

## GEORGE ELIOT (1819-1880)



### Chronology

1819 Mary Anne Evans born at Arbury Farm in Warwickshire. Her father, Robert Evans, was an overseer at the Arbury Hall estate, and Eliot kept house for him after her mother died in 1836. Her father remarried and Mary Ann had a good relationship with her two stepbrothers, particularly with Isaac, who played marbles with her and took her fishing.

1824-35 At the age of five she was sent to a local boarding school while Isaac was sent to school in Coventry. She became sternly Christian after her strict religious schooling.

1836 Her mother died and her elder sister married the following year so Mary Ann became her father's housekeeper and companion. She continued to learn languages and in her own words: "used to go about like an owl, to the great disgust of my brother".

1841 Her father moved to Coventry hoping her daughter would meet a potential husband there. Their next-door neighbour, Mrs Abijah Pears, was the sister of Charles Bray, an enthusiastic social reformer and freethinker. Eliot made friends with the members of the Bray family, and began reading such works as *An Enquiry into the Origins of Christianity*. Mary Ann soon informed her father that she had lost her faith in Church doctrine. She soon gave up her Evangelicism in favor of a non-sectarian spirituality based on a sense of common humanity. She refused to attend church with her father and began work on a translation from German of *Life of Jesus*, a rationalist reexamination of some Bible sections. *Life of Jesus* was published in 1846, and on the strength of that accomplishment, Eliot moved to London after her father's death.

1849 After her father's death, whom she had nursed for months, she inherited a modest income of L1000 and five days after the funeral she left for the Continent with the Brays. Despite her depression she enjoyed the trip and decided to stay in Geneva for the winter. She lodged at M. D'Albert Durade, a four-foot tall hump-backed painter, especially endearing to Mary Ann, who may have provided the inspiration for Philip Waken in *The Mill on the Floss*.

1851 Mary Ann, now a 30 year-old spinster, did not want to intrude in her brother's lives and decided to move to London and lodge at John Chapman's house. He had just bought *The Westminster Review*.

1851-3 Mary Ann became assistant editor of *The Westminster Review* and met numerous influential thinkers such as Florence Nightingale, Herbert Spencer, Dickens, John Stuart Mill, and Harriet Martineau.

1853 After an unhappy liaison with Herbert Spencer Eliot met and became close to George Henry Lewes, an actor, novelist, journalist, and later the author of two highly successful books explaining science to the layman. He was editor of the *Leader*. Lewes was living apart from his wife, and Eliot's decision to accompany Lewes to Germany, living as a couple, provoked a degree of scandal in London. In particular, Eliot sacrificed her relationship with her brother Isaac, and she depicted the pain of his disapproval in *The Mill on the Floss* in Tom's disapproval of Maggie's relationships with Philip and Stephen.

Eliot and Lewes lived together, considering themselves virtually married until his death in 1878. He was

a small, lively man, nicknamed "the Ape" by the famous philosopher Thomas Carlyle because of his facial hair. When they eloped abroad, vicious stories circulated back home and, on their return, she was shunned everywhere.

1854 She published a translation of Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* under her own name; Victorian society was offended by her daring to openly flout its moral laws.

1855 The couple settled in Richmond (London) and had few visitors or invitations. Mary Ann's brother, Isaac, disowned her. Such enforced isolation made Mary Ann turn to fiction.

1856 With the encouragement of Lewes, Eliot began writing fiction. *Scenes of Clerical Life* was published under the pen name of George Eliot. She was 38. Her first novel, *Adam Bede*, "a country story full of the breath of cows and the scent of hay", for which she drew on her childhood memories, was published the following year. The central character was based on her father. The book attracted tremendous interest and speculation about the real identity of its author. Some readers, her editor and her brother Isaac, recognized characters and background detail, but kept the secret. Other readers decided the author was a former curate, Joseph Liggins, who to Marian's astonishment claimed authorship. She was forced then to admit her authorship publicly. She became the famous novelist George Eliot. The book sold 5000 copies in a fortnight and she and Lewes were able to buy a house.

Her domestic life, however continued unchanged. She produced a steady flow of best-sellers: *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner* (1861), *Romola* (1863), *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866), *Middlemarch* (1871), *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Marian's income rose from L800 for *Adam Bede* to L8000 for *Middlemarch*. They bought a bigger house, the Priory near Regent's Park and traveled widely in Europe.

1878 Lewes died from a serious stomach illness. Marian tried to complete his final book. Johny Cross, 20 years her junior was a frequent visitor. They fell in love and got married in 1880. A few months later Marian died of a severe kidney infection. The consequences of her social transgression pursued her to the grave -she was denied a funeral at Westminster Abbey but her family ties had been restored and her brother Isaac was a mourner at her burial, besides Lewes at Highgate Cemetery.

George Eliot was a radical Tory. Her radicalism lay in the spheres of theology and ethics. Born in the Established Church she had become a Calvinist Methodist as a girl; essentially religious, she was brought up by her intellectual honesty to an agnosticism that laid a stress on morals, on right behaviour. She believed in determination, human beings were made for good or for ill by their actions. Her moral beliefs run chimes with what appeared to be the findings of contemporary science, particularly heredity, which appeared as a scientific determinism. The idea of Nemesis -the inescapable consequences of one's past -is a central one in Eliot's work. This gave her fiction great authority in its day; later it was to make it seem dated; now, when she is again seen as a great novelist, we realize how much of her strength is derived from the very intransigence of her view of human beings. By placing the responsibility for a man's life and fate firmly on the individual and his/her moral choices, she changed the nature of the English novel. It is the individual's choice of actions what shape his/her life, then plot -in the old sense of something external to character and often working unknown to it- is irrelevant and unnecessary. Character, in fact, becomes plot.

Nevertheless in *Middlemarch* character itself is discovered to be conditioned by environment, or rather, its capacity for growth and scope to be limited, almost to the point of tragedy, by the world around it.

According to Lewes "The great desire of this age is for a Doctrine which may serve to condense our knowledge, guide our researches, and shape our lives, so that Conduct may really be the consequence of Belief". Eliot, like Comte, Spencer and Lewes, was similarly searching for a moral and rational doctrine that could take the place of her lost religion.

While writing *The Mill on the Floss*, George Eliot stated the principle that informs the best of her fictional work. "If art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally... The only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings is that those who read them should be better able to feel the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves". In *Adam Bede* she suggests that in art "attention must be focused on the minute details of everyday life". Many critics have associated these ideas with a mimetic theory of representation, however Eliot establishes a distance between the author and the narrative voice (a male).

According to Leavis, the belief that people can be improved through the twin experiences of suffering and joy, whether in real life or through reading about them, is the backbone of George Eliot's fiction. It is the central theme of her seven great novels, in each of which the principal characters grow in moral stature through their "clear-eyed endurance" of pain. The doctrine replaced her religious beliefs. Leavis argues that her greatness lies in her unflinching portrayal of the causes and effects of human suffering, and her insistence on dealing with the realities of life. She shows how sympathy and love can emerge even in the most hostile circumstances. Consequently, some critics have interpreted the manner in which Eliot engages her readers' sympathy for her leading characters -who come through difficult circumstances as better, wiser people -as being a subconscious plea for an understanding of her own plight. Her fiction can also be read as a distinguished and successful attempt to regain her rightful place in the social world.

### **Works.**

George Eliot's fiction falls into two parts. To the first one belong *Scenes of Clerical Life*, *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, & *Silas Marner*, all published between 1868 and 1861. The second part is her more ambitious period with novels like *Romola*, *Feliz Holt*, *the Radical*, *Middlemarch*, & *Daniel Deronda*. Many critics have commented upon the difference between the pastoral charm of her first three novels and the philosophical weight of her last three.

The novels of the first period deal with life in the countryside in which she was brought up; the society is depicted as a strong and stable one. Eliot called them "natural history" or "history incarnate" and not fiction. *Romola* marks a dividing point; it is a historical novel about the society of the Italian city of Florence in 15C. The last three novels, *Middlemarch* less than the others, have serious faults but they also have strongly successful themes about the relationship of the individual to society, similar to those of the Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy. Each decision, each character's action -however trivial- is directed by psychological and social laws.

### **The Mill on the Floss.**

#### **Context**

*The Mill on the Floss* involves many autobiographical details, and it reflects Eliot's close childhood relationships with her father and her older brother Isaac. Eliot was sent to school as a child and at the age of fifteen and underwent a spiritual conversion to Evangelicism, similar to Maggie Tulliver's pious conversion upon reading Thomas a Kempis in Book IV of *The Mill on the Floss*.

Eliot's most important contribution to literature was in her treatment of realism. Eschewing the caricature fiction of Charles Dickens, Eliot perfected the genre of psychological realism, paving the way for the later work of the American novelist Henry James. Eliot understood that art should be near to life, valuing observed truths and creating a greater sense of sympathy in the reader by coherently and non-judgementally depicting the psychological motives of characters. Eliot's attention to character is mediated by a strong sense of historical and cultural climate. Thus in *The Mill on the Floss*, Mr. Tulliver's financial downfall is depicted within the larger context of the increased materialism of the British Midlands in the first half of the nineteenth century, but it is also portrayed as the result of minute social and psychological actions and reactions of Mr. Tulliver and the characters that affect him, such as Mrs. Tulliver and Mr. Wakem.

