8-4-1987

Maggie Tullier's Thorny Wilderness: George Eliot's use of Natural and Social Environment to Develop the Character of the Heroine in "The Mill on the Floss"

Nelle McFather
Longwood University

Maggie Tulliver's Thorny Wilderness:

George Eliot's Use of Natural and Social Environment

to Develop the Character of the Heroine

in *The Mill on the Floss*

by

Nelle McFather

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English at Longwood College, Farmville, Virginia, August 4, 1987.

Maggie Tulliver's Thorny Wilderness

by

Nelle McFather

Rosemary Sprague
Thesis Director (Dr. Sprague)

Michael C. Lund
1st Reader (Dr. Lund)

William L. Frank
2nd Reader (Dr. Frank)

4 August 1987
DATE

Acknowledgements

The author is especially grateful to Dr. Rosemary Sprague for her continuing encouragement, guidance, and inspiration during the past year, as well as for her invaluable contributions to the completion of this work. The author acknowledges also, with deep appreciation, Dr. Michael Lund's and Dr. Bill Frank's impeccable editorship, as well as their generosity with their time in agreeing to serve on the reading committee. A special, personal acknowledgement is additionally accorded Dr. Jack Jacques and his wife, Aleece, for immeasurable support during this year of graduate study.

Table of Contents

Introduction

During this writer's year of pursuit of the Master of Arts degree in English, the critical catechism has been applied to the work being studied in every class: "Does this work stand up to the test of time and, if so, why?"

The first part of the question can be glibly answered by the fact that the work in question is being read and taught in modern classrooms, or is included on a current suggested reading list. The second part of the question, the "why?" is more complex. What makes one "out-dated" novel gather dust on an obscure shelf while another draws in still another new generation of readers?

It is due to "universality of theme," we say; the "memorableness of the language"; the "unforgettable characters." Among these phrases, we intersperse the stock labels of "relevant" or "timely" or, even, "camp."

The novel we have chosen in our modest exercise of attempting to analyze one "why" of literary greatness has all of these requisites for continued literary extancy (except, perhaps, the "camp" designation). But The Mill on the Floss has something extra: it has a kind of magic that exists from the first time we enter Maggie Tulliver's theatre and know that we are going to be in on the morphosis of her character. We are going to be front-row spectators to the unfolding drama of a soul, played

against the back-drops of nature and society, and we are emotionally committed to watch until the last, tragic act.

But, wait; we are not mere "readers" at this performance; we are assigned the privileged role of "critics." Therefore, let us go on-stage and examine more closely these "back-drops" of environment and their place in the "fleshing-out," or developing of George Eliot's character, Maggie Tulliver.

Maggie Tulliver's Thorny Wilderness

Before we begin our consideration of the way George Eliot uses natural and social environment to develop the character of Maggie Tulliver in The Mill on the Floss, we should make it clear that we mean "develop" in the sense of "influencing" rather than in the sense of "determining." While there is no denying that George Eliot was aware of the influence of environment on character, Maggie's creator never shows environment as determining character. As Samuel Chew puts it in providing the consensus of critical opinions on this issue, to George Eliot, "the moral choice [is] everything" (1381).

In other words, so far as the author is concerned, the core of Maggie's character is in place when we first meet her. That does not change, however, our basic thesis: that the natural and social environment depicted in The Mill on the Floss provides the influential rhythms and shapes which make up one of English literature's most vibrant and unforgettable heroines.

We shall begin, as the author does in her book, with the natural surroundings of the young heroine. It is no accident that Maggie's physical landscape is etched with such authenticity, since Mary Ann Evans spent her

young years in a country setting not unlike the Tullivers'. As George Eliot, she never strays far from her "truth in nature," for which she was once praised by an eloquent fan (Cross 221). As in Adam Bede, the setting's detail is important and adds consistent versimilitude to Maggie's story. It anchors her character in believability from the start.

Mary Ann Evans's early memories at Griff House and in Coventry would serve for much of the rural flavor as they did in Adam Bede, but the physical setting for The Mill on the Floss had to be created. Ever insistent on realism in her novels, George Eliot searched for and found a real-life model. Thus, the old town of Gainsborough on the River Trent becomes St. Ogg's on the Floss and its tributary, the "Idle," becomes the "Ripple," upon whose bank the Dorlcote Mill would become the nucleus of Maggie's young life and later tragedy.

As many commentators have noted, the artery of Maggie's natural environment is the Floss river. Given significant attention in the introductory pages, it will be an important line tying Maggie's beginning and end together. It is a permanent part of her history, an undeniable part of her destiny. Not only does the river link the first and final parts of Maggie Tulliver's life;

it also maps her path along the way to her ultimate end.

Much has been written about the imagery and symbolism of the river in The Mill on the Floss. Perhaps too much. But no one could discount the large role water plays in this novel, although some otherwise positive Eliot commentators are critical of the emphasis. F. R. Leavis, for example, remarks on George Eliot's "fondness for using boats, water and chance" almost to a fault (244). Henry James, on the other hand, counterpoints, avowing himself as having "no objection to [seeing floods and earthquakes] made use of in novels" (52).

While not concerning ourselves with this issue per se, we maintain that no in-depth character study can be made of Maggie Tulliver without taking into account the importance of the Floss River. Barbara Hardy supports this statement, saying that "Maggie's vision of possibility is conveyed in the imagery of the river: its enchantment, its power, its isolation, its languor" (329). Knoepflmacher in his study of the flux of the novel and its characters refers to the river as "an emblem for the stream of change, the permanence of impermanence" (168).

Indeed, we join with these and other Eliot commentators in holding that not only is the Floss an important symbolic part of the novel's structure, it is

also the heroine's counterpart in nature. The river's rhythm is in harmony with Maggie's all of her life. During her childhood, it is playful and unthreatening. In her girlhood, it is seductive and languor-inducing, letting her float away with Stephen beyond the point of no return. In her days of opprobrium, it becomes dark and turbulent, like her own thoughts of self-hate and despair, finally destroying her.

Not just the Floss River but water in general is an important presence from an early point in the child's life. When we first are brought into Maggie Tulliver's safe little universe, we hear with her

> . . . the rush of the water, and the booming of the mill...like a great curtain of sound, shutting one out from the world beyond (The Mill on the Floss 10).

We feel, along with Maggie, that the mill is "a little world apart from her outside everydaylife" (32). But even the very young Maggie is sensitive to the undercurrents around her, as well as to her own undercurrents which will become the "stored-up force" of the final chapter. Unconsciously she offers a prolepsis of her destined tragedy. As she stands listening to the

> . . . resolute din, the unresting motion of the great stones,

> Maggie felt dim delicious awe as
> at the presence of an
> uncontrollable force . . . (32).

The "uncontrollable force" is a subconscious foreknowledge long before it assumes mastery of Maggie's heart in the last book.

