] Paxton, *op. cit.*, p.151
[316] Ibid., p.21
[317] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.174

"Don't move, pray," he said on entering; "you look as if you were standing for your own portrait."

"I take that as an insinuation," said Esther, laughing, and moving toward her seat on an ottoman near the fire, "for I notice almost all the portraits are in a conscious, affected attitude. That fair Lady Betty looks as if she had been drilled into that posture, and had not will enough of her own ever to move again unless she had a little push given to her."

[…]

She had often fancied pleasant scenes in which such homage was rendered to her, and the homage was not disagreeable now it was really come; but, strangely enough, a little darting sensation at that moment was accompanied by the vivid remembrance of some one who had never paid the least attention to her foot.

[…]

"I wonder," said Esther, breaking the silence in her usual light silvery tones — "I wonder whether the women who looked in that way ever felt any troubles. I see there are two old ones up-stairs in the billiard-room who have only got fat; the expression of their faces is just of the same sort."

"A woman ought never to have any trouble. There should always be a man to guard her from it. (Harold Transome was masculine and fallible; he had incautiously sat down this morning to pay his addresses by talk about nothing in particular; and, clever experienced man as he was, he fell into nonsense.)

"But suppose the man himself got into trouble—you would wish her to mind about that. Or suppose," added Esther, suddenly looking up merrily at Harold, "the man himself was troublesome?"

"Oh, you must not strain probabilities in that way. The generality of men are perfect. Take me, for example."

"You are a perfect judge of sauces," said Esther, who had her triumphs in letting Harold know that she was capable of taking notes.[318]

Esther comprehends the dangers of perceiving women as static art, if once she would have been flattered to receive compliments for her beauty, now instead she understands how it is more important to receive compliments for other qualities, such as her intellect. She then proceeds to present herself as anything but a meek and passive woman, she holds her stance and even criticizes Harold, taking pride in such accomplishment. The Esther of the first chapters of the novel could have

[318] Ibid., pp.383-384

become the kind of wife which Harold would have appreciated: not like his silent, dark-eyed slave wife, but someone like the striking majestic figure who still appears from time to time in his mother.[319] Harold's fake radicalism is thus revealed by his true relationship with women, the significance that his first wife was a slave seems to escape him, but not Esther, who instead understands while at Transome Court the complementary nature of his political public life and his private life, as well as the dangers in Harold's view of women as static art.

Felix treats Esther completely opposite to Harold, he does not compliment her beauty until later in the novel, he chastises her quite harshly because he believes her capable of change and of becoming a better person. Although he ultimately proves a good teacher and he kindles Esther's conversion, it could be argued that his behaviour towards women is equally debatable. He is uncompromising with his mother, and with Esther he is the most tactless and insensitive. His bluntness often belittles her, and he is also unnecessarily mean: "'I should like to come and scold her every day and make her cry and cut her fine hair off.'".[320]. At times appearing even unworthy of Esther's worship, Felix is self-righteous, even if the narrator discloses that there is "a delicacy of which he was capable under all his abruptness".[321] Felix chastises her like he does with his workers, but Esther not only defends herself from his criticism, but proves a more apt pupil. She undergoes not only a change in ideals but also in attitude: her pride and egoism disappear, and instead learns new ways to express her love and tenderness, especially towards her father. Before Esther's submission and newfound sympathy, Felix loses his bluntness and develops tenderness himself.[322]

As previously examined, Felix harshness might have been attributed to his uncompromising political and social views, as the novel proceeds, events – such as

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[319] R. Bode, "Power and Submission in Felix Holt, the Radical", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 35, no. 4, 1995, pp. 769-788, p.773
[320] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.72
[321] Ibid., p.152
[322] Zimmerman, *op. cit.*, p.445

the mob – and people – such as Rev. Lyon and Esther – teach Felix that one cannot separate the public and private sphere. He undergoes a process of change, where he becomes much more tender towards Esther and accepts that her love can improve him as a man.

