

**Culture and Gender in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss***

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***Abstract***

The patriarchal society of Victorian England constructed its system of gender relations with reference to the qualities perceived to be specifically masculine or feminine. Men were deemed to be active and resourceful, whereas women were associated with passivity and self-sacrifice. In consequence, the public arena was defined as the appropriate sphere for male activity, with women enshrined in domesticity. Dissenting voices argued that separate spheres ideology was a fiction designed to secure masculine control of society, and that women should be empowered to function in all spheres of life. The attitude of George Eliot towards the "woman question" has stimulated critical debate: Does her work uphold or challenge traditional notions of gender identity? This paper examines Eliot's attitude to cultural constructions of female gender identity in *The Mill on the Floss*. It focuses upon the way in which Eliot illustrates the inequality inherent in the Victorian education system through her portrayal of the childhood of Maggie and Tom Tulliver. While Tom's education prepares him to play an active role in public life, Maggie is denied the opportunity to receive a formal education, and left unfit to function independently in society. Thus, Eliot shows how, even in childhood, Maggie's identity is debased by the culture of patriarchy which, by restricting her development, seeks to mould her to play her pre-ordained submissive role. In the course of the novel, patriarchal society strives to instil into Maggie the perception that she has no alternative but to conform to its conception of appropriate female behaviour. Although Maggie struggles profoundly to construct her own identity, ultimately she is defeated and chooses self-abnegation. In conclusion, the paper argues that Eliot does not radically challenge the dominant patriarchal culture in *The Mill on the Floss*, in the sense of providing a prescription for immediate change: Maggie is left with no alternative which would not

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damage her psychologically or emotionally, and finds release only in death. However, through her depiction of Maggie's tragedy, the novelist clearly calls into question the validity of the masculine hegemony which constructed every aspect of contemporary women's lives.

**Keywords:** George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, patriarchal culture, gender identity, Victorian women

### Öz

Erkek egemen Viktorya dönemi İngiltere toplumu, cinsiyetler arasındaki ilişki sistemini kadın ve erkek özelliklerinin farklılıkları üzerine kurmuştur. Erkekler, aktif ve becerikli olarak algılanırken, kadınlar pasif ve özverili özelliklerle özdeşleştirilmiştir. Sonuç olarak, kamu alanı, erkek aktiviteleri için tahsis edilirken kadınlar eve hapsedilmiştir. Farklı görüşteki insanlar, ayrı mekanlar ideolojisinin erkeklerin toplumu kendi talepleri doğrultusunda kontrol etmesi için bir araç olduğunu, buna karşın kadınların hayatın her alanında faaliyet göstermeleri gerektiğini ileri sürmektedirler. George Eliot'ın "kadın sorusuna" yönelik tutumu, bir çok tartışmayı da beraberinde getirdi: Eliot yapıtlarında geleneksel cinsiyet ayrımını savunmakta mıdır ya da eleştirmekte midir? Bu makale, Eliot'ın *The Mill on the Floss* adlı romanında kadının kültürel kimliğinin oluşumunu irdelemektedir. Makale, Maggie ve Tom kardeşlerin hayatları üzerinden Viktorya dönemi İngiltere toplumunda cinsler arasında eğitim alanında yaşanan eşitsizlik üzerine odaklanmaktadır. Tom'un almış olduğu eğitimi kendisini kamu alanında aktif rol oynamaya hazırlarken, Maggie düzenli bir eğitim alacak fırsatı bulamamakta, dolayısıyla da toplumsal hayatta aktif ve bağımsız bir rol oynayacak bilgiden mahrum kalmaktadır. Bu nedenle Eliot, ataerkil Viktorya toplumunda Maggie'nin bir kadın olarak kimliğinin çocukluk döneminden itibaren kültürel olarak nasıl dikkate alınmadığını, geleneksel itaatkar kadın rolü anlayışına mahkum edilerek hareket alanının nasıl kısıtlandığını romanda ele almaktadır. Romanda, ataerkil toplum Maggie'ye kendisi için belirlenen kadın rolü dışında bir alternatif sunmadığı gibi geleneksel kadın rolü anlayışını kabul etmesi gerektiği anlayışını dikte etmeye çalışmaktadır. Maggie, kendi kimliğini oluşturmaya çalışsa da, sonunda yenilir ve fedakarlık yapmayı tercih etmek zorunda kalır. Son olarak makale, Eliot'ın baskın, ataerkil kültür anlayışına net olarak karşı durmadığını ve dolayısıyla bu anlayışta bir değişiklik olması yönünde de bir öneri sürmediğini tartışmaktadır: Maggie, kendisine psikolojik ve duygusal olarak zarar vermeyecek bir alternatifsiz bırakılmıştır. Sonunda da ölüme terk edilmiştir. Bununla birlikte, Maggie'nin trajik hayat hikayesiyle yazar, kadınların kimliğinin ve hayatlarının her aşamasını belirleyen erkek hegemonyasının doğruluğunu sorgulamıştır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ataerkil kültür, toplumsal cinsiyet kimliği, Viktorya dönemi kadınları