The rhythm of water is almost always an underlying part of Maggie's life. Its rhythm is constant and permeating, an arterial, flowing presence in her natural background. But it might be productive here to dwell for a moment on the "rhythm" of Maggie's childhood environment. Rhythm is important in this novel. (John Blackwood must have realized this when he chose the name which, as Redinger points out, has the same poetical beat as the now-immortal Gone with the Wind [417]). It accounts for a great deal of the strength of the childhood portion of the novel. The cadence of the writing in the first book is that of childhood and nature put to lyrics; it is simple and lilting with occasional caesurae of crises. Olivier Elton tells us the first book scans beautifully (198). The river's rhythm is a permanent, pleasant undertow pulling us along with Maggie's story as it pulls Maggie along to her destiny.

Although she is lulled by the rhythm of her childhood surroundings, Maggie's mind is never dulled for

a moment. In her little sanctuary of Dorlcote Mill, safe in the comfortable rustic existence of the Tulliver family, young Maggie is attuning herself to everything that is different around her. This "'cuteness" (her father's word for her unusual intelligence) will sharpen as the "oppressive narrowness" of her social environment tightens during her development. The oneness with her environment will hone the sensitivity and curiosity to an edge that will cause much trouble later on.

But right now, we linger with Maggie in her childhood world and wonder what will happen to this elf-child who has already inserted her uniqueness into our consciousness.

W. C. Brownell once made the amusing (if cynical) remark that "In George Eliot's world nothing ever happens" (171). (Indeed, that may seem to be the case, since as one of Eliot's biographers suggests, the plot's primary importance is that it seems to evolve "naturally and inevitably from the characters and their surroundings" [Sprague, 153].) That may be why we are so conscious of the smallest nuances of change in the developing Maggie Tulliver in the early chapters of The Mill on the Floss.

Though nothing does happen in these early pages, except inside Maggie, we are not spared the sense of acute

vulnerability of this little girl. Part of her vulnerability stems from her strength of character, which seems at this point in its development to be acting as a magnet, drawing every negative reaction possible. The growing pains of her personality are exquisite and visible. Neither George Eliot nor the little Maggie hides these "growing pains" from us. We are privy to every inner pain. We hurt with the young heroine as she is exposed to rebuff after rebuff to her passionate, inquiring nature. We share her painful solitude in the attic in which she often vents her frustration on a mutilated doll. We hear her being frequently and always unfavorably compared to the antipodal, doll-like Lucy. (Is it possible that there was a very real prejudice in favor of blondes in the Nineteenth Century? We believe George Eliot and George Sand would agree there was. Perhaps that is why Maggie Tulliver is eventually allowed to reenact the ugly duckling legend with pretty, blonde Lucy finally taking a back-seat to her brown-skinned cousin!) The passionate, loving part of our Maggie is lidded time after time. Is it any wonder it roils to pressure-point, until it later tragically explodes when unqualified love is finally offered?

Rhetorical questions such as these arise as we

continue our modern reader's diatribe of indignation. We fume over Maggie's treatment by the Dodson-cloned Tom and become impatient with her for her unwavering adoration for him. We cringe with poor Maggie under the constant barrage of criticism from the aunts. From our Twentieth-Century platform informed by current child psychology, we suffer with the foreknowledge that Maggie's budding and fragile libido cannot possibly survive in its constant state-under-siege.

Hopeful safety valves are glimpsed in the child's nature. Maggie's imagination, the intelligent being's refuge for trauma, is rooted in nature and is developing steadily, fed by things around her which offer the comfort humans have withheld. The wings of creativity in this young person soar in the slightest breeze of an idea. Like little Lucy, we are fascinated that our small heroine can imbue even ear-wigs and fat toads with life histories. Nature whispers its secrets to Maggie and she translates them for the duller minds around her.

Child of nature she may be, but our Maggie has a normal share of quite human flaws. She lets Tom's rabbits die through sheer neglect. She is occasionally manipulative, self-centered, mercurial to a fault, too quick to love blindly and not well. Her sense of justice

leaves much to be desired; Maggie's most loyal admirer, the gentle Lucy, certainly does not deserve the mud-bath to which she is condemned as a result of Maggie's misplaced pique during the famous visit to Garum Firs.

These imperfections are not short-shrifted by the author, whose intimacy with many of these imperfections is not strictly coincidental. That Maggie's surroundings and early years garner much of their authenticity from her creator has already been pointed out. There are personal autobiographical hints as well. It is no secret that George Eliot is writing a great deal of herself into Maggie Tulliver. But we should be doing both the author and her character disservice by insisting they are one and the same throughout. Maggie's flaws belong to her. As John Cross warns us in his preface to Life of George Eliot, "Maggie's parallels with George Eliot are striking, but should not be taken as a 'true history'" (16). We therefore are put on guard about reading too much Mary Ann Evans into Maggie Tulliver. In fact, it is our suspicion that George Eliot may be making Maggie Tulliver a "there but for the Grace of God went I" character. (The author is fond of drawing morals from the results of impulsive behavior. Certainly the fate of Maggie is very different from that of the woman who created her.)

While we accept the author's kinship with her character, that empathetic closeness only concerns us insofar as it adds poignancy to the way in which George Eliot establishes Maggie's kinship with her surroundings. This is evident, for one example, in the role of animals in the early pages. We would not attempt to match the extensive studies that have been made of the animal imagery and its allusiveness to human characters in The Mill on the Floss. But we would point to the frequent appearance of such imagery and its allusiveness as being another important device in George Eliot's tying of Maggie's character to her natural environment. Maggie and young Tom, for instance, are described as being "still very much like young animals" (42).

Maggie does not run; she "trots." She and Tom rub noses like two young ponies to show affection. Maggie's dark hair is like a mane, forever falling into her eyes and being tossed back. Her high spirits are those of an untamed woods creature. If the traditionally pretty Lucy is a soft kitten, our Maggie is a spirited colt.

Chapter Five of Book One is filled with the uninhibited activities of "young animals," adding to the pastoral attractiveness of this part of the novel. The rhythm of childhood and nature are in full swing in these

passages. The narrator goes into near fits of lyrical retrospect:

> We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in it---if it were not the earth where the same flowers come up again every spring that we used to gather with our tiny fingers as we sat lisping to ourselves on the grass---the same hips and haws on the autumn hedgerows---the same redbreasts that we used to call "God's birds" . . .
>
> . . . such things as these are the mother tongue of our imagination, the language that is laden with all the subtle inextricable associations the fleeting hours of our childhood left behind them (Mill 44-45).

It would be easy to project wistful nostalgia onto the undertones of these pages. In fact, George Eliot once wrote to Miss Sara Hennell that "Childhood is beautiful only in retrospect; to the child it is full of deep sorrows, the meaning of which is unknown" (Cross 64). Undoubtedly, Eliot had Maggie Tulliver as well as herself in mind when she penned this sad little line.

While Maggie Tulliver has no equal in our eyes as the most memorable of the literary children of nature, another famous sprite springs into our mind. The intruder

is none other than the jewel-bright little Pearl in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, published in 1850. The sisterhood of this pair in character and circumstances is fleeting but striking enough to bear brief investigation. In fact, it should not surprise us that there are similarities in the two novels and some of the characters. Though Hawthorne parallels are more noticeable in Eliot's Adam Bede (as pointed out by F. R. Leavis in the preface to that novel), The Mill on the Floss holds quite a few.

