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THE THIRTY-NINTH GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL LECTURE, 2010

Delivered by Rosemary Ashton

THE MILL ON THE FLOSS AND THE DIFFICULTIES OF RELATIONSHIPS

By late 1859, when she had almost finished writing *The Mill on the Floss*, George Eliot was still unsure of its final title. The working title was 'Sister Maggie', which was particularly appropriate to the first two thirds of the novel, where interest is concentrated on the pleasures and pains of the childhood relationship between Tom and Maggie Tulliver. But in the last third of the book, attention had turned to the romantic relationship between Maggie and Stephen Guest, itself intruding into Maggie's near-engagement to Philip Wakem, with Tom kept in the background until the death of brother and sister in the great flood which forms the novel's climax.

George Eliot's life partner G. H. Lewes suggested 'The House of Tulliver, or, Life on the Floss' as a possible title, drawing attention to the tragic aspect of all the family relationships within the novel, not only that between Tom and Maggie, but also the unfortunate family squabbles between their father the hasty miller – who dies overwhelmed by grief at the loss of his mill – and his wife's relations, the redoubtable Dodson sisters. Lewes's suggestion, with its echo of the Greek story of the never-ending curse on succeeding generations in the House of Atreus, is true to the vein of allusion to Greek tragedy that runs through the narration of the novel. It was decided finally in January 1860, only a couple of months before publication, that the more neutral, descriptive title 'The Mill on the Floss' was the best one; George Eliot's publisher, John Blackwood, suggested it.[1]

By choosing this title, George Eliot avoided spelling out which of the many relationships in the novel should be supposed to be the most significant, though it is clear from reading it that the brother-sister one predominates. However, all the relationships are important, and all are difficult; the novel explores in precise detail the whys and wherefores of human interaction among its characters. All George Eliot's novels do this, of course, but *The Mill on the Floss* stands out from the others both in terms of the ultimate tragedy of the relationships (it is her only professedly tragic novel) and in its closeness to the facts of her own life. This lecture will concentrate on these two aspects of the novel: the tragedy of its chief relationships, and the events in George Eliot's life which inform it.

If *David Copperfield* is Dickens's most autobiographical novel, in which he exorcizes the childhood humiliation of the blacking factory and the early rejection in love, *The Mill on the Floss* is George Eliot's most autobiographical novel, transposing and transforming Marian Evans's unhappy relationship with her brother Isaac and expressing in indirect ways her sense of injustice at the attitude of friends and critics towards her partnership with Lewes, as well as her sensitivity about the revelation of the identity of 'George Eliot', which occurred in the summer of 1859 as she was writing *The Mill on the Floss*. Tom and Maggie act out the brother and sister drama, while the part of the plot which involves Maggie in an apparent act of betrayal and sexual indiscretion – her drifting down the Floss with Stephen – and the subsequent cruel gossip of the community of St Ogg's represent indirectly the psycho-drama of George Eliot's resentment at her anomalous social position as a single woman living with a married man.

In *Adam Bede* (1859) George Eliot had already described family relationships – in this case Adam's with his querulous mother – as complicated and painful:

> Family likeness has often a deep sadness in it. Nature, that great tragic dramatist, knits us together by bone and muscle, and divides us by the subtler web of our brains; blends yearning and repulsion; and ties us by our heartstrings to the beings that jar us at every movement. (*Adam Bede*, chapter 4, 'Home and its Sorrows')

The Mill on the Floss explores this melancholy observation in relation to parents and children, husbands and wives, and brothers and sisters. The older generation are treated with irony, even broad satire in the case of the Dodson aunts whose visits vex Maggie with their criticisms of her boyishness and untidiness and their narrow, petty view of what makes a Dodson a Dodson and therefore superior to the rest of society. Their entrance into the story is signalled as comic by the very title of the chapter which introduces them, 'Enter the Aunts and Uncles' (Book 1, chapter 7). The most formidable of the aunts, Mrs Glegg, is described with anthropological – and archaeological – rigour:

> Mrs Glegg chose to wear her bonnet in the house to-day – untied and tilted slightly, of course – a frequent practice of hers when she was on a visit and happened to be in a severe humour: she didn't know what drafts there might be in strange houses. For the same reason she wore a small sable tippet which reached just to her shoulders and was very far from meeting across her well-formed chest, while her long neck was protected by a *chevaux-de-frise* of miscellaneous frilling. One would need to be learned in the fashions of those times to know how far in the rear of them Mrs Glegg's slate-coloured silk gown must have been, but from certain small constellations of small yellow spots upon it, and a mouldy odour about it suggestive of a damp clothes-chest, it was probable that it belonged to a stratum of garments just old enough to have come recently into wear. (*The Mill on the Floss*, Book 1, chapter 7)

Maggie's three aunts, though differing among themselves on details, have an unswerving faith in their superiority as a family:

> There were particular ways of doing everything in that family: particular ways of bleaching the linen, of making the cowslip wine, curing the hams and keeping the bottled gooseberries, so that no daughter of that house could be indifferent to the privilege of having been born a Dodson, rather than a Gibson or a Watson ... There were some Dodsons less like the family than others – that was admitted – but in so far as they were 'kin', they were of necessity better than those who were 'no kin' .... Mrs Tulliver was a thorough Dodson, though a mild one, as small beer, so long as it is anything, is only describable as a very weak ale ... she was thankful to have been a Dodson, and to have one child who took after her own family, at least in his features and complexion, in liking salt, and in eating beans, which a Tulliver never did. (*The Mill on the Floss*, Book 1, chapter 6)

Comic, too, is Mr Tulliver's opposing view that his own side of the family is more intelligent and worldy-wise; he is proud to have chosen the least bright of the Dodson sisters, and is puzzled that his own daughter should have turned out to be cleverer than Tom:

> It's the wonderful'st thing ... as I picked the mother because she wasn't o-er cute – bein' a good-looking woman too, an' come of a rare family for managing – but I picked her from her sisters o' purpose 'cause she was a bit weak, like; for I wasn't a-goin' to be told the rights o' things by my own fireside. But, you see, when a man's got brains himself, there's no knowing where they'll run to; an' a pleasant sort o' soft woman may go on breeding you stupid lads and 'cute wenches, till it's like as if the world was turned topsy-turvy. (*The Mill on the Floss*, Book 1, chapter 3)

Readers noticed from the beginning the frequency with which George Eliot uses terminology from natural history when describing the motivation and behaviour of her characters. Since her novel was published in 1860, it is sometimes assumed that she was influenced by the appearance of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859, but we should note that Darwin's work, the full title of which is *On the Origin of Species by Natural Selection; or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, was published in November 1859, by which time George Eliot was writing the last section of *The Mill on the Floss*. So she was not indebted specifically to Darwin for her use of the language of struggle and selection in the context of the Tulliver family.

As with many famous moments in scientific progress, Darwin's book represented a striking and climactic formulation of theories and ideas already aired by naturalists and geologists (Lamarck, Charles Lyell, Alfred Russel Wallace, for example). George Eliot was widely read in history and science and was living with Lewes, who was in 1859 experimenting and writing on animal behaviour and physiology. His *Sea-Side Studies* came out in 1858 and *Studies in Animal Life* in 1862. Both Lewes and George Eliot were already evolutionists when the great work came out, though they recognized that it was Darwin who answered the question about *how* species developed. The mechanism for development, he argued in his book, was to be found in the idea of natural selection to explain adaptation and variation of species. George Eliot was fully aware that in dealing with human, not animal, life mechanistic explanations were inadequate. Her response to reading Darwin's book when it came out was to write that 'the Development theory and all explanations of processes by which things came to be, produce a feeble impression compared with the mystery that lies under the processes'.[2] She employs the language of familial similarity and difference, as Darwin does, and she appears deterministic in her view of the seemingly inevitable mutual thwarting of Tulliver family members, but she also allows for surprises – Mrs Tulliver's unexpected support of her daughter in her moment of disgrace, for example – and leaves it a mystery why Maggie and Stephen Guest should fall in love against their wills, as they do. And in this novel the difficulties of human relationships and family ties are embedded in a plot with a tragic outcome, in which for many of the characters the 'struggle for life' is lost.

