

Conflict of Sympathies: Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*¹

Masako ISHII

1. Introduction

In “The Natural History of German Life,” George Eliot writes:

The greatest benefit we owe to the artist [. . .] is the extension of our sympathies. Appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment. (*Essays* 270)

This conception of sympathy is the prevailing principle in George Eliot’s letters, essays, and novels, and “sympathy” is a keyword in understanding her ethics and work. The narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* (1860, hereafter *The Mill*) also argues that morality is not to be based on “maxims” but on “a wide fellow-feeling with all that is human” (498).²

¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented in Japanese at the 18th annual conference of the George Eliot Fellowship of Japan at Kyoto University on 28 November, 2014. I express my sincere gratitude to Toru Sasaki, Beryl Gray, and Hiroshi Ebine for their helpful suggestions. All remaining errors and inadequacies are, of course, my own.

² George Eliot. *The Mill on the Floss*. Ed. Gordon S. Haight. Intro. Dinah Birch. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. All references to *The Mill on the Floss* are from this edition; page numbers are indicated in parentheses.

First, we should define sympathy as used by George Eliot. Modern usage of the term “sympathy” conforms to the definition (3c) in *The Oxford English Dictionary*: “The quality or state of being thus affected by the suffering or sorrow of another; a feeling of compassion or commiseration.”³ However, in the nineteenth century, sympathy was more broadly defined as in (3b): “The quality or state of being affected by the condition of another with a feeling similar or corresponding to that of the other; the fact or capacity of entering into or sharing the feelings of another or others; fellow-feelings.” For example, William Wordsworth argues in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) that “a selection of language really used by men” prevents poets from “separat[ing] themselves from the sympathies of men” (Wordsworth 597). Eliot first read Wordsworth’s poems at the age of twenty and wrote, “I never before met with so many of my own feelings, expressed just as I could like them” (*Letters* 1: 34) and continued to read “steadily all the rest of her life” (*Biography* 29). George Eliot also totally agreed with Ludwig Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* (1854),⁴ which refers to sympathy as follows: “Feeling is sympathy [. . .] In feeling man is related to his fellow-man as to himself; he is alive to the sorrows, the joys of another as his own” (276-77). Hence, Eliot’s usage of sympathy, which she paraphrased as “fellow-feeling,” is also closest to definition (3b). Here it should be noticed that in George Eliot’s novels sympathy encompasses definition (3c), that is pity or compassion, as a subset. This usage of

³ *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. CD-ROM. Vers. 4.0. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009.

⁴ In her essay “Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming,” George Eliot argues in line with Feuerbach that “The idea of a God [. . .] is an extension and multiplication of the effects produced by human sympathy” (Pinney, 188).

sympathy appears, for example, in the narrative in George Eliot's short novel *Silas Marner* (1861): "[. . .] that merging of suspicion and dislike in a rather contemptuous pity for him [Silas] as lone and crazy, was now accompanied with more active sympathy, especially amongst the women" (120). It goes without saying that sympathy includes various modes of intensity from mere approval of another to the love of a mother who tries to save her child at the cost of her life. Moreover, I believe that sympathy in George Eliot's novels is sometimes based on ignorance or misunderstanding as is seen in Dorothea Brooke's blind admiration for Edward Casaubon in *Middlemarch* (1871-72).

Traditionally, George Eliot's statement about sympathy illustrated at the beginning of this section has often been taken to indicate that in her novels sympathy always causes its subject to behave morally and brings peace and happiness to its object. For example, Forest Pyle argues that for George Eliot sympathy is "the means by which the romantic wound opened by the imagination is to be sutured" (5). In other words, imagination leads to selfish desire, while sympathy overcomes egotism and repudiates the desires of self, making a bridge over the "epistemological and ethical gap between self and world" (6). In a similar manner, Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth argues that for George Eliot sympathy is a unity that comes from the recognition and acceptance of the difference between oneself and another. This difference between oneself and another is critically significant for human morals, Ermarth says, quoting Feuerbach's concept of prayer: "Prayer is the self-division of man into two beings, —a dialogue of man with himself, with his heart" (Feuerbach 122)

and only the “distinction between me and others” makes my sin “shrink within its limits” (*ibid.* 159). Therefore, Ermarth claims that the characters with “single-mindedness” do not improve morals in George Eliot’s novels (26).⁵

However, I believe that sympathy cannot always be the basis of morality but sympathy sometimes “threatens to make the other into merely an extension of the self—or the self into an extension of the other,” as Rachel Ablow argues (71). For example, when a person has conflicting interests and sympathies for different persons, he/she might take such a selfish attitude in order to secure his/her identity or his/her own value on earth. Rosemarie Bodenheimer calls this conflict of sympathies “conflicts between loyalty and old commitments and acceptance of new ones” (103). Thus, sympathy does not always lead to ethics and a sympathetic person may sometimes be accused of immorality and even be banished. On the other hand, a non-imaginative and strong-willed person can sometimes behave morally more easily than a person sympathetic in imagination but insecure in identity who wavers between conflicting sympathies.

