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The Mill On The Floss: A Study Of Individual Agency And The Power Of Community's Identity And Social Constraint

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Abstract

This paper examines the tensions between individual agency and social constraints in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. Using the heroine Maggie Tulliver as a case in point, the novel reveals how, in 19th century rural England, personal ambition is often set against tight social structures. Analyzing the role of community identity, family expectations, and gender norms, this study sheds light on the ways in which social constraints limit individual expression and decision-making. In doing so, this research argues that Eliot critiques these restrictive societal frameworks and situates Maggie's struggle as a reflection on the broader consequences of suppressing individual agency in favor of communal conformity. From this perspective, *The Mill on the Floss* is at the same time a personal and social commentary that throws into relief the intricacies of identity formation in a society where freedom is not forthcoming. This paper contributes to existing scholarship on Eliot's work by pointing out how the novel's narration of community and individual agency speaks to contemporary debates over social identity and personal autonomy.

Keywords: Individual Agency, Social Constraint, Community Identity, Gender Roles, Victorian Society, Feminism, Maggie Tulliver, Family Loyalty, Social Judgment, Morality and Ethics, Narrative Voice, Self-Sacrifice, Gendered Expectations, Victorian Literature, Family Dynamics, Social Conformity, Romantic Relationships, Social Norms, Tragic Heroine, The River Symbolism, Moral Criticism, Women's Autonomy, Moral Dilemmas, *The Mill on the Floss* Analysis, Moral and Social Codes.

Chapter One

1.1 Introduction

One finds profound in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* a sense of exploration concerning the inner wrestle of the individual trapped between societal expectations. He does it in this wonderful way to portray the tangle dance between personal liberty and communal authority. Thus, it is around this very aspect that Maggie Tulliver's life embodies this incessant war for self-determination in respect of 19th century social pressures of England. Born into a rural, conservative society, Maggie possesses an acute intellectual curiosity and emotional depth that set her apart from the cultural norms of her time, making her both a subject of admiration and suspicion within her community. In her very desire for personal agency, Maggie represents the dilemma for those who want an existence beyond the constraints of any social identity, to aspire to fulfillment that lies greater than the conventional roles as well as expectations. Such is the case with this portrayal of Maggie and family by Eliot: weights of communal values and fidelity to family that form him but, in many senses, limit his aspirations.

For Maggie, personal choices often clash with the moral and social judgments of her family and neighbors, creating a world where conformity is prized and divergence is penalized. Her desires for intellectual growth and emotional independence are met with resistance, particularly as they threaten the established social order that her family and community uphold. The present narrative is thus a way of critiquing social constraints on women and portraying the consequences of a life defined by outer expectations instead of inner conviction. Thus, Eliot's delicate characterization and portrayal of Maggie's struggles invites readers to question the power of the community in forming the individual's identity and choices.

The Mill on the Floss shows how community identity can be a dominating force that defines and sometimes restricts the members, showing how much nonconformity costs in a society that expects people to comply. It is clearly demonstrated in Maggie's life as she navigates familial and societal expectations in determining her choices and, thus, her fate. At the same time, it goes into the more extensive implications of social control and how communal values, family ties, and gender conventions restrict the development of self-identity. The aim of this paper is to explore these themes through analyzing the dual forces of individual agency and social constraint in *The Mill on the Floss*.

It shall therefore study Maggie's journey through the lens of 19th-century rural England, attempting to find out how Eliot deals with broader cultural tensions between self-expression and societal obligation. By looking at this, the paper will expose how the struggle for autonomy of the subject in the novel portrays Maggie reflects broader social questions related to identity, community, and the sacrifices that need to be made for individuality in a world dominated by collective values. This exploration contributes to the existing scholarship by highlighting how Eliot's work resonates with contemporary discussions on autonomy and

social constraint, showing *The Mill on the Floss* as an enduring commentary on the timeless conflict between personal desire and public expectation.