The comedy of small family disagreements outlined in the early chapters turns to tragedy when Mr Tulliver's stubbornness and quarrelsomeness, exacerbated rather than compensated by Mrs

Tulliver's well-meaning but disastrous attempts to help, lead to his bankruptcy and loss of livelihood. The narrative tone modulates to accommodate the seriousness of the blighting effect on Tom's and Maggie's young lives of their father's bringing upon himself the poverty and shame he cannot endure. George Eliot elsewhere compares Mr Tulliver to Oedipus in this respect, and here she insists on winning our sympathy not only for the children whose life choices are drastically limited by their father's actions, but also for the obstinate miller himself. Like two of the authors she most admired, Wordsworth for his valuing of the lives and feelings of ordinary people of no special talent, and Carlyle with his remark that in every peasant's hut there may be the fifth act of a tragedy going on, George Eliot comments:

> The pride and obstinacy of millers and other insignificant people, whom you pass unnoticingly on the road every day, have their tragedy too, but it is of that unwept, hidden sort, that goes on from generation to generation and leaves no record – such tragedy, perhaps, as lies in the conflicts of young souls, hungry for joy, under a lot made suddenly hard to them, under the dreariness of a home where the morning brings no promise with it, and where the unexpectant discord of worn and disappointed parents weighs on the children like a damp, thick air in which all the functions of life are depressed; or such tragedy as lies in the slow or sudden death that follows on a bruised passion, though it may be a death that finds only a parish funeral. (*The Mill on the Floss*, Book 3, chapter 1)

From this point on, with the need for Tom to work to pay off his father's debts and for Maggie to suffer the misery and restraint of a clever girl unable, given social conditions, to fulfil her own potential either for her own sake or in order to contribute to the family finances, every relationship within the family is shown as problematic. Mrs Tulliver is unable to do anything except complain. To her husband's reminder 'We promised one another for better or for worse', she replies helplessly, 'But I never thought it 'ud be so for worse as this' (Book 3, chapter 8). Tom, bitter at having to work in the humble position of a clerk to his uncle and disappointed in love, feels thwarted at every turn by Maggie's bids for independence. She, in turn, envies him his ability as a man 'to do something in the world' (Book 5, chapter 5) and accuses him of punitiveness towards her. When she is found out in her friendship with Philip Wakem, the son of Mr Tulliver's enemy, Tom accuses her of selfishness. When – far worse – she drifts off down-river with Stephen Guest, who is informally engaged to their cousin Lucy, and gets the reputation of a loose woman, Tom turns her out of the house. This is the point at which George Eliot merges in her narrative two themes which are of vital interest in her own life at the time of writing this novel: her relationship with her brother and the effect of her relationship with Lewes on her reputation as a woman and as a writer just becoming known to her readership.

In 1829, the year in which the opening of the novel is set, Tom is thirteen and Maggie ten, the same ages as Isaac and Mary Anne Evans were in that year. Tom reacts negatively to Maggie's words and deeds, asserting his superiority and finding fault with her at every turn, starting with the early episode in which she confesses to having let his rabbits die while he was away at school by forgetting to feed them (Book 1, chapter 5), for which Tom punishes her by threatening not to take her fishing. Tom's attitude towards his sister at this early age is simple and childish, but George Eliot shows during the course of her story that it never really changes. Admonished by his father for upsetting Maggie, Tom relents about the fishing trip, but his

private thoughts are not flattering to her:

> Tom, indeed, was of opinion that Maggie was a silly little thing: all girls were silly – they couldn't throw a stone so as to hit anything, couldn't do anything with a pocket-knife, and were frightened at frogs. Still, he was very fond of his sister, and meant always to take care of her, make her his housekeeper, and punish her when she did wrong. (*The Mill on the Floss*, Book 1, chapter 5)