This article aims to prove the unreliability of sympathy as a guide to morality as depicted in Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill*. It specifically argues that her indecisiveness to the allure of Stephen Guest, her cousin Lucy’s fiancé, and her final resistance to his persuasion to elope both derive from conflicting sympathies. This conflict arises from her insecure identity and need for a “stronger

⁵ For another *example*, Zelda Austen asserts that the aim of George Eliot’s aesthetic is to make us “know and feel a little pain of other souls, for to Eliot, as it was to Shelley, the sympathetic imagination is the foundation of all morality, and we can never be good until we lose ourselves and feel with others” (560).

presence” to protect her, which is a product of the narrowness of her world (464).⁶ This paper also argues that Maggie’s attempt to rescue her brother Tom, who is isolated and endangered by the flood, is based not only on her morality but on her desperate attempt to gain his love, which has been lost since her affair with Stephen. In other words, here again, her sympathy for Tom is intensely characterised by her needs.

2. Maggie’s Insecurity about her Identity

In *The Mill*, the narrator tells us that “character is destiny,” but “not the whole of our destiny” and that “[t]he tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within” (401). It follows that the kind of society found in St. Ogg’s, the town where the story is set, is important. In a letter to her publisher, George Eliot says *The Mill* is “a sort of companion picture of provincial life [in *Adam Bede*]” (*Letters* 3: 41). However, family life in *The Mill* is not as idyllic and innocent as depicted in *Adam Bede* (1859). In St. Ogg’s, the Tullivers and the Dodsons, Mrs. Tulliver’s birth family, are enlightened by “no sublime principles, no romantic visions, no active, self-renouncing faith” (*The Mill* 272). The narrator warns the reader about their “oppressive

⁶ However, Ablow discusses the fact that it does not seem that “Maggie understands Stephen or has any particular access to his thoughts or feelings” (76). Hence, Ablow regards Maggie’s sympathy for Stephen as the feeling of oneness in rapture when they are gazing of each other, which is close to definition (1b) in the *OED*: “A relation between two bodily organs or parts (or between two persons) such that disorder, or any condition, of the one induces a corresponding condition in the other” (76-77). This type of sympathy, she argues, paralyzes moral judgement. However, for George Eliot, sympathy is premised on the access to the other’s thought and feelings or the illusion of such access, as illustrated in *Silas Marner* mentioned above. Therefore, definition (3b) including definition (3c) as a subset is more appropriate. I believe that the problem of sympathy is not in itself, but in a conflict between different sympathies.

narrowness” (*ibid.*). As Pauline Nestor observes, unlike Hetty Sorrel’s involvement with Arthur Donnithorne in *Adam Bede*, which is “entirely [a] personal failure,” in *The Mill*, Maggie’s susceptibility to the allure of Stephen, is largely “a product of the narrowness of her world” (59).

In this oppressive society, Maggie simultaneously lives in “Reality, Books, and Waking Dreams” (276). In reality, her physical traits—her dark skin, dark eyes, and notoriously uncontrollable black hair—and the rashness and wilfulness she inherits from her father cause her mother grief. Moreover, Maggie’s carelessness and forgetfulness always make her mother lament her fate in having such a daughter and vexes her brother Tom (28). For example, Maggie once forgets to feed the rabbits entrusted to her by Tom and they starve to death (35); absorbed by music, she bumps Tom and makes him spill his wine (93). Her aunt, Mrs. Pullet, tells her mother that Maggie’s dark skin, like that of a gypsy, will lead her to bad luck in the future (68). When Maggie escapes to a gypsy camp in despair due to Tom’s favour for their cousin Lucy over her, Aunt Pullet is finally convinced of Maggie’s unfortunate end (103).⁷ Even her high intelligence, of which she is very proud, her imaginative and sympathetic nature, along with her “passionate longings for all that [is] beautiful and glad” and her strong desire for all knowledge (235), are expected to “turn to trouble” (17).

Thus, Maggie’s traits totally contradict her maternal family’s criteria for female talent, manners, and appearance; her cousin Lucy is their ideal. As Bernard J. Paris points out, this low esteem leads

⁷ According to Alicia Carroll, “Marked by the darkness of their skin, hair, and eyes, Gypsies could embody multiple European fears and fantasies” (33).

Maggie to entertain an almost neurotic degree of uncertainty about her identity (172). Because hardly any of her family appreciates her, young Maggie turns to her father and brother for love and protection of a “stronger presence” (464). This presence is expected to allow Maggie to daydream happily under its care and protection. A fishing scene from her childhood illustrates this experience and need:

“O Magsie! you little duck! Empty the basket.”

Maggie was not conscious of unusual merit, but it was enough that Tom called her Magsie, and was pleased with her. There was nothing to mar her delight in the whispers and the dreamy silences, when she listened to the light dipping sounds of the rising fish and the gentle rustling, as if the willows and the reeds and the water had their happy whisperings also. Maggie thought it would make a very nice heaven to sit by the pool in that way, and never be scolded. She never knew she had a bite till Tom told her; but she likes fishing very much. (40)

In terms of being a source of sympathy, Maggie’s father far exceeds her brother. It is only her father who is proud of her excellent intelligence, telling his friend, Mr. Riley, “It’s a pity but what she’d been the lad—she’d ha’ been a match for the lawyers, *she* would. It’s the wonderful’st thing” (19).⁸ By way of contrast, Tom regards her as “a little silly thing” (40). It is her father who values her appearance as

⁸ Nevertheless, Mr. Tulliver is also worried about Maggie’s cleverness, saying, “Too ’cute for a woman, I’m afraid. It’s no mischief much while she’s a little un, but an over-’cute woman’s no better nor a long tailed sheep” (12).

