The Ending of *The Mill on the Floss*: A Reconsideration

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Richard Andretta
King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

Most of the critics who have written on George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* are dissatisfied with its ending. Their dissatisfaction stems from their sympathy with the heroine and their desire to see her live on and continue the struggle with her society or from their insistence on finding autobiographical material inadequately transmuted into the experience and fabric of the novel.

It is the purpose of this article to show that the ending of *The Mill on the Floss* is the inevitable result of the characters' background and the nature of the personal relations George Eliot has portrayed in her novel. Maggie's attachment and commitment to her past and the strong ties she has with her childhood companions, such as her brother Tom, her cousin Lucy and Philip dictate both her decisions and her fate. Moreover, George Eliot's own attachment to her past, her conservatism and belief in Positivism and determinism translate themselves into a naturalism that precludes a romantic escape for the heroine. There is no doubt that the issues she raises and the solutions she offers are the dramatization of her own personal feelings and beliefs, but the way the dramatization is presented shows neither personal intrusion actuated by personal need or self-pity, nor indulgence in fantasy on the part of the writer. Therefore, the ending is both structurally coherent and thematically justified.

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Most critics who have written on *The Mill on the Floss* have been dissatisfied with its ending. Thus Henry James has expressed the opinion that Maggie should have been left to her own devices and objected to the Flood because "[n] othing has prepared the [reader] for it; the story does no move towards it; it casts no shadow before it."(1) F. R. Leavis, in a seminal essay on George Eliot, has found in the ending "an element of self-idealization," which is accompanied by "an element of self-pity."(2) Like Leavis, Barbara Hardy believes that the ending is unsatisfactory because of George Eliot's personal intrusion: "There is some relation, at each stage in the novel, between a great personal need and the artistic shaping."(3)

Joan Bennett is critical of the ending because, according to her, George Eliot "has placed Maggie in a dilemma in which no preconceived principle could direct her choice-she has let her choose and she has refused to imagine the results of her choice."(4) Likewise, Ian Adam thinks that George Eliot is reluctant to face the results of the situation she has created and to draw moral conclusions form it:

It is as though the author, having had her faith in an immanent, purposeful universe destroyed through rational inquiry into Christianity, is reluctant to draw final conclusions from a similar investigation of doctrine which grants to the past a similar theological authority.(5)

Neil Roberts is of the opinion that didacticism constitutes the major weakness of the ending: "The didactic purpose shows through very clearly here [in Maggie's renunciation of Stephen Guest], and the moralist again has his answers."(6) Although Jerome Thale finds the ending "plausible" he objects to it as "too convenient".(7) David Carroll, while accepting the ending, finds that "the final episode is written in a different mode from the fictional, that of story...which descends from and is taken up into legend and which eschews motivation and explanation."(8) George Levine, while finding Maggie's rushing to rescue Tom "a spontaneous motivation", still considers the ending "an escape...[which] can be seen also as external and fortuitous, an intrusion of that Favorable Chance' which George Eliot anathematized in *Silas Marner* (Ch.
IX)." (9) Philip M. Weinstein finds Maggie's and Tom's deaths "thematically uncontrolled" and "abrupt" (10) William Myers objects to the ending because, according to him, the Floss has never been part of the story and because, in view of the symbolic meanings that the Floss acquires in the course of the narration, when it "sweeps Tom and Maggie into climactic reunion and revelation, it is hard not to feel that George Eliot is allowing social and personal reconciliation to become confused, that she is trying to bind the smallest things with the greatest in a flurry of illogical excitement". (11) Forest Pyle reads the novel in terms of a conflict between the egotistic romantic imagination and sympathy and finds that Maggie's tragedy occurs because she recovers her feelings of sympathy too late. (12) And, finally, Susan Fraiman in her feminist approach to the novel rejects both the ending and the story of the novel because Maggie has been defined in terms of a cultural discourse which favors the hero and keeps the heroine imprisoned in the claustrophobic confines of the Gothic novel. (13)

Such comments as I have quoted above stem from the critics' sympathy for Maggie and their desire to see her live on and continue the struggle with her society; from their insistence on finding autobiographical material inadequately transmuted into the experience and fabric of the novel; or from their overriding concern with genre, gender and structure.

