

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

1988

Maggie's Sisters: Feminist Readings Of The Mill on The Floss

Oliver Lovesey
Calgary University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English](#), [British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Lovesey, Oliver, "Maggie's Sisters: Feminist Readings Of The Mill on The Floss" (1988). *The George Eliot Review*. 87.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/87>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

MAGGIE'S SISTERS: FEMINIST READINGS OF
THE MILL ON THE FLOSS

*by Oliver Lovesey of the English Department,
Calgary University, Alberta, Canada*

The view that Eliot presented her female characters with only very limited possibilities for self-realization in either marriage or martyrdom, and that Eliot herself "lived" but did not "write" the "revolution" is one that has dominated the feminist assessment of George Eliot. This tradition regards Eliot as an author who served unintentionally to bolster a reactionary, phallogocentric ethos. Further, Eliot is suspect as she has been, particularly since F. R. Leavis gave her prominence in The Great Tradition a part of the accepted literary canon. Nevertheless, as Elaine Showalter, for example, has pointed out in "The Greening of Sister George," George Eliot's life and work has had enormous impact on women writers and theorists. The tension between these different attitudes is an indication of the vitality of feminist writing in general, and it has produced perhaps the most stimulating new reading of Eliot's work. Here, I wish to examine recent feminist critical discourse on The Mill on the Floss, and to attempt to demonstrate that significant aspects of the novel have been consistently overlooked.

A crisis in feminist criticism has been noted by a number of critics.¹ One of the major causes of this crisis is the very acceptance of feminist writing and of many feminist ideological positions. To a degree this is understandable as the very attempt to create a feminist poetics or a female canon was based on the model of traditional canon production.² American feminist criticism has attempted to address this problem, and to investigate all areas of female experience, including the political, sexual and economic, necessarily ignored in the traditional canon. Much French feminist writing has examined women's writing using a Marxist or psychoanalytic framework, and has been questioned for employing such value-laden methodologies. The problem of discovering a "l'écriture féminine," that is not biased by the patriarchal structures embedded in language, has dominated much feminist writing. Finally, the very notion of an inviolate, autonomous voice for feminist criticism, or "gynocriticism," has been regarded with suspicion. The diversity of approach and perspective in feminist criticism, the plurality of voices, and the on-going analysis of the very methods and goals of the feminist programme demonstrates a vitality in the field which can only be hinted at here to indicate the foundations upon which some of the feminist writing on George Eliot is based.

Feminist literary criticism is wary of the standards and values of traditional criticism, and refuses to ignore biographical information and such notions as authorial intentionality, and the historical context of a work's production in considerations of a text. There is an inherent difficulty in defining feminist literary criticism in that its relationship to dominant modes is problematic and as it uses approaches ranging from legislative and theoretical criticism to applied criticism. Two recent studies by Jennifer Uglow and Gillian Beer have examined Eliot's work from different feminist perspectives. Gillian Beer demonstrates how a certain type of feminist interpretation of Eliot has become a critical orthodoxy, and, in the light of a perceptive critical formalism, and with the aid of much new material, particularly about Eliot's close activist friends, she provides a new feminist reading of the novels. Jennifer Uglow's aim is not to examine Eliot's use of language, or to locate her in a female tradition, but to examine the interplay between Eliot's life and work. The difference in their approaches may be seen in their treatment of The Mill on the Floss.

Contemporary critics were disturbed by what they regarded as the mature Maggie's moral instability and especially by Eliot's reluctance to censure her strongly. Criticism in this century has tended to celebrate the honest accuracy in the demarcation of sexual roles in the novel, and to deplore the restriction of choices available to Maggie at the novel's close. Showalter, for example, contrasts what she perceives as the narcissism and inertia in Maggie's return to St. Oggs, with Jane Eyre's dynamic departure from Rochester Hall. However, Jane Eyre ultimately returns to Rochester Hall to nurse Rochester, and Maggie's infraction and guilt is part of a pattern developed earlier. Beer questions Showalter's casting of Maggie as a stereotypical "passive, self-destructive heroine." She regards The Mill on the Floss as a study in desire: incestuous desire which equals the wish for self-realization. Uglow sees The Mill on the Floss as the movement to synthesis of a kind of psychological, mythic dialectic. Her analysis of various binary oppositions in the novel's technique and theme (dream and reality; nature and art; tradition and independence) is interesting, but there seems to be little that is distinctively feminist in her critique, except perhaps her rather traditional account of the Oedipal and incestuous bonding in the novel, and her insistence on viewing Eliot's work and life together.