We remember, for instance, Maggie's active imagination, which serves, as Pearl's does, as a refuge against the cruelties of reality. How similar Pearl's magical transformation of her would-be bleak world is to that of the little English girl's:

> The unlikeliest materials---a stick, a bunch of rags, a flower---were the puppets of Pearl's witchcraft, and, without undergoing any outward change, became spiritually adapted to whatever drama occupied the stage of her inner world. Her one baby-voice served a multitude of imaginary personages, old and young, to talk withal. The pine trees, aged, black and solemn, and flinging groans and other melancholy utterances on the breeze, needed little transformation to figure as Puritan elders; the ugliest weeds of the

> garden were their children, whom Pearl smote down and uprooted, most unmercifully. It was wonderful, the vast variety of forms into which she threw her intellect, with no continuity, indeed, but darting up and dancing, always in a state of preternatural activity, soon sinking down as if exhausted by so rapid and feverish a tide of life, and succeeded by other shapes of a similar wild energy (The Scarlet Letter 84-85).

The impish Pearl, too, shares with Maggie the habit of personifying nature. Maggie has made the old mill her warm friend, almost humanizing it. Pearl, when she is walking with her mother in the forest, talks to the babbling brook as though it were a person. Not only that, we are also told that

> Pearl resembled the brook, inasmuch as the current of her life gushed from a wellspring as mysterious, and had flowed through scenes shadowed as heavily with gloom (159).

The parallel in kinship with nature does not stop there. Both children stand out from those around them like colorful Matisse figures mistakenly cast in Holbein backgrounds.

Look at little Pearl, a crimson drop against her gray Puritan background:

> Her nature appeared to possess

> depth, too, as well as variety; but...it lacked reference and adaptation to the world in which she was born (81).

Like the young Maggie, Pearl stands out in brazen color in her surroundings and does not fit into the native mold.

There are other interesting parallels in George Eliot's novel to that one produced close in time across the sea. As they concern the growing up Maggie, we shall look at them in their proper time. Right now, let us join Maggie in one last childish act: that of pushing poor Lucy into the mud and standing there glaring at us like a "small Medusa with her snakes cropped." It is a sight which leaves us uncertain as to whether to laugh or cry. But we should probably opt for the latter, suspecting as we do by now that Maggie's emery character, already abrasive to the outside world, is already dooming her to a series of troubles.

While not all her griefs arise from conflicts with her world, the troubles cause devastation to her sensitive soul. Childhood worries at Dorlcote Mill will fade by comparison as, with Mr. Tullliver's stubbornesss at its reins, misfortune will overtake the Tulliver family.

The "Downfall" comes, bringing with it unbearable

weights to rest on sapling-slender shoulders. Maggie is forced to grow up, compelled to leave mainly carefree summers and face the harsh cold winters of new responsibilities. With the downfall, there is no longer time for

> ...that child-like spelling-out of what nature has written, which gives its poetry to peasant life (Mill 267).

In his illness and despair, Mr. Tulliver recognizes what Maggie has taken for granted all along: the mill is basic to Tulliver well-being and happiness. Sadly, he tells his old mill-hand, "'The old mill 'ud miss me, I think, Luke. There's a story as when the mill changes hands, the river's angry...'" (261).

But, of course, it will be Maggie, not her father, who suffers the river's anger at the end.

For now, however, the girl's life has taken on drab drama. Maggie's existence is cheerless, anchorless, full of gloomy deprivation. There are no books, no music, no pleasures. Even her joy in nature, in the changing of the seasons, is gone. One is reminded of George Eliot's last journal entry after Mr. Lewes's death: "Here I and sorrow sit" (Cross 280) when we find the girl endlessly staring out the windows, often moved to tears without

provocation. We see her suffering from listless loneliness and

> . . . utter privation of joy, which had deepened with advancing spring. All the favorite out-door nooks about home, which seemed to have done their part with her parents in nurturing and cherishing her, were now mixed up with the home-sadness, and gathered no smile from the sunshine (Mill 280).

Along with Tom, she has been forced to take her place in the "real" world. With her father's financial and physical ruin, she feels she will never again see

> ...the sunshine undimmed by remembered cares. They had entered the thorny wilderness, and the golden gates of their childhood had for ever closed behind them (192).

In picking her way through the "thorny wilderness" of life after the downfall, Maggie finds herself on an unexpected new by-way. It leads her into the "valley of humiliation," architected by Thomas a Kempis. She, as George Sand and George Eliot in real life did, falls into what Cate calls the "sacred sickness" (66), a sort of spiritual anorexia nervosa which apparently habitually struck Nineteenth-Century, above-average-in-intelligence young women at or around the age of puberty.

The world around her no longer penetrates the spiritual cocoon in which she seals herself. All she needs are her three religious books which fill her mind

> . . . with a continual stream of rhythmic memories; and she was too ardently learning to see all nature and life in the light of her new faith, to need any other material for her mind to work on (288).

It is a quiet time in Maggie's life, a period during which she is set apart from her environment entirely. Maggie has transversed the small rapids in her river and has come to a calm stretch on which she will float serenely for a while. The inner turmoils that have marked her growing up have been temporarily anesthetized by spiritual opiates. Philip Wakem will come along soon and engineer the inevitable withdrawal and help Maggie re-enter the real world, but let us save the beautiful time in the Red Deeps for later.

We will watch Maggie's growth undergoing further boosts from her natural environment, but right now it is a good time to stand back and observe another kind of outside influence. While Maggie is serenely shut off in her mental cloister, at peace with herself and her family for perhaps the first time, let us look at the other, sharper tine of the two-pronged environmental influence in

Maggie's life.

Without question, the social environment of the young Maggie has had a heavy influence on her character. But before we measure this influence, let us recall an interesting observation George Eliot once made about society. To her old teacher, Miss Lewis, she once wrote,

> We should aim to be like a plant in the chamber of sickness---dispensing purifying air even in a region that turns all pale its verdure, and cramps its instinctive propensity to expand. Society is a wide nursery of plants, where the hundred decompose to nourish the future ten, after giving collateral benefits to their contemporaries destined for a fairer garden (Cross 39).

(Joan Bennett keyed a splendid critical piece off George Eliot's basic "nursery" metaphor, contending "It is the growth of the plant, the gradual unfolding of characters in its environment, that compels attention, not the mere concentration of events" [227], reiterating Sprague, who has been quoted earlier.)

And what kind of "nursery" is the one in which George has greenhoused her immortal heroine? In a word, it is one filled with little uniform plants of the genus Dodson or like species. In this society's "nursery," a rare plant like Mary Ann Evans or Maggie Tulliver would

stand out as noticeably as a rose in a pea-patch, which is exactly what happens to Maggie in her social environment. She is never a part of it; she is apart from it.

Unfortunately, her isolation does not lead her to become an independent character like Dorothea in Middlemarch. (Perhaps Dorothea is a lucky beneficiary who is nourished by the aforementioned nursery's decomposition!) This later, stronger Eliot heroine stands apart from her peers as Maggie does, but Dorothea makes her own plans (often outlandish ones) for her life, while Maggie lets society plan for her.