Adrienne Rich defines patriarchy as "the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men... determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male" (Albert et al., 1986, p. 35). Victorian society typified such a system of gender relations. From the eighteenth century onwards, theories of masculinity and femininity related perceived biological differences between the sexes to notions of appropriate male and female behavior.

ur. In other words, a “socially and culturally constructed ‘femininity’” was imposed upon women (Kent, 1999, p. 179). The active qualities associated with masculinity – determination, resourcefulness, aggressiveness, rationality – were held to justify the male domination of the public space, whereas women were identified with passive qualities – self-denial, patience, sympathy – which made the domestic arena their natural environment and dependence their lot (Dyhouse, 1978, p. 175; Eisenstein, 1983, p. 8; Kent, 1999, p. 179). Contingent upon these womanly “virtues” came the notion of the woman as the “Angel in the House,” in Coventry Patmore’s terms (Kent, 1999, p. 154). The woman was deemed to be a repository of moral influence, too pure to be exposed to public life, because a woman’s duty, according to Ruskin, was to “heal, to redeem, to guide, and to guard” (Gillooly, 2002, p. 397). In other words, an ideology of “separate spheres” divided male from female roles, fostered beliefs about the nature of those roles, associated woman with submission and man with control, and thereby perpetuated male dominance over women, in both public and private spheres (Eisenstein, 1983, p. 14). Separate spheres ideology also encompassed the obverse of the iconic “Angel in the House” in the image of the fallen woman (Kent, 1999, p. 180).

In nineteenth century England, as in any patriarchal society, the construction of gender identity was reinforced by institutions and systems subject to male control. Education, religion, morality and the family were means by which the values and doctrines of the dominant ideology could be continually inculcated into individuals, both male and female (Gunes, 2006, p. 103). In the first half of the nineteenth century, for example, “the practice of educating middle-class girls... resembled... a kind of decorative packaging of goods for display in the marriage mart” (Dyhouse, 1978, p. 177). Girls were educated for a life of dependency; they were trained to be homemakers, denied the opportunity to develop skills which would enable them to claim a place in a man’s world. Any departure from this was considered to be dangerous. Women might be “unsexed,” and traditional notions of the female role might be undermined if they were granted equality of opportunity in education (Lerner, 1978, p. 219). Once safely installed in the marital home, the culturally-constructed notions of specifically female purity and morality were used to restrict women’s sphere of activity to the domestic (Kent, 1999, p. 195). In the home, received family values continued to promote the concept of the male as the source of authority, sustenance and protection, with the female as his submissive companion. As Alfred Tennyson wrote:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:  
Man for the sword and for the needle she:  
Man with the head and woman with the heart:  
Man to command and woman to obey;  
All else confusion. (Alfred Tennyson, *The Princess*, 1847)

Nonetheless, dissenting voices were raised against the ideology of separate spheres. Throughout the nineteenth century, feminist activists sought to achieve the emancipati-

on of women. In her *Enfranchisement of Women* (1851), for example, Harriet Taylor Mill argued that the dominant ideology of patriarchy was a means of denying women access to power, that cultural constructions of gender identity were not founded in reality, and that “the proper sphere for all human beings is the largest and highest which they are able to attain to” (Kent, 1999, pp. 194-5).

Before attempting to analyse the significance of social constructs of gender identity in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), it will be useful to examine George Eliot's position in the ideological debate. In the earliest criticism of Eliot's life and works, J. W. Cross records that Eliot was reluctant to speak out “on a question so entangled as the ‘woman question’” (1885, p. 336). Cross cites Eliot's statement that the “‘Enfranchisement of women’ only makes creeping progress; and that is best, for woman does not yet deserve a much better lot than man gives her” (220). Here, Eliot seems to imply that few women of her era were as yet capable of challenging contemporary gender stereotyping. Since few women questioned the characteristics of their society, they did not strive to achieve a wider range of rights but rather accepted what they were given by patriarchy. K. M. Newton makes a similar statement about Eliot's feminism. In Newton's view, Eliot sympathised with feminism, yet he has reservations about whether she upheld traditional notions of female gender identity or criticized them in her works (1991, pp. 19-23). He also highlights the fact that although Eliot subscribed to a feminist journal, she was not a radical feminist in her own life and views (20). Similarly, Kerry McSweeney notes that while acknowledging that many arguments on women's issues “want being urged,” Eliot maintained that “they do not come well from me” (1991, p. 84). For McSweeney, Eliot's reluctance may have stemmed from her unorthodox relationship with Henry Lewes with whom she lived, but whom she was unable to marry, because contemporary law did not allow him to divorce the wife who had twice deserted him (84). However, McSweeney also observes that Eliot did not oppose the institution of matrimony but saw her liaison with Lewes as a marriage in all but name (85). Finally, Henry James points out that although Eliot was prominent in radical intellectual circles, lived the life of an emancipated woman, and was estranged from her brother because of her unconventional domestic situation; she remained “in morals... essentially a conservative” throughout her life (cited in Draper, 1977, p. 12).