“a straight black-eyed wench as anybody need wish to see” (13), while Tom laughs at her to her indignation, helping her roughly cut off her unruly hair, “O, my buttons, what a queer thing you look!” (64). Moreover, it is her father who always protects her from being criticized or scolded. Even when Maggie runs away to the gypsy camp in despair over Tom’s favours toward Lucy, her father comforts her and orders her mother and Tom never to mention it. On the other hand, while Tom is “very fond of her,” he punishes her when he thinks it necessary (40). Maggie accuses Tom as follows:

“[. . .] even when I was a little girl, and always loved you better than any one [*sic*] else in the world, you would let me go crying to bed without forgiving me. You have no pity [. . .] You have not even a vision of feelings by the side of which your shining virtues are mere darkness!” (347)

However, it is Tom, not her father, who Maggie loves best. I believe that this comes from Maggie’s longing for a “stronger presence” (464) to protect her from the harsh society around her and secure her vulnerable identity and self-confidence. Her father cannot be this “stronger presence,” because he resembles her too much in his rashness and social vulnerability. He files various irrational lawsuits that result in his bankruptcy, making himself a moral “wreck” (254). Even at home, he sometimes cannot control himself and falls into a “paroxysm,” beating his poor horse and the boy who works in the mill (281). At one point, Maggie has to stop him from severely flogging his enemy, the lawyer Wakem (356). Thus, her father, though deeply

sympathetic toward her, is socially vulnerable in a way similar to Maggie; he often complains about “a puzzling world” (83) which is “too many for [him]” (261). Tom, by contrast, “is not a youth of whom you would prophesy failure in anything he had thoroughly wished” (309). He “performs what [he] intends, subdues every counteracting impulse, and has no visions beyond the distinctly possible” (310). His “unimaginative” and “unsympathetic” mind, which is the accusation of Maggie (393), conforms to the expectations of his family and the townspeople, as practical mind-set (393). As a result, Tom succeeds in repaying the family’s debt and recovering the family pride and mill. Moreover, it is this unimaginative Tom, not sympathetic Maggie, who can resist and conceal his impossible love for Lucy. Tom accuses Maggie for her indecisiveness:

“I never feel certain about anything with *you*. At one time you take pleasure in a sort of perverse self-denial, and at another you have not resolution to resist a thing that you know to be wrong.” (393)

Thus, Tom has what Maggie does not, the power to survive and the power to keep to his moral judgment, which helps to satisfy Maggie’s need for the love of a “stronger presence” on which her security depends. Thus, Maggie’s love is guided more by her dependence than by the depth of any sympathy toward her. In other words, her sympathy for Tom is based on what Ablow calls an “extension of the self” (71). Had Maggie grown up accepted by her family, she could have endured estrangement from Tom without fearing loneliness and

vulnerability. As Paris explains, “Her dread of Tom is the dread of her own anxiety, and the intensity of her fear is a direct revelation of the weakness of her real self” (171).

3. Maggie’s Renunciation

Following her father’s bankruptcy, Maggie falls into poverty with the rest of her family and loses the love and care of her guardians. Tom and her father must concentrate all their efforts into paying back the family debt and seeking revenge against Wakem, the lawyer who has caused her father to lose their fortune (267). Maggie, who is intelligent enough to succeed in the world if she were a boy, passionately longs for knowledge, music, and all beautiful things, but is frustrated with the small world she occupies (235). At times, she fears becoming “a demon” because she rebels against her situation and feels rage toward her father, mother, and Tom (287). Then she turns for help to the teachings of Thomas à Kempis, who advises that renouncing earthly joys is the way to Heavenly happiness. Maggie clings to this idea as a substitute for Tom’s love, as “the key” to happiness in *this* world (291). For her, renunciation must “carry any efficacy’ in life” (497). In this sense, self-renunciation serves her as “opium” to numb her hunger for love (48) and to find “a faith for herself” (292).

At this point in the story, Philip, who is Wakem’s son and Tom’s schoolmate, re-enters Maggie’s life as a suitor. Paris argues that if not for the family feud, marriage to Philip would be “one of the best courses open to Maggie” because Philip’s love comprises “neurotic intensity that satisfies her need for indulgence and importance” and

also because Maggie's devotion to this feeble and sexually unappealing man provides her with "a sense of virtue" (177). I think that Philip's high intelligence and talk about books and music also enhance Maggie's sympathy for Philip, leading her to clandestine meetings that Tom later bans. However, I believe that Philip can neither be a substitute for Tom nor Maggie's ideal lover. He is too similar to Maggie in his dependence and hunger for love. He not only depends on his father financially to win and support Maggie (373) but also complains to her about various things that he has to forego (303). This weakness stems from his neurotic nature and his physical deformity, which keeps him from participating in many practical aspects of life. The following simile presented by Philip symbolises the power relations between Maggie and Philip. On one hand, he compares Maggie to a hamadryade, a nymph who lives in a wood called the Red Deeps. For him, she is "dark and strong and noble, just issued from one of the fir-trees" (326-27). On the other hand, he likens himself to a little bird as he laments for the condition of his life: "I *flutter* all ways, and *fly* in none" (327, my emphases).⁹ I believe these analogies imply that Maggie must prop up and protect Philip and accordingly verify how unsuited Philip is as Maggie's lover. Maggie does not need someone merely to be assimilated into her life; he must also shield her from the world. In other words, Philip cannot give her the bliss of "Waking Dreams," nor does he attract her sexually (276). However, Maggie's neurotic hunger for love, her