*The Mill on the Floss* marks a break from the earlier work of Eliot, which was mainly a depiction of provincial life, and it bridged the gap to more wide-ranging later novels, such as *Middlemarch*, that drew

detailed backdrops of the social and economic forces alive in an entire community. *The Mill on the Floss* is Eliot's only novel to end tragically and the most autobiographical novel.

### **Key Facts**

Full Title - *The Mill on the Floss*

Author - George Eliot (pseudonym for Marian Evans)

Type of work - Novel

Genre - Victorian novel, tragedy

Language - English

Time and place written - Richmond and Wandsworth in England, 1859–1860

Date of first publication - 1860

Publisher - Blackwood and Sons

Narrator - The unnamed narrator was alive for Maggie Tulliver's life and is narrating the events many years later.

Point of view - The narrator speaks in the first person at selective points of narration but for all else, narrates as though third-person omniscient.

Tone - The tone can vary from lightly satiric when dealing with lesser characters, to elegiac or only slightly ironic when dealing with main characters.

Tense - Past

Setting (time) - 1829–1839

Setting (place) - St. Ogg's in English midlands (real life model for the Floss was the Trent in Lincolnshire)

Protagonist - Maggie Tulliver

Major conflict - Maggie must choose between her inner desire toward passion and sensuous life and her impulse towards moral responsibility and the need for her brother's approval and love.

Rising action - Incurious Tom is sent to school, while Maggie is held "uncanny" for her intelligence. Mr. Tulliver's pride and inability to adapt to the changing economic world causes him to lose his property in a lawsuit against Lawyer Wakem and eventually die as the result of his fury toward Wakem. To Tom's dismay, Maggie becomes secretly close to Wakem's sensitive crippled son, Philip.

Climax - At the age of nineteen, Maggie visits her cousin Lucy and becomes hopelessly attracted to Lucy's wealthy and polished suitor, Stephen Guest, and he to her. Stephen and Maggie are inadvertently left to themselves for a boatride. Stephen rows them further down river than planned and tries to convince Maggie to elope with him.

Falling action - Maggie parts with Stephen, arguing that they each cannot ignore the claims that Lucy and Philip have on them. Maggie returns to St. Ogg's several days later and is met with repudiation from the entire town and from Tom. Philip and Lucy contact Maggie and forgive her. The Floss floods, and Maggie seizes a boat and rows to the Mill to save Tom. Their boat is capsized by floating machinery, Tom and Maggie drown in each other's arms.

Themes - The claim of the past upon present identity; The effect of society upon the individual; The importance of sympathy; Practical knowledge versus bookish knowledge

Motifs - The disparity between the Dodsons and the Tullivers; Music; Animal imagery; Dark and light women

Symbols - The Floss; St. Ogg; Maggie's eyes

Foreshadowing - As the story is being told in the past tense, the narrator often alludes to future circumstances when describing the present moment. An example of this is the narration of the figure of Maggie at the St. Ogg's bazaar in Chapter IX of Book Sixth, when the narrator alludes to the future attitudes of the women of St. Ogg's toward Maggie in light of her "subsequent conduct." The use of the Floss to symbolize Maggie's destiny throughout the novel also foreshadows her eventual drowning.

### **Plot Overview**

The *Mill on the Floss* is a work of almost startling sadness and is one of the most affecting stories of

family loss, tragedy and the sheer meanness of fate in the history of the novel.

Maggie Tulliver, our heroine, who is the daughter of a miller in the English midlands. She is the impetuous, clever younger daughter of the Tullivers of Dorlcote Mill in St. Ogg's. Like many nineteenth century literary girls, her intelligence and emotional capacity outflank those of her family and cause problems.. Maggie frustrates her superficial mother with her unconventional dark coloring and unnatural activeness and intelligence. Maggie's father often takes Maggie's side, but it is Maggie's older brother Tom upon whom she is emotionally dependent. Maggie's greatest happiness is Tom's affection, and his disapproval creates dramatic despair in Maggie, whose view of the world, as all children's, lacks perspective.

Though Tom is less studious than Maggie appears to be, Mr. Tulliver decides to pay for Tom to have additional education rather than have him take over the mill. This decision provokes a family quarrel between Mr. Tulliver and his wife's sisters, the Dodsons. Mr. Tulliver is frustrated by the snobbish contrariness of the Dodsons, led by Mrs. Tulliver's sister Mrs. Glegg, and vows to repay money that Mrs. Glegg had lent him, thereby weakening her hold on him. He has lent almost an equal sum to his sister and her husband, the Mosses, but he feels affectionately toward his sister and decides not to ask for money back, which they cannot pay.

Mr. Stelling, a clergyman, takes Tom on as a student, and Maggie visits him at school several times. On one of these visits, she befriends Mr. Stelling's other student—the sensitive, crippled Philip Wakem, son of her father's enemy, Lawyer Wakem. Maggie herself is sent to school along with her cousin, Lucy, but is called home when she is thirteen when her father finally loses his extended lawsuit with Lawyer Wakem over the use of the river Floss. Mr. Tulliver is rendered bankrupt and ill. Tom returns home as well to support the family, as the Dodson's offer little help. The mill itself is up for auction, and Lawyer Wakem, based on an idea inadvertently furnished to him by Mrs. Tulliver, buys Dorlcote Mill and retains Mr. Tulliver as a manager in an act of humiliating patronage.

Even after Mr. Tulliver's recovery, the atmosphere at the Tullivers' is grim. One bright spot is the return of Bob Jakin, a childhood friend of Tom's, into Tom and Maggie's life. Bob, a trader, kindly buys books for Maggie and one of them—Thomas a Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*—influences a spiritual awakening in her that leads to many months of pious self-denial. It is only after Maggie reencounters Philip Wakem on one of her walks in the woods that she is persuaded to leave her martyrish dullness in favor of the richness of literature and human interaction. Maggie is devoted to her brother Tom but he is hopelessly limited in his understanding and as such Maggie turns to Philip Wakem. Philip and Maggie meet clandestinely for a year, since Maggie's father would be hurt by their friendship as he has sworn to hold Lawyer Wakem as his life-long enemy. Philip finally confesses to Maggie that he loves her, and Maggie, at first surprised, says she loves him back. Soon thereafter, Tom discovers their meetings, cruelly upbraids Philip, and makes Maggie swear not to see Philip again.

On a business venture with Bob Jakin, Tom has amassed enough money to pay off Mr. Tulliver's debts to the family's surprise and relief. On the way home from the official repayment of the debts, Mr. Tulliver meets Lawyer Wakem and attacks him, but then Mr. Tulliver falls ill himself and dies the next day.

Several years later, Maggie has been teaching in another village. Now a tall, striking woman, she returns to St. Ogg's to visit her cousin Lucy, who has taken in Mrs. Tulliver. Lucy has a handsome and rich suitor named Stephen Guest, and they are friends with Philip Wakem. Maggie asks Tom for permission to see Philip, which Tom grudgingly gives her. Maggie and Philip renew their close friendship, and Maggie would consider marriage to Philip, if only his father approved. Lucy realizes that Tom wishes to purchase back Dorlcote Mill, and she asks Philip to speak to his father, Lawyer Wakem. Philip speaks to his father about selling the mill and about his love for Maggie, and Lawyer Wakem is eventually responsive to both propositions.

Meanwhile, however, Stephen and Maggie have gradually become helplessly attracted to each other, against both of their expectations and wishes. Maggie plans for their attraction to come to nothing, as she will take another teaching post away from St. Ogg's soon. Stephen pursues her, though, and Philip quickly becomes aware of the situation. Feeling ill and jealous, Philip cancels a boat-ride with Maggie and Lucy,

sending Stephen instead. As Lucy has proceeded down river, meaning to leave Philip and Maggie alone, Stephen and Maggie find themselves inadvertently alone together. Stephen rows Maggie past their planned meeting point with Lucy and begs her to marry him. The weather changes and they are far down the river. Maggie complacently boards a larger boat with Philip, which is headed for Mudport. They sleep over night on the boat's deck and when they reach Mudport, Maggie holds firm in her decision to part with Stephen and return to St. Ogg's.

On her return to St. Ogg's, Maggie is treated in town as a fallen woman and a social outcast. Tom, now back in Dorlcote Mill, renounces her, and Maggie, accompanied by her mother, goes to lodge with Bob Jakin and his wife. Despite public knowledge of Stephen's letter, which acknowledges all the blame upon himself, Maggie is befriended only by the Jakins and the clergyman Dr. Kenn. Lucy, who has been prostrate with grief, becomes well again and secretly visits Maggie to show her forgiveness. Philip, as well, sends a letter of forgiveness and faithfulness.

