

연구논문

The Mill on the Floss: A Girl's Drowned Dream

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〈Abstract〉

The Mill on the Floss, George Eliot's novel of 1860, traces the process by which a girl with rich potential meets a tragic end, caught in a circumscribed society and denied the opportunity of education and self-realization. The present thesis is intended to elucidate female education as represented in the novel, focusing on the ways in which the heroine's identity and behaviour are shaped by the institutions of family, school and society. Maggie's caliber puts her at odds with the social codes of her community. Her survival depends on whether she could come to terms with them to accommodate herself within the community. But she fails. The social forces, in conjunction with her internalized values, compel her to take self-denial, the moral choice which leads to an impasse from which she is only delivered by an untimely death. The catastrophic ending can thus be construed as a protest against the restrictions imposed upon women. In sum, the novel presents a critique of the social system which accords no space for women. It makes a sociological inquiry into the defeat of the heroine and the condition of women at large and discloses the ways in which female education—its institution, practices and conventions—functions as a key mechanism which hinders women from attaining a morally and socially fulfilled existence.

Key words: George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, the Woman Question, female education, social critique

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1. Introduction

The social progress of the Victorian age motivated discussion and argument on the role and place of women. Above all, the extension of the franchise by the Reform Bills of 1832 and 1867 and the increased need for female workforce in the capitalist market called for a redefinition of women's political and socio-economic rights. Alongside other disquieting public debates, the Woman Question, by then preoccupying men's minds more gravely than ever before, affected literature of the turbulent era.

One of the eminent thinkers of her time, George Eliot was not explicitly engaged with feminism. She has been rather a controversial figure for feminist critics. Kate Millet denounces her as bound with "the Ruskinian service ethic and the pervasive Victorian fantasy of the good woman" (Millet, 1977: 139). Ellen Moers incisively noted that "George Eliot was no feminist" (Moers, 1976: 194). As Gillian Beer claims, this distinguished woman of intellect appears to "persistently work at the central dilemmas in her time without setting out to write feminist novels" (Beer, 1986: 1-2). In effect, however, George Eliot had an abiding concern with feminist agendas and held the belief that women's release from oppressive law and custom would benefit both sexes. In her essay "Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft" (1855) she observes:

On one side we hear that women's position can never be improved until women themselves are better, and, on the other, that women

can never become better until their position is improved-until the laws are made more just, and a wider field opened to feminine activity. [...] we want freedom and culture for woman, because subjection and ignorance have debased her, and with her, Man. (Eliot, 1963: 205)

Indeed, a close look at her writing reveals that it is involved in a range of assumptions and arguments about women in a discreet but exposing manner. Her second full-length novel *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), which sympathetically delineates the “unfulfilled longings of an intelligent young woman in a narrow and oppressive society” (Showalter, 1978: 125), attests to the writer’s serious attempt to grapple with the feminist issue with sociological insight.

As is acknowledged, *The Mill on the Floss* is an autobiography in fictional disguise, in which George Eliot painfully revisits her intense childhood companionship with her brother Isaac and their complete break-off after her common-law union with G. H. Lewes. Drawing on the writer’s own traumatic experience, it features “more thought and a profounder veracity” than her earlier work *Adam Bede* (Eliot, *Letters* III: 374). The novel thus won admiration and empathy from nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectuals including Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence and Simone de Beauvoir,¹⁾ living up to George Eliot’s ideal of art as “a mode of amplifying experience and

1) See Virginia Woolf(1966), “George Eliot” in *Collected Essays*, vol. 1. London: Harcourt, pp. 200-04; Jessie Chambers(1935), *D. H. Lawrence: A Personal Record*, London: Cambridge University Press, pp. 97-98; Simone de Beauvoir(1959), *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, trans. James Kirkup. Cleveland: World, p. 148; Deirde Bair(1990), *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography*, New York: Simon, p. 71.

extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot” (Eliot, 1963: 271).

The Mill on the Floss traces the tragic process through which a girl with ample inner resources breaks down, caught in a circumscribed society, and denied the opportunity of education and self-realization which her nature demands. In this respect, the novel is to be construed as an understated protest against the cultural and institutional restrictions imposed upon women.²⁾ With this in mind, the present article is intended to elucidate female education as represented in the novel, focusing on the ways in which the heroine’s identity and behaviour are shaped by the institutions of family, school and society which extensively condition what one becomes³⁾ and, ultimately, to what extent the mode of the narrative could serve as that of social critique.