But, then, Dorothea's human environment is not so domineering as poor Maggie's. Let us face it: George Eliot is not always gentle in peopling the worlds of her characters, especially in her early novels. However, we must remember that society had not always been gentle with her. She once wrote to Charles Bray about her frustration with the hypocrisy around her: "I feel that society is training men and women for hell" (Cross 97). In a later letter, this time to Mrs. Bray, she spoke of her annoyance with a lecturing clergyman, describing with her usual dry humour

> . . . those Caribs who by dint of
> flattening their forehead, can
> manage to see perpendicularly above

> them without so much as lifting their heads . . . . There are some good people who remind me of them (74).

Mary Ann Evans quite definitely was surrounded by "some good people" such as George Eliot was describing above, just as the fictional Maggie is. Yet Mary Ann's world was not odious to her. As George Eliot, she proves this over and over again by recreating copies of her own social environment, much as she recreates her early physical surroundings, in book after book. In fact, that world may have provided the roots of her genius. According to John Cross, "the very monotony of her life at Griff, and the narrow field it presented for observation of society added immeasurably to intensity..." (18). Certainly, the narrowness of the environment which Mary Ann Evans escaped is brought back time after time in her works. With Dorothea of Middlemarch, new acceptance is achieved. That more mature, more fully independent heroine is able to see things as they are and place responsibility on her social environment rather than on herself as Maggie does. Dorothea

> . . . was disposed . . . to accuse the intolerable narrowness and the purblind conscience of the Society around her . . . (Middlemarch 46).

But poor Maggie never progresses to the point of being critical of those who are influencing her; she is trapped in the dark side of George Eliot's world as Mary Ann Evans never allowed herself or Maggie's successively stronger successor, Dorothea, to be. In literarily indulging what Leslie Stephens calls her "pathetic yearning for the past" (140), the author weaves for immortality the social fabric of Maggie's environment and keeps Maggie entangled in its steel threads until her death.

And what is the social "fabric" of Maggie's social world? The human warp and woof must certainly be recognized as the famous ant-like Dodsons, the less-regulated Tullivers on a minor influential basis, and the community of St. Ogg's.

We make no apology for turning first to the incomparable Dodsons, who are an environment all by themselves. As they demand, let us peek first down the neat corridors of Dodson 'ways.'

> There were particular ways of doing everything in that family: particular ways of bleaching the line, of making the cowslip wine, curing the hams and keeping the bottled gooseberries; so that no daughter of that house could be indifferent to the privilege of

> having been born a Dodson, rather than a Gibson or a Watson . . . . And it is remarkable that while no individual Dodson was satisfied with any other individual Dodson, each was satisfied, not only with him or her self, but with the Dodsons collectively . . . . Mrs. Tulliver was thankful to have been a Dodson, and to have one child who took after her own family, at least in his features and complexion, in liking salt and in eating beans, which a Tulliver never did (Mill 47-48).

This, then, is the world in which Maggie Tulliver must confine her quicksilver mind and un-Victorian ways. It is within the first few pages of the novel that we learn what it is to be an intelligent little girl in a narrow-minded household and community peopled with Dodsons and Not-Dodsons. Maggie is already in the process of learning what it is like when we first meet her. As Bushnell puts it,

> Maggie recognizes only too painfully the limitations placed upon her from outside, the inability of conventions and stereotypes to allow for her uncharacteristically wide-ranging aspirations (382).

Being a girl is the first strike against her. Being a girl with a " 'cute" mind, a hoydenish appearance and strong independent spunk strikes Maggie out by Dodson

and St. Ogg's social standards.

We learn from several of her letters to John Blackwood that George Eliot was shocked at many readers' and critics' strong dislike of the Dodsons, who typify the narrowminded society which eventually will strangle young Maggie. Indeed, she would have been distressed to hear critics such as Mr. Dallas refer to Aunt Glegg, Aunt Pullet and Mrs. Tulliver as "those odious Dodsons." Nor would she have agreed with him that they represented ". . . a world of pride, vainglory, and hypocrisy, envy, hatred and malice, and all uncharitableness . . . (8). She once wrote to John Blackwood, ". . . I am so far from hating the Dodsons myself, that I am rather aghast to find them ticketed with such very ugly adjectives" (Cross 299).

We find Mr. Dallas and other Dodson haters unfair in singling the family out for literary scorn. In our opinion, the Dodsons represent the stilted (but solid) is-ness of the mid-Victorian family, with its reliance on the dominant values of custom, duty, family pride and propriety. The fact that young Maggie does not fit into the proper Dodson mold of primness, obediance and docility befitting a suitable young girl in Nineteenth Century England is no more the Dodsons' fault than it is Maggie's. While Maggie Tulliver is more a victim than a product of

her environment, the perpetuators of the victimization are largely innocent of any crime against her. That the Dodsons contribute to the victimization cannot be denied, but it is an innocent collaboration with the times they live in, and we think George Eliot means us to realize this.

What of this "victimization" of Maggie Tulliver by the social environment into which she is born? We have already hinted that her immediate family and attendant relatives are the closest culprits. Though we generally think of the Dodson clan as a unit, a solid wall enclosing Maggie's allotted space, we should occasionally take them less collectively.

Maggie's mother, for instance, a cornerstone in her child's life, is probably the most negative human influence in Maggie's environment (next to Tom). She spends the major part of the book wringing her hands over Maggie, totally dismayed by this brown-skinned antithesis to her own plump, fair Dodson-ness. She hardly has a relationship at all with her daughter beyond continually trying to smoothe the ravages of wild-blown hair and rumpled pinafore and wishing Maggie were more like the princess-perfect Lucy. Thus, Maggie is denied even the love-blindness of most mothers. Maggie is a far cry from

being a Dodson and therefore beyond the ken of her Dodson-to-the-bone mother. Bessie Tulliver, by the same token, is hardly the appropriate role model for a girl like Maggie. If she contributes anything to her daughter's character, it is weakness by example.

Mr. Tulliver is not much of an improvement, beyond offering his daughter more affection than she gets from anyone else. But since this affection is generally of the nature of pats on the head that his dog might get from performing amusing tricks, it does little besides develop the admirable loyalty and sense of duty that Maggie will exhibit later.

Brother Tom's withholding of affection, his chauvinism and Dodsonese traits have devastating influence on his sister's youthful development, mainly of a negative kind. We need only to review his projection for Maggie's future when he is feeling smugly pleased with her (for a change):

> . . . all girls were silly . . . .
> Still he was fond of his sister,
> and meant always to take care of
> her, make her his housekeeper, and
> punish her when she did wrong (43).

It is difficult at times for us to accept that Maggie is a full-blooded member of the family, especially

as she gets a little older. Some of the Dodson creeds are totally alien to her character. For example, the notorious Dodson materialism is not only incomprehensible to Maggie; it is despicable. But we must be more fair than Maggie is capable of being. We realize that the Dodson materialism does not spring from greed; it springs from the heart. It is part of the Dodson character.

Obviously, Maggie's character is not influenced by this beyond a rebellion against its shallowness. When Bessie is piteously bemoaning the loss of all her fine china and linens after the downfall, Maggie flares up at her:

> "Mother, how can you talk so? as if you cared only for things with your name on, and not for what has my father's name too---and to care about anything but dear father himself!---when he's lying there, and may never speak to us again" (202).