Stephen sends Maggie a letter renewing his pleas for her hand in marriage and protesting the pain she has caused him. Maggie vows to bear the burden of the pain she has caused others and must endure herself until death but wonders to herself how long this trial, her life, will be. At this moment, water begins rushing under the Jakin's door from the nearby river Floss, which is flooding. Maggie wakes the Jakins' and takes one of their boats, rowing it down river in a feat of miraculous strength toward Dorlcote Mill. Maggie rescues Tom, who is trapped in the house, and they row down river towards Lucy. Before they can reach Lucy's house, the boat is capsized by debris in the river, and Maggie and Tom drown in each other's arms. Years go by and Philip, and Stephen and Lucy together, visit the grave.

## Character List

**Maggie Tulliver** - The protagonist of *The Mill on the Floss*. The novel tracks Maggie as she grows from an impetuous, clever child into a striking, unconventional young woman. Maggie's closest tie is to her brother Tom, and she seeks—and constantly feels denied—his approval and acceptance. Eliot presents Maggie as more imaginative and interesting than the rest of her family and, sympathetically, in need of love. Maggie is clever and enjoys books, the richness of intelligent conversation, and music, but her family's downfall lends her a quieter, troubled side that tends toward self-abnegation. With her dark skin, dark hair, and dark eyes, Maggie is often associated with the Tulliver side of the family, and, specifically her father's sister, Mrs. Moss. Yet Maggie's passionate preoccupations also cause pain for others, as when she forgets to feed Tom's rabbits, which leads to their death. Maggie will remember her childhood fondly and with longing, yet these years are depicted as painful ones. Maggie's mother and aunts continually express disapproval with Maggie's rash behavior, uncanny intelligence, and unnaturally dark skin, hair, and eyes. Yet it is only Tom's opinion for which Maggie cares, and his inability to show her unconditional love, along with his embarrassment at her impetuosity, often plunges Maggie into the utter despair particular to immaturity.

**Tom Tulliver** - The Tullivers' older son. Tom has his own clear sense of duty, justice, and fairness, and these standards affect his action more so than emotion. Tom has affection for Maggie, but he dislikes her impetuous way of doing what she wants, assuming that she knows better than Tom. When Mr. Tulliver goes bankrupt, Tom must go to work at a young age and with little experience other than the Latin and Euclid he has learned in school. Tom brings the family out of debt and becomes a promising young worker at his uncle Deane's company, Guest & Co. Tom may be in love with Lucy Deane, but he focuses only on his work. As a child, Tom Tulliver enjoys the outdoors. He is more suited to practical knowledge than bookish education and sometimes prefers to settle disputes with physical intimidation, as does his father. Tom is quite close to Maggie as a child—he responds almost instinctively to her affection, and they are likened to two animals. Tom has a strong, self-righteous sense of "fairness" and "justice" which often figures into his decisions and relationships more than tenderness. As Tom grows older he exhibits the Dodson coolness of mind more than the Tulliver passionate rashness, though he is capable of studied cruelty, as when he upbraids Philip Wakem

with reference to Philip's deformity . Repelled by his father's provincial, small-minded ways and the mess these ways caused the family, Tom joins the ranks of capitalist entrepreneurs who are swiftly rising in the world. Tom holds strict notions about gender—his biggest problem with Maggie is that she will not let him take care of her and make her decisions for her. Tom's character seems capable of love and kindness—he buys a puppy for Lucy Deane, and he often ends up reconciling with Maggie—but the difficult circumstances of his young life have led him into a bitter single- mindedness reminiscent of his father.

**Elizabeth Tulliver** - Maggie Tulliver's mother. Mrs. Tulliver is a dull-witted, stout, blond woman. Formerly a Miss Dodson, Mrs. Tulliver still maintains that the respectable ways of the Dodson family are better than the ways of Mr. Tulliver. Mrs. Tulliver's mind works in small circles—she focuses mainly on tactile objects like the linens and the china. Her husband's bankruptcy makes her confused and listless, and all she can do is wonder what she has done to receive such bad luck. Mrs. Tulliver likes Tom more than Maggie as children, but she grows prouder of Maggie as Maggie grows tall, striking, and more demure.

**Jeremy Tulliver** - Maggie Tulliver's father. Mr. Tulliver works the mill on the Floss river, which is on land his family has held for generations. Mr. Tulliver is fond of Maggie, especially her cleverness, and he often takes her side in family quarrels. Mr. Tulliver's bankruptcy is, in part, the result of his own single- mindedness and pride. Associated with the older, provincial ways, Mr. Tulliver senses enough of the changing economic world around him to be puzzled by it. Tulliver is an affectionate man, who is soft with his daughter, wife, and sister, yet his bitterness toward Mr. Wakem consumes and changes him in the end. Like the other main characters of *The Mill on the Floss*, Mr. Tulliver is the victim of both his own character and the circumstances of his life. His personal pride and rashness causes his bankruptcy; yet there is a sense, especially in his illnesses, that Tulliver is also sheerly overwhelmed by the changing world around him. Tulliver is somewhat more intelligent than his wife—a point of pride and planning for him—yet he is still "puzzled" by the expanding economic world, as well as the complexities of language. The lifestyle to which Mr. Tulliver belongs—static, local, rural social networks and slow saving of money—is quickly giving way to a new class of venture capitalists, like Mr. Deane. Part of the tragedy of Tulliver's downfall is the tragedy of the loss of his way of life. Mr. Tulliver is one of the few models of unconditional love in the novel— his affection for Maggie and his sister, Mrs. Moss, are some of the few narrative bright spots of the first chapters. Yet Tulliver can also be stubborn and obsessively narrow-minded, and it is this that kills him when he cannot overcome his hatred of Wakem.

**Lucy Deane** - The pretty, petite, blond cousin of Tom and Maggie. Lucy is genuinely good-hearted, thinking often of the happiness of others. She is also enough of a child of society life, though, that she pays heed to social conventions and to her own appearance.

**Philip Wakem** - Philip Wakem is perhaps the most intelligent and perceptive character of *The Mill on the Floss*. He first appears as a relief to Maggie's young life—he is one of the few people to have an accurate sense of, and appreciation for, her intelligence, and Philip remains the only character who fully appreciates this side of Maggie. Philip himself is well read, cultured, and an accomplished sketcher. Philip's deformity—a hunched back he has had since birth—has made him somewhat melancholy and bitter. Of small stature and with a pale face, Philip is often described as "womanly." Philip's love of art, music, and knowledge go some way toward counteracting the severe sadness he feels about his deformity. Like Maggie, he suffers from a lack of love in his life. Philip first meets Maggie when he is at school with Tom. He falls in love with her the year that they meet in secret during Maggie's father's bankruptcy. His attraction to Maggie is, in part, a response to her seemingly bottomless capacity for love. Philip's gentleness, small stature, and sensitivity of feelings cause people to describe him as "womanly," and he is implicitly not considered as a passionate attachment for Maggie. It is Philip who urges Maggie to give up her unnatural self-denial. He recognizes her need for tranquility but assures her that this is not the way to reach it. Through the remainder of the novel, Philip seems to implicitly offer Maggie the tranquility that she seeks—we imagine that Maggie's life with Philip would be calm, happy, and intellectually fulfilling.

**Lawyer Wakem** - Lawyer Wakem is a powerful, and increasingly wealthy member of St. Ogg's society. He remembers his late wife lovingly and is very indulgent but close to his deformed son, Philip. Wakem holds strict ideas about class and money. He is scornful of the vindictive Mr. Tulliver.

**Stephen Guest** - Stephen Guest is courting Lucy Deane when we meet him but has not yet proposed marriage. He is the son of the senior partner of Guest & Co., where both Tom and Mr. Deane work. Stephen is handsome and self-assured. Though he cares for Lucy, and for the life they would have together, he falls unexpectedly in love with Maggie, drawn to her strikingly different qualities.

**Bob Jakin** - Bob Jakin was a childhood friend of Tom's. Though Tom rejected his friendship when they were children over an incident of cheating, Bob returns after Mr. Tulliver's bankruptcy to offer help to Maggie and Tom. Bob is a packman—a salesman who buys goods at one place and sells them at another.

**Mr. and Mrs. Glegg** - Mrs. Glegg, formerly Miss Jane Dodson, acts as the leader of the Dodson sisters. Mrs. Glegg is loudly vocal regarding her disapprovals, which usually involve a violation of the Dodson way of doing something. Yet it is her same strict sense of respectability that allows Mrs. Glegg to stand by Maggie, when no one else will at the end of the novel. Mr. and Mrs. Glegg are miserly, though Mr. Glegg is more good-natured about thrift. Mr. Glegg tries to mediate his wife's ill temper and will stand up to her as well.

**Mr. and Mrs. Deane** - Mrs. Deane, formerly Miss Susan Dodson, is a pale, quieter, Dodson sister. Mrs. Deane does not say much, and she rehearses what she says beforehand. She dies before the end of the novel. Mr. Deane is a swiftly rising junior partner at Guest & Co. He focuses on business and profit-making more than family claims. Their daughter is Lucy.