It is the purpose of this paper to show that the ending of The Mill on the Floss is the inevitable result of the characters' background and environment as well as of the nature of the personal relations George Eliot has painstakingly depicted in her novel. Maggie's attachment and commitment to her past and her environment and the strong ties she has with her childhood companions, such as her brother Tom, her cousin Lucy and Philip dictate both her decisions and her fate. Moreover, George Eliot's own attachment to her past, her conservatism and belief in Positivism and determinism translate themselves into a naiveralism that precludes a romantic escape for the heroine. There is no doubt that the issues she raises and the solutions she offers are the
dramatization of her own personal feelings and beliefs, but the way the dramatization is presented shows neither personal intrusion actuated by personal need or self-pity, nor indulgence in fantasy on the part of the writer. Therefore, the ending is both structurally coherent and thematically justified.

Since the ending of the novel covers two phases: Maggie's renunciation of Stephen Guest (Chapter XIV of Book 6 and Chapter V of Book 7), and the Flood, Maggie's rescuing of Tom, their final reconciliation and drowning together (Chapter V in Book 7 and the Conclusion), I will address each phase separately but will show, in the course of the discussion, that they are closely interrelated.

Maggie's renunciation of Stephen Guest is not merely the result of personal need on the part of George Eliot, who, according to Barbara Hardy, may be expressing her awareness of moral imperatives and indicating that if she has chosen to live with George Henry Lewes, her choice has not victimized anybody (Lewes's wife was unfaithful to him) whereas in Maggie's case, both Lucy and Philip would suffer and Tom would certainly frown upon her impulsiveness and look on her taking Stephen from her cousin Lucy as an act of treachery and ingratitude.\(^{14}\) Tom, Lucy and Philip are part of Maggie's past (Stephen Guest, as his last name implies, is only a passing episod in her life).\(^{15}\) They are part of her childhood and memories to which she is attached with inalienable ties. By renouncing Stephen, Maggie is prompted by her loyalty to her past and the people she loves the most.

Throughout the novel Maggie makes repeated references to her past and the feelings she attaches to it:

Perhaps not, ' said Maggie simply; 'but then, you know, the first thing I ever remember in my life is standing with Tom by the side of the Floss. ... (p. 373)\(^{16}\)

It is not so, Stephen--I'm quite sure that is wrong. ... If the past is not to bind us, where can duty lie we should have no law but the inclination of the moment.\(^{17}\) (p. 585)
George Eliot also describes Maggie's attachment to her childhood memories: "Her tranquil, tender affection for Philip, with its root deep down in her childhood, and its memories of long quiet talk" (p. 502).

Maggie, however, is not an anomaly in her environment. Both her father and Tom are attached to the old premises:

But the strongest influence of all was the love of the old premises where he had run about when he was a boy, just as Tom had done after him. The Tullivers had lived on this spot for generations. (p. 323)

George Eliot herself was very loyal to her past. She cherished her childhood memories and therefore sympathized with and shared those feelings she attributes to Maggie and Tom regarding their past:

Life did change for Tom and Maggie; and yet they were not wrong in believing that the thoughts and loves of these first years would always make part of their lives. (p. 45)

There is no sense of ease like the ease we felt in those scenes where we were born, where objects became dear to us before we had known the labour of choice. (p. 184)

George Eliot's attitude to the past, however, is not a purely sentimental one. In addition to the feelings it aroused in her, the past was a matter of belief and reverence for which she found support in Auguste Comte whom she greatly admired and who greatly influenced her. In one of her letters she wrote: "No one has more clearly seen the truth that the past rules the present, lives in it, and that we are but the growth and outcome of the past." (18) Comte himself had written: "In accordance with the principle laid down at the beginning of this work, we have already seen, in various signal instances, that the chief progress of each period, and even of each generation, was a necessary result of the immediately preceding state." (19)