Overlooked in these critiques is Eliot's new form of writing. While in feminist literary theory there is much interest in delineating a distinctly female or feminist writing, the difficulty arises in how this distinction is to be determined within the text: whether by style, subject or voice. One of the most fruitful areas for this research is the relationship between genre and gender. In The Mill on the Floss, Eliot abandons her use of a rather clumsy masculine narrator, the youth awaiting confirmation in "Janet's Repentance," and the person who meets Adam late in Adam Bede, in favour of a more impersonal, objective voice that, surprisingly, reduces the distance between character and narrator and implied author. Further, The Mill on the Floss, a type of bildungsroman, clearly establishes the influence of childhood on adult development: "ontology recapitulates phylogeny" (Harvey 88-9). Maggie's attitude during her visit to the gypsy camp and her later treatment of Bob Jakin show a similar awareness of the role of early education in class reproduction. The Mill on the Floss contains a unique blending of generic modes, which may be closely linked to gender. There is a movement in the narrative from the sharply dramatized and realistic Austenean social satire, dealing with Maggie's youth to a more impressionistic mode closer to the poles of myth, tragedy and romance. The linear narrative, decentered by the repetition and chaos of desire, is, however, partly a subversion of the stereotypes of female romantic fiction. The novel is united around the largely deterministic character of Maggie.

In "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," Eliot wrote that the "real drama" of Evangelicalism took place within the lower and middle classes, and suggested that it had been ignored in fiction. In The Mill on the Floss, the Evangelical Maggie accepts the creed of a Roman Catholic monk. As a child, religious texts (Defoe's and Bunyan's) have given her imagination great scope. Criticism which dismisses Maggie's return to St. Oggs as an artistic failure, and sees the flood as an employment of "deus ex machina," ignores the significance of religion and religious values in the novel and in nineteenth-century England. The soul's progress from egotism through suffering to a sympathetic state, is presented in the novel as a profound reality, and not as a denial or limitation of life's possibilities. It is not Maggie's acceptance of Christian values that is criticized in the novel, but her faulty understanding. Immediately before Maggie is startled by the flood water at her knees, she recalls a passage from The Imitation of Christ, "On the Obligation of Self-denial and Imitating Christ by Way of the Cross." Her suffering "which belongs to every historical advance of mankind" (363) represents a

new generation's attempt to evolve spiritually, and she must live out "the inmost truth of the old monk's outpourings, that renunciation remains sorrow . . ." (384).

The closure of The Mill on the Floss is problematic, and, like the audience for Richardson's Clarissa, readers anticipate a romantic ending. In Clarissa the text's referent is a future of Christian justification in heaven, and in Daniel Deronda the referent is also the future, one of uncertainty and choice. The referent at the end of The Mill on the Floss, a closure foreshadowed frequently in the text (Hardy 169), is death by water. Travellers in Ogg, the son of Beori's boat are protected from such a fate by the Blessed Virgin as Ogg "didst not question and wrangle with the heart's need but wast smitten with pity and didst straightway relieve the same" (182). When Sister Maggie manoeuvres the boat towards the Mill to collect Tom, it is questionable whether he might not have been safer if he had remained there. This ambiguity, which is also present in the deaths of Casaubon and Grandcourt raises the possibility that Maggie and Tom's deaths signal Maggie's final infraction against social and moral codes.

Just as the exceptional George Eliot does not fit readily into feminist literary history, The Mill on the Floss resists easy critical categorization. This is partly a result of the novel's use of shifting narrative modes, the character of Maggie and the matter of the novel's autobiographical status. That Eliot was not an active feminist is widely accepted, and, as early as 1959, Barbara Hardy argued that George Eliot wasn't "writing as a proselytizing feminist," although she showed "general sympathy with Victorian feminism . . ." (51-2), and Gillian Beer implies that George Eliot was disillusioned with the progress achieved by the movement. In the future, more diverse feminist readings of Eliot's fiction, written with a full acceptance of her historical position, will continue to raise disturbing and challenging questions about George Eliot's art.

NOTES

1. In "Shooting the Rapids: Feminist Criticism in the Mainstream" (Oxford Literary Review, 8 (1986), 218-224), for example, Elaine Showalter writes of the impact of the inclusion of feminist writing in the "mainstream" of academic studies, and of the threat from advocates of "postfeminism." See also, her autobiographical account of her early involvement in the field in "Women's Time, Women's Space" (Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship, ed. Shari Benstock. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1987, 30-44), and Toril Moi's Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory (London: Methuen, 1985).

2. One of the first books to postulate the notion of a female literary tradition, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic (New Haven: Yale U P, 1979), employed a theoretical framework based on a concept derived from the dominant literary tradition, Harold Bloom's largely Freudian elucidation of the "anxiety of influence."

WORKS CITED

- Beer, Gillian. George Eliot. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1987.
Eliot, George. The Mill on the Floss. ed. A. S. Byatt.
Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1985.
Hardy Barbara. The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form.
London: U of London P, 1959.
Harvey, W. J. "Ideas in George Eliot," Modern Language Quarterly. 1966: 86-91
Showalter, Elaine. "The Greening of Sister George," Nineteenth Century Studies.
December 1980: 292-311.
Uglow, Jennifer. George Eliot. London: Virago Press, 1987.