**Mr. and Mrs. Pullet** - Mrs. Pullet, formerly Miss Sophie Dodson, is the closest Dodson sister to Mrs. Tulliver. They share a love of fine household goods. Mr. Pullet is a gentleman farmer, and the couple were originally the most wealthy of the Dodson family, until Mr. Deane began rising in the business world. Mr. Pullet does not have much to say for himself. He covers for this fact by sucking on peppermints.

**Luke Moggs** - Luke Moggs works for Mr. Tulliver. He is the miller at the mill on the Floss. Luke is practically a family member, and he sits by Mr. Tulliver's sickbed.

**Mr. Riley** - Mr. Riley is the auction manager in St. Ogg's. Mr. Tulliver looks up to him as a high class and full of wisdom and intelligence, but Mr. Riley is more likely middle class and not entirely full of wisdom. Mr. Riley has died by the middle of the novel.

**Mr. Stelling** - Mr. Stelling is the clergyman tutor of Tom Tulliver and, later, Philip Wakem. Stelling wants to rise in the world and lives somewhat beyond his current means. He teaches exactly as he was taught, with Latin and Euclid. He doesn't have the imagination or the open-mindedness to help Tom learn in other ways.

**Dr. Kenn** - Dr. Kenn is the stern, but charitable, minister of St. Ogg's.

**Mr. and Mrs. Moss** - Margaret Moss, Mr. Tulliver's sister—and "Aunt Gritty" to Tom and Maggie—is a patient, loving woman. She is especially fond of Maggie. She has eight children, and the family is very poor. Mr. Tulliver did not want Margaret to marry Mr. Moss, and Tulliver is still cross about this. Mr. Moss does not have much character, mainly because he must work too much.

**Mr. Pivart** - Mr. Pivart, who lives down the Floss, begins a dispute with Mr. Tulliver over the river water.



**Kezia** - Kezia is the Tullivers' servant.

**Mr. Gore** - Gore is Mr. Tulliver's lawyer.

**Mr. Poulter** - Mr. Poulter is brought in by Mr. Stelling to give Tom exercise. Mr. Poulter drinks and talks about the war in which he fought.

**the Miss Guests** - The Miss Guests (there are two) are Stephen Guest's sisters. They are not very attractive and are snobbish.

The most important event of Maggie's young life is her encounter with a book of Thomas a Kempis's writings, which recommend abandoning one's cares for oneself and focusing instead on unearthly values and the suffering of others. Maggie encounters the book during the difficult year of her adolescence and her family's bankruptcy. Looking for a "key" with which to understand her unhappy lot, Maggie seizes upon Kempis's writings and begins leading a life of deprivation and penance. Yet even in this lifestyle, Maggie paradoxically practices her humility with natural passion and pride. It is not until she re-establishes a friendship with Philip Wakem, however, that Maggie can be persuaded to respect her own need for intellectual and sensuous experience and to see the folly of self-denial. Maggie's relationship with Philip shows both her deep compassion, as well as the self-centered gratification that comes with having someone who fully appreciates her compassion. As Maggie continues to meet Philip Wakem secretly, against her father's wishes, her internal struggle seems to shift. Maggie feels the conflict of the full intellectual life that Philip offers her and her "duty" to her father. It is Tom who reminds her of this "duty," and Maggie's wish to be approved of by Tom remains strong.

The final books of *The Mill on the Floss* feature Maggie at the age of nineteen. She seems older than her years and is described as newly sensuous—she is tall with full lips, a full torso and arms, and a "crown" of jet black hair. Maggie's unworldliness and lack of social pretension make her seem even more charming to St. Ogg's, as her worn clothing seems to compliment her beauty. Maggie has been often unhappy in her young adulthood. Having given up her early asceticism, she longs for a richness of life that is unavailable to her. When she meets Stephen Guest, Lucy Deane's handsome suitor, and enters into the society world of St. Ogg's, Maggie feels this want for sensuousness fulfilled for the first time. Stephen plays into Maggie's romantic expectations of life and gratifies her pride. Maggie and Stephen's attraction seems to exist more in physical gestures than in witty discussion, and it seems to intoxicate them both. When faced with a decision between a life of passionate love with Stephen and her "duty" to her family and position, Maggie chooses the latter. Maggie has too much feeling for the memories of the past (and nostalgia for a time when Tom loved her) to relinquish them by running away.

### **Themes, Motifs, and Symbols**

*The Mill on the Floss* is distinguished from Eliot's other works by its unusual centre of focus. While the other novels examine the problems experienced by the protagonists on their entry into adulthood, *The Mill* devotes most of its attention to Maggie's growth from childhood into adolescence. But Maggie's experience is not that of unified progression, as in the traditional structure of a Bildungsroman; it is rather continuous conflict and contradiction, a cycle of internal struggle.

The close relationship between the author and her heroine, Maggie, gives the novel warmth and immediacy. The first half of the book with its remarkable portrayal of childhood is irresistibly appealing, and the study of Maggie's mingled motives reaches a new level of psychological subtlety. Maggie and Tom are based on her own childhood self and her brother Isaac. Their closeness and subsequent alienation reflect the way in

which her real-life brother refused to acknowledge her when she started living with Lewes. Similarly, Tom is hurt when Maggie innocently spends the night with Stephen Guest - he feels that Maggie has degraded herself, him and their family name irredeemably. The most striking theme in the novel is that of the effects of family ties.

Mr Tulliver's preoccupation with fending off the aggressive activities of other mill owners depicts new industrial methods challenging and destroying the old. The peace and tranquility of long-established traditions at Dorlcote Mill are sharply contrasted with the zealous banking, investment and commercial activities of St. Ogg's. Mr Waken the lawyer personifies this new capitalism, and Tom Tulliver quickly learns to turn it to advantage. Though the society of St. Ogg's regards such entrepreneurship as admirable, the novel questions the ethics of a materialistic system that turns people like the Tullivers into its victims.

Another underlying theme is that of the repression of women. Maggie is much brighter than Tom, her mind is quicker but she is always "the little wench" in her father's eyes. Eliot's position seems to be that biological differentiation between the sexes makes social differentiation inevitable. However, in *The Mill* the initial base of difference seems to be social rather than psychological. Maggie's and Tom's relative positions in the social hierarchy govern their psychological development, as Tom acquires "manly" resolution and determination, and Maggie develops emotional sensitivity. This belief that the desired social goal should be that of an ever-increasing differentiation of functions for men and women takes its roots from the theories propounded by Comte, Spencer and Lewes (Positivism brought the study of society under the strict rigour of scientific analysis). According to these writers, social evolution followed a course from homogeneity (where all members of a society perform the same tasks) to heterogeneity, which is marked by an increasingly diverse division of labour. Acceptance of this theory was part of Eliot's stated belief in social progress. This ideology appears to be at odds with the way Eliot's fictional heroines are thrust into socially subordinate positions, excluded from social power and self-fulfillment - a contradictory position.

It has been said that Eliot spoils the plot by the quite arbitrary "tragic" ending: the flood of the Floss, Maggie's rescue of her estranged brother, and their reunion in death. The novelist, instead of allowing Maggie to resolve the moral dilemma in which she found herself and live by its consequences, took the easy way and substituted for a genuine resolution a cliché-ending from the stock of Victorian fiction. Feminist critics complained that Eliot never allowed her heroines to fulfil their potentiality, but constrained them ultimately with the straitjacket of Victorian patriarchal values (Routledge edition critical commentary). Another reading of Maggie's final embrace with Tom is that of "a supreme moment of transcendence", as all life difficulties are swept away by the flood and like in the conclusion to *Wuthering Heights*, with the suggestion that Cathy and Heathcliff's spirits still wander the moor. This evocation of the spirit world, outside social time, reinforces once more the novel's commitment to a cyclical, non-progressive model of history: there can be no true conclusion, no progress or ultimate summation for the past lives within, and perpetually disrupts, the present. This conclusion is set within a mythic frame. Maggie might die, but her form of death re-enacts the legend of St. Ogg's: she takes on the redeeming qualities of the legendary Virgin, thus confirming a cyclical vision of history.

In structural terms, then, the two endings reinforce the novel's questioning of many of the assumptions associated with the realist novel: in place of a linear progress we are offered a non-progressive model of time.

