

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

# *The Mill on the Floss*

GEORGE ELIOT



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

# THE MILL ON THE FLOSS

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George Eliot

*Introduction and Notes by*

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WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

First published in 1995 by Wordsworth Editions Limited  
8b, Crib Street, Ware, Hertfordshire SG12 9HJ  
New introduction and notes added in 1999

ISBN 1 85326 074 6

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Introduction and notes © Wordsworth Editions 1999

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Typeset by Antony Gray  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

## INTRODUCTION

'George Eliot' was the pen-name adopted by Mary Anne Evans when, in her late thirties, she began to write fiction. Born in 1819 in Warwickshire, where her father was manager of an estate, she grew up in an agricultural area. In childhood she was particularly close to her father and her elder brother Isaac. She went to school in Nuneaton and Coventry, and became ardently evangelical. When she was sixteen years old her mother died, and she took over the management of the household. Finding local teachers to guide her she studied German, Italian, Greek and Latin. At twenty-two, as a result of her reading and of discussions with thoughtful and sceptical friends, she ceased to believe in the supernatural elements of Christianity, and at first refused to go to church, but later resumed attendance in deference to her father's wishes, on the understanding that she was not engaging in an act of worship but would occupy her mind on other things. In 1844 she undertook to complete the translation (begun by a friend) of D. F. Strauss's *Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, which had appeared in German nine years earlier; her translation was published in 1846.

In 1849 her father died and she left home, staying for several months alone in Geneva then with friends in Coventry and, in 1851 went to London. There she helped to edit the *Westminster Review*, and contributed articles and reviews to it; she quickly became familiar with the most active and influential intellects in London and was highly respected by them. In 1854 she published her translation from German of Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*, a closely argued interpretation of Christianity that makes humanity, rather than an external God, the source of moral values and the proper object of worship.

In the same year she formed a close emotional relationship with G. H. Lewes, a writer on a wide variety of subjects ranging from

the history of philosophy to the biology of the seashore. They travelled together in Germany, and lived together until Lewes's death twenty-four years later, but were not able to marry because, under the laws of the time, the fact that when his wife had had a child fathered by her lover he had accepted it as his own meant that he had condoned her misconduct and therefore could not seek a divorce on the grounds of her adultery. Mary Anne Evans considered, however, that she and Lewes were married in the sight of Heaven, and although some of their friends disapproved, and her brother Isaac did not write or speak to her again until Lewes died, she was far from being a social outcast (she had several invitations from Queen Victoria's daughters).

In 1857 George Eliot's first fictional work was published: Part I of 'Amos Barton', itself part of *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858). *Adam Bede* followed in 1859, *The Mill on the Floss* in 1860 and *Silas Marner* in 1861. *Romola*, a historical novel, came out in parts in the *Cornhill Magazine*, and in book form in 1863. *Felix Holt* appeared in 1866, *Middlemarch* in 1872 and *Daniel Deronda*, her last novel, in 1876. Lewes died in 1878 and two years later she married John Cross, but died only seven months afterwards.

There is evidently some common ground between the fictitious life of Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* and the real life of Mary Anne Evans. Both, as children, live in the country, and both love and admire their older brothers, and are often unable to satisfy their brothers' demanding expectations of them. Both elope with men who are committed to other women, and both are then conclusively rejected by their brothers.

But this does not mean that George Eliot simply inserted her own past into Maggie Tulliver's. There are important differences between their stories, and these can sometimes direct our attention to significant features of the novel (and, perhaps, to aspects of the life, though that is not our main concern here). Maggie's elopement lasts only until she has slept on it, whereas Mary Anne Evans's was for life (Lewes's life, as it turned out), and this difference reflects another: that G. H. Lewes was a man for whose intellectual activities and achievements Miss Evans had a well-founded respect, a man who could accompany, if not lead, her own explorations of the human predicament, but Maggie's Stephen Guest is shown to us as having a mind that could only be constricting for her. So on the basis of what we know of Mary Anne Evans's life (bearing in mind that no biography can recover much of its subject's inner life), we

may conclude that she was right to decide to live with Lewes, and on the basis of a careful reading of the novel we may feel that Maggie is right not to commit herself for life to the company of Stephen Guest.

