



**The Influence of Gender Roles on Destiny in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss***

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*'We can never give up wishing and longing while we are thoroughly alive' (Eliot 314)*

George Eliot's 1860 novel *The Mill on the Floss* explores the emotional and physical destruction associated with the rigid gender expectations of Victorian society. Eliot's supposition that literature 'was an arena in which women and men could, and should, be assessed in equal terms' inspired her construction of Maggie Tulliver, whose intellect and emotional depth contests the character's patriarchal limitations (Flint 136). It is important to appreciate, however, Eliot's awareness of her responsibility to portray her characters in the 'imperfect social state' in which they lived (Eliot 784). Analysing Eliot's characters through a feminist and psychoanalytical lens, therefore, reveals that each character's fate is not only shaped by their external societal pressures, but is equally informed by their internal psychological conflicts, which ultimately results in the novel's tragic end. Wilfred Bion's psychoanalytic research offers a retrospective interpretation of Eliot's prose; his notion of the container and the contained suggest the need for other people's psyche to accommodate emotions which cannot be contained in one's own. *The Mill on the Floss*' literal and psychological flooding, which disfigure the narrative, are hence emblematic of Eliot's feminist, political impetus.

Feminist theory is fundamental to Eliot's narrative fabric. Her construction of the novel's protagonist, Maggie Tulliver, whilst based on 'the quiet assumptions of patriarchal norms', proposes that 'genuine observation, humour and passion' are not explicitly gendered, in contrast to the misogynistic constructs of Victorian society (Flint 136; Pinney 324). Maggie's desire to be 'a clever woman' is consistently inhibited by Victorian expectations of passive femininity, whereby she's reminded by Mr Tulliver 'a woman's no business wi' being so clever' (Eliot 15- 46). This ongoing conflict between female ambition and the harsh reality of inevitable subordination is responsible for the tragic destiny of Eliot's heroine. Her desire for knowledge and emotional fulfilment is consistently thwarted and considered fundamentally unwomanly. Her subsequent flirtations with Stephen Guest present an

opportunity to escape the ‘oppressive narrowness’ that dictates Maggie’s romantic affiliations (Eliot 244). Yet, despite Maggie’s desire to allow passion to triumph fidelity, Eliot ‘was deeply mistrustful of creating idealistic expectations’, hindering this romance from substantiation (Flint 137). Eliot herself, writing under a male pseudonym to negate critical attacks on her literary ability, exhibits her autobiographical frustrations with the gendered limitations of the canon. Paxton, however, suggests ‘Eliot is more preoccupied with examining the origins of gender identity’, guided by her reading of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (Paxton 70). Her comparisons of Tom and Maggie to young animals echoes the Darwinian belief that humanity ‘was subject to the same organic laws as inferior creatures’ (Spencer 364). Eliot’s disagreement with Spencer’s conclusion that humans remained at a ‘proud distance from the chimpanzee’ is visible throughout her writing (Spencer 468). She urges her readers to consider how nature ‘under these average boyish physiognomies conceals some of her most rigid inflexible purposes’, and that a woman’s sex offers ‘the deepest and subtlest sort of education life gives’ (Flint 137). Eliot’s character construction in *The Mill on the Floss* suggests these profound gender distinctions are not only determined biologically but are established by extensive patriarchal ideologies. Maggie’s tragic destiny can therefore be considered imminent, fated by both political and biological repression.

Masculinity, in a similar respect, equally shapes the novel’s narrative destiny. Tom Tulliver is emblematic of Victorian ideals of masculinity. Emotionally reserved, pragmatic and duty-bound, Tom has the ‘power’ ‘to do something in the world’, ‘because [he] is a man’ (Eliot 282). Tom’s incessant focus on maintaining family honour, informed by patriarchal expectation, contributes to Maggie’s emotional subjection. Maggie’s comparison of Tom to ‘Bluebeard at the show’ situates the character allegorically within ‘Victorian discourse about Bluebeard like men’ (Eliot 179; Kiesel 117). In a Victorian context, comparisons to ‘Bluebeard’ evoke an aggressive, animalistic connotation. Nayeypour warns that Tom’s ‘solid