1.2 History and Background of the Mill on the Floss by George Eliot

The Mill on the Floss is a novel that was authored by the prominent English novelist George Eliot, the pen name adopted by Mary Ann Evans. Its first publication was in 1860. The novel chronicles early 19th-century provincial life along the River Floss in the fictional town of St. Ogg's. It is one of the more accomplished works by Eliot and has often been the subject of study for understanding the theme of individual agency, social expectations, and personal desires pitted against social constraints.

1.2.1 Historical Context

The Victorian era was a time of great social, political, and cultural change in Britain. The 19th century saw a rise in industrialization, the growing middle class, and a burgeoning British Empire. However, it was still an era with strong moral codes, and those concerning women and the family seemed more rigid. A woman should be chaste, modest, and domestic, the virtues emphasized. As such, Victorian novels often explored the moral dilemmas associated with women who tried to gain autonomy outside of these norms.

The novel was published at a time when significant intellectual and social ferment were excited in society, particularly with regard to women's rights and roles. The emergence of feminist movements together with growing concerns for class disparity and the fragility of individual pressures under social conformity created a scenario in which Eliot's critique of the limits applied to personal freedom, especially for women, would assume importance.

1.2.2 Background of the Novel

The story of *The Mill on the Floss* is based on the Tulliver family, especially siblings Tom and Maggie Tulliver. Their family's mill is a central symbol of their position in society and the economy. As children of Mr. Tulliver, a mill owner, the Tulliver family is in a slightly precarious position in the social hierarchy. Their financial security is soon threatened by the actions of Mr. Tulliver, whose ill-advised legal battle results in the family losing their mill and plunging into poverty.

Maggie Tulliver, the protagonist of the novel, is a highly intellectual and emotionally complex young woman who struggles with the expectations placed on her as a woman in a rigid society. The novel portrays Maggie's internal conflict as the tension between personal ambition and familial loyalty, as well as societal constraints that prevent her from achieving self-fulfillment. Her relationships with the many characters she encounters—including her brother Tom, her intellectual companion Philip Wakem, and her passionate but doomed affair with Stephen Guest—end up exploring themes of love, guilt, social judgment, and personal sacrifice.

1.2.3 Personal Background of George Eliot

Mary Ann Evans used the pen name George Eliot to write under a male-dominated literary society and to avoid the prejudice against female writers during that period. George Eliot was born in 1819 in Warwickshire, England, and was educated in several fields, including languages, philosophy, and literature. Her writing was influenced by her personal life, including her unorthodox romantic life and her exploration of philosophical and theological issues.

In particular, her own experiences with relationships outside the conventional norms of her time, such as her long-term relationship with George Henry Lewes—a married man—influenced the moral complexity of her characters, especially female protagonists like Maggie Tulliver. Her works are known for their psychological depth, moral reflections, and sociopolitical critiques. She was particularly fascinated by the topics of social improvement, the struggle of the individual to assert individual rights, and women's deprivation in a patriarchal society.

1.2.4 Literary Significance

The *Mill on the Floss* is one of the greatest achievements of George Eliot in the universe of the English novel: both realistic, philosophic to the core, with severe social criticism, showing acute insight into human psychology in moral dilemmas, great observations on human nature as can be seen in the master use of symbolism, especially river-imagery, and finally intricately drawn character-relationship.

The novel is also interesting because of its themes, concerning class, gender, and moral values, issues pertinent to the Victorian era. The social commentary present in *The Mill on the Floss* speaks to both the limitation of Victorian society and to the human desire for personal freedom and moral expression. Maggie's tragedy, partly a result of the conflicting forces of love, duty, and social expectation, remains a potent critique of the Victorian social order.

In short, *The Mill on the Floss* is a critical and literary landmark of the Victorian era, offering deep insight into the societal and personal struggles of individuals in the context of a restrictive social framework. Its exploration into individual agency, the role of women, and the consequences of social expectations continues to resonate in the minds of modern readers and scholars alike.

