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Eng 324

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Wordsworthian Imagery and Childhood in The Mill on the Floss

William Wordsworth's influence on 19th-Century literature is not to be underestimated. His romantic ideals and conceptions begot a renewed interest in the nature of childhood and the effects are seen in key Victorian novels. In her 1860 work The Mill on the Floss, George Eliot reiterates Wordsworthian sentiments but offers a unique perspective on them, and an interpretation that is completely her own. She at once embraces Wordsworth's ideals, and rejects them as wholly unrealistic. It is complex and deeply emotional, the way childhood memories, experiences, and one's relationship to nature are woven throughout The Mill on the Floss. This essay will examine key passages and parallels between The Mill on the Floss and Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" and "My Heart Leaps Up", and discuss their implications.

Considered Eliot's "most Wordsworthian novel" (Stone 194), The Mill on the Floss often grounds itself with natural imagery as a reference point from which to discuss childhood, and the change from childhood to adulthood. More specifically, the novel illustrates the transition from girlhood to womanhood, and though the protagonist Maggie Tulliver is not particularly infatuated with nature, the narrator is, and braids natural imagery, its relationship to human lives, with her reflections on Maggie's life and death

beautifully. Maggie's developments as a character are wholly dependent on the memories and longings of her childhood. In this way, the novel has two threads throughout: the Wordsworthian nature-childhood relationship, and Eliot's adaptation of Wordsworth: the childhood experience-adult perception relationship.

In Book First, Chapter 5, our second glimpse of the attic, the narrator of The Mill on the Floss evokes Wordsworth's back-to-nature romanticism in several passages. Discussing the differences between children and adults, the narrator proclaims that as children we "approximate in conduct our behavior to the mere impulsiveness of lower animals" (Eliot 34) and as adults we "conduct ourselves in every respect like members of a highly civilized society" (34). Tom forgives Maggie, who is overcome with sorrow and grief, for killing his rabbits. His anger subsides through Maggie's unrestrained kisses and nuzzles, and the siblings are likened to "friendly ponies" (Eliot 34). In this passage, Eliot departs from Wordsworth's use of animal imagery in his "Ode", meant to exemplify children's natural innocence (Wordsworth lines 19-20, 174-175) and serve as a means to reflect on childhood joys. Eliot's use is more somber: the scene in the attic is profoundly sad and touching, and the narrator's recollection of childhood animal conduct, natural and forgiving, juxtaposed with adult high-society foreshadows Maggie's suffering at the behest of such society later in the novel. The narrator, unlike Wordsworth is not overcome with joy at her conclusion that children are like animals. Her focus is different: she is sorrowful that adults must abandon such natural inclinations to "preserve a dignified alienation" (Eliot 34).

The morning after the attic scene, Tom and Maggie proceed with the trip to the Round Pool. After Maggie's haphazard success at fishing, and her delight in Tom's renewed

pleasure with her, Eliot's narrator passionately argues that our love of nature, rooted in our childhood, parallels our adult perceptions, rooted in "the thoughts and loves of these first years" which for Tom and Maggie "would always make part of their lives". The narrator goes on: "Our delight in the sunshine on the deep-bladed grass to-day, might be no more than the faint perception of wearied souls, if it were not for the sunshine in the grass in the far-off years that still live in us, and transform our perceptions into love" (36). Here, the emphasis is on happy memories, keeping us from becoming nothing more than "wearied souls" and offering us a means to experience perfect joy later in life. These memories persist in Maggie, even more than her unhappy ones, contributing to her profound and ultimately detrimental, misguided yearning to return to childhood, and live again in that "very nice heaven" (Eliot 35).

For Wordsworth, *memories* of nature induced only a *renewed love* for nature, and a way to return to childlike empathy, compassion and simplicity. In "Ode Intimations of Immortality", he says, "Though nothing can bring back the hour/ Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower/ We will grieve not, rather find/ Strength in what remains behind/ In the primal sympathy/ Which having been must ever be" (lines 181-187). For Eliot's narrator, memories of nature are inseparable from memories of complex relationships and experiences, and are important because of the influence they maintain in our adult perceptions. Indeed, "The Child is the Father of the man" as Wordsworth says (My Heart Leaps Up, line 7) but for Eliot this means that our *experiences* shape who we become, not simply that our childhood *love of nature* gives us a window into childlike purity as adults. Maggie's occasional reflections on her childhood experiences do not widen her sense of compassion or beautify her adult life; instead she obsesses over returning to that

childhood, which rigidly forces her into an adulthood of sorrow and non-growth. Brief moments of ecstasy peppered her life, like the aforementioned fishing scene, all inextricably linked to Tom's infrequent—but in Maggie's mind, magnified—affections and admiration.

