Down or Be Drowned: Gender Constructions in The Mill on the Floss

Elena Patton

Follow this and additional works at: https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors

Part of the Classical Literature and Philology Commons, English Language and Literature Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons
Down or Be Drowned: Gender Constructions in *The Mill on the Floss*

People only remember Ophelia because she downs. One of Shakespeare’s iconic characters, she fulfills the feminine ideal, captivating Hamlet’s affections. However, she is taken advantage of when Polonius uses her to gain access the king. Because she obediently submits to men, she complies with his scandalous plan. However, due to various circumstances, including Hamlet’s mistreatment of her, she goes insane and drowns, singing about flowers and dying amid the garlands of flowers she had collected. Millais’s painting of the drowning Ophelia is a Pre-Raphaelite painting, and Victorians quickly developed a fascination with the artistic piece. Therefore, it is a painting that Mary Ann Evans, a Victorian novelist who published under the pen name George Eliot, most likely saw. Eliot, in *The Mill on the Floss*, uses drowning as away to illuminate the problematic gender constructions of the period and people’s various reaction to them.

In her last completed novel, *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen Harleth, the heroine, uses water to secure her own safety from oppressive gender constructions. Beautiful, yet selfish, she decides to marry Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt because of his financial stability. Grandcourt, however, is a despicable man. With his controlling and abusive behavior, he forces Gwendolen to submit to his will, and she complies because she knows that “[t]o resist was to act like a stupid animal unable to measure results” (597). Gwendolen adheres to the strict social standards not out of a desire to become the ideal Victorian woman, but out of fear of her husband and the
power he has over her being. On one particular occasion, Grandcourt demands that Gwendolen go out on a boat with him. While sailing, Grandcourt falls into the water and begins drowning. Gwendolen sees him struggling, but hesitates. Eventually, she attempts to rescue him, but her husband is already dead. Although Grandcourt’s death appears accidental, Gwendolen realizes she did not waver out of fear. Instead, she was contemplating whether or not she wanted him to live. This motivation is confirmed when, in a moment of overwhelming guilt, she cries out, “‘But if I had not had that murderous will—in that moment . . . perhaps it would have hindered death?’” (613). Gwendolen’s experience of allowing Grandcourt to drown demonstrates how “the patriarchy’s devices for enslaving women may backfire,” June Szirotny puts it (179).

Mirah, another strong female presence in Daniel Deronda, believes that drowning can also provide her with safety. Her ethnic identity as a Jew casts her as a fallen woman. During Eliot’s lifetime, Jews were oppressed and excluded from engaging in English society. Legendary authors of the time, like Charles Dickens, used literature to perpetuate this problematic ideology by presenting Jewish characters in a derogatory way (Dachslager xvii). Because Eliot went through a religious transformation, she uses her work, particularly Daniel Deronda, to subvert this prevailing attitude (xviii). Readers are first introduced to Mirah as she contemplates drowning herself. Mirah’s “dark curls,” indicate her deviation from cultural expectations (166). Therefore, Mirah does not embody ethnic ideal of Victorian society. Fortunately, Daniel Deronda saves Mirah from a drowning, allowing Eliot to undermine the demeaning opinions Victorians held towards Jews.

The image of drowning also affected her first and most autobiographical novel, The Mill on the Floss. Although the title of the novel does not capture the crux of the story, it does provide a conceptual framework for it. Dorlcote Mill, owned by the Tulliver family, grinds the
grain that is grown on the land, and the Floss operates as the source of energy that keeps the wheel of the mill in motion. The opening lines of Eliot’s novel describe the river flowing through a “wide plain, where the broadening Floss hurries on between its green banks to the sea, and the loving tide, rushing to meet it, checks its passage with an impetuous embrace” (1). The mill—a man-made construction—infringes upon the natural splendor of the Floss, therefore disrupting its beauty. Nevertheless, for the Tulliver family, Dorlcote Mill is their source of livelihood: the Mill cannot continue working without the water from the Floss. Moreover, because “the great river flows forever onward, and links the small pulse of the old English town with the beatings of the world’s mighty heart” (307), it has deeply influenced the history of the town: St. Oggs, named after the boatman who ushered the Virgin and her baby across the Floss on one particular night when the winds were harsh. Although the boatman did not recognize his sacred passenger, legend has it that when the Floss floods he and the Virgin appear in the boat, providing other boatmen guidance through the rising waters. Water is pivotal to The Mill on the Floss, and scholars such as Galia Ofek and June Szirotny have focused on its importance to gender relations in the novel. However, no scholar has considered its significance in relationship to the shape of the land and how that reflects gender constructions.

The Floss has a spirit of its own. Sometimes its waters are described as having a steady ebb and flow of “happy whisperings” (41). At other times, however, it behaves in dangerous, unpredictable ways. People who have lived in St. Oggs long enough distinctly remember the flood when “the swift river once rose, like an angry, destroying god, sweeping down the feeble generations” (305). Select individuals have taken precautionary measures and constructed disaster plans, in case the river should ever flood again. One townsman boldly declares, “I shall
make a boat with a wooden house on the top of it, like Noah’s ark, and keep plenty to eat in it—rabbits and things—all ready” (52).

Eliot’s clear reference to the Noah story echoes a land/water binary associated with a male/female dichotomy perpetuated by Medieval Drama. In the Wakefield Noah play, Noah and his wife operate under strict gender constructions while on land. He instructs his wife to board the ark, but Mrs. Noah adamantly refuses. According to her, she cannot get on the boat because she needs to spin cloth for her husband and children. Because people considered spinning a woman’s task, Mrs. Noah simply fulfills the duties associated with her sex. However, once they board the ark, they are no longer constrained by their gender roles. Noah instructs, “Wife, tent the stere-tre, and I shall assay / The depnes of the see that we bere . . . (Noah 303-304). Noah appoints his wife to take on the masculine role of guiding the boat, and Mrs. Noah’s obedience, in this moment, differs from her arbitrary compliance with traditional gender roles. In response to her husband’s orders, she asserts, “I shall do ful wisely” (304). She intentionally accepts this role of steering the boat according to her own wisdom. In the context of this conversation, Noah calls attention to the deepness of the water: “A! it [the boat] is far to the grownd” (304). In other words, the farther away they are from the land, the less bound they are by gender constructions.