Nonetheless, on the question of the education of women, Eliot was more sympathetic: “We want freedom and culture for woman because subjection and ignorance have debased her” (Eliot & Ashton, 2000, p. 186). Likewise, in 1867, Eliot wrote that she would not oppose any attempt to establish “an equivalence of advantages for the two sexes” in terms of “education and the possibilities of free development” (McSweeney, 1991, p. 84). Again, in a letter written in 1868, she argued that the “same store of acquired truths or beliefs as men have” should be made available to women, “so that their grounds of judgement may be as far as possible the same,” and that the “domestic misery” and “evil education” of children arising from the “presupposition that women must be kept ignorant and superstitious” were self-evident (Robertson, 1997, p. 102). However, if here Eli-

ot attacks one of the fundamental tenets of patriarchy, elsewhere in the same letter, she links her support for the education of women to enhancing their ability to maintain the character and sustain the role constructed for them by that very ideology:

We can no more afford to part with that exquisite type of gentleness, tenderness, possible maternity suffusing a woman's being with affectionateness, which makes what we mean by the female character than we can afford to part with the human love, the mutual subjection of soul between a man and a woman (Lerner, 1978, p. 219).

Whilst acknowledging that women appear to have "the worse share in existence" in terms of "zoological evolution," she claims that, for that very reason, there is, in terms of "moral evolution," the "basis for a sublimer resignation in woman" (McSweeney, 1991, p. 84). Thus, the question of the degree to which George Eliot was sympathetic towards feminism has exercised many literary critics. Does Eliot's work uphold traditional notions of gender identity, or does it censure them (Newton, 1991, p. 19-23)?

This paper seeks to contribute to the critical debate by examining George Eliot's attitude towards cultural constructions of female gender identity in *The Mill on the Floss*. In doing so, the paper focuses upon Eliot's treatment of the way in which Victorian society constructed the identities of men and women in line with preconceived notions of appropriate male or female behaviour. It demonstrates how, through her representation of the siblings Maggie and Tom Tulliver, Eliot illustrates the Victorian practice of leaving girls uneducated and ignorant whilst educating boys to play an active role in society. That is, Eliot reveals how the culture of patriarchy not only debases Maggie's identity, but also, by depriving her of the opportunity to receive a formal education comparable to that given to her brother, denies her the opportunity to reap the benefits of such an education. The novelist represents Maggie and Tom Tulliver as constrained by patriarchal ideology to the extent that they are brought up to play pre-ordained roles in society. Society strives to adjust Maggie and Tom to their respective roles by instilling into them the perception that there is no alternative or, in the case of Maggie, that there is no escape. Although she struggles profoundly to find her own voice and to bring meaning into her life, ultimately Maggie is defeated and conforms to the norms laid down for her by patriarchal society. In conclusion, the paper argues that although George Eliot does not radically challenge the dominant patriarchal culture of Victorian England in *The Mill on the Floss*, in the sense of providing a prescription for change, nonetheless the novelist clearly questions the validity of the masculine hegemony which constructed every aspect of a woman's life in that period.

The family environment in which Maggie Tulliver and her brother Tom grow up in *The Mill on the Floss* is the one in which whatever is "customary and respectable" is valued, and where no "breach of traditional duty or propriety" may be countenanced (Eliot, 1948, p. 332). The dominant ideology is patriarchal, and gender-specific notions and models of behaviour are presented to children at an early age. Moreover, the process of indoctrinating children into their culturally-determined male and female roles is carried out unquestioningly by the adult members of the Tulliver family, whose own gender

identities have been similarly constructed. Although Mr Tulliver fears that Tom “hasn’t got the right sort of brains for a smart fellow” (17), therefore, this does not deter him from planning to educate his son at a “downright good school,” since one day Tom too will be a “breadwinner,” and must “be put to a business, as he may make a nest for himself” (22, 13). Mr Tulliver’s views are reinforced by those of the auctioneer, Mr Riley: “there is no greater advantage you can give him than a good education” (22). In contrast, the opinions of Mrs Tulliver, whom Mr Tulliver perceives to be “conspicuously his inferior in intellect,” are neither solicited, nor given (except in terms of Tom’s prospective domestic arrangements): “Well, Mr Tulliver, you know best” (31, 14).

The ideology of separate spheres likewise determines the family attitude towards educating the female child, Maggie. Although “twice as cute as Tom” (17), she is denied access to the same educational opportunities as her brother. Some education is eventually provided in the form of a girl’s boarding school, which Aunt Pullet believes may “subdue some vices in her” (156). Aunt Glegg, on the other hand, views Maggie’s education as unnecessary and damaging: “as for her having so much schooling, I never thought well o’ that” (263). Each aunt here reflects a different aspect of the prevailing attitude towards the education of girls under the patriarchal system. Domestically-oriented education enables girls to fulfil their traditional role as wife and mother in the home, and is ideologically sound. In contrast, a comprehensive education grounded in reason is ideologically unsound, since it makes girls “unwomanly,” and therefore threatens the familial and social stability of patriarchal society and culture. In fact, Maggie’s education, which the authorial narrator reminds the reader, is the common lot of girls “in the civilised world of that day” (350), is pitifully inadequate for a girl “thirsty for all knowledge” (287). Maggie leaves school “untrained for inevitable struggles – with no other part of her inherited share in the hard-won treasures of thought, which generations of toil have laid up for the race of men, than shreds and patches of feeble literature and false history – with much futile information” (350; for a detailed argument of the view of education in *The Mill on the Floss*, see Gunes, 2006, pp. 103-114).