2. Gender/Society/Education

Set in the town of St. Ogg’s and Dorlcote Mill, the Midlands, of the 1820s and 1830s, *The Mill on the Floss* presents a carefully studied provincial middle-class society. By the early nineteenth century, the Midlands, the major backdrop of the Industrial Revolution, were

2) For a feminist study of the novel, see, among others, Beer(1986); Gilbert(1979); Showalter(1977).

3) George Levine defines the world of *The Mill on the Floss* as deterministic and positivistic (Levine, 1970: 111).

undergoing great social dislocations, caught between pre-industrial lifestyle and the pressure of burgeoning capitalism. The upheaval brought in a new social order to the relatively stable self-contained rural community, while a growing number of people were engaged in business, industry and other modern professions.

In the novel *St. Ogg's* is depicted as a world in transition. The traditional village steadily gives way to a modern town, represented by its inhabitants' diversifying occupations, which encompass farmers, millers, traders, merchants, lawyers and businessmen (Newton, 1981: 127-35). Here contradictory modes of life coexist and intermingle with each other: rural/urban; feudal/modern; agricultural/mercantile. This sense of contrast or ambivalence is evoked early on in the text: "The rush of the water and the booming of the mill bring a dreamy deafness, which seems to heighten the peacefulness of the scene. They are like a great curtain of sound, shutting one out from the world beyond".⁴⁾ It is notable in the quotation above that the language of flux (rush, booming and sound) is offset by that of stasis (deafness, peacefulness, shutting out), conjuring up a limbo state between modern and pre-modern.

The Tulliver and Dodson family, however, avert from the impending social change. They are behind the times and subscribe to stringent Victorian social codes while moving in the tightly-knit community. This is crucial to making sense of the story of Maggie Tulliver and her brother Tom, as the family's narrowness restricts the freedom of

4) George Eliot(1979), *The Mill on the Floss*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 54. All subsequent references to this edition will be made parenthetically in the text.

children and deters them from developing their full human potential (Ermarth, 1985: 77). Their limited and limiting existence is portrayed in a satirical vein:

Perhaps something akin to this oppressive feeling may have weighed upon you in watching this old-fashioned family life on the banks of the Floss, which even sorrow hardly suffices to lift above the level of the tragi-comic. It is a sordid life [...] irradiated by no sublime principles, no romantic visions, no active, self-renouncing faith; moved by none of those wild, uncontrollable passions which create the dark shadows of misery and crime; without that primitive, rough simplicity of wants, that hard, submissive, ill-paid toil, that childlike spelling-out of what nature has written, which gives its poetry to peasant life. Here one has conventional worldly notions and habits without instruction and without polish, surely the most prosaic form of human life; proud respectability in a gig of unfashionable build; worldliness without side-dishes. Observing these people narrowly, even when the iron hand of misfortune has shaken them from their unquestioning hold on the world, one sees little trace of religion, still less of a distinctively Christian creed. [...] their moral notions, though held with strong tenacity, seem to have no standard beyond hereditary custom. (362)

The ideas and values that the Tulliver and Dodson clan adhere to are essentially philistine. Their religion, of a “simple, semi-pagan kind”, consists in reverence for “whatever was customary and respectable” (364). As confirmed guardians of “traditional duty or propriety”, they equate honour with “perfect integrity, thoroughness of work and faithfulness to admitted rules” (364). They are also

profoundly materialist, putting a great emphasis on household goods and property:

it was the storeroom, where her mother kept all her linen and all the precious "best things" that were only unwrapped and brought out on special occasions. [...] Mrs. Tulliver was seated there with all her laid-up treasures. One of the linen chests was open; the silver teapot was unwrapped from its many folds of paper, and the best china was laid out on the top of the closed linen-chest; spoons and skewers and ladles were spread in rows on the shelves. (281)

Consequently their philosophy of life is marked with a peculiar worldliness: "To be honest and poor was never a Dodson motto, still less to seem rich though being poor; rather, the family badge was to be honest and rich, and not only rich, but richer than was supposed" (364).

The conformist provincial middle-class frame of mind is evinced as well in their blind, uncritical espousal of entrenched gender ideology, which acts upon the upbringing and education of their children. This is a society in which patriarchal authority proclaims that "we don't ask what a woman does—we ask whom she belongs to" (542-43). They take for granted the idea of male preference and sexist discrimination of education. The first book "Boy and Girl" presents an intimate portrait of Maggie and Tom. Maggie figures as an engaging child. She is configured as perceptive and intelligent, while Tom appears mediocre, equipped with few of the qualities that she has.

Maggie takes centre stage in the book and her moral and intellectual development, as she grows and comes of age, comes under close scrutiny in the course of the narrative.