Therefore, if Maggie were to take Stephen away from Lucy she would be betraying this past: she would be cutting herself off from the most sustaining influence in her
life. It is true that Maggie's past was not an ideally happy one, but, nevertheless, it provided her with a haven in which she enjoyed her father's protection and love, her mother's caring, and Tom's companionship and love. There was no Gothic curtailment of her freedom to wander and enjoy an idyllic relationship with Nature: the trees, the flowers, the birds, the water as well as her dear Mill. It was an idyll in which the Evil one was only referred to but never encountered face to face, and Maggie was intelligent enough to realize that it was her father's exaggerated hatred for the lawyer Wakem that made him impart that title to him. Contrary to what Susan Fraine says, she has more freedom than Tom on whose young shoulders are laid many responsibilities which not only hamper his freedom but also stunt his emotional growth. Moreover, there were no betrayals of trust nor treachery in that pastoral setting and Wordsworthian communion with Nature. If she occasionally rebelled against her environment (her naughtiness to her mother, her escape to the gypsies, her cutting her own hair and her throwing Lucy into the mud), her rebellion amounted to no more than minor acts of impulsive childhood. But stealing her cousin Lucy's fiancé (though informally engaged, everybody regarded Stephen Guest as Lucy's fiancé) and betraying Philip would be a major act of rebellion. She would be the Evil one in that pastoral setting which she has cherished the most. It is therefore her loyalty to this past that determines what decisions she takes in the present and in the future. As Thomas Pinney has aptly remarked: "At the moment of her great crisis of decision, she recognizes that her early affections must determine the conduct of her life."  

Closely allied with George Eliot's conservatism and attachment to the past, is her strong belief in determinism. She always sought causes that would explain or justify her characters' actions. She put her characters in such a framework as would make their future choices easy to anticipate.

George Eliot's detailed description of Maggie and Tom's environment and attachment to the earth, the Mill and the Floss, and her deterministic approach to the development of events makes of The Mill on the Floss a naturalistic novel. In a
naturalistic setting there is no room for romantic or fairy-tale escapes from the realities of life. The most insignificant and sometimes repellent facts of everyday life are insisted upon. Thus George Eliot takes great pains in portraying the minutest details in the lives and habits of the Gleggs, the pullets, the Deanes and the Tullivers. Accordingly, the Dodsons are shown to be efficient and practical, but also narrow-minded, pharisaic and incapable of generosity or warm feelings. All their emotions have been frozen into objects such as locks, linen, keys, closets, and pans. Mr Tulliver, on the other hand, is impulsive, stubborn, rash and miscalculating. Although he can be generous and warn, he is also proud and unforgiving. His conversation is mainly about lawyers whom he considers rascals and would like his son Tom to avenge him on them. Mrs Tulliver's world does not go beyond her "household gods" which are her silver, her china and her linen. St Ogg's is depicted as malicious, narrowly provincial and hopelessly conventional. Mr Wakem, the lawyer, instead of felling pity for this victim's wife, makes use of the information she foolishly provides him with in order to dispossess Mr Tulliver of his beloved Mill and complete his revenge on him. There is no implausible transformation of Wakem into a forgiving and benign benefactor. The gypsies whom Maggie has believed to be strange and mysterious and, therefore, romantic are shown for what they really are: dishonest, dirty and greedy, and anything but romantic. Tom sacrifices his youth and love (for Lucy) in order to restore his family's good name. He works day and night until he gradually manages to pay off his father's creditors and get the Mill back. There is, however, no sudden rise in his career, but slow and strenuous effort which, little by little, kills every sense of the joy of life in him and transforms him into a selfrighteous pedant. There are thus no Dickensian philanthropists in The Mill on the Floss, nor Cinderella-like escapes from harsh reality.