Moreover, not only does patriarchy deny Maggie full access to knowledge, it also constructs her very intelligence as abnormal. Although Mr Tulliver is proud of her precocity, he fears that she is “too cute for a woman” (17), and that her cleverness will “turn to trouble” (23). In particular, her intelligence will not favour her marriage prospects, any more than the possession of a long tail raises the value of a sheep (18). Mr Tulliver had married Maggie’s mother for the very reason that “she wasn’t o’er cute – bein’ a good-looking woman too, an’ come of a rare family for managing” (26). In the patriarchal model of the ideal woman, conventional beauty and domestic accomplishments are valued over exceptional qualities. Further up the social scale, the same ideological imperatives also prevail. Stephen Guest chooses Lucy Deane as his prospective bride for the very reason that she is not “a remarkable rarity... A man likes his wife to be pretty... accomplished, gentle, affectionate, and not stupid” (450). In contrast to Lucy, “the dearest little creature in the world” (464), Maggie does not initially strike Stephen as a suitable

candidate for matrimony – she is “too tall... too fiery” (463) and possessed of too distinctive a character: “Generally, Stephen... was not fond of women who had any peculiarity of character – but here the peculiarity seemed really of a superior kind... provided one is not obliged to marry such women” (464).

Maggie’s failure to conform to the pattern of femininity prescribed by patriarchy manifests itself early in her childhood. The character of Lucy serves to highlight her cousin’s “deficiencies.” Lucy is invariably lauded as obedient and well-behaved (54), “neat” (76), “little” and “pretty” (75). Her blonde hair curls obligingly (75). The child Maggie, in contrast, is “naughty” (36), careless of her appearance, (76), “tall for her age,” and “rude and brown” (118). Her dark hair refuses to curl, which marks her out from “other folks’s children” (19). Susan Rowland Tush suggests that Maggie’s incurable hair is an early indication in the novel of her “inability to fit into her society” (1993, p. 77), and discusses a typology in contemporary novels in which fair women conform to the patriarchal rules, while dark heroines suffer for their nonconformity (64). Maggie herself refers to “dark unhappy heroines” (Eliot, 1948, p. 404). If Maggie’s unruly locks are a symbol of her alienation from society, Eliot also uses them to symbolise her rebellion against society’s norms (Tush, 1993, p. 78). Maggie dips her head into a basin of water, determined to prevent it from curling (Eliot, 1948, p. 36). Then, in an act of supreme defiance, she crops her hair, achieving “a sense of clearness and freedom” (80). The triumph, however, is short-lived. Maggie is left with “that bitter sense of the irrevocable which was almost an everyday experience of her small soul” (80).

In other words, Maggie learns at an early age that to act upon impulse inevitably brings consequences which must be faced. Moreover, those consequences are frequently represented to her in terms of the withdrawal of family affection. After the hair-wetting episode, her mother exclaims: “I’ll tell your (aunts)... and they’ll never love you any more” (36). When her thoughtless behaviour angers Tom, he declares: “I don’t love you” (46) and “I like Lucy better than you” (107). Maggie is torn two ways. Although she frequently rebels against the socially-constructed stereotype of ideal femininity, she remains constantly aware that conformity is the key to the acceptance and the love that she craves: “the need of being loved” is “the strongest need in poor Maggie’s nature” (48). So, on the one hand, she pushes “little pink-and-white Lucy” into the mud (124), but, on the other hand, she becomes Lucy in her dreams: “the queen was Maggie herself in Lucy’s form” (76).

Likewise, Maggie objects to performing the domestic tasks which society deems suitable for girls: “I don’t want to do my patchwork... It’s foolish work” (19). Nonetheless, Maggie does wish to demonstrate her capacities in a different sphere, the realm of the intellect. What she does not immediately realise, perhaps misled by her father’s pride in her intelligence (17), is that the world of knowledge has been culturally-constructed as masculine. The males to whom she turns for approval become the spokesmen of patriarchy. Thus, when Maggie hopes that Mr Riley will respect her for her knowledge of books (24), and that Tom’s tutor, Mr Stelling, will admire her cleverness (182), it is



inevitable that she will be disappointed. There is no place for a female in this male domain. Mr Riley is "admonitory," and "patronising, advising her to read "prettier books." For instance: *The History of the Devil* "is not quite the right book for a little girl" (25). From Mr Stelling, she learns that girls are quick and shallow," capable of learning at only a superficial level (184). Her very cleverness becomes "the brand of inferiority" (184).