The chapter in which the aunts (and their spouses) deal with their sister's downfall is a masterfully satirical indictment of the Dodson materialism. But materialism takes second place to Dodson loathing of public humiliation. After quibbling with Aunt Pullet over which of poor Bessie's "things" are to be saved, Aunt Glegg makes her positive kind of statement, revealing to

Maggie (and us) where family disgrace sits in the line-up of Dodson disasters.

> "As to disgrace o' the family," said Mrs. Glegg, "that can't be helped wi' buying teapots. The disgrace is, for one o' the family to ha' married a man as has brought her to beggery. The disgrace is, as they're to be sold up. We can't hinder the country from knowing that" (211).

On the other hand, we must be fair to the family who somehow never gain the reader's compassion as the equally picky, but doubly humorous and likeable Mrs. Poyser does in Adam Bede. At the bottom-line, Dodson characteristics, foreign as most of them are to Maggie's personality, are not all bad. When the girl is suffering her way through the "thorny wilderness" and has entered the relative peace and calm of the the "valley of humiliation," the narrator is given a chance to comment on the better Dodson qualities.

> A conspicuous quality in the Dodson character was its genuineness: its vices and virtues alike were phases of a proud, honest egoism, which had a hearty dislike to whatever made against its own credit and interest, and would be frankly hard of speech to inconvenient 'kin', but would never forsake or ignore them...(269).

In other words, the Dodsons are a breed which takes care of its own, sour though the dressing of advice that is provided along with the bread may be. As Maggie's personality develops and leads her into the conflicts with society and her own sense of morality, we see this basic Dodson loyalty more clearly. Aunt Pullet shows pride in the blossoming Maggie when she returns to St. Ogg's and sees to it that the girl is properly dressed and is presented to the "right" people. Aunt Glegg, when Maggie is disgraced later on, "burst forth in severe reproof of Tom for admitting the worst of his sister until he was compelled." After all,

> If you were not to stand by your "kin" as long as there was a shred of honour attributable to them, pray what were you to stand by? Lightly to admit conduct in one of your own family that would force you to alter your will, had never been the way of the Dodsons...(485).

And then, of course, the excellent Mrs. Glegg is the one who offers Maggie refuge later on, when even Tom has turned his sister out. Like Bob Jakin, Aunt Glegg has a core of goodness that will come out in times of pressure.

Mrs. Tulliver, even, weak though she may be in many

ways, comes through unexpectedly. She shows us what we believe George Eliot means to be the basic truth of the Dodsons: that one comes through no matter what when one's own has an ox in the ditch and needs help getting it out. Bessie Tulliver offers to leave Tom's house with Maggie, in fact does so, which is probably one of the largest sacrifices she has ever made for anyone.

But, unfortunately, Dodson support is not consistent enough nor of the spirit-nurturing variety that Maggie needs. It is not enough to buffer the girl against the social tides in whose currents Maggie is ill-equipped to swim. For the Dodsons are only a part of Maggie's overall social environment. The "general aspect of things at St. Ogg's" is a concentric enlargement of the Dodson social microcosm.

> It was a time when ignorance was much more comfortable than at present, and was received with all the honours in very good society, without being obliged to dress itself in an elaborate costume of knowledge; a time when cheap periodicals were not, and when country surgeons never thought of asking their female patients if they were fond of reading, but simply took it for granted that they preferred gossip...(122).

The spirit of St. Ogg's is embodied in the

wonderful, if sometimes difficult, person of Aunt Glegg who

> . . . had both a front and back parlour in her excellent house at St. Ogg's, so that she had two points of view from which she could observe the weaknesses of her fellow-beings, and reinforce her thankfulness for her own exceptional strength of mind (123).

While the aunts Glegg and Pullet, who embody much of the character of the human environment in which Maggie must be made or broken, are comfortable in their "superiority," their niece is unable to adjust to the community's shallowness. She is the rough diamond amongst the polished less-precious stones when she tries to fit into society upon her return. Maggie's awkwardness is noticeable from the first moment of debut into St. Ogg's version of the posh set. When Stephen Guest first compliments her, for instance, she is totally unprepared to join into society's games between men and women:

> Poor Maggie! She was so unused to society that she could take nothing as a matter of course, and had never in her life spoken from the lips merely; so that she must necessarily appear absurd to more experienced ladies, from the excessive feeling she was apt to throw into very trivial incidents (367).

She is as "transparent as a rock pool" and so free of the period's coquetry that it is a mark against her.

> . . . Maggie was so entirely without those pretty airs of coquetry which have the traditional reputation of driving gentlemen to despair, that she won some feminine pity for being so ineffective in spite of her beauty . . . there was no pretension about her (389).

Her dependency, nurtured by society's determination to weed out strength and individualism in its young females, is like a weight holding her down in the thin atmosphere of St. Ogg's . She cannot live without the approval which she has been conditioned to think of us as oxygen. Her happiness and lack of it wax and wane with the reactions of society to her. "When Maggie was not angry, she was as dependent on kind or cold words as a daisy on the sunshine or the cloud" (381). As Haight points out about George Eliot, the strong "need of being loved would always subdue" Maggie Tulliver (145). While she receives her share of admiration and compliments from the elite of St. Ogg's, the words are mixed with old prejudices toward women who show such striking difference from their ilk.

At the bazaar, for example, Maggie's popularity with the male population of St. Ogg's is not a credit to

her; it simply presupposes the unflattering opinion of her that will meet her adventure on the river with Stephen Guest later on.

> ...it is possible that the emphatic notice of various kinds which was drawn towards Miss Tulliver on this public occasion, threw a very strong and unmistakeable light on her subsequent conduct in many minds then present...(420).

But high society is not the instigator of the important turmoil that eddies in her soul prior to her disgrace. The downfall and Mr. Tulliver's subsequent illness bring Maggie to a painful collision point with her environment. She suffers, in the words of the narrator, from the "contrast between the outward and the inward" (233).

> Maggie, in her brown frock, with her eyes reddened and her heavy hair pushed back, looking from the bed where her father lay, to the dull walls of this sad chamber which was the centre of her world, was a creature full of eager, passionate longings for all that was beautiful and glad; thirsty for all knowledge; with an ear straining after dreamy music that died away and would not come near to her; with a blind, unconscious yearning for something that would link together the wonderful impressions of this mysterious

> life, and give her soul a sense of home in it (233).

Maggie's soul can find no "sense of home" in her community, but affinity with the natural environment which has nurtured her brings occasional relief from the outward turmoil. Thus, we find her returning again and again to the Red Deeps, where her tender relationship with Philip Wakem deepens into disturbing beauty. Here, amongst the rocks and hollows, strolling through the chiaroscuro landscape, she is comfortable as she never is in her social environment.

The narrator points out the girl's "kinship with the grand Scotch firs" (291); Philip sees this, too, later on as the two begin meeting regularly in the Red Deeps:

> Then---the pity of it, that a mind like hers should be withering in its very youth, like a young forest-tree, for want of the light and space it was formed to flourish in! (301).

