

Textiles and Connections

Throughout the history of man, community and belonging have been important parts of life. Textiles have had a role in community since the dawn of time. Whether it be through the making of clothes, doing laundry, handicraft, or through inheritance of cloth or skills from the elder members of a family or community, textiles have been a part of connecting people and the past and present. They have an ability to bring people together, awaken memories and feelings that might have been forgotten, and connect people to their heritage.

The functions of textiles in society and their general role has varied. According to Mary Schoeser in *World Textiles*, they have been “objects of exchange, valued for their buying (or persuasive) power, their status and their aesthetic and physical content” (50). Though textiles in themselves were no longer regarded as currency during the late 1800s, they never lost their importance. People still had to dress themselves, and the beauty of the handcraft was not disregarded.

The ways in which textiles have functioned as a connector between people, to heritage, or between past and present can be explored through different approaches. Textiles can show what role a person plays in society, and the creation of certain types of textiles can bring people together or drive them apart. The view someone has on a certain way of dressing or certain types of clothing could change the interpersonal relationship between two individuals. To discuss this phenomenon, there are multiple works of fiction that draw upon the themes of community and inheritance. Three works in particular could reflect the themes quite well: *Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe* by George Eliot, “Everyday Use” by Alice Walker, and “Abbey’s Year in Lowell” which was written by ‘Lucinda’ and printed in the *Lowell Offering*. *Silas Marner* is especially interesting to consider. The way these works of fiction make use of textiles in the context of connections, and how could they can be connected to each other is detrimental, as well as what roles the textiles play and connections they create.

Silas Marner is set in nineteenth century England and is centered around Silas, a weaver who arrives in the village of Raveloe in Warwickshire. He has been cast from his previous community of Lantern Yard after being betrayed by his friend and wrongly accused of theft. Silas is a quiet and mysterious young man who lives on the outskirts of Raveloe, and the inhabitants see him as a suspicious entity who might be in conspiracy with the devil. The sound of his loom and his appearance is perceived as spooky and strange, and few people have been able to speak to the weaver, even after he has lived among them for over a decade. “Without a sense of connection to family, friends, or community, Silas’s work has lost its purpose” (Johnstone 70); weaving becomes something compulsive. The fact that people find the sound of Silas’s loom to be something scary, could be due to the fact that during the time

the story is set, man-handled looms were replaced by industrial looms and factories. Areas that had little access to industrial goods still had a need for weavers, and Raveloe might have been one such area.

The need for local weavers had decreased during the 1800s. In earlier centuries, most weavers lived in their own workshops, and they were dependent on getting orders and requests from private patrons or merchants and salesmen (Schoeser 98). After the industrial revolution started to peak, these patrons had more or less disappeared. The change was rapid, which meant that many nations, including England, saw a rise in unemployment and poverty. Writers such as Thomas Carlyle wrote about the situation in England during these difficult times. Carlyle's work, *Past and Present*, was a criticism of British society and the government. While George Eliot's *Silas Marner* did not portray a specific political view or any concrete values thereof, one could speculate that it tries to show an ideal small town that builds on human interaction and human companionship rather than on industrialization of work and economic capitalism.

At the very end of the novel, Silas decides to return to Lantern Yard to demand some answers to what happened in the past, only to find that the entire area has been replaced with a factory. As Susan Stewart explains, "the dead and the sacred are grist, too, for the mills of industrialism" (524). This statement supports the suspicion that George Eliot might have written *Silas Marner* to question industrialism versus community. Eliot does this through parallelism and descriptions of opposing forces, by putting both *good* and *evil* up against each other. In the end, though, there is no pure *good* or *evil*, only life and people who act on their own motives and wishes.

The villagers of Raveloe are part of a community where everyone knows their place. There are rich folks (the parishioners), and there are poor villagers. Even though they have different roles, they are all connected through their religion, through neighborly kindness, through the trade of wares and helping each other, for example with doing the laundry. "Raveloe works by both division and specialization of labor" (Stewart 523). That means that everyone has a specific role to fill. Eliot describes life in the lower and upper classes interchangeably, drawing on descriptions of Silas's cottage and the Red House. The description of clothing also helps in concluding what class a character has and what his or her role might be. Clothing says a lot about people's place in society and where they come from in this story. Those in the upper classes wear fine fabrics and have belongings with embroidered silks and other lavish materials, while those in the lower classes have heavier and more sturdy materials like cotton and linen.

