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Drowning in Sacrifice: Maggie Tulliver's Role in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*

To read George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* is to take note of the protagonist Maggie Tulliver. She enters the action of the novel "incessantly tossing her head to keep the dark heavy locks out of her gleaming eyes," and it quickly becomes apparent that Maggie is brash, troublesome, and a misfit in her community (Eliot 7). She also, however, possesses many endearing qualities: curiosity, intelligence, fierce loyalty, and conciliatory leanings. Nonetheless, the town of St. Ogg's, where Maggie resides, does not condone her independent spirit. In fact, before she turns twenty, Maggie is rejected by society and perishes in a flood. The novel's swift ending raises the question: why must such a memorable character die? While some critics may blame Maggie's character flaws or the unpredictable power of nature, the answer is much more profound. Throughout *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot demonstrates the futility of orthodox religion. As the model for Eliot's "religion of humanity," Maggie's sacrifice is a demonstration of great love and an example of the religion that St. Ogg's should embrace.

In order to understand Maggie's downfall, it is important to have a clear picture of St. Ogg's. Situated on the fictional river Floss in the middle of England in the 1820s, it is a well-developed, semi-rural area, "a town which carries the traces of its long growth and history" (92). Most of the townspeople attend Anglican churches, but attendance is more of a social ritual or tradition than a religious act of devotion. There is little Christian fervor, and the local minister, Dr. Kenn, says of his parish, "the ideas of discipline and Christian fraternity are entirely

relaxed—they can hardly be said to exist in the public mind” (401). In fact, the rules of society more often overshadow any doctrine of the Church. The narrator explains, “The ladies of St. Ogg’s were not beguiled by any wide speculative conceptions; but they had their favorite abstraction, called Society, which served to make their consciences perfectly easy in doing what satisfied their own egoism” (410). In order to satisfy this egoism, rules about desired morality, familial loyalty, and appearances are dutifully enforced. Families such as Maggie’s maternal relatives, the Dodsons, have high expectations for their linens, their fan-shaped caps, and their children. While the Dodsons will support and help their relatives in times of need, they disdain those who disgrace the family name, as Mr. Tulliver does when he goes bankrupt. They consider families such as the Mosses, Maggie’s paternal relatives, inferior and unfortunate. An air of self-righteousness and superiority permeates St. Ogg’s, leading to a tendency to gossip and to judge.

From a young age, Maggie finds herself fitting in with the Mosses and the Tullivers, rather than with the Dodsons and the rest of St. Ogg’s. Her objectionable characteristics are numerous. First, she has dark skin and unruly hair, unfortunate appearances for a society that admires the fair and the tidy. Second, Maggie is very intelligent and curious, while those around her are content with academic mediocrity. While her father is proud of her, he also points out, “a women’s no business wi’ being so clever; it’ll turn to trouble” (10). Additionally, Maggie has a temper and acts impulsively. When she feels upset, Maggie pierces a doll with nails, cuts off her own hair, runs away to visit gypsies, and bursts out in anger. Moreover, Maggie struggles with pride. During her brief visit with the gypsies, Maggie is certain they will demand that she act as their ruler once they learn of her high intelligence. Finally, Maggie fervently desires to be loved. The narrator explains that “the need of being loved, the strongest need in poor Maggie’s nature” is even stronger than her pride (26). From her childhood, Maggie receives love from her father;

her brother Tom; and her friend with a deformity, Philip Wakem. She yearns and works for the love of these men for the remainder of her life. She believes that her father “had always defended and excused her, and her loving remembrance of his tenderness was a force within her that would enable her to do or bear anything for his sake” (165). Her willingness to do or bear anything to gain love, along with her many other characteristics, set Maggie apart from the citizens of St. Ogg’s.

