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GEORGE ELIOT'S HEROINES AND THE VICTORIAN CONVENTION

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CONTENTS

The poor woman was not content simply to write amusing stories. She is convicted upon conclusive evidence of having indulged in ideas; she ventured to speculate upon human life and its meaning, and still worse, she endeavoured to embody her convictions in imaginative shapes and probably wished to infect her readers with them. This was, according to some people, highly unbecoming in a woman and very inartistic in a novelist.

Leslie Stephen
Cornhill, February, 1881

Introduction: The Victorian Convention

To Victorians, women were the embodiment and guardians of domestic life. Yet they were also seen as frail creatures subject to temptations of all kinds, including sexual temptation. To keep them from folly, their husbands gave them time-consuming but humble roles: caring for children, looking after the household and, possibly, directing servants (Calder, p.120). Marriage and the family were the two basic institutions through which women's social and economic lives were organized. As a result, the Victorian novel was concerned with domestic relationships above all others, presenting the family as a microcosm which reflected the values and preoccupations of society at large. That is the reason why that part of life which was beyond the confines of the family was often considered incompatible with a moral view of human relations.

Marriage was the core of social life and the critical factor governing social aspirations which were the single[1] legitimate pursuit permitted to girls and women. For the most part, they were denied opportunities for an identity other than that of wife and mother. Ambitious, immoral and peculiar women were seen to challenge ordered society. Because a woman was nothing on her own, her very existence was an extension of her sexual functions as a wife and mother. The quality of the function determined the quality of the woman.

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[1] N. Frye (p.148) discusses the apocalyptic conception of human life in terms of "three kinds of fulfillment: individual, sexual, and social." Respectable Victorian writers do not discuss sexual fulfillment. Victorian women rarely achieved individual fulfillment; they were bound to seek what satisfaction they might find from social relations. Eliot's apocalyptic vision is the terminal point of the Mill on the Floss.

Matrimony was a necessary condition for a woman in a male-dominated society, where she was recognized only as some man's daughter, sister or wife. As Mr. Wakem says "We don't ask what a woman does – we ask whom she belongs to." (MOF, p.414) Their essential activities were to be the devoted wife, the instinctive mother and the efficient housekeeper (Murray, p.5). A woman had to conform to these expectations. Otherwise, she faced social exclusion, a condition that afflicts the heroines in George Eliot's novels.

George Eliot created heroines who had hopes and aspirations beyond the conventional. These were women who wanted more than what the social order was ready to grant them. Eliot did not isolate her female characters from the society which shaped their lives, condemned, punished and rewarded them. If a Victorian woman (or heroine) realized that she was ambitious, it defied what she had been brought up to consider acceptable.[2] Passion in women outside the "narrow" confines of domestic life baffled the society which blindly rejected ideas, actions and goals tainted with freedom of action, as being dangerous and offensive. Maggie Tulliver's father in The Mill on the Floss poses the problem explicitly when he says Maggie is "too 'cute for a woman. I'm afraid. . . 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" (MOF, p.32). Thus Eliot's heroines learned to adjust to the reality of what was expected of women. In Adam Bede, for example, Hetty was different, divisive and desperate. She could not flout the immutable laws of her society without penalty. "Hetty could have cast all her past life behind her, and never cared to be reminded of it again" (AB, p.151). Hetty offended the rules of moral

[2] In Becoming a Heroine, Rachel M. Brownstein gives a very readable account of the interactions among heroines, authors and readers. Of Eliot's novels, she deals specifically only with Daniel Deronda.

propriety of Hayslope, and her liaison with Arthur shattered the conventional complacency of that community. Their violation of the code brought suffering to themselves, to people around them, and to their entire social order: "men's lives are thoroughly blended with each other as the air they breathe: evil spreads as necessarily as disease"[3] says the Reverend Irwine (AB, p.407).

The Victorians believed in the value of suffering and renunciation. They were especially concerned about order, sequence and, inevitably consequence. As the narrator says in Adam Bede "Deep, unspeakable suffering may well be called a baptism, a regeneration, the initiation into a new state" (AB, p.409). Suffering led to an awakening. Therefore Hetty's arrest caused Adam Bede to "look back on all the previous years as if they had been a dim sleepy existence, and he had only now awaked to full consciousness" (AB, p.410). Adam had been harsh and hard to people around him. However, he learns to be more sympathetic to others, to Hetty at first, and ultimately to Arthur as well. This might be caused by the fact that Adam felt powerless as he contemplated "irremediable evil and suffering" (AB, p.409). His initial arrogance, which was the root of his lack of tolerance of others, was thus tempered by his feeling of helplessness. In Middlemarch self-renunciation held another key to moral growth. Dorothea suppressed her sexuality for the sake of an idealistic service. Through an outsider, Will Ladislaw, who was not an integrated member of the society she belonged to, she came to some awareness of her physical desires. On the other hand, in The Mill on the Floss, Maggie's passionate nature remains unsubdued despite her efforts at self-renunciation,

[3] The story of the flood in Genesis punishes the sinfulness of mankind. Irwine's words evoke the Biblical reference to "the sins of the fathers..."

and her death might be seen as a punishment for her failure to subdue her passions.

Eliot created her characters, put them in particular settings, and exposed them to the reality of those settings and their moral order. The individual who conformed to that order found "happiness", but the one who disrupted it was expelled. Yet, society is not wholly to be blamed for the characters' failure to adapt. Her heroes and heroines were ambitious and unrepresentative, and this hindered them from fully understanding the realities of the outside world. The point is that they should strive to utilize their untapped passions not only for their own sakes, but for the sake of society as well.

In Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss, and Middlemarch, three ambitious heroines struggle in a limited world in which they cannot find an outlet for their passions. Dorothea, Dinah and Maggie are unconventional in the sense that they refuse to conform to the existing order of society, which expects women to be good mothers and wives and to be docile and unopinionated outside their limited spheres. In The Mill on the Floss and Middlemarch, the heroines are contrasted with Lucy, Celia and Rosamond who are simpler, more conventional and more accepting of the limitations imposed by society. In Adam Bede, however, we are introduced to an anomaly of sorts in the character of Hetty whose aspirations above her class, in degree, although not entirely unconventional, differentiate her from her counterparts. Unlike the others moreover, Hetty serves as a foil to Dinah in Adam Bede and thus her role in that work is much more central to the plot than the roles of Celia, Rosamond and Lucy are in their respective novels.

Dorothea, Dinah and Maggie have natural drives toward knowledge and individuality. However, their chances of success are undermined not only by the restrictive forces of society which prove too strong for them but also by flaws in their characters which conspire against them. Yet, for George Eliot "character too is a process and an unfolding" (Middlemarch, p.178). As the novels progress, the heroines overcome these personal flaws and reach a state of self-realization as defined by the prevailing attitudes of their society. In overcoming these flaws and achieving self-realization they are affected by the heroes they meet who contribute greatly to their efforts to attain completeness. How these heroines deal with the conflict between their characters and society's expectations concerns Eliot.

To Eliot, society is perceived as a brown pond, separate from the cygnets and ducks within it, and inexorably fixed: "Here and there a cygnet is reared uneasily among the ducklings in the brown pond, and never finds the living stream in fellowship with its own oary-footed kind" (MM, p.26). She is concerned with the struggle of individuals in a society which has its own norms and laws. Her concern therefore is how the clash between the life of the individual and the social order gives rise to conflicts that bring her characters to the brink of personal tragedy, and sometimes force them to succumb. Thus her heroines must find a way either to reach an accommodation with the social order or meet the same kind of fate that befalls Maggie in The Mill on the Floss. Eliot offers only three alternatives in cases of failure: suffering, death, or capitulation to the norm through marriage. In Adam Bede, Hetty suffers in the end because she has violated the rules of society by having a sexual relationship with a man who is a future squire. Hetty is a child of nature, beautiful but with no more sense of right and wrong than the roses with which Eliot frequently

associates her. We have no indication that Hetty regrets her sexual relation with Arthur nor attaches blame to herself in its consequence. Her pregnancy is unmentioned as such and, apparently unconscious to some degree because Hetty believes that marriage to Adam will somehow solve that problem. Her flight to find Arthur is instinctive rather than rational. The delivery of her baby does not change Hetty's consciousness. She does not begin to think of herself as a mother and is not aware of the implications of abandoning the child. Hetty is accused of murdering her child – an act unnatural and horrifying to the Victorians. In fact Hetty in her absolute naturalness knowingly commits no crime.

Maggie stands up and "fights" against society but pays for her hubris by dying in a flood. This can be seen as a punishment for her refusal to conform. Dinah, on the other hand, settles in the community through marriage with Adam. She gives up preaching and assumes the role of mother and wife. Likewise, in Middlemarch, Dorothea sees her marriage to Casaubon as an escape from a meaningless social life that "seems nothing more than a labyrinth of petty courses" (MM, p.51). Innocent in every way, she imagines that marriage will be a means of leading a more fulfilled life.[4]

The options of suffering, punishment and reward that end these three novels were congenial to the Victorian mentality: the fundamental attitude was that marriage was an unquestioned goal (Reed, p.105).

[4] Dorothea is just plain wrong. The labyrinth becomes more intricate but less meaningful as she begins, as early as her honeymoon, to see that Casaubon is himself petty and his personality remote and cold. At this point, Eliot introduces Ladislaw as a living, breathing contrast to Casaubon. We do not learn whether Dorothea's second marriage is happy. We know only that she wants it and she gets it.

It was believed that a female's real existence only begins when she has a husband. This belief is not particular to the Victorians. Milton, an exceptional misogynist, says,

> "In woman, then to study household good,
> And good works in her husband to promote."
>
> Paradise Lost, p.1328

Although the lines above were written two centuries earlier than George Eliot's novels, the role and position of women in society had not changed very much when she began to write novels.

Victorian readers expected the "good" characters in fiction to be rewarded with matrimony and the "bad" ones with a "deserved" punishment. The solutions that Eliot offers to her heroines' dilemmas have their own drawbacks: marriage does not make a heroine "complete". On the contrary it increases her dependency on men, that is she gains a "happy" life at the expense of her autonomy and ambitions. Likewise the author's decision that Maggie had to die at the end, moves the modern reader to pity because she was not wicked according to our definition, so her misfortune was greater than she deserved. Her fate is truly tragic. Similarly, Hetty was the victim of her nature and of the society in which she lived and she therefore suffers a fate similar to Maggie's. Dorothea's first marriage did not bring her happiness, but suffering, in that she was restricted and unable to satisfy her passionate nature or her ambitions. Whether her second marriage brought her "fulfillment" remains as we have noted, an open question.

> Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life

> of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother. But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done – not even Sir James Chettam, who went no further than the negative prescription that she ought not to have married Will Ladislaw.
>
> MM, p.894

This study will focus on Eliot's heroines: Dorothea, Dinah and Maggie; their contrasting female characters in the novels: Lucy, Celia and Rosamond, and Hetty. We shall examine to what degree the outcome of their struggles against personal limitations and societal constraints was prejudiced by what Victorian readers expected and, more emphatically, by the social conditions and norms of their particular historical period.

CHAPTER 1

Eliot wrote Adam Bede in the 1850s, but the novel is set at the turn of the 19th century. She opened her novel with an unvarnished appeal to the nostalgia of her readers for a society more orderly, simple, and stable than theirs:

> With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen, I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr. Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder, in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of July, in the year of our Lord 1799.
>
> The afternoon sun was warm on the five workmen there, busy upon doors and window-frames and wainscoting. A scent of pine-wood from a tent-like pile of planks outside the open door mingled itself with the scent of the elder-bushes which were spreading their summer snow close to the open window opposite; the slanting sunbeams shone through the transparent shavings that flew before the steady plane, and lit up the fine grain of the oak panelling which stood propped against the wall. On a heap of those soft shavings a rough grey shepherd-dog had made himself a pleasant bed, and was lying with his nose between his fore-paws, occasionally wrinkling his brows to cast a glance at the tallest of the five workmen, who was carving a shield in the centre of a wooden mantelpiece.
>
> AB, p.7

The industrial revolution and its effects on the economic and social structure, rapid urbanization, the appearance of smokestack industries, strip mining, the consequent deterioration of rural England, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, pressures for and resistance to political and social reform, all contributed to a sense of insecurity and loss among the Victorians who might well have been pleased to reflect on the relative peace and good order of the rural community of Adam Bede. Eliot insisted that a slower pace need not lack vitality. So she described the Hall Farm.