Chapter Two

2.1 Literature Review

This relationship has been a significant focus for scholarly analysis in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. For years, critics have analyzed Eliot's critique of the social and gender norms that restrict individual freedom, especially in regard to the character of Maggie Tulliver. For example, Rosemary Ashton (1992) holds the opinion that Eliot applies Maggie's situation to show the failure of 19th-century women expectations,

inasmuch as they are bound into the definite life path. Ashton concludes that the internal battle, which Maggie wages between personal expression and familial loyalty is a broader conflict in women's lives, since most women were called upon during Eliot's time to sacrifice personal ambitions for the sake of family honor and social reputation.

The other approach views Maggie's character in terms of moral and psychological dimensions, in which her relationship with the community reflects the tension between individual morality and social obligation. According to U.C. Knoepfelmacher (1973), "Eliot's story is a deep moral criticism of the Victorian world's value system, in which moral judgment often served as a weapon of oppression.". Knoepfelmacher observes that Maggie's desire for intellectual and emotional fulfillment is viewed as transgressive, yet her yearning represents a universal human drive toward meaning and self-actualization. He further posits that the character of Maggie in Eliot's novel challenges the idea that morality equates with societal approval and instead provides a complex view of ethical autonomy.

In recent years, feminist scholars have explored *The Mill on the Floss* from the perspective of gender politics, especially in regard to Maggie's limited agency in patriarchal society. For instance, Nancy Henry, in her work "George Eliot and the Politics of National Identity" (2008), argues that Eliot employs Maggie's story as a critique of the patriarchal structures that limit women's opportunities for intellectual and social independence. Henry notes that Maggie's attempts to assert her individuality, from her intellectual pursuits to her relationships, are consistently thwarted by her family and community. According to Henry, this dynamic demonstrates Eliot's exploration of how social institutions reinforce gender inequalities, confining women like Maggie to roles that restrict their autonomy.

Scholars also explain how the community of St. Ogg's used by Eliot reflects the themes of individuality versus group identity. Indeed, George Levine (2001) mentions that the presentation of Eliot on the communal life at St. Ogg's is a kind of mini-Victorian society. In this presentation, he shows how group identity normally suppresses the individual in Victorian society. Levine further suggests that the strength of community power over Maggie's choices is reflective of wider cultural forces that enforce conformity, thereby limiting personal development. He argues that this portrayal of communal values, as presented by Eliot, is the oppressive side of collective identity, mainly because it is so rigidly adhered to and enforced by social expectations.

Finally, scholars have addressed Eliot's complex treatment of agency in the novel, usually perceiving it as a reflection on determinism and free will. According to Suzy Anger (2006), *The Mill on the Floss* presents a nuanced view of human agency, where characters navigate personal choice within the bounds of social, familial, and economic limitations. Anger points out that the tragic end of Maggie in Eliot's novel has raised questions about the extent to which individuals can have control over their lives against the forces of the external world. Maggie's decisions are influenced not only by her personal desires but also by her family's

financial crises and the judgments of her community, thus highlighting the interdependence of individual agency and social determinism.

This literature review reveals the extensive scholarly engagement with Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* as a work that interrogates the boundaries of individual autonomy in a socially constrained world. These studies, focusing on themes of gender, morality, community, and agency, therefore provide a foundation for understanding how Eliot critiques the limitations placed on individual freedom by social and cultural forces. This paper will expand on this scholarship by exploring how Maggie's struggle reflects a broader critique of societal constraints and their impact on personal identity, contributing to ongoing discussions about autonomy and social identity in Eliot's work.

2.2 Methodology

This study uses qualitative literary analysis of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, combining close reading with thematic analysis to explore the interplay between individual agency and social constraint in the novel. This will be based on examining textual evidence at the primary text level, focusing on how Eliot characterizes individuals, uses narrative techniques, and constructs themes to articulate tension between personal autonomy and communal identity. This approach is aimed at deconstructing how Eliot critiqued the societal structures in terms of gender, family, and morality.

The research is divided into stages. The first stage includes a close reading of Maggie Tulliver's character arc and her interactions with other characters and the expectations of society on her. This analysis centers on key passages that demonstrate Maggie's inner struggles and the external pressures she faces, with particular attention to her conflicts of family loyalty, community judgment, and her aspirations for intellectual and personal fulfillment. The close reading method will allow for an in-depth examination of Eliot's language, imagery, and symbolism, which will help in understanding Maggie's experience as a character bound by social forces.