> "Oh, I tell you what, though!" said Felix, starting up, thrusting his hands into his pockets, and creasing his brow playfully, "if you take me in that way I shall be forced to be a much better fellow than I ever thought of being."[323]

Felix initiates a process of change in Esther, but such process goes in two directions.[324] It is through Esther's relationship with Felix that Eliot illustrates the true potential power of women, namely their ability to change men's hearts and minds for the better. Esther displays such womanly ability in two poignant instances. The first being that Esther seems to be moulding and creating Felix into the inspiring figure that he will later become, through her words while Felix is in prison.[325] When at Transome Court Esther repeatedly thinks of Felix and what he would be thinking or saying, and it is through such reflections that she turns Felix into a hero. Bode states that Felix does inspire Esther, but only after she creates him in the image of the inspirer.[326] It is also her love that shapes him. As it happened with Rev. Lyon and Annette, when Felix falls in love with Esther he realizes that he cannot exert the control he wants on his life, rather that he can improve himself by accepting and reciprocating her love. The reader changes their opinion of Felix because of Esther's view of him, and so do the people in court. In the scene of the trial Esther becomes the ideal woman. Inspired and inspirer, she changes the hearts of the men in the room, projecting an image of Felix that he will embody because she believed him capable of such feat.

> His mind was full of great resolutions that came from his kind feeling toward others. It was the last thing he would have done to join in riot or to hurt any

[323] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.475
[324] Bode, *op. cit.*, p.776
[325] Ibid., p.779
[326] Ibid., p.779

> man, if he could have helped it. His nature is very noble; he is tender-hearted; he could never have had any intention that was not brave and good.[327]

Esther expresses herself with Wordsworthian manners, with simple unadorned words and guided by emotion.[328] The testimony of a "modest, brave, beautiful woman" has the effect of moving the audience, especially the most influential.[329] As a result, although Felix is found guilty, people move in favour of the arrangement of his pardon. It is during her decision to take a stand that Esther's ultimate transformation happens. Although she had been tempted in a substantial and prolonged way at Transome Court, she awakens and uncovers a virtuous self that has always been there.[330] Bode argues that for George Eliot it is creation the true power of women.[331] Moreover, in *Felix Holt,* Eliot illustrates the best and worst outcomes of a union between male and female. The latter being the affair between Mrs Transome and Jermyn, who brings out the worst in each other, and the former being the partnership between Esther and Felix, who instead help one another to become the best possible version of themselves: Felix will touch people's minds, Esther their hearts.[332]

The novel illustrates Eliot's belief that women do not need direct access to political power to change society and undergo a successful path of self-development, because they are able to instil in men duty and self-devotion through sympathy.[333] Still, Zimmerman indicates a weakness present in the novel, namely that the story is set during the time of the elections, but women have no political consciousness.[333] It seems that they live in isolation from the male-controlled political system to the point that in the chapters involving Esther and Mrs Transome any political discussion is almost absent. The novel seems to cement the

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[327] Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.449
[328] Dramin, *op. cit.*, p.278
[329] R.B. Yeazell, "Why Political Novels Have Heroines: "Sybil, Mary Bardon" and "Felix Holt"", *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 1985, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 126-144, p.139
[330] Ibid., p.140
[331] Bode, *op. cit.*, p.780
[332] Zimmerman, *op. cit.*, p.445
[333] Ibid., p.446

different spheres of female and male agency, the latter being politics, money, and social reform; the former being marriage, birthright, and inheritance.[334] Eliot is forced to create coincidences and complicated plots to have everything combine. Zimmerman also mentions the issue of determinism, meaning that if women are condemned to miserable conditions, and such meaner things cannot be changed in fear of social revolution, than women cannot change their condition unless an outside agent is inserted.[334] Locked in their drawing rooms and with insufficient education, women cannot evolve on their own. In the novel the outside agent is Felix, who represents a higher standard for men, and who takes the role of moral agent. Only through education women are offered something higher than the "meaner things in life", but such education can only be offered by an outside agent.[335]

Eliot's ambivalent and ambiguous position towards the role of women is exemplified in the last chapter of the novel before the epilogue, chapter LI. In the last pages, during her conversation with Felix, Esther becomes gentle and deferential towards him. She has concluded that Felix is her ideal husband, and submission her true lot, acquiescing to a life of passivity and dependence. However, at the same time she banters with Felix, challenging his former dogmatic ideals by not only keeping her two-pound income, but also keeping his self-righteousness in check. Such behaviours of submission and agency coexist in multiple exchanges. She banters but then stops to ask for his permission,