From the outset Maggie strikes the reader as uncommon. Tall, dark and angular, she is a “small Medusa with her snakes cropped” (161) and is unfavourably contrasted with her cousin, the demure Lucy, who impeccably epitomizes the Victorian ideal of femininity. Maggie’s disposition, active, curious and impulsive, is also at odds with expected gender norms. What distinguishes Maggie most, however, is her keen inquisitive mind. She craves for knowledge, taking to voracious reading. Her enthusiasm for learning is indicated in the scene below, in which she talks to gypsies:

“But I can tell you almost everything there is in my books, I’ve read them so many times, and that will amuse you. And I can tell you something about Geography too—that’s about the world we live in—very useful and interesting. Did you ever hear about Columbus?” Maggie’s eyes had begun to sparkle and her cheeks to flush—she was really beginning to instruct the gypsies, and gaining great influence over them. (173)

Maggie is also well-furnished with artistic faculties. She is susceptible to beauty and abounds in imagination. Several episodes illustrate that she is capable of envisioning an imaginative world of her own beyond prosaic, matter-of-fact reality. Her soul strives for a larger arena than her current one. Furthermore, she has a tender loving heart. She longs to give and receive love⁵⁾ and is sympathetic

towards the weak and the unprotected. Her eyes are, one perceives, filled with “unsatisfied intelligence and unsatisfied, beseeching affection” (253).

In sum, Maggie is a child of immense potential with intellectual, artistic and affective sensibilities.⁶⁾ A child of marked intelligence, she has a wish to be recognized as such. Her own cognitive superiority is integral to sustaining her self-esteem and it needs to be reinforced by positive external response. Yet in a social order which discriminates against women, her caliber is disregarded and suppressed. Since prevailing gender stereotyping defines intelligence as a masculine attribute, Maggie’s exceptional resourcefulness is branded as improper. In brief, the environment in which she is reared is fundamentally antagonistic to a Maggie figure. She invariably finds herself subject to stricture and reprehension. There are no allies or, more significantly, no female role-models around her who could provide her with moral support:

“I think all women are crosser than men,” said Maggie. “Aunt Glegg’s a great deal crosser than uncle Glegg, and mother scolds

5) Gilbert and Gubar point out that Maggie’s desperate “need of being loved, the strongest need in poor Maggie’s nature” (89) is ascribed to her “ontological insecurity” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984: 532).

6) As critics suggest, Maggie’s life is “a road not taken” on Marian Evans’s part. Phyllis Rose’s portrait of George Eliot brings to mind the possible overlaps and disjunctions between the two: “what I see is a woman of passionate nature who struggles, amidst limited opportunity, to find someone to love and to love her; a woman who goes to quite unconventional lengths and is willing to be unusually aggressive—almost predatory—in her efforts to secure for herself what she wants” (Rose, 1984: 211).

me more than father does.” “Well, *you’ll* be a woman some day,” said Tom, “so *you* needn’t talk.” “But I shall be a *clever* woman,” said Maggie, with a toss. “Oh, I dare say, and a nasty conceited thing. Everybody’ll hate you.” (216)

Her desire for recognition is dashed. Rather she is considered a deviant or an aberration which goes against nature. Her inborn brightness thus arouses her father’s apprehension:

“She’s twice as ‘cute as Tom. Too ‘cute for a woman, I’m afraid,” continued Mr. Tulliver, turning his head dubiously first on one side and then on the other. “It’s no mischief much while she’s a little un; but an over-‘cute woman’s no better nor a long-tailed sheep,— she’ll fetch none the bigger price for that.”… “a woman’s no business being so clever; it’ll turn to trouble, I doubt” (59-60, 66)

The second book, entitled “School Time”, brings to light female education of the time. George Eliot gives voice to her keen interest in the problem in her letter:⁷⁾

There is no subject on which I am more inclined to hold my peace and learn, than on the ‘Woman Question.’ [...] women ought to have the same fund of truth placed within their reach as men have; their lives (i.e. the lives of men and women) ought to be passed together under the hallowing influence of a common faith as to their duty and its basis. And this unity in their faith can only be

7) She supported the founding of Girton College, Cambridge, as “the better Education of Women is one of the objects about which I have no doubt” (Eliot, *Letters* IV: 395).

produced by their having each the same store of fundamental knowledge. (Eliot, *Letters* V: 58)