The second part of the analysis is a thematic investigation of wider social and community structures in the novel, including an analysis of St. Ogg's community as a representation of Victorian society, and how, in this regard, she portrays the role of community in enforcing conformity and the suppression of individuality. Scenes and dialogue that highlight how the society holds sway over individual choices in decision-making are therefore analyzed. By doing this thematic analysis, it is possible to treat the study as *The Mill on the Floss* not merely as a personal account of Maggie's life but rather as a critique of social values and beliefs in the 19th century culture.

Besides that, it makes use of feminist literary theory and sociology to describe the boundaries which Maggie had to cross over, including the patriarchal roles, gender-based and family circles. From the feminist theories, this helps in providing a basis to understand how Maggie had a limited choice and action based on patriarchal orders within her social circle, pointing out how there was gender-based regulation of freedom. Sociological

analysis of community and identity further extends the ways that collective pressure shapes and circumscribes individual agency within the novel. When bringing these analytical frameworks together, the essay positions Eliot's work within an extensive conversation of gender and social identity issues, fostering cross-disciplinary understanding of novelistic themes.

Finally, by drawing upon secondary scholarly sources and incorporating them into the text, this analysis provides insights into how *The Mill on the Floss* engages socially and in terms of issues of gender. These materials include scholarly articles and works that critically address themes around agency, morality, and community within social constraint against the backdrop of Eliot's work. By situating these findings within scholarly literature, the study finds a means to contribute to current scholarship within Eliot studies and 19th-century literary critique.

This combination of close reading, thematic analysis, and theoretical contextualization will make the methodology aim to offer a comprehensive exploration of how Eliot portrays the conflict between individual agency and social constraint. The aim is to deepen our understanding of Eliot's critique of social conformity and to show the relevance of her insights on autonomy and identity for contemporary readers.

2.3 Analysis Approach

In light of this, the analytic framework for this study into *The Mill on the Floss* is built upon multi-layered approaches, through character analysis, thematic explorations, and contextual study. This approach seeks to unpack how George Eliot's portrayal of Maggie Tulliver's life can be seen as encapsulated within the struggle for individual agency within the rigidly constructed social structures of 19th-century England. The analysis will center on the ways Eliot employs narrative strategy to unveil the restrictions imposed through family expectations, gender roles, and communal values within the text: 2.3.1 Maggie Tulliver Character Analysis This analysis is built on the character of Maggie Tulliver as a platform through which Eliot raises criticism about social constraints. It analyses how Maggie's personal growth and desire for self-expression are constantly challenged by her community's conservative values and by her family's traditional expectations. Key episodes in Maggie's life, such as her strained relationship with her brother Tom and her romantic entanglements, will be analyzed to highlight how her agency is both asserted and suppressed. This character-centered analysis enables insight into Maggie's inner struggles as well as the social forces driving her decisions.

2.3.2 Thematic Analysis of Social Constraint and Community Identity

The investigation also conducts thematic analysis on the larger social context of which Maggie is a part. The community of St. Ogg's will be analyzed as a smaller unit of Victorian society where the group's values have often determined individual actions. Through this thematic exploration, the analysis tries to expose how Eliot critiques the role of community as a conformity enforcer, using scenes and relationships that reflect the power of the community in limiting individual agency. This thematic perspective allows the study to look

beyond personal experiences and illustrates how *The Mill on the Floss* deals with universal questions of social control and identity formation.

2.3.3 Contextual Analysis through Feminist and Sociological Lenses

To take the analysis to a deeper level, the study employs feminist and sociological perspectives to understand Maggie's limited agency in a patriarchal and socially constrained environment. Feminist theory is used to interpret Maggie's experiences as representative of the broader limitations placed on women's intellectual and personal freedoms in Eliot's time. Through a feminist lens, this analysis allows for the critique of the gendered social constraints of the novel, revealing how Maggie's choices—and sometimes, lack thereof—point toward the gendered expectations of the 19th century. Sociological insights into community dynamics also point out how collective identity serves as a force that molds, defines, and delimits individual actions.