Whatever Maggie does, she ends up somehow in the wrong, and her creator is always on her side against Tom's injustices to her, as in the famous scene of the jam puffs. Mrs Tulliver is baking in preparation for the visit of the aunts, and the children are given three jam puffs to share. They eat one each, and Tom proceeds to divide the third with his pocket knife:

> (It was a difficult problem to divide that very irregular polygon into two equal parts.)... the knife descended on the puff and it was in two, but the result was not satisfactory to Tom, for he still eyed the halves doubtfully. At last he said, 'Shut your eyes, Maggie.'
> 'What for?'
> 'You never mind what for. Shut 'em I tell you.'
> Maggie obeyed.
> 'Now, which'll you have, Maggie – right hand or left?'
> 'I'll have that with the jam run out', said Maggie, keeping her eyes shut to please Tom.
> 'Why, you don't like that, you silly. You may have it if it comes to you fair, but I shan't give it you without. Right or left, you choose now ....'
> So she shut her eyes quite close, till Tom told her to 'say which', and then she said, 'Left-hand.'
> 'You've got it', said Tom, in rather a bitter tone.
> 'What, the bit with the jam run out?'
> 'No: here, take it', said Tom firmly, handing decidedly the best piece to Maggie.
> 'O, please, Tom, have it: I don't mind – I like the other: please take this.'
> 'No, I shan't', said Tom almost crossly, beginning on his own inferior piece.
> Maggie, thinking it was no use to contend further, began too, and ate up her half-puff with considerable relish as well as rapidity ....
> 'O, you greedy thing!' said Tom, when she had swallowed the last morsel. He was conscious of having acted very fairly, and thought she ought to have considered this and made up to him for it. He would have refused a bit of hers beforehand, but one is naturally at a different point of view before and after one's own share of puff is swallowed. (*The Mill on the Floss*, Book 1, chapter 6)

As they grow into young adults, the dynamic between them remains the same, with Tom insensitive to Maggie's needs and always ready to punish her with his disapproval and prohibitions, as when he forbids her to meet with Philip, because of Mr Tulliver's dispute with the lawyer Wakem.

When Mary Anne, having cared for her father in the family house until his death in 1849, refused to make her life with Isaac and his wife, preferring to move to London to pursue a career as translator and journalist to top up her small inheritance, Isaac was disapproving, as he had been of her going to the theatre as a young woman, becoming friendly with the progressive Bray family of Coventry, and losing her religious faith under their influence. Isaac and his father had despaired of the wayward Mary Anne, fearing that the combination of her diffidence, plain looks, unusually scholarly knowledge, and loss of faith would render her ineligible for marriage and a quiet respectable life in the middle England they inhabited, both literally and metaphorically. While their horrified puzzlement at Mary Anne's unorthodoxy is understandable and not entirely reprehensible, since they were concerned for her future as well as their own standing in provincial society, so also is her resentment at her treatment.

Having broken free and made the move to London, Marian, as she now called herself, left London to visit her older sister Chrissey in December 1852 on hearing of the death of Chrissie's doctor husband. Her sister, living in Meriden with young children, was likely to be left quite poor. Marian wanted to help in any way she could, but after a few days in Meriden she returned to London, writing in explanation to her friends the Brays:

> I had agreed with Chrissey that, all things considered, it was wiser for me to return to town – that I could do her no substantial good by staying another week, while I should be losing time as to other matters. Isaac, however, was very indignant to find that I had arranged to leave without consulting him and thereupon flew into a violent passion with me, winding up by saying that he desired I would never 'apply to him for anything whatever' – which, seeing that I never have done so, was almost as superfluous as if I had said I would never receive a kindness from him. (George Eliot to Charles and Cara Bray and Sara Hennell, 31 December 1852)

With relations already soured in this way, Marian and Isaac had little, if any, correspondence until May 1857, when she took the brave step of belatedly telling him of her relationship with Lewes (which was now three years old), though she was not quite brave enough to tell him the whole truth of her partnership:

> My dear Brother
> You will be surprized, I dare say, but I hope not sorry, to learn that I have changed my name, and have someone to take care of me in the world. The event is not at all a sudden one, though it may appear sudden in its announcement to you. My husband has been known to me for several years, and I am well acquainted with his mind and character. He is occupied entirely with scientific and learned pursuits, is several years older than myself, and has three boys, two of whom are at school in Switzerland, and one in England. (George Eliot to Isaac Evans, 26 May 1857)

She asks Isaac to pay her income from her father's inheritance into the account of 'Mr G. H. Lewes'. Ten days later she tells Sara Hennell that she has not heard from Isaac yet; she cannot speak for what he will do, but thinks Chrissey will not 'give up correspondence with me in any case, and that is the point I most care about, as I shall still be able to help her as far as my means

allow'.[3]

Isaac did not reply in person. His solicitor wrote saying Isaac was hurt at her not having told him of her marriage before and asking 'when and where you were married'; she replied that the marriage was not a legal one but one 'regarded by us both as a sacred bond'. At this, Isaac cut off all communication with his sister and prevailed on Chrissey to do the same.[4] At the same time as this painful but not completely unexpected severance was taking place, George Eliot was having an awkward correspondence with her close friend Cara Bray, who was also shocked by the relationship with Lewes. Marian wrote to Cara in early June 1857 that she would never invite anyone to visit unless that person had asked for an invitation. She was determined not to give any friend or acquaintance the opportunity to decline on account of her social status. As she expected, most of her female friends, and the wives of Lewes's male friends, neither visited her nor invited her to their homes.

To make things worse, rumours were doing the rounds at the same time about the identity of 'George Eliot', the name Marian had taken on publication of her first work of fiction, the three stories being published as 'Scenes of Clerical Life' in *Blackwood's Magazine* during 1857. (Indeed, her awareness of the curiosity aroused by the stories was partly what motivated her to tell her siblings of her relationship with Lewes. She did not wish them to hear about her authorship, and thence about her relationship with Lewes, as a result of gossip.) Even worse than general curiosity about this new author was the unfortunate fact that readers in the Midlands recognized the local story she used as a basis for her first 'Scene of Clerical Life', 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton'. It was publicly suggested that the author was a local man, Joseph Liggins; as Mr Liggins omitted to say he was not the author, the rumour took hold, especially in 1859 after the publication of *Adam Bede*, with Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Florence Nightingale, *The Times*, and everyone else in the country, it seemed, joining the discussion. The result – a bitter one for Marian – was that she had to let it be known in summer 1859 that she was the author.

Then followed, as Marian and Lewes had feared, some snide critical remarks. *Adam Bede*, on its publication in February 1859, with Marian's pseudonym safe for the time being, had been universally well received, quoted in Parliament, and read with such enthusiasm by Queen Victoria that she commissioned two paintings of scenes from the novel from Edward Henry Corbould. A few months on, in June 1859, after the enforced lifting of the incognito, Marian had to read in an article by William Hepworth Dixon in the *Athenaeum* that she was 'a clever woman with an observant eye and unschooled moral nature', 'a rather strong-minded lady, blessed with abundance of showy sentiment and a profusion of pious words, but kept for *sale* rather than for use'. Worse than that, the whole Liggins story, Dixon alleged, was 'a mystification, got up by George Eliot, as the showman in a country fair sets up a second learned pig to create a division among the penny paying rustics'.[5]

It was galling to a woman who had done her utmost to avoid revealing her authorship, knowing that the revelation would bring her pain, to be accused of having manufactured interest by creating the Liggins myth herself. She turned this protracted and unhappy episode into fiction much later, in her last work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1878), reworking a fable from Aesop, calling it 'The Wasp Credited with the Honeycomb', and adapting it to the theme 'the

Mine and Thine in original authorship':