Some critics have noted that while all her other novels are named after the hero: *Adam Bede*, *Silas Marner*, *Felix Holt*, *Daniel Deronda*, with the exception of *Romola*, her historical novel, named after the heroine, *Middlemarch* and *The Mill* are not allowed the same treatment. As it stands the title suggests the novel's central preoccupation: the role of the mill as a productive, economic force. But it also hints symbolic implications: the confining circle, locking its inhabitants into an ever-repeating circle

## Themes

**The Claim of the Past Upon Present Identity** - Both characters and places in *The Mill on the Floss* are

presented as the current products of multi-generational gestation. The very architecture of St. Ogg's bears its hundreds of years of history within it. Similarly, Maggie and Tom are the hereditary products of two competing family lines—the Tullivers and the Dodsons—that have long histories and tendencies. In the novel, the past holds a cumulative presence and has a determining effect upon characters who are open to its influence. The first, carefully sketched out book about Maggie and Tom's childhood becomes the past of the rest of the novel. Maggie holds the memory of her childhood sacred and her connection to that time comes to affect her future behavior. Here, the past is not something to be escaped nor is it something that will rise again to threaten, but it is instead an inherent part of Maggie's (and her father's) character, making fidelity to it a necessity. Book First clearly demonstrates the painfulness of life without a past—the depths of Maggie's childhood emotions are nearly unbearable to her because she has no past of conquered troubles to look back upon with which to put her present situation in perspective. Stephen is held up as an example of the dangers of neglecting the past. Dr. Kenn, a sort of moral yardstick within the novel, complains of this neglect of the past of which Stephen is a part and Maggie has worked against: "At present everything seems tending toward the relaxation of ties—toward the substitution of wayward choice for the adherence to obligation which has its roots in the past." Thus, without a recognition of the past with which to form one's character, one is left only to the whims of the moment and subject to emotional extremes and eventual loneliness.

**The Importance of Sympathy** - *The Mill on the Floss* is not a religious novel, but it is highly concerned with a morality that should function among all people and should aspire to a compassionate connection with others through sympathy. The parable of St. Ogg rewards the ferryman's unquestioning sympathy with another, and Maggie, in her final recreation of the St. Ogg scene during the flood, is vindicated on the grounds of her deep sympathy with others. The opposite of this sympathy within the novel finds the form of variations of egoism. Tom has not the capability of sympathizing with Maggie. He is aligned with the narrow, self-serving ethic of the rising entrepreneur: Tom explains to Mr. Deane that he cares about his own standing, and Mr. Deane compliments him, "That's the right spirit, and I never refuse to help anybody if they've a mind to do themselves justice." Stephen, too, is seen as a figure that puts himself before others. His arguments in favor of his and Maggie's elopement all revolve around the privileging of his own emotion over that of others', even Maggie's. In contrast, Maggie's, Philip's, and Lucy's mutual sympathy is upheld as the moral triumph within the tragedy of the last book. Eliot herself believed that the purpose of art is to present the reader with realistic circumstances and characters that will ultimately enlarge the reader's capacity for sympathy with others. We can see this logic working against Maggie's young asceticism. Maggie's self-denial becomes morally injurious to her because she is denying herself the very intellectual and artistic experiences that would help her understand her own plight and have pity for the plight of others.

**Practical Knowledge Versus Bookish Knowledge** - *The Mill on the Floss*, especially in the first half of the novel, is quite concerned about education and types of knowledge. Much of the early chapters are devoted to laying out the differences between Tom's and Maggie's modes of knowledge. Tom's knowledge is practical: "He knew all about worms, and fish, and those things; and what birds were mischievous, and how padlocks opened, and which way the handles of the gates were to be lifted." This knowledge is tangible and natural—it brings Tom in closer association to the world around him. Meanwhile, Maggie's knowledge is slightly more complicated. Other characters refer to it as "uncanny," and her imagination and love of books are often depicted as a way for her to escape the world around her or to rise above it—"The world outside the books was not a happy one, Maggie felt." Part of the tragedy of Maggie and Tom Tulliver is that Tom received the education that Maggie should have had. Instead of Maggie blossoming, Tom is trapped. When Tom must make a living in the world, he discovers that his bookish education will win him nothing: Mr. Deane tells Tom, "The world isn't made of pen, ink, and paper, and if you're to get on in the world, young man, you must know what the world's made of." Tom soon returns and takes advantage of his skills for practical knowledge, making good in the newly entrepreneurial world. Tom's practical knowledge is always depicted as a source of superiority for Tom. From his childhood on, Tom has no patience for Maggie's intellectual curiosity. The

narrowness of Tom's miseducation under Mr. Stelling seems somewhat related to the narrowness of Tom's tolerance for others' modes of knowledge. Yet Eliot remains clear that Maggie's intellectualism makes her Tom's superior in this case—"the responsibility of tolerance lies with those who have the wider vision."

**The Effect of Society Upon the Individual** - Society is never revealed to be a completely determining factor in the destiny of Eliot's main characters—for example, Maggie's tragedy originates in her internal competing impulses, not in her public disgrace. Yet, Eliot remains concerned with the workings of a community—both social and economic—and tracks their interrelations, as well as their effect upon character, as part of her realism. *The Mill on the Floss* sets up a geography of towns and land holdings—St. Ogg's, Basset, Garum Firs, Dorlcote Mill—and describes the tone of each community (such as the run-down population of Basset). The novel tracks the growth of the particular society of St. Ogg's, referencing the new force of economic trends like entrepreneurial capitalism or innovations like the steam engine. A wide cast of characters aims to outline different strata in the society—such as the Dodsons, or the Miss Guests—through their common values, economic standing, and social circles. In the first part of the novel, Eliot alludes to the effect these communal forces have on Maggie's and Tom's formation. Toward the end of the novel, the detailed background of St. Ogg's society functions as a contrast against which Maggie seems freshly simple and genuine.

## Motifs

**The Disparity Between the Dodsons and the Tullivers** - Early on in the novel a distinction between the two families from which Tom and Maggie are descended is drawn out. The Dodsons are socially respectable, concerned with codes of behavior, and materialistic. The Tullivers are less socially respectable and have a depth of emotion and affection. The constant repetition of the characteristics of the two clans serves to create a division along which Maggie's and Tom's growth can be tracked. Tom is associated with the Dodsons, even more so when an adult, and Maggie is associated with the Tullivers.

**Music** - We often see Maggie nearly lose consciousness when listening to music; she is so overcome with emotion and forgetful of any punitive or self-denying impulses. As a motif, music works the opposite way too: when Maggie experiences moments of profound, unconscious discovery or understanding, these moments are accompanied by a sense of music, as when she reads Thomas a Kempis for the first time and feels as though she hears, "a strain of solemn music." The vulnerability that Maggie experiences in relation to music can also put her in danger. Stephen Guest woos Maggie with music, not with words, and we see that his singing creates an "emotion that seemed to make her at once strong and weak: strong for all enjoyment, weak for all resistance." Music in *The Mill on the Floss* is not meant to indicate moments when Maggie is either succumbing to evil or experiencing good, but rather it indicates her generally heightened sensibilities—Maggie seems to experience everything with more emotion than others, and music is used throughout the novel to underscore this effect.

**Animal Imagery** - Especially in the early books of *The Mill on the Floss*, Tom, and especially Maggie, are associated with animal imagery. The imagery is usually of farm-type animals—ponies, dogs, ducks—and usually points to the character's capacity for affection or non-adherence to social convention. Following Darwin, Eliot uses this imagery also to gesture toward the wider relation between humans and animals that can be especially seen in young children. Thus, when Maggie and Tom reconcile in Chapter IV of Book First, the narrator points out, "We [adults] no longer approximate in our behaviour to the mere impulsiveness of the lower animals, but conduct ourselves in every respect like members of a highly civilized society. Maggie and Tom were still very much like young animals."

**Dark and Light Women** - The motif of darkness and lightness of women—meaning their eyes, hair, or skin—

is often used to emphasize the uniqueness of Maggie's appearance. The motif of darkness and lightness connects to the motif of the distinctions between the Dodsons and the Tullivers—the Tullivers have darker skin, while the Dodsons have lighter skin. The Dodsons, and indeed, all of St. Ogg's, respect or covet Lucy Deane's fair appearance. Her lightness is also prized in a larger cultural arena, and, in Book Fourth, Maggie becomes frustrated by the traditional plot lines in which the light, blond women live happily ever after in love. Maggie's family views her darkness as ugly and unnatural, yet by the end of the novel, it has made men perceive Maggie as more beautiful because her darkness is a rarity.

## Symbols

**The Floss** - The Floss is a somewhat difficult symbol to track, as it also exists for realistic effect in the workings of the novel. On the symbolic level, the Floss is related most often to Maggie, and the river, with its depth and potential to flood, symbolizes Maggie's deeply running and unpredictable emotions. The river's path, nonexistent on maps, is also used to symbolize the unforeseeable path of Maggie's destiny.

**St. Ogg** - St. Ogg, the legendary patron saint of the town, was a Floss ferryman. One night a woman with a child asked to be taken across the river, but the winds were high and no other boaters would take her. Only Ogg felt pity for her in her need and took her. When they reached the other side, her rags turned into robes, and she revealed herself to be the Blessed Virgin. The Virgin pronounced Ogg's boat safe to all who rode in it, and she sat always in the prow. The parable of Ogg rewards the human feeling of pity or sympathy. Maggie has a dream during her night on the boat with Stephen, wherein Tom and Lucy row past them, and Tom is St. Ogg, while Lucy is the Virgin. The dream makes explicit Maggie's fear of having neglected to sympathize with those whom she hurts during her night with Stephen (and also, perhaps, her fear that they will not sympathize with her in the future). But it is Maggie, finally, who stands for St. Ogg, as she rows down river thinking only of Tom's safety during the flood in a feat of "almost miraculous, divinely-protected effort."