2.3.4 Narrative Techniques and Symbolism in Eliot's Social Critique

The analysis examines Eliot's narrative techniques, such as symbolism, foreshadowing, and imagery, to enhance the social critique of the novel. In this respect, the river in *The Mill on the Floss* is a recurrent symbol that represents freedom and destruction, echoing Maggie's simultaneous desire for independence and her entrapment by fate and forces of society. The moral observations Eliot directly addresses to readers are further used to analyze how narrative interventions shape our understanding of social constraint and individual morality. This approach to how the narrative devices function for the themes provides a nuanced perspective of Eliot's reinforcement and broadening of themes for Maggie's personal struggle.

Such a critical analysis would help shine light on how Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* can be construed as both a personal journey of one woman's tragedy as well as a social statement on individual autonomy and group pressure. Such an understanding thus contextualizes Maggie's account within Eliot's wide-angle critique of Victorian social etiquette and engages with contemporary discussion on autonomy and identity-making, thereby enhancing the currency of the novel for reading today.

Chapter Three

3.1 The Conflict Between Individual Agency and Social Expectation

Eliot's portrayal of Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* has a very deep root in the conflict between individual desires and rigid social mores of her community. The novel depicts Maggie desiring intellectual and personal satisfaction outside the limited expectations from her family and community of St. Ogg's. According to Ashton (1992), Eliot constructs Maggie's character as a critique of Victorian social constraints on women, particularly the limitations placed on their intellectual ambitions. For example, Maggie's reading habits frequently set her apart as "different" and are criticized by her family, most notably her brother, Tom, who feels that her intellectual pursuits run contrary to what is expected of her as a woman. This dynamics

signifies the limiting forces of the norms of that time over female autonomy during the 19th century (Ashton, 1992).

Furthermore, Maggie's quests for personal independence and personal dignity illustrate some of the wider concerns about the status of women in Victorian society. For Knoepfelmacher (1973), Maggie's insistence on achieving independence upsets the classical moral conventions of her neighborhood as it has perceived the woman's quest for ambitions to be antagonistic to both family stability and social cohesion. Eliot applies Maggie's inner struggles against these conventional values, arguing that social norms are not only limiting but also unethical when they hinder individual development (Knoepfelmacher, 1973).

3.2 Gender and Patriarchal Limitations on Maggie's Agency

The use of gender in the novel is closely related to how Maggie is restricted by social expectations, and thus there is a need to take into account the limitations given by a patriarchal society. Henry (2008) further notes that by describing the choices of Maggie, as very limited, Eliot reveals oppressive conditions of lives for women during Victorian times. In the case of Maggie, for example, her relationships with Philip Wakem and Stephen Guest depict much more than personal considerations. It has social meaning, limiting her freedom as well. Her family sees her relationship with Philip as a betrayal of their honor, given the long-standing animosities in her family, whereas her association with Stephen has been condemned by her society as morally scandalous. These verdicts show how gendered social expectations and patriarchal values dictate Maggie's decisions and ultimately mold her destiny (Henry, 2008).

Here, failure on Maggie's part to harmonize her individual desires with social norms leads to a tremendous internal conflict. The feminist critics argue that this depiction shows Eliot's criticism of the lack of independence granted to women, since Maggie's need for individuality is always thwarted by the patriarchal values of the community (Henry, 2008). This conflict is evident in Maggie's interactions with her family, particularly with her brother, Tom, who embodies the community's adherence to traditional, patriarchal principles. These, then, stand out as Tom's inflexibility of morals and insistence on maintaining the family name for Maggie above her personal happiness as reminders of gender-based restrictions defining Maggie's life.

3.3 Power of Community and Social Conformity in St. Ogg's

Eliot's town of St. Ogg's is a microcosm of the Victorian society where community and social conformity define the powers through which an individual constructs their identity. According to Levine (2001), Eliot employs St. Ogg's as a metaphor for the dominant power of collective identity in the personal lives of people. The approval of the townspeople in St. Ogg's is as vital as family loyalty, and the breaking of social norms leads to ostracism and condemnation. This collective mentality is illustrated in Maggie's experiences, where her choices are met with societal disapproval and her character is judged based on community standards rather than personal merit. According to Levine (2001), this dynamic reflects Eliot's broader commentary on the

oppressive nature of communal values, suggesting that such values can constrain personal development and limit individuality.

