Challenges, Struggle, Compromise: a Sociological Reading of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*

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Abstract

Even though well-known for its autobiographical elements, George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* is far more than either a mere reflection of Eliot's life or a document of mid-Victorian society. Beneath the surface of the novel lies the complicated interplay among the text, the author, and the society. To avoid perpetrating gross oversimplifications, this essay aims at re-reading the novel in terms of authorial as well as social context in order to uncover the latent interactions among Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, and the Victorian society.

In effect, through the seemingly inconsistent characterization, the "radical-conservative" authorial explanation (Ashton 57), and the disputable ending of the novel, Eliot writes out not only her childhood, her wish, and her critique, but her challenges, struggle, and compromise with the Victorian society. Thus to read *the Mill on the Floss* in terms of the authorial and social context enables the reader to perceive an overall picture of the complicated interplay among Eliot, the novel, and the Victorian society.

Keywords: George Eliot, *Mill On the Floss*, sociology and literature, Victorian society

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挑戰、掙扎、妥協：
從社會學的角度看喬治艾略特的《河畔磨坊》

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摘要

喬治艾略特 (George Eliot) 的《河畔磨坊》雖以自傳特質聞名，但更值得注意的是，該作品反映了維多利亞中期的種種社會現象：包括社會階級、風土民情、親情倫理、家庭結構，甚至女性地位。這些社會現象的反射，與豐富多層的敘事內容相互融會，交織出豐富多面的風貌，更提供了讀者無限的閱讀角度與詮釋空間。本文從社會學的角度出發，深入探討小說中反映出的社會現象，及這些現象與文本之間的交互作用。研究結果發現：這部自傳體小說無論在人物刻畫、敘事角度，甚至結局安排方面，在在顯示作者與其所置身之維多利亞社會之間，充滿著種種難以化解的衝突，女主角的矛盾、掙扎與最終的妥協，更突顯女性小說家在保守社會中的艱難處境，以及批判之餘不得不然的退讓。

關鍵字: 喬治艾略特、河畔磨坊、社會學與文學、維多利亞時期英國社會

Challenges, Struggle, Compromise: A Sociological Reading of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*

Even though well-known for its autobiographical elements, George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (later to be referred to as *The Mill*) is far more than either a mere reflection of Eliot's life or a document of mid-Victorian society. In effect, beneath the surface of the novel lies the complicated interplay among the text, the author, and the society. Therefore, to avoid perpetrating gross oversimplifications, this essay aims at re-reading *The Mill* in terms of authorial as well as social context in order to uncover the latent interactions among Eliot, *The Mill*, and the Victorian society.

In fact, ubiquitous yet puzzling in the novel is Eliot's ambivalence—her "clear-sighted criticism," her yearning for breaking through tradition, as well as her desire for wish-fulfillment[1]on the one hand, and her "wide tolerance" towards rigid conventionality (Ashton 14), her inextricable attachment to social duty and custom, as well as the demands of the Victorian society on the other. It is exactly such ambivalence that accounts for rebellious Maggie Tulliver's attachment to "the ties that all our former life has made for us" (461),[2] for Eliot's seemingly contradictory characterization (of Mrs. Tulliver and Mrs. Glegg), and above all, for the "rescuing" yet disputable flood at the end of the novel. Moreover, such ambivalence constructs the very process of Eliot's challenges[3], struggles, and compromise with the Victorian society. With such ambivalence, Eliot seems to abandon a "master key" to fit all cases (Ashton 44) in favor of the endeavor to strike a balance between individual desire and social norms. Likewise, her ambivalence parallels her belief in no absolute moral judgment or arbitrary dichotomy within the complicated social network.

Eliot's question and satire against the stagnant conventionality prevail in *The Mill*--passages about the faith, custom, and moral judgment of people in St. Ogg's, characterization of Mrs. Tulliver and Dodson aunts, together with Maggie's rebellion against her society--all reveal Eliot's challenge to the rigid tradition and moral standards

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[1] By "wish" I mean Eliot's hope to regain her brother Issac's affection after her "marriage" with George Henry Lewes.

[2] All page references to *The Mill* are to the *Penguin Popular Classics* (London: Penguin Books, 1994.)