⁹ Reva Stump also points out Philip's birdlike features: "Two more brief recurrences of the image—Stephen speaks of Philip's 'ruffled feathers' and later tells Philip: 'I wish you'd conduct yourself a little less like *a sparrow* with a residence on the house-top [. . .]—emphasize Philip's birdlike qualities and indicate that they are generally apparent" (94).

penchant for self-renunciation as a way of seeking self-esteem, and her “tenderness for deformed things” prevent her from refusing him (177). She even finds “a moment of real happiness” in her successful self-renunciation (337). Therefore, it is understandable that when Tom’s interference forces their separation, she feels “a certain dim background of relief” (348). Furthermore, subsequently, when Stephen asks her if she loves “some one [*sic*] else better,” she is silent, rather than admitting that her heart belongs to Philip (448).

4. Another Stronger Presence: Stephen Guest

The narrator describes the beginning of Maggie’s love for Stephen as “[i]t was not that she thought distinctly of Mr. Stephen Guest [. . .]” (385). However, as a well-educated, masculine, handsome young gentleman with sex appeal, and status as heir to the largest business in town, he gradually impresses Maggie as another “stronger presence” that could protect her from the harsh society and could allow Maggie to daydream. F. R. Leavis argues that Maggie is immature because “she has no sense that Stephen Guest [. . .] is not worthy of her spiritual and idealistic nature” (43-44). Felicia Bonaparte also regards Stephen as “too unequal to Maggie,” and argues that Maggie’s escapade with him is merely due to sexual attraction (205). It is true that Stephen is at first depicted as an affected man with a “diamond ring, attar of roses, and air of nonchalant leisure, at twelve o’clock in the day” (363). However, later in the story, when Stephen asserts that he and Maggie are fated to love one another by “natural law” (475) and accuses her of intending to marry Philip, who she does not love, Maggie flushes deeply and

cannot say anything, admitting to herself that Stephen is the sole candidate for her ideal marriage partner (476). Her only objection to Stephen's proposal is that it betrays other relationships and threatens the identity she has nurtured. If George Eliot had further elaborated Maggie's love story with Stephen, she could have established Stephen as the respectful and captivating person Maggie deserves.¹⁰ Moreover, as Rosemary Ashton points out, it should be noted that *The Mill* is "George Eliot's most autobiographical novel," reflecting "her unhappy relationship with her brother Isaac" and "her sense of injustice at the attitude of friends and critics towards her partnership with Lewes" (26). While writing *The Mill*, George Eliot was living with George Henry Lewes. Lewes could not divorce his wife, Agnes, because he had registered himself as the father of Agnes' children who were actually fathered by his friend. George Eliot was rejected by her brother and society for living with Lewes.¹¹ Hence, Maggie's plight reflects George Eliot's predicament, and Maggie's flight with Stephen invokes George Eliot's trip with Lewes to Germany when they decided to begin living together openly, as Ashton argues (35)

¹⁰ George Eliot confessed to the publisher John Blackwood in her letters on 3 April and 9 July, 1860 "the absence of things that might have been there." She was "beguiled by love of [her] subject" in the first two volumes, which "caused a want of proportionate fullness in the treatment of the third, which [she would] always regret" (*Letters* 3: 285, 317).

¹¹ The American, Charles Eliot Norton reported to a friend on 29 January, 1869 (*Biography* 409) that he had attended one of the Lewes' Sunday afternoon receptions:

She is an *object* of great interest and great curiosity to society here. She is not received in general society, and the women who visit her are either *émancipée* as not to mind what the world says about them, or have no social position to maintain. [. . .] the common feeling is that it will not do for society to condone so flagrant a breach as hers of a convention and a sentiment (to use no stronger terms) on which morality greatly relies for support. I suspect society is right in this.

(*Biography* 148). Thus, if the analogy with George Eliot's own life is followed, Stephen should be considered worthy of Maggie in terms of the plot.

What has made Stephen another "stronger presence" for Maggie? First, as Paris argues, by marrying Stephen Guest, "Maggie can achieve the position of pre-eminence" in the town (179). Her passionate longings for knowledge and all that is beautiful, and her long perseverance of the poverty and loneliness in the vulgar environment must have caused her to be tempted by the vision of a future sophisticated and respectable life as Stephen's wife. The narrator depicts her carried away by vanity and looking on herself as one who is now beautiful but still awkward in socialising because of her temperament:

Maggie had smiled at herself then, and for the moment had forgotten everything in the sense of her own beauty. If that state of mind could have lasted, her choice would have been to have Stephen Guest at her feet, offering her a life filled with all luxuries, with daily incense of adoration near and distant, and with all possibilities of culture at her command. (436)

Thus, Maggie secretly represses her vision of a wealthy and respectable life as a result of accepting Stephen's admiration for her. Moreover, as Laura Comer Emery argues, deep in Maggie's mind, there is "unconscious jealousy" of Lucy, in whose shadow she has always existed (38). Maggie's unconscious jealousy must have helped to strengthen her illusion about the future as Stephen's wife. This

explanation is compelling because the narrator observes as follows:

There were moments in which a cruel selfishness seemed to be getting possession of her [Maggie]; why should not Lucy—why should not Philip suffer? *She* had suffered through many years of her life; and who had renounced anything for her?’ (458, original emphasis)