This aspect of community judgment also brings out the way in which societal pressures feed into a cycle of conformity. For example, when Maggie elopes with Stephen, and then returns to St. Ogg's, she is condemned by society in its entirety, no matter the circumstances surrounding her decision. Eliot represents this as the final victory of the community's power over the individual because Maggie's personal agony becomes secondary to the social necessity of moral propriety (Levine, 2001). In this manner, Eliot critiques the rigidity of social norms by making clear how communal pressure stifles individual agency and maintains an oppressive moral code.

3.4 Eliot and Symbolism and Techniques of the Narrative

The novel's use of symbolism further highlights the tension between individual freedom and societal constraints. The river, a recurring motif in *The Mill on the Floss*, symbolizes both Maggie's longing for freedom and the dangers associated with resisting societal norms. As Anger (2006) points out, the river represents Maggie's inner conflict, embodying her desire for autonomy and her ultimate entrapment by external forces beyond her control. In the final scene of the climactic flood, Maggie's efforts to rescue Tom represent her final reconciliation with familial duty when she gives up her life for the act that was an act of personal agency but also surrender to fate (Anger, 2006).

Eliot's narrative style especially the use of direct address and moral commentary supports the novel's social critique. Throughout the novel, Eliot frequently interrupts the narrative as a narrator to comment on ethical and moral issues. Readers are prompted to challenge societal restrictions on characters like Maggie by establishing the observer as a commentator. Through positioning the narrator as observer-commentator, Eliot leads readers to consider more of the general implications in the struggles of Maggie, thereby emphasizing ethical tension in keeping social expectations intact at the cost of personal happiness (Ashton, 1992).

3.5 The Tussle of Family Loyalty and Individual Autonomy

One of the defining features of Maggie Tulliver's struggle for agency is her deep-seated loyalty to her family, specifically to her brother Tom, whose approval she constantly seeks. Eliot presents family loyalty as both a moral value and a source of entrapment for Maggie. Knoepfmacher (1973) suggests that Maggie's loyalty to Tom is a manifestation of her adherence to familial duty, but it also underscores the restrictions imposed on her personal freedom. Tom's harsh moralistic judgments and refusal to sympathize with Maggie's aspirations for intellectual and emotional growth demonstrate the conflicting demands of family honor and personal autonomy. In her efforts to please her brother's stern requirements, Maggie sacrifices her own wishes, thus epitomizing the novel's concept of family obligation as a force that restricts individuality (Knoepfmacher, 1973).

In addition, Eliot uses Maggie's relationship with her family to explore the concept of "self-sacrifice" as both a feminine virtue and a means of societal control. Henry (2008) argues that Maggie's inclination toward self-denial reflects Victorian ideals of femininity, where women were often expected to suppress their desires for the sake of family and community harmony. Maggie's choice to break off her relationship with Philip Wakem, despite her own feelings, is influenced by her sense of duty to her father's honor and Tom's animosity towards the Wakem family. This decision reveals how Maggie internalizes the expectations of society and chooses her family's reputation over her happiness. According to Henry, Eliot condemns this idea of self-sacrifice as an oppressive power that works for gendered expectations and limits female agency (Henry, 2008).

3.6 Romantic Relations as a Source of Social Judgement

Maggie's romantic relationships with Philip Wakem and Stephen Guest are important sites of social judgment and moral scrutiny that expose the strict social codes that govern relationships and sexuality in Victorian society. Philip is an intellectual companion to Maggie, providing her with a rare opportunity for emotional connection and intellectual engagement; however, their relationship is forbidden by Maggie's family due to longstanding animosity between the Tulliver and Wakem families. Maggie's final decision to split up under pressure from Tom is a reflection of how she has internalized moral codes from her community as well as her inability to break free from the dominance of her family. This, according to Levine, is a critique of society and family boundaries that define the human relationship, demonstrating how these prevent relationships and personal fulfillment altogether (Levine, 2001).