These differences are too important for us to regard *The Mill on the Floss* as an autobiographical novel. Certainly the novelist made use of what she had learned from her own life, but not by writing about herself and her brother under altered names. She used parts of her own experience to enable her to imagine the different but related experiences of her fictitious characters. What she says about a comparable feature in *Adam Bede* puts the matter pretty clearly: 'I could never have written *Adam Bede* if I had not learned something of my father's early experience: but no one who knew my father could call Adam a portrait of him – and the course of Adam's life is entirely different from my father's' (letter to Charles Bray, 19 September 1859).

As readers, we need to appreciate how hard it must be for a novelist to 'use' her recollections of a real person, especially one so close as her father or her brother, without falling into reminiscence, investing her fictional character with her feelings about the real person, and failing to sustain the critical detachment without which sympathy slides into sentimentality. Not all readers would agree that George Eliot succeeded in this in *The Mill on the Floss*, but its first two books, 'Boy and Girl' and 'School-Time', quickly became popular favourites as representations of childhood in fiction.

The characterisation of Maggie Tulliver is a special case of this general problem, for she is evidently in some respects based on Mary Anne Evans herself. A novelist's use of her own younger self as a model for a fictional character is special because one can't help experiencing and remembering oneself in quite a different way from other people. However much sympathy and imagination we exercise, they can only be seen from outside; their thoughts and feelings can only be guessed at. We ourselves, however hard we try to be objective, can only see ourselves from inside; how we look to other people can only be guessed. So it is especially hard to stand back from the fictional character that is derived partly from one's own past self, and to make that character credible to the reader in the same way as the other characters

George Eliot seems to have been well aware of the pitfalls of this process, and to have taken care to make Maggie's nature and her destiny different from her own. In so far as *The Mill on the Floss* is

about Maggie Tulliver it is a study in unfulfilled yearnings, whereas Mary Anne Evans, who was accurately aware, even in childhood, of her intellectual advantages, may have experienced the yearnings but was able to find much that is denied to Maggie. Maggie yearns for the education that was not considered necessary or good for girls; Mary Anne Evans got herself an education, using the resources of her own apparently unpromising locality – an education far broader and deeper than her modern counterpart would get in a degree course at a university. Maggie needs to love and be loved, but is blocked by her brother's incomprehension; Mary Anne Evans had the need, and an equally unforgiving brother, but did not allow him to stand in her way: she entered on a loving and mutually supportive relationship with G. H. Lewes, and most of her friends supported her. In short, while *The Mill on the Floss* is in part a complaint against the limitations imposed on women by nineteenth-century society, using Maggie as a representative of yearning and frustrated womanhood, Mary Anne Evans herself took the freedom she needed – a freedom that no woman in a George Eliot novel would ever be allowed. This is not as inconsistent as it sounds; in her novels George Eliot was concerned with the plight of women in general, not with the few who had her advantages.

Maggie Tulliver is trapped (and the implication is that many women were) by being too compliant with other people's expectations of her. Her brother Tom requires, as the price of his love and protection, that she should be rigorously righteous, as he is; he requires her obedience, in his father's name, and he requires her to have no dealings with Philip Wakem. Wakem requires her love, and that she meet him without her brother's knowledge; she feels admiration for his intellect, and pity for his body, and the combination makes a kind of love – an extremely strenuous kind.

Her heart bled for Philip: she went on recalling the insults that had been flung at him with so vivid a conception of what he had felt under them, that it was almost like a sharp bodily pain to her, making her beat the floor with her foot, and tighten her fingers on her palm.

And yet, how was it that she was now and then conscious of a certain dim background of relief in the forced separation from Philip? Surely it was only because the sense of a deliverance from concealment was welcome at any cost?

(*The Mill on the Floss*, p. 312)

We can only take the questions to be Maggie's reported self-questioning, and her doubt about her sense of a welcome deliverance suggests that she knows, though she is not quite ready to admit it to herself, that her predicament cannot be endured much longer. Caught between two flatly contradictory requirements, between which she must eventually choose, and renounce her lover or her brother, Maggie is on the verge of a state of 'burn-out', the exhaustion experienced by 'carers', professional or not, when they cannot care any more. In this vulnerable state she is susceptible to the charming, and adequately accomplished, Stephen Guest, who may have little of substance to offer but has the merit, for someone in Maggie's situation, of being wonderfully unstrenuous. He represents for her, briefly, not a solution to her problem, but an escape from it. Nothing could be more unlike the relationship of Mary Anne Evans and G. H. Lewes, based on an active working partnership.