Raveloe values itself on the connections the people share with each other, but even the name of the village carries a sort of unraveling. As the story progresses, the villagers appear torn in their choices and between each other. The tragedies that strike the village and its inhabitants seem to create a kind of flow between isolation and community. For example, Godfrey can either share that Eppie is his daughter

and claim her but risk losing Nancy or keep it a secret and have only Nancy. In the end he goes with the latter, and the two end up having no children. When the truth about Dunstan comes out, Godfrey is afraid that the truth about Eppie might come out as well and decides to come clean to Nancy about his past. They decide to adopt Eppie, but she declines, saying that: “I can’t think o’ no happiness without him” (Eliot 94) (referring to Silas) and “I can’t think o- no other home” (95). This signals an unraveling in the bond of blood, as Eppie breaks off her ties to her born father to stay with her adoptive father.

Silas’s appearance dehumanizes him. He is often referred to as a spider or something insect-like. Silas is a weaver, so he is often described as “weaving a web”. In addition to that, a lot of things happen around him quite frequently. “Here Eliot is drawing on the deep Western myth of the weaving of the fates – a steady progression toward the resolution of form in time, acquiring more and more fixity as the elements are drawn together” (Stewart 522). One could say that people get tangled in a web, or perhaps it is Silas that gets tangled up in other people’s webs. Whether one or the other, Silas seems destined to bring people together in some way. Though he does not know it, he is a big participant in the Cass family’s problems, and he inadvertently has to pay for their mistakes.

Silas is connected to Raveloe through his profession. He weaves linen for the villagers and buys and sells wares. Still, he rarely socializes with anyone, and almost never outside of work. Linen is often associated with an idiom that talks about washing or airing one’s dirty linen in public. It means that one reveals one’s secrets to outsiders or shows some sort of shameful display to the public. We can connect this to Raveloe and the Cass family in particular. The Cass family has secrets that come to the surface towards the end, and the unveiling of said secrets actually connect people; especially Silas and Eppie through the secrets of Godfrey. Although not literally, the linen ties their fates together.

When Dolly Winthrop brings some clothes for Eppie to wear, Silas is the first to dress her. This ties the two together as well, as Dolly says: “Go, then: take her, Master Marnar; you can put the things on, and then you can say as you’ve done for her from the first of her coming to you” (Eliot 68). By being the first to dress Eppie in clothes instead of rags, Silas has a connection to her that no-one else has. Eppie has no connection to her birth father anymore: all she is, is thanks to Silas.

Those same clothes were previously worn by Aaron Winthrop, Dolly’s son. One could speculate that Eliot added the inheritance of said clothes with the intention of showing a discrete connection between Aaron and Eppie that would blossom into love in the future. The clothes tie Aaron and Eppie together before they meet, and before they grow up and decide to get married. The clothes have connected them through the inheritance of them.

In “Abbey’s Year in Lowell”, heritage is not as essential to the plot. Still, the theme of

community is very important, and the way textiles connect people and emotions, both past and present, is also quite interesting. This short story focuses on a girl named Abbey, who begs her parents for permission to go to the Lowell Mills so she can earn some money. Her plan is to spend the money on fancy clothing: “she would have silk dresses, - one of those grass green, and another cherry red, and another upon the color of which she would decide when she purchased it; and she would have a new Navarino bonnet, far more beautiful than Judith Slater’s” (‘Lucinda’ 28). Abbey’s connection to others and to society seems driven by fine clothes. Throughout the story, she is ridiculed by other girls for her simple clothes.

The Lowell Mills usually employed single women who were between 15 and 35 years old, mainly because they had experience in the field of spinning and weaving and could be paid much lower wages than men. Though they were called *operatives* due to their operation of machinery and looms, the girls were dubbed *mill girls* by the general public. “They worked at the many machines powered by turning waterwheels in the factory basements, producing sheetings, calicoes, broadcloths, carpets, and rugs for a growing market” (Montrie 282). These girls were persuaded to come work at the mills due to payment being received weekly or bi-weekly, but that was not the only reason many women chose to work there: Francis C. Lowell devised a community for the girls. While they worked at the factories, the girls had to live in dormitories that were owned by the company and near the mill. These dormitories were run by matrons who kept the girls in check.