Traditionally, Noah’s Flood is the manifestation of the turmoil generated by the sin of others: people have corrupted the land. Similarly, in The Mill on the Floss, the Flood is a manifestation of the corruption generated by change in ownership of the Mill. The people of St. Oggs hold tightly onto the eerie superstition that “‘when the mill changes hands, the river’s angry’” (300). Belief in this superstition propels Eliot’s plot. The Mill has been in the Tulliver family for generations, inherited through the family bloodline. The water that flows through the Mill becomes like the blood that flows through the Tulliver’s veins. Therefore, it is foundational
to the family legacy, explaining why Mr. Tulliver’s world is shattered when a lawyer named Mr. Wakem threatens his livelihood and source of pride with a lawsuit concerning the ownership of the Mill. After he loses the Mill to Mr. Wakem, Mr. Tulliver suffers immense embarrassment when he is reduced to manager of the Mill, rather than its owner. The tension between the two men peaks when they pass each other on the road to Dorlcote Mill. Irate over having to work under Mr. Wakem, Mr. Tulliver, in a burst of anger, charges his horse at him. Startled, Mr. Wakem’s horse bucks him off, and Mr. Tulliver vigorously lashes the lawyer with his riding whip. After the brutal altercation, Mr. Tulliver’s emotional and physical state rapidly deteriorates. As Mr. Tulliver comes to terms with his impending death, he reiterates the familial significance of the Mill: “‘I wanted to die in th’ old place where I was born and my father was born’” (304). He, therefore, desires his son to regain ownership of the Mill, his parting words expressing his dying wish: “‘And if ever you’re rich enough—mind this—try and get th’ old mill again’” (400). Tom, fully devoted to the flowing lines of blood and water, spends the rest of his life trying to fulfill his father’s wish of carrying on the family legacy.

While Tom is aligned with the Mill, Maggie is aligned with the Floss, her tenacious spirit rising up to overpower the gender roles that constantly suppress her mind and body. After Tom would scold Maggie for a petty, mischievous act, she would apologize profusely as “the tears flowed so plentifully” (48). Moreover, she always “rushed to her deeds with passionate impulse” (69). When Maggie discovers Tom will finally be able to pay his father’s debt, she responds with the “clasping her hands . . . [as] a sudden flash of joy across her wretchedness” (389). With the words “flowed,” “rushed,” and “flash,” readers are reminded that, just like the Floss, Maggie has a spirit of her own. Maggie is more directly aligned with the Floss when, on one particular occasion, she refuses to have her hair done: “when her mother was in the act of brushing out the
Maggie, however, insists that Maggie abide by the gender ideal in appearance and behavior. After all, Mrs. Tulliver does so with her mild temperament and light features: something she takes pride in, which is revealed through her preference for Tom, who takes after the Dodsons in appearance. Her commitment to her assigned gender role is also seen in the precise way she carries out her domestic duties, such as specific ways of “bleaching the linen, of making the cowslip wine, curing the hams, and keeping the bottled gooseberries” (44). Maggie, however, refuses to have her hair brushed and plaited, forgets to feed Tom’s rabbits when he is away, interrupts games he plays and ruins one very important play-date between Tom and their cousin Lucy. In addition, Maggie does not adhere to the feminine ideal in appearance due to her fierce ebony eyes and thick black hair, which her mother is constantly, but unsuccessfully, trying to tame: “‘But her hair won’t curl all I can do with it, and she’s so franzy about having it put i’ paper, and I’ve such work as never was to make her stand and have it pinched with th’ irons’” (8). In this way, Maggie’s hair is rebelling against the physical feminine ideal. Because Maggie adamantly resents her mother for obsessively trying to control her hair, she cuts her hair in an act of rebellion: “Maggie . . . seiz[ed] her front locks and cut them straight across the middle of her forehead . . . Snip! went the great scissors” (68). She thus directly defies the Mill-like control of
her appearance. Galia Ofek captures the crux of the moment by stating, “Maggie cannot undo her gender by cutting her hair, nor can she meet social definitions of femininity” (86). With this, Ofek implies that Maggie wants to circumvent her gender and society’s expectations for an ideal woman.

Lucy Dean, Maggie’s cousin, embodies the feminine ideal because of her perfectly plaited golden hair. This explains why Mrs. Tulliver “had to look on with a silent pang while Lucy’s blond curls were adjusted . . . . Maggie always looked twice as dark as usual when she was by the side of Lucy” (64). Lucy also embodies the female ideal in behavior, explaining why Mrs. Tulliver perceives Lucy Deane as “such a good child” that she “can’t help but loving the child as if she were [her] own” (43). Lucy “proved wonderfully clever at building; she handled the cards so lightly, and moved so gently, that Tom condescended to admire her houses as well as his own” (95): she is adept at construction. In contrast, Maggie infuriates Tom when, in a burst of energy, she knocks over his house of cards. This incident mirrors the girls’ responses to gender: Lucy works to uphold traditional gender constructions, but Maggie seeks to destroy them. Moreover, the force of Maggie’s impetuosity is revealed when she pushes Lucy into the mud: “the utmost Maggie could do, with a fierce thrust of her small brown arm, was to push poor little pink-and-white Lucy into the cow-trodden mud” (112). This act again aligns Maggie’s behavior with the Floss: dirt becomes mud only when it comes into contact with water. Moreover, because the narrator calls attention to Maggie’s dark skin and Lucy’s white skin at this exact moment of action, Eliot reinforces the correlation between appearance and behavior.