We have seen, in the questions I quoted above, an example of George Eliot's use of free indirect speech—the indirect quotation, so to speak, of a character's thoughts. The usefulness of this device is that it conveys not only the substance of the character's thinking, but something of its tone too, the quality of the person's thinking. Thus Stephen, we are told, on meeting Maggie at Lucy's home,

was vexed and disappointed: he thought, perhaps Maggie didn't like the name of Wakem to be mentioned to her in that abrupt way – for he now recalled what Lucy had told him of the family quarrel. It was of no use to stay any longer. Maggie was seating herself at the table with her work, and looking chill and proud, and he – he looked like a simpleton for having come. A gratuitous, entirely superfluous visit of that sort was sure to make a man disagreeable and ridiculous. Of course it was palpable to Maggie's thinking, that he had dined hastily in his own room for the sake of setting off again and finding her alone.

*(The Mill on the Floss, p. 364)*

It isn't the narrator who is directly telling us these things; after the first sentence the narrator's voice is replaced by the indirect quotation of Stephen's thoughts, as he considers that he has made a fool of himself. It is Stephen's vanity that is so concerned about 'look[ing] like a simpleton', and it is he who imagines that Maggie will 'of course' have worked out what he has been doing. There could hardly be a more economical way of showing a mediocre and self-regarding mind. It is by such means as these, rather than by



direct evaluative comments, that George Eliot displays Stephen as a spoilt rich boy, 'vexed' when he does not easily get what he wants.

But she does also use more direct ways of reporting people's lines of thought, and making her own analytical comments on them:

Philip's sense of the situation was too complete for him not to be visited with glancing fears lest he had been intervening too presumptuously in the action of Maggie's conscience – perhaps for a selfish end. But no! – he persuaded himself his end was not selfish. He had little hope that Maggie would ever return the strong feeling he had for her; and it must be better for Maggie's future life, when these petty family obstacles to her freedom had disappeared, that the present should not be entirely sacrificed, and that she should have some opportunity of culture – some interchange with a mind above the vulgar level of those she was now condemned to live with. If we only look far enough off for the consequences of our actions, we can always find some point in the combination of results by which those actions can be justified . . .

*(The Mill on the Floss, p. 296)*

Here she is giving us an example of Philip Wakem's thinking, the activity of a more mature and complex mind than Stephen Guest's, and one that she generally presents more favourably, so it comes as a surprise when she criticises it so explicitly and severely. For all her subtlety, George Eliot does not hesitate to tell the reader, directly and explicitly, what needs to be said. She would hardly have been attracted by Henry James's theory that a novelist must leave some things for the reader to work out for himself: her primary concern was that the reader should get it right, should not misunderstand, should sympathise appropriately and judge wisely – so why take risks? It would be merely perverse. For George Eliot's novels are intended not only to entertain, but also to inform, to give the reader some of the results of her observations of people and their interactions.

Some of her most interesting observations in this novel are things she perceived about children and how they deal with each other. In a series of carefully described episodes in the relationship between Maggie and her brother she traces the way in which bonds established in early childhood are strong enough to be decisive in Maggie's decision-making when she is a grown woman. One of the episodes concerns a piece of jam puff, and who is to have the larger

portion (pp. 39-40); another involves Maggie's forgetting to feed Tom's rabbits (pp. 26-34). Our sympathies are directed for the most part towards Maggie, although we also have to acknowledge that Tom, for all his muddled and contradictory expression, tries, at some cost to himself, to behave in an honourable and principled way. The incidents, as they are presented, are small but characteristic parts of the process by which Tom gains his sister's loyalty. A more ordinary kind of thinking might have led the author to show loyalty being won by kindness; it seems reasonable that it should be so. But by imagining this and other episodes with close attention to how it might really be, the author finds that people, like dogs, may give their loyalty and devotion to those who oppress and ill-treat them.

