



The Art Of Indirect Characterisation: Dunstan Cass, The Consummate Villain In *Silas Marner*

Vivek Chauhan

Associate Professor

Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning

Abstract

The present study aims to establish that Eliot has created Dunstan Cass through the art of indirect characterisation and that he is a consummate villain who shapes the simple tale of the weaver, giving it such twists and turns that we are struck by the brilliant narrative and descriptive skills of Eliot. Dunstan's villainy surpasses that of all characters and his cool and calculated style makes him one of the best villains ever created by any novelist of the Victorian Age.

Key Words : *Silas Marner*, Dunstan Cass, Godfrey Cass, Wildfire, Guineas, George Eliot, Villain

Silas Marner, a masterly creation of George Eliot, was written in 1861. She was inspired to write this novel when she had observed a weaver bent under the weight of the bag of linen that he was carrying. To George Eliot goes the credit of creating a variety of characters in her work *Silas Marner*. Considered to be one of her masterpieces, this book contains, among other characters, a few of them noteworthy for the sheer power of their existence. One such character is that of Dunstan Cass, the brother of Godfrey Cass, and of course the person who becomes the concern of several individuals all on account of his notoriety.

Eliot has predominantly used the art of indirect characterisation to build up her character Dunstan Cass scene by scene. Indirect characterisation means, "characteristics are conveyed indirectly to the reader through a necessary inference, on his part, from the speech, action, and thoughts of the character in the narrative itself. Of the two methods of characterization, direct and Indirect, indirect delineation has always been held to be vastly superior to the direct form from the artistic point of view." (Currie, 1929)

Eliot employs this method of characterization of Dunstan right from the beginning; where, except for a few glimpses of the general look of his personality, Eliot makes profuse use of dialogues, actions and thoughts of Dunstan to build his character. All the dialogues that Dunstan has with his brother Godfrey reveal his carefree, cunning and selfish nature. His disrespectful conversation also shows how uncouth he is in dealing with his elder brother. What he says to his brother and the manner he says it expresses a complete disregard for Godfrey to the extent of undermining Godfrey's status as an elder brother. His unplanned action of recklessly riding Godfrey's horse wildfire and getting it pierced with a stake; and towards the end of the story his impetuosity in stealthily escaping with the stolen guineas of Silas in the rainy night results in his death by drowning in the water-logged stone pit. His thoughts of the gold of Silas Marner haunt him all the while and show him to be an

extremely avaricious individual who has no morals and who has the audacity to go ahead with any felonious plan.

Patrick Swinden in his book remarks, “Dunstan is bound to appear a simpler as well as a more wicked individual than Godfrey because George Eliot presents him more in terms of Victorian melodramatic conventions than she does his brother.” (Swinden,1992) Dunstan or “Dunsey Cass” the younger son of Squire Cass is described as a gentleman “whose taste for swopping and betting might turn out to be a sowing of something worse than wild oats” (Eliot, 1900)

Dunstan Cass is undoubtedly the consummate villain in *Silas Marner*. The term consummate is defined as “showing great skill or flair” and villain means “ a bad character in a novel or play whose evil actions or motives are important to the plot” (Soanes,2001) It is noteworthy that this gentleman Dunstan was a habitual drunkard and he would particularly sponge on other people’s money and make them empty their pockets to entertain him. It was on one of those November evenings when Godfrey was waiting in one of those parlours that we observe Dunstan pacing in with his usual gait that told a thousand stories. Eliot’s artistic description of the entry of Dunstan, first the auditory presence and then the visual impact of his entry is made vivid by Eliot. Observe how the author does it. “.....presently the sound of a heavy step, with an accompanying whistle, was heard across the large empty entrance-hall. The door opened, and a thick-set, heavy-looking young man entered, with the flushed face and the gratuitously elated bearing which mark the first stage of intoxication.”(Eliot,1900)