Maggie’s worst behavior is, perhaps, revealed when she runs away to live with the gypsies, people known for their nomadic lifestyle. Because of her complexion, thick curls and spirited personality “she had often been told she was like a Gypsy and ‘half wild.’” This episode
unfolds in a chapter entitled “Maggie Tries to Runaway from Her Shadow” (116). Maggie’s behavior is aligned with her defiance of cultural constructions, but, as with a shadow, she is unable to escape her impulses. Regardless of how annoying and inconvenient, these acts are never carried out with malicious intent, something that Mr. Tulliver recognizes. This explains why, when her father finds her among the gypsies, he soothes her by gently stating, “‘Pooh, pooh . . . you mustn’t think o’ running away from father. What ’ud father do without his little wench?’” (129).

Maggie never outgrows the need for love from the men in her life. Her continued interactions with her father and brother cause critics to raise an important question: as Szrotny puts it, “Why [does] she cling to those who are destroying her?” (79). One might answer that Maggie clings to the significant male figures in her life because her existence demands she engage with them on some level, regardless of whether it takes the form of submission or resistance. This reveals the duality of Maggie’s character: she desires love from the men in her life, but also has a forceful spirit that rebels against gender constructions, mimicking the Floss’s restless spirit.

Eliot reveals society’s problematic perception of gender by comparing female characters to animals. For example, the difference in physical appearance between Maggie and Lucy is described as “the contrast between a rough, dark, overgrown puppy and a white kitten” (65). Lucy is described as having feline mannerisms: “[She] looked on mutely, like a kitten pausing from its lapping” (95). In contrast, when Maggie adamantly reprimands her immediate family for not supporting her father and mother through their bankruptcy, she is compared to a different feline character: “Maggie suddenly started up and stood in front of them, her eyes flashing like
the eyes of a young lioness” (243).1 This contrast between Lucy and Maggie reveals their different approaches to gender constructions: just as a tamed cat is controlled by its owner, Lucy, as the ideal woman, is controlled by society in appearance and behavior. Maggie, however, like a wild cat, vehemently refuses to have her spirit broken by the hand of domesticity.

Nevertheless, Maggie cannot escape the language paradigms of her culture. This is exemplified through her interactions with Philip Wakem, one of Tom’s schoolmates and the son of the lawyer who wins the lawsuit over the Mill. In her childhood innocence, Maggie is not aware of the rivalry between her father and Mr. Wakem. She, therefore, develops a strong sense of sympathy towards Philip because he was born with a birth defect that left him with a hunched back. The narrator, however, states that Maggie’s compassion for Philip is the same compassion she would extend to a feeble lamb:

Maggie, moreover, had rather a tenderness for deformed things; she preferred the wry-necked lambs, because it seemed to her that the lambs which were quite strong and well made wouldn’t mind so much about being petted; and she was especially fond of petting objects that would think it very delightful to be petted by her. (201)

Maggie’s intentions and feelings reveal that she, like a lion, wants power over the unempowered. Significantly, the deformed Philip is described as being girlish. When he and Tom get into an argument, Tom refuses to respond with physical violence, stating, “‘You know I won’t hit you [Philip], because you’re no better than a girl’” (196). Lucy reiterates this, reminding her father, Mr. Deane, that he believes “Mr. Wakem has brought Philip up like a girl” (477). By comparing Philip to both a domesticated lamb and a girl, Eliot exposes the cultural

1 Maggie is also compared to a Shetland pony, Skye terrier, and birds (9, 12, 243).
construct of females as both tamed and deformed creatures. Because his body deviates from the norm through its hunched back, it is labeled female. In this way, Philip and Maggie are alike: aside from their deep desire to be loved by others, neither of them are considered fully human, Philip because of his physical deformity and Maggie because of her gender.

Tom, although not physically deformed, suffers from a different kind of deformity. When readers are first introduced to him, he is in the midst of his boyhood. He gets into arguments with other boys over petty matters, and his immaturity is made evident through his angry outbursts over insignificant issues. Like others his age, he does not fully realize the value of a good education and resents his father for sending him away to live with a tutor. However, this education has the complete reverse effect than what his father had hoped. Instead of molding him into a man with many prospects, Tom thinks he has become “more like a girl than he had ever had been in his life before” (Eliot 158). The narrator implies that Tom’s lack of an intellect that lends itself to academic studies carries the same social stigma as a physical deformity: “[a] boy born with a deficient power of apprehending signs and abstractions must suffer the penalty of his congenital deficiency, just as if he had been born with one leg shorter than the other” (191). Here, Eliot speaks to a problematic dichotomy, where book knowledge is highly valued above practical knowledge. Tom has the latter type of intelligence, which includes information about “. . . how the padlocks opened, and which way the handles of the gates were to be lifted” (40). Here, the extent of Tom’s intellectual deformity is revealed. Lacking the ability to think in new ways, Tom is controlled by the Mill, both literally and figuratively.

Ironically, females are allowed neither kind of intelligence. Indeed, Maggie’s intelligence, something Tom aligns with the female realm, generates a lot of anxiety among family members. Mr. Tulliver is of the belief that “a woman’s no business wi’ being so clever;
it’ll turn to trouble” (13). He supports the widely held patriarchal belief that an educated woman is a threat to society: a misconception perpetuated by Victorian culture. Most Victorians operated according to the two-sphere ideology: each sex has their own designated roles in society. As the bread-winners, men dominated the public sphere; as the moral gatekeepers of society and the home, women governed the private sphere. Therefore, there was no need for women to be educated. Ironically, Queen Victoria—the most powerful woman of the Victorian era—endorsed this ideology, although she herself was exempt from it due to her position of power (“Perspectives” 1547). Florence Nightingale, a Victorian woman who is credited with establishing the nursing profession as it is understood today, discusses how women were made to feel guilty for designating time for their educational advancement: “[t]hey have accustomed themselves to consider intellectual occupation as a mere selfish amusement” (1514). The misconception that women were inherently inferior to men served as another justification for keeping women uneducated. When Maggie struggles to help Tom with his Latin lesson, he quickly asserts, “‘You see you’re not so clever as you thought you were.’” In response, Maggie claims, “‘I dare say I could make it out, if I’d learned what goes before, as you have’” (166). Therefore, even in her childish mind, she recognizes that women are ignorant because they are uneducated, not vice versa.