The key moments of Maggie's childhood, far more devastating than joyous—the neglect of Tom's rabbits, her clever haircut, the jam-cake scene—all reflect Maggie's extreme sensitivity to Tom's judgments. The narrator reminds us to view these pangs through a child's eyes:

Very trivial, perhaps, this anguish seems to weather-worn mortals who have to think of Christmas bills, dead loves, and broken friendships; but it was not less bitter to Maggie—perhaps even more bitter—than what we are fond of calling antithetically the real troubles of mature life. (Eliot 56)

This passage illustrates that childhood emotions are just as poignant as those belonging to adults, and for passionate Maggie such sorrows were especially tortuous. These emotions and experiences are critical, and they help shape who we become. For Wordsworth, childhood is bliss, reminiscent of heaven, a place he longs to vividly remember through his interactions with nature. He does not detail the extreme sadness children can experience, nor its impact on their immature minds. In his "Ode", he describes adult life as characterized by "human suffering" (line 189) and expresses that childhood offers him strength and a new perspective on such suffering (lines 184-185). For Maggie, childhood was characterized by frequent sobbing and its impact on her adulthood was never a release: it was an entrapment,

and her suffering only continued and increased. She never lost her childlike empathy. In fact, such empathy is what distinguishes her from cold Tom who does not feel; he only rationalizes and judges. And sadly, these traits also contribute to her tragic flaw: the inability to abandon her love for unforgiving Tom, progress as an individual, and find happiness for her own sake.

However, the narrator and Maggie both seem to have skewed recollections, which very much resemble Wordsworth's lamentations on the loss of idyllic childhood. Aside from the heavenly, Wordsworthian fishing scene mentioned earlier, and the visits at Mr. Stelling's, Maggie and Tom's childhood relationship was one of crime and punishment. Despite this fact, evident in the myriad of unhappy Tom-Maggie episodes related by the narrator, both the narrator and Maggie dwell on the moments of joy and mourn Maggie's coming of age. The narrator refers to "the golden gates of their childhood" and the "thorny wilderness" of their adolescence (Eliot 159). Considering what the reader knows of Maggie's childhood, one can easily see the trajectory of this novel is only to venture beyond the familiar tragedies into extreme loss.

As a young adult, Maggie faced countless challenges, and the events described above played important roles in shaping her life. Maggie's adulthood proves how much control her past had over her, and this is exemplified when she visits Tom to be released from her promise concerning Philip Wakem. This promise, devastating for both Philip and Maggie and satisfying to cold Tom, is unfair and rooted in Tom's (and society's) "unimaginative, unsympathetic" mind (318). In this scene, Maggie approaches Tom, begging for him to release her of her obligation but

at the same time assuring Tom that only because of Lucy Deane's coercion did she dare question him in the first place. In a moment of clarity, Maggie describes her life just as it was —unhappy— and criticizes Tom, questioning his purpose and his insults to her person (Eliot 317).

However, in her sadness, Tom's control over Maggie only increases. The narrator points out that "she was as dependent on kind or cold words as a daisy on the sunshine or a cloud: the need of being loved would always subdue her, as, in the old days, it subdued her in the worm-eaten attic" (Eliot 317). Tom lays his hand on her arm, and revises his demand, continuing to exert his power and authority and affront Maggie's character. She submits, and at the slightest hint of Tom's care, her anger subsides and her "ready affection came back with as sudden a glow of when they were children" (Eliot 319). Maggie's Wordsworthian memory, the "glow" she speaks of, is grossly inaccurate; from what the reader sees, her unhappy childhood experiences, with and without Tom, far outweigh the happy ones. Maggie's skewed memories have the power to convert anger into love, unhappiness into bliss, and a resented obligation one perceived as just and righteous. This is completely anti-Wordsworthian, as the implications of these transformations is disillusionment and spiritual imprisonment in the course of Maggie's life, not joyousness or conciliation.

Later, Stephen Guest, Maggie's first romantic love, nearly overcomes Maggie's profound empathy, pity and dedication to her family, Lucy and Philip. He takes advantage of her absent-mindedness, and offers Maggie an alternative life, one that the reader can imagine would, at the very least, provide the escape from society

Maggie desperately needs to maintain her sanity. But Maggie's moral purity, more complex and under greater siege than Wordsworth's examples, prevails in this episode, as does her profound need to seek Tom's approval, or even Tom's punishment. She longs to return to that unhappy childhood; for her Tom's cruelty was more bearable than the impossible trials of adulthood, mainly the complicated social system Maggie is unable to navigate.

Home—where her mother and brother were—Philip—Lucy—the scene of her very cares and trials—was the haven towards which her mind tended—the sanctuary where sacred relics lay—where she would be rescued from more falling (Eliot 388).

As Maggie leaves, she feels the power of Stephen's love, and rejects it with twisted excitement, recalling her Thomas-à-Kempis-days, an especially dark era of renunciation in Maggie's dark history. This is another one of her tragic flaws: Maggie rejects opportunity and embraces unhappiness simply because it is familiar. At the same time, Maggie rejects this temptation because it is immoral; her emotions, weaknesses, strengths and values are all complexly intertwined, and even Maggie seems to have difficulty unraveling them.