> Plenty of life there! though this is the drowsiest time of the year, just before hay-harvest; and it is the drowsiest time of the day too, for it is close upon three by the sun, and it is half-past three by Mrs. Poyser's handsome eight-day clock.. But there is always a stronger sense of life when the sun is brilliant after rain; and now he is pouring down his beams, and making sparkles among the wet straw, and lighting up every patch of vivid green moss on the red tiles of the cow-shed, and turning even the muddy water that is hurrying along the channel to the drain into a mirror for the yellow-billed ducks, who are seizing the opportunity of getting a drink with as much body in it as possible.
>
> AB, p.71

The sun and the clock impose order upon the Arcadian imagery of the scene that follows: a menagerie of ducks, bull dog, foxhounds, cock, hens, sow and calves emitting "a concert of noises" (AB, p.72) from the stables, cowsheds and kennel. Everything is sparkling and vivid after a recent rain, and under all, a fine ear discerns "the continuous hum of human voices" (AB, p.72).

The Hall Farm is home to the Poyser family who have lived on it for generations and claim, with reason, to have brought their holding to the pinnacle of the craft that feeds it. Their house, dairy and fields are immaculate, their children, livestock and crops define the desiderata of the village of Hayslope. Mr. Poyser's harvest is brought home on schedule, Mrs. Poyser's suppers are served on the stroke of the promised hour. The Poysers represent the moral and inseparably physical aspirations of their community, a collection of people bound to the land by powerful ties of work and kinship.

Adam Bede is a young man, tall, handsome, strong, skilled and honest, in search of his future in Hayslope. Adam is a "natural", and although he grows morally in the course of the novel, his progress is charted more through the people he loves than through his own conscious understanding. We learn quite quickly that Adam loves his parents (not without reservation), his brother, his young squire, Arthur, and, Hetty, the 17-year-old orphaned daughter of Mr. Poyser's sister. At a more leisurely pace, we understand that the community-at-large holds Adam in its affection and esteem. Still, the measurement of Adam's moral growth is seen through the prism of the women he is, sequentially, in love with: Hetty and Dinah. Eliot lavishes more attention on them than she does on Adam himself.

Dinah and Hetty represent alternative survival strategies in a community which does not allow its female members to lead their lives outside of a prescribed framework. As Adam asserts, "God has made women to be companions for men. A working man 'ud be badly off without a wife to see to th' house and the victual, and make things clean and comfortable" (AB,

p.232). This virtually universal belief, reiterates Milton's bias – in his life as well as in Paradise Lost.

Dinah and Hetty seem to represent mutually exclusive alternatives for their creator. Eliot gives us a physical introduction to each of them but, having done so, she treats them very differently. It is not only in terms of attitude that the two women differ. Eliot reinforces their unlikeness in describing them as well. Our knowledge of Dinah is delivered through the young woman's speech, always temperate, loving and filled with an urgent Christian message. By contrast, Hetty is permitted few words of her own as Eliot stalks her consciousness, repeatedly finding it vain, trivial and short-sighted. Physically we find them like this:

> There was no keenness in [Dinah's eyes]; they seemed rather to be shedding love than making observations; they had the liquid look which tells that the mind is full of what it has to give out, rather than impressed by external objects. She stood with her left hand towards the descending sun, and leafy boughs screened her from its rays; but in this sober light the delicate colouring of her face seemed to gather a calm vividness, like flowers at evening. It was a small oval face, of a uniform transparent whiteness, with an egg-like line of cheek and chin, a full but firm mouth, a delicate nostril, and a low perpendicular brow, surmounted by a rising arch of parting between smooth locks of pale reddish hair. The hair was drawn straight back behind the ears, and covered, except for an inch or two, above the brow, by a net Quaker cap. The eye-brows, of the same colour as the hair, were perfectly horizontal and firmly pencilled; the eyelashes, though no darker, were long and abundant; nothing was left blurred or unfinished. It was one of those faces that make one think of white flowers with light touches of colour on their pure petals. The eyes had no peculiar beauty, beyond that

> of expression; they looked so simple, so candid, so gravely loving, that no accusing scowl, no light sneer could help melting away before their glance.
>
> AB, p. 24

We are given a much more tactile description of Hetty.

> There are various orders of beauty, causing men to make fools of themselves in various styles, from the desperate to the sheepish; but there is one order of beauty which seems made to turn the heads not only of men, but of all intelligent mammals, even of women. It is a beauty like that of kittens, or very small downy ducks making gentle rippling noises with their soft bills, or babies just beginning to toddle and to engage in conscious mischief – a beauty with which you can never be angry, but that you feel ready to crush for inability to comprehend the state of mind into which it throws you. Hetty Sorrel's was that sort of beauty.
>
> AB, p.82

Dinah's austerity is in pale contrast to Hetty's roundness, ripeness, her presumable fecundity, her love of physical display and ornament. Their attitudes to life differ just as sharply. These differences might be (at least partially) explained by the age gap between them. At 17, Hetty is almost a child while Dinah, seven years her senior, should have her feet on the ground. Eliot, however, makes no allowances for Hetty's youth and no criticisms of Dinah's impracticality finding, apparently, that differences in character explain Hetty's folly and Dinah's high-mindedness.

The novel hinges on two women who are "like two halves of a personality" (Purkis, p.101). Dinah represents the spiritual, Hetty the physical. Dinah projects her emotional life into an instrument to be used by God and mankind. She declines to marry, to embark on the life of a "normal" woman in her community. Dinah says,

> My heart is not free to marry. That is good for other women, and it is a great and a blessed thing to be a wife and mother; but . . . God has called me to minister to others, not to have any joys or sorrows of my own.
>
> AB, p.36

Her love encompasses a general love for mankind and for all that is good and true. It is impassioned but rarefied, demanding, with the sharp moral measurements of youth (see quotation below). However, as John Purkis suggests, she has to learn to "substitute a new kind of loving, the particular, for the general benevolence which she has hitherto exercised in the communities of Hayslope and Snowfield." (Purkis, p.101). She harangues Bessy (AB, p.31) on the question of earrings as though their presence or absence represented the keys to heaven.

> Poor child! poor child! He is beseeching you, and you don't listen to him. You think of ear-rings and fine gowns and you never think of the Saviour who died to save your precious soul. Your cheeks will be shrivelled one day, your hair will be grey, your poor body will be thin and tottering! Then you will have to stand before God dressed in your sins, in your evil tempers and vain thoughts. And Jesus, who stands ready to help you now, won't help you then: because you won't have him to be your Saviour, he will be your judge. Now he looks at you with love and mercy, and says,'Come to me that you may have life;' then

> he will turn away from you, say, Depart from me into everlasting fire!
>
> AB, pp.31-32

"The Two Bed Chambers" (Chapter 15) highlights the contrast between Dinah and Hetty as they prepare for bed. Hetty's is a ritual of vanity and self-admiration tied to a tactile, worldly mentality:

> She was going to let down her hair, and make herself look like that picture of a lady in Miss Lydia Donnithorne's dressing-room. It was soon done, and the dark hyacinthine curves fell on her neck. It was not heavy, massive, merely rippling hair, but soft and silken, running at every opportunity into delicate rings. But she pushed it all backward to look like the picture, and form a dark curtain, throwing into relief her round white neck . . . And Hetty looked at herself to-night with quite a different sensation from what she had ever felt before; there was an invisible spectator whose eye rested on her like morning on the flowers.
>
> AB, pp.146-147

Rather than looking to a reflected image of herself as Hetty does, Dinah, otherworldly, looks out of her bedroom window at things outside herself: the fields, the elm trees, the cows, and the meadow.

> Her heart was very full, for there was to be only one more night on which she would look out on those fields for a long time to come; but she thought little of leaving the mere scene, for, to her, bleak Snowfield had just as many charms: she thought of all the dear people whom she had learned to care for among these peaceful fields, and who

> would now have a place in her loving remembrance for ever. She thought of the struggles and the weariness that might lie before them in the rest of their life's journey, when she would be away from them, and know nothing of what was befalling them; and the pressure of this thought soon became too strong for her to enjoy the unresponding stillness of the moonlit fields. She closed her eyes, that she might feel more intensely the presence of a Love and Sympathy deeper and more tender than was breathed from the earth and sky.
>
> AB, pp.153-154

Hetty thinks of her beauty, her hoped-for marriage to Arthur, her elevation in rank. Dinah thinks of the people in Hayslope whom she must soon leave, and prays to God for them as members of the Christian flock rather than as individuals. However, she doesn't think of herself and her altruism is directed to the masses while she cannot see individuals. She is self-sacrificing, self-denying and self-deprecating. Her judgements on others are gentle but judgements notwithstanding.

"Dinah has understood the heavy responsibilites which freedom of action involves" (Pearce, p.69). Her lecture to Bessy is followed by a similar sermon directed at Hetty (AB, pp.156-157). They both "belonged unquestionably to that unsoaped, lazy class of feminine characters with whom you may venture to eat an egg, an apple or a nut" (AB, p.31). The modern reader finds this assessment harsh and unsubstantiated. In any case, Hetty is impervious to criticism. It is partly through her suffering during her desperate journey and partly through Dinah that Hetty comes to some awareness of her unconsidered behaviour. Especially in prison with Dinah, Hetty emerges to feeling and

human communication, forgives Arthur and asks Adam's forgiveness. Moreover, these two women give one another what each needs: Dinah takes on something of Hetty's natural femininity, whereas Hetty frees herself from the shackles of selfishness and responds to the experience of living with other people.

Dinah is a Methodist preacher in a community where the Anglican faith is a cohesive religious force. She follows the teachings of Methodism, a new and barely-tolerated form of Christianity which is outside the purview of the Anglican Church. Methodism and the other religious "isms" of the day were considered suspicious by the establishment and mainstream Christianity. Women preachers were doubly suspect although Dinah's purity and blamelessness are never questioned. She diverges from the norm as her aunt, Mrs. Poyser, who personifies the norm, is quick to point out:

> But, for the matter o' that, if everybody was to do like you, the world must come to a standstill; for if everybody tried to do without house and home, and with poor eating and drinking, and was allays talking as we must despise the things o' the world, as you say, I should like to know where the pick o' the stock, and the corn, and the best new-milk cheeses 'ud have to go.
>
> AB, p.77

Society does not accept her role as a preacher any more than her aunt Poyser does. She is also reiterating Adam's words. She has to fit usefully and happily into a social environment (Daiches 1, p.1069) to become a settled member of the community. The matrimonial option is an unquestioned goal

considered to provide "for the roots and nourishment of a community" (Calder, p.56). However, the institution of marriage damages as well as sustains since within it a woman has no status except as a dependent daughter or wife.