But perhaps it would be more accurate to say that *the novel* makes this discovery, because in a sense the author didn't. Book Second of *The Mill on the Floss* ends with this remarkable passage:

They [i.e. Maggie and her brother] had gone forth together into their new life of sorrow, and they would never more see the sunshine undimmed by remembered cares. They had entered the thorny wilderness, and the golden gates of their childhood had for ever closed behind them.

(*The Mill on the Floss*, p. 171)

The chapter is entitled 'The Golden Gates are Passed'. Evidently this is offered to us as a significant moment in the structure of the narrative, a moment in Maggie's and Tom's lives that can appropriately be compared with the expulsion from Eden. The treatment quoted above of Maggie and Tom with a piece of jam puff seems relaxed, easy, unstrained, whereas this paragraph is designed, crafted and polished. But this should not prevent us from recognising the first as a far more distinguished and difficult kind of thinking than the second. The great achievement of the first two books of the novel, the section closed by the paragraph I have quoted, has been to present Maggie's childhood, and less directly Tom's too, as an experience of a complex and varied world in which the sky is not always blue, nor always cloudy, a world in which the sunshine is rarely 'undimmed by remembered cares', or by present or anticipated sorrows: Maggie may forget to feed Tom's rabbits, but the guilt she experiences when they die is vividly remembered. Maggie is acquainted with the thorny wilderness long before her childhood ends, and a life of sorrow is not new to her; her childhood and Tom's have not been paradisaical.

So the closing, summing-up paragraph of the first movement of the novel is a misrepresentation; the penetrating intelligence of the novel seems to be betrayed by its own author. ('The artist usually sets out – or used to – to point a moral and adorn a tale. The tale, however, points the other way, as a rule. Two blankly opposing morals, the artist's and the tale's. Never trust the artist. Trust the tale.' – D. H. Lawrence, 'The Spirit of Place', in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Seltzer, 1923.) A fully imagined fiction like *The Mill on the Floss* may give us access to knowledge that we did not have before we read it, or that has been at best a shadowy implicit knowledge. As readers we may notice it or not; perhaps we may possess it as experience, without being fully aware of having it. Perhaps the author too may be unaware of knowledge that is implied in the novel (although, after all, it was she who put it there). Perhaps the shape she had chosen that the novel should have, the framework around which she was constructing the narrative, seemed in danger of being obscured if she did not emphasise it.

The paragraph quoted above from the end of Book Second has, I suggested, a structural importance in the novel. Consistently with her wish to keep in circulation what she took to be the essential truths of the Christian religion, she presents us with a pattern of experience in which an initial paradisaic phase is followed by a loss of innocence (Maggie has, we recall, tasted – and sought more of – a forbidden knowledge, even if that knowledge is of the educational variety purveyed by Tom's teacher and not considered necessary for girls) and an expulsion from Eden, and this is to be in a sense reversed at the end of the action in a balancing vision of atonement:

The boat reappeared – but brother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted: living through again in one supreme moment, the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together.

(*The Mill on the Floss*, p. 467)

But one thing that has been established in the early part of the novel is that 'the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together' had been very few. How do we read this mismatch? We may minimise its importance by putting it down to the more or less accidental presence in the final version of structural materials left over from an earlier state: this was how the novel had been planned to end, and although a more appropriate ending could have been formulated when the novel turned out to be rather different from what had initially

been planned, the discrepancy is on such a small scale – just one sentence – that it can be accepted as a mere flourish of the pen at the end of the narrative. But George Eliot is too intelligent and careful a novelist for us to make excuses for her. There is another way of reading it.

A narrative that is shaped predominantly by the author's imagining how it might really be, and then ending with an improbability, says in effect: 'Of course we know that that isn't what *would* happen, so you have a choice, you may take either comfort or reality. You can believe, or make believe, that the story has this neat, satisfying, almost "happy" end, or you can figure out for yourself what would really be more likely to happen.'

So we may read the end of *The Mill on the Floss* as offering to faith a vision of reconciliation (though at no less a cost than the lives of both Maggie and her brother), and to scepticism the painful, though not utterly hopeless, prospect that has been presented clearly enough just a few pages earlier:

. . . she walked back to her lodgings, through the driving rain, with a new sense of desolation. She must be a lonely wanderer; she must go out among fresh faces, that would look at her wonderingly, because the days did not seem joyful to her; she must begin a new life, in which she would have to rouse herself to receive new impressions – and she was so unspeakably, sickeningly weary! There was no home, no help for the erring: even those who pitied were constrained to hardness. But ought she to complain? Ought she to shrink in this way from the long penance of life, which was all the possibility she had of lightening the load to some other sufferers, and so changing that passionate error into a new force of unselfish human love? All the next day she sat in her lonely room, with a window darkened by the cloud and the driving rain, thinking of that future, and wrestling for patience: – for what repose could poor Maggie ever win except by wrestling?