In addition to work, the women were held to strict moral codes, had classes outside of work, and were expected to attend church. Montrie says that “‘mill hands’ attachment to the flowers in their workrooms suggest the challenge capitalist industrialization posed to traditional relationships with the natural world” (275). The Mill Girls were parted from the society they knew, as well as nature, and many disliked their working environment. The industry was changing the way things were done, and changing the way that people were connected to each other. This separation from what they were used to made the community of the Lowell Mills tightly wound, connecting those living and working there through their shared daily lives.

Abbey’s relationship with clothes reflects her connection to her parents. She would rather have her parents be proud of her than to have pretty things and lavish clothes. With that conviction, her relationship with her parents improves. One could say that Abbey’s relationship with her parents corresponds with her relationship to clothes and textiles. She is allowed to go to the Lowell Mills, but her parents are reluctant because of their daughter’s view on money and what to spend it on. Abbey overhears her father talk about values and decides to change herself and not spend any of the money that she earns. She manages to save her money and buys some nice things for her family, as well as a straw

bonnet and a dark merino dress for herself. When asked how many silk gowns she now has, Abbey replies: “Not one, father” (‘Lucinda’ 32). The above allows us to tie the story to “Everyday Use”; the characters are driven by their need for a connection to their elders, and they show it through textiles and inheritance of values.

The theme of heritage is prevalent in “Everyday Use”; especially the way one might misunderstand one’s own heritage. Mama and Maggie are visited by the eldest daughter, Dee, and her boyfriend/husband. Dee is used to getting what she wants, while Maggie seems content with what she gets. Dee – or Wangero, as she has now dubbed herself – takes a picture of her relatives on the front porch without asking, and later starts gathering things about the house that she wants to bring home to use as decorations, such as the dasher and top of the butter churn, rendering items that Mama and Maggie use every day useless. Dee/Wangero’s greeting: “Wa.su.zo.Tean.o!” (Walker 3) and the way she is dressed, as well as the man she has brought along, shows that she is trying to come in contact with her African heritage in some way.

During the visit, Dee/Wangero sets her sight on some old quilts that have been sewn by Grandma Dee, Big Dee and Mama over many years:

They had been pieced together by Grandma Dee and then Big Dee and me had hung them on the quilt frames on the front porch and quilted them. One was in the Lone Star pattern. The other was Walk Around the Mountain. In both of them were scraps of dresses Grandma Dee had worn fifty and more years ago. Bits and pieces of Grandpa Jattell’s Paisley shirts. And one teeny faded blue piece, about the size of a penny matchbox, that was from Great Grandpa Ezra’s uniform that he wore in the Civil War. (Walker 5)

Dee/Wangero is especially adamant about the importance of not using these quilts because they contain pieces of textile that have been worn by their ancestors, as well as having been sewn by ancestors of the family.

Dee/Wangero seeks to reclaim the cultural identity of her ancestors but seems to have a twisted view of what her actual heritage is. Maggie seems more in touch with their true heritage than Dee/Wangero. Maggie says that she can “member Grandma Dee without the quilts” (6). Maggie has inherited the skill of quilting from her elders, from Grandma Dee and Big Dee, and that is something that cannot be replaced or appreciated by flaunting it to the outside world. While Wangero wants the quilts so she can hang them up as decorations, Maggie would have put them to everyday use, and then quilted new ones when they were worn out. Dee/Wangero says that doing so will ruin their cultural

importance. The two sisters (and Mama, who is the one who argues with Dee/Wangero about this) clearly have widely different views of their heritage and what appreciating one's heritage entails. As Dee/Wangero leaves, she tells Mama that Mama doesn't understand her own heritage (6). Most people would argue, based on the tone of the story, that Dee/Wangero is the one who has misunderstood her heritage, not Mama and Maggie.

Silas Marner and "Everyday Use" are different in writing style, length, and on a historical level. Still, they have some themes in common. The connection the characters have to each other and society can be shown through the textiles they interact with, as well as the subtext of the stories. We can tell that both Silas and Mama are quite withdrawn from regular society, but they have a connection to their past that they carry with them. Both go through a change that brings them closer to other people. Silas connects with the villagers of Raveloe and Eppie after his money has been stolen. Mama stands up to Dee/Wangero and takes the quilts from her hands and gives them to Maggie, thus deepening her bond with her youngest daughter. In both stories, the children inherit something from their elder: a connection that starts with the handing-over of clothes or quilts, an inheritance of sorts.

