

# Love and Religion in *Mr. Gilfil's Love Story*

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What is “love,” according to Rev. Gilfil, the protagonist of *Mr. Gilfil's Love Story* (1858), the second story in George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), as well as according to Eliot herself? One assumes that they have basically the same understanding of it: Love is a sincere and strong feeling of empathy, and romantic love, like what Gilfil experiences with Tina, is not only a beautiful feeling but by no means contradicts *agape*, which signifies love for God and one's neighbor. Thus, the Faustian moral dilemma, characterizing much of Romantic literature in which an individual's passionate love for another person is in conflict with God, is not the case in Eliot's work. However, since she portrays the Shepperton pastor in a positive and sympathetic way, and inasmuch as she admirably presents his love, not only what he feels for Tina but also what he shows for his fellow humans, Eliot's own conception of love and religion becomes at the same time more conspicuous.

## I.

Consider the novella's last paragraph:

And so the *dear* old Vicar, though he had something of the knotted whimsical character of the poor lopped oak, had yet been sketched out by nature as a *noble tree*. The heart of him was *sound*, the grain was of *the finest*, and in the gray-haired man who filled his pocket with sugar-plums for the little children, whose most biting words were directed against the *evil-doing* of the rich man, and who, with all his social pipes and slipshod talk, *never sank below the highest level of his parishioners' respect*, there was the main trunk of the same *brave, faithful, tender* nature that had poured out *the finest, freshest* forces of its life-current in a *first and only love*—the love of Tina. (166, emphasis added)

This conclusion, ending with the phrase “the love of Tina,” suggests that romantic love is the novella's main theme, indeed, that is, a combination of platonic and erotic love in which one finds, in spite of a great physical attraction, a sense of purity as well as beauty and goodness. Such a love may seem idealistic to many, but it is genuinely felt by the lover. It is also usually associated with religiosity, mysticism, or spirituality. Since the “love” in Eliot's title refers to Tina, she is thus present in the first as well as the last words of the narrative, and what immediately precedes the story's last words, namely the phrase “a first and only love,” also underscores that it is about a romantic love *par excellence*.

Now, this strong feeling does not have to be mutual. It may only exist in the heart of one individual toward another. In the last paragraph Eliot emphasizes the protagonist's goodness. Gilfil is not only a passionate lover and husband but also a very good man, who sincerely cares about others, a rare phenomenon offered by Eliot, both an idealist and a realist—an idealist because she expresses an ideal, a sublime love, and a realist because, although quite rare, people like Gilfil do exist. At any rate, almost everyone loves Gilfil, “the *dear* old Vicar,” *dear* to Eliot as well as to Sheppertonians. Eliot compares him to a beautiful “tree” who has suffered much—he resembles a “poor lopped oak”—but still remains “noble” because he is very kind and honest.

He loves everybody but is particularly fond of children. Gilfil is also very much concerned with justice, which is a fundamental theme in the Bible. It is true that he is sometimes harsh in his sermons, but were not Jewish prophets generally harsh against evil-doers or evil-doing? However, one must not forget that Gilfil's "most biting words were directed against the *evil-doing* of the rich man" and not the rich man himself. He has, indeed, a "tender nature," Eliot points out. Furthermore, he is "brave" and "faithful." As far as his love for Tina is concerned, he remains so faithful to her that he never marries again, although he lost her when he was still young, and no child had blessed their union.

The novella's first sentence is, like its ending, quite revealing: "When old Mr. Gilfil died, thirty years ago, there was *general sorrow* in Shepperton" (67, emphasis added). The introductory "Chapter One" lengthily shows how much people loved their old preacher: thus at his funeral service,

if black cloth had not been hung round the pulpit and reading-desk, by order of his nephew and principal legatee, the parishioners would *certainly* have subscribed the necessary sum *out of their own pockets*, rather than allow such a tribute of respect to be wanting. (67, emphasis added)

In this long chapter, readers are taken back to the time when Gilfil was an old respected pastor in Shepperton and told about his interactions with country folk of both Shepperton and Knebley, the nearby village where he also preached on Sundays. Eliot provides a number of examples to illustrate the Vicar's practical theology. The first one is humorous, concerning Dame Fripp and her pig. Gilfil shows that he is not an importunate and severe preacher. He thus could have a good and warm conversation even with a woman like Dame Fripp. He does not lecture or admonish anyone, especially not randomly or out of place. He is friendly and amiable with all kinds of people. So after the funny words the lady utters about her pig, comparing it to a good "Christian," one realizes that Gilfil is not offended by this comparison, as many of his colleagues would

have been. On the contrary, he “laughed [and] . . . said good-bye to Dame Fripp without asking her why she had not been to church, or making the slightest effort for her spiritual edification” (68). Evidently, Eliot does not blame the pastor for avoiding the “edification” of Dame Fripp. She must even appreciate the good man’s sense of humor and simple manners. True religion lies not in the appearance, she intimates. It is not usually found in moralistic discourse and severe attitude but, rather, in one’s thoughts and deeds. This is basically the point the Apostle Paul makes in his letter to the Romans:

For not the hearers of the law *are* just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law to themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness. (2:13–15)

With regard to Dame Fripp, not only did the pastor refrain from admonishing or reprimanding her, but he even sent her a “piece of bacon” the next day (68). This is a more profound way to “edify” somebody, Eliot might suggest.