Dinah's determination to pursue her preaching and forgo the love of a specific man so that she may love all mankind sets her apart from society. She refuses to accept the wife/mother role offered by the transparent and devoted Seth who is Adam's brother and is in love with her, and believes her vocation excludes that role:

> I've not turned a deaf ear to your words, Seth, for when I saw as your love was given to me, I thought it might be a leading of Providence for me to change my way of life, and that we should be fellow-helpers; and I spread the matter before the Lord. But whenever I tried to fix my mind on marriage, and our living together, other thoughts always came in – the times when I've prayed by the sick and dying, and the happy hours I've had preaching, when my heart was filled with love, and the Word was given to me abundantly. And when I've opened the Bible for direction, I've always lighted on some clear word to tell me where my work lay. I believe what you say, Seth, that you would try to be a help and not a hindrance to my work; but I see that our marriage is not God's will – He draws my heart another way.
>
> AB, p.36

Towards the end of the novel, however, Dinah shifts her general love of mankind to a much more particular love for Adam, who has touched her physically as well as emotionally. Plainly put, Dinah is not physically attracted to Seth and her affection for him remains platonic. She does respond to Adam. She blushes, she melts at his touch, she longs for the sight of him:

> Dinah, for the first time in her life, felt a painful self-consciousness; there was something in the dark penetrating glance of this strong man so different from the mildness and timidity of his brother Seth. A faint blush came, which deepened as she wondered at it. This blush recalled Adam from his forgetfulness.
>
> AB, p.115

She accepts him because of an undeniable physical response – not present in her relationship with Seth, and her virginal asceticism crumbles. Although she tries to deny her attraction to Adam by racing back to the icy realm of Snowfield, her blood has felt the warmth of Adam's touch and Hayslope calls her. Dinah accepts Adam's proposal joyfully.

> What a look of yearning love it was that the mild grey eyes turned on the strong dark-eyed man! She did not start again at the sight of him; she said nothing, but moved towards him so that his arm could clasp her round. It is the Divine Will, my soul is so knit to yours that it is but a divided life I live without you. And this moment, now you are with me, I feel that our hearts are filled with the same love . . . And they kissed each other with a deep joy.
>
> AB, p.510

Eliot cannot forbear comment:

> What greater thing is there for two human souls, than to feel that they are joined for life – to strengthen each other in all labour, rest on each other in all sorrow, to minister to each other in all pain, to be one with each other in silent unspeakable memories at the moment of the last parting.
>
> AB, p.510

Adam enables Dinah to reveal feelings that she has subdued for what she herself calls "living only in God and those of his creatures" (AB, p.488). She receives the full acceptance of society only after their marriage. She is then seen to fulfill the role of wife and mother on any normal day as she waits with her children for Adam to return from his work.

Dinah has no mother or father. Free from family pressures, she may forge her own career, think, plan and act for herself. After marrying Adam, Dinah is resigned to her role in an earthly institution. Although Rachel M. Brownstein claims that, "by linking her life to a man's, the heroine defines her singularity. By reconciling opposites, transforming the complex into the simple – by marrying, in other words – she makes herself all she is, complete." (Brownstein, p.14), the novel tells us clearly that marriage makes a woman dependent on her husband.[1]

Dinah's very spirituality, her ethereal devotion to the service of God, brand her a renegade and, therefore, a social "problem." Her acquiescence to life's physical needs and her new dedication to her biological family redeem her in this life and restore her to humankind.

No such metaphysical ruminations disturb Hetty's reflections on her hopes and expectations. Hetty is a beautiful dairymaid. The author dwells on her beauty. She seems to be seen by others as a beautiful object. Men and women turn their heads to look at her because of the beguiling effect her freshness and attraction have upon beholders, including both Adam and Arthur.

[1] Brownstein's argument glosses over the difficulties of existential choice between these alternatives to make a virtue of necessity since either choice represents the denial of an essential part of human nature.

But Eliot sounds a warning of trouble and does so in the earthy physical terms she relies on when considering Hetty.

> Hetty's was a spring-tied beauty; it was the beauty of young frisking things, round-limbed, gambolling, circumventing you by a false air of innocence — the innocence of a young star-browed calf, for example, that, being inclined for a promenade out of bounds, leads you a severe steeple-chase over hedge and ditch, and only comes to a stand in the middle of a bog.
>
> AB, p.83

Hetty knows that men are attracted to her and she takes pleasure from any attention shown to her by them: "Hetty was quite used to the thought that people liked to look at her" (AB, p.95). The chapter entitled "Hetty's World" examines her character and consciousness. Her thoughts are almost exclusively on the attraction of others to her: that of Mr. Craig, the gardener at the Chase, or of Adam, who is favoured by her uncle, Mr. Poyser, as suitor for her hand. They would make a good match as far as their rank in the community is concerned, Hetty being a farmer's niece and Adam an artisan because "those were times when there was no rigid demarcation of rank between the farmer and the respectable artisan" (AB, p.96). Hetty never gives Adam's love a moment's thought until she learns that Arthur has left her. What thought she gives to Arthur's love is unclear except in Eliot's comments to the effect that her "dreams were all of luxuries: to sit in a carpeted parlour, and always wear white stockings; to have some large beautiful ear-rings such as were all the fashion . . . " (AB, p.98).

Hetty is preoccupied with her physical appearance as well as worldly pleasures. According to Laurence Lerner (p.34), she is the most powerfully

rendered character in Adam Bede; and on her hinges the resolution of the plot (Bennett, p.105). She enjoys putting on jewellery and admiring herself. Yet, she has some realization of the vanity of this, as shown by her hiding such things and only indulging in coquettish activities in her own room at night:

> Hetty got up and reached an old black lace scarf out of the linen-press, and a pair of large ear-rings out of the sacred drawer from which she had taken candles. It was an old scarf, full of rents, but it would make a becoming border round her shoulders, and set off the whiteness of her upper arm. And she would take out the little ear-rings she had in her ears - oh! How her aunt had scolded her for having her ears bored!
>
> AB, p.147

Hetty is interested in fripperies and useless decorations which not only her aunt, Mrs. Poyser, but also Dinah dislike because for them they are the signs of self-indulgence that can only lead to a tragic outcome such as Hetty's. She herself finally realizes that from once being "the earnest of her future paradise of finery" all this jewellery as well as "her short poisonous delights spoiled for ever all the little joys that had once made the sweetness of her life." (AB, pp.322-323)

Adam and Arthur each love Hetty but their affections for her occupy polar opposites on a temporal and moral scale. Adam wants to love and cherish Hetty forever, to make a gift of his very soul, to care for her every wish, to comfort her every hurt. Arthur luxuriates in her beauty, finds it enchanting, a delight, a voluptuous and irresistible pleasure that he cannot, will not, deny himself. The reader cannot ignore the evidence that Hetty simply fails to

understand the nature and value of Adam's love for her. But she understands Arthur's love very well: it is a mirror image of the value she places on herself. That Hetty and Arthur exceed the sexual confines of their stations is not really a surprise. On the physical level, they understand each other very well.

However, Arthur himself says, "No gentleman could marry a farmer's niece." (AB, p.136) Within the hierarchical social structure of Adam Bede, everyone has a traditional place in the community. The highest ranking characters are Squire Donnithorne and his grandson Arthur. Then come the representatives of the established Church, the schoolteacher, the shopkeepers, the farmers and the agricultural labourers. Within this organisation all are expected to defer to their social superiors. Movement between ranks is limited: In Chapter 25, "The Games" Mrs. Irwine says of Hetty,

> She's a perfect beauty! I've never seen anything so pretty since my young days. What a pity such beauty as that should be thrown away among the farmers, when it's wanted so terribly among the good families without fortune!
>
> AB, p.265

Everyone except Hetty, is aware that there can never be a marriage between the heir to the estate and the Poyser's dairymaid, but her desires and daydreams blind her to the unrealities of such a match and she is carried along on a tide of romantic infatuation:

> He would want to marry her, and make a lady of her, she could hardly dare to shape the thought – yet how else could it be? Marry her quite secretly, as Mr. James, the

> Doctor's assistant, married the Doctor's niece, and nobody found it out for a long while after, and then it was of no use to be angry. The doctor had told her aunt all about it in Hetty's hearing. She didn't know how it would be, but it was quite plain the old Squire could never be told anything about it, for Hetty was ready to faint with awe and fright if she came across him at the Chase.
>
> AB, pp.147-148

Her inner thoughts reveal a fantasy unchecked by any practical considerations of her unsuitability to marry Arthur, elevated in rank to become a fine and privileged lady. The very fact that Hetty can entertain such an impossible dream is testimony to her simple nature, as is her confusion about the dissimilarity between her position and that of the "Doctor's niece" who married her uncle's assistant. The social gap in rank between her and Arthur is much greater. Eliot repeatedly portrays Hetty as shallow and pleasure-loving, pins her down as "a little trivial soul" (AB, p.321), and warns the reader against an outward appearance which does not provide a reliable indication of her moral state: "How pretty the little puss looks in that odd dress! It would be the easiest folly in the world to fall in love with her..." (AB, p.148).

Although Hetty is subjected to the same social, moral and sexual limitations, she does not have the dedication to a cause possessed by Dinah. Instead of agreeing to marry someone (Adam for example) of her own class, Hetty's attempt to ascend to the upper classes would not have been accepted by the readers of the time. Hetty is a child; it never occurs to her that she cannot transcend her class. Hetty does not want to be a respectable wife to a man of her own class and mother of his children. She wants much more. Her yielding to the temptation of heightened social status leads to her downfall. Eliot does

not tell us whether Hetty found her sexual relation with Arthur tempting. On this point, we are uninformed.

Hetty floats like "some plants that have hardly any roots, with no ties to those around her, not to anything in her past life" (AB, p.151). She does trust Arthur. She is not a "bad" but a simple person, easily self-deceived, whose egoism prevents her from seeing the implications of her actions. Even when Hetty finds herself deserted by Arthur and pregnant, she cannot focus on the terrible reality of her situation. She accepts Adam as a suitor as though marriage of any kind would offer a solution to her difficulty, as though Adam and the entire Hayslope community were unable to count the months from one to nine. Far along – too late – in her pregnancy, she realizes that marrying Adam is not a solution and sets off in search of Arthur, still persuaded that he can and will rescue her.

Hetty's desperate journey in pursuit of Arthur is a revelation for her. She undergoes the trials of carrying a terrible secret on a long journey, in a strange part of the country, with limited financial resources. Hetty changes. On her journey she starts to realize the results of her behaviour and, because she is dependent on strangers, begins to relate to other people. She understands that, even for one as lovely as she is, "actions have consequences" (Brownstein, p.242), that she is not exempt from feeling those consequences. Her frantic, hopeless search is heart-rending but Eliot has few words of sympathy for her as she delivers a detached account of Hetty's peregrinations and disappointments. Her suffering is borne with the same mute incomprehension she brings to the moral implications of her previous behaviour. Finally she learns what she has not appreciated before: "that her home had been a happy one, that her uncle

had been very good to her" (AB, p.356). She understands how safe and secure home and life have been and what she has lost by flirting with fate.

In Eliot's day sexual relationships were unacceptable outside marriage.[2] Society imposed moral standards which would preclude any illegitimate children. Therefore, Hetty flagrantly disrupts the moral order of society: She transgresses the prescribed limitations and is punished by exile, condemnation and, later, death. She is unable to cope with the consequences of her past behaviour and she abandons her illegitimate child, as usual, without thinking. Later, drawn back to the child by instinct, she finds it dead. Her remorse is overwhelming but does not prevent her arrest on the inhuman charge of child murder.

Not only does Hetty suffer as a result of her illicit relationship with Arthur, but so do Adam, Arthur, Dinah and the entire Poyser family because they represent the extended community. They feel that Hetty's misfortune is "worse than death" (AB, p.394). Hetty brings disgrace on them; they feel bound to leave the area: "There's no staying in this country for us now" says Mr. Poyser (AB, p.398) because they are proud of their untarnished reputation. The failure of one individual can affect the whole community. They are all damaged and they must all suffer. Roots and traditions are very important for the Poysers, and these are things that Hetty is not mature enough to consider until her arrest. The Poysers represent a unified group, thus a microcosm of the integrity of the community. Hetty and Arthur violate the moral code of society which is based on traditional forms and patterns.

[2] That Eliot was not personally bound by this general law is intriguing but not, here, at issue. Nevertheless, it is fascinating to learn how she came to feel exempt from blanket application of such a ruling.