Though he is bemoaning Maggie's voluntary withdrawal from worldly pleasures, Philip might be referring to her narrowing environment which is tightening at a compounding rate with Maggie's entry into young womanhood. Nevertheless, through Philip's love and caring, Maggie regains a glimpse of freedom in the Red

Deeps. After he leaves her, she undergoes a new mental conflict:

> Here suddenly was an opening in the rocky wall which shut in the narrow valley of humiliation, where all her prospect was the remote unfathomed sky; and some of the memory-haunting earthly delights were no longer out of reach (318).

Safe in the soul-restoring shadows of the Deeps, Maggie allows herself the luxury of enjoying Philip's nurturing love for her. His homage to her is expressed in beautiful terms of nature; when he is begging her to allow him to paint her in this setting, he tells her

> "You will look like a tall Hamadryad, dark and strong and noble, just issued from one of the fir-trees, when the stems are casting their afternoon shadows on the grass" (319).

Though the Red Deeps keep Maggie insulated from much of painful reality and outer conflicts, they cannot protect her from the inner conflicts which her new vulnerability of the heart now brings in. Maggie's feelings for Philip, even as they intensify, are tempered by inner warnings. As she walks with Philip in the Red Deeps, dreading the pain of parting and still unable to

initiate it, she feels the foreshadowing of danger. The feeling is couched, as is often the case with Maggie, in terms of the river:

> It was one of those dangerous moments when speech is at once sincere and deceptive---when feeling, rising high above its average depth, leaves flood-marks which are never reached again (329).

The significant note of this passage is not its foreshadowing; it is the analogy of passion to the river. Still, foreshadowing does become a significant part of this section of Maggie's story. The narrator will not allow us to forget, not for a moment, even as Maggie enters the high society of St. Ogg's as Lucy's protege, that she is not meant for happiness. The river imagery which has flowed quietly throughout Maggie's history becomes stronger as the girl's relationship with Stephen Guest appears to be inevitable. The reader's imagination is not left to its own devices. We are ominously told that

> Maggie's destiny, then, is at present hidden, and we must wait for it to reveal itself like the course of an unmapped river: we only know that the river is full and rapid, and that for all rivers there is the same final home (391).

We are fairly certain by now that the "final home" referred to is not going to be a story-book romance castle, with Maggie living happily ever after with the man of her dreams. The river imagery is gathering momentum, rushing us towards the ending which can be only a sad one, no matter how it turns out for Maggie and her dreamed-of love.

As for the "man of her dreams" ---

In a way, Philip and Stephen represent the two extremes of environmental influence on Maggie. Philip, forever connected to ours and Maggie's vision of the Red Deeps, is a gentle refuge, as constant and loyal as nature itself. He has never exerted anything but positive influence on Maggie. As Maggie's mental and spiritual soul-mate, he suffers for her as he sees her trying to hide her escalating feelings for young Guest. How difficult it is for him to see his honest Maggie, who is as "open and transparent as a rock-pool" (433), being pulled into a vortex from which Philip knows she cannot escape. But he tries, always unselfishly, to save her from herself and from domineering outside influences.

Stephen Guest, on the other hand, represents all that is foreign to Maggie's natural character. He symbolizes all of the outward, negative influences of St.

Ogg's and crew. He is the seductive persuader, the spoiled prince of the Have's of the world, the dedicated sensualist who will have what he wants at whatever cost to anyone else. His milieu is the parlor, the frivolous soiree, the waltz. He would be as out of place in Maggie's Red Deeps as Maggie is at his haughty sisters' social events.

Even so, as identifiable as Stephen is with society, we still find many of Maggie's early reactions to the spoiled Stephen expressed in terms of nature. For instance, when the two have their first real encounter with their mutual passion in the Conservatory (not an insignificant meeting place, when we think of Maggie's closeness to all growing things), her fascination with his gaze makes her face turn up toward his "like a flower at the ascending brightness..." (430).

Inevitably, the river imagery comes into Maggie's cressendo-ing feelings for Stephen. When he rides like a demon from hell over to Aunt Moss's to persuade Maggie that she must become his and that their love is not "wrong," she wishes fervently that she could believe him and "need no longer beat and struggle against this current, soft and yet strong as the summer stream!" (438).

Her tortured wish for peace is, of course, as irresolute as her will where Stephen is concerned. It is lost in the tide of passion which sweeps her away. The phantasmagoric boat-ride lulls her resistance and she is over-powered by her own and Stephen's desires. Nature treacherously cooperates in the act of seduction:

> They glided along, Stephen rowing . . . on between the silent sunny fields and pastures, which seemed filled with a natural joy that had no reproach for theirs. The breath of the young, unwearied day, the delicious rhythmic dip of the oars, the fragmentary song of a passing bird heard now and then, as if it were only overflowing of brim-full gladness, the sweet solitude of a twofold consciousness that was mingled into one . . . (452).

Nature, inherently mingled with Maggie's character, is as much her enemy at this point as when it lures her into a major, tragic role in the river's final flood. It aids Stephen in his seduction. This scene is described with a mesmerizing sweetness that catches us up in the irresistibility to which Maggie succumbs:

> Behind all the delicious visions of these last hours, which had flowed over her like a soft stream and made her entirely passive, there was the dim consciousness . . . that the morrow must bring back the old life of struggle . . . . But now nothing was distinct to her:

> she was being lulled to sleep with
> that soft stream still flowing over
> her, with those delicious visions
> melting and fading like the
> wondrous aerial land of the west
> (458).

Later, when she renounces her love, Maggie is still in the semi-euphoric state in which nature has wrapped her against the harsh realities that await her in St. Ogg's. Her memories "made existence an easy floating in a stream of joy" (468). But grey dawn brings a cold awakening from the dream-like state. She sees herself and Stephen clearly now and cannot bear what she sees.

The "stream of joy" becomes a deluge of pain and recrimination upon her return to the environment whose rules she has broken. It is at this point that we begin to know how impossible it would be for Maggie Tulliver ever to be happy in St. Ogg's. Her soul is further from its sense of home than ever before.

We are reminded once more of Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter. We think of the Puritan village's unmerciful, blistering indictment of Hester Prynne. Perhaps George Eliot did not intend for us to compare her St. Ogg's folk with those in Dimmesdale's parish, but it is too tempting to resist. When Hester is led out onto the scaffold in the marketplace, babe in arms and

ignominious emblem blazing from her breast, the "good" people in her audience show no mercy:

> "Goodwives," said a hard-featured dame of fifty, "I'll tell ye a piece of my mind. It would be greatly for the public behoof, if we women, being of mature age and church members in good repute, should have the handling of such malefactresses as this Hester Prynne. What think ye, gossips? If the hussy stood up for judgment before us five, that are now here in a knot together, would she come off with such a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded? Marry, I trow not!" (Letter 50).

The more civilized people of St. Ogg's will not admit to wishing to see Maggie Tulliver hanged from the nearest ash tree to pay for her transgression, but they are, in their way, quite as vindictive. Maggie may as well have sewn a scarlet letter on her own bosom when she comes back from her aborted elopement.