By the same token, the fact that Gilfil’s sermons are short is not a negative sign either:

You already suspect that the Vicar did not shine in the more spiritual functions of his office; and indeed, the utmost I can say for him in this respect is, that he performed those functions with undeviating attention to brevity and dispatch. He had a large heap of short sermons, rather yellow and worn at the edges, from which he took two every Sunday, securing perfect impartiality in the selection by taking them as they came without reference to topics. (68–69)

He may not *seem* to be well versed in theology, but who can really tell how much he knows about doctrine, since he does not display his knowledge, as some less godly preachers might? Does Jesus talk about

the Good Samaritan's doctrinal knowledge? No, because to Jesus only the man's actions mattered. Moreover, he was a Samaritan, that is, an individual despised by the prejudiced Jews of that time. The truth about Mr. Gilfil is that he is a humble man, who hates to talk much about intellectual issues or to show off, especially since his congregation, consisting mainly of uneducated people, would have had a hard time understanding him. That is why Gilfil's gesture touches Dame Fripp so much that she never forgets the old man's kindness, and it is also why in both Shepperton and Knebley, where people had known him, the "farmers would as soon have thought of criticizing the moon as their pastor" (69). Now, the quarrel with Oldinport is an exceptional case in the village, an illustration of Gilfil's "biting words against" a rich man's "evil-doing." Rev. Gilfil is sarcastic toward the rich landlord's treatment of others. Obviously, Oldinport could not like such a man. But were not Jesus, the Jewish prophets, and the Apostles hated by the same type of people?<sup>1</sup>

Another example of the preacher's goodness occurs in his relations with children. He used to fill "his pocket with sugar-plums for the little children" (166). The amusing scene with Tommy Bond is a fine illustration of his love for little ones. The pastor jokes with the boy, nicely teases him about geese and goslings but calls him "dear heart" and lets him put his hand into his pocket to take out some goodies (71). He has them in "his wonderful pocket, because, as he delighted to tell the 'young shavers' and 'two-shoes'—so he called all little boys and girls—whenever he put pennies into it, they turned into sugar-plums or gingerbread, or some other nice thing" (71).

<sup>1</sup>Indeed, Oldinport represents the epitome of an arrogant, greedy, and ambitious rich man: "and as Mr Oldinport's armour of conscious virtue presented some considerable and conspicuous gaps, the Vicar's keen-edged retorts probably made a few incisions too deep to be forgiven" (70). Farmers, however, liked the way their pastor treated the landlord: "Hence, to the Shepperton farmers it was as good as lemon with their grog to know that the Vicar had thrown out sarcasms against the Squire's charities, as little better than those of the man who stole a goose, and gave away the giblets in alms" (70).

Overall, then, Gilfil is a good-humored man who makes nearly everyone happy. He shows interest in the people's ordinary and daily affairs, and so

[t]he farmers relished his society particularly, for he could not only smoke his pipe, and season the details of the parish affairs with abundance of caustic jokes and proverbs, but, as Mr Bond often said, no man knew more than the Vicar about the breed of cows and horses. (71)

It seems that the way he lives and talks is not different from theirs, because "it was his habit to approximate his accent and mode of speech to theirs" (72), another reason why he is likable. Because he is a humble man, he had made an effort to get close to people, but, adds Eliot, if "a *superficial observer* might have seen little difference, beyond his superior shrewdness, between the Vicar and his bucolic parishioners" (71–72, emphasis added), "the farmers themselves were perfectly aware of the distinction between them and the parson and had not at all the less belief in him as a gentleman and a clergyman for his easy speech and familiar manners" (72). By criticizing some people's lack of depth, Eliot continually warns against misjudgment, based on the Vicar's appearance. Does she find fault with the way Gilfil performs his "clerical functions," or does she underestimate the pastor's theological knowledge (72)? Not at all, for Eliot's sarcastic tone against the villagers' prejudices and superstitions should not be confused with her opinion about the pastor's intellect and personality. The farmers are prejudiced against what they scornfully label "Dissenters," someone like the Milby pastor. But this is probably not Gilfil's view. These same ignorant people do not care whether the sermon their preacher delivers "had been heard for the twentieth time" (72).

It is true that Eliot mocks these simple-minded people, as she asserts that "to minds on the Shepperton level it is repetition, not novelty, that produces the strongest effect; and phrases, like tunes, are a long time making themselves at home in the brain" (72). She does not, however, mean that *the preacher* is stupid for repeating

himself. Even though his sermons “were not of a highly doctrinal, still less of a polemical cast” and “perhaps did not search the conscience very powerfully” (72), one should consider the fact that Eliot is addressing a cultured reader who *might* despise a preacher like Gilfil, like Friedrich Schleiermacher’s “cultured despisers.”<sup>2</sup> But two following points are implicitly made in the description of the pastor’s theology and the content of his sermons. First, he wants to be understood by his congregation, where many people were like Mrs. Patten, so he has decided to be just a practical and effective theologian. After all, he has studied theology and had preached at Cheverel Manor when he was young, that is, in front of “educated” and “refined” people. Second, he is mainly interested in the *essence* of religion, in other words, in the practice of goodness. Although Eliot *seems* ironic in using the expression “concise thesis” (72), it is not at all ridiculous, for it consists of basic principles of morals, including “honesty, truthfulness, charity, industry, and other common virtues” (72). Third, punishment and reward, fundamental notions in the Bible, are also mentioned. The pastor stresses the fact “that those who do wrong will find it the worse for them, and those who do well will find it the better for them” (72). In spite of its simplicity, still Mrs. Hackit has a hard time understanding “the sermon on anger” (73). The reader realizes that Eliot’s sarcasm is in fact directed against some of Gilfil’s parishioners and not against Gilfil himself. Besides, Eliot praises him so much throughout the story that it would be contradictory to mock him: a few humorous remarks should not be confused with sarcasm.