In the prison scene (Chapter 45), the two halves of Eliot's female characters' personality make one entity. Hetty and Dinah embrace each other and provide what is lacking in one another. Hetty realizes that all her past joys based on trinkets and fripperies led to her "downfall". Dinah, on the other hand, affected by Hetty's tragedy discovers a tolerance for human imperfection. While in prison, Hetty is greatly comforted by Dinah's support and presence. It is Dinah who opens the path for Hetty to reach out to other people. And Hetty teaches Dinah that human beings are by nature fallible but not, for that reason, beyond the reach of love and compassion. Dinah teaches Hetty to strive towards sympathy and altruism. As Dinah enters the cell and makes herself known, her quiet and tender words move Hetty to rise and embrace her – the first step in her movement towards human communication.

> Not a word was spoken. Dinah waited, hoping for a spontaneous word from Hetty; but she sat in the same dull despair, only clutching the hand that held hers, and leaving her cheek against Dinah's. It was the human contact she clung to.
>
> AB, p.430

But, blessed with Dinah's faithful patience, Hetty, for the first time, reconstructs the events that have led to her condemnation by a jury of her peers. There is no evidence that Hetty herself sees this account as a confession (although it is characterized as such) but rather that she has a simple need to tell her story and not to an emissary from God but to another human being, to her friend, to Dinah. And Dinah does not judge. Dinah opens her arms. In this way, the end of Hetty's story is the beginning of Dinah's integration into the human community. But women are subject to the conventions of their society. Eliot suspends judgement on the women and the convention but her message is

clear enough: the convention is stronger. The author's consciousness of the complexities of human desires, fears and self-deceptions prevents her from simplifying characters into good and evil, and towards the revelation of a complex mixture of traits. So, although Hetty has allowed Arthur to seduce her, she is not wicked. She is a simple girl who can only relate to herself as she is reflected in the eyes of males and values herself according to their opinions of her.

Like Hetty, Arthur starts the day's activities looking at his own image in a mirror. He is complacent, self-satisfied with his good intentions and he has a shallow relationship with others. He wants his pleasures, but thinks that he can avoid their consequences. Moreover, he believes that moral wrongs may be rectified by expressing regret and providing material compensation. "If he should happen to spoil a woman's existence for her,[he] would make it up to her with expensive bon-bons, packed up and directed by his own hand" (AB, p.122). Accordingly, he deludes himself that he can trifle with Hetty and escape unscathed: "Every man likes to flirt with a pretty girl, and every pretty girl likes to be flirted with" (AB, p.288). His relationship with Hetty is contrary to everything he thinks he stands for. He should have flirted with a girl of his own class he would have known exactly what to do in those circumstances.

The limitations placed on Dinah are those of conforming to society's expectations of woman - either the sober respectable spinster (Mr. Irwine's sister), or the wife and mother. The moral, sexual limitations are less restricting for her as her own moral standards will not permit sexual relations outside marriage. As Paul Turner says, "every sexual indulgence in youth has an

'unmitigated evil' consequence" (Turner, p.2). However, her work as a preacher is not approved of generally and this puts her "outside" society. Dinah never has to resolve this question since her yearning for Adam's body and soul becomes the salient matter. We are, apparently, not to question the life Dinah has abandoned in favour of a more humble calling. Dinah realizes her Victorian reality and succumbs. She does not triumph, she accepts. She is offered the option of marriage and motherhood by Eliot; the alternative is the inevitability of becoming a lonely old lady. She conforms to society's expectations and finds what happiness she can in doing so.

Adam Bede was a successful commercial publication in 1859 and is still in command of a wide contemporary readership. But the novel is now, differently criticised than at the time it first appeared. Many modern readers find Dinah Morris and Adam Bede less interesting than Hetty Sorrel and Arthur Donnithorne as theirs is the most dramatic story in the novel. It is not enough to hear the author tell us that Hetty was vain and trivial and Arthur self-indulgent and careless. Some kind of passion tied these people together and, in the reader's imagination that passion is more vibrant, more immediate than the foot-dragging admission of attraction Dinah half-reluctantly (AB, p.510) concedes to Adam.

Here is precisely where the Victorian Convention plays its high card. Passion in women (of any age or station) is not acceptable. Even Dinah's Christian passion is outside the prevailing social framework. Nor do we perceive Dinah's Methodism as a passion. It is loving, dutiful and faithful, but not passionate. We suppose therefore that Dinah will be loving, dutiful and faithful in her marriage to Adam. But she will never be the physical, luxurious,

sensual woman that he loved in Hetty. Adam learns to temper his passions. We do not learn whether Dinah ever indulges her passions; perhaps within circumscribed limitations.

We are quite happy to let the future of Hayslope unfold however it may. The love, the passion, between Hetty and Arthur was always impossible and now is unreachable. Dinah and Adam, married and beyond passion, reassert the traditional order.

In The Mill on the Floss, George Eliot heightened the dramatic tension among her characters and unleashed spectacular natural forces to describe their destinies.

CHAPTER 2

The Mill On the Floss is the story of the Tulliver family of Dorlcote Mill near St. Ogg's, and especially of Maggie Tulliver, a sensitive and intelligent girl who cannot find an outlet for her true nature. In F. R. Leavis's understatement, "She has the intellectual potentiality for which the environment into which she is born does not provide much encouragement" (Leavis, p.52).

Maggie Tulliver is George Eliot's most lovable – and in many ways most memorable – character. We meet her as a spunky, spirited nine-year-old (MOF, p.33), imaginative, affectionate, irrepressible. Maggie is no goody-two-shoes. She forgets to feed Tom's rabbits, chops off her hair in defiance of her Aunt Dodsons' criticism, runs away from home and, when alone, reads and reflects. Maggie is impressed by what she reads. She hates doing patchwork but enjoys reading books by Defoe, Jeremy Taylor and Bunyan.

Instead of Mrs. Poyser and the Hall Farm, the maternal uncles and aunts – Glegg, Deane and Pullet – represent, with considerable comic effect, the social norm in The Mill on the Floss. It is an urban but provincial society and its narrowness thwarts Maggie and warps her brother Tom who "takes after" his mother's family, the Dodsons, while Maggie is more like the colourful and romantic Tullivers. Tom, the object of Maggie's deepest affection, does not have any sense of alternative values or ways of life; he will do nothing that is not "right". He can never understand Maggie; he is a boy with a deficient power of perception regarding signs and abstractions (MOF, p.152). This

deficiency makes his study of Euclid difficult but does not diminish Maggie's admiration of her brother.

To her mother's incredulity, Maggie is a freethinker. Like her father, she is rebellious, headstrong. She has a weak spot: her brother Tom who may, by whatever form of rejection, reduce her to tears and supplication. From the time we meet her, we see that Maggie loves freedom but loves Tom more, more than anything (MOF, p.37). This love ties the story together at every critical point.

As a child Maggie's emotional yearning and power, as well as her physical appearance, is inappropriate to her world which prefers unopinionated and kittenish blondes, epitomized in the appearance and character of her cousin Lucy. Maggie is tall, dark and fiery. She says what she thinks unhampered by convention. The physical contrast between Lucy and Maggie is remarkable: Lucy has a rosebud mouth to be kissed; hazel eyes and clear eyebrows rather darker than her curls. She is meek and quiet and she complies with the Victorian idea of womanhood. Maggie's hair is straight, not curly: her mother wishes her daughter had a curled crop, "like other folks's children" (MOF, p.33). Maggie has ambivalent feelings about her station in society, and does not like the conventional restrictions of her place in it. Nor does she wish to be patronized by Mr. Riley (MOF, pp.37-44), a minor character in the novel but a person who feels Maggie should benefit from his superior judgement.

Because she is born into the "wrong" sex, she does not get the opportunities offered to her brother Tom. She reads but is excluded from masculine practical knowledge in the mill and education in school. She succumbs to the ideologies offered in a variety of books. Eliot suggests that the impulse to dream and to live in the imagination is closely related to the need for

love, "the strongest need in poor Maggie's nature" (MOF, p.56). Both are expressions of a desire, not for knowledge, but for complete identification with another person or a different role in life. From childhood, Maggie is a bit of an escapist.

Maggie's nature and desires are incompatible with the values of the community she is born into. Feminists critics, ranging from Virginia Woolf (The Common Reader, p.217) to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (The Madwoman in the Attic, p.448) talk about the voice George Eliot gives to the aspiring, complex, alluring and overflowing female consciousness and to mute forebearance. Virginia Woolf in her essay on George Eliot (quoted by Showalter, p.111) says,

> The ancient consciousness of woman, charged with suffering and sensibility, and for so many ages dumb, seems in [Eliot's heroines] to have brimmed and overflowed and uttered a demand for something – they scarcely knew what – for something that is perhaps incompatible with the facts of human existence. . . For her too the burden and the complexity of womanhood were not enough; she must reach beyond the sanctuary and pluck for herself the strange bright fruits of art and knowledge. Clasping them as few women have ever clasped them, she would not renounce her own inheritance – the difference of view, the difference of standard nor accept an inappropriate reward.

There is a persistent opposition between the way Maggie wants the world to be and the way it actually is. Although she shares and treasures the sensory world around her, she escapes into a dream world where goodness and love solve all problems. She finds significance in her fantasies and when she confuses them with the real world, the consequences are devastating. Her

experiment with becoming the queen of the gypsies ends in humiliation; when she chops off her hair, she does not look like the "perfect" Lucy – she looks ridiculous. She repeatedly resolves to conform but her overwhelming need for affection and intimate personal relations melts both her resolve and proper detachment. She reacts emotionally.

Maggie, as a child, seeks various opiates – in daydreams, literature and personal relationships (Hardy, p.45) in order not to feel out of harmony with her surroundings: Her imagined life is so much more loving than the real world. "Everybody in the world seemed so hard and unkind to Maggie: there was no indulgence, no fondness, such as she imagined when she fashioned the world afresh in her own thoughts" (MOF, p.240). One of the problems Maggie is confronted with is how to distinguish between dreaming and waking and to lead life without an opiate, an exaggerated promise, the hope of a beautiful future.

> Well! There was no hope for it: Tom was gone now, and Maggie could think of no comfort but to sit down by the holly, or wander by the hedgerow, and fancy it was all different, refashioning her little world into just what she should like it to be.
>
> Maggie's was a troublous life, and this was the form in which she took her opium.
>
> MOF, p.67

Maggie is passionate in her joys and sorrows. Her imagination is creative. But as soon as she tries to make her stories part of her life – for example, by running away to the gypsies (Chapter 11) – on the groundless premise that they will be delighted to make her their queen – she finds that reality is intractable and that her young mind is "the oddest mixture of clear-

eyed acumen and blind dreams" (MOF, p.127). As a child and an adolescent she is unable to foresee the consequences of her actions because she can hardly bear to admit that the laws operating in the real world may be at odds with the vitality of her imagination. She juggles her experiences and suppresses her feelings so that her individuality and aspirations may somehow adjust to inescapable reality. She has to find a way to accept "the hard-non-moral-outward conditions" (Eliot's Letters, in Fernando, p.29) of the material world.

St Ogg's women are valued to the extent that they are of unquestionable virtue, obedient and subservient. The "ideal" woman is fair, petite and has long, curly hair, preferably in ringlets. Mr. Tulliver has married just such a woman who has the added distinction of being "dull-witted" (MOF, p.37). Maggie rebels against this stereotype by cutting off her hair (MOF, pp.81-82), a characteristic blow for freedom followed by equally characteristic remorse. She is defiant but recriminatory. It is as though she wants to say: criticize me, I will leave. Whether it is cutting her hair or running off to the gypsies, the external world, the Victorian world, is too powerful for Maggie. With her hair hair hacked off, in the public view she looks queer, adrift in society, androgynous. She suffers for her impetuous actions and is left with "a bitter sense of the irrevocable which was almost an everyday experience of her small soul" (MOF, p.82). Worst of all, out of jealousy and impetuous pique, she pushes inoffensive Lucy into the mud.