> Maggie had returned without a trousseau, without a husband---in that degraded and outcast condition to which error is well known to lead; and the world's wife, with that fine instinct which is given her for the preservation of Society, saw at once that Miss Tulliver's conduct had been of the most aggravated kind. (Mill 477).

The "world's wife" is certainly accountable for the

way Maggie is held disgraced for what is, after all (as in Hester's case), half a "crime." But we have to be fair. Maggie herself, as Ermarth so brilliantly phrases it, has "collaborated in her own defeat" (594). She has adapted to the habit of putting herself in the wrong, has become used to putting herself in the village stocks.

What a very big difference there is in the grown-up Maggie and the little Maggie! The rebellious child who runs away to the gypsies in defiance of the punishment she knows awaits her at Garum Firs is a far cry from this meek miscreant who crawls back to take her medicine from the society which has made her ill. It is here that we see the final toll that Maggie's environment has extracted upon her soul. She has no shred of self-forgiveness left.

The fact is, Maggie Tulliver and society have been in a struggle of wills from the start and society has finally beaten hers down completely. How can Maggie do anything other than defer to her victors now? They have chipped away at her sense of self and self-trust over the years until there is nothing left but guilt and longing for the eternally-withheld approval. She is now worth less than nothing as a woman in her community's eyes and, thus, less than nothing in her own.

That sexist thread in the norms of the period is pulled too tightly through the fabric of Maggie's environment ever to be broken. It goes back a long way. Even Maggie's father worries about her being too "'cute" for her own good. Tom is a constant voice of chauvinism. Mrs. Tulliver nags the poor girl about her large arms and brown-skinned non-Dodson looks. Even Tom's early tutor has gotten in on the act, agreeing with Tom that girls cannot "do Euclid," or very much of anything requiring intelligence.

> 'They can pick up a little of everything, I daresay,' said Mr. Stelling. 'They've a great deal of superficial cleverness; but they couldn't go far into anything. They're quick and shallow' (151).

Poor Maggie. With the exception of Bob Jakin and Philip Wakem, no one in her social environment values brightness in a "gell." Her most sterling attributes, her quickness, her independence, her originality, must be kept locked away like Aunt Pullet's beloved chappeaux.

But we must be cautious here. We cannot foist our century's new outlooks on a woman who does not share them any more than we share hers. Unlike Ermarth and other feminist writers, we refuse to indict the Victorians for acting their age, nor do we scorn George Eliot for

accepting this. The author is a woman of her century, one who values feminine talent as well as writing talent. In many ways she is harder on her own sex than its opposite is. In fact, George Eliot wrote to Mrs. Peter Taylor that "woman does not yet deserve a much better lot than man gives her" (Cross 155). This reminds us that we must not project our modern anti-sexist views on a writer of that age, even a woman so courageous for her times as George Eliot. To the author of Maggie's tragedy, there is a very clear distinction between breaking moral laws and breaking society's laws. George Eliot herself, in choosing to live openly with George Henry Lewes, did not mean to disregard the "moral obligation of marriage," as Lord Acton stated quite a while ago, but to disregard the "social law of England" (157). Thus, she could, in the interest of her story, allow Maggie to break the moral law of hurting loved ones who did not deserve betrayal (i.e., Lucy and Philip), but she could not bring herself to allow her to do so without suffering the consequences. This was built into George Eliot's character; she saw to it that it became part of Maggie Tulliver's.

It is hard to accept many of Maggie's consequences in the light of today's standards for women, but perhaps it is hardest of all to accept Maggie's tragic end. It

seems so unfair that one who has struggled so hard to keep from drowning spiritually and emotionally should finally be claimed by the river she loves.

The critical controversy that has always surrounded the last book of The Mill on the Floss generally centers on the suddenness of the flood, on the lack of reader preparation for the ending for poor Maggie. Even George Eliot, in a letter to John Blackwood, admits that Maggie is too passive at points and "Secondly, that the tragedy is not adequately prepared" (Cross 384). But what else can she do with a heroine for whom living a pentitent life would be grimmer than death?

Perhaps influenced by George Eliot, Kate Chopin, a late nineteenth century writer who takes up the standard for independent-thinking heroines, has a similar dilemma with her Edna Pontellier in The Awakening which was published in 1899. Unable to project anything happier for her, Chopin has her end her own life by walking into the sea. (In this heroine's story, Maggie's symbolic river is exchanged for the symbolic ocean. As in The Mill on the Floss Maggie's river provides a continuum of unity, so does Edna Pontellier's sea cohere with her character in The Awakening.) There is uncanny similarity in Mrs. Pontellier's thoughts to Maggie's at the low-point of her

misery.

> Despondency had come upon her there in the wakeful night, and had never lifted. There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her, who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them. She was not thinking of these things when she walked down to the beach (The Awakening 188-189).

George Eliot could never have reconciled Maggie Tulliver's character with deliberate self-destruction. No more could we. But the hopelessness, as well as the helplessness, is there as with Chopin's character. George Eliot has Maggie in her deep misery think as despondently as Edna:

> Life stretched before her as one act of penitence, and all she craved as she dwelt on her future lot, was something to guarantee her from more falling: her own weakness haunted her like a vision of hideous possibilities, that made no peace conceivable except such as laying the sense of a sure refuge (Mill458).

Maggie is given that "sure refuge" by George Eliot who is, according to Redinger, "propelled toward that ending with the same inevitability that directed the progress of the flood itself..." (418). We think that she is being merciful to a character of whom she is fond, toward whom she has an author's compulsion to provide a definitive ending. Unlike Dorothea of Middlemarch, whose story follows our Maggie's, Maggie is too defeated, too tired of fighting to withstand the buffeting from the environment which has contributed to her weakened condition. The flood is a dramatic and symbolic way to remove Maggie from a world in which she can never live happily. George Eliot is too sharp a writer to miss the opportunity to combine symbolic justice with drama as set up by the flood.

The flood actually offers an appropriate arena for Maggie's last fight. Maggie almost welcomes this tangible enemy, against whom she can use her "stored-up force" as she can never do against those who have contributed to her misery. At first, she feels only calmness when she feels the cold water creeping up around her knees as the flood begins its rushing entry into Bob Jakin's house where Maggie is agonising over her future. John Bushnell

describes this moment in a dramatic way:

> . . . the river seems almost literally to beckon George Eliot's heroine from her confining room, to coax her into the boat which has crashed its bow through the window and remains lodged and waiting (378).

But then Maggie comes to life as no other character does in the catastrophe. It is as though this is the one time in her life when she is allowed to act from her own resources, use her own judgment about what is right, follow her own instincts. It is a chance for self-redemption, though Maggie has no such conscious motive for unleashing every pent-up energy to save Tom and, afterwards, Lucy Deane. The energizer is love, not hope for redemption. Maggie Tulliver is too noble a character at this point for that.

She is more at home on the river, in the rushing currents bearing along deadly dark masses, than she has ever been at home with those who have never understood her or allowed her to follow her heart. The flood offers a purposefulness to her existence that has been obliterated by recent events. It is a challenge that she accepts unquestioningly. Perhaps, too, it is a fulfillment of the unconscious death-wish that we know has been lying at the

bottom of her misery since the beginning of her state of social and self-inflicted ostracism. Maggie's thoughts when she is out in the raging river make us remember the weary Mr. Tulliver's sigh not long before his death: "this world's been too many for me" (259).