Whether he knows much about “doctrine,” since Gilfil is a humble man in the true sense of the word, he prefers being in the company of common people rather than the upper class. He does, in fact, exactly what Jesus did. But he knows rich people quite well also, having been reared at Cheverel Manor. Moreover, “Old Sir Jasper Sitwell would have been glad to see him every week” (73)—and with him Gilfil used to feel quite comfortable in the past.

<sup>2</sup>Eliot had probably read Schleiermacher’s *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799), since she owned a copy of it.

However, “in his later years these visits became a little too troublesome to the old *gentleman*, and he was rarely to be found anywhere of an evening beyond the bounds of his own parish” (74). Note that Eliot does not like much the haughtiness and snobbery of many wealthy people either, and so her sarcasm is not only directed against some farmers but also against alleged “refined” persons (74).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, she must agree with Gilfil for preferring now a more simple lifestyle and society. Other moral qualities of the pastor, appreciated by Eliot, include his sobriety and frugality. If he has become thrifty, it is not because he loves money but because he wants to save it for his nephew, his sister’s only son. He thinks that after he passes away, the young man “will have a nice little fortune to begin life with, and will bring his pretty young wife some day to see the spot where his old uncle lies. It will perhaps be all the better for *his* hearth that mine was lonely” (74). The pastor’s thought is very kind and generous, indeed, though the ending seems rather sad. It is because, despite his apparent joviality, the old man, much more deeply than he appears, has not forgotten his love for Tina. This faithfulness is certainly not the least of his qualities; it is even one of the novella’s main topics. One of the points made numerous times by Eliot is that one should not judge people by their appearance. The last part of this chapter emphasizes Gilfil’s fidelity and devoted love to his wife, although deceased so long ago. Still, who would imagine that this old man has been, and has remained, such a romantic lover?

Before examining Gilfil’s love story *per se*, something even Mrs. Patten knows almost nothing about—only Eliot and, to some extent, the pastor’s housekeeper, Martha, do—one must focus on the ending of Chapter One, which so touchingly describes a strong feel-

<sup>3</sup>Since Gilfil sometimes takes a little gin-and-water, which is not a drink for “refined” folks, Eliot sarcastically observes, “Here I am aware that I have run the risk of alienating all my refined lady readers, and annihilating any curiosity they may have felt to know the details of Mr Gilfil’s love-story. ‘Gin-and-water! foh! you may as well ask us to interest ourselves in the romance of a tallow-chandler, who mingles the image of his beloved with short dips and moulds’” (74).



ing and scene, telling of an old man *still* in love with the only woman of his life. Based on what one can observe from Gilfil's humble sitting-room, where he spends most of his evenings alone with his dog (75), it would be impossible, Eliot points out, to imagine the room where he keeps alive the memory of his beloved Tina, so different from the rest of the vicarage:

But there was a chamber in Shepperton Vicarage which told a different story from that bare and cheerless dining-room—a chamber never entered by any one besides Mr Gilfil and old Martha the housekeeper, who, with David her husband as groom and gardener, formed the Vicar's entire establishment. The blinds of this chamber were always down, except once a quarter, when Martha entered that she might air and clean it. She always asked Mr Gilfil for the key, which he kept locked up in his bureau, and returned it to him when she had finished her task. (75)

This room, kept like a shrine, tells of a beautiful young woman, who died many years earlier and has been deeply loved. There is ironically more life in this room than in the pastor's living-room, for in there, just by looking at the "threadbare Turkey carpet" (75), one feels that it is not only expressing contempt for the material world but also decline and death. In the secret room, if the blinds are always down and the door locked, it is because Gilfil refuses to talk about his private life with others. Besides, he must care too much about others to bother them with his own sad memories. If Martha can enter the room, it is because it must be once in a while aired and cleaned. It has to be kept in a good condition, like anything one respects and loves. Thus, Tina's memory remains *alive* for Gilfil. One's memories, Eliot suggests, may be more precious than one's present life. At any rate, the pastor's nostalgia is so poetic and beautiful and brings so much hope, especially to blasé readers who do not believe in such a constant romantic love, that Eliot's description of the room makes this passage one of the book's most moving and significant ones:

It was a *touching* sight that the daylight streamed in upon, as Martha drew aside the blinds and thick curtains, and opened the Gothic casement of the oriel window! On the little dressing table there was a *dainty* looking-glass in a carved and gilt frame; bits of wax-candle were still in the branched sockets at the sides, and on one of these branches hung a little black lace kerchief; a faded satin pincushion, with the pins rusted in it, a scent-bottle, and a large green fan, lay on the table; and on a dressing-box by the side of the glass was a work-basket, and an unfinished *baby-cap*, yellow with age, lying in it. Two gowns, of a fashion long forgotten, were hanging on nails against the door, and a pair of tiny red slippers, with a bit of tarnished silver embroidery on them, were standing at the foot of the bed. Two or three water-colour drawings, views of Naples, hung upon the walls; and over the mantle-piece, above some bits of rare old china, two miniatures in oval frames. One of these miniatures represented a young man about seven-and-twenty, with a sanguine complexion, full lips, and clear candid gray eyes. The other was the likeness of a girl, probably not more than eighteen, with small features, thin cheeks, a pale southern-looking complexion, and large dark eyes. The gentleman wore powder; the lady had her dark hair gathered away from her face, and a little cap, with a cherry-coloured bow, set on the top of her head—a coquettish head-dress, but the eyes spoke of sadness rather than of coquetry. (75, emphasis added)

One's room generally represents one's personality, tastes, feelings, etc. Of the secret room in the vicarage Eliot only describes first and very briefly the window, an old and charming one ("Gothic," "oriel"), but which does not reveal anything about Tina's personality. Her "little dressing table," however, meticulously described, is not without significance. The adjective "dainty" applied to the looking-glass, suggesting some sensuality and femininity, could pertain to other items on the table, such as the "black lace kerchief," "the satin pincushion," "the scent-bottle," and "the fan." "Dainty" could also qualify other objects in the room, especially the "tiny red slippers." Besides, if all

these details, the “wax-candle,” the “kerchief,” the “pincushion,” are mentioned, perhaps it is because Eliot wants the reader to feel what the old pastor has felt throughout these years of Tina’s absence. She wants the reader to know how important and precious all these ordinary objects have been to this sensitive man. One sees that he has kept them religiously in the same place, like relics. The time as well as the strong feeling attached to them is emphasized by the adverb “still,” by the epithet “faded,” by the term “rusted,” and by the phrase “yellow with age.” In other parts of the room, old age is again stressed—in the “[t]wo gowns, of a fashion *long forgotten*” and in the “*tarnished* silver embroidery.” On the dressing table the “unfinished baby-cap” is an especially touching object. The young mother and the expected baby come *alive* again in this depiction. Other objects in the room are also each undoubtedly precious to the old and faithful husband, including the “tiny red slippers” and the “water-colour drawings.” The bed itself is not described, probably out of nineteenth-century decency.

Then come the pictures of a young couple “over the mantle-piece,” which constitutes the longest portion of the paragraph. The portraits of the young couple, Maynard Gilfil, twenty-seven, and his wife, Caterina (Tina) Sarti, eighteen, are all the more moving because of the tragic ending of this beautiful union. These details are surely not without significance. First, Eliot implicitly expresses the fact that the changes in the pastor’s physique are not only due to aging but also to lifelong suffering. One must compare this portrait of the young Gilfil with that of his old age. He had in those former days “a sanguine complexion, full lips,” and according to the fashion of the time he also “wore powder.” Gilfil looked happy in spite of all the hardship he had already experienced—including Tina’s love for Anthony, the latter’s sudden death, Tina’s disappearance, and her long and worrying illness. However, after marrying her, he had forgotten about all those miseries and had become somewhat joyful again. The only physical feature that has probably not changed is the “*candid* grey eyes,” for he remains indeed a kind, frank, favorably disposed person throughout his life. In contrast, the older pastor has “white hair hung around a *pale* and *venerable* face” (74),

which reflects a grave and pure spirit.<sup>4</sup> As for Tina's portrait, one can imagine the old pastor's feelings as he looks at that miniature every time he enters the room. Eliot puts herself in his shoes as she highlights Tina's beauty, especially with regard to her dark eyes but also an inner beauty manifested in her paleness and her melancholy look, as her "eyes spoke of sadness rather than of coquetry." This sadness has been with Gilfil himself all his life, and there is surely a beauty in it. But, as the reader knows, this sadness is related to the young woman's guilty feeling since the premeditated intention of killing Anthony until the horrible death scene of the Captain due to heart attack. Even though it was not her fault, the thought she had had was enough for her to feel guilty the remainder of her short life. At any rate, a portrait is no doubt an interesting item to analyze, and Eliot's comparison of Gilfil's picture on the wall with the way he looks at an advanced age foreshadows a later poetic comment about the effect of love and suffering upon an individual's life:

Rich brown locks, passionate love, and deep early sorrow,  
strangely different as they seem from the scanty white hairs, the  
apathetic content, and the unexpectant quiescence of old age,  
*are but part of the same life's journey*; as the bright Italian  
plains, with the sweet Addio of their beckoning maidens, are  
part of the same day's travel that brings us to the other side of

<sup>4</sup>Eliot's earlier digression is here appropriate to quote, for it reveals her compassion and understanding of the elderly, although she herself was only thirty-eight when she wrote it: "Alas, alas! we poor mortals are often little better than wood-ashes—there is small sign of the sap and the leafy freshness, and the bursting buds that were once there; but wherever we see wood-ashes, we know that early fullness of life must have been. I, at least, hardly ever look at a bent old man, or a wizened old woman, but I see also, with my mind's eye, that Past of which they are the shrunken remnant, and the unfinished romance of rosy cheeks and bright eyes seems sometimes of feeble interest and significance, compared with that drama of hope and love which has been long ago reached its catastrophe, and left the poor soul, like a dim and dusty stage, with all its sweet garden-scenes and fair perspectives overturned and thrust out of sight" (74).

the mountain, between the sombre rocky walls and among the guttural voices of the Valais. (165–66)

The comparison with the Italian landscape is doubly significant, first, because Tina was an Italian girl who brought Maynard both sorrow and joy, and, second, because the contrast between the two types of nature shows that one ought to look at an entire life if one wishes to describe it realistically. Furthermore, everyone's life resembles that Italian nature, for sorrow and joy are both part of life.