Second, Maggie is also attracted by Stephen as a handsome and masculine young man. When Stephen visits her during Lucy’s absence before their ill-fated boat ride, Maggie does not look at him, who is Lucy’s de facto fiancé; but at the same time, she feels “a presence like that of a closely-hovering broad-winged bird in the darkness” (406). I believe that this imagery indicates that Maggie is attracted by Stephen’s masculine appeal and wishes to be carried away by that strong force. Hence, though she has persistently avoided eye contact with Stephen during their meeting, the discontented tone of his “Good-bye” suddenly changes her attitude. To his surprise, she accepts his invitation to go for a walk in the garden and his “offer of the firm arm” (408). Subsequently, Maggie strolls with “the presence of strength” by her side “in the same dim dreamy state as they had been in a quarter of an hour before” (*ibid.*). Moreover, the narrator emphasizes how a masculine “firm arm” appeals to women. Thus, Stephen’s “stronger presence” consists of his masculine attractiveness and his high social status including financial power and sophisticated culture. On the other hand, Maggie’s intense “need to be loved” (37) by a socially and physically strong presence resulting from her lack of

self-confidence since childhood renders her extremely vulnerable to the temptation of the passionate admiration of Stephen.

At the beginning of their boating excursion that leads to Maggie's ostracism, Stephen is not mentioned by name but by what Maggie needs most, a "stronger presence." Moreover, the phrase "the added self" in the description of the scene below implies that Maggie merges with the presence Stephen represents as she did with the presence of Tom in the fishing scene in her childhood:

And they went. Maggie felt that she was being led down the garden among the roses, being helped with *firm tender care* into the boat, having the cushion and cloak arranged for her feet, and her parasol opened for her (which she had forgotten)—all by *this stronger presence* that seemed to bear her along without any act of her own will, like the added self which comes with the sudden exalting influence of a strong tonic—and she felt nothing else. Memory was excluded. (464, my emphases)

Thus, her flight with Stephen begins with her waking dream, which always means supreme joy for Maggie as observed above. Leavis argues that the process of letting "the boat carry her down-stream until it is too late, so that the choice seems taken from her and the decision compelled" offers "admirable [. . .] insight and understanding" (45). However, I believe that Leavis overlooks Maggie's intention to leave Stephen before it is too late. She fatefully fails to leave Stephen after that blissful hour because she dreads Stephen's anger. In fact,

when she rouses herself from her daydreaming and notices that they have passed the intended destination, she blames Stephen with her awakened sympathy for Tom and Lucy. She speaks to him in “an agitated tone” and gives him “an indignant look,” while he earnestly entreats her to elope with him (466). If Maggie had left him at this stage and had told Lucy that he was mad enough to make Maggie hate him, as Stephen had advised Maggie to do, none of the people concerned other than Stephen would have been deeply hurt. Even in Stephen’s case, “the world’s wife”¹² would have forgiven his deviation from socially acceptable behaviour because “young men [a]re liable to those sudden infatuated attachments” (490).

However, once Stephen gets angry, Maggie is “paralysed” by his “tone of suppressed rage” and it is difficult for her to turn away from his angry face (466). She cannot bear the loss of love and admiration of this “stronger presence”. At this point, Maggie’s sympathy for Stephen overcomes that for Tom and Lucy, because sympathy is “merely an extension of the self” and a matter of securing one’s identity, one’s own value on earth. Those who are full of self-confidence, though unimaginative, like Tom, would never have failed in moral judgment on this occasion; however, Maggie’s insecure identity cannot resist Stephen’s anger. She must cling to admiration of this “stronger presence,” whether ethically correct or not. She then reproaches Stephen for his lack of trust in her love and abandons the chance to leave. Consequently, she submits to the disgrace of staying with him for one night. This leads all those whom

¹² The narrator defines public opinion in these cases as “always of the feminine gender—not the world, but the world’s wife” (490). This recalls the social ostracism George Eliot suffered. See Section 2 of this paper.

she loves, including Stephen, into misery, even though the couple did not consummate their love. Thus, at this critical point, Maggie fatally gives her sympathy for Stephen the highest priority among sympathies for all her beloved ones.

5. Between Two “Stronger Presence[s]”

Regarding the reason Maggie finally refuses to elope with Stephen, critics explain this variously. Many critics attribute Maggie’s conversion overnight to her awakened sympathy for Lucy and Philip and the renunciation of her own happiness. For example, Pyle, who distinguishes imagination and sympathy as mentioned in Section 1, believes that when Maggie rejects Stephen’s entreaties, “imagination and desire are displaced by a sympathy that finally asserts a narrative force” (20). Ablow argues that Maggie must compensate for her “irresponsible form of absent-mindedness” (82) by accepting “the consequence of things that happen when her mind is elsewhere” (84). Paris argues that, at this point, Maggie finally grasps the teachings of Thomas à Kempis and renounces earthly joy in favour of the path toward heavenly happiness (182). Barbara Hardy argues that Maggie gives up Stephen because of her sense of duty rising mainly from “the generous lovingness that was there” inside her since her childhood (55).¹³

¹³ Hardy regards Maggie’s refusal as George Eliot’s self-justifying “apologia,” that “had human ties been involved, [George Eliot] would not even have broken the faintest commitment; since there were none, [she] was prepared to break social laws and commandments” (51). On the other hand, Janice Carlisle regards the novel as self-condemnation, arguing that “[b]y allowing Maggie to refuse to sacrifice her ties with the past and her family despite the strength of her desires, George Eliot created what she could not be, a noble, self-sacrificing character” (193).