Tapping into the issue of the siblings' education, the book registers the writer's interrogation of the educational system of the time. The resource of education is unequally distributed to children according to sex. Middle-class boys are privileged to get classical education while girls of the same social origin, born into the "wrong" sex, are not. The rigorous social codes are internalized within children from an early age and they learn to fit into a prescribed gender role instead of cultivating a whole well-rounded character. Tom's schooling should be better suited to Maggie, given her talents and interest. But she is denied the opportunity offered to him. She is excluded from the world of higher knowledge and attainment which she aspires to, although she demonstrates her facility and readiness in scholarly pursuit. Not merely does her thirst for learning remain unsatiated but the very motivation of hers is crushed by authority figures who depreciate her potential and refuse to afford her expected recognition:

"Mr. Stelling," she said [...] "couldn't I do Euclid, and all Tom's lessons, if you were to teach me instead of him?" "No, you couldn't," said Tom, indignantly. "Girls can't do Euclid; can they, sir?" "They can pick up a little of everything, I dare say," said Mr. Stelling. "They've a great deal of superficial cleverness; but they couldn't go far into anything. They're quick and shallow." Tom, delighted with this verdict, telegraphed his triumph by wagging his

head at Maggie, behind Mr. Stelling's chair. As for Maggie, she had hardly ever been so mortified. She had been so proud to be called "quick" all her little life, and now it appeared that this quickness was the brand of inferiority. [...] Maggie was so oppressed by this dreadful destiny that she had no spirit for a retort. (220-21)

The verdict comes as a blow to Maggie, who accepts it as final and irrefutable. She thus learns to distrust herself early on before she reaches a point of independent reasoned judgement. The self-doubt or self-suppression which she develops insidiously forms a basis for the extreme self-abnegation to which she is to succumb.

In practice, gender stereotyping has an adverse effect on the development of children of both sexes. Tom's superior education appears hardly beneficial to him as opposed to his parents' expectation. His talents lie elsewhere and he wastes away time and energy, struggling with his unsolicited "gentlemen's education" for which he has no aptitude and which is irrelevant to his wished-for career in the modern business world. Tom is as much a victim of androcentric culture as Maggie is, for he should cope with "the full weight of required manliness" and dutifulness (Beer, 1986: 104).

The siblings' path is decidedly divergent at the financial ruin which falls upon the family when Maggie is thirteen. Tom and Maggie pass through the dire straits in a different way. The bankruptcy occasions Tom to embark on a premature working career. He starts to pay the debt and gets on in the business world. In contrast to Tom's rise in vocation, Maggie has to quit her boarding school and is left imprisoned home. She should come to terms with the unexpected

downfall all alone and is much afflicted with the family's austerity and social disgrace. Her complex psyche, fraught with frustration, dejection and helpless rage, is palpably charted in the following passage:

Still, Latin, Euclid, and Logic would surely be a considerable step in masculine wisdom,—in that knowledge which made men contented, and even glad to live. [...] And so the poor child, with her soul's hunger and her illusions of self-flattery, began to nibble at this thick-rinded fruit of the tree of knowledge, filling her vacant hours with Latin, geometry, and the forms of the syllogism, and feeling a gleam of triumph now and then that her understanding was quite equal to these peculiarly masculine studies. For a week or two she went on resolutely enough, though with an occasional sinking of heart, [...] the studies would all end in sobbing. She rebelled against her lot, she fainted under its loneliness, and fits even of anger and hatred toward her father and mother, who were so unlike what she would have them to be; toward Tom, who checked her, and met her thought or feeling always by some thwarting difference,—would flow out over her affections and conscience like a lava stream, and frighten her with a sense that it was not difficult for her to become a demon. (379-80)

Torpid and conflict-ridden, Maggie increasingly sinks to her inside. Her preoccupation with inner life takes a morbid turn when she comes across Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* which preaches the doctrine of renunciation:

"Know that the love of thyself doth hurt thee more than anything

in the world... If thou seekest this or that, and wouldst be here or there to enjoy thy own will and pleasure, thou shalt never be quiet nor free from care [...] Blessed are those ears that receive the whispers of the divine voice, and listen not to the whisperings of the world [...] Forsake thyself, resign thyself, and thou shalt enjoy much inward peace... Then shall all vain imaginations, evil perturbations, and superfluous cares fly away; then shall immoderate fear leave thee, and inordinate love shall die.” (382-83)

Maggie adopts the medieval mystic as her guide for asceticism. She falls back on the perverted assumption that all selflessness is good and that all self-love is evil. She is convinced that joy and duty are mutually exclusive and that the former should be forfeited for the sake of the latter. She sets about death-in-life and evades all personal happiness, including books, music and human communion, which has hitherto sustained her. Her misguided moral sense is persuasively criticized by Philip's remark that her asceticism is merely a “narrow, self-delusive fanaticism, which is only a way of escaping pain by starving into dullness all the highest powers of [her] nature” (427).