Maggie's frustration is both intellectual and emotional. The disastrous failure of her father's lawsuit, the reduction of her family to poverty, her mother's grief and her father's dependence, the sense that "life had no love in it" (286, 347) compound Maggie's sense of oppression. With her father incapacitated by his stroke, Tom assumes the mantle of patriarchy. However, whereas Mr Tulliver's exercise of authority over his daughter is tempered by love, Tom's version of the dominant male is not softened by sentiment. Tom will protect Maggie, but Maggie must submit to his authority: "I shall always take care of you. But you must mind what I say" (226), "I can judge much better than you can" (285). Maggie rebels inwardly, dreams of escape to a life "less sordid and dreary," but remains torn between the "inward impulse" and the "outward fact" (335), in tension between her "hopeless yearning for that something, whatever it was, that was greatest and best on this earth" (350) – beauty, joy, knowledge, music (287) – and the narrowness of her lot.

In contrast, Tom never questions his socially-constructed identity, although he also suffers because of it. As a boy of practical rather than theoretical inclination, Tom's schooldays are a source of much misery to him: "His pride met with nothing but bruises and crushings," giving him "something of the girl's susceptibility" (173). Tom's real nature is not well-adapted to this phase of the masculine route map prescribed for him by society. However, he never rebels: "I had to do my lessons at school" (281). Although he doubts the practical value of his schooling (281), the ideological formation he has received from his earliest childhood leaves Tom with no questions about his ultimate destiny. If he receives more money than Maggie at Christmas, it is because he will be a man, and she is only a girl (45). Likewise, if he must endure his lessons, he does so in line with his father's idea that education represents an "investment" (88) in the future that awaits him in the public world of work and business (14), and with Philip Wakem's comment that "All gentlemen learn the same things" (199).

When adversity strikes the family, Tom is as affected as Maggie (273). However, with the male's "impatience of painful emotion" (313), he subsumes feeling to duty (592) and dedicates himself to fulfilling the role which family and society prescribe for him: "he must behave like a man" (249). "He would provide for his mother and sister, and make everyone say he was a man of high character" (275). As a man, Tom is master of his own destiny: "you are a man, Tom, and have power, and can do something in the world." As a woman, Maggie is afforded no such outlet in action, no such "steady purpose" (350). If Tom is Hector engaged in the world's combat, Maggie is Hecuba, condemned by her gender to long empty days "inside the gates" (375). Her struggle "li-



es almost entirely within her own soul” (375). Throughout *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie is constantly torn between the imperatives of self-fulfilment and duty.

For Maggie, the fulfilment which she occasionally finds in daydreams, books, music and romantic love is an absorbing experience, in which time is suspended and memory excluded. It is invariably transient, confined to a few moments in which her “hard, real life” is transcended (347, 468, 536). Duty, on the other hand, arises out of “the ties that all our former life has made for us” (547). It is associated with:

all the memories of early striving – all the deep pity for another’s pain, which had been nurtured in her through years of affection and hardship – all the divine presentiment of something higher than personal enjoyment which made the sacredness of life (558).

In her involvement with both Philip and Stephen, Maggie’s desire for personal fulfilment is invariably thwarted by this concept of duty, which derives ultimately from patriarchal values and relationships.

Maggie’s earliest memory is of standing with her brother Tom by the River Floss, while he held her hand (373). As a child, Maggie loves Tom “better than anybody else in the world” (40). She envisions a future in which they will live together and she will keep his house (40). At the same time, she dreads “Tom’s anger of all things” (45), and indexes her happiness to his approval: “What use was anything if Tom didn’t love her?” (47). Meanwhile, Tom, who is fond of Maggie, intends “always to take care of her, make her his housekeeper, and punish her when she did wrong” (51). Thus, the gender stereotypes are delineated at the outset: the male as the protector, provider and judge; the female as materially and emotionally dependent. After Mr Tulliver’s stroke, Tom assumes patriarchal authority over the family, and is thus instrumental in the outcome of Maggie’s relationships with Philip and Stephen.

Through clandestine meetings with Philip, the son of the man who ruins her father, Maggie finds release in books, conversation and affection. She accepts Philip’s declaration of love, but avows that “I will never do anything to wound my father” (408). In this patriarchal system, filial duty takes precedence over personal inclination. Discovered by Tom, Maggie is powerless to do anything but promise not to meet or correspond with Philip without her brother’s knowledge. Tom had his “terrible clutch on her conscience and her deepest dread” (418). Moral authority and the power to enforce it are centred in the male. Branded by her brother as “a disobedient deceitful daughter, who throws away her own respectability” (416), Maggie submits to his authority and repents, although she remains resentful of his treatment of Philip.

After their father’s death, although Tom acknowledges Maggie’s wish to be independent and consents to her meeting Philip socially, he nonetheless reasserts his fraternal authority over her by warning that if she contemplates Philip as a lover she must lose him as a brother. In a patriarchy, a woman has little or no say in the choice of her husband: “A brother, who goes out in the world and mixes with men, necessarily knows better what is right and respectable for his sister than she can know herself” (477). The decision of the male head of the family is of paramount importance. Thus, the basic soci-

al unit, the family, is continually reconstructed in line with masculine values, and the system becomes self-perpetuating. Maggie is not free. Family ties and the sense of moral obligation associated with them continue to bind her, even when Lawyer Wakem withdraws his opposition to her as a prospective daughter-in-law: "the tie to my brother is one of the strongest. I can do nothing willingly that will divide me always from him" (540).