On the other hand, some critics, for example, Bonaparte attributes Maggie's separation from Stephen to her attachment to the past because the "past, as both time and place, is the foundation of her identity" (210). Similarly, Brigid Lowe argues that Maggie's controversial final choice is "not a matter of subordinating human desire to inhuman duty," but choosing the more peaceful affections and social inclination than passion (217). My reading is close to Bonaparte and Lowe's arguments in foregrounding individualism and the emphasis on Maggie's desperate yearning for her identity based on her past. However, I think that Maggie returns to Tom because he is at the centre of her childhood memories and she hopes that Tom, rather than the sceptical townspeople, will accept her and protect her from society. After all, it is Tom's anger that Maggie is worried about in her dream as elaborated below.

Maggie has two dreams during her night with Stephen, which prompt her to leave him. I believe these dreams come from Maggie's latent fear of Tom's anger and her longing for his and Lucy's forgiveness. Philip appears in neither dream because he is merely the object of her penchant for self-renunciation, even if she would claim that Philip is one of the reasons she must leave Stephen after she wakes up.

In the first dream, two boats appear, one with Maggie and the other with Lucy in the form of the shining Virgin Mary and Tom as a boatman. Lucy, I believe, simultaneously symbolises Tom's secret love for Lucy and Maggie's need for her forgiveness. Tom symbolizes Maggie's fear of his anger and her need for his protection. Critics, such as Emery, who see in Maggie's conquest of Stephen a vindictive

triumph over Lucy, would think Lucy's appearance in the dream with Tom, instead of Maggie, reflects Maggie's "unconscious jealousy" (44). In other words, Lucy reflects Maggie's anger. However, why then does Lucy take the form of the glorious Virgin Mary rather than a miserable woman suffering the treachery of her cousin with her fiancé? I think that the glowing dream figure of Lucy symbolizes neither Maggie's jealousy nor anger, but Maggie's repentance and wish for Lucy's love and forgiveness. Here, Maggie's sympathy for Lucy again works as "the extension of the self into the other." Lucy must feel pity for her suffering and accept her repentance. Lucy's symbolism in *The Mill* is related to the legend of the Virgin Mary in the town, in which Virgin Mary rewards Ogg, a ferryman, who has helped her cross the river in high winds without asking about her identity or the reason she must cross the turbulent river (117). Hence, Lucy, who has been always kind to Maggie, would appear in Maggie's dream not to accuse her of boating alone with Stephen, but to sympathize with Maggie, who is torn between her past loyalties and her new love. In other words, Lucy symbolizes Maggie's identity crisis and her hope for reconciliation with her past.

What changes Maggie's mind about Stephen, however, is the appearance of Tom in her dream. He ignores Maggie's presence in the other boat, as he always does when he is angry. Maggie's dread of "Tom's anger of all things," which she has experienced since childhood, returns (35). Then, as Maggie's boat begins to sink, she transitions into her second dream in which, as a child in the old parlour, she is relieved to discover that Tom is "not really angry" (470). This, I believe, symbolizes her wish for his forgiveness. Once

her dread of Tom's rage reoccurs, Stephen's indignation over her resistance means nothing to her. Stephen might support her identity only provisionally; if his passion for her subsides, she will "feel as if there were nothing firm beneath [her] feet" because her primary sense of identity and self-worth has been nurtured by Tom's love and acceptance (478). Tom and Maggie's lives have been entwined since "the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together" (521).¹⁴ It is Tom that ultimately retrieves the management of the mill which has belonged to their family "for five generations" (398) and unconditionally protects the "torn nest" of their family pierced by the unsympathetic outside world (275). Moreover, Tom is stronger than Stephen in that he has the self-command to repress his hopeless love for Lucy and continues to live a hard life. Tom declares to Maggie, who has returned to him after her escapade with Stephen, "Yes! *I* have had feelings to struggle with; but I conquered them" (485, original emphasis). In contrast, Stephen, when persuaded by Maggie to think of Lucy's feelings, exclaims, "*I can't* think of her," "stamping as if with pain" (476, original emphasis). Stephen is really an untrustworthy lover.

On waking the next morning beside Stephen, Maggie no longer hesitates to persuade him that she cannot throw away the "memories," "affections," and "longings after perfect goodness" that are so dear to her and define her (476). She declares to Stephen that he could gain her "feeling" momentarily but could not have her "whole soul" (*ibid*).

¹⁴ Some critics are sceptical about this description of Maggie's happy childhood. For example, U.C. Knoepfelmacher says that Tom "ceases to torment her only upon his death" (219). However, as mentioned above, Tom contributes to Maggie's blissful moments as she daydreams under his care and protection and he retrieves her confidence in herself.

Maggie's eager craving for love and security prefers the more trustful Tom. Thus, she finally renounces her love for Stephen not because of Thomas à Kempis' teaching or any other type of self-sacrifice, but because of her sympathy for Tom and other relations based on the need for her self-confidence.