[3] By "challenge" I mean not only Eliot's criticism of the old (e.g. tradition) but her meditation, re-examination and reassessment of the new (e.g. scientific discourses such as Darwinian view of evolution and natural selection) in her society.

of her society.[4] However, behind Eliot's question, satire, and challenge hides her strong pathos (Adam 132), her tolerance and sympathy resulting partly from her reading of Goethe, Scott, and Feuerbach.[5] Through the narrator as her mouthpiece,[6] Eliot reveals her sympathy with people like those "emmelike Dodsons and Tullivers" (276) as well as her recognition of the "core of soundness" (277) within tradition.

As Adam points out, St. Ogg's is not a source of moral well-being but rather the embodiment of a malign conventionality (131). In *The Mill*, St. Ogg's is depicted as

> ...one of those old, old towns which impress one as a continuation and outgrowth of nature, as much as the nests of the bower-birds or the winding galleries of the white-ants: a town which carries the traces of its long growth and history like a millennial tree and has sprung up and developed in the same spot…from the time when the Roman legion turned their back on it (115)

where people do not "look extensively before or after" (118) but lead "a sordid life," irradiated by no sublimed principle, no romantic visions,[7] no active, self-renouncing faith" (276). In such an old town that "inherit[s] a long past without thinking of it" (118), one "sees little trace of religion, still less of a distinctively Christian creed" but "conventional worldly notions and habits without instruction and without polish" (276). However, in spite of such comparison of people of St. Ogg's to insects, and such seemingly objective yet sardonic description on St. Ogg's, Eliot never fails to realize that there is still something admirable in these "dull men and women's" stubborn

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[4] As Ashton points out, the settings of *the Mill* are "borrowed from the experience of life in Warwickshire" (137). Accordingly, the depiction of St. Ogg's and the authorial comment on it reveal somewhat Eliot's society as well as her attitude towards it.

[5] As an avid reader of Scott and Goethe, and also as a translator of Feuerbach's *Essence of Chirstianity*—a work on the religion of humanity, Eliot is affected by their humane interest and tolerance towards "mixed and erring human nature" (Cf. Ashton 17; Hanson 12).

[6] Among Eliot's novels, *The Mill* is probably the most autobiographical. Thus Maggie Tulliver is considered by some critics as Eliot's "self-duplication" (Carlisle 182). Yet in my opinion, it is the Narrator (not Maggie) in the novel that offers an authorial explanation/criticism of St. Ogg's.

[7] The lack of "romantic visions" or "polish" in St. Ogg's is presented not only in the "provincial respectability of figures like the businessman Mr. Deane" but also in the portraits of Maggie and Philip Wakem. In Tom's eyes, Maggie's creative imagination is no better than silly "stuff;" moreover, by portraying Philip Wakem—an amateur artist—as a cripple, Eliot emphasizes that in a world (i.e. St Ogg's) which values the practicality and concrete accomplishments, artists are doomed to be "marginalized" (Carlisle 185-7).

"reverence for whatever [is] customary and respectable" (277); instead, she expresses her compassion and sympathy not only by asserting that "their theory of life [has] its core of soundness," but also by the touching episode of Mr. Tulliver's visit to his sister Mrs. Moss (81-2).

Likewise, Eliot's ambivalence is revealed in the characterization of Mrs. Glegg and Mrs. Tulliver. The first appearance of Mrs. Glegg is by all means "unprepossessing." With "her large gold watch in her hand," with the "bitter simile and scarcely perceptible toss of her head" (51-2), with her pride and pretentiousness, she insinuates Mrs. Tulliver's having married beneath her and Maggie's coming to no good.[8] When Mrs. Pullet arrives in tears, lamenting for the death of "old Mrs. Sutton o' the Twentylands," Mrs. Glegg—a woman "who always cr[ies] just as much as [is] proper when anything happen[s] to her own 'kin'"—sneers at her sister, stressing that the dead neighbor "is no kin o' yours, nor much acquaintance as I've ever heard of" (55). The portrait of Mrs. Tulliver is equally unprepossessing: Besides her affection to Tom,[9] her fetish of "all her linen and all the precious 'best things'"(204), and her "facility of saying things that drive [Mr. Tulliver] in the opposite direction to the one she desire[s]" (73), Mrs. Tulliver impresses the reader with her fretful and sharp grumble about Maggie's "naughtiness," her untidy hair and dress, her unladylike manner, her useless occupation, and her father's fondness which "encourage[s] her i' naughtiness" (9-10). Yet, for all these unpleasant appearances in the novel, Mrs. Tulliver and Mrs. Glegg still win the reader's esteem when they affectionately embrace and help Maggie, who returns unmarried from Stephen Guest: Whereas Tom yells at Maggie "with cruel bitterness": "…you are ten times worse than [Stephen] is," and accused her of disgracing the whole family (496-7), Mrs. Tulliver's "love leap[s] out now stronger than all dread." She stands by Maggie, comforting her by stressing that "you've got a mother" (497). While Tom declares that Maggie "will find no home" with him, Mrs. Tulliver goes with her daughter without hesitation; at that moment, "the only thing clear to her [is] the mother's instinct that she would go with her unhappy child" (498). Equally unforgettable is Mrs. Glegg's defense for Maggie. Upon knowing that Tom casts his