These personality traits continue into Maggie’s young adulthood, and some critics might argue that her independent yet needy spirit, along with her poor choices, cause Maggie’s rejection from society and eventually her death. The members of high society continue to comment on Maggie’s unusual appearances. She maintains her intelligence and works as a governess, although her relatives consider that to be a menial profession. Maggie’s temper and pride remain as well, although she tries to subdue them. Her attempts, however, make only a marginal difference. Maggie simply does not know how to function in St. Ogg’s. The narrator explains, “She was so unused to society that she could take nothing as a matter of course, and had never in her life spoken from the lips merely, so that she must necessarily appear absurd to more experienced ladies, from the excessive feeling she was apt to throw into very trivial incidents” (304). But it is her desperate need for love that causes the most trouble. Maggie develops a relationship with Philip Wakem to the extreme displeasure of both her brother and father. As she attempts to separate herself from Philip to appease her kin, she becomes strongly attracted to Stephen Guest, the love interest of her cousin Lucy Deane. Maggie is tempted by the possibility of living comfortably wedded to him and is pulled away by emotion and unforeseen circumstances. She finds herself on a riverboat alone with Stephen far from St. Ogg’s. While the citizens of St. Ogg’s would have understood if she had married Stephen, Maggie refuses his hand

in marriage out of love for Philip and loyalty to Lucy. Yet the townspeople proclaim she is a fallen woman and shun her from their company. When Maggie has no one else to whom to turn for love, she nonetheless attempts to save her friends, her brother, and her cousin from the flood. This final act results in her death by drowning. In the opinion of some critics, if Maggie had been accepted, had found her place in society, and had not sought after love so desperately, then she would have lived.

More significant than her choices, Maggie's downfall and death could be attributed to nature. George Eliot wrote *The Mill on the Floss* in 1859, around the same time Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published, and contemporaneous scientific thought made its way into her novel. Early on, Maggie is called a "small mistake of nature" (6). Mistakes of nature do not survive in an unforgiving world. Maggie upsets nature's order because she is both a Dodson and Tulliver, and "Tulliver blood did not mix well with the Dodson blood" (46). Maggie is proud like the Dodsons, and she expects the accouterments of higher society, such as tea and books. But she has enough Tulliver in her to prevent her from becoming too concerned with possessions. She has a temper like many of the Tullivers, and perhaps if that were balanced with the social awareness of the Dodsons, she would be able to function well in St. Ogg's. Instead, Maggie has strong emotions and little awareness of what society thinks. If she had been more of a Dodson, she would have saved herself from the floodwaters. Instead, she saves Bob Jakin and his family, and she tries to rescue Tom. Since Maggie is born with characteristics from both families, she is a mistake of nature and therefore not meant to survive. She is, according to this argument, a victim of the natural world.

While some assert that character flaws or nature's inevitability led to Maggie's death, neither of these arguments provides the whole story. While the young protagonist is often carried

away by emotion, her downfall is in large part due to the St. Ogg's community. She is never encouraged, but rather, "everybody in the world seemed so hard and unkind to Maggie: there was no indulgence, no fondness.... it seemed to be a world where people behaved the best to those they did not pretend to love and that did not belong to them" (190). Her family and friends constantly criticize her choices. The Dodsons despise her girlish rebellion; Philip discourages her self-renunciation; and her cousin Lucy does not let her get away with making a life for herself apart from St. Ogg's. When she does make a selfless choice, refusing Stephen's marriage offer in order to protect and stay loyal to Philip and Lucy, the citizens of St. Ogg's prefer to judge her as a fallen woman and exclude her from their circles. Therefore, it is not just Maggie's weaknesses that cause her downfall; for her community even condemns her strengths and her bravery. Moreover, Maggie's death is not simply nature's fault. Tom had both Dodson and Tulliver blood, and he was able to climb the social ladder successfully. If nature dictated the fates of "mistakes of nature," he would not have been able to do so. Additionally, before her refusal of Stephen, Maggie's life had potential. Even though she did not fit in, she could have married Philip Wakem, or she could have worked as a governess or shopkeeper, proving that it is possible for even nature's "mistakes" to find at least some place in society. While the flood can be understood to represent nature's hand, Eliot intended it to serve as the means of Maggie's sacrifice. Her death is not simply the result of a faulty character or the cruelty of nature.