A return now to another interesting comparison with nature in the novella's Epilogue completes the parallel between the external and the internal as well as between the two Gilfils, the young and the old:

And indeed the Mr Gilfil of those late Shepperton days had more of the knots and ruggedness of poor human nature than there lay any clear hint of in the open-eyed loving Maynard. *But it is with men as with trees: if you lop off their finest branches, into which they were pouring their young life-juice, the wounds will be healed over with some rough boss, some odd excrescence; and what might have been a grand tree expanding into liberal shade, is but a whimsical misshapen trunk.* Many an irritating fault, many an unlovely oddity, has come of a *hard sorrow*, which has crushed and maimed the nature just when it was expanding into plenteous beauty; and the trivial erring life which we visit with our harsh blame, may be but as the unsteady motion of a man whose best limb is withered. (166, emphasis added)

The simile here is at once very poetic and realistic. Indeed, trees suffer too in the vicissitudes of nature and weather. Yet there is beauty in the "misshapen trunk." Gilfil's life has not been an easy one. Although the sensitive man has suffered more than many, still most humans' lives are shaken by similar tragedies. Eliot's art in part consists in revealing the greatness of some people one considers ordinary, just by judging from their appearances. The reality is that Gilfil does not love the way most people do. He is in this respect a superior man, for his love is sublime. But one can still better assess

his greatness by comparing him with Tina herself, who is actually not an ordinary woman either. Indeed, her guilty feeling after Anthony's death is not something so common after all.

## II.

The novella's main plot is a classic love triangle: Gilfil loves Tina, but Tina loves Anthony, and Anthony himself is not in love with Tina nor Beatrice, even though he is supposed to be and is willing to marry her. The feeling is in fact reciprocal, and so Beatrice's jealousy toward Tina has nothing to do with love. So it would simply be a marriage of convenience on both sides. As for Gilfil's love for Tina, it happened gradually and imperceptibly, as he was growing up by her side at Cheverel Manor. One sees this kind of love in other Eliot plots too. It is, for instance, the case for both Adam and Dinah in *Adam Bede* (1859). Tina is a very sensitive girl, and Eliot understands and is compassionate toward her, as she describes Tina's sorrow in the summer of 1788: "The poor bird was beginning to flutter and vainly dash its soft breast against the hard iron bars of the inevitable, and we see too plainly the danger, if that anguish should go on heightening instead of being allayed, that the palpitating heart may be fatally bruised" (89). She passionately loves Anthony, who is false and insensitive. Hypersensitivity and romantic love, as described by writers such as Shakespeare, Rousseau, Goethe, Stendhal, the Brontës, and Balzac, are not absent in Eliot's works. Tina is certainly a very good example of them. When she is seven years old, her feelings for the fifteen-year-old Gilfil, Sir Christopher Cheverel's ward, are of a sisterly nature and remain so till after her serious illness at eighteen, when her love grows for the young pastor quite unexpectedly and imperceptibly. It is true that when she was just a child, she liked her "playfellow" so much that "[w]henver Maynard went back to school, there was a little scene of parting" (100). Still, nothing one might call a romantic love existed between them. Then, "As the years wore on, and Maynard passed from school to college, and from a slim lad to a stalwart young man, their companionship in the vacations *necessarily* took a different form, but it retained a

brotherly and sisterly familiarity” (101, emphasis added). This interesting revelation, however, must be noted: “With Maynard the boyish affection had *insensibly* grown into ardent love” (101, emphasis added), as should Eliot’s further comment concerning this type of love: “Among all the many kinds of first love, that which begins in childish companionship is the strongest and most enduring: when passion comes to unite its force to long affection, love is at its spring-tide” (101). The first tragic event in the young pastor’s life is caused by the fact that Tina’s feelings for him are different, even though she likes and respects him very much. She is also quite aware of his passion:

And Maynard Gilfil’s love was of a kind to make him prefer being tormented by Caterina to any pleasure, apart from her, which the most benevolent magician could have devised for him. It is the way with those tall large-limbed men, from Samson downwards. As for Tina, the little minx was perfectly well aware that Maynard was her slave; he was the one person in the world whom she did as she pleased with; and I need not tell you that this was a symptom of her being perfectly heart-whole so far as he was concerned: for a passionate woman’s love is always overshadowed by fear. (101)

There is some ambiguity in this passage. That Tina is not in love with Gilfil is a fact, but, subconsciously, as she enjoys seeing him so much in love with her, one might imagine that she is capable of loving him someday in a different way. So Gilfil is not wrong to be hopeful, as Eliot explains: “Maynard Gilfil did not deceive himself in his interpretation of Caterina’s feelings, but *he nursed the hope* that some time or other she would at least care enough for him to accept his love. So he waited patiently for the day when he might venture to say, ‘Caterina, I love you!’” (101).