Maggie wants an identity other than that pre-destined for her. Like Dinah in Adam Bede, she searches for a guide to life which can sweep her up from the sheer dreariness of ordinary life to an ideal purpose. She tries to prove herself through her power of knowledge and understanding in a male-

dominated world. She feels her only refuge can be in escape from the narrow-mindedness of her world to some other place.

> In the books there were people who were always agreeable or tender . . .who did not show their kindness by finding fault . . .Maggie was a creature full of passionate longings for all that was beautiful and glad; thirsty for all knowledge: with an ear straining after dreamy music that died away and would not come near to her: with a blind, unconscious yearning for something that would link together the wonderful impressions of this mysterious life and give her soul a sense of home in it.
>
> MOF, pp.240-241

Her behaviour is highly inappropriate in a woman. She has always been told that she is brighter than Tom and she resents the fact that she won't have Tom's opportunities to develop her potential.

> "I'll help you now, Tom," said Maggie with a little air of patronizing consolation. "I'm come to stay ever so long, if Mrs. Stelling asks me. I've brought my box and my pinafores, haven't I, father?"
>
> You help me, you silly little thing!" said Tom, in such high spirits at this announcement that he quite enjoyed the idea of confounding Maggie by showing her a page of Euclid. "I should like to see you doing my lessons! Why, I learn Latin too! Girls never learn such things. They're too silly."
>
> MOF, p.157

Her father knows that she's "too 'cute for a woman" (MOF, p.32), he is convinced that her intelligence will be a problem. Maggie is incapable of relating to the situation in which she finds herself. As John Purkis (pp.319-320) puts it, "in some other place or time she would be in the right."

As long as Maggie is presented as a child, her father's "little wench", her trials and tribulations are more charming than troublesome for the reader. We share Mr. Tulliver's appreciation of her bright mind, her need for approval and affection. Her sense of total desolation when she finds she has erred in judgement is touching and sweet without a trace of treacle. All this light and colour recedes into shadow when Mr. Tulliver loses his lawsuit and is confronted with bankruptcy, an event that coincides with Maggie's early adolescence.

Mr. Tulliver badly overestimated his strength and power of his position in the community. His is a sin of pride but such sins are commonplace in St. Ogg's. Mr. Tulliver will pay – and pay heavily – for over-stepping the bounds that tie him to his trade and his class. However, Tulliver most emphatically does not repent: a heretic, he curses his enemy, the lawyer Wakem in writing and in the family Bible (MOF, p.276), and he nurses his hatred until its physical release actually kills him (MOF, p.353). At that dreadful moment Maggie, assuming she is somehow at fault, cries, " 'Tom, forgive me – let us always love each other;' and they clung and wept together." Tom learns when very young not to doubt himself, while Maggie, to the end of her life, is self-doubting and unassertive. Maggie's self-esteem is pitifully dependent on Tom's love, and she will sacrifice any legitimate claim of her own personality to avoid rejection by him.

Tom and Maggie experience two consecutive losses. First they are bankrupt as a result of Tulliver's lost lawsuit and obliged to make their livings by the sweat of their bodies and the stifling of their souls, like Adam and Eve. Then at the long-hoped-for moment when Tom has repaid his father's debt, Mr.

Tulliver strikes out physically at his old enemy, Wakem, and quickly dies of heart failure. The reader begins, at just this point, to see the hand of Fate and after a moment's reflection, recalls not only "the sins of the fathers" but the inevitable doom of the Oresteia[1]. At this point, it is interesting to note that George Eliot was an admirer of Aeschylus; it is more than interesting, almost strange, that this mythic theme resurfaces in George Eliot's very 19th century novel.

Tom and Maggie each renounce the pleasures of the world. More importantly, they renounce each other as Tom will not accept Maggie's friendship with Philip Wakem. Each of them finds a vision of life which is narrowed, impoverished. Until this point, Tom and Maggie have always been physically close even if they have disagreements. Their peace making involves physical manifestations: tears, hugs, kisses. Physically distanced from each other, they have no way of expressing their loneliness for each other. This is the important renunciation in The Mill on the Floss. Maggie and Tom, like Dinah and Hetty, in Adam Bede, are each like half of one whole personality. But Dinah and Hetty discover that they need each other as adults. Tom and Maggie have had each other since childhood. When they are estranged, their experience is one of pain and loss.

[1] Eliot's critics at the time the book was published made similar observations. They are usefully collected in George Eliot: The Critical Heritage, ed. David Carroll. Sir Edward Bulwer-Lyton invokes Homer's quarrel between Agememnon and Achilles;E. S. Dallas in a review in The Times, 19 May, 1860, claims that "the riddle of life as it is here expounded is more like a Greek tragedy than a modern novel." Dinah Mulock comments on "the fatal Floss, which runs through the whole story like a Greek fate..." (p.154)

Maggie's "process" toward maturity begins when she is forced to abandon her dream worlds. When literary dream worlds fail her, she finds a new and effective drug in the religion of self-denial. Her childhood is marked by the need to be loved and admired and by the habit of creative fantasy. Now she shifts her focus to art and religion and her need to be loved and admired is subdued. Her illusions of self-flattery and her absorption in herself are to be overcome for the achievement of self-discovery. She decides that the "miseries of her young life had come from fixing her heart on her own pleasure" (MOF, p.290).

She stumbles on Thomas à Kempis whose teachings provide her with a sense of self-humiliation and devotedness. Renunciation seems to her "the key" to the entrance into "that satisfaction which she had so long been craving in vain" (MOF, p.291). She renounces all those worldly pleasures which bring nothing but unhappiness to her. She does not read or listen to music anymore, activities which constitute in her own words "an insignificant part of life" (MOF, p.290). We have seen a similar spirit of renunciation in Dinah but her motives were very different. Dinah believed her happiness lay in helping others and her efforts to do so were concrete, effective. Maggie wants to be a good girl and confuses goodness with self-denial.

Maggie's acceptance of Philip's friendship represents a first step which enables her to see that renunciation does not bring happiness but misery. Philip believes that she is "shutting herself up in a narrow self-delusive fanaticism, which is only a way of escaping pain by starving into dullness all the highest powers of her nature" (MOF, p.324). She lets her imagination run loose and yearns for more knowledge. For a girl such as Maggie, seeking safety in

negation is of no use because, when she is faced with the intellectual temptations delivered by Philip, she realizes that she really knows nothing of renunciation, whereas she has thought of it in her imagination as "ecstasy" (MOF, p.456).

Maggie needs to love and to be loved. That central fact is apparent in her relationships with her father and her brother who are the "two idols of her life" (MOF, p.280). Her father thinks that his "little wench" will not be able to make a good marriage, and he cannot bear the thought that she might marry beneath her. Tom is aware of the power he has over Maggie and is ready to exploit his superiority in being both male and older. Philip is attracted to her and has won Maggie's pity because he is deformed and she respects him for his keen and well-furnished mind. She does not desire Philip who does not arouse her sexually. She enjoys his company and his mind which "is a sort of world to me: you can tell me all I want to know. I think I should never be tired of being with you" (MOF, p.332). In addition to her lack of physical response to Philip, Maggie is also filled with a sense of duty. When she meets Philip in the Red Deeps, she declares the necessity of duty and her family. Maggie is torn between what she sees as duty and her own desires, and this conflict is the central drama of the novel.

Philip's deformity, he is a hunchback, is the result of an accident in infancy rather than a birth defect. The distinction has a symbolic relevance as we are meant to understand that he is emotionally normal. It is an obstacle to physical love between Maggie and himself and his impotence in that respect is the successor to that of Mr. Tulliver's from the moment he loses his lawsuit as a result of a confrontation with Philip's father. So Maggie's gods crumble in

succession before her eyes. But Tom does not crumble. Tom – worse – retreats beyond Maggie's reach and losing him casts a great shadow over her life. She is forced to feel that her passionate nature and "uncontrolled" character must be disciplined because as, Tom tells her,

> You are always in extremes – you have no judgement and self-command; and yet you think you know best, and will not submit to be guided . . . At one time you take pleasure in a sort of perverse self-denial, and yet, at another you have not resolution to resist a thing that you know to be wrong.
>
> MOF, pp.382-383

Tom's world has no place for nice arguments or imaginative flexibility. He does not allow Maggie to contribute to the family budget when their father goes bankrupt: "I don't like my sister to do such things, I'll take care that the debts are paid, without your lowering yourself in that way."(MOF, p.357) So Maggie's actions are bound to be circumscribed by convention. However helpful her instincts are, it is not proper for her to fulfill them. Tom thrives because he has a wonderful discernment of what will turn to his advantage or disadvantage.

However, Philip her friend, and the novel's course make it plain to Maggie that she has fallen into the fantasy of choosing the kind of renunciation that empties life and depresses the spirit. George Eliot reminds the reader that Maggie

> threw some exaggeration and wilfulness, some pride and impetuosity even into her self-renunciation: her own life

> was still a drama for her, in which she demanded of herself that her part should be played with intensity. And so it came to pass that she often lost the spirit of humility by being excessive in the outward act.
>
> (MOF, p.292)

Maggie suppressed her emotions but she had a nature "full of eager, passionate longings for all that was beautiful and glad" (MOF, p.241). Thus she failed to resist temptation represented in the intellectual form of Philip Wakem and later in the physical attraction of Stephen Guest.

Stephen Guest is a "rather striking young man of five-and-twenty, with a square forehead, short dark-brown hair standing erect, with a slight wave at the end, like a thick crop of corn, and a half-ardent, half-sarcastic glance from under his well-marked horizontal eyebrows" (MOF, p.355). When they first meet in the drawing room, Maggie feels that life is revealing something quite new to her: "There was a new brightness in her eyes, and a very becoming flush on her cheek" (MOF, p.392). She is irresistibly attracted by Stephen, who is pledged to her cousin Lucy.

Stephen believes himself to be in love with Lucy and likes to "smile down from his tall height, with the air of a rather patronising lover, at the little lady on the stool." (MOF, p.354) Stephen has chosen Lucy very deliberately and approves of himself for doing so. She is exactly the sort of woman he wishes to acquire: she is pretty, accomplished, gentle, affectionate and not stupid. He, and his society, believes that Lucy is the kind of the woman who will make him happy.

Then Stephen meets Maggie, who is in many ways the opposite of Lucy; she is frankly intelligent, she is tall, dark, striking looking, instead of small, fair and pretty. She is angular and unconventional, instead of being pliant and conformist. In contrast to his deliberate choosing of Lucy, he will be mastered by passionate love for a woman he would never have thought of choosing. However much Maggie wants Stephen's love she cannot accept him because she knows that she is taking him away from her cousin Lucy. She does not want to hurt anyone, although of course she does damage to most of the people who matter to her.

Maggie understands that her love for Stephen is very different from her love for Philip. This kind of experience includes "the inexplicable delight" given by physical contact. Stephen holds her hand when her foot slips while being taught how to row. Eliot remarks: "It was very charming to be taken care of in that kind graceful manner by someone taller and stronger than one's self. Maggie had never felt just in the same way before" (MOF, p.373). Yet, it is a forbidden relationship. Stephen is Lucy's beloved. At first Maggie is able to carry out her purpose as she describes it to Stephen outside Aunt Moss's:

> Oh, it is difficult – life is very difficult! It seems right to me sometimes that we should follow our strongest feeling; but then, such feelings continually come across the ties that all our former life has made for us – the ties that have made others dependent on us – and would cut them in two . . . If life did not make duties for us before love comes – love would be a sign that two people ought to belong to each other. But I see – I feel it is not so now: 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.
>
> MOF, p.436

Maggie and Stephen feel the effects of a mutual attraction that is distinctly sexual, heart-stoppingly physical, driven, magnetic, irresistible. But, this language is not that of the Victorian novel or sensibility. Magnetically drawn to one another they may be, but their society and the Victorian convention has no patience with the bedazzled lovers. A succession of credible accidents leaves Maggie and Stephen taking a simple ride in a boat, together but otherwise alone. Maggie and Stephen are gently carried down the river to the sea. Maggie is oblivious of the passing shoreline until they have drifted far enough to sea to make the return to St. Ogg's impossible on that day. Stephen has not precisely calculated this event, but he has not prevented it either. Certainly Maggie is, in terms of the convention, seriously compromised. Maggie first yields for a moment to the spell against which she has struggled, when they drift out to sea in the boat. Stephen attempts to convince her that they are being driven by stronger forces than the ties of duty. Nevertheless, he cannot prevail upon her to flee with him. She insists on returning, whatever reproaches must be faced.