> Several complimentary presumptions were expressed that the honeycomb was due to one or other admired and popular bird, and there was much fluttering on the part of the Nightingale and Swallow, neither of whom gave a positive denial, their confusion perhaps extending to their sense of identity; but the Owl hissed at this folly, arguing from his particular knowledge that the animal which produced honey must be the Musk-rat, the wondrous nature of whose secretions required no proof; and, in the powerful logical procedure of the Owl, from musk to honey was but a step. ('The Wasp credited with the Honeycomb', *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, 1878)

The Liggins business and the undesired exposure to publicity thus added sensitivity about her public position to George Eliot's private misery over her family relations. Isaac and, following him, Chrissey had stopped communicating in 1857 on the revelation of her partnership with Lewes. In February 1859, while writing the early chapters of *The Mill on the Floss* and in the midst of receiving excellent reviews for *Adam Bede*, as well as congratulatory letters to its unknown author from Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Jane Carlyle, she finally heard from Chrissey. 'I have just had a letter from my sister Chrissey', she told Cara Bray; 'ill in bed – consumptive – regretting that she ever ceased to write to me. It has ploughed up my heart.'[6] Before she could arrange to visit her sister, Chrissey died on 15 March 1859.

Her feelings towards Isaac are likely to have been particularly bitter now that it was too late to resume relations with Chrissey. At the same time, with all the Liggins business, close relations of another sort became strained, namely those between her and her excellent publisher John Blackwood. He had been the perfect publisher for a diffident and at first secretive author, content to accept the first 'Scenes of Clerical Life' via Lewes, who said they were by a 'friend', and patient enough to wait until Marian chose to reveal herself to him, though he had already guessed her identity. Blackwood took Lewes's hints about not being too critical of the manuscript as it was sent to him in batches; he was unstintingly encouraging and genuinely enthusiastic, especially about *Adam Bede*, which he recognized as a masterpiece. When the novel did well, he gave the author an extra £400, and he made a good offer for *The Mill on the Floss*. But in the meantime Marian had been rocked by Chrissey's death, the Liggins affair – which she and Lewes thought Blackwood was too casual about, while he in turn thought they were making too much of a fuss – and now she thought she saw a slight when Blackwood suggested the new novel should be published first, anonymously, in *Blackwood's Magazine*. She supposed, not altogether wrongly, that Blackwood was reluctant to print the name George Eliot now that the author was known to be the 'strong-minded woman' who lived with Lewes. Fortunately, she was unhappy at the coolness which arose between them, and wrote to clear the air. In December 1859 Blackwood visited to discuss terms and warm relations resumed as she set about finishing her novel. As we have seen, it was Blackwood who suggested the final title in January 1860; the novel was published on 4 April, and no more was heard about anonymous publication. George Eliot was the name henceforth used with pride by both author and publisher.

Given all the turmoil in George Eliot's relations with family, friends, publisher, and critics as

she wrote *The Mill on the Floss*, it is a triumph that the novel contains as much comedy and as much benevolent authorial wisdom as it does. Nonetheless, it is a work written out of hurt and resentment and a sense of injustice. If we take two passages towards the end of the novel, we can see how George Eliot brings together in the tragic plot an imaginative version of her own complex feelings towards Isaac and her strong sense of the unfairness of society's judgement on a woman who appears to have broken the social and sexual rules. The last section, Book 7, opens with one of the many moments of tragic irony in the novel. Tom has at last almost paid back his dead father's debts and stands outside the mill as its master. The authorial point of view starts with him, sympathetic to his feelings:

> Between four and five o'clock on the afternoon of the fifth day from that on which Stephen and Maggie had left St Ogg's, Tom Tulliver was standing on the gravel walk outside the old house at Dorlcote Mill. He was master there now: he had half fulfilled his father's dying wish, and by years of steady self-government and energetic work he had brought himself near to the attainment of more than the old respectability which had been the proud inheritance of the Dodsons and Tullivers.
>
> But Tom's face, as he stood in the hot still sunshine of that summer afternoon, had no gladness, no triumph in it. His mouth wore its bitterest expression, his severe brow its hardest and deepest fold, as he drew down his hat farther over his eyes to shelter them from the sun, and thrusting his hands deeper into his pockets, began to walk up and down the gravel. No news of his sister had been heard since Bob Jakin had come back in the steamer from Mudport and put an end to all improbable suppositions of an accident on the water by stating that he had seen her land from a vessel with Mr Stephen Guest. Would the next news be that she was married – or what? Probably that she was not married: Tom's mind was set to the expectation of the worst that could happen – not death, but disgrace.