[8] Mrs. Glegg "had always augured ill of Maggie's future." See p. 511 of *the Mill*.

[9] Upon hearing of Mr. Tulliver's plan to send Tom to a new school, Mrs. Tulliver cares about nothing but whether the school is too far off for her to "wash and mend him" (21).

sister out from family refuge, she not only "has a scene of remonstrance" with "unmovable" Tom but offers Maggie "a shelter in her house," promising to "uphold" her niece "against folks as say harm of [Maggie]" (512-3). Surprising is the fact that it is these conservative, inflexible Dodson sisters that counter public condemnation and protect Maggie with their genuine affection and sheer trust. However, such seeming inconsistency in characterizing Mrs. Tulliver and Mrs. Glegg undeniably reveals Eliot's ambivalence with which she reinforces her conviction that "the mysterious complexity of life is not to be embraced by maxims," and that "no moral judgment" should be made "by general rules," or by "a ready-made, patent method without the trouble of exerting patience, discrimination, impartiality" (510).

If the ambivalence in depicting St. Ogg's and in characterizing Mrs. Tulliver and Mrs. Glegg echoes Eliot's "tolerance towards the narrow doctrines she [has] rejected," her sympathy with the "importance of a traditional religious creed in the lives of ordinary people" (Ashton 98), and her "awareness of relativity of credos and doctrines" (Pinion 130), the ambivalence in portraying Maggie's grapple with her society parallels the everlasting clash between individual and society. With such ambivalence, the complicated relationship among the author's upbringing, text, and the society is embodied. Even in an autobiographical novel, the relation between the author and the character is still complex. Through Maggie's struggle with her own society in the novel, the reader perceives on the one hand Eliot's critique of Victorian social norms, which undeniably restrain women's self-fulfillment, and on the other hand the profound influence on Eliot of Evagelical emphasis on social responsibility (Brown 45-8)[10]—an influence that pulls both Maggie and Eliot back—the former from elopement with Stephen Guest by "bringing sorrow into the lives of others" (483) and the latter from breaking completely through Victorian morality by "emancipating" Maggie.

[10] Evangelical faith was introduced to George Eliot (who was eight then) by Maria Lewis, head teacher of Mrs. Wallington's school, and Eliot's religious fanaticism was even strengthened not only by her friendship and correspondence with Maria Lewis but by the Evangelical ardor in Misses Franklins' school. She once indulged so much in Evangelicalism that she rejected "all signs of pleasure in her life": literary works (including Shakespeare), theatre, and music were all spared (Hanson 25-27; Taylor 26-29). Even though her acquaintance with free-thinkers (Herbert Spenser, among others) and her translation of Strauss and Feuerbach finally led her to doubt and even to abandon her Evangelical faith, she never denied that Evangelical emphasis on social duty had rooted in her mind, and exerted greater influence on her. (Cf. Eliot's autobiographical essay "Looking Backward" and her letter to Francois d' Albert Durade in 1860.)