Maggie's withdrawal from life is further explored in the book entitled “The Great Temptation”, in which she turns down Stephen Guest's proposal and a promise of new life that he offers. She renounces him on the ground that their love is precluded by prior claims: Stephen's tacit engagement to Lucy and her loyalty to her cousin. She asserts that when one's feelings collide with the ties or duties formed before love comes, the feelings should be forsaken (570):

there are things we must renounce in life; some of us must resign love. Many things are difficult and dark to me; but I see one thing quite clearly,—that I must not, cannot, seek my own happiness by sacrificing others. Love is natural; but surely pity and faithfulness and memory are natural too. And they would live in me still, and punish me if I did not obey them. I should be haunted by the suffering I had caused. Our love would be poisoned. (571)

Afterwards, her life-denying resignation goes to the extreme and she develops the ill-conceived moral vision that happiness consists in renunciation (604). This is, as Jerome Thale aptly puts it, “at bottom egotistic, a false transcendence, driving out self with self” (Thale, 1959: 51).

3. Conclusion

The denouement of the novel, in which Maggie meets a “violent, willful, premediated” death after saving Tom in flood, has been a knot of controversy among critics (Pinch, 2013: 122). Some, and especially feminist critics, assess it positively and maintain that Maggie’s rescue of Tom and their final reconciliation mark a moment of victory or self-fulfillment on her part (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984: 493-94; Auerbach, 1986: 232; Nestor, 2002: 71). Others disapprove of the melodramatic ending to the effect that the employment of an external calamity means an artistic flaw (Leavis, 1972: 46). Joan Bennet, for one thing, states that it is a “symptom of the relaxation of

the author's serious concern with her characters" (Bennet, 1948: 130). In other words, they consider it an arbitrary and contrived "plot manipulation" like the *deus ex machina* in classical drama (Fleishman, 1983: 254). It is, according to them, a "fantasy of wish-fulfillment" intended for a facile solution to the dilemma which the writer cannot unravel (Rignall, 2000: 266).

In symbolic terms, however, the catastrophic ending seems convincing enough in that it represents the only possible mode of existence open to the heroine, self-immolation. Maggie's character, disposition and all her extraordinary qualities put her at odds with the "oppressive narrowness" of the community in which she dwells (363). Her survival, therefore, depends on whether she could come to terms with it and accommodate herself within the existing social order. But she fails. The antagonistic social forces, in conjunction with her internalized values, compel her to undertake self-denial, the most ruinous anti-ethic, in the name of morality and her death is just an apotheosis of that self-denial (Polhemus, 1990: 173).

In conclusion, the ending signifies "the inadequacy both of the social choices available to Maggie and of the novelistic forms available to her creator" (Shuttleworth, 1991: 492). Maggie drowns with her arduous journey leading nowhere. It comes to a tragic end without taking her to the promised land of moral and social development. The narrative contour eventually swerves from the trajectory of the *Bildungsroman*. In this respect, the ending serves as "the most telling indictment of a society which has offered the heroine so little outlet, such impoverished choices and such 'false

and hollow' moral judgements" (Nestor, 2002: 70). In sum, *The Mill on the Floss* presents a critique of the social system which accords no space for women like Maggie. The novel makes a sociological inquiry into the defeat of the heroine and the condition of women at large and discloses the ways in which female education—its institution, practices and conventions—functions as a key mechanism which displaces women's potential and aspirations, hindering them from attaining a morally and socially fulfilled existence.

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〈국문초록〉

『플로스강의 물방앗간』에 나타난 여성 교육 연구

최지안*

조지 엘리엇의 『플로스강의 물방앗간』(1860)은 풍부한 지적 예술적 소양과 재능을 갖춘 한 소녀가 편협하고 인습적인 공동체 내에서 교육 및 자아실현의 기회를 얻지 못한 채 파국을 맞게 되는 과정을 다룬다. 본 논문은 여주인공 매기의 정체성과 행동이 가정, 학교, 사회 제도에 의해 형성되는 과정과 함께 그가 당대의 억압적인 젠더 규범과 이데올로기를 내면화하는 과정을 분석함으로써 작품에 재현된 여성교육의 문제를 규명한다. 작품은 매기의 비극 혹은 여성의 삶의 조건 일반에 대한 사회학적 탐구를 통해 교육이 여성의 도덕적·사회적 성취를 돕지 못하고 오히려 좌절시키는 핵심 기제로 작동한다는 점을 보여주며, 이 점에서 빅토리아 시대 여성 문제에 대한 재고 혹은 사회비평으로 간주될 수 있다.

주제어: 조지 엘리엇, 『플로스강의 물방앗간』, 여성교육, 사회비평, 페미니즘

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