Paradoxically, Philip becomes synonymous with duty (Mitchell, 1994: 114), as Maggie struggles to resist her passion for Stephen. Although Maggie's sense of family responsibility deters her from marrying Philip, she considers herself to be engaged to him (Eliot, 1948: 545). Moreover, since the values which have shaped Maggie's concept of familial duty – childhood ties and memories, pity, self-sacrifice (409), and womanly devotedness – are all present in her tender affection for Philip, he now appears to her to be less a potential source of just reproach than "a sort of outward conscience that she might fly to for rescue and strength" (499). The fact that several times earlier in the novel Maggie imagines Philip in the role of brother, and that her initial feelings for Philip are closer to those of a sister than a lover, helps to illuminate this transference of association. In her moment of deepest crisis, Maggie thinks of Tom as the "natural refuge that had been given to her" (590). Moral authority and strength are amongst the attributes which Tom frequently claims for himself. However, Tom is invariably harsh and judgemental. Philip, on the other hand, is the kind of brother Maggie would have liked to have had: "I wish you were my brother... you would teach me everything" (223):

What a dear good brother you would have been... you would have made as much fuss about me, and been as pleased for me to love you as would have satisfied even me. You would have loved me well enough to bear with me, and forgive me everything. That is what I always longed that Tom should do (399).

Here Eliot clearly advocates a standard of brotherly behaviour quite different from that upheld by Tom. Had Tom been cast in this gentler mould, then no doubt Maggie's history and psychology – and, by implication, her society – would have been quite different. Nonetheless, the patriarchal notions of the male as fount of knowledge and source of approval and authority still pervade this alternative version, suggesting that although Eliot is critical of the dominant ideology, she cannot entirely free herself of its influence.

Stephen offers Maggie potential fulfilment in terms of "love, wealth, ease, refinement, all that her nature craved" (558). Dancing with him, Maggie momentarily experiences life as a "keen, vibrating consciousness poised above pleasure or pain" (536). Thoughts of past or future privation and duty are briefly obliterated. Tempted by romantic love, temporarily distracted by "delicious visions" (572), and irrevocably compromised by her "thoughtlessness" (567), Maggie nonetheless holds fast to her convictions that duty must outweigh inclination, that happiness cannot be born out of the misery of others, and that past ties cannot be forsaken. Stephen's counter arguments are persuasive: constancy without love may in any event bring misery to Philip and Lucy (579); love is

natural, other unnatural bonds should be broken (567); and, most persuasive of all, because “it was less distinguishable from that sense of others’ claims which was the moral basis of her resistance” (568), his own suffering. As June Skye Szirotny points out, both self-denial and self-fulfilment may produce positive results (1996, p. 178). Maggie herself acknowledges that it is impossible to predict where anyone’s happiness will lie (Eliot, 1948: 581). However, if Maggie chooses fulfilment, then she must forfeit the acceptance she can only attain through self-denial (Szirotny, 1996, p. 178). In the final analysis, Maggie returns home, because she cannot bear to be alienated from Tom (Eliot, 1948, p. 590). Judging herself to be weak and guilty, she finally bows to patriarchy on its own terms, ready to “submit in patient silence to that harsh, disapproving judgment, against which she had so often rebelled” (590).

Judith Mitchell describes Maggie’s craving for love as the “fatal feminine flaw” which motivates most of her failures (1994, p. 109). As a child, Maggie’s eyes were full of “unsatisfied, beseeching affection” (Eliot, 1948, p. 217). Of course, Maggie’s need for being loved operates on both sides of the dichotomy between self-realisation and self-abnegation. On the one hand, it draws her towards first Philip and then Stephen, and on the other, it pulls her back towards her family. Ultimately, however, Maggie rejects romantic love as selfish. Duty, in contrast, involves unselfish love in the form of sensitivity to the hopes and expectations of others. In particular, it involves fidelity to lessons learned in childhood, “to memories and affections, and longings after perfect goodness” (581). As discussed earlier, amongst the lessons which Maggie learns only too well as a child, is the fact that the affection of her family, with the possible exception of her father, is conditional upon her conformity to prescribed behaviour. This aspect of Maggie’s formation is the key to her psychology: “the need of being loved would always subdue her” (476) – above all, the need of being loved by Tom: “To have no cloud between herself and Tom was still a perpetual yearning in her that had its roots deeper than all change” (553).

Hence, Maggie returns home, repentant, to face “the law of the fathers.” She expects to be judged and reproved, but, at the same time, she expects to be given sanctuary. However, Tom – “inexorable, unbending, unmodifiable” (590) – represents patriarchy at its most inflexible. In his view, his sister has disgraced the family. He refuses to allow her under his roof, although he undertakes to provide for her through their mother. Here, Eliot affords us a glimpse into the vulnerability of women in Victorian England, since they are almost entirely dependent upon men for their material welfare.