Accordingly, we cannot expect George Eliot to allow Maggie an easy way out of her poverty and misery by letting her marry Stephen Guest. Such a solution would be blatantly inconsistent with the naturalism of the novel and her own conservatism.
which she was not unwilling to avow: "The bent of my mind is conservative."(22) Nor would Maggie, in view of her attachment to the past and her childhood ties, be able to choose Stephen Guest over Tom, Lucy and Philip. This, however, does not mean that Maggie is like a robot deprived of all freedom of choice and acting only according to those facts (or data) fed into her.

When Maggie receives Stephen's letter in the chapter entitled "The Last Conflict," she has been lonely and forlorn. Tom had rejected her and St. Ogg's had condemned her. Stephen can rescue her from her misery and bring light into the darkness of her life (p. 632) She has to summon all her determination and courage in order to resist the temptation of calling him to her. By mustering all the determination she is capable of and choosing to suffer instead of to live happily with Stephen, Maggie is exercising her freedom of will. She is, it is true, helped by both the memories of the past, "the long past came back to her, and with it the fountains of self-renouncing pity and affection, of faithfulness and resolve," (p. 633), and the words of Thomas a Kempis who had taught her renunciation; nevertheless, the final decision to be faithful to Lucy and Philip, and, by implication, to be worthy of Tom through her honorable action, is all her own. The price she pays and the effort she makes in order to be able to pay it are indicative of a choice freely made even if made after considering past ties and relations.

Commenting on Maggie's decision to renounce Stephen Guest, Joan Bennett has written:

Maggie can refuse to go forward to marriage with Stephen and the enjoyment of a selfish happiness; but she cannot save Lucy and Philip from the misery of knowing that they are not loved. (23)

This, however, would be putting too heavy a burden on Maggie's shoulders and saddle her with a responsibility beyond a mortal's power. Maggie recognizes that she has made a mistake by letting her feelings carry her away. She has finally come to accept, in the words of David Carroll, "the truth of the novel's realism that there is
always a discrepancy between the inner desire and the outward fact."(24) she repents, renounces Stephen and goes back to St. Ogg's fully aware of the humiliations she will be subjected to. She believes she has done the morally right thing. If Lucy then chooses to continue to be miserable after her renunciation of Stephen, that is Lucy's own seeking. Maggie cannot be expected to dispense universal peace and happiness. Moreover, subsequent events show that Joan Bennett's fears are not justified. Philip's letter to Maggie shows he understands the situation and does not blame her; that, on the contrary, he continues to derive strength from his love for her and does not suffer because of what has happened (pp. 516-19). Lucy, on her part, visits Maggie and shows she also understands what Maggie has gone through and that she herself has got over her suffering. She even admits that Maggie has proved herself morally superior to her in her decision to give up Stephen: "Maggie,' she said, in a low voice, that had the solemnity of confession in it, you are better than I am. I can't." (p. 628). Lucy is neither miserable nor resentful.

The second part of the ending which deals with Maggie's triumphant rescuing of Tom, their final reconciliation and subsequent drowning together has also been severely criticized. Thus Walter Allen has written that George Eliot has spoiled her novel by succumbing to the temptation of using the river to provide a tragic ending and that she "took the easy way and substituted for a genuine resolution a cliche-ending from the stock of Victorian fiction."(25) F.R. Leavis believes that in using the Flood, George Eliot was indulging in day-dreaming and wishful thinking: "It is only the dreamed-of perfect accident that gives us the opportunity for the dreamed-of heroic act."(26)

Joan Bennett is of the opinion that the "inflated melodramatic style of the close" is indicative of the "relaxation of the author's serious concern with the characters."(27) Barbara Hardy objects "to the bad faith that contrasts so strongly with the authenticity of everything that comes before."(28) And, finally, Neil Roberts finds in the Flood and the reconciliation between brother and sister an "element of personal involvement"(29) on the part of George Eliot.

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When dealing with the tragic ending of the novel, we have to realize, however, that there are two issues involved. The first issue touches upon George Eliot’s way of structuring her novel and her conception of Maggie’s character. The second issue involves her choice of a tragic ending for her heroine, a choice which is the result of both her view of society and the role that an individual like Maggie can play in it, and her aesthetic sense of what a proper ending for her heroine should be. I will address myself to each issue in turn.