Her decision to return to her town is a hard one but she does not seriously entertain any other. Her presence in St. Ogg's brings distress to herself and to others. St. Ogg's condemns her. This condemnation is akin to that of her aunts and uncles when she was a child but her offence is greater since it affects other people, and, most reprehensible of all, represents a sexual transgression, draws

public notice. She is, on all sides, trapped by the conventions that have always shaped – and circumscribed – her life.

Maggie's weakness and fatal circumstances create a much greater crisis after she has spent an enforced, but blameless, night with Stephen in Mudville – the name speaks for the meaning – and away from St. Ogg's. Maggie returns to take up her life – considered shameful by her neighbours – in St. Ogg's. She offers no excuse, no justification for her "runaway" with Stephen, nor does she proclaim her innocence. Her sorrow and sense of loss is patent enough that (although Tom does not), her mother and her Aunt Glegg, her sternest critics in the past, offer her sympathy and help.

Therefore, no matter how hard she tries to renounce her desires and longings, she cannot; she finds "the joyless days of distasteful occupation harder and harder" (MOF, p.325). She is faced with a dilemma which the exercise of freedom raises for responsible individuals. She is forced to choose between alternatives, neither of which offers a happy issue: she can perhaps maintain her ties with her family, and with established social values, or she can realize her desires for a mature and passionate love. She sacrifices feeling to duty.

She puts her lessons on renunciation into practice: "lay the axe to the root, that thou mayst pluck up and destroy that hidden inordinate inclination to thyself" (MOF, p.289). For Maggie this means that Stephen must be given up, and the passion of love denied, so that she may return to her original place in society, a place she has repeatedly rebelled against but which now, sadder and wiser, she accepts as inevitable. She cannot break away from her lot in the community. As she tells Dr. Kenn, "I have no heart to begin a strange life

again. I should have no stay. I should feel like a lonely wanderer – cut off from the past" (MOF, p.477). She cannot marry Stephen if her joy is to be wrung out of Lucy's and Philip's misery. There are people connected either with Maggie or with Stephen who can be injured by their union (Bennett, p.122). She has deviated from inherited principles. She has broken faith with Lucy, and disrupted a moral code through her involuntary elopement.

Maggie, the animated, outgoing, exuberant child, is still a young woman, isolated, sorrowful. She lives in the house of her brother's old friend Bob Jakin. Without warning, the river Floss is driven by a raging storm, flooding its banks, washing out houses. Awakened by the storm, Maggie rushes out of her lodgings and rows, with her own hands, a small boat to the Mill and to Tom. The Mill is destroyed and sister and brother drown in each other's arms. "There was no future for Maggie that was preferable to death" says Pearce (p.94). It is at the very end that Tom understands his sister's true nature: "It was such a new revelation to his spirit, of the depths in life that had lain beyond his vision, which he had fancied so keen and clear . . . Maggie with eyes of intense life looking out from a weary, beaten face – Tom pale with a certain awe and humiliation" (MOF, p.500).

Some of Eliot's contemporary critics reasoned that the flooding of the Floss was inadequately prepared as an end of the tale of the Tullivers and Eliot herself (Carroll, p.123) admits this as a fault. Rereading and reflection pose a question about why this response is so frequent. At the earliest possible point, Eliot identifies the river with Maggie. Her mother worries that Maggie has fallen or will fall into it and drown. (MOF, p.33) Eliot uses folklore to provide metaphors for the deviant woman. As a little girl, Maggie is fascinated by the

stories of witchcraft in Defoe's History of the Devil: Maggie explains to Mr. Riley "That old woman in the water's a witch; they've put her in to find out whether she's a witch or no, and if she swims she's a witch, and if she's drowned – and killed, you know – she's innocent, and not a witch, but only a poor silly old woman. But what good would it do her then, you know, when she was drowned?" (MOF, pp.37-38)

George Eliot wrote novels described as "naturalistic" or "realistic". Symbolism in English poetry or prose was not contemplated as a writer's conscious technique until thirty years after her death. But there can be no doubt that the Floss functions as a symbol in The Mill on the Floss. Although there are several warnings about the river's temperament, we experience it as an element that gives, rather than takes, life. It is, after all the Floss that turns the mill that puts bread, literally, on the Tulliver table. Maggie's memories of the river are benign; its presence is part of the natural rhythm of life. Until the final chapter of The Mill on the Floss, the reader never meets the river "in a bad mood." So that the river in a rage, a rage that takes life, is a shock to the reader's system.

Certainly the biblical resonance of destruction and death by water has a powerful affect on the Judeo-Christian – or perhaps, human – mind. God destroyed the people he had created because he found them wicked, corrupt, and violent (Genesis, Chapter 6) and he regretted giving life to his creatures. In the great flood, God gives evidence of his power to take life away as well as to give it.

However, and quite apart from Eliot's well-known skepticism about religion, it seems likely that she was more interested in the 19th century debate about the moral role of nature. In France, Jean-Jacques Rousseau had espoused the cause of the "noble savage" and a consequent ideology that was anti-intellectual and anti-academic. The Victorians, especially rich Victorians, found these ideas quite enchanting and they beatified Nature as a benign and loving influence on the lives of men. Ab absurdum, they meandered through their grottos, constructed new "ruins" and visited each other's "follies."

Keener minds rejected this escapism. John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold, most notably, strove to identify and use Nature as the handmaiden of art. So we hear of the work of art "burning with a hard gem-like flame", and of "nature, red in tooth and claw." Evidently, Eliot sided with her learned and talented compatriots. The flood in The Mill on the Floss is not an example of pathetic fallacy but a unifying and cyclical symbol.

Given the critical reaction to Eliot's "killing off" Maggie and Tom, we suspect that George Eliot failed to make the technique work for her in the novel. But the novel holds her best characters. Tom and Maggie Tulliver retain the reader's imagination and sympathy throughout and we understand in the immemorial and mythic sense, the power of blood over the central characters. We know from the beginning of The Mill on the Floss that Maggie is not a witch, not a bad person. So the finality and brutality of her death seems at odds with the Victorian precept that the "good" shall be rewarded. The mechanics of her and Tom's tragedy are compelling and perplexing. This turn of events perplexes the modern reader as well and dictates a more sympathetic assessment of the symbolic elements of the novel.

This referral is part of the ongoing tradition in English letters. Spencer invokes the cooperation of the "sweet Thames." D. H. Lawrence improves upon the image of the flood as an element of sexuality in The Rainbow; T. S. Eliot tries to make peace with the river in "The Waste Land". We, the readers, make undeniable connections in this wealth of ideas about water, the moon, the tides, and human love.

So opposed to the notions – never mind the discussion – of physical desire and sexual attraction was the "cultivated" Victorian mind that reviewers of The Mill on the Floss found it inconceivable, indeed unnatural, that a fine spirit like Maggie's would be drawn to a "lout" like Stephen Guest. Comment on Stephen Guest was unanimous during Eliot's lifetime and even after her death. Once again we are indebted to David Carroll.

"It may be quite natural that she should take that liking to him, but it is a position at variance with all that had before been Heroic about her", said Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton in a letter to John Blackwood April 14, 1860 (p.121). "Why did she love Guest?. What was there about the man to attract her when there was so much to forbid her thinking of him" (p.140). And, "Stephen Guest's dishonourable abduction of Maggie is treated as the quite natural result of his passion for her; he is evidently not disgraced by conduct that would cause any honourable man to turn his back on him" (p.141). Swinburne, in 1877, is still in shock to find "that a woman of Maggie Tulliver's kind can be moved . . . by a thing – I will not write a man – of Stephen Guest's kind" (p.474). Sir Leslie Stephen said Stephen Guest was "offensive, a low creature" (p.478) and Maggie's attraction to him "simply indefensible" (p.477) "a second-rate dandyism" (p.478).

CHAPTER 3

> '. . . It was, I confess, beyond my hope to meet with this rare combination of elements both solid and attractive, adapted to supply aid in graver labours and to cast a charm over vacant hours; and but for the event of my introduction to you (which, let me again say, I trust not to be superficially coincident with foreshadowing needs, but providentially related thereto, as stages towards the completion of a life's plan), I should presumably have gone on to the last without any attempt to lighten my solitariness by a matrimonial union.'
>
> MM, pp.66-67

"Dorothea trembled when she read this letter; then she fell on her knees, buried her face and sobbed" (MM, p.67).

Can you believe it? Imagine yourself – or your sister or daughter – a young woman not yet twenty, receiving a letter representing a marriage proposal from a man more than twice your or her age, whose face is a parade ground for a troop of white moles, who blinks before he speaks and who scrapes his soup spoon over the bottom of the bowl, a letter wherein the essential substance and emotion are wed in the foregoing passage. Would you tremble, kneel, sob? Or would you tear the letter up and then burn it?

Certainly the second course is at least as reasonable as the first. We are learning, however, that Dorothea Brooke, the central character in Middlemarch, is not an entirely reasonable young woman. She accepts the marriage proposal from Edward Casaubon with gratitude and a kind of veneration, flying in the face of general opinion about the tastes of young women and of the advice offered her on all sides.

We have met forerunners of Dorothea Brooke in Eliot's novels. Dinah Morris and Maggie Tulliver are idealists who share qualities with Dorothea. But apart from other differences in personality, Dinah and Maggie are working class, Dorothea is a product of the middle class. For better as in the case of Dorothea – or worse – as in the case of Arthur Donnithorne – Eliot sees through a triple prism where the ties of class, morality and religion each compete for the reader's judgement of character. The results are – to the extent they are comparable – interesting.

Middlemarch is a long, late coming-of-age story; its heroine, Dorothea Brooke strives toward maturity: social, intellectual, sexual and moral. George Eliot develops Dorothea's mind and character in the course of her great masterpiece.[1] Since the novel is about Dorothea's moral education, it can be said that Middlemarch is a novel in which the heroine is educated by life into a fuller knowledge of herself and her relation to her environment.[2] (Daiches, 2, p.10). As the novel unfolds, Dorothea achieves self-knowledge and recognizes the forces that shape her true nature and her relation to the world around her. The novel depicts the growth of Dorothea's mind and character through varied forms of experience which are presented in different stages: It is, first, in her marriage to Mr. Casaubon that her self-education begins. This marriage subjects her to many tests of her patience and pity. Then, after having transcended her egoistic tendencies, Dorothea adopts another attitude to Mr. Casaubon and to other people who surround her. Eventually, as a mature woman, she will marry the man who permits her to realize herself. Dorothea

[1] More than 100 years later the jury is still out on Middlemarch. The "masterpiece" school of thought is still vocally opposed by the "too" crowd: too pedantic, too long, too discursive, too didactic. See David Carroll, pp.286-353

progresses through the novel from a girlhood of ardent opinion and egoism to a womanhood of sympathy and altruism.