> In the first moments Maggie felt nothing, thought of nothing, but that she had suddenly passed away from that life which she had been dreading: it was the transition of death, without its agony---and she was alone in the darkness with God (503).

When she recognizes St. Ogg's at last, it is as though a new strength comes from seeing the old familiar sights of nature. Even in her great danger, she feels safe now, back in her old element. She has a clear vision now of where the old Mill lies, with its

> . . . grey willows, the now yellowing chestnuts . . . . More and more strongly the energies seemed to come and put themselves forth, as if her life were a stored-up force that was being spent in this hour, unneeded for any future (505).

Then, as she approaches the Dorlcote fields, she can discern "the tints of the trees---could see the old Scotch firs far to the right, and the home chestnuts"

(506). It is as though the old landmarks of her childhood are acting as guiding buoys in her great danger. Or if we were to be morbid about it, we could say that they, like the river, are leading her closer to her inevitable doom.

After the rescue of Tom, as we know, Maggie's fate is soon sealed by the on-rushing masses of wooden machinery. It is a final irony, according to Bushnell, that

> They are swept under by machinery from St. Ogg's, that industrial center which has represented throughout the novel a nemesis to the rural setting of the mill (379).

Survivors in a nearby boat yell at the brother and sister to "Get out of the current!" (507). But Maggie is caught fatally in that deadly current, just as she has been caught all of her life by currents over which she has little or no control. It is significant that this current carries death into her path rather than the reverse, a symbolic testimony, perhaps, of her final, passive defeat. She is a helpless victim whose fighting nature has re-emerged only to carry her into the midst of danger rather than away from it. She is, to her very end, the victim of her environment, not its controller.

The sadness of Maggie's ending is somewhat softened

by the author's conclusion. Life goes on, she seems to be assuring us; though perhaps not quite as before, at least there is optimism about the healing aspects of time and nature. Though Maggie has not survived, her environment has.

As the author tells it,

> Nature repairs her ravages---repairs them with her sunshine, and with human labour. The desolation wrought by that flood had left little visible trace on the face of the earth, five years after. The fifth autumn was rich in golden corn-stacks, rising in thick clusters among the distant hedgerows; the wharves and warehouses on the Floss were busy again, with echoes of eager voices, with hopeful lading and unlading....
>
> Nature repairs her ravages---but not all. The uptorn trees are not rooted again; the parted hills are left scarred; if there is a new growth, the trees are not the same as the old...(509).

A sentimentalist to the end, George Eliot leaves us with the wistful image of Philip returning to find companionship among the trees of the Red Deeps, "where the buried joy seemed still to hover---like a revisiting spirit" (509). We are reminded of Virginia Woolf's remark

about the women of George Eliot's novels: "It is always upon the heroine that we would cast a final glance," she says, among other admiring comments on The Mill on the Floss (189). Let us, instead of joining Philip's more transcendental walk through old memory lanes haunted by Maggie Tulliver, cast Ms. Woolf's "final glance" now on the heroine of The Mill on the Floss.

Maggie was a child of nature. Much of what she learned from her kinship with nature, though, was often useless in her dealings with society. Society was her artificial nursery where the beautiful, skyward-reaching fir tree was forced to be a Bonsai.

Thus, Maggie's soul never found its "sense of home" in her world. But there can be no denying that, as we have argued in this paper, both natural and social environment had vast claims on her character as it developed. Both claimed her for their own, the river taking her back when society had closed its hearts and doors against her.

Many readers and critics wished George Eliot had given Maggie Tulliver a happy ending; many of us agree that there could be no such thing for the dark-haired heroine who was so out of step with her times. But Eliot aficionados and most critics will agree with what John

Blackwood wrote glowingly to George Eliot after finishing the first draft of Maggie's story. "The Mill on the Floss is safe for immortality," he crowed exultantly (Redinger, 420).

We think that Maggie Tulliver, too, is "safe for immortality." Against the background of nature and society which is etched sometimes softly, sometimes harshly, but always with genius, George Eliot's keenly-drawn character emerges and takes her place amongst the immortal heroines of all time. As with Philip Wakem, Maggie's presence will be missed, but never completely gone and never, never forgotten by those who loved her.

Elton, Olivier. :On George Eliot." A Century of George Eliot Criticism. Ed. Gordon S. Haight. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965. 190-198.

Ermarth, Elizabeth. "Maggie Tulliver's Long Suicide." Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900 14 (1974): 587-601.

Haight, Gordon S. George Eliot. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968.

Hardy, Barbara. "The Mill on the Floss." Critical Essays on George Eliot. Ed. Barbara Hardy. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1970. 42-58.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. The Scarlet Letter. New York: Airmont Books, 1962.

James, Henry. "The Novels of George Eliot." Discussions of George Eliot. Ed. Richard Stang. Boston: D. C. Heath & Company, 1960. 3-7.

Knoepflmacher, U. C. George Eliot's Early Novels. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968.

Laski, Marghanita. George Eliot and Her World. London: Thames and Hudson, 1953.

Leavis, F. R. Forward. Adam Bede. By George Eliot. New York: Signet Books, 1961. vii-xv.

Redinger, Ruby V. George Eliot: The Emergent Self. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975.

Sprague, Rosemary. George Eliot. Philadelphia: Chilton Book Company, 1968.

Stephen, Leslie. "George Eliot." Discussions of George Eliot. Ed. Richard Stang. Boxton: D. C. Heath and Company, 1960. 17-24.

Woolf, Virginia. "George Eliot." A Century of George Eliot Criticism. Ed. Gordon S. Haight. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965. 183-189.

Biographical Notes about the Author

Nelle McFather, a native Georgian, holds a B. A. degree in English from Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Georgia. She has taught junior and senior high school English, has worked with a publishing company, an advertising firm, and for several years served as assistant to the Director of the School of Nuclear Engineering at Georgia Tech. For the past twelve years, she has been developing a professional career in writing fiction, with eight popular genre paperback novels published to date. An essay on gothic suspense was included in Crown's bestselling How To Write a Romance and Get It Published. Three of her early books have appeared in a number of foreign translations. Her contemporary woman's novel, Woman Alive! won a regional award in 1981.

Ms. McFather has taught or served on panels at over fifteen national writers' conferences and has served as Co-Director at a major annual conference for the past three years. She is on the Advisory Panel of a southern authors' organization for which she also produces a bi-annual newsletter.

Upon completion of her Master's Degree pursuit at Longwood, she will join the English staff at Brunswick Jr. College in Georgia and teach creative writing classes at

two other colleges. She is currently under contract with a New York publisher for an historical romance set in Tudor England and will continue revision of this work. A mainstream novel set in the south is also under contract with another publisher. Both books are scheduled to appear in 1988.

Ms. McFather has resided with her sister in Virginia but will return to live in a restored antique gallery on her family's estate in Georgia with her sixteen year-old son, Rob.