Portrayed as a carefree gentleman who considers life as mere enjoyment and hard work as the share of other persons, Dunstan has turned out to be a pain in the neck both for the Squire as well as Godfrey his elder brother. In the habit of frequenting inns and other places of entertainment , Dunstan has made it his rule to live and thrive on the hard earned money of his father Squire Cass. In this very regard we find that Godfrey , his elder brother, under extreme stress from the Squire’s strict orders concerning the collection of Fowler’s rent ,has sent for his brother Dunstan to get back Fowler’s rent money that he lent him. As soon as Godfrey observes Dunstan making his casual entry , the gloom on his face takes the shape of active hatred that is clearly marked in his face. Dunstan knows fully well the reason for his being summoned to his elder brother. At the same time his villainous nature takes predominance over him and he has the cheek to place a very impertinent question before Godfrey, “.... “Well, Master Godfrey, what do you want with me ?” said Dunsey, in a mocking tone.”(Eliot ,1900) Throughout the narrative Eliot makes profuse use of dialogue to expose the villainy of Dunstan Cass.

When Godfrey informs him that the Squire would distraint if he did not receive Fowler’s rent money ; Dunstan, who is ever so unthinking and selfish, comes up with a suggestion so horrid that it appears to be one of the worst instances of his villainy. This is precisely what the carefree Dunstan presses on his brother Godfrey: “ Oh! ” said Dunsey, sneeringly, coming nearer to his brother and looking in his face. “ Suppose, now, you get the money yourself, and save me the trouble, eh ? Since you was so kind as to hand it over to me, you’ll not refuse me the kindness to pay it back for me: it was your brotherly love that made you do it, you know.”(Eliot,1900)

It also takes great skill to be a villain and that art Dunstan possessed in abundance. He was so clever that he knew the weaknesses of his brother Godfrey; and this he now used for his own protection and escape from the demand for the return of money. He had come to know that Godfrey had married a drunken woman of ill repute called Molly Farren. He meant to use this piece of information to blackmail his brother. He said, “Because I’m such a good-natured brother, you know. I might get you turned out of house and home, and cut off with a shilling any day. I might tell the Squire how his handsome son was married to that nice young woman, Molly Farren, and was very unhappy because he couldn’t live with his drunken wife, and I should slip into your place as comfortable as could be”.(Eliot, 1900)

Godfrey actually felt frightened at the prospect of being disinherited as the elder son of the Squire and in his state of turmoil he expressed his total inability to arrange for the rent money. Dunstan knew that Godfrey was psychologically beaten and therefore he openly let loose his villainy on Godfrey and asked him to arrange for the money by borrowing it from various quarters that he named. When Godfrey could not arrive at any

solution, Dunstan, the villain that he was, suggested that Godfrey might sell his horse Wildfire at the fair. This attitude of Dunstan shows that he had scant respect or love towards his brother and that he only knew how to get things done for himself, putting all others into discomfort.

Harold Bloom, the great American literary critic sums up the character of Dunstan Cass in two words. He calls Dunstan “a dissolute rogue” (Bloom, 1996). Ultimately Dunstan is successful in persuading Godfrey to sell wildfire after blackmailing him again and again about the Molly affair. Dunstan himself offers to ride wildfire to the fair and fetch a good bargain for the horse. Godfrey gives in because of the fear of being disinherited and also because if he did not do so, Dunstan might let his secret out to the Squire and then all would be over with him.