> Esther said all this in a playful tone, but she ended, with a grave look of appealing submission—
> "I mean—if you approve. I wish to do what you think it will be right to do."[336]

[334] Ibid., p.448
[335] Ibid., p.450
[336] Eliot, *op. cit.*, pp.474-475

Then grows playful again, but when Felix displays his former harshness she rebukes him:

> "Oh, yes," she said, with a little toss; "I shall improve your French accent."
> "You won't want me to wear a stock," said Felix, with a defiant shake of the head.
>
> "No; and you will not attribute stupid thoughts to me before I've uttered them."[336]

Ultimately, she admits her weakness and Felix's superiority because male, but at the same time recognizes that she contributed to transform him into a better man, therefore she is not completely helpless.

> "I'm a rough, severe fellow, Esther. Shall you never repent?—never be inwardly reproaching me that I was not a man who could have shared your wealth? Are you quite sure?"
> "Quite sure!" said Esther, shaking her head; "for then I should have honored you less. I am weak—my husband must be greater and nobler than I am."
> "Oh, I tell you what, though!" said Felix, starting up, thrusting his hands into his pockets, and creasing his brow playfully, "if you take me in that way I shall be forced to be a much better fellow than I ever thought of being."
> "I call that retribution," said Esther, with a laugh as sweet as the morning thrush.[336]

Esther submits but at the same time keeps her oversight on Felix, guiding him towards a nobler and more gentle approach towards her and, consequently, towards society. Esther's inheritance allows her moral end economic independence, which hints to Eliot's feminist idea of an egalitarian marriage, but at the same time her reverence towards Felix is rooted in Eliot's conservative view of marriage.[337] The ending displays both an ultimate submission of the woman, and a partnership between Felix and Esther. It could be argued that Eliot once again attempted to represent the Victorian feminist discourse in a dialogic rather

[337] Paxton, *op. cit.*, p.170

than moralistic attitude. Although faulty and imperfect, she represented the dangers of the contemporary situation of women and what their miserable lot might lead to. Eliot does not offer any solution, but rather a consideration about the role of women, men, society, and their interconnectedness, voicing another aspect of an age in transformation.

Conclusion

Many Victorian authors have drawn inspiration from the significant transformations of the age. Industrialization, constitutional change, political shifts, the emergence of a new social structure, the crisis of religion coupled with the rise of the scientific method undoubtedly generated fear and provided insights for moral and literary debate. George Eliot participated in such discussion and reflection, although she never took a clear political position. On the contrary, she baffled her contemporaries and her successors by escaping the binary of either/or and embracing multiple and contrasting socio-political attitudes.[338]

This dissertation has sought to establish the context for the analysis of the novel, firstly by examining George Eliot's life, with the purpose of identifying the events and the people that influenced her thought and work; and secondly, by providing an overview of the main events and issues of the Victorian age spanning from the 1830s to the 1860s. By tracing a connection between contemporary moral and social debates and the core themes of the novel, this dissertation has attempted to demonstrate that *Felix Holt, the Radical* represents a portrait of the transformation Britain underwent during the Victorian era. Despite what many critics have defended, this thesis argued that *Felix Holt* should not be considered merely as George Eliot's mouthpiece, rather it could be considered her attempt to put in conversation all the different beliefs and thoughts of the Victorian age.

In *Felix Holt,* Eliot illustrates how Treby is swept by change. On one level she represents in scale what many other British towns and cities underwent. Treby turns from a tranquil agricultural country town to a manufacturing and mining one. The rural community gets increasingly agitated because of the upcoming elections. Moreover, such turmoil is exacerbated by the fact that the town has been appointed as polling place. As it happened all over Britain repeatedly over the 19th

[338] K.M. Newton, *op. cit.*, p.34

century, in Treby social discontent and dissatisfaction escalate until the mob breaks out. The old social order is turned upside down by such unrest, but also by the questioning of the legitimacy of the Transome legacy. All certainties are eroded, a new socio-political system has been established but it has created deep confusion and fear.