Whether deformity is present in crooked limbs or ignorant minds, it serves an ironic function. Though deformed, Philip he is the most upright character in the whole novel, which implies that Maggie’s gendered deformity might be positive as well. The strength of his character is revealed when he meets Maggie walking among the Scotch Furs in the Red Deeps. He yearns to spend time with her, but not at the expense of her character, showing that he is not driven by ulterior motives. Given the feud between Mr. Wakem and Mr. Tulliver, Maggie’s
willingness to secretly meet with Philip would be considered detrimental to her virtue. Philip, therefore, looks for a way to circumvent the scandalous circumstances of the situation by suggesting, "If I meet you by chance, there is no concealment in that?" (374). After further coaxing, Maggie agrees to keep seeing Philip in the Red Deeps, and these secret meetings continue for a year. Under these conditions, the liquidity of the Red Deeps is further aligned with the female experience of menstruation. In her landmark work, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelist from Brontë to Lessing*, Elaine Showalter explains that, in Victorian culture, women were expected to keep their biological experiences, particularly menstruation, "concealed" (15). In the same way, Maggie must conceal her meetings with Philip.

Tom finds out about the secret meetings between Maggie and Philip when he hears "his mother scold Maggie for walking in the Red Deeps when the ground [is] wet, and bringing home shoes clogged with red soil" (386). Water is what caused the soil to stick to the soles of Maggie’s shoes. Just as the Floss functions as a bloodline that carries on the Tulliver legacy, the waters of the Red Deeps represent the literal monthly flow of blood Maggie experiences. Aligning the female’s biological functions with the liquidity of the Floss shows that water is a key symbol because it represents the female body. This explains why Tom is adamant about taking back ownership of the Mill: having control over the Mill means having control over the female waters.

Although Tom puts an immediate end to these secret encounters, the conversations that unfold between Maggie and Philip during the meetings are significant. In the Red Deeps, the two reminisce about their childhood years. Moreover, he encourages her to engage in personal and intellectual expression by lending her books that contain strong female protagonists. But Maggie is tired of reading stories where the ideal Victorian woman fulfills that role: "I’m
determined to read no more books where the blond-haired women carry away all the happiness. I should begin to have a prejudice against them . . . give me some story, now, where the dark woman triumphs” (377). Philip affirms her stance by musing that perhaps Maggie will be the “dark woman” to claim victory over her cousin by captivating the heart of the man courting Lucy.

As the narrative continues, Philip’s words take on a prophetic irony. Not only does the physical contrast between Maggie’s jet-black curls and Lucy’s blond hair cast them into opposing roles, but Maggie “carr[i]es away all the love from . . . Lucy” (377). As a foil to Philip, Eliot presents Mr. Stephen Guest as the ideal suitor. He prefers Lucy to other women simply because she is the ideal Victorian woman: Stephen “approved his own choice of her chiefly because she did not strike him as a remarkable rarity” (418). However, that changes once he lays eyes on Maggie: “[f]or one instant Stephen could not conceal his astonishment at the sight of this tall, dark-eyed nymph with her jet-black coronet of hair” (424). Eliot’s words once again align Maggie with the Floss because “nymph” refers to a “semi-divine spirit, imagined as taking the form of a maiden inhabiting the sea [and] rivers” (“Nymph” def. 1). Maggie is equally astonished that her physical characteristics evoke a positive response because she has internalized the fact that her body is a source of shame, a belief embedded in the Mill-like gender constructions of Victorian society.

Stephen also calls attention to rarity of Maggie’s beauty through her clothes: “but assisted by the beauty, they made Maggie more unlike other women even than she had seemed at first” (428). His attraction to Maggie’s appearance is made evident in nearly fifty references where he looks at her wishing she would turn her eyes toward him. Philip, however, is captivated by Maggie’s eyes because of what they reveal about her character, not what they indicate about her
interest in him. In response to him complementing her eyes, Maggie inquires, “Why do you like my eyes?’ said Maggie, well pleased. She had never heard any one but her father speak of her eyes as if they had merit” (209). Unlike Stephen, Philip’s attraction to Maggie’s eyes is more relevant to the soul and intellect. In other words, Philip sees Maggie differently than Stephen does, made evident by the fact he admires her mind not just her body for the sensual pleasure it evokes in him. Philip genuinely cares for Maggie’s wellbeing.