The next paragraph swings the focus – and the sympathy – wholly to Maggie:

> As he was walking with his back towards the entrance gate, and his face towards the rushing mill-stream, a tall dark-eyed figure, that we know well, approached the gate, and paused to look at him, with a fast-beating heart. Her brother was the human being of whom she had been most afraid, from her childhood upwards – afraid with that fear which springs in us when we love one who is inexorable, unbending, unmodifiable – with a mind that we can never mould ourselves upon, and yet that we cannot endure to alienate from us. That deep-rooted fear was shaking Maggie now: but her mind was unswervingly bent on returning to her brother, as the natural refuge that had been given her. (*The Mill on the Floss*, Book 7, chapter 1)

Narrator and reader – 'we' – are engaged entirely with Maggie's feelings towards this difficult brother. Sympathy with him drains away as he refuses to listen to her explanation and banishes her from his life and home: 'You will find no home with me' and 'You don't belong to me.' The lesser of the two siblings rejects the greater, as had been the case, in Marian's feelings,

with herself and Isaac.

In addition to the private family drama played out here, there is, in the following chapter, the public drama, the equivalent in terms of George Eliot's life experiences of society's shunning of her as a woman living with another woman's husband. While Maggie is in fact 'innocent', having refused to consummate her relationship with Stephen and refused even to marry him, her return unmarried leads society to presume that she is a 'fallen' woman. The narrator gives vent to anger at the injustice done to Maggie; behind the authorial comments is a criticism of the double standard she was experiencing in her own life, whereby men like Dickens or Wilkie Collins or her friend Charles Bray could have mistresses and in some cases illegitimate children without forfeiting their invitations to dinner at respectable houses, while Marian Evans remained largely invitationless. The chapter is entitled 'St Ogg's Passes Judgment':

> It was soon known throughout St Ogg's that Miss Tulliver was come back: she had not, then, eloped in order to be married to Mr Stephen Guest – at all events, Mr Stephen Guest had not married her – which came to the same thing, as far as her culpability was concerned. We judge others according to results; how else? – not knowing the process by which results are arrived at. If Miss Tulliver, after a few months of well-chosen travel, had returned as Mrs Stephen Guest – with a post-marital *trousseau* and all the advantages possessed even by the most unwelcome wife of an only son, public opinion, which at St Ogg's, as elsewhere, always knew what to think, would have judged in strict consistency with those results...
>
> 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. (*The Mill on the Floss*, Book 7, chapter 2)

In case we should think that Marian was feeling excessively sensitive about her own situation, it is worth reading an account of Marian's life in London which she could not have read. The American visitor Charles Eliot Norton reported back to a friend in January 1869 that Lewes had invited him to one of the Leweses' Sunday afternoon receptions. He describes George Eliot:

> 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 so emancipée as not to mind what the world says about them, or have no social position to maintain. Lewes dines out a good deal, and some of the men with whom he dines go without their wives to his house on Sundays. No one whom I have heard speak, speaks in other than terms of respect of Mrs Lewes, but 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. (Charles Eliot Norton, letter of 29 January 1869)[7]

The world's wife is, according to Norton, right. As Norton and many others knew, the reason Marian and Lewes were unable to marry was that his wife Agnes had borne children by his friend before he met Marian; Lewes, who had accepted Agnes's right to have other relationships as he had himself, registered the births of these children as his own. This made it impossible for him to sue for divorce when the marriage broke down and when he subsequently met Marian Evans and wanted to make his life with her.