In spite of the conservative atmosphere in her family and the limited education she has received,[11] George Eliot is by no means a conformist to Victorian society. She is never a model child in her family.[12] Her pursuit of knowledge, independence, and the "true marriage based on the 'natural law'" with George Henry Lewis (Ashton 10) further proves that she is never a woman who "keeps her place" (71) as her society demands. In a sense, she is a feminist. By portraying Maggie Tulliver and her struggle, Eliot writes out not only "her own spiritual and emotional struggles as a child and a girl" (Hanson 220-3), but also her challenges to Victorian social norms and ideology, especially to the rigidly defined gender roles in a patriarchal society (Goodman 31) and the stereotypical opposition of the blonde and the dark heroines (Landa 45). Eliot's Maggie has been a rebel against her society since her childhood; as a clever, studious, yet "naughty" little girl, she refuses to brush her hair, to wear her pinafore, to do her patchwork "like a little lady" (10); she rejects Tom's obstinate assertion that "girls couldn't learn Latin… Girls can't do Euclid" (150-151) by learning Latin, doing Euclid, and reading difficult books; she declines to "live respectably among relations" or to be "taken care" of by her brother (401) by working as a school teacher (374)[13] and "getting her own bread" (513). On the other hand, Eliot "paints" Tom as a sharp contrast to Maggie: dominant, self-righteous, and sometimes cruel, he never grows as his sister does in spite of his expensive education.[14] Throughout the novel, though trying to "behave like a man" (217), Tom never abandons his boyhood desire to dominate and to "punish" his sister. Since childhood, Tom has been "partially clear and positive on one point—namely, that he would punish everyone who deserve[s]" (35), believing that he "can judge much better than [Maggie] can" (237). Even Maggie knows clearly that Tom "ha[s] been reproaching other people all [his] life" and has

[11] Eliot's father, Robert Evans, "dealt fairly with all within the bounds of the social framework" (Hanson 2); everything "was black or white and judged by the simplest of tests" both in her school and family (Hanson 12). "Her own schooldays had come to an abrupt end" when she was sixteen because of her mother's fatal illness (Taylor 22).

[12] The *model child* in her family was her "gentle, neat, dainty, obedient" elder sister Chrissey. In the eyes of her mother, Eliot is "undisciplined, self-opinioned, proud, hot-tempered and sulky…"—a "queer, three-cornered, awkward child, sallow and dark" (Hanson 10-11).

[13] Lucy mentions to Stephen that Maggie "has been in a dreary situation in a school" since her father's death, "because she is determined to be independent and not live with aunt Pullet" (374).

[14] Tom's education fails to qualify him for a profession but leaves "a slight deposit of polish" (512). Moreover, his education doesn't really "humanize him and make him more tolerant" either (Pinion 110).

"been always sure [he himself is] right." She even points out to his brother that all his reproaching and self-righteousness is because he has not "a mind large enough to see that there is anything better than [his] own conduct and [his] own petty aims" (354).

Contrasting the "education" and the growth of Maggie and Tom, Eliot revises traditional *Bildungsroman* into a "male-female double" one (Gilbert and Gubar 51), offering her critique of a patriarchal society where the rigid differentiation of male and female gender roles limits the full development of women and men alike (Goodman 31). Whereas women like Maggie are asked to "keep their place" by abandoning their gift and wish for self-fulfillment, men's privilege, education, and power can hardly develop them "a mind large enough" to see that they are by no means superior to the opposite sex.

Likewise, through Maggie's words, Eliot reveals her resentment towards the stereotypical opposition of the blonde and the dark heroine:

> As soon as I came to the blond-haired young lady reading in the park, I shut it up and determined to read no further. I foresaw that that light-complexioned girl would win away all the love from Cornne and make her miserable. I'm determined to read no more books where the blonde-haired women carry away the happiness…. If you could give me some story, now, where the dark woman triumphs, it would restore the balance (339).

Her characterization of Maggie as a "gypsy-like" heroine, who tries hard to grapple with her society in order to achieve her own self-fulfillment undeniably discards such an arbitrary blonde/dark dichotomy.

However, for all these questions to the Victorian social norms and ideology, Eliot still fails to steer clear of tradition; as a result, she does not "emancipate" Maggie by making her another George Eliot. Instead, Eliot restores her rebellious heroine back to the framework of family ties and social duty. Therefore, upon leaving Stephen Guest, Maggie rushes immediately back to her

> Home—where her mother and brother [are], Philip Lucy…--the haven towards which her mind tend[s], the sanctuary where sacred relics lies, where she would be

rescued from more falling (491).