Like Tom, who accuses Maggie of being “ten times worse than Stephen” (592), the members of St Ogg’s society have been inculcated with the notion of the fallen woman. They are, therefore, quick to accuse Maggie of “unwomanly boldness and unbridled passion” (599). The “care of Society” demands that Maggie be ostracised (600) With bitter irony, Eliot, no doubt influenced by her own experience of fraternal and social repudiation due to her liaison with Lewes, unmasks the superficiality and hypocrisy of mid-Victorian society: “If Miss Tulliver... had returned as Mrs Stephen Guest – with a post-

marital trousseau... public opinion... would have judged in strict consistency with those results" (598).

However, if Eliot is radical in her attack on the superficial respectability of the patriarchal society of the day, she appears to be more conservative in her attitude to morality. Maggie's decision to return home is rooted in the "virtues" which the ideology of separate spheres designates as womanly – family loyalty and, in Harriet Mill's words: "abnegation of self, patience, resignation and submission to power" (Kent, 1999, p. 195). Maggie's decision is, likewise, consistent with George Eliot's belief in "sympathetic emotions," which she defines as specifically female, in particular maternal, emotions which give women a means of "amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow men beyond the bounds of our personal lot" (Gillooly, 2002, p. 397). Elsewhere, Eliot refers in positive terms to "the beauty and heroism of renunciation... that keen sympathy with human misery which makes a woman prefer to suffer for the term of her own life, rather than run the risk of causing misery to an indefinite number of other human beings" (Draper, 1977, p. 43).

Nonetheless, in *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot's position on the value of Maggie's renunciation is not entirely clear-cut. Feminist critics have viewed Maggie's recourse to the writings of the male Thomas à Kempis on renunciation as "only a sublimated version of Tom's plain-spoken patriarchal prohibition" (Jacobus, 1986, p. 75), and as "reinforcing the self-suppressing submissiveness that is identified as feminine" (Dee, 1999, p. 391). In the novel, similar views are expressed by Philip, who argues that when Maggie seeks to cope with the pain of her narrow existence by subduing her desire for books, music and the pleasures of life, she is merely stupefying herself (Eliot, 1948, p. 398). Again, when Maggie resolves to take a situation away from St Ogg's, because her experience of love is invariably painful, Philip argues that such a mode of renunciation is no better than "perverting or mutilating one's nature" (502). However, even Philip appears to recant in his final letter to Maggie, when he refers to the transformation of his own spirit of rebellion into "that willing endurance which is the birth of sympathy" (615).

It may be that the vacillation of Dr Kenn best reflects Eliot's position on the matter. The "great problem of the shifting relation between passion and duty" is not to be resolved by "the men of maxims" (607). The "actual relations of all concerned must be considered" (606). Decisions and moral judgements must, therefore, be made in relation to individual circumstances. Moreover, they must be enlightened by a "wide fellow-feeling with all that is human" (608). Daniel Cottom writes that "Eliot makes the universal spirit of humanity the measure of individuals throughout her fiction," and that "sympathy is... the manifestation of truth as immediate social experience" (1987, p. 183). Maggie's decision to return to St Ogg's and, when tempted again, not to write "Come!" in response to Stephen's letter, are decisions which spring from sympathy. Through her representation of Dr Kenn, Eliot suggests that marriage between Stephen and Maggie might be a morally legitimate outcome, based on the actual relations of all af-

fects and on potential consequences (Eliot, 1948, p. 606), but that this must not be at the expense of truth as perceived by Maggie's conscience (607). Of course, Maggie's conscience has been shaped by society and by her own unconscious internalisation of social and familial values: by "the irreversible laws within and without her, which, governing the habits become morality, and developing the feelings of dependence and submission becomes religion" (350). Prominent amongst these values is the notion of sympathy which, George Eliot, as we have seen, defines as a particularly feminine attribute. The heroine's social and ideological formation, and indeed Eliot's own internalisation of this aspect of the dominant ideology, therefore, appears to leave them both with no alternative but self-abnegation as Maggie's choice.

Nonetheless, Eliot's protest against the patriarchal system, which by stereotyping women as wives and mothers confines them to domesticity, subjects them to male authority, and thereby limits their potential for fulfilment, is apparent in her sympathetic treatment of Maggie's childhood rebellion. It is heard in Maggie's cry for freedom: "I begin to think there can never come much happiness to me from loving: I have always had so much pain mingled with it. I wish I could make myself a world outside of it, as men do" (502). It is felt in Maggie's "doubt in the justice of her own resolve" (629). It is seen in the depiction of Maggie's life as a constant struggle with "enemies that were forever slain and rising again" (625). The desire for self-realisation will not lie dormant.