Stephen, however, blatantly disregards Maggie’s wellbeing. He had planned to take his boat out on the river with Maggie, Lucy, and Philip to accompany him. However, Philip cancels, feigning an illness because he cannot bear to witness the interactions between Maggie and Stephen, which obviously carry romantic undertones. Lucy also has to decline the invitation to address personal matters out of town. Nevertheless, Stephen insists that he and Maggie go out of the boat as planned. Initially, Maggie refuses, recognizing the precarious position she would find herself in alone on the waters with someone else’s suitor. Stephen, though, is persistent and eventually convinces her to go on this brief boat ride. After being out on the water for some time, Maggie realizes Stephen has taken her far away from the landmark where they had agreed to stop. Although it appears that they have just been carried away by the tide, it soon becomes clear that those were Stephen’s exact intentions. He let the boat drift so that he could convince Maggie to marry him, an incident in direct opposition to Maggie entering the Red Deeps, which she enters by choice. Unlike the deformed Philip, this physically charming character operates under the most crooked motives. Maggie, however, fiercely refuses, realizing the way in which he has violated her: "Let me go! . . . You have wanted to deprive me of any choice. You knew we were come too far; you have dared to take advantage of my thoughtlessness” (530). The language Eliot draws on in this particular moment paints this scene like a rape: Stephen does not
actually commit the act, but the command “let me go!” and the phrases “deprived me of an choice” and “take advantage of” certainly suggest sexual assault. In other words, Stephen uses the boat—a man-made construction—to get Maggie to conform to his will, but he fails because water, like Maggie’s spirit, flows against cultural constructions. Moreover, the farther away Maggie and Stephen get from Maggie’s intended docking point, the farther away they are from the Mill, which is what allows men to control female waters, explaining why Stephen’s attempt to control Maggie fails. Even though the Mill, like the males in charge of it, attempts to control the water, Eliot makes it clear that sometimes the water rises up to overpower Mill-like control.

Even though Maggie ultimately overpowers Stephen’s Mill-like control of her, she suffers harsh consequences because of the town’s misconceptions, which are foreshadowed in a dream. Because Maggie and Stephen stray too far from shore with a storm approaching rapidly, they must take refuge on a ship they encounter. While on the vessel, Maggie falls into a deep slumber and dreams vividly:

She was in a boat on the wide water with Stephen, and in the gathering darkness something like a star appeared, that grew and grew till they saw it was the Virgin seated in St. Ogg’s boat, and it came nearer and nearer, till they saw the Virgin was Lucy and the boatman was Philip,—no, not Philip, but her brother. (536)

Although Maggie dreams of the legend of St. Oggs, there is a slight, yet profound, variation in character: Lucy is the Virgin. By aligning the Virgin with Lucy—the woman who fulfills the feminine ideal in appearance and behavior—Eliot conveys that the ideal woman is also the virginal woman. As a result, Maggie’s appearance and behavior establishes her as Lucy’s foil, casting her as the fallen woman. Therefore, while Gwendolen returns with blood on her hands,
Maggie returns with a perceived scarlet letter on her chest because the townspeople assume that she was complicit with Stephen’s intentions to elope.

Maggie’s reputation as the fallen women is foreshadowed early on in the novel. Leading up to Maggie’s deviant act of pushing Lucy into the mud, Maggie’s appearance is likened to Medusa’s:2 “[M]aggie lingered at a distance, looking like a small Medusa with her snakes cropped” (109). The modifier “cropped” reminds readers of Maggie’s bold act of cutting her hair. Immediately after thrusting Lucy in the mud, Maggie is again compared to the legendary woman as she “sat on the roots of the tree and looked after them with her small Medusa face” (113). Prior to becoming the monster that kills Perseus, Medusa was a beautiful maiden, and her most stunning feature was her hair (Ovid 117). As a result of breaking her chastity vow in Athena’s shrine, Athena turns Medusa’s luscious hair into writhing strands of snakes, thus transforming her into a Gorgon (Bowers 222). However, it is not Medusa’s fault: Poseidon, the sea god, raped her.

Observing Maggie’s story through the lens of this Greek legend, readers see that she parallels Medusa in appearance and plight. Like Medusa, Maggie’s most captivating feature is her hair, explaining why Stephen, upon seeing her for the first time, calls attention to “her jet-black coronet of hair” (424). More significantly, just as Poseidon draws his power from water, Stephen also attempts to derive power over the water to force Maggie to submit to his will. Just as Medusa becomes a victim of rape, Maggie falls victim to Stephen’s metaphorical rape. As a result, society marks Maggie as the fallen women, much as Athena turns Medusa into a monster.

2 Eliot’s contemporaries even compared her unflattering appearance to Medusa: “[i]ndeed it was whispered that she was so hideous that, Medusa-like, you only had to look upon her to be turned to stone.” See pg. 2 of *The Last Victorian* by Kathryn Hughes.
Indeed, when Maggie returns home, the whole community, aside from a select few people, harshly judge and reject her. This goes against everything the proud Dodson side of the family claims they value. The Dodsons hold members of their family in the highest esteem, even those who do not conform to their ideal in looks or behavior: “[t]here were some Dodsons less like the family than the others—that was admitted; but insofar as they were ‘kin,’ they were of necessity better than those who were ‘no kin’” (45). Maggie is one of the lesser Dodsons because she inherited her black hair and dark eyes from her father’s side of the family. Her tenacious spirit rebels against the passivity modeled by the Dodson sisters and perfectly exemplified by Lucy. Mrs. Glegg, one of Mrs. Tulliver’s sisters, although harsh and abrasive towards Maggie as a child, is totally consistent in her character. Mrs. Glegg believes that family must stand by their own. In light if Maggie’s unfortunate circumstances, she recognizes that Maggie is, nevertheless, a Dodson. As a result, Mrs. Glegg comes to her defense. Although she at first finds it far more “probable” that Maggie has drowned, rather than disgraced the family name, she later defends Maggie’s integrity because she already knows the answer to a crucial question: “[i]f you were not to stand by your ‘kin’ as long as there was a shred of honor attributable to them, pray what were you to stand by?” (567). For all the Dodsons, family is important, but each define it differently. For Mrs. Glegg, family is determined by bloodline, regardless of whether it is the patriarchal blood in Tom’s vein or the menstrual blood that flows through Maggie. Others in her family, especially Tom, operate according to gender constructions. Therefore, they define family in terms of appearance and behavior, exacerbating Maggie’s suffering. After returning from her night on the boat, Maggie seeks out Tom for protection, but he responds with merciless admonishment: “‘You will find no home with me . . .
You have disgraced us all. You have disgraced your father’s name . . . I wash my hands of you forever’’ (551).