rationality, practical-mindedness, conceit and solipsism are as dangerous as Maggie's imaginative and emotional personality' (Nayebpour 9). The incompatibility of each character's respective sense and sensibility highlights how sensitivity and practicality cannot exist in isolation. Therefore, whilst Tom demonstrates praiseworthy characteristics under a Victorian readership, 'taking those qualities to an extreme can make a cruel tyrant who is potentially harmful to himself and to those around him' (Kiesel 120). This is certainly true throughout the character's refusal to accept Maggie's contentious involvement with Steven Guest, preventing the siblings' reconciliation, and underscoring the novel's conflict between sexual desire and economic necessity. Kiesel suggests the disharmony between the inherently masculine economic plotline, and the effeminate romantic narrative of Maggie's courtship necessitates 'the abrupt and apocalyptic melding of the two plots in the redemptive waters of the flood' (Kiesel 113). Come the novel's conclusion, the narrator can therefore proclaim, regarding both the siblings and the plots, that 'they were not divided' (Eliot 1). Eliot's choice to feature this statement in both the epigraph and final line consolidates the novel's central concern: the highly gendered friction between determinism and autonomy. The character's destinies are made known to the reader before the novel begins. External patriarchal structures, therefore, in Eliot's judgment, renders tragedy an inevitability, predestined by a defective social system.

Whilst Maggie's fate is undeniably shaped by external forces, it is equally crucial to recognise the internal, psychological impacts of gender roles on destiny throughout *The Mill on the Floss*. Maggie Tulliver's perpetual state of wishing and longing, for better opportunities, intellectual stimulation, and 'more instruments playing together', ultimately transcends the limitations enforced by Victorian femininity (Eliot 341). Philip Wakem's declaration that 'we can never give up wishing and longing while we are thoroughly alive' stresses the vitality of yearning for human existence (Eliot 314). Maggie's inability to fully

realise this longing, akin to the overflowing banks of the river floss, cannot be restrained by the imposing confines of her sex. Wilfred Bion's theory of the overflowing psyche is especially poignant in this regard, and can be applied to not just the events which take place in the novel, but are inseparably knit to Eliot's prose. As Alicia Christoff indicates in *Novel Relations: Victorian Fiction and British Psychoanalysis*:

‘With sexual desire that flows out of significant looks and the ends of brushed fingertips... with subjectivity that overflows the bounds of a single character or consciousness, with feelings that cannot be contained within the covers of a book and voices that speak out beyond the page... the novel makes flooding and feeling nearly synonymous terms’ (Christoff 47).

In this sense, Bion's conclusion that it takes ‘two people to think’ aligns with Eliot's allusion that ‘it takes two people to feel’ (Bion 94). The incessant psychological, literal and narrative liquidity which permeates every aspect of *The Mill on the Floss*, I would argue, is a pointed warning of the dire ramifications of constrictive patriarchal constructs. With this in mind, the catastrophic flood which shifts the novel from one of realism into fantasy, suggests a feminist reconciliation is beyond the realm of possibility for Eliot. In the words of Virginia Woolf, Eliot's heroines, ‘charged with suffering and sensibility... have brimmed and overflowed and uttered demand for something’, that is ‘perhaps incompatible with the facts of human existence’ (Woolf 657). Maggie's desire to supersede the inhibitions of Victorian society cannot be psychologically, emotionally, or physically contained, ultimately resulting in a flooding of her psyche, St Oggs, and Eliot's narration.

In summation, Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* stands as a profound exploration of the ways in which restrictive Victorian gender roles irrevocably mould destiny. Maggie Tulliver's incessant struggle to express her emotional and intellectual splendour under the confinements of Victorian expectation is manifest throughout the novel's narrative fabric. As theorised by

Wilfred Bion's containment theory, Maggie's desires transcend her psychological containment, resulting in the inevitable devastation of Eliot's conclusion. Internal psychological contention, in which the human extent of emotion cannot be fully contained in isolation, is perhaps responsible for the novel's metaphorical flooding. Reading Eliot's prose through a Feminist critical lens remains crucial in appreciating the text's central conflict of female aspiration and patriarchal reality, which permeates every aspect of Eliot's narrative construction. Individual autonomy in the midst of a profoundly embedded patriarchal system is presented as an impossibility in the realm of Victorian realism. Yet Eliot's assurance, that despite the fatal predestiny of her protagonists, 'in their death, they were not divided', indicates that true reconciliation is achievable; in death, the confinements of patriarchal society fail to triumph the intensity of human affection (Eliot 1).

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