6. Maggie's Glory and Death

When Maggie returns home, however, she finds that her moral judgment proves ineffective in the town. Though she refused to consummate her relationship with Stephen or to marry him, Tom and the townspeople regard her as a fallen woman. They believe that she has failed to seduce Stephen. Tom, with Maggie's previous clandestine meetings with Stephen and Philip in mind, rejects her excuses and banishes her from his life and home, saying, "You don't belong to me" (484). It is not only that Tom cannot understand the conflicts in his sister's mind but that he even wishes for her death rather than her humiliating return. The reaction of the town of St. Ogg's is a little different from that of Tom, giving Maggie one moral possibility in which Stephen overrides Maggie's objections and "sweeps her away" (103). However, in order to achieve morality in that way, Maggie must return home as Stephen's wife; otherwise, Maggie is a fallen woman who has failed to tempt Stephen. The world's wife "passes judgement" (490):

But the results, we know, were not of a kind to warrant this extenuation of the past. 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. [. . .] It was to be hoped that she should go out of the neighbourhood—to America, or anywhere—so as to purify the air of St. Ogg's from the taint of her presence, extremely dangerous to daughters there! [. . .] (491-92)

From the Victorian perspective, as Jonathan Loesberg points out, Maggie may be regarded as a fallen woman even though she returns before her elopement with Stephen without having had sexual relations (137).¹⁵ Hence, even Dr. Kenn, the rector of St. Ogg's and one of Maggie's few supporters, concludes that "an ultimate marriage between Stephen and Maggie" would be "the least evil" (497).¹⁶

Lucy and Philip both give her a message of forgiveness and admiration for her renunciation by paying a visit or writing a letter to her. However, their sympathy is no use in restoring her self-confidence, just as her father's love and sympathy did not work well without Tom's reassurances. Maggie needs the sympathy and forgiveness of Tom to restore her moral confidence and positive self-recognition. Forlorn Maggie still resists the further entreaties of Stephen's letter for three days and nights, wishing for death: "I will

¹⁵ For example, see Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton's letter to John Blackwood on 4 April 1860 (*Letters* 8: 121-22).

¹⁶ Some modern critics also prefer Maggie's choice of Stephen. For example, Nina Auerbach criticizes Maggie's renunciation, saying that "[t]he novel's heavy irony against 'the world's wife' does not mean the wife is wrong in seeing that Maggie's wild swerve toward renunciation and her solitary return after the fact are the most destructive choices she can make" (245-56).

bear it, and bear it till death. [. . .] But how long it will be before death comes!” (515). Then unexpectedly, on the third night, a flood comes and kills both Maggie and Tom soon after their happy reconciliation.

Critics view this sudden, accidental flood from various perspectives. For example, “The flood river,” writes Leavis, “has no symbolic or metaphorical value” (45). According to Hardy, the denouement of the deaths of siblings Maggie and Tom in the flood is needed not by the plot, but by the author because of “Eliot’s own break with family and society” (44). Ashton also focuses on George Eliot’s depression due to the alienation from her brother Isaac, claiming that “the ending magnanimously forgives Tom/Isaac as well as annihilating (*sic*) him” (36). Gillian Beer argues that the flood makes manifest Maggie’s incestuous union with Tom (101)¹⁷ and that Maggie’s death solves her difficult situation, letting her escape from all pain.

I believe that in the last section of the novel titled “The Final Rescuer,” the flood activates Maggie, who was wishing for death in despair over ostracism by Tom and society. I also think that her death glorifies her rescue and saves her from future pain at the cost of her life. When the flood arrives, she is transformed from the one to be protected into the one who tries to protect. Maggie is no longer a “hateful” creature (485), but someone heroic and helpful to Tom. As the narrator observes, “she paddled and rowed by turns [. . .] inspired by mighty emotion” (518). Maggie cries out in the dim loneliness: “O God, where am I? Which is the way home?” (517). Here it should be

¹⁷ David Smith also interprets the final embrace between brother and sister as the orgasmic culmination of an incestuous relationship (149-62).

noted that Maggie cries which way “home” rather than “the mill,” when referring to her destination. Taken out of context, as Laurence Lerner points out, “home” clearly implies “Maggie’s question about her own identity” arising from her loneliness (276). The flood gives her a chance to restore her identity. In order to rescue Tom at the risk of her life, Maggie not only makes a moral decision but also acts out of her desire to regain Tom’s love, both of which come from her sympathy for Tom, which consists of “the strong resurgent love towards her brother” and “unshakable memories of early union” (518).¹⁸ Eventually, at “home,” the place to secure her identity, she receives Tom’s understanding and gratitude for her. This time Tom is “pale with a certain awe and humiliation” and his eyes are blurred with tears; he utters her “old childish” name, “Magsie!” (520). Then, the drowning of the siblings makes Maggie’s final glory both permanent and transient, releasing her from all pain on earth.¹⁹ If they had not died, Maggie might have continued “to struggle and fall and repent again,” while Tom would have been the same Tom, hard and narrow-minded, punishing Maggie when she is wrong (515). Moreover, Tom, who is now sympathetic to Maggie, might be banished with her from the town due to their nonconformity. It goes without saying that there is a possibility that author’s personal situation might have affected the plot, as Hardy and Ashton point out.

¹⁸ Lerner says that “Maggie [does] not take a moral decision in fetching Tom” but acts on the same impulse that in her childhood made her cut her hair off and run away to live with gypsies (277). However, in my point of view elaborated above, Maggie’s confidence in her own respectability belongs to her loyalty to Tom and her past, which leads to morality.

¹⁹ Ashton also says that “[t]ragic though this end is, it is represented as a happy reconciliation” (36). Paris even argues that “Maggie at the end has adopted an extreme form of the self-effacing solution” and that “[s]he wishes to die so that she might remain good” (186).