If Gilfil wished to be chaplain at Cheverel Manor, it was because he wanted to be close to his love and see her as much as possible. Thus, his jealousy toward Anthony seems quite natural, Eliot intimates—a minimum of this feeling is normal in romantic love—but

this does not make the vicar mean or hateful. He is afflicted because he knows that the Captain is dishonest and therefore capable of badly injuring Tina. The latter remains rather blind for a long time, which is also psychologically understandable, and does not believe Gilfil at first when he tries to disabuse her mind about Anthony. When Beatrice enters the Captain's life, and thus his attitude toward Tina totally changes, "Gilfil watched Caterina through these days with mixed feelings. Her suffering went to his heart; but, even for her sake, he was glad that a love which could never come to good should be no longer fed by false hopes" (105–06). Tina, who is rather an ordinary person compared to her old playfellow, imagines that he is merely jealous of the rival and does not tell her the truth about the latter's relationship with Beatrice.

Another instance of Gilfil's devoted love, which goes beyond a regular romantic one, is the way he deals with the marriage Sir Christopher tries to arrange between him and Tina. Anthony also tries his best to make this happen so he will be rid of Tina and can marry Beatrice without any obstacle. Nevertheless, the good pastor is not happy with this arrangement. Even though it would be to *his* advantage, he only wants Tina's happiness and would never marry her in this way without her entire consent. He hopes that some day she may love him. The letter he writes to Tina in this regard is a good testimony of his sincerity:

Do not suspect for a moment that anything Sir Christopher may say to you about our marriage has been prompted by me. I have done all I dare do to dissuade him from urging the subject, and have only been prevented from speaking more strongly by the dread of provoking questions which I could not answer without causing you fresh misery. (135)

When she finally finds out that Gilfil was right and the Captain dishonest, she thinks about her old friend: "Dear, good Maynard!—what a poor return I make him! *If I could but have loved him instead*—but I can never love or care for anything again. My heart is broken" (137, emphasis added). This thought is quite revealing, for



it shows one more time that, subconsciously, Tina might come to love Gilfil. Maybe there has been with her a psychological obstacle, some moral issue tormenting her mind, perhaps even a sexual repression due to the fact that Gilfil as a playfellow had been like a brother to her.

Tina's decision to murder Anthony in the Rookery where they are supposed to meet is due, Eliot suggests, to momentary madness. She is a very impulsive girl, but she still loves Anthony: "See how she rushes noiselessly, like a pale meteor, along the passages and up the gallery stairs! Those gleaming eyes, those bloodless lips, that swift silent tread, make her look like the incarnation of a fierce purpose, rather than a woman" (140–41). Eliot describes her in almost Racinian terms: she is out of her senses, close to madness, as she rushes to the cabinet in the gallery where the "sharp weapons" are kept, with a firm resolution to "plunge that dagger into his heart" (141), because he has broken hers. That only Gilfil could not believe her capable of such a crime is also proof of his great love for her. Eliot herself considers Tina at this moment a mentally deranged person, capable of anything in her abnormal state, even murder, but pities her: "Poor child! poor child! she who used to cry to have the fish put back into the water—who never willingly killed the smallest living thing—dreams now, in the madness of her passion, that she can kill the man whose very voice unnerves her" (141), from which one can deduce, first, that although she is not justifying Tina, she would not consider her a true, i.e., conscious, murderer; second, that her pity is mingled with empathy; and third, that in her view, if passionate love is blind and selfish, it can lead to madness, and so love may turn into its opposite. But Tina is not that type of passionate person. She still believes in love, and her ethical principles do not disappear on account of temporary madness. She completely forgets about her criminal plan when she sees Anthony's body lying on the ground. Even before she realizes that he is dead, she panics and is much troubled by the idea that he has fainted due to illness: "Good God! It is he—lying motionless—his hat fallen off. He is ill, then—he has fainted. Her hand lets go the dagger, and she rushes towards him. His eyes are fixed; he does not see her. She sinks down on her knees, takes the

dear head in her arms, and kisses the cold forehead” (141). She is terrified when she fully realizes that he is dead.

The best testimony of Tina’s moral mindset is her guilt for her criminal thought. She is so tormented that she cannot bear life any longer and sincerely wishes to die; describing her remorse and pangs of conscience, Eliot observes,

But she could not stay at the Manor, she must go away; she could not bear Sir Christopher’s eye, could not bear the sight of all these things that reminded her of Anthony and of her *sin*. Perhaps she should die soon; she felt very feeble; there could not be much life in her. She would go away and live humbly, and *pray to God to pardon her, and let her die.* (146, emphasis added)