(*The Mill on the Floss*, p. 460)

The idea of alternative endings has been put before us earlier in the novel:

'"The Pirate",' she said, taking the book from Philip's hands 'Oh, I began that once; I read to where Minna is walking with Cleveland, and I could never get to read the rest. I went on with it in my own head, and I made several endings; but they were all

unhappy. I could never make a happy ending out of that beginning. Poor Minna! I wonder what is the real end . . .'

(*The Mill on the Floss*, p. 275)

In *The Mill on the Floss* too, a constant factor in the possible endings is that none of them is really 'happy.' Given the Maggie established in the novel, with her scrupulously imagined inheritance of values and the personal history that forms her adult mind, and the attentively if less closely imagined Tom with *his* history, it is entirely credible that nothing short of imminent death can allow a reconciliation between them; that is, it cannot take place until it can have no consequences in action.

But a thoughtful reader has a right to disagree with a novel's view of what is likely to happen, even when the novel is by George Eliot. We can object that she has not allowed for enough possibilities before fixing on the ending she gives us. For instance, she does not convince *this* reader that Maggie could not leave St Ogg's and find or make a life elsewhere; it is all very well to value one's roots, but human beings are, after all, not plants; they have the means of mobility. Maggie has already spent some years away from St Ogg's; if we are to believe that the experience has only confirmed her in her insistence that St Ogg's is the only place where she can live, the novel needs at least a chapter to give us a full sense of that experience. We have been shown how Maggie becomes conditioned to value her brother's judgement of her actions far more highly than it merits, but she has both a lively intelligence and a capacity for strong and complex emotion, so she is surely capable of changing – of maturing and of reshaping her relationship with the past. It is one thing to have behind one a store of memories of childhood, it is another thing to remain entangled in them for the rest of one's life. Mary Anne Evans, as far as we can tell, had the benefit of the first; Maggie, it seems, is obstructed by the second. Is it really inevitable?

\* \* \*

For over a century *The Mill on the Floss* seems to have been, along with Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and two or three of Dickens's novels, a favourite novel for mothers and aunts to give their daughters and nieces. It is interesting to consider why these were so often chosen. Of course they were all gripping stories, but were they also saying something that the older women thought the younger ones needed to know? In some of them there are spirited heroines who stand up to men and women in positions of power and authority, refusing to be put down; but in

*The Mill on the Floss* the heroine is, it seems, beaten. But perhaps this book was given in the hope that its readers would be so incensed by Maggie Tulliver's voluntary subordination that they would be emboldened to assert their right to autonomy.

But probably the point of the presents is not that any specific message was to be found in all or any of the books. After all, if novels offer any solutions, they are likely to be to someone else's problems; perhaps the problems of another time, another culture. What the best novels do for us when we read them is to increase our resources for thinking clearly about people and their interactions. Novels will not make us good or clever, but our thinking is often more clumsy than it need be because of the terminology we use (as the phrase 'bottling up his anger' implies a rather crude and inaccurate theory of the emotions), and a novel like *The Mill on the Floss* can accustom us to the use of a more exact and resourceful use of language for analysing feelings. For example:

Philip was often peevish and contemptuous; and Tom's more specific and kindly impressions gradually melted into the old background of suspicion and dislike towards him as a queer fellow, a humpback, and the son of a rogue. If boys and men are to be welded together in the glow of transient feeling, they must be made of metal that will mix, else they inevitably fall asunder when the heat dies out.

(*The Mill on the Floss*, p. 165)

Reading novels like this, young women of the late Victorian period did not miss much by being excluded from a 'classical' education.

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*I think there is more than enough literature of the criticising sort . . . To read much of it seems to me seriously injurious: it accustoms men and women to formulate opinions instead of receiving deep impressions, and to receive deep impressions is the foundation of all true mental power.*

GEORGE ELIOT

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