The relationship with Stephen Guest, which ends in her social ostracism, represents the community's extreme reaction to perceived moral infractions. Though Maggie does not consummate her relationship with Stephen, the mere possibility of impropriety is enough to destroy her reputation in St. Ogg's. According to Anger (2006), Eliot utilizes this episode to illustrate how social judgment affects the life of an individual, pointing out a double standard in sexual matters and moral behavior as practiced for women and men. While Stephen returns to society without blemish, Maggie is left with her reputation destroyed, which underscores Eliot's critique of the high moral standard imposed on women and how society tends to punish the female gender more harshly for moral "failings" (Anger, 2006).

3.7 River and the Flood as Forces of Fate and Autonomy Symbolism

The river in *The Mill on the Floss* serves as a powerful symbol of Maggie's internal conflict between freedom and duty. From the beginning, Maggie is drawn to the river as a source of solace and escape, a place where she can momentarily release herself from societal constraints. However, as Levine (2001) notes, the river also represents the forces of fate and inevitability that ultimately dictate Maggie's life. In the dramatic flood scene, Maggie's decision to venture into the river to save her brother is both an act of loyalty towards family and submission to destiny. This marks the dialectical relationship between personal autonomy and social obligation, for Maggie's last act is one of personal courage and familial sacrifice (Levine, 2001).

Eliot's use of the flood as a symbolic end also points out the tragic inevitability of Maggie's struggle. Ashton (1992) believes that the flooding is the result of unstoppable forces—social expectations and pressures, family loyalty and expectations, and community opinion that engulf Maggie. Being carried away by the waters of the river, she loses to both natural strength and social power. It thus reinforces Eliot's condemnation of a society that does not leave much room for female agency and penalizes any violation of its codes (Ashton, 1992).

3.8 The Role of Narrator as Moral Guide and Social Critic

The Mill on the Floss by Eliot is a novel in which the narrative voice shapes the reader's understanding of the social constraints faced by Maggie. Through frequent narrative intrusions, Eliot offers moral reflections that provide insight into the ethical implications of her characters' actions and the broader social order. According to Anger (2006), Eliot's style of narration, which incorporates moral comment and sympathetic tone, appeals to the reader to ask questions about the justice of social expectations and to feel sympathy for characters whose lives are limited by these social norms. By presenting Maggie's struggles in a moral and ethical context, Eliot subtly criticizes the rigidity of Victorian social codes and encourages readers to think about the human cost of such constraints (Anger, 2006).

Additionally, Eliot's narrative interventions often come as a counterpoint to the community's severe judgment on Maggie, with a softer tone that raises questions regarding the morality of social ostracism. For example, when the narrator ponders over the limitations of "poor humanity," Eliot shows the inbuilt flaws and hypocrisies of the values within the community. By using this method, Eliot highlights her scathing critique of societal norms which are obsessed with reputation and conformity over understanding and sympathy. The readers are being encouraged to view Maggie's choices and struggles from a more humane perspective.

Through the analysis of individual agency, family loyalty, societal judgment, and symbolic narrative techniques, The Mill on the Floss is a nuanced critique of the restrictive social forces that shape personal identity. Eliot uses Maggie Tulliver's character to show the painful consequences of a society that enforces conformity and moral rigidity, especially for women. By examining Maggie's relationships, family dynamics, and the symbolic power of the river, Eliot demonstrates the complex interplay between personal desires and communal expectations, revealing the social limitations on individual freedom in the Victorian era. This study, therefore, highlights The Mill on the Floss as a profound exploration of the sacrifices demanded by social identity and the costs of seeking autonomy in a world governed by collective values.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

The Mill on the Floss is a powerful exploration of the tension between personal agency and the social imposition of familial duty, gender, and community expectations. In the character of Maggie Tulliver, George Eliot penetrates to great psychological and emotional depths to explore a young woman who is caught between her desire for intellectual and personal fulfillment and the powerful forces of social conformity. Maggie's efforts to express her individuality in a community that puts reputation and moral propriety above all else show the painful effects of living in a society where the personal is often subsumed by the collective. Maggie's life is used as a lens through which Eliot critiques Victorian social structures that confine women to limited roles within the family and the broader community.