In the New Testament, sinning is considered a form of death. Thus, Tina believes her soul to be already dead and so thinks that the only thing she must now do is to “pray to God” for forgiveness, for her sinful thought and intention, and for Him to “let her die,” since suicide is out of question for a Christian. Indeed, Eliot immediately adds, “The poor child never thought of suicide” (146). As she runs away from the manor, she still thinks of Gilfil and the others. She does not want to hurt them. She hopes that they will forget her soon, thinking that she is dead, and her old playfellow will be able to marry someone else, a better woman. She wishes for him to be truly happy: “and by-and-by they will forget me, and Maynard will get happy again, and love some one else” (146). One sees here a teenager with not only much sensitivity but also high moral standards and a religious mind, and one wonders how such a person could possibly have murdered Anthony, even in a transitory madness. The last sign of her sincerity is that, as she reaches Daniel Knott’s farmhouse, where she had decided to seek refuge, she faints in Dorcas’s arms (154). If during “those five long days and nights” at the hospitable coachman’s house (152), in spite of his wife’s great and motherly care, she remains in a state of total bereavement and looks so miserable, it is because her soul has been seriously bruised. It is not only because Anthony is dead but also, and above all, because

of her guilt. Only a very ethical mind is capable of such a reaction. As Dorcas reports to Gilfil, who has come to see Tina at her house, "She lies there teckin' no notice o' nothin, no more nor a baby as is on'y a wick old, an' looks at me as blank as if she didn't know me" (155). The death Tina desires so much would surely have come, had not Gilfil saved her, thanks to his great love. Nonetheless, Tina has not yet understood how deep is the love Gilfil has for her. If she knew, she would not feel so forlorn and thus might be cured.

Eliot takes pleasure in describing again, but in a new way, the beauty and the nuances of Gilfil's particular romantic love. As soon as the young pastor learns from Knott that Tina is alive, he hurriedly rides to Callam, a few miles away, to see her:

*Once more* he saw some gladness in the afternoon sunlight; *once more* it was a pleasure to see the hedgerow trees flying past him, and to be conscious of a "good seat" while his black Kitty bounded beneath him, and the air whistled to the rhythm of her pace. Caterina was not dead; he had found her; *his love and tenderness and long-suffering seemed so strong, they must recall her to life and happiness*. After that week of despair, the rebound was so violent that it carried his hopes at once as far as the utmost mark they had ever reached. Caterina would come to love him at last; she would be his. They had been carried through all that dark and weary way that she might know *the depth of his love*. How he would cherish her—his little bird with the timid bright eye, and the sweet throat that trembled with love and music! She would nestle against him, and *the poor little breast which had been so ruffled and bruised* should be safe for evermore. In the love of a brave and faithful man there is always a strain of *maternal tenderness*; he gives out again those beams of protecting fondness which were shed on him as he lay on his mother's knee. (154–55, emphasis added)

Gilfil is so devastated by Tina's disappearance that the news brought by the coachman revives his soul. The phrase "once more," twice used at the beginning of this passage, clearly expresses a kind of resurrection,

the more so since the young man believes in the power of love, which is capable of reviving a sick soul. He is confident that his strong love and steadfastness toward Tina can “recall her to life and happiness.” One should not consider egoistical his idea of being at last loved by Tina in this way, even though his hope is quite natural. He does not compare her to a “little monkey,” as Sir Christopher used to, even though he did so also out of tenderness, but to a bird, since she is a remarkable singer and as pretty as one, just as Eliot had stated earlier, associating her with warmth, passion, and beauty. No Romantic poet has better depicted a man’s love for a woman. The last part of this passage is particularly touching, as erotic/platonic love reveals another component, maternal love. Indeed, who can love better than a good mother, Eliot intimates, as Gilfil compares himself to the mother-bird who would take care of his Tina, and so “*the poor little breast which had been so ruffled and bruised should be safe for evermore.*”

It is true that romantic love for Eliot is quite different from Balzac’s conception of it, not because the latter is a man, for even in female authors like the Brontë sisters or George Sand one does not see a lover like Gilfil with such a feminine heart and sensibility. Eliot thus emphasizes the idea that “[i]n the love of a brave and faithful man there is always a strain of *maternal tenderness.*” Does this mean that the erotic aspect is weak or nonexistent? Surely not. Eliot simply shows that in a great romantic love, in spite of its specific mystery, which is a combination of sexual desire and spirituality, the “maternal tenderness” is not absent, whether one be a man or a woman: if the lover is a man, such as Gilfil, “he gives out again those beams of protecting fondness which were shed on him as he lay on his mother’s knee.” Silas Marner rears and loves his Eppie in both fatherly and motherly fashion, but his relationship with her is obviously not erotic. What is interesting about Gilfil’s love for Tina is its novelty. Eliot means to show that, although rare, this type of romantic love is not impossible. Another implicit idea in both the novella and *Silas Marner* (1861) is the fact that a man is not necessarily devoid of motherliness. He can be, as far as affection is concerned, both father and mother. The same can be said of a woman,

but that idea, although found elsewhere in Eliot's work, is not at issue here.

Another sign of Gilfil's genuine and remarkable love for Tina is the way he attempts to relieve her of her remorse of conscience. He really believes that she would never have been capable of murdering the Captain. Besides, what he says makes sense and is convincing, although it is hard to know what would really have happened had she not found Anthony dead already. Here, what matters is the vicar's kindness and intelligent reasoning:

"No, my Tina," answered Maynard slowly, waiting a little between each sentence; "we mean to do wicked things that we never could do, just as we mean to do good or clever things that we never could do. Our thoughts are often worse than we are, just as they are often better than we are. And *God sees us as we are altogether*, not in separate feelings or actions, as our fellow-men see us. We are always doing each other injustice, and thinking better or worse of each other than we deserve, *because we only hear and see separate words and actions*. We don't see each other's whole nature. *But God sees* that you could not have committed that crime." (159, emphasis added)

Gilfil does his best to ease Tina's sorrow. One notes that he has a strong faith in a just and good God who is infinitely more charitable than humans are—"God sees us as we are altogether," whereas humans judge each other according to "separate feelings or actions." Furthermore, his love for Tina does not prevent him from loving humans in general, even though he finds them, including himself, "always" unjust toward one another—"We are *always* doing each other injustice"—emphasizing again God's goodness and revealing his perfect trust in the Creator as well as in his much afflicted friend: "*But God sees* that you could not have committed that crime."