Virginia Woolf asserts that Eliot's heroines "charged with suffering and sensibility" yearn for something "that is perhaps incompatible with the facts of human existence" (cited in Draper, 1977, p. 106). The much criticised ending of *The Mill on the Floss* has been interpreted in various ways (Crater, 2002, pp. 149-161). Perhaps, as Woolf implies, it would have been impossible for Maggie to find fulfilment in the patriarchal society of her day. Neither of her suitors seems entirely worthy of her. In D.H. Lawrence's view, Philip was "wrong, wrong, wrong" (cited in Draper, 1977, p. 102). Philip is, at best, a kind of potential surrogate brother for Maggie. He is deformed and thus, like Maggie, a misfit in patriarchal society. However, his sensitivity, although it might make him a fit soul mate for Maggie, renders him "by nature half feminine" (Eliot, 1948, p. 402), and therefore unsuited to the passionate side of her nature (Mitchell, 1994, p. 114). Not only is he debarred as a potential husband by the authority of her father and brother, but Maggie's own subconscious recoils from the prospect: "Maggie... shivered as if she felt a sudden chill" (Eliot, 1948, p. 471). On the other hand, although Maggie's passionate nature is attracted by Stephen, it is by no means certain that he would have satisfied her as a husband, even if her moral objections could have been removed. Eliot attributes Maggie's initial attraction to Stephen to the restrictive environment in which she grew up; again, an implicit criticism of patriarchal society: "Such things could not have had a perceptible effect on a thoroughly well-educated young lady, with a perfectly balanced mind" (467). Maggie is perhaps swept along by her need for affection and approval, by her "keen appetite for homage" (509). The impression that she is not wholly lucid in her assessment of Stephen is reinforced by Philip's belief that there will be "no

promise of happiness for her if she is beguiled into loving Stephen Guest" (510), and his perception that there are chords in Maggie's nature that are lacking in Stephen's (613). Moreover, Maggie herself is not persuaded that Stephen would bring her happiness:

It has never been my will to marry you: if you were to win consent from the momentary triumph of my feelings for you, you would not have my whole soul... I would choose to be true to my calmer affections (581).

Perhaps most telling of all, despite their frequent "mutual gaze" (537) of passion, Maggie's attraction to Stephen implies submission and reliance, and therefore, acceptance of the culturally-defined gender stereotyping against which she has so long rebelled: "another future, hard endurance and effort exchanged for easy delicious leaning on another's strength" (629). She would be legally Stephen's (582). Phyllis Susan Dee notes that Stephen's vocabulary of power is identical to that used by Tom to control Maggie (1999, p. 391). Characteristically, at the moment of crisis, Maggie is not prepared to sacrifice her perceived right to self-determination: "You have wanted to deprive me of any choice" (Eliot, 1948, p. 567). In short, neither Philip nor Stephen can satisfy Maggie's nature in all its complexity.

Eliot creates a problem which cannot be resolved satisfactorily in the context of a restrictive patriarchal system. There is no way out for Maggie, which does not involve some damage to her nature, which does not leave her either alienated from her family, or physically or emotionally unfulfilled. Like the witch in her book (24), Maggie must sink or swim; and if she swims she will in any event be condemned to a living death. Eliot, therefore, allows Maggie immediate release in death: "Rather than be annihilated, Maggie annihilates herself" (Crater, 2002, p. 152).

At the same time, in death Maggie transcends the reality of her situation and the limits of patriarchy. Her role during the flood is active, not passive – Bob Jakin had "a vague impression of her as one who would help to protect, not need to be protected" (Eliot, 1948, p. 631). Tom is enlightened to "the depths in life that had long lain beyond his vision" (636); the narrowness of the male worldview is exposed. Reconciliation is symbolised in Tom's use of the childhood name: "Magsie" (636). Perhaps, too, in the dying embrace of Tom and Maggie, George Eliot anticipates a future in which the male and the female need no longer be divided. After all, earlier in the novel, she depicts Maggie and Tom as representative of the suffering which each new generation, oppressed by narrowness, must experience as it seeks to transcend "the mental level of the generation before them, to which they have been nevertheless tied by the strongest fibres of their hearts" (331).

In the final analysis, Eliot may not radically challenge the values of Victorian patriarchy in *The Mill on the Floss*. Nonetheless, inherent in the novelist's representation of Maggie's life and tragedy, is a challenge to the "presupposition that women must be kept ignorant" (Robertson, 1997, p. 102). Throughout the novel, Eliot calls into question the patriarchal tenet of female dependency upon the male, which confined Victorian women



to a sphere of activity limited to the home and family. She reveals how this culture of female dependency was propagated by the Victorian system of education, which prepared the male to contribute to society, and thereby to perpetuate the patriarchal system, but left girls like Maggie Tulliver poorly educated, prepared only for domesticity, and unable to take decisions “with a perfectly balanced mind” (Eliot, 1948, p. 467). In other words, Eliot’s novel reinforces the demand of contemporary feminists that girls and women should be granted access to a level of education, beyond the merely domestic, which would enable them to develop and function as the equals of men in society. However, while *The Mill on the Floss* does indeed raise questions which point towards the need for radical social change, the author does not propose an immediate solution. Rather, Eliot seems to point towards the cumulative effect of small advances over time as a means to effect social improvement. Carried away by the flood, Maggie is drowned, but her story becomes part of the river of time, part of that “vast sum of conditions” which contribute to “every advance of mankind” (331). In conclusion, in *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot does not go further than to highlight the problems caused by the ideology of separate spheres which subjugated women to men in the Victorian era. Indeed, almost a century will pass before a female author is able to assert openly that “Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer” (Woolf, 1931).

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