The character of Maggie is characterized by her intellectual curiosity, emotional depth, and the desire to express herself—features that clash with the accepted norms assigned to women at that point in time. Eliot's characterization of Maggie and her relationships, especially her brother Tom, and then romantic involvements with Philip Wakem and Stephen Guest, highlights the harsh judgment meted out by society. These relationships are not just personal interactions but battlegrounds where Maggie's desires for love, intellectual companionship, and emotional freedom clash with the rigid expectations placed upon her as a daughter, a woman, and a member of the community. The novel presents a critical examination of the limitations placed on women's agency in the 19th century, emphasizing how women's desires for autonomy were often viewed as transgressive.

For example, her relationship with Philip is an intellectual and emotionally fulfilling one but is unacceptable because of the historical animosity between the two families. Her relation with Stephen, though filled with passion and longing, gets her ostracized socially and publicly shamed, thus revealing the double standards that are applied when it comes to women's sexuality and behavior. Through these relationships, Eliot illustrates how social codes surrounding morality and gender worked to suppress individual autonomy, particularly for women, whose actions were always subject to public scrutiny and condemnation. Central to the novel is the theme of sacrifice—both the self-sacrifice expected of women in the name of familial duty and the social sacrifice imposed by a community that punishes deviation from its norms.

Maggie's choices are heavily bound by her loyalty to her family, especially her brother Tom, whose strict moral code always leads Maggie to suppress her desires for the sake of family unity. This is a kind of nobility that has led to Maggie's internal conflict, where she has to balance her sense of duty with her yearning for self-expression and freedom. Throughout the novel, this inner turmoil is symbolized by the river itself. It stands as an entity of solace and a means of escape for Maggie yet also as something that would overwhelm her forces of fate and social expectations that end up sweeping her away. In the tragic flood that kills Maggie, Eliot encapsulates the culmination of these forces: the clash between the individual's desires for autonomy

and the crushing weight of societal and familial obligations. Techniques such as direct address and moral commentary within the novel reinforce the novel's critique of the restrictive social codes governing individual lives.

The narrator constantly sends the reader to raise a question regarding the morality and justice of the judgment against Maggie. This builds a sympathetic view of the decisions she has made, but through a moral approach, Eliot forces the reader to change his point of view toward the basis of the ethics of a society that sentences Maggie to a life of misery. The narrator occasionally intervenes to provide more insight into the underlying social critique, which speaks against the hypocrisy and cruelty of a society that prioritizes reputation over understanding and sympathy. Ultimately, *The Mill on the Floss* is not just a novel concerning the tragic life of an individual but a broader social critique of the forces behind personal identity and moral behavior.

Through Maggie's experiences, Eliot underscores the complexities of navigating a world where personal desires are constantly at odds with the expectations and judgments of society. The novel critiques a social structure that values conformity over individuality, moral righteousness over human compassion, and family loyalty over personal fulfillment. Maggie's tragic ending—her death in the flood, trying to save Tom—is a poignant symbol of the cost of trying to reconcile these opposing forces. It reflects the inescapable nature of social norms and the inevitable failure of those who seek to challenge them, particularly women whose lives were so tightly bound to family reputation and community approval. In conclusion, *The Mill on the Floss* remains a powerful and relevant exploration of the intersection of individual agency, social constraints, and the gendered nature of societal expectations.

Eliot's portrayal of Maggie's struggles speaks to universal themes of identity, autonomy, and the costs of social conformity, offering both a critique of Victorian society and a meditation on the broader human condition. Maggie's story—her development, her struggles, and her tragic fall—makes a powerful statement about the relationship between the individual's struggle for self-expression and the external forces that seek to contain and define identity. Through Maggie Tulliver, Eliot raises key questions about the constraints of personal liberty, especially as they relate to women, and the destructive nature of a society that cannot support the complexity of human existence.

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