Critics have already found several references to floods and drowning by floods throughout the novel so that it becomes clear that George Eliot was preparing the reader for such an ending. The Flood of the Floss is therefore no fortuitous occurrence. Because George Eliot has subtly incorporated several references to floods and premonitions of Maggie and Tom’s drowning into the structure of the novel, we are not surprised when the flood comes. We are dismayed and apprehensive but not surprised.

There are many references to tragedy in *The Mill on the Floss*. First of all there is the reference to Maggie’s tragic flaw: her impulsiveness and rashness which she has inherited from her father: “For Maggie rushed to her deeds with passionate typical” (p. 75). Although she does not possess the greatness or importance characteristic of a typical tragic heroine, George Eliot enhances her status by comparing her to Ajax, a Greek hero also famous for his impetuosity and rashness: “She sat as helpless and despairing among black locks as Ajax among the slaughtered sheep” (p. 76).

There are other references to the tragic possibilities in Maggie’s character: “There were passions at war in Maggie at that moment to have made a tragedy” (p. 122). Moreover, George Eliot was also aware that tragedy did not result solely from inner weaknesses, but external circumstances must combine with the inner defects in order for the tragedy to occur. Her shrewd remarks on Hamlet in the novel (pp. 490-91) indicate that the tragic course she had chartered for Maggie was deliberate and not an "abrupt" ploy she had to resort to in order to extricate herself from Maggie’s situation and problems.
Therefore, she carefully set up all the external circumstances that would frustrate Maggie and would, when combined with her impulsive nature, lead to tragedy. Her other was, though, kind, of very limited understanding and, after her husband's bankruptcy, she became almost imbecilic. Her father was warm and loving but impulsive, reckless, stubborn, and proud, which qualities led to his ruinin himself and his family and bringing poverty and humiliation to every member of his household, including himself. (31) Tom, whom Maggie adored, was self-righteous, narrow and callous. The aunts, though firm believers in standing by their kindred, were incapable of feeling sympathy or understanding Maggie's yearnings for a more fulfilling kind of life. Philip Wakem who loved Maggie was the son of her father's arch-enemy. Finally, Stephen Guest who could have rescued her from her environment, was informally engaged to her cousin Lucy. Considering what she wrote about the external circumstances which brought about Hamlet's tragedy (i.e., if his father had lived to a good old age and his uncle had died when very young, Hamlet would have married Ophelia and the play would have had a happy ending), George Eliot could very well have made Stephen free to marry Maggie; i.e., she could have given him a friend who possessed all the qualities that could make Maggie happy and have made him and Maggie fall in love with each other and then get married. It is thus clear that George Eliot was set on creating all kinds of external circumstances and obstacles that would, when combined with Maggie's impetuosity and yearning for a more fulfilling kind of life, bring about her tragedy.

It is also significant that most of the novels Maggie reads have either an unhappy ending for the heroine or show that "the blonde-haired women [Lucy is blonde] carry away all the happiness" (p. 405).

Mrs Tulliver herself prophesies a tragic ending for both Maggie and Tom: "they'll be brought in dead and drowned some day. I wish that river was far enough" (p. 125).
The title of the novel is also revelatory of the heroine’s tragedy. The Mill symbolizes her past, her memories and her affection—all of which influence her life. The Floss in her final destiny. The mill being on the Floss underscores the proximity of Maggie’s life to her eventual fate.\(^{(32)}\)

George Eliot’s conservatism and her admiration for Auguste Comte’s Positivism led her to believe that no individual, no matter how great, can bring about an abrupt change in the society in which he lives. Auguste Comte wrote: “In any case, human action is very limited, in spite of all aids from concurrence and ingenious methods; and it is difficult to perceive why social action should be exempt from this restriction, which is an inevitable consequence of the existence of natural laws.”\(^{(33)}\) So, in one of her letters she wrote: "The reason societies change slowly is because individual men and women cannot have their natures changed by doctrine and can only be wrought on by little and little."\(^{(34)}\) And in her review of *Natural History of German Life* by the German sociologist W. H. Richl she wrote that society and the individual can develop only by "the gradual consentaneous development of both."\(^{(35)}\)