More than examining character flaws or nature's power, Eliot uses *The Mill on the Floss* to demonstrate how orthodox religion is old-fashioned and ineffective. St. Ogg's itself is named after a boatman who helped ferry a disguised Virgin Mary across the river, but that religious memory is long forgotten, along with its implications. The citizens of St. Ogg's do little to care for one another or to honor the God they proclaim to follow. Mr. Stelling, Tom Tulliver's

teacher, is a clergyman who only cares about his own advancement and prestige. Mr. Pullet, one of Maggie's uncles, goes to church and pays his taxes without giving any thought to why he does so, and Maggie's father makes a vow on a Bible never to forgive Mr. Wakem for taking his mill and crushing his pride. Most of the characters possess some sort of religious tradition in their backgrounds, but that religion has no fervor or any power to change their lives. Concerning the Tullivers and Dodsons, the narrator explains, "Observing these people narrowly... one sees little trace of religion, still less of a distinctively Christian creed. Their belief in the Unseen... seems to be rather a pagan kind; their moral notions, though held with strong tenacity, seem to have no standard beyond hereditary custom" (219). For Maggie's family and most of the citizens of St. Ogg's, religion is a dead ritual. While they maintain the organization and trappings of church, their real belief lies in themselves and their customs.

Just like the townspeople of St. Ogg's, George Eliot recognized orthodox faith only in her past. While she grew up in an evangelical tradition, the philosophies and questions of her time led her eventually to give up organized religion. Nonetheless, Eliot still longed for order and meaning, which she found in a "religion of humanity" put forth by German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach. This religion of humanity stated that while Christianity was just a story, it taught "the perennial truth of human love and selflessness" (Knoepflmacher, *Religious Humanism* 53). George Eliot saw this truth in her own life, as she felt spiritually fulfilled when she cared for her father, sacrificed for her illegitimate husband, and doted on her stepsons. She believed that meaning could only be found in selfless sacrifice, a lesson she attempted to share in her stories.

In *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot's most autobiographical novel, she portrays Maggie as the paragon of her religion of humanity. Maggie grows up in a town that has moved beyond its need for organized religion. Throughout her life, she struggles to find the best way to live in such a

society: she is a curious and stubborn child; she embraces a program of religious devotion and self-renunciation; and she tries to find peace and happiness in a few romantic and familial relationships. But none of these approaches satisfy her. Late in the novel, Maggie tells Tom that she wants to be kept from doing wrong, and he replies, “What *will* keep you? ...Not religion; not your natural feelings of gratitude and honour” (393). Her character, her nature, or even orthodox religion cannot keep Maggie morally focused, so she must move on from what is commonplace but ineffective in St. Ogg’s. From Eliot’s worldview, Maggie’s life is a developing ground for the religion of humanity. At age nine or ten, she pushes Lucy into the mud out of spite; as a young adult, she sacrifices her life for her brother. Maggie grows from a selfish girl to a selfless woman. By the last chapter of the novel, when this suffering protagonist can find no comfort in church, family, or personal devotion, she can choose to care for others. In the last few moments of her life, Maggie saves Bob Jakin and his family, attempts to rescue her brother, and only thinks about helping others. She epitomizes Eliot’s religion of humanity by living out and then dying for the belief that the greatest quality of humanity is love. Maggie encounters little hope in society or in the judgmental religiosity that society offered her. In order to live meaningfully, Maggie has to embrace the religion of humanity and die for others. Since she is a social outcast, death is the only way that she could demonstrate her love for her society. The young lady shunned by an insincere religious community is the only one able to show her neighbors what kind of religion they should place their trust in – a religion of humanity.

St. Ogg’s is a town with many flaws. With its critical judgment and outmoded religious system, its citizens disparage and cast out young Maggie Tulliver. Because of her appearance, intelligence, temper, pride, and desperate need to be loved, she struggles to find her place in society. When she seeks romantic love and approval, she finds herself in difficult situations. Her

family disapproves of her relationship with Philip, and society condemns her riverboat trip with Stephen. When Maggie aspires to love and sacrifice for others, however, she becomes the perfect model for George Eliot's religion of humanity. Through her sacrificial death, Maggie practices the essence of Christianity—selflessness—without the religion, and thereby demonstrates to St. Ogg's the new type of religion which they should embrace. Her death is not simply a matter of character flaws, poor choices, or natural selection. Rather, it is the pinnacle of Maggie's development from a selfish child to a young woman who moves away from traditional faith and lives according to the values of George Eliot's religion of humanity. This one memorable character becomes Eliot's voice through which she shares her values with her readers. For that reason, Maggie Tulliver has to die, and for that reason, she should be remembered.

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