**Maggie's eyes** - Eliot depicts Maggie's eyes as her most striking feature. All men (including Philip, Bob Jakin, and Stephen) notice her eyes first and become entranced. Maggie's eyes are a symbol of the power of emotion she contains—the depth of feeling and hunger for love that make her a tragic character. This unique force of character seems to give her power over others, for better or for worse. In Book First, Maggie is associated with Medusa, the monster who turns men to stone by looking at them. Maggie's eyes compel people, and different characters' reactions to them often reflect the character's relationship with Maggie. Thus, Philip, who will become Maggie's teacher, in a sense, and first love, notices that her eyes "were full of unsatisfied intelligence, and unsatisfied, beseeching affection." Bob Jakin, who views Maggie as superior to him and a figure of whom to be in awe, reports that Maggie has "such uncommon eyes, they looked somehow as they made him feel nohow." Finally, Stephen, who will exploit the inner struggle that Maggie has felt for the entire novel, notices that Maggie's eyes are "full of delicious opposites."

## Book First, Chapters I, II, III, and IV Summary

### Chapter I

The narrator stands on a bridge over the Floss next to Dorlcote Mill. The narrator peacefully watches a little girl and her white dog that stand on the bank of the river, watching the mill. The narrator can see the light of a fire burning inside the little girl's house.

It is decades later and the narrator has been dozing in her armchair, dreaming of that past afternoon outside Dorlcote Mill. The narrator proceeds to tell the story of what Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver were discussing in their house, in front of the fire on that afternoon.

## Chapter II

Mr. Tulliver explains to Mrs. Tulliver his wish to send their young son Tom for further education, so that Tom might have a lucrative career and enough scholarly knowledge to help Mr. Tulliver with confusing legal processes. Stout, blond Mrs. Tulliver submissively does not object but wants to have her sisters to dinner to hear their thoughts on the matter. Mr. Tulliver refuses to ask his sister-in-laws' advice.

Mrs. Tulliver prattles on about her wish that Tom not be sent to a school too far away so that she can still do his washing. Mr. Tulliver, using analogy about not hiring a waggoner because of only a mole on his face, warns her not to set herself against a perfectly good school if they can only find one farther away. Mrs. Tulliver takes his analogy literally, and Mr. Tulliver tries to explain, but then gives up—"it's puzzling work, talking is." Bessy Tulliver continues talking about laundry while Mr. Tulliver resolves to himself to ask Mr. Riley's advice about a good school. Mr. Tulliver brings up his only doubt over Tom's education—that Tom is a bit slow, taking after Bessy's family. Mr. Tulliver laments the fact that his daughter instead of his son takes after his own family in her cleverness.

More than happy to concede Maggie's likeness to the Tulliver family line, Mrs. Tulliver calls her a "wild thing" and complains of her messiness, absentmindedness, and "brown skin as makes her look like a mulatter." Mr. Tulliver dismisses his wife's complaints, citing Maggie's ability to read "almost as well as the parson." Mrs. Tulliver wishes Maggie's dark hair would curl, like that of her pretty cousin Lucy Deane.

At this moment, Maggie enters the room and throws off her bonnet and refuses her mother's injunctions to work on her patchwork for Mrs. Glegg, whom Maggie doesn't like. Mr. Tulliver chuckles at her honesty as she leaves the room.

## Chapter III

Mr. Tulliver and Mr. Riley have been discussing local arbitrations and troublesome lawyers such as Wakem, all of whom Mr. Tulliver believes have been created by the devil. At a pause in the conversation, Tulliver asks Riley's advice about Tom's schooling. Tulliver explains his plan to educate Tom so that Tom can go into business instead of looking to replace himself at the mill. Maggie, who has been sitting with a book, runs to her father proclaiming that Tom would be incapable of such an evil. Tulliver comforts Maggie, bragging to Riley of her cleverness. Maggie feels excitement at the mention of her intelligence to Riley, who is busy looking at the book she has dropped. Maggie hopes to earn Riley's respect with an exposition of the book—"The History of the Devil" by Daniel Defoe—but Riley is unreceptive. Mr. Tulliver is suddenly embarrassed by his daughter's knowledge and sends her to her mother.

Tulliver explains his fears that Tom is more inclined to an outdoors sort of knowledge and isn't at ease speaking to strangers as Maggie is. Riley recommends a parson named Stelling as a tutor for Tom. Riley speaks elaborately of Stelling's merits and soon convinces Tulliver, though we learn that Riley's recommendation has sprung more from Riley's desire to do a favor to Stelling's father-in-law and to speak authoritatively, than from first-hand knowledge of Stelling's merits.

## Chapter IV

Maggie, not allowed to accompany her father to fetch Tom from school, won't let her hair be curled to spite her mother, then runs up to the attic. Maggie picks up the doll that she uses as a voodoo doll, abusing it with nails and beatings, while she imagines it to be people who vex her like Aunt Glegg. Maggie's sobbing abates after a while, and she runs outside into the sunshine to her dog, Yap, celebrating Tom's imminent arrival. Maggie runs into the mill with her father's miller, Luke, and tries unsuccessfully to convince Luke to read some of her books. Luke declines, warning, "That's what brings folks to the gallows—knowin' everything but what they'n got to get their bread by." In the midst of the conversation, Luke mentions the fact that Tom's rabbits have died, and Maggie becomes upset, realizing that she had forgotten to feed the rabbits according to Tom's request and has killed them. Maggie is soon distracted, however, as she accepts Luke's invitation to visit his wife at his nearby house. At Luke's house, Maggie becomes interested in a series of pictures depicting the parable of the prodigal son.

## Analysis

The opening of *The Mill on the Floss* introduces us first to the narrator of the tale. The narrator is presented as a witness who lived in St. Ogg's at the time of the Tulliver's and now remembers and tells the tale thirty years later. However, we soon see that the narrator also remains unnamed and omniscient. Thus he/she recounts to us not only the dynamics of a conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver that she was not present for, but also the dynamics of each of their thought processes. Every so often, however, the narrator does refer to his/herself in the first person and recount personal opinions, as with the narrator's musings on Mrs. Tulliver at the end of Chapter II—"I have often wondered.... " Often these first person sections will involve an address to the reader, as with the narrator's plea on behalf of Mr. Riley at the end of Chapter III—"If you blame Mr. Riley very severely.... " Thus we might look for two modes of narration in *The Mill on the Floss*. The first, impersonal omniscient mode will be used for basic narration, and especially narration of larger social or historical forces within St. Ogg's, while the second, more personal, will be used often with an address to the reader and will betray sympathy or lack of sympathy for a character.

One of the techniques that the narrator uses is that of free indirect narration, meaning the use of a character's own mode of expression to narrate a passage involving that character. This mode of narration might require some attention to recognize, especially given that some passages in *The Mill on the Floss* will only partially use free indirect narration, sliding into it at the end of a paragraph, for example. Eliot often uses the technique for satiric effect, when introducing characters. Thus, Mr. Riley is described in his own flattering words at the opening of Chapter III, to comic effect.

The description at the end of Chapter III, of the forces that have brought about Mr. Riley's recommendation of Mr. Stelling, is a good example and plea for George Eliot's psychological realism. Here the narrative explicitly distinguishes itself from more dramatic modes of art that portray characters' motives as blatant and forcefully conscious. Thus Mr. Riley would be depicted by a dramatist as having an obvious motive of selfishness and a goal of benefitting himself in sight when he recommended Mr. Stelling. George Eliot, however, is more interested in mapping the subtle nuances of social interaction that give rise to Riley's inappropriate endorsement. Instead of condemning Riley outright for a moral failure, Eliot traces the psychological causes of his behavior to their root in ambiguous, and sometimes good, intentions, such as Riley's sympathy for Stelling's father-in-law because he has so many daughters. Finally, Mr. Riley is not seen as a freestanding character but within the context of his era, his profession, and his education. Thus, we see that *The Mill on the Floss* will not be so interested in tracing the workings of fate on the destinies of individual characters, so much as the minute inner workings of characters that arise as a result of both their individual mindsets, and their treatment at the hands of other characters and larger, but subtle, historical forces.

As the main character of *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie Tulliver will get the most in-depth psychological realist examination of the kind used to explain Mr. Riley above. Yet, in these opening three chapters, Maggie is introduced through the opinions and eyes of others, usually her parents. The Tullivers' discussion of Maggie in Chapter II actually serves more to pinpoint their individual characters—Mr. Tulliver as good-natured and practical and Mrs. Tulliver as superficial and dim-witted—than to render Maggie's character in depth. Here in these initial chapters, the figure of Maggie seems ominous through the eyes of others. Mr. Tulliver, though proud of Maggie's intelligence, has morose predictions about the future of a clever girl and seems to feel superstitious and intimidated toward Maggie's talents at times. Mrs. Tulliver directly relates Maggie to both untamed nature—she is a "wild thing"—and madness—she is a "Bedlam creatur." Finally, Maggie is associated with the devil in Chapter III, not only through her possession and knowledge of "The History of the Devil" by Defoe. Maggie's discussion of the devil's black and red coloring recalls her parents' discussion about her own coloring and descriptions of her dark hair, skin, and eyes.