George Eliot’s attitude to the struggle between the individual and society is also manifest in her review of a school edition of the Antigone of Sophocles. In her opinion, neither Antigone who represents "the impulse of sisterly piety which allies itself with reverence for the Gods," nor Creon who represents, "nor Creon who represents "obedience to the State," is absolutely right or wrong. George Eliot’s comment on the conflict of the play is especially relevant to Maggie's predicament vis-a-vis St. Ogg's which has condemned her for eloping with Stephen Guest and then returning empty-handed; i.e., unmarried:

Wherever the strength of man's intellect, or moral sense, or affection brings him into opposition with the rules which society has sanctioned, there is renewed the conflict between Antigone and Creon; such a man must not only dare to be right, he must also dare to be wrong—to shake faith, to wound friendship, perhaps to hem in his own powers.\(^{(36)}\)
St. Ogg's as portrayed by George Eliot is narrow, malicious and conventional. As George Levine has remarked: "Quite deliberately, she was creating a society which has not as yet moved beyond the egoism of man's animal beginings to the sympathy and benevolence which Feuerbach and Comte believed would grow out of egoism." But although this society also includes the Guests, the Deanes, the Gleggs, and the pullets who, in spite of all their deficiencies, are not without strengths and advantages (Stephen shows he appreciates music and art and so does Lucy; the Dodsons show family solidarity, honesty and self-reliance) on the whole, it is portrayed as hypocritical, uncharitable and materialistic.

Accordingly, in her collision with this society of which Tom, with his brutal morality, narrow understanding, and self-righteous rectitude, is now the most important representative, Maggie can have no hope for sympathy or forgiveness. Since she is tied to this society--and to Tom above everything else-- with inalienable ties, she cannot go anywhere else. Maggie, as we know, needs to be loved and, therefore, for her to continue to live like a pariah in this society which ostracizes and despises her, and which she, as an individual, cannot change, would merely prolong her misery. Without love, music, art, and books, Maggie's existence would be like a life-in-death. Ian Adam has written:

But it is quite clear that he [Philip] is a rarity in St Ogg's. There is undoubtedly no simple way for Maggie to find the wholeness and fulfilment she seeks but the novel strongly suggests that one stage in that quest would be to find a milieu in which enlightenment like Philip's is more widely dispersed. (380)

The point is, however, where can Maggie find the kind of milieu which will offer her "wholeness and fulfilment"? In the first place, she is tied to her past. Secondly, having little money and little formal education, where can a girl in the Victorian age go to find "wholeness and fulfilment"? Maggie has already spent two miserable years away from St. Ogg's working as a teacher, and if she leaves St. Ogg's
it will not be for a much better or a more fulfilling position.

Furthermore, Maggie cannot change her society nor can she hope that it will change rapidly enough to be able to understand or sympathize with her. Society, according to Comte’s Positivism which is fully endorsed by George Eliot’s conservatism, changes only gradually and according to certain natural laws beyond the individual’s powers of manipulation. St. Ogg’s will therefore continue to be the pharisaic society it is for many years to come and will continue to disapprove of Maggie.