Marian felt no guilt about her relationship. But the position she puts Maggie Tulliver in is different from her own. Maggie is innocent too, though in a different way, not having consummated her affair with Stephen. Similar though the problems rehearsed in the novel are to those faced by its author, they are not identical. And the novelist, when choosing her ending, can be destructive-romantic in a way which deviates radically from the life still being lived and not coming to an end. The last section of the novel is entitled 'The Final Rescue', and it famously has Maggie steer a boat along the flooded river Floss to save her now estranged brother, only for them both to drown.

Tragic though this end is, it is represented as a happy reconciliation. The boat goes down, then reappears, but empty; 'brother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted'. It is a happy ending inasmuch as it signals the wished-for expression of approval by the stern but beloved brother towards the loving, rebellious, misunderstood sister. The novel has shown Tom Tulliver as harsh and unforgiving, as Marian felt her brother was; but the author retains memories of a childhood which was happy as well as painful, of a relationship with an older brother she loved as well as feared, and the ending magnanimously forgives Tom/Isaac as well as annihilating him. As for Maggie/Mary Anne, it renders her powerful and heroic in seeking to save her brother, and validated by her brother's love at last, even if only in death.

Full reconciliation with a loved, feared, and resented brother never really came for Marian herself. After suffering the misery and loneliness of life after Lewes's death in 1878, George Eliot surprised and shocked the world and its wife once more by marrying in 1880 John Cross, a friend twenty years her junior. This time, though shocking, the marriage was legal, and George Eliot initiated contact for the first time in over thirty years with her estranged brother Isaac. Though she would have been able to tell him this time the where and the when of her marriage, she appears to have written to Isaac's solicitor rather than to her brother directly. Her reward was a brief note of congratulation, showing some warmth:

> My dear Sister
> I have much pleasure in availing myself of the present opportunity to break the long silence which has existed between us, by offering our united and sincere congratulations to you and Mr Cross, upon the happy event of which Mr Holbeche has informed me. My wife joins me in sincerely hoping it will afford you much happiness and comfort .... Your affectionate brother Isaac P. Evans.
> (letter of 17 May 1880)

Marian, who had reverted to calling herself Mary Ann as in her childhood, replied expressing the 'great joy' she felt in receiving his kind words, 'for our long silence has never broken the affection for you which began when we were little ones'.[8] Brother and sister did not meet again, as Mary Ann died on 22 December 1880, just seven months after her marriage. It is not known

whether Isaac read *The Mill on the Floss*, though it is likely that he did. His portrait in the novel is not a flattering one, but he would surely have recognized the representation of his difficult relationship with an irritating, wayward, independent-minded younger sister, who, though clearly favoured by her creator, is shown also as flawed and partly responsible for the difficulties between the siblings. For despite being so close emotionally to the material of her novel, George Eliot manages to tell her sad story of family life with empathy for all its members, from the stubborn Mr Tulliver and the foolish Mrs Tulliver to the self-righteous Tom and the impulsive Maggie.

Notes

1 See George Eliot to Blackwood, 3 January 1860, Blackwood to George Eliot, 6 January 1860, and George Eliot to Blackwood, 6 January 1860, *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven, Connecticut, 1954-78), III, 240, 244, 245.

2 George Eliot to Barbara Bodichon, 5 December 1859, ibid, III, 227.

3 George Eliot to Isaac Evans, 26 May 1857, and to Sara Hennell, 5 June 1857, ibid, II, 331-2, 342.

4 Vincent Holbeche to George Eliot, 9 June 1857, George Eliot to Vincent Holbeche, 13 June 1857, Vincent Holbeche to Isaac Evans, 17 June 1857, ibid, II, 346, 349, 354.

5 *Athenaeum*, 2 July 1859.

6 George Eliot to Cara Bray, 24 February 1859, *The George Eliot Letters*, III, 23.

7 Quoted in Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford, 1968), p. 409.

8 Isaac Pearson to George Eliot, 17 May 1880, and George Eliot to Isaac Pearson, 26 May 1880, *The George Eliot Letters*, VII, 280, 287.