The novel opens with the description of Dorothea Brooke: Her birth, her environment, her way of life, her relations with her sister Celia, are all presented. Then the author goes on to say:

> Her mind was theoretic, and yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world which might frankly include the parish of Tipton and her own rule of conduct there; she was enamoured of intensity and greatness, and rash in embracing whatever seemed to her to have those aspects; likely to seek martyrdom, to make retractions, and then to incur martyrdom after all in a quarter where she had not sought it.
>
> MM.p.38

The word "theoretic" is crucial in describing Dorothea's character. It suggests that Dorothea does not really know the world she lives in; that she is ignorant of herself and of the world; and that her actions and attitudes are based on general ideas that have never been tested by experience. Then the narrator dwells on Dorothea's idea of marriage:

> Dorothea, with all her eagerness to know the truths of life, retained very childlike ideas about marriage. She felt sure that she would have accepted the judicious Hooker, if she had been born in time to save him from that wretched mistake he made in matrimony . . . The really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you Hebrew, if you wished it.
>
> MM. p.32

Here Eliot reveals something of considerable importance about Dorothea, an aspect of her character which will explain her subsequent marriage and also her future relationship with Will Ladislaw. Dorothea "retained very childlike ideas about marriage." In other words, marriage for her is a duty to a father figure. She has no idea of the kind of emotional or physical relationship that is involved. It is through an outsider that she comes to some awareness of this. Thus, the curly-headed Apollo-like figure of Will Ladislaw, who meets Dorothea in Rome at the very moment when she is beginning to realise the sterility of her marriage to Casaubon, is a symbolic agent of awakening. Dorothea has suppressed her sexuality for the sake of an idealistic service. But Will releases some of Dorothea's repressed sensuality.

Dorothea is a passionate idealist. She looks after dilapidated cottages on her uncles's estate. She lives in an "old provincial town" which seems to her a prison from which she longs to escape by doing great good or by embracing a noble cause. She is confined by the conditions of the town. Therefore she wants a marriage in which she will escape into a higher and more intellectual world. She wants to marry so that she can serve humanity. As the Reverend Edward Casaubon has already aroused in Dorothea "some venerating expectation", she misinterprets Mr. Casaubon, who appears to her to be the saviour of her nature which is "hemmed in by a social life which seemed nothing but a labyrinth of petty courses." (MM p.51) Mr. Casaubon, however, has no real inner resources. He is spiritually starving as well as emotionally dead. He has devoted his life to research and to the preparation of a book entitled A Key to All Mythologies which he is not equipped to complete. As for his expectations of marriage:

> He made up his mind that it was now for him to adorn his life with the graces of female companionship, to irradiate the gloom which fatigue was apt to hang over the intervals of studious labour with the play of female fancy, and to secure in this, his culminating age, this solace of female tendance for his declining years.
>
> (MM p.87)

Mr. Casaubon sees a wife as a graceful ornament to his life and a trustworthy assistant over whom he can claim superiority. Dorothea soon comes to understand her husband. Her idealistic expectations of him are shattered on their honeymoon. She experiences her first sense of disappointment over her marriage and life when she is in Italy. She herself suffers from a narrow frame of mind that is perplexed by the strange, the different, or the unknown. She is a girl "who had been brought up in English and Swiss Puritanism, fed on meagre Protestant histories and on art chiefly of the hand-screen sort." (MM p.225) Middlemarch itself, as a provincial town, is limited and limiting: this is clearly seen in Dorothea's restricted horizons. She understands this when she encounters the culture and history of Rome. It is also in Rome that she discovers what Mr. Casaubon really is. She observes his deficiencies, his lack of ability and power to complete his work. His refusal to learn German prevents him from knowing that his work is dated, redundant and without purpose.

Apart from the problem of Dorothea's misinterpretation of Mr. Casaubon, there is also the problem of the difficulty of real human contact in their marriage. They both have lost touch with the reality of human relationships, because they are trapped in their "prisons" of egoism which they

cannot easily abandon. Dorothea realizes that Casaubon, too, is self-centred: "Mr. Casaubon was the centre of his own world." (MM p.111) He cannot desert his own egoism and recognize the individuality of the person he has married. Egoism is a self-seeking aspect of human nature. Human beings can be egoists but they can also be changed. What is important is that humankind should strive towardslove and kindness. Dorothea and Casaubon have to learn that the universe exists for other people as well as for themselves personally. The development from egoism to a broader view of life involves suffering as the individual goes through various experiences and comes to establish a relationships with his fellowmen. The life of a scholar has enabled Casaubon to live apart from other people for the almost all of his life. He cannot reach out to others or respond to them. He has to learn to live with another human being. In doing so, he becomes the means for Dorothea's growth out of egoism. Dorothea's progress, a function of duty, to compassion and tenderness begins with her husband, then it is directed towards others:

> As Dorothea's eyes were turned anxiously on her husband she was perhaps not insensible to the contrast, but it was only mingled with other causes in making her more conscious of that new alarm on his behalf which was the first stirring of a pitying tenderness fed by the realities of his lot and not by her own dreams.
>
> (MM pp.241-242)

With Will's insight, she has found Casaubon out and this leads her for the first time to consider him as he is, not as an object for the satisfaction of her own idealism. No matter how difficult and painful it may be, she has learned not to seek from Casaubon a reflection of herself, a satisfaction of her own

needs, but to see him as he is. When Dorothea finally apprehends the real Casaubon, she feels pity for him. And when she discovers that he is ill, she goes to her husband to give him her trust and compassion.

After her husband's death, Dorothea tries to reach out to other people and to help them with their problems. The triumph of that change is reached when she is capable of understanding Lydgate's tragic situation. He is a young doctor whose new ideas are unacceptable in the provincial town of Middlemarch. He has married a kind of Lucy, beautiful and charming, but unable to adapt to a less affluent life style. Dorothea goes to talk to Lydgate's wife, Rosamond, and helps the Lydgates in spite of her innate reticence and her suspicion that Rosamond has formed an attachment with Will. To Dorothea, contact with others creates in her an obligation towards them. That is why the relationship between Dorothea and Lydgate is essential to the unfolding of Dorothea's character. Dorothea believes in him when the rest of her world accuses him of accepting a bribe to shelter a murderer. As she learns more about herself and her personal relationships, her attitude to the great world outside changes too:

> She opened her curtains, and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view, with fields beyond, outside the entrance-gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving - perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining.
>
> (MM p.846)

So Dorothea, like Dinah, opens the window in order to look out to others. She has succeeded in becoming a woman who now turns out to the outside world and sees people at work in a given time and place.

After Casaubon's death, her life takes a new form. She undergoes a metamorphosis. She realizes that she has idealized a man "whose thoughts had been lower than she had believed . . . " (MM p.535) She then marries Will Ladislaw, and by doing so, gives up her position and fortune. Her first marriage was a mistake. Her imaginary portrait of Casaubon as a modern Milton was an illusion. Her second marriage is an improvement on the first, because it is based on an appreciation of the man as she knows him; their love for each other consists of sympathy, understanding and respect.

Dinah Morris has, Mrs. Bede tells us, rough hands; she works in a cotton mill. Maggie Tulliver is obliged, by circumstance and her own sense of honour, to earn a living as a maid, seamstress and teacher. Dorothea has no such material worries, single, married or widowed. Other characters in Middlemarch do have or have had such worries. Unafflicted by economic hindrances Dorothea – compare Lydgate and Fred Vincy – is given a power more usual to men in her society and, furthermore, she is determined to use it.

A Marxist analysis of the work of George Eliot might be interesting but this paper is not such an analysis. Nonetheless, Dorothea is a heroine who does not have to take notice of material necessity and in that sense, she is very different from the other women – Hetty, Dinah, Maggie – we have been looking at. This point was critical in contemporary assessments of Middlemarch.

Dorothea is "ardent", "noble"; like Dinah, she hopes to make the world "a little bit better." Transcribing, consolidating, indexing notes to her husband's

Dorothea is "ardent", "noble"; like Dinah, she hopes to make the world "a little bit better." Transcribing, consolidating, indexing notes to her husband's opus, Key To All Mythologies, Dorothea is neither successful nor inspired. She begins to suspect that the mole-bearing, blinking, soup-bowl-scraping man she has married is, in fact intellectually defunct and her opinion is horrifyingly confirmed when Will Ladislaw tells her that German scholars are much advanced on her husband's research. When Dorothea recognizes that Mr. Casaubon's vanity has prevented him from learning what he must know about his own field – "graver labours" – she recognizes, not that she has made a mistake, but that this husband has disappointed, finally, her hopes as an object of reverence.

Furthermore, she begins to see that reverence may not be the most appropriate characteristic of marital bliss. From the day – on her honeymoon in Rome – she meets Will Ladislaw, she is aware of an attraction far stronger than intellectual admiration. Ladislaw's appreciation of Dorothea's beauty is frank, unapologetic, and she feels physically drawn to him as to a magnet. Much of Dorothea's subsequent history in Middlemarch could be summarized as a growing awareness of what is and what is not sexual attraction. In this sense Middlemarch is the story of the coming of age of a slightly superannuated heroine.

Since 1872, readers and critics of Middlemarch have ranged themselves on opposite sides of the question of the credibility of this heroine. The Victorians themselves were divided. Many thought Eliot had come a cropper with Dorothea in particular and Middlemarch in general. Collected by David Carroll we note among them that, "Unsigned Review" (in Saturday Review, pp.314-320) says the novelist is too didactic. A. V. Dicey (Nation, pp.339-

352), Henry James (Galaxy, pp.350-358), Sir Leslie Stephen (an obituary on George Eliot in Cornhill), and W. H. Mallock (Edinburgh Review) find numerous and serious faults in Middlemarch. Just as many others felt that in Middlemarch, George Eliot had brought the novel form to a smashing triumph. These people are R. H. Hutton, (the Spectator, pp.286-314), Edward Dowden, (Contemporary Review, pp.320-322), H. Lawrenny, (the Academy, pp.322-330), Sidney Calvin, (Fortnightly Review, pp.331-320). (We exclude those critics who are really taking issue on the grounds of Eliot's personal life.)

Middlemarch represents an opportunity to look at Eliot's women in a more subtle comparative sense than we have had in either Adam Bede or The Mill on the Floss. We have noted that Dinah Morris and Hetty Sorrel are physical and moral opposites and that Maggie Tulliver makes repeated attempts to change herself into a more conventional child and woman. In Middlemarch, we have three women, Dorothea Brooke, her sister Celia, and Rosamond Vincy to examine in relation to each other, as objects of their creator's interest and approval, and as members of Eliot's larger cast of characters.

In connection with this last aspect, we may say that Dorothea is as beautiful as Hetty Sorrel, as open and honest as Maggie's cousin, Lucy, and as spirited and honourable as Maggie herself. Hers is, unusually for Eliot, not the emphatic dark beauty of either Hetty or Maggie but a "Madonna", a "sort of Christian Antigone – a sensuous force controlled by spiritual passion" (MM, p.221), with dark brown hair and a fair complexion, fit to pose, as she does, as Santa Clara (MM, p.249), with the golden sun bathing her in a kind of mystical light.

Celia is fairer than Dorothea in looks and more predictable in character. She is a norm of feminine attractiveness. She likes jewellery and ornament (but not to excess) wears only as much ruffling and tucking as are within the bounds of sensible good taste, is always reasonable, always fair-minded and always wisely affectionate. Without the presence of Celia, Dorothea would seem a much colder personality than we find in Middlemarch. Celia's continual use of the pet name "Dodo" for her sister is a regular reminder that she thinks of Dorothea with warmth and childlike trust. Since Celia is, in turn, a devoted wife to Sir James Chettam (whom we know to be a very decent man), and a level-headed but doting mother to her son Arthur (of whom we suspect no malignity at all) we rely on her judgement.