Eliot equally represents how such transition, and its consequences affected the whole community but also the single characters. Harold embodies the new man that wants to embrace progress and change, he is the charming modern politician. However, he is held tightly back by his past, which he ignores, and which will be his downfall. Anchored and ossified in the same past is Mrs Transome, who represents a Conservative attitude towards change, one laced with fear. Her burden is worsened by her gender: Arabella Transome represents all those women stuck in their miserable lot and who misuse their role of women to obtain power, only to bear its repercussions. Felix instead might represent those Radical politicians that Mill and Carlyle criticized, with lofty ideals but without a vision on how to put such ideals in practice, he also ultimately fails in his great project. Felix is a deeply flawed character, but he learns throughout his vicissitudes and becomes a better man. Felix finds a way to enact concrete change and understands that the public and private sphere are interconnected. Esther instead is the most active character, she undergoes a lifechanging path of conversion, from egoism and selfishness to sympathy and fellow feeling. Through Esther, Eliot represents her hope for women, but at the same time her doubts about women's rights and suffrage. Esther also enacts a positive attitude towards both change and the past, she acknowledges faults and values in both, and embraces what is constructive to her moral values. Each character embodies and represents a different share and branch of Victorian issues, and each of them develops and unfolds such questions, weaving together a tapestry that encapsulates the heterogeneity of Victorian society.

Some conclusions can be drawn, firstly it would be simplistic to try and

appoint Eliot either as a radical or a conservative.[339] On the contrary, she escaped a clear political stance, defied categorization, and challenged the reader to question clear cut definitions. Through the political ideologies and behaviours of Felix and Harold Eliot attempts to represent a wider picture of Victorian society and politics.[340] The two men are indeed Radical representatives, but, as for Eliot, it may be simplistic to merely see them as such. Felix and Harold transcend categorization and represent broader socio-political issues of the Victorian age. Through them, Eliot criticizes a wider political attitude and ideology.

Similarly, Eliot reflects on the importance of the past, defending both the need for progress and the necessity for a tradition on which to root the aforementioned new order. She attempts such consideration through the characters of Felix, Harold, Esther, and Arabella Transome, each embodying a different attitude towards the past, which succeeds or fails to varying degrees. Eliot concludes that the two absolutes embodied by the two Transomes – namely Harold that completely rejects his past, and Arabella that is cemented in her past – are to be avoided. The laudable attitude is that of Esther, who understands and recognizes her origins, while removing what is corrupt. She endeavours to create a future rooted in the traditional values that align with her newfound morality.

Lastly, Eliot ponders on the role of women. The 1860s are years of great tumult over women's rights, Eliot questions the efficacy of the drastic change many feminists were championing, while at the same time acknowledges the need for change. Again, it would be simplistic to try and categorize Eliot either as feminist or as anti-feminist, as she embodies a double attitude. Through Arabella Transome she illustrates the negative consequences of the current Victorian attitude towards women, thus encouraging change. But it is through Esther that Eliot's ambivalent approach becomes evident, as Esther is both submissive to Felix but also spurs him, as she represents an emancipated and educated moral compass for him. Eliot thus

[339] Newton, *op. cit.*
[340] Paxton, *op. cit.*, p.156

both defends the traditional role of women and argues for a change and for better chances for women to improve.[341] Her core attitude is evolution over revolution.[342]

Felix Holt represents the portrait of an era, a depiction that is characterized by chaos and change. While it is true what many critics mentioned, namely that the novel does not offer any clear stance on the questions arose by Victorian intellectuals, and that its characters are all faulty in some aspect, the present dissertation defends that it is such characteristics that make the representation accurate and vivid. Eliot gives voice to the insecurities, fears as well as hopes and dreams not only of Victorian society, but also of the Victorian individual. She debates over the conflict between old and new ideologies, morals, and beliefs. Eliot investigates and meticulously represents the Victorian age to understand it, and in such representation she is successful.

[341] *Ibid.*, p.170
[342] GEL, I, 254

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