After all, the narrator explains that of all the characters mentioned in this story, only Tom and Maggie are killed in the flood (521).

7. Conclusion

The narrator declares that morality is not guided “solely by general rules” but by “insight and sympathy” (498). However, even insight and sympathy do not always lead us to what we think is morally correct behaviour because sympathy presupposes self-confidence and positive self-recognition of its subject, and sympathies conflict with each other in order to protect those. An imaginative, oversensitive person with an insecure self-respect would especially have difficulty choosing the most appropriate feelings of sympathy among many toward different people.

Maggie’s relatives, narrow-minded and oppressive, regard her dark-skinned, dark-haired appearance, and her rash and forgetful disposition as signs of evil. Even her high intelligence and imaginative and sympathetic nature, which are a source of pride to her, are not appreciated by her family. Therefore, Maggie, with a lack of self-confidence, unconsciously seeks the love and protection of a “stronger presence” to secure her own value on earth. She wavers between her feelings of sympathy for two “stronger presence[s],” Tom and Stephen. Eventually she fails in conforming to the moral judgment of Tom, the townspeople and even herself and leaves the town through death despite her fidelity to her loved ones. Thus, this novel depicts the inward struggles of, in George Eliot’s words, “a character essentially noble but liable to great error—error that is anguish to its own nobleness” (*Letters* 3: 317) and thereby shows the

limits of sympathy as moral foundation.

Works Cited

- Ablow, Rachel. *The Marriage of Minds: Reading Sympathy in the Victorian Marriage Plot*. Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 2007.
- Ashton, Rosemary. "The *Mill on the Floss* and the Difficulties of Relationships." *The George Eliot Review*. 42 (2011): 26-37.
- Auerbach, Nina. "The Power of Hunger: Demonism and Maggie Tulliver." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 30.2 (Sep. 1975): 150-71. Rpt. in *Romantic Imprisonment: Women and Other Glorified Outcasts*. New York: Columbia UP, 1986. 230-249.
- Austen, Zelda. "Why Feminist Critics Are Angry with George Eliot." *College English* 37.6 (Feb. 1976): 549-61.
- Beer, Gillian. *George Eliot*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986.
- Bodenheimer, Rosemarie. *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot—Her Letters and Fiction*. New York: Cornell UP, 1994.
- Bonaparte, Felicia. *Will and Destiny: Morality and Tragedy in George Eliot's Novels*. New York: New York UP, 1975.
- Carlisle, Janice. "The Mirror in *The Mill on the Floss*: Toward a Reading of Autobiography as Discourse." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 23.2 (Autumn 1990): 177-96.
- Carroll, Alicia. *Dark Smile: Race and Desire in George Eliot*. Athens: Ohio UP, 2003.
- Eliot, George. *The Mill on the Floss*. 1860. Ed. Gordon S. Haight. Intro. Dinah Birch. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.
- . *Silas Marner*. 1861. Ed. David Carroll. Intro. David Carroll

- and Q. D. Leavis. London: Penguin, 1996.
- Emery, Laura Comer. *George Eliot's Creative Conflict: The Other Side of Silence*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1976.
- Ermarth, Elizabeth Deeds. "George Eliot's Conception of Sympathy." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 40.1 (June 1985): 23-42.
- Feuerbach, Ludwig. *The Essence of Christianity*. Trans. George Eliot. 1854. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012.
- Haight, Gordon S., ed. *The George Eliot Letters*. Vols.1, 3, 8. New Haven: Yale UP, 1954, 1978.
- . *George Eliot: A Biography*. New York: Oxford UP, 1968.
- Hardy, Barbara. "The Mill on the Floss." *Critical Essays on George Eliot*. Ed. Barbara Hardy. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970.
- Knoepfmacher, U.C. *George Eliot's Early Novels: The Limits of Realism*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1968.
- Leavis, F. R. *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad*. New York: George W. Stewart, Publisher Inc., 1950.
- Lerner, Laurence. *The Truth-tellers: Jane Austen, George Eliot, D. H. Lawrence*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1967.
- Loesberg, Jonathan. "Aesthetics, Ethics, and Unreasonable Acts." Suzy Anger ed. *Knowing the Past: Victorian Literature & Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001. 121-47.
- Lowe, Brigid. *Victorian Fiction and the Insights of Sympathy: An Alternative to the Hermeneutics of Suspicion*. London: Anthem Press, 2007.
- Nestor, Pauline. *George Eliot*. New York: Palgrave, 2002.
- Paris, Bernard J. *A Psychological Approach to Fiction: Studies in*

- Thackeray, Stendhal, George Eliot, Dostoevsky, and Conrad*.
Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1974.
- Pinney, Thomas, ed. *Essays of George Eliot*. New York: Columbia UP,
1963.
- Pyle, Forest. "A Novel Sympathy: The Imagination of Community in
George Eliot." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 27.1 (Autumn 1993):
5-23.
- Smith, David. "Incest Patterns in Two Victorian Novels." *Literature
and Psychology* 15 (1965): 135-62.
- Stump, Reva. *Movement and Vision in George Eliot's Novels*. New
York: Russell & Russell, 1973.
- Wordsworth, William. *William Wordsworth: The Major Works
including The Prelude*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.
- The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. CD-ROM. Vers. 4.0. Oxford:
Oxford UP, 2009.