In Chapter IV we get a closer look at Maggie and see that her world consists of oversensitive experiences of the world. Maggie feels pain and happiness more drastically for being a child and even more for her active imagination and knowledge of books, both of which inflect her perception of the world. For example, part of Maggie's attraction to the Mill involves the personal histories that she invents for the animals that live there, and Maggie feels her own guilt about neglecting Tom's rabbits more fully when she connects it to the parable of the Prodigal Son. The narrator is sympathetic with Maggie, yet also creates distance, by

emphasizing the sinister quality of her voodoo doll and her unthinking neglect of Tom's rabbits. Less morally ambiguous is Luke, whose words are often presented as aphorisms of wisdom or unknowing foreshadowings of events to come.

### **Important Quotations Explained**

1. It is a wonderful subduer, this need of love—this hunger of the heart—as peremptory as that other hunger by which Nature forces us to submit to the yoke, and change the face of the world.

#### **Explanation for Quotation 1**

This quotation, from Chapter V of Book First, introduces an important element in Maggie's character—her extreme need for love and affection. The use of the word "hunger" stresses the overwhelming power of Maggie's need. This need can sometimes seem self-centered, yet by related her need to a body's hunger, this quotation naturalizes and normalizes it. Love here is shown to be something humbling, something with power over characters ("submit to the yoke"), instead of a force that characters use. Finally, just as hunger makes humans adapt their behavior and environment ("change the face of the world" could mean planting crops), Maggie's need for love will be seen to be a formative force on her.

2. Nevertheless, there was a visible improvement in Tom under this training; perhaps because he was not a boy in the abstract, existing solely to illustrate the evils of a mistaken education, but a boy made of flesh and blood, with dispositions not entirely at the mercy of circumstances.

#### **Explanation for Quotation 2**

This quotation occurs as narrative commentary within Chapter IV of Book Second, and it points to George Eliot's preoccupation with realism. Eliot scorned so-called "realistic" novels that were written in her day in which characters were idealistically simple or stereotypical, and motives were depicted as straightforward. Eliot proposed to concentrate on psychological realism, depicting in detail the variety of forces at work within one character, to create a sense of authenticity and believability. At moments such as this, Eliot calls attention to this method by pointing to how a character would be treated in another novel. Though Eliot has a point to make about the evils of a miseducation, she will not make it bluntly or at the expense of the veracity of a main character. A similar comment occurs in Chapter III of Book First, when the narrator discusses the motivation behind Mr. Riley's recommendation of Mr. Stelling.

3. I share with you this sense of oppressive narrowness [of the Tullivers and Dodsons]; but it is necessary that we should feel it, if we care to understand how it acted on the lives of Tom and Maggie—how it has acted on young natures in many generations, that in the onward tendency of human things have risen above the mental level of the generation before them, to which they have been nevertheless tied by the strongest fibres of their hearts.

#### **Explanation for Quotation 3**

This quotation, from Chapter I of Book Fourth, illustrates George Eliot's conception of human progress as a struggle of individuals against formative forces, yet also remaining faithful to those formative forces. In order for humanity to progress, each generation must move beyond the generation before it. Here the influence of George Eliot's knowledge of natural history and Darwinism can be detected. Yet, Eliot adds a stipulation of her own—without continued connection to those outgrown generations, something spiritual is lost in the onward progression. Maggie suffers at the hands of her family's expectations in childhood, yet does not abandon these expectations or family members in her adulthood, instead heeding their call to duty, with an added capacity of feeling on her part.



4. ... the happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history.

#### **Explanation for Quotation 4**

This sentiment, (the quotation occurs within Chapter III of Book Sixth), was first articulated by Montesquieu in neutral gender as "the People." Eliot's gendering of the comment as female perhaps gestures to the fact women, more than men, are conspicuously absent from history. Yet, more specifically, the quotation gestures toward Maggie's status as a tragic character. The quotation also subtly points to Eliot's conception of progressive life as a struggle—to progress beyond previous generations is to meet difficulty, yet this progression is necessary and noble, worthy of recording and recounting, as she does with the story of Maggie Tulliver.

5. Was it possible to quarrel with a creature who had such eyes—defying and deprecating, contradicting and clinging, imperious and beseeching—full of delicious opposites? To see such a creature subdued by love for one would be a lot worth having.

#### **Explanation for Quotation 5**

This quotation occurs as a thought of Stephen Guest's at the end of Chapter VI in Book Sixth. It participates in the symbolism of Maggie's eyes, referred to throughout the novel, as expressive of her particularly deep character. The quotation, occurring as it does before Stephen and Maggie have voiced their mutual attraction, also foreshadows the dangerous instability that Stephen offers Maggie. Maggie has been wracked by competing impulses within her throughout the novel. This is part of her tragic character, yet here, Stephen finds this opposition "delicious." We also see that Stephen's love for Maggie is based on unsound principles: egoism, attraction to her novelty, and an impulse to dominate her.

### **Study Questions and Essay Topics**

#### **Study Questions**

1. Is *The Mill on the Floss* a feminist novel?

#### **Answer for Question 1**

*The Mill on the Floss* is a feminist novel in the sense that it reveals the difficulty of Maggie's coming of age, and that difficulty is shown to be made harder by her society's narrow views about women. Especially during Maggie's childhood, we are constantly confronted with older characters ignoring or devaluing Maggie's obvious intelligence because she is a girl. Even Tom is shown to participate in this narrowness—he considers it his right to keep Maggie in her place, as well as care for her. In scenes such as the one in which Mr. Stelling pronounces the cleverness of women to be shallow, we are clearly meant to become angry at this pronouncement and know automatically that the pronouncement is wrong. Significantly, society's mistaken views about the shallowness of women are shown to adversely affect men as well—it is Tom who suffers just as much as Maggie, through his miseducation. The structure of the novel itself presents Maggie as constrained and unable to move outside of her family circle. We are significantly not shown the chapters in which she is on her own, teaching, and are made to focus, instead, on scenes with Maggie and her family and friends, in which Maggie's subjection, or non- subjection, to their will is at issue. The passages dealing with the hypocritical morality of St. Ogg's society are unsparing in relation to women—the town's females are revealed as the most self-serving and shallow of the population—yet, this harsh realism does not change the basic feminist tenor of the novel.

2. Do the concerns of *The Mill on the Floss* relate to 1830s England?

## Answer for Question 2

*The Mill on the Floss* mainly deals with the troubled childhood and young adulthood of Maggie Tulliver, but a variety of background details reveal the changing community of the time and so relate to the actual sociological and economic shifts in 1830s England. The novel situates itself on the cusp of a new economic order. The old ways of local provincial relations, illustrated through Mr. Tulliver, as well as the old ways of slow saving, as illustrated by the Gleggs and the Pullets, as shown to be giving way to a new order of speculation capitalism. The Tulliver family has owned Dorlcote Mill for years, but suddenly, new families like the Pivarts are advancing in the world and becoming moneyed and propertied. Over the course of the novel, we are shown how Mr. Deane advances in the world, making Mrs. Deane the most successful Dodson sister, when Mrs. Pullet had claimed that honor for years prior. Mr. Deane himself points to one of the agents of this change, in the steam engine. Mr. Deane also explains that the age of farming is being succeeded by the age of trade: "Somebody has said it's a fine thing to make two ears of corn grow where only one grew before; but, sir it's a fine thing, too, to further the exchange of commodities, and bring the grains of corn to the mouths that are hungry." Buying goods cheaply and selling them for a profit is the exact way that Tom made enough money to cancel the family debts. Finally, these economic forces are shown to effect the sociology of the society in that fortunes are won and lost more swiftly, and the hierarchies of the community are not as stable. Thus the young people of St. Ogg's are not as restricted in their choices of marriage partner as they may once have been—Stephen can marry down to Lucy Deane, and even to Maggie Tulliver, and Lawyer Wakem can agree to a match between his son and Maggie.

3. Make a case for either Philip, Tom, Stephen, or another character as the character who is depicted as having the most influence on Maggie's character.