Physically, Rosamond is a carbon copy of Lucy in The Mill on the Floss: the same golden curls, the same diminutive stature. Lucy's eyes are amber and Rosamond's a "heavenly" blue; but the differences between these women in character are greater. Lucy is really and truly a fine, bright, person. Rosamond has the petty, vain concerns of Hetty Sorrel before her fall. She is selfish, and self-indulgent at the expense of her husband's peace of mind and of their happiness as a couple. She is not above bare-faced deceit and, when things go wrong, as they inevitably do, her reaction is to feel nothing more than self-pity. Rosamond is charming as long as life goes her way; when stymied, she can be a very nasty piece of business.

These sketches of Eliot's characters and the differences among them are preliminary to an examination – to the extent that it is feasible – of Eliot's attitudes, as author, toward the women in question. It is easy to imagine that Eliot likes, perhaps reveres, Dinah to the same extent that she dislikes and disapproves of Hetty in Adam Bede. Easy, but not entirely satisfying since it is

plain that without Hetty there is no novel. In a similar way it seems likely that Eliot feels tremendous affection for Maggie Tulliver and a great deal of sympathy with her difficulties in society. However, when we come to Middlemarch, the notion that Eliot likes and approves of Dorothea, is sympathetic to her sufferings, and concerned with her future stretches credulity. Dorothea is just too good to be true, too "ardent", too "noble", too saintly, too self-sacrificing, too full of the milk of human kindness. If we follow her fortunes with serious attention, we begin to suspect that Eliot is laughing up her sleeve at us. This problem is put nicely by Dicey in David Carroll (p.348).

> "Any one," writes George Eliot, "watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots, sees a slow preparation of effects from one life to another which tells like a calculated irony on the indifference or the frozen stare with which we look at our unintroduced neighbor. Destiny stands by sarcastic with dramatis personae folded in her hand." This passage, and especially the last sentence of it, might be taken as a fair description of the attitude occupied by the author towards her own work. To a certain extent in all her books, but to a far greater extent in Middlemarch than in any of her other writings, George Eliot performs the part of the destiny which stands by sarcastic, and comments on the fate of the actors whom she brings into existence. A main feature – in short, perhaps the main feature – of Middlemarch is the prominence given to what, borrowing a term from Greek tragedy, may be called the "chorus".

Dicey tempers his opinion by saying (Carroll, p.346),

> What readers care for in Middlemarch is the study of character, but the author herself, as she takes pains by the very title to point out, intended it as a study primarily not of character but of provincial life. She in fact aimed at two

> different objects. Her first aim is to give a picture of existence in an English country town forty years ago; her second, to show how this prosaic life told upon the characters of three or four of the persons born into it.

Not all readers or critics agree with either of these assessments but it is difficult to entirely reject them. If George Eliot is playing with her characters in Middlemarch, she is definitely not playing with the structure of the novel. So Eliot, with great skill, uses circumstance to illustrate character. She is like a circus performer in Middlemarch, juggling a great many balls called characters and keeping each in appropriate orbit.

Those who think Middlemarch is the perfection of the novel form may be correct if we give a moment's thought to the complexity of the structure and to the skill with which Eliot invents and reinvents – rather like a symphony or a tapestry – on that form. Although Middlemarch may or may not be a novel of character, it is jam-packed and chock-a-block with characters whose interactions are telling and extremely inventive. Middlemarch is a great deal more than the kind of "scenes from provincial life" that some critics have supposed it to be. It is bursting with life as though driven by a healthy heart through a complex arterial system.

We are looking at Dorothea especially, and other women, in Middlemarch, in the light of Victorian convention. We have seen the convention ostracize Dinah, exile Hetty and destroy Maggie. In Middlemarch, it seems, Eliot is as ready to take on the convention as she is to defy stereotypes of character.

If, as I have suggested, Middlemarch is about the sexual awakening of Dorothea Brooke, then Eliot has written the ultimate Victorian novel: a novel about sex that never mentions sex as an act, a relation, or a bond (although possibly as a lexical equivalent of "gender").[1]

Sex and sexuality underlie the events that shape lives in Middlemarch. For some late 20th century readers, the charm of Victorian novels may be precisely in the fact that they are spared detailed and graphic descriptions of sexual encounters. How the obvious deductions and inevitable conclusions operated on the imaginations of the readers in the 1870's is difficult to imagine or reconstruct.

We have seen Dinah Morris and Hetty Sorrel bow under the forces of Victorian convention, and Maggie Tulliver, lost in the River Floss, a victim of the convention. How does the convention affect Dorothea Brooke?

With respect to her marriage to Edward Casaubon it seems not to affect her at all. Her uncle and her sister point out the unsuitability of the union but Dorothea will not be stopped. Her marriage to Casaubon is an illustration of the old proverb, "marry in haste, repent at leisure". The reader is relieved when Casaubon dies. Almost equally the convention opposes her second marriage to Will Ladislaw for the important Victorian reason that this marriage will cost her a lot of money. It is difficult to overestimate the materialism of the Victorian middle-class mind.

[1] Henry James succeeded Eliot as the master of this sub-genre. D. H. Lawrence in prose and T. S. Eliot in poetry smashed this frail vessel to bits. None of that derogates from Eliot's achievement.

Perhaps George Eliot became more cynical as her novel-writing career continued. Her first motive for attempting fiction was an understandable impulse to make money to help support a rather extended family. But over time and with success, money itself plays a role in her novels. In Adam Bede money is not at issue although social status certainly is. Adam and Arthur have a fist fight which cancels out the power of money. We never learn whether Arthur paid or bribed to get a reprieve for Hetty; probably not since, if money was the only issue, he might have as easily got a pardon.

The Mill on the Floss features money as a determining factor in deciding the fates of its characters. If Maggie had not been the daughter of a tradesman to begin with and a member of a bankrupt family next, her fate might have been very different. In Middlemarch, Dorothea experiences no such constraints. She has the power of money within her reach throughout the novel. It is an interesting irony that when, late in the novel, she offers to guarantee Lydgate's debts, she, for the first time, actually does something useful with the sums at her disposal. This moment may be a turning point for Dorothea. She drops her good intentions, none of which has borne fruit, and begins to be a good person who acts rather than reflects on the benefits she may provide. Her process, determined as it is to be beyond reciprocation and self-interest, brings her to the place she has recently understood as her goal: within the embrace of Will Ladislaw.

Like Dinah, Dorothea becomes a mother, presumably content with her own domestic world. We are left to conclude that these women are sexually as well as spiritually fulfilled by their roles as wives and mothers. It is, of course, the Victorian convention that makes these happy endings possible.

I hope it is evident that when the student of Eliot encounters Middlemarch, that student must proceed beyond the confines of "character", "circumstance" and certainly "plot" to try to discover the novelist's object. In Middlemarch, a very long novel, these ambiguities are very striking, never far from the surface; even as Eliot's "familiars", the comic cast, are well represented.

Dorothea never admits her mistake in marrying Edward Casaubon any more than she meditates on her attraction to Will Ladislaw. Her implicit faith in the honesty of Lydgate makes no more sense than her earlier confidence in Casaubon. She may be as stupid as she is "ardent" and "noble".

Thus Dorothea's reactions and actions reflect the maturing woman, while a series of events - her marriage to Casaubon, her widowhood, and her relationships with Will and her environment - unfolds with her character. What does this mean? There is always the very notion of change of character through process. The idea of change holds out the possibility that human beings can learn and progress. Dorothea's character develops as she undergoes a series of lessons in Middlemarch. She learns from these lessons, she changes and achieves self-awareness. And what she learns is loss of egoism and the importance of sympathy and altruism. As she acquires these attributes, the novel ends.

Conclusion

Although George Eliot's heroes and heroines often try to escape or defy the Victorian convention, they can never achieve a complete break. They are ultimately bound by the forces and fluctuations of their community. For women the convention is overpowering.

Marriage provides the roots and nourishment of a community and women are drawn or doomed to it. Their individual pain and tragedy may far exceed that of the men to whom they are unhappily or unsuitably married.

Before marriage passionate or ambitious women suggest irregularity and disorder to a society which prefers women who are docile and accepting. Such women assert a freedom of action seen as dangerous and offensive. Accordingly, what they have to offer, often valuable in itself, is blindly rejected.

Characters (and readers) are judged according to the accepted rules of correct conduct, which involves regard for the integrity of the community, respect for appropriate divisions of class, and for words and gestures that convey personal transparency and practical generosity.

Woman's place is in the home. While man's duty is to protect and provide for her. Marriage is the founding force of ongoing social stability. The family provides the continuum, the necessary human units of the larger movements of society and history. At the same time, it is the family and the community that stifles individual endeavour.

Women are restricted to their object roles; they are the objects of the sexual, procreative and economic drives of their husbands. Husbands are the engines of social progress; wives are the fuel. of of copulation and maternity and submission to men in every sphere. Marriage is the smallest significant social unit which binds a man and a woman.

Anything which distracts a woman's attention from her household function should be seen as mischievous. Women are sheltered, not because they are treasured for themselves, but because they are the working principle of the home and the guardians of the "honour" of their husbands. Marriage is one of the chief instruments in the degradation of women. It is the lot of a member of the female sex to depend upon a man for support, answer his sexual demands, to attend the household, and to the rearing of children – in reality a set of articles of faith utterly incompatible with the freedom of any human being. Women collectively, have been social victims for millenia and the expression "blame the victim"might have been invented to describe the thousands of years of their unhappy history.

We can see a similarity between Maggie Tulliver's death and Hetty Sorrel's exile and death, in that their fates could be seen as "punishment" for what would be interpreted as immoral behaviour by Victorian readers. On the other hand, both Dorothea and Dinah, after enduring processes of growth and self-learning, find the "right" path and their fulfilment in marriage. Is survival enough? Hetty and Dorothea lose their egoism and selfishness after the suffering which appears to be necessary before achieving spiritual growth and maturity. Not much consolation for Hetty, we suppose.

Eliot's Adam Bede is set at the end of the eighteenth century in a very simple rural community. This period and community are nostalgic for Eliot's audience and portrays a simple orderly life style that would appeal to Victorian readers. The Mill on the Floss is set in the mid-nineteenth century in a village community, while Middlemarch is set a little earlier, around 1830, in a provincial town. Eliot seems to reflect the changing political and social conditions and the increasing urbanization of England.

Eliot acquired a reputation as a realist because she portrayed characters who are like the people next door; masses of baseless beliefs, impulses, simple generosity, instinctive greed, suspicion and faith. Such people are not easily classified as "good" or "bad", they are, above all, human.

Eliot is continuously and deliberately present in her novels, and provides an ongoing commentary on character and events – an overarching view point. She tempers her satire with compassion. She presents situations to show how her characters got into their predicaments, and it is clear that whatever character is not wholly to blame. The inter-relationship between the life of the individual and the life of society is shown. She tells us that

> "My artistic bent is not at all to the presentation of mixed human beings in such a way as to call forth tolerant judgement, pity and sympathy. And I cannot stir a step aside from what I feel to be true in character . . ." and again later: "Art must be either real and concrete, or ideal and eclectic. Both are good and true in their way, but my stories are of the former kind. I undertake to exhibit nothing as it should be; I only try to exhibit some things as they have been or are, seen through such a medium as my own nature gives me."
>
> Quoted by T. S. Pearce from Haight's "Eliot's Letters", p.28

The only options offered to Eliot's heroines were either capitulation through marriage, suffering or death. These options were what Victorian readers expected – the punishment of the "bad" and the reward of the "good". Although Eliot was essentially a novelist of her age, she was not merely paying lip srevice to those expectations. She herself was a realist who, like Dickens before her, chronicled her times in a vivid but unsparing fashion which allows the reader to form his or her own conclusions. However unacceptable or unrealistic her options might appear to the late 20th century readers, we must remember that a novel is first and foremost work of art, not a guidebook to behaviour. If Eliot's "headstrong" and passionate women characters become tame and docile after marriage, we should not interpret this as being countenanced by the artist. She herself was simply following Shakespeare's dictim to "hold a mirror up to nature" and cannot be held accountable for the reflections found therein.

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