In contrast, Dr. Kenn, a minister in St. Ogg’s, attempts to mitigate Maggie’s suffering. When the women of St. Ogg’s refuse to employ Maggie, he employs her as a governess. However, people begin suspect that her interactions with Dr. Kenn are equally as scandalous as her interactions with Stephen. Dr. Kenn unsuccessfully attempts to restore Maggie’s dignity: “in an attempting to open the ears of women to reason, and their consciences to justice, on behalf of Maggie Tulliver, he suddenly found himself as powerless as he was aware he would have been if he had attempted to influence the shape of bonnets” (575). This comparison reminds readers of Maggie’s childhood distain for wearing her bonnet. Sometimes she would tear it off her head or drag it on the ground (9). At other times, she blatantly refused to wear it (20). However, this is the only time Eliot calls attention to the shape of a bonnet, although she could have likened Dr. Kenn’s attempts to influencing the color or texture of bonnets. With the word shape, in reference to a head garment, Eliot reiterates the fact that, by removing her bonnet, Maggie discards the material that maintains her hair and adherence to gender expectations. Therefore, by stating that Dr. Kenn cannot alter the shape of bonnets, Eliot is implying that he cannot subvert cultural norms.

Through this, Eliot reveals something about her own life: she too endured the pain of rejection. *The Mill on the Floss* is considered Eliot’s most autobiographical novel (Byatt xxxiii). However, while people thought Maggie intentionally eloped with Stephen, Eliot, in actuality, eloped with G.H. Lewes. Instead of ostracizing her, Eliot’s father worked to reconcile her back into the family (Karl 18-19). This echoes how Mr. Tulliver responds with compassion, rather than rage, when Maggie runs away to live with the gypsies. In contrast, Isaac, Eliot’s brother,
responded with rejection, which resulted in nearly two decades of silence between the siblings (398). Eliot experienced great agony over this because she had a close relationship with her brother growing up, similar to the relationship Maggie has with Tom. Both, therefore, are devastated their brothers reject them.

More devastation befalls Maggie. Her likeness to the Floss not only represents her attitudes towards gender, but also foreshadows the tragic end to the novel. Tom eventually regains ownership of the Mill by working for Mr. Deane to pay it off. He is incredibly successful in his line of work because Mr. Deane believes that “the world isn’t made of pen, ink, and paper” (262). Therefore, the work Mr. Deane assigns Tom requires him to utilize his knowledge of practical Mill-like things, rather than the book knowledge his father sent him away to learn. This enables the Floss to once again change hands. With this, readers are reminded of the myth that the town’s people believe to be true: “when the mill changes hands, the river is angry” (300).

Indeed, the Floss floods again, producing the Noah-like waters that flooded St. Oggs sixty years ago. For the older generation, the uncanny behavior of the Floss leading up to the Flood functions as a reminder of that natural disaster. However, “[t]he younger generation, who had seen several small floods, thought lightly of these somber recollections and forebodings” (583). Although a part of the “younger generation,” Maggie and Tom experience the full atrocity of the Flood, tragically drowning in its waters.

There is a plethora of criticism produced about the drowning of the Tulliver siblings, and although their reasoning differs, scholars hold negative attitudes towards the ending of the novel, the only novel Eliot ends tragically. Eliot spends the majority of the novel on Maggie and Tom’s

3 This, however, was the only way women, like George Eliot, had a voice in Victorian England, although they often had to publish under male pseudonyms.
childhood years and ends the novel too abruptly. Jane Smiley, in the “Afterword” to the book, explains that, because Maggie is “one of literature’s most fully developed characters,” Maggie’s character is somewhat incomplete because the drowning “prevented Eliot from allowing Maggie to follow in her author’s footsteps and to find some productive use for her talents and her passions” (605). Smiley goes on to state this is due to the fact that Eliot chose to write this novel as a tragedy, a type of writing that requires a specific form:

> Tragedy is a dramatic form; when the curtain rises and the characters take their places, the play moves with accelerating energy toward the catastrophe of the climax . . . . But the novel is a form that depends on digression and with every digression, the possibility of another choice on the part of one of the characters arises. (604)

Here, Smiley is not criticizing the content of the ending; she is critiquing its form. Because of the sudden, unexpected nature of the tragedy genre and the long prose of the narrative style, the two are not compatible.

Eliot, however, uses her elaborate narrative to ready her readers for the tragic conclusion. Throughout the novel, she implements multiple literary techniques as foreshadowing devices, which undermine the scholarly opinion that Eliot does not prepare her readers for the abrupt ending. One of the defining characteristics of Eliot’s writing is her ability to use the same motif in radically different ways. For example, in *Middlemarch*, Eliot establishes the neck as a symbol of ideal Victorian femininity.⁴ Constant attention is drawn to Rosamond’s “swan neck” (94). These references, however, serve an ironic purpose: when readers are reminded of Rosamond’s graceful and elongated neck, it is always within the context of her most selfish behavior.

---

⁴ Here Eliot is mimicking Pre-Raphaelite artists who used the neck to signify the ideal femininity of Victorian culture.
Likewise, in *Daniel Deronda*, the “white pillar of [Gwendolen’s] throat” accentuates her ideal beauty (70). In *Mill on the Floss*, however, the neck motif serves a different purpose: love of the other rather than the self. At particular moments in the novel, attention is called to Maggie’s act of throwing her herself around Tom’s neck when a strong wave of feelings rushes over her. In her childhood bliss, she hears exquisite music from a music box and “run[s] toward Tom, put[s] her arm round his neck and [exclaims], ‘Oh, Tom, isn’t it pretty?’” (103). When Tom and Maggie embark on their most mischievous adventure—playing with a sword Tom promised he would not use as a toy—Tom “put[s] his arm round her neck, and she put[s] hers round his waist, and twined together in this way, they [go] upstairs” to where Tom has the sword hidden away (202). Moreover, after Maggie admonishes her mother for her insensitivity to the humiliation Mr. Tulliver has suffered, Tom is deeply moved by the sight of his father, and Maggie is equally impacted by Tom’s display of emotions: “[w]hen Maggie saw how he was moved, she went to him and put her arm round his neck as he sat by the bed, and the two children forgot everything else in the sense that they had one father and one sorrow” (232). By themselves, these incidents are heart-warming because they capture solidarity between the two siblings; however, in light of the novel’s abrupt ending, this act of wrapping one’s arms around another’s neck mirrors, in shape, the position in which they die.