There is also the connections that textiles can create on people's memories, or more specifically, on people's connection to their past. There are many examples of clothing and textiles that remind Silas of his past, that tie people together in some way, or that show a refusal to part from the past in other characters. Eppie reminds Silas of his younger sister that died when he was a child. Even the rags she is wearing has this effect. This connection is also present in "Everyday Use": Dee/Wangero claims to need the quilts to remember her ancestors.

Clothes can tie the past to the present and allow characters to refuse to move on in some ways. This is shown in chapter XVII of *Silas Marner* where Nancy is thinking about her relationship with her husband and that she feels she has let him down. "Was there not a drawer filled with the neat work of her hands, all unworn and untouched, just as she had arranged it there fourteen years ago – just, but for one little dress, which had been made the burial-dress?" (Eliot 85). Nancy keeps the connection to her past by not getting rid of the old, unworn baby clothes. This, like Silas sees his late sister in Eppie, gives her a reminder and connection to the past.

By the eighteenth century, the industrialization of spinning and weaving was in full swing:

Within a decade or so, water- and steam-powered spinning was common and machine-spun yarns were being distributed globally to handweavers. In Britain these yarns revolutionized hand-frame knitting and made a substantial contribution to the machine-making of nets and

laces. (Schoeser 166)

When the Lowell community had its most lucrative business, weavers such as Silas Marner would have suffered losses. There was little use for handweavers in areas with access to the industrial market, and thus, there would have been little use for Silas. In this way, Silas and Abbey could be compared. They are both outsiders in the community they enter, and they both need to change to be happy. That change comes from outside forces. For Silas, it is the loss of his gold and adoption of Eppie. For Abbey, it is the longing for her parents' approval. The two could also be put in opposition due to their professions: Each on their separate side of industrialization.

Textiles have a clear role in society and interpersonal relationships. They carry meaning and importance to the individuals, and have the ability to show social class, social role, to remind people of their past, or connect them otherwise. Inheritance of skills or of such things as quilts, blankets or clothing are surprisingly important when considering connections between people and past or present. The past leaves imprints on people through both these instances. It is through inheritance that a skill and a memory can be passed on through many generations, and in turn remind people of what has been. But that is not all. When someone teaches another person how to quilt or sew, the two are connecting on an interpersonal level, and bonding as they go along.

Textiles are important in literature as metaphors for relationships or as signs and imageries for something that is not directly explained in the written word. This is a fact for *Silas Marner*, "Abbey's Year in Lowell" and "Everyday Use" alike. In these fictitious stories, textiles have the effect of bringing up the past in some way or showing a change in people. Abbey's change is shown when she tosses away the idea of silken dresses and buys herself one merino dress instead. With that, she has changed the way her parents see her as well. Mama does not change *because of* the quilts, but the treatment of and conversation about them drives her to make a change and oppose her eldest daughter. By standing up to Dee/Wangero, Mama does something she has never done before, and this in turn strengthens her connection to Maggie. When it comes to Silas Marner, textiles and the making of them is the way he copes with his sorrow, but also what connects him to his adoptive daughter and the rest of Raveloe. Clothing shows the different roles and personalities of the community he is part of, and it allows people to look back on the past and connect with it in a more figurative and detached sense.

It is clear that textiles are important in forming connections (or breaking them), as well as giving insight into the thoughts of characters and hinting at their past experiences. Reading between the lines and looking at different aspects of a story might create realizations about things the story that one might

ENG2501
Fall 2018

not previously have known were there. It could also help flesh out the connections between characters.

ENG2501

Fall 2018

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ENG2501

Fall 2018

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Cowart, David. “Heritage and Deracination in Walker's "Everyday Use". *Studies in Short Fiction* (1996): pg. 171-185.

Cowart draws connections between the quilts and the African American heritage, as well as Walker's style of writing. It takes a dive into the character of Dee or “Wangero” and sets her and the novella into a social and historical perspective. By exploring Dee/”Wangero”, Cowart touches onto the subject of heritage and the need for preservation – stating that Dee/”Wangero” seems to have a warped view of what her heritage is and how to best preserve it. The essay compares Dee/”Wangero” to Maggie and draws lines between the sisters in where their views might differ and where their connection to their heritage also differs, looking at the quilt in that context. It also goes into detail about the importance of the quilt itself, especially when it comes to inheritance and the passing-down of skills connected to it.

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Johnstone, Peggy Fitzhugh. Chapter 3: “Loss, Anxiety, and Cure: Mourning and Creativity in *Silas Marner*“ *The Transformation of Rage: Mourning and Creativity in George Eliot's Fiction* (1994): pg. 68-85.