In the final scene of The Mill on the Floss, the forgiveness Maggie so desired is granted in Tom's emotional outburst of the name he, as a child, would bestow on Maggie when he was pleased with her: he yells out, "Magsie!" just moments before their death. Tom, for the first time in his life, looks at Maggie with "a certain awe and humiliation", proving his sudden realization of how he had always wronged her

(Eliot 421). For Maggie, this completes her life: before the flood, she lamented the thought of living a life without Tom, without Philip, Stephen— a life without love. It is bittersweet, how much weight Tom's love carried throughout Maggie's life, and she lets out "a long deep sob of that mysterious wondrous happiness that is one with pain" (Eliot 421). For the reader, this is a tragedy—Maggie's life story, her malignant obsession with Tom, and her death-scene. For Maggie, however, it is freeing: in her death she is reunited with her child-love, and her adult life of suffering ends forever. Here, the child is not simply "the Father of the man" (Wordsworth, line 7); instead, the child has destroyed the woman.

In her essay "Eliot, Wordsworth and the scenes of the Sisters' Instruction", Margaret Homans compares The Mill on the Floss with two of Wordsworth's lesser-known works: "Tintern Abbey" and "Nutting". She argues that like Wordsworth to his sister, Tom is consistently "instructing" Maggie, though his instruction is on how to behave, and ultimately conform to society's demands on Victorian women. In both cases, however, the brother has the power and authority to makes demands of his sister, and the brothers' course in life will naturally differ dramatically from the course of their sisters'. But there is a key difference, one to Wordsworth's favor; for Wordsworth's sister in "Nutting", obeying means to "move along these shades with gentleness of heart": to gently move through her natural childhood, and not rush into a demanding adult life (54-56). Tom's instruction is without regard for nature, or the beauty of childhood, but a rigid sense of right and wrong, and a limited conception of childhood purity. Maggie following his instruction is what leads to her

downfall, and her death: completely anti-Wordsworthian, except in the *idea* of Maggie's obedience to her more powerful brother.

Other Victorian novels focus on childhood purity and Wordsworthian innocence, but without the realism unique to Eliot's interpretation in The Mill on the Floss. For Eliot, as observed in Homans' essay, a bad beginning results in a bad, unhappy ending, and even fictional, dark-haired Maggie observes this with regard to the dark-haired heroines in her novels. But in Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist and David Copperfield, published in the same era of Victorian fiction, both title characters embody and persist in their perfect Wordsworthian innocence and purity, despite enduring horrendous treatment in their beginnings, and being exposed to various kinds of criminality and wickedness. Solely to the credit of their innate child-goodness, both boys have happy endings in their respective stories. Perhaps this is because they are boys, while Maggie the girl, in Tom's mind and society's, was nothing but "a silly little thing" (Eliot 35) and had "no business wi' being so clever" (16). Had she been an Oliver or a David, her flaws may not have been considered such, and her cleverness may have gotten her the respect, admiration and acceptance from her family that she absolutely deserved. As stated earlier, the ultimate conformation to the demands and expectations of Tom and others is what led to Maggie's destruction. Her increasing femininity paralleled her increasing sorrow and isolation. Eliot, unlike Dickens and Wordsworth, accepts that masculine authority, societal demands, and the trials of life are far more powerful than a child's innocence, and therefore Maggie's end, like her beginning, is heart-breaking.

At the conclusion of The Mill on the Floss, the narrator informs the reader that several years have passed since great flood, and that some things are back to normal, though nature's violent past is still evident:

Nature repairs her ravages—but not all. The uptorn trees are not rooted again; the parted hills are left scarred: if there is a new growth, the trees are not the same as the old, and the hills underneath their green vesture bear the marks of the past rending.

This passage further exposes the dark undertones throughout the narrator's Wordsworthian-inspired digressions, and weaves together the two threads throughout Eliot's masterpiece: nature's relationship to our childhoods, and the realistic impact of our childhood memories and experiences on our adult lives. Young Maggie was left scarred, and throughout her life the new relationships, "new growth" never compared with her recollections of her union with Tom. Her adult self was conflicted and distressed, echoing the trials of the "past rending", and sealing Maggie's end as a tragic one.

Just as Wordsworth first so passionately illustrated, and Eliot so uniquely portrayed, our childhoods greatly impact our adulthoods, and our childhood loves (and losses) are never forgotten. Wordsworth longs to revisit his childhood, and does so through his recollections and reconnections with nature.

Maggie, too, longed to return to her childhood, but it was her memory and her passion that gave her glimpses into the untouchable past. The narrator embraces Wordsworth's love of nature, but always with a realistic slant, as his

notion is inconsistent with Maggie's actual experiences. The riveting reconnection with nature can be tragically ironic when the grown-up life is so far from those idyllic scenes. Eliot's interpretation is complex, and even conflicted. Eliot's narrator and passionate protagonist yearn for the Wordsworthian ideal, but such possibilities are rejected for them as unrealistic, and sadly, impossible. They are rejected for the narrator in the sad story she must tell, and the anti-Wordsworthian nature depicted at the novel's conclusion. For Maggie, the rejection of this ideal is simply her life: her unhappy childhood, and the reconnection with that childhood she so desperately craved and was granted only in her death.

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