In the opening sentence of the novel, Eliot subtlety alludes to the novel’s tragic ending by using the “impetuous embrace” of the Floss (1). The phrase “impetuous embrace” could be applied to the position that the bodies of Maggie and Tom are found on the last page of the novel: “[n]ear that brick grave there was a tomb erected very soon after the Flood for two bodies that were found in close embrace” (595-596). This foreshadowing also points to the deep connection Tom and Maggie develop to the Floss. Many of Maggie’s childhood memories are
tethered to the Mill and the Floss. In fact, as a child, Maggie’s favorite spot was inside the Mill with the grain before it was milled: “[b]ut the part of the mill she liked best was the topmost story—the corn-hutch, where there were the great heaps of grain, which she could sit on and slide down continually” (28). More significantly, Maggie’s earliest memory includes the Floss and Tom. During her first secret meeting with Philip in the Red Deeps, she claims, “‘[T]he first thing I ever remember in my life is standing with Tom by the side of the Floss, while he held my hand; everything before that is dark to me’” (347). This innocent memory carries deadly undertones because Maggie’s final moment also involves Tom and the Floss.

While Maggie’s relationship to the Floss is rooted in her childhood years, Tom’s relationship is rooted in the fruit of his labor. In accordance with his father’s dying wish, Tom works to get the Mill back into family hands, and he is proud of his work. Upon successfully paying the debt his father accumulated during the lawsuit regarding ownership of the Mill, he boldly announces the news to his father, mother, and sister. Immediately following his moment of triumph, however, the narrator states, “Tom never lived to taste another moment so delicious as that; and Maggie couldn’t help forgetting her own grievances” (400). The past tense in this present moment suggests that Tom will suffer an untimely death, which is fully realized at the close of the novel. These words, therefore, take on a double connotation: paying his father’s debt functions as Tom’s greatest victory but also paves the way for his sudden demise.

Tom’s drowning comes as a shock because the narrator does not directly imply that is how he will eventually die. That is not, however, the case with Maggie. As a child, Maggie’s rebellious spirit and her connection to the Floss is revealed through the fact that she is unable to stay away from the water. Mrs. Tulliver warns her of the consequences: “‘You’ll tumble in and be drownded some day, an’ then you’ll be sorry you didn’t do as mother told you’” (9). Maggie
blatantly disobeys her mother, and her relatives foretell that because Maggie is always “‘wanderin’ up an’ down by the water, like a wild thing: she’ll tumble in some day’” (8). The syntax and punctuation of this sobering sentence implies causation: the colon equates the two statements, suggesting that Maggie will drown because she is a “wild thing.” Moreover, Maggie, in a desperate attempt to demonstrate her cleverness, tells a visitor consulting Mr. Tulliver about Tom’s education the peculiar story behind an image in one of her books:

Oh, I’ll tell you what that means. It’s a dreadful picture, isn’t it? But I can’t help looking at it. That old woman in the water’s a witch—they’ve put her in to find out whether she’s a witch or no; and if she swims she’s a witch, and if she’s drowned—and killed, you know—she’s innocent, and not a witch, but only a poor silly old woman. But what good would it do her then, you know, when she was drowned? (14)

Considered in relationship to the end of the novel, it is as if Maggie is foretelling her own death. Just like the witch, Maggie is accused of being a fallen woman upon returning home from her night on the boat with Stephen. She is drowned by the accusations of the townspeople, which are influenced by the gender constructions that dictate what a woman can and cannot do. Ultimately both women escape the false accusations through drowning. It is only through drowning that the woman is able to prove she is not a witch. Likewise, it is only through drowning that Maggie is literally and metaphorically freed from the accusations. The Flood destroys the gender constructions that mark her as a fallen woman, allowing Maggie to prove where her true love lies: with Tom.

The idea that people can be saved by water, in one way or another, is not unique to Eliot’s work. In fact, this belief has deep religious roots given the fact that land is aligned with
sin in the Creation account. As a result of the Fall, God permits thorns and thistles to emerge from the dirt, and curses man to experience hardship in planting and harvesting the land.⁵ Therefore, the land becomes aligned with sin. This explains why, according to Marjorie Hope Nicolson, many pre-19⁹th century Jewish scholars assumed the mountains and valleys were a result of the Fall.⁶ The land is associated with sin because the fruit, a product of the land, comes to symbolize the transferring of sin from Eve to Adam. Moreover, there is a long-standing tradition among Christians, which they inherited from the Jews, which recognizes the symbolic importance of water. Jesus calmed the stormy waters, echoing Moses who parted the Red Sea to bring His people into the promise land. To this day, believers attach sacred value to the rite of baptism because the immersion in water signifies one’s public profession of faith. Many baptism liturgies include the fact that Jesus Christ was “nurtured in the water of a womb,” before asking God to “Pour out your Holy Spirit, / . . . to wash away their sin” (United 42). Therefore, water became aligned with salvation from the fallen land.