The author discusses the mentality of *Silas Marner* and how Silas draws himself away from other people. Knowing how Silas went from refusing society to becoming a part of it is important when trying to understand the connections of the story. The chapter also connects creativity to mentality, discussing how Silas's weaving changes its meaning to him as the story progresses. When Silas becomes an outcast at Lantern Yard, his weaving becomes a compulsive act. The book explains Eliot's life, which is certainly an interesting read and it helps put the writing in perspective when it is compared to the author's own experiences.

Montrie, Chad. “I Think Less of the Factory than of My Native Dell’: Labor, Nature, and the Lowell ‘Mill Girls’”. *Environmental history*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2004): Pg. 275-295.

The article seeks to explain the relationship the Mill Girls had with nature, both before they came to work at the Lowell Mills and during their stay. It goes into detail about the daily lives of the workers, at home and in the mills, talking about the chores and tasks the women and girls were usually employed with. Montrie seeks to explain the community of Lowell. He also talks about the Lowell Offering and the various writers that posted in it.

ENG2501

Fall 2018

Schoeser, Mary. *World Textiles: A Concise History* (2003).

This book gives a chronological explanation of various textiles around the world and their span over human history. It is appropriate to survey Schoeser's book due to the connections she makes between textiles and society, as well as where certain types of textiles came from and what meaning they hold. In addition to this, it gives insight into the terminologies of textiles and textile production. The history of the loom and weaving has a lot of focus, which makes the book worthwhile to consider in the context of *Silas Marner*.

Stewart, Susan. "Genres of Work: The Folktale and *Silas Marner*". *New Literary History: Art, Design & Architecture Collection* (2003): pg. 513-533.

This chapter compares many themes and plot-points from *Silas Marner* to themes and regularities found in fairytales. It focuses on industrialization and some political themes. Eppie and Silas' relationship stands in the midst of it all, and the author seeks to explain the dynamics of their history and depictions. It also describes the community's connection to the weaver.

There are many works of fiction that make use of textiles as symbolic imageries and/or plot points. “**The Angel**” is a short story by Mary Johnston. It revolves around the situation of Jinny and Mary, a daughter who takes care of her disabled elderly mother, and how they struggle to make ends meet. Textiles and clothes show connections to the past and connect the two women to the community they live in. At the end of the story, a female friend of the two brings along an artist who gives them information about the painting of an angel they own, which is worth a *lot* of money, and which will save them from personal bankruptcy.

Life in the Iron Mills is a novella by Rebecca Harding Davis about the cotton-picker Deborah and puddler Hugh in a nineteenth-century factory. They both get arrested after stealing a pouch of gold. Hugh commits suicide, and the quaker woman promises Deborah that she will find a grave for Hugh and help Deborah get back on her feet when she is released. The text is a criticism of industrialism and the greed involved in it.

“**Roman Fever**” is a short story that focuses on two widows who are chatting about the past. As the plot moves, secrets are unveiled, and the dynamic of the relationship between them changes. Textiles are present in the knitting of silk, which could be a metaphor for someone trying to keep a façade or perhaps trying to cover up something ugly with something pretty.

Family Linen is a novel by Lee Smith, written from the perspective of various characters, with varying tenses according to who is in focus. The novel tells the story of a family whose secrets are slowly coming to the surface. The title could indicate something like family linen being aired out, that secrets are being revealed. Smith herself has said that the novel is about “the mystery of family”.

“**The Blank Page**” by Karen Blixen focuses on storytelling and has multiple characters and narratives. There is no specific plot. It talks briefly about the creation and tending of linen, and how it connects people through the trade of it. It also describes traditions involved with textiles.

“**Because I Could Not Stop for Death**” is a poem by Emily Dickinson that involves themes of mortality, immortality and spirituality, but especially death. The speaker is driven by Death in a horse-drawn carriage and taken on a ride through town. The speaker sees the sights and the atmosphere is calm and serene. As the end of the ride draws near, the speaker feels cold in her thin shawl and clothes. In the end it is revealed that the speaker has actually been dead for quite some time.

ENG2501

Fall 2018

Although these works of fictions all make use of textiles as topics and plot points, I did not choose to use them as I felt that they did not connect as clearly to each other as do *Silas Marner*, “Everyday Use” and “Abbey’s Year in Lowell”. They do have similar themes, but I felt that the time the plot in those three fall to and the way the stories connect to true history would make them more cohesive to work with.