During the night Gilfil spends at Tina's bedside, the confessions they make to each other of their sins reveal the degree of their religious belief, especially that of Gilfil's, who had not done anything most people would have considered wrong. Nonetheless, he insists

that he is not better than she. He even views himself as worse, as he says to her, “I am more sinful than you, Tina” (159), simply because he has “often had very bad feelings towards Captain Wybrow” (159–60). As a later comment underscores, “My Tina, we have all our secret sins; and if we knew ourselves, we should not judge each other harshly” (160). Gilfil has the Bible in his heart, even though he does not quote from it. He does not like to preach but to act according to Jesus’ religious principles. The way he confesses himself and listens to her, affectionately holding her “tiny hand” in his (161), is another testimony of his sincere faith in God, who *is* Love. The relationship between religion and love, as described by Eliot, is quite significant, as her conception of religion is at the same time revealed:

In this way—in these broken confessions and answering words of comfort—the hours wore on, from the deep black night to the chill early twilight, and from early twilight to the first yellow streak of morning parting the purple cloud. Mr. Gilfil felt as if in the long hours of that night the bond that united his love for ever and alone to Caterina had acquired fresh strength and sanctity. It is so with the human relations that rest on the deep emotional sympathy of affection: every new day and night of joy or sorrow is a new ground, a new consecration, for the love that is nourished by memories as well as hopes—the love to which perpetual repetition is not a weariness but a want, and to which a separated joy is the beginning of pain. (160)

Confessing in this way is something that has always been done among Christians, starting with Paul himself. Gilfil, a Protestant pastor, himself confesses as much as he listens to Tina’s confession. He does not consider himself superior to her but even worse than she is, since he says to her—there is no reason to question his sincerity—about her criminal thought with regard to Anthony, “if he had provoked me as he did you, I should perhaps have done something more wicked” (160). Eliot’s phrase, “their broken confessions,” expresses the spontaneity and naturalness of their talks. Besides, no one is above another; no one acts like a saint; no one is God’s representative.

The reason why time is so much stressed, and night and day are both poetically described, may be that Eliot meant to show through the symbolism of these notions the end of a tunnel or the promise of an end to misery and weariness for both characters. The term "sanctity" about love best shows this kind of love: a true romantic love is "holy," but let one not confuse this religious component with one Balzac had for Madame Hanska, or one theorized by Auguste Comte based on his passionate love for Clotilde de Vaux. Likewise, the term "consecration," definitely religious, alludes to Christian faith: everything is holy, and one ought to be grateful for everything one receives. Ludwig Feuerbach would have said from one's own mind, not from God, which is far from Eliot's digression.

### III.

It is true, as some critics note,<sup>5</sup> that Eliot, like William Wordsworth in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), decided to describe the lives of ordinary people and show that they can be beautiful and interesting. She herself clearly expressed this idea in her correspondence. Note, however, that her narratives are not without real heroes and heroines. For example, if Amos Barton is a commonplace preacher and man, his story is interesting to recount mainly because of his wife, who is not ordinary but a kind of saint. By the same token, if Adam Bede is almost an ordinary carpenter, though an excellent man, his story would not have been interesting to tell without a Dinah Morris, who is an extraordinary personage, indeed another saint. As Milly Barton is the reason why Eliot's first narrative is beautiful, and as Edgar Tryan is the great hero who makes *Janet's Repentance* (1858) such a moving story, so Gilfil is the one without whom the second novella would not have been as interesting. Tina's story

<sup>5</sup>For example, U. C. Knoepfelmacher writes, "'Mr. Gilfil's Love-story' portrays the history of a 'man so wrapt up in a woman' that he becomes dulled by her premature death" (59). To Knoepfelmacher, Gilfil's love, unlike that of Tina, is "unromantic" (59); the pastor is "a man condemned to remain in that temporal world" (72).

alone would still be a touching one, but Gilfil is not a “common-place” preacher, as Thomas A. Noble, for instance, believes (x). On the contrary, Gilfil is a remarkable man and preacher, for he practices *true* religion, meaning that he does good discreetly and humbly. Gilfil’s sermons are simple and short for the reasons here explained, not because he has nothing to say, but because he practices the religion of the Good Samaritan Jesus talks about, not that of the Levite and the Rabbi of the famous parable. His love for his wife is also a sublime one. These two extraordinary qualities (true religion, according to Jesus’ definition of it, and his ethical principles), as well as a true romantic love, so rare in literature, make this second novella of *Scenes of Clerical Life* a true masterpiece.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>To Noble, however, “‘Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story,’ while not an absolute failure,” is still “very inferior George Eliot” (146). Melissa Raines writes, “In calling our readerly focus to the quiet Mr Gilfil, we are made to see that for all his apparent ordinary-ness, he is the extraordinary one” (42).