Although Maggie is not granted religious salvation through drowning, she is granted a type of cultural salvation from the fallen land. Many scholars, however, draw very different conclusions from Maggie’s tragic death. In her book, George Eliot's Feminism: The Right to Rebellion, which works to illuminate the feminist aspects of Eliot’s work, Szirotny outlines scholars’ various interpretations of the ending. Some readers believe the Flood functions as an opportunity for suicide (74). However, this interpretation does not hold water because moments before the Flood, Maggie resigns herself to the fact that she has to live with the consequences of spending the night on the boat with Stephen: “‘I will bear it, and bear it till death . . . But how long it will be before death comes! I am so young, so healthy. How shall I have the patience and

⁵ See Genesis 3:17-18.
⁶ This is the basic premise of her work Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory.
strength?” (587-588). Here, Maggie is asking for the stamina to live on, not the courage to die. This future tense claim, of course, serves an ironic function, given the fact that Maggie dies that very day. Moreover, the unpredictable spirit of the Floss does not allow for premeditated suicide, like Mirah’s attempts. The Floss floods quickly and without warning. Moreover, Maggie knows the risk of going out on the rising waters, but she goes so with the intent of saving Tom, not with resolve to kill herself.

Others see the Flood as an opportunity for Maggie to bring Tom to his death (Szriotny 75), a form of retaliation for his fierce admonishment and rejection of her. This interpretation, however, is not consistent with Maggie’s noble character or her relationship with Tom. She clearly asserts her intentions of always being good to Tom: “I love Tom so dearly . . . better than anybody else in the world. When he grows up I shall keep his house, and we shall always live together” (29). Tom has similar intentions because he was very fond of his sister, and meant always to take care of her, make her his housekeeper, and punish her when she did wrong” (40). Additionally, Maggie is resigned to the consequences of her actions, declaring, “‘I will bear it, and bear it till death” (587), a declaration that does not suggest her desire to mitigate the harsh reality of her situation. For some readers, the Flood only exacerbates the grim circumstances of Maggie’s situation, functioning as punishment for her disgraceful actions (75). With this interpretation, like the others, readers remain on the surface of the text, failing to realize that Maggie, instead, finds her fullest self in the deeps—the Red Deeps with Philip and the depths of the Floss with Tom.

There are several framings of the Flood that are correct in a literal sense. For example, the Flood does in fact function as a “transition to death” (Szriotny 589). In other words, by entering the waters, the siblings enter into death. A.S. Byatt, a novelist and scholar who is
gravely disappointed by the way Eliot concluded the novel, complains that “all [the Flood] ends is the relationship between Tom and Maggie,” and in a physical sense it does. Although this reading is correct, it is a very literal interpretations of the ending, and readers who take this superficial approach are likely to agree with Byatt in that “the Flood is no resolution to the whole complex novel” (xxxix).

This critique, however, does not take into account important textual evidence embedded in the novel. Although the ending does not provide a quick fix for the oppressive implications of the gender constructions that dictate society, considered in relationship to the rest of the novel, the Flood functions as a summation of the key aspects of the novel. Throughout the entire novel, Eliot reveals the problematic nature of the gender constructions that dominated Victorian culture and, through Maggie, the consequences of subverting them. In the end, it is not the violent waters of the Flood that kill Tom and Maggie:

[A] new danger was being carried toward them by the river. Some wooden machinery had just given way on one of the wharves, and huge fragments were being floated along. . . Tom, looking before him, saw death rushing on them.

Huge fragments, clinging together in fatal fellowship, made one wide mass across the stream. (590)

The phrase “fatal fellowship” foreshadows their impending death, and this passage reveals the true cause of death. In other words, the machinery of gender constructions from the land ultimately kills the siblings. Here, Eliot subverts the land/water binary; because the fragments of the Mill are hurled into the floss by the floodwaters, the Mill and the Floss cannot be separated.

To fully understand the brilliance of Eliot’s novel, readers also need to consider what happened because of the drowning, rather than focusing solely on the tragedy that closes the
novel. Tom and Maggie meet the fatal fates in the section titled “The Final Rescue,” a seemingly ironic title because they are not saved from the Flood. (549). Readers must thus consider what it is that they are actually saved from. During their previous conversation, Tom abrasively rejected Maggie because of her night on the boat with Stephen. The closing words of the novel convey that, in death, their relationship is restored: “[i]n their death they were not divided” (596). This ending reinforces the fact that Eliot “associated reconciliation with death.” Eliot herself claimed, “We have all a chance . . . some charity when we are dead; it is the living only who cannot be forgiven” (Lifted 4). It was only in their death that Tom is able to forgive Maggie.

Moreover, it is only in death that Maggie is able to synthesize the two aspects of her character that are in constant conflict with one another: her desire to be loved by brother and her need to reject oppressive gender constructions. In this way Maggie mirrors the behavior of the gypsies. Because they do not permanently settle in any particular place, gypsies are not connected to one specific landscape or the constructions situated on it. In the same way, Maggie rejects them because they suppress her spirit. Maggie, therefore, directly opposes Mr. Tulliver and Tom who work relentlessly to establish themselves and their family legacy through the constructions situated on the land, particularly the Mill. However, as a result of the Flood, Maggie’s spirit is freed from the oppressive Mill-like gender constructions. Upon realizing the Floss is flooding, Maggie gets into a boat and goes searching for Tom: “She seized an oar and began to paddle the boat forward with the energy of wakening hope . . . she was hardly conscious of any bodily sensations,—except a sensation of strength, inspired by mighty emotion” (590-591). With this, Eliot subverts the binary male/female. Rather than fulfilling the traditional gender role of the passive damsel in distress, Maggie, like Mrs. Noah, takes on the active male
role of guiding the boat; taking on the masculine role, Maggie, like St. Oggs, guides the boat through the floodwaters. By going out on the boat in an attempt to rescue Tom, Maggie practices both love and agency only allotted to males; as a result, she is transformed into a saint.
Works Cited