Finally Godfrey agrees to swap horses with Dunstan and Dunstan now rides wildfire towards the fair. While he is on his way he is thinking of Silas Marner and the money that the miser is supposed to have hoarded. Thinking of all this he becomes careless while riding wildfire and consequently meets with an accident that results in the death of wildfire. Having now to walk on his feet Dunstan takes to paths and roads that are most unfrequented and this he does to avoid being observed by familiar faces who he fears might laugh at his expense. In the process of walking he comes across the deserted stone cottage of Silas and naturally enough he is drawn towards it, thinking that he would persuade the miserly Silas to part with some of his gold. Having neared the stone cottage, Dunstan knocks loud; and receiving no reply he pushes the door that opens exposing a bright fire that glowed forth in the face of Dunstan. Upon the fire was suspended a bit of pork that was left to cook. There was nobody there and therefore Dunstan’s mind started to imagine things about the strange absence of Silas on such a night. This is how his thought process went. “Dunstan’s own recent difficulty in making his way suggested to him that the weaver had perhaps gone outside his cottage to fetch in fuel, or for some such brief purpose, and had slipped into the Stone-pit.” (Eliot, 1900) This is how the mind of a felon works. People like Dunstan do not think of the welfare of other people. They rather are overjoyed at the prospect of the other person getting into some kind of trouble or suffering some accident. Imagining that Silas might be dead, Dunstan now started to look for the treasure that the miserly Silas had hoarded. Dunstan himself was so criminal minded that after a few conjectures he finally discovered the hidden guineas of Silas Marner. This is how Eliot describes the stealing of the hoard of the weaver: “And Dunstan’s mind was as dull as the mind of a possible felon usually is. There were only three hiding-places where he had ever heard of cottagers’ hoards being found: the thatch, the bed, and a hole in the floor.In an instant Dunstan darted to that spot, swept away the sand with his whip, and, inserting the thin end of the hook between the bricks, found that they were loose. In haste he lifted up two bricks, and saw what he had no doubt was the object of his search; for what could there be but money in those two leathern bags? And, from their weight, they must be filled with guineas. Dunstan felt round the hole, to be certain that it held no more; then hastily replaced the bricks, and spread the sand over them.” (Eliot, 1900) Thus it was that the villain Dunstan stole the hard earned money of

Silas. Having stolen the bag of guineas, Dunstan made his way in the dark of night walking unfrequented paths in order to avoid being noticed by the weaver. Eliot now shifts to the other part of the story and 16 years have elapsed since the theft of Silas Marner’s gold.

Providential justice is done after the passage of 16 years. The skeleton of Dunstan was found when the stone pit had gone dry. It appears that when Dunstan was escaping with Silas Marner’s treasure, he had slipped and fallen into the stone pit on that fateful rainy night 16 years ago. All the crimes of Dunstan came to light when his skeleton was discovered.

“No, it’s nobody living,” said Godfrey, unequal to the considerate skill with which he would have wished to make his revelation. “It’s Dunstan — my brother Dunstan, that we lost sight of sixteen years ago. We’ve found him — found his body — his skeleton.” The deep dread Godfrey’s look had created in Nancy made her feel these words a relief. She sat in comparative calmness to hear what else he had to tell. He went on: —“The Stone-pit has gone dry suddenly — from the draining, I suppose; and there he lies — has lain for sixteen years, wedged between two great

stones. There's his watch and seals, and there's my gold-handled hunting-whip, with my name on: he took it away, without my knowing, the day he went hunting on Wildfire, the last time he was seen."(Eliot,1900)

The end of the tale of the villain Dunstan is that sooner or later things come to light and the justice of God descends on man. Individuals like Dunstan enjoy life at the cost of fellow beings not realising that they would have to pay for their follies and their lapses in life; and that there was no escape from the consequences of one's actions in life. An individual should not set his eyes on the gold of another person; and particularly the money that is hard earned. The toiled for wealth ultimately returns to the person who has earned it through the sweat and blood

of his life. It is thus that the hard earned guineas of Silas returned to him. When the skeleton of Dunstan was found, the hands still held the leather bag full of the gold belonging to Silas. That bag of gold was returned to Silas who used it for the welfare of his adopted daughter Eppie.

References

Bloom, Harold. *George Eliot's Silas Marner*.

New York: Chelsea House,1996,p.23

Currie,Eula Mae.*Methods of characterization in the novels of George Eliot*.

Kansas: Kansas State Agricultural College, 1929,p.8

Eliot, George.*Silas Marner;Essays*.New York:T.Y.Crowell, 1900

Soanes, Catherine. *The Oxford Dictionary of Current English*.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2001,p.187,1030

Swinden,Patrick .*Silas Marner:Memory and Salvation*.

New York: Twayne Publishers,1992,p.68