## Answer for Question 3

Though Philip Wakem is shown to teach Maggie a great deal and to be the single force which leads her away from her path of self-abnegation, Tom still remains the character with the most formative power over Maggie. Tom's influence upon Maggie is hard to track for the same reason it is the most powerful: Tom has a negative influence upon Maggie's sensibility. As children, it is Tom that is set up as increasing Maggie's need for love and approval by his very denial of that love and approval. As they grow older, it is Tom who enables the shift in Maggie's inner struggle. When Tom finds out about Maggie's clandestine meetings with Philip Wakem, Tom, for the first time, articulates Maggie's failures in terms of a failure to fulfill her duty (up until then, Maggie's failures had been seen as the result merely of her impetuosity). This classification of Maggie's failures under the rubric of duty to close family affects Maggie's inner struggle throughout the rest of the novel, which will be understood by her in terms of duty versus love. Additionally, it is for her childhood with Tom that Maggie longs throughout her adult years—this pull to the past is entirely due to Tom's childhood effect on her. Finally, the structure of the novel itself invites us to recognize the supreme formative power Tom has over Maggie. Toward the end of the novel, it is in scenes with the unforgiving Tom which call for the most reader sympathy and allow us to classify Maggie Tulliver as a tragic figure. The final scene, in which the brother and sister drown together, cancels out the potential importance of figures such as Philip or Stephen, affirming the centrality of Tom to Maggie's character development.

## Suggested Essay Topics

4. Discuss the role of the narrator. What is the purpose of having a narrator tell the story in the past tense? With whom does the narrator sympathize? What values does the narrator uphold? What does the narrator ask for from the reader?
5. In what sense is *The Mill on the Floss* a spiritual novel?
6. How does Eliot use water imagery? Does this imagery relate to the Floss? What does the Floss symbolize?

7. Is Mr. Tulliver a tragic character? Is he a tragic hero?

8. Discuss the Dodsons as a group. Are their values upheld?

Explain the novel in terms of the world of the Mill and that of St. Ogg's (Read Book 4, chapter I).

Explain Eliot's idea of "nemesis" (the burden of the past) and draw a comparison with Hardy's in *Tess or Jude*.

Discuss the role of religion in the characters' lives.

Comment on Maggie and Tom's tragical end and on the different critical interpretations. Comment on Maggie as heroine or as victim.

Read chapter 9 of Ellen Moers' *Literary Women: The Myth of Corinne* (pp.173-78). Read Elaine Showalter *A Literature of their Own* (pp. 124-132). Explain similarities and differences between Maggie and Jane Eyre.

Read the critical commentary in the Routledge edition and comment on brother/sister relationships in *The Mill* as compare to *Hard Times* and *Wuthering Heights*.

### Quiz

1. Which of these reasons is *not* one of Mr. Tulliver's reasons for sending Tom on for more education?

- (A) So that Tom can teach Maggie
- (B) So that Tom can learn to write well
- (C) So that Tom will have something else to do besides take over the mill from Mr. Tulliver
- (D) So that Tom can help Mr. Tulliver with law documents and arbitrations

2. What does Mr. Tulliver seek Mr. Riley's advice about?

- (A) Maggie's uncanny intelligence
- (B) Tulliver's dispute with Mr. Pivart over the Floss water
- (C) Tom's education
- (D) Tulliver's disputes with his wife's family, the Dodsons

3. What book does Maggie show Mr. Riley that she is reading?

- (A) *Aesop's Fables*
- (B) *The Christian Year*
- (C) *Pilgrim's Progress*
- (D) *The History of the Devil*

4. Why does Tom first get angry at Maggie when he comes home from school in Book First?

- (A) Because she won't curl her hair
- (B) Because she doesn't play fair at Heads or Tails
- (C) Because she has forgotten to feed his rabbits and they've died
- (D) Because she speaks badly of Lucy

5. Why does Tom break off his friendship with Bob Jakin?

- (A) Because Bob is better at trapping rabbits than Tom
- (B) Because Bob is not intelligent
- (C) Because Bob does not play fairly
- (D) Because Bob has stolen Tom's pocketknife

6. What impulsive action does Maggie take during the visit of her aunts and uncles in Book First?

- (A) She falls in the mud
- (B) She eats Tom's dessert
- (C) She steps on a cake
- (D) She cuts her own hair

7. What do Mrs. Glegg and Mr. Tulliver have a disagreement over?

- (A) Table linens
- (B) Tom's education
- (C) The 500 pounds Mrs. Glegg has lent Mr. Tulliver
- (D) Maggie's behavior

8. Why does Mr. Tulliver ultimately decide not to press his sister for the money she owes him?

- (A) Because he thinks of Maggie dependent upon Tom after his own death
- (B) Because he sees her eight children
- (C) Because Mr. Moss convinces him to lay off
- (D) Because another investment of his makes good

9. What are Maggie's intentions towards the gypsies?

- (A) To use them to make her family pity her
- (B) To learn their language
- (C) To teach them and be their queen

(D) To teach them how to cook

10. What was St. Ogg's profession?

(A) A farmer

(B) A miller

(C) A priest

(D) A ferryman

11. Who insists upon the repayment of the 500 pounds between Mr. Tulliver and Mrs. Glegg?

(A) Mrs. Glegg

(B) Mr. Tulliver

(C) Mrs.  
Tulliver

(D) Mr. Glegg

12. Who is Tom's only playmate during his first term with Mr. Stelling?

(A) Poulter

(B) Bob Jakin

(C) Laura Stelling

(D) Yap

13. Why is Christmas dreary after Tom's first term with Mr. Stelling?

(A) Because Maggie has become religiously ascetic

(B) Because Tom hates school

(C) Because the Dodsons refuse to visit

(D) Because Mr. Tulliver is preoccupied with litigation over the river water

14. How does Philip Wakem first win Tom's respect?

(A) His singing

(B) His drawing skills

(C) His intelligence

(D) His self-assured  
demeanor

15. What feature of Maggie's draws Philip to her?

(A) Her eyes

(B) Her hair

- (C) Her linguistic power
- (D) Her impetuosity

16. What is Philip's first thought when Tom drops a sword on his own foot?

- (A) That Tom deserved it
- (B) That Tom might fear he will be lame for life
- (C) That Tom is headstrong and stupid
- (D) That warfare is wrong

17. With whom does Maggie go to boarding school?

- (A) Her mother
- (B) Miss Guest
- (C) Tom
- (D) Lucy Deane

18. What is Mr. Tulliver reading when he has a stroke?

- (A) A decision against him in the court case over the water power
- (B) A notice from his lawyer, Mr. Gore, that he is bankrupted
- (C) A letter stating that the mortgage of the mill has been transferred to Wakem
- (D) A letter from Maggie saying she will be home soon

19. Why does Maggie become angry at her aunts and uncles during her father's illness?

- (A) Because they are insulting Tom about the benefits of his education
- (B) Because they will not offer to buy any of the family's furniture
- (C) Because they are insulting to Mrs. Moss
- (D) Because they have befriended Lawyer Wakem

20. What causes Lawyer Wakem to buy the mill?

- (A) The transference of Tulliver's mortgage to him
- (B) Mrs. Tulliver's visit to him
- (C) Mr. Riley's recommendation
- (D) Tom's proud behavior

21. What does Mr. Tulliver make Tom write in the family Bible?

- (A) A notice that Maggie will never marry

- (B) A notice that Wakem is not forgiven
- (C) The occasion of Tom's repayment of the family debts
- (D) The formal transference of power from Tulliver to Tom

22. How does Tom manage to pay off the family debt?

- (A) By saving his wages at Guest & Co.
- (B) Through an entrepreneurial scheme with Bob Jakin
- (C) By appealing to Mr. Glegg for money
- (D) By selling his own goods

23. What is Stephen Guest's relationship to Lucy Deane?

- (A) They are engaged
- (B) They are married
- (C) They are courting
- (D) They are friends

24. What is the significance of Maggie's sewing?

- (A) It shows that she is accomplished in female arts
- (B) It shows her love of handicraft
- (C) It signifies nothing
- (D) It shows that she has been in financial difficulty

25. Why does Maggie become angry when Stephen kisses her arm at the dance?

- (A) Because Lucy might have seen
- (B) Because Maggie is engaged to Philip
- (C) Because he is drunk
- (D) Because it shows that Stephen thinks lightly of her

26. Which of the following is *not* a reason that Maggie decides to leave Stephen in Mudport and return to St. Ogg's?

- (A) Because she feels her life with Stephen wouldn't be noble
- (B) Because she feels the pull of the past on her
- (C) Because she knows that St. Ogg's will never accept her as Stephen's wife

- (D) Because she sympathizes with Lucy's and Philip's positions



## Suggestions for Further Reading

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## Internet Sources

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Victorian Web, George Landows' sites Victorian Web: <http://www.victorianweb.org/>

Postcolonial Web: <http://www.postcolonialweb.org> ...

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GEORGE ELIOT'S WORKS Text search engine and links to full versions.

[www.princeton.edu/~batke/eliot/](http://www.princeton.edu/~batke/eliot/)

[George Eliot](http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/gelliot.htm) in-depth look at Eliot's life and her literary significance. Includes a list of works.  
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[Eliot](http://www.personal.psu.edu/faculty/k/a/kaw16/Eliot.htm) - Related Links and George Eliot Web Sites.  
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[The Writing of Marian Evans \(George Eliot\)](http://www.users.bigpond.com/justd/evans.htm) Comment with links to Romola, Daniel Deronda, Middlemarch, Adam Bede, Mill on the Floss, Silas Marner, [www.users.bigpond.com/justd/evans.htm](http://www.users.bigpond.com/justd/evans.htm)

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