Maggie's attachment to her "ties" parallels Eliot's own to the virtues sanctified by Evangelicalism—loyalty, duty, and self-sacrifice (Alexander 115). Furthermore, noticeable is the fact that by 1860, Eliot, forty-one years of age, has been facing the transition of her life; her fascination with the "shifting relation of passion/individual desire and duty/social norms" flourishes with her "increasing conservative feelings" (Alexander 102). Accordingly, *The Mill* is not only Maggie's struggle, choice, and compromise with her society but also Eliot's. As a novelist "subject to implicit and explicit censorship" (Brown 102), she can never make her heroine break through all the internal and external restrictions regardless of her reading public. Thus through Maggie's struggles, the reader seems to perceive once again Eliot's ambivalence—her desire to break through on the one hand and her attachment to tradition on the other—as well as her endeavor as a female novelist in the Victorian society to strike a balance between passion and duty.

It is Eliot's ambivalence together with her endeavor to strike a balance that accounts for the seemingly anti-climatic ending of the novel. As the ultimate act of the story, the flood is not so much Eliot's escapism as the very embodiment of her wish-fulfillment as well as her compromise with her society. Maggie's drowning with Tom "in an embrace never to be parted" (534) seems to fulfill Eliot's yearning for not only her brother's affection but also for an ideal self—the balanced harmony of masculinity and femininity; furthermore, with the flood which drives the rebellious heroine back to the "clasp" (534) of her dominant brother, Eliot seems to achieve a recognition with her society.

In dealing with the brother-sister motif, Eliot indeed writes out her "stormy" relationship with her brother Issac (Ashton 38), whom she has followed "like a shadow" (Hanson 4) and adored "puppy-like" as a little girl (Ashton 10) in spite of all his boyish stubbornness and dominance. Moreover, in depicting Maggie, Eliot does project her own wish and feelings: Not only Maggie's craving for Tom's love but her predicament as a rebellious woman in a conservative society parallels Eliot's personal life. However, even though depicting Maggie with "so much love and pity" (Eliot 247), Eliot is still unable to destroy the overwhelming social network for Maggie. Under the boundaries imposed by her society, Maggie's desire for "always liv[ing] together with

Tom (27), namely, for a perfect harmony between brother and sister which she sometimes experienced in her childhood, can only be possible in tomb—a symbolic regression to their childhood.[15] Thus, for Eliot as a novelist in the Victorian society, the flood seems the only way through which she can free Maggie from social constraints to join with the brother she has lost; above all, by "liberating" Maggie with the flood (Emmitt 317), Eliot fulfills, through the novel, her own wish for regaining Issac's affection, which is, undeniably, not available in real life.[16] Besides, such an ending echoes Eliot's endeavor to strike a balance between extremes and indicates her longing for a balance and harmony between masculinity and femininity, namely, for "a harmonious and balanced androgynous self" (Goodman 31) impossible in a patriarchal society. In short, with the flood, she fulfills her own wish by reconciling Maggie with Tom, and above all, she achieves the balance she desires by sweeping away all the conflicts between masculinity and femininity defined by a patriarchal society.

Feminist critics might sneer at such a wish-fulfillment which drives the rebellious heroine back to the "clasp" of her brother, yet to equate the flood to an irrelevant escapism is to be blind to the complicated social network behind Eliot, especially to the strict and rigid Evangelical morality of which Eliot ought to beware. In fact, Eliot can hardly refuse to "stop short" owing to the pressure from social norms; thus she "construes *The Mill* as a confession" (Carlisle 195) and offers her reading public a novel with a submissive ending in order to reconcile with her society. Only through such a compromise can she acquire her social position as a successful woman novelist—a position that grants her one more opportunity to challenge the rigid social norms through her writing.

The Mill on the Floss is a novel of ambivalence—of Eliot's ambivalence resulting from her upbringing and the social network from which she can hardly escape. Through the seemingly inconsistent characterization, the "radical-conservative" authorial explanation (Ashton 57), and the disputable ending in the novel, Eliot writes out not only her childhood, her wish, and her critique, but her challenges, struggle, and

[15] Rowing to save Tom, Maggie at last obtains her reward, "the old childish 'Magsie'"—a word that hints a symbolic return to their childhood. Moreover, when the flood "embrace[s]" Maggie and Tom, they seem to "live through again in…the days they ha[ve] clasped their little hands in love and roamed the daisied fields together" (534).

[16] George Eliot didn't regain her brother's affection until her marriage with Cross.

compromise with the Victorian society. Thus to read *the Mill* on the Floss in terms of the authorial and social context enables the reader to free himself/herself from both arbitrary moral judgment and naïve oversimplification, and above all, to perceive an overall picture of the complicated interplay among Eliot, the novel, and the Victorian society.

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