Maggie’s rescuing of her brother Tom is a characteristic spontaneous act by which she unwittingly shows she is superior to the entire St. Ogg’s society including Tom. There is no self-idealization on George Eliot’s part. Maggie has already shown that she could stand up to her aunts when they criticized her father and revealed their self-calculating, self-satisfied selfishness as well as their cupidity and arrogance. (p. 262). She has also shown that she could find fault with her brother when he rebuked her for her impulsiveness and that she was aware of his shortcomings. (pp. 424-25). Her typically-Tulliver rushing to rescue her brother (her father has rescued his sister and her husband from financial problems and possible bankruptcy) elevates her far above the Dodson clan and St. Ogg’s society. Her undiminished love for and loyalty to her cruel brother and her ability to forgive him are indicative of her generous nature and her superiority to her environment. Most of her previous impulsive acts were followed by disasters (cutting her own hair, escaping to the gypsies, throwing Lucy into the mud, upsetting Tom’s pagoda, rebuking her aunts when she and her family needed them most, her meetings with Philip, and her drifting with Stephen Guest). George Eliot finally allows her the one impulsive act that is completely devoid of selfishness and that, for this very reason, redeems all her past mistakes. This one act, however, is not granted to Maggie gratuitously. She has gone through a great deal of self-examination and self-torment which have eventually resulted in her becoming not only mature but also able to really give up happiness and joy in life.
Like Lear whose recovery is followed by a willingness to forgive all renounce everything (except Cordelia), a willingness which shows he is unfit for this world, Maggie's completely unselfish renunciation of happiness and impulsive rescue and forgiveness of her brother show she is unfit to live in a society such as St Ogg's which, like every other society, cannot change rapidly or abruptly. Even Maggie's tragic sacrifice will fail to produce an immediate change or appreciation. K. M. Newton is certainly right when he writes: "The highest form of tragedy, for her, is produced by being true to human values or ideals in the face of a resistant world that must inevitably triumph, causing human destruction and defeat."(39)

Accordingly, to continue to show Maggie living miserably in St. Ogg's destitute of happiness and hope would accomplish nothing. To portray, as Barbara Hardy wanted, "the struggle between the energetic human spirit and a limited and limiting society" would produce only a protracted and futile struggle and the end-result would be a naturalistic picture of unrelieved gloom showing Maggie dragging on her miserable stunted existence among the philistines. Therefore her reconciliation with Tom and his final realization of the meaning of life do not constitute a self-idealization on George Eliot's part, but a way of being fair to her heroine who, after all, has not committed an irredeemable sin to deserve to live such a miserable life in St. Ogg's to the end of her days. Maggie deserves a brief moment of happiness before her final exit from this world. Her life has been a series of frustrations, disappointments, humiliations and deprivations. To make her die without the slightest feeling of satisfaction, no matter how brief or fleeting, would not only show gratuitous cruelty on the part of the author who would thus have failed to do justice by her heroine, but would also be inconsistent with George Eliot's attitude to Maggie and St Ogg's. Maggie's yearnings and consequent mistakes do not lead to the sordid results that Emma Bovey's romantically ambitious yearnings bring on her. George Eliot shows that, until the end, Maggie's unselfishness and spontaneous generosity overcome whatever bitterness and selfregarding considerations she may be experiencing.
Moreover, to deny Maggie the slightest kind of achievement or satisfaction would be admitting the incontestable triumph of St Ogg's and what it stands for and the utter futility of the efforts of the individual who dares to oppose or be different from it, which is clearly inconsistent with George Eliot's beliefs.
Notes


[15] According to William Myers, Guest represents "more than adequately the superficially conscious yet profoundly conscious yet profoundly unknowing stream of modern life," and George Eliot could see "that Maggie's rejection of him expresses an uncompromising repudiation of a cultural modernity which was, and is, genuinely seductive." (The Teachings of George Eliot, p. 66). Nowhere in the novel, however, does George Eliot imply that in rejecting Guest, Maggie was rejecting modernity. Moreover, Guest is too inadequate to represent modernity.


[31] We should also note that there are several comparisons between Mr Tulliver and the typical tragic hero (pp. 159 and 238). Thus, as with his daughter, both external circumstances and his inner weaknesses combine to bring about his ruin.

George Eliot, who was more of a Lamarckian than a Darwininan, believed that the individual inherited many personality traits from his parents. (See Neil Roberts' George Eliot: Her Beliefs and Her Art, pp. 46-47). Thus Maggie inherits her father's impulsiveness and rashness. George Eliot, however, went perhaps even further than Lamarck when she made Maggie inherit a similar unhappy destiny and exposed her to adverse external circumstances.


[33] The Positive Philosophy, p. 469.


References


