The Mill on the Floss

Character List

Maggie Tulliver The intelligent, emotionally sensitive daughter of a country mill-owner. Her life is the central story of the novel.

Tom Tulliver Maggie's older brother, whom she loves in spite of his strictness with her.

Mr. Tulliver Fiery owner of Dorlcote Mill. He is particularly attached to his daughter Maggie, whom he resembles in his generosity and emotional spontaneity.

Mrs. Tulliver Mother of Tom and Maggie. She is the youngest of four Dodson sisters, and is a pleasant-looking, unintelligent woman concerned mainly with her household possessions.

Mrs. Glegg Oldest of the Dodson sisters, and the one in whom the family's strict traditions are preserved in the purest state. She is cautious with money, unbending in personal relationships, and strict in observance of custom.

Mr. Glegg A self-made businessman, now retired and concerned mainly with his garden and his reflections on the ways of women.

Mrs. Pullet The second Dodson sister, a hypochrondriac married to a scrawny gentleman-farmer.

Mr. Pullet The gentleman-farmer, whose character consists almost entirely of his memory for his wife's prescriptions and his affection for lozenges.

Mrs. Deane The third Dodson sister. She was once considered to have made a poor marriage, but it appears to be turning out better than any of the others.

Mr. Deane A shrewd businessman, new partner in the firm of Guest and Company.

Lucy Deane Tom and Maggie's cousin. By Dodson standards she is the perfect child — beautiful, obedient, and always quiet.

Lawyer Wakem Archenemy of Mr. Tulliver, who considers all lawyers to be in league with the devil. Wakem's legal skill is instrumental in ruining Mr. Tulliver.

Philip Wakem Son of the lawyer. He has been deformed in a childhood accident and is highly sensitive about it. An artist of moderate talent, he falls in love with Maggie when they meet at the school Philip and Tom attend together.

Stephen Guest Son of the principal partner of Guest and Company. He intends to marry Lucy Deane, but falls in love with her cousin Maggie.

Bob Jakin A lower-class childhood companion of Tom Tulliver. He becomes a peddler, and his glib tongue and shrewd business sense are an important aid to Tom's financial success.

Dr. Kenn Anglican clergyman of the parish of St. Ogg's. He is a touchstone for the author's views on social morality.

Rev. Walter Stelling A financially ambitious clergyman who is schoolmaster to Tom and Philip.

Mr. Riley A local auctioneer who advises Mr. Tulliver to send Tom to school to Rev. Stelling.

Mr. Poulter Tom's drillmaster at school.

Mr. Pivart A new neighbor against whom Mr. Tulliver goes to law over water rights.

Luke The miller who works for Mr. Tulliver.

Mrs. Moss Mr. Tulliver's sister, who has made a poor marriage to an impoverished farmer.

Character Analysis Maggie Tulliver

She is in most ways the opposite of Tom. She is her father's daughter, and she has inherited his warm feeling for other people and his impetuosity. But she has none of his masculine self-assurance.

As a child Maggie is highly intelligent, but likely to be forgetful. She acts rashly without considering consequences. This is one of the results of her great sensitivity, for she cannot abide criticism or harsh judgments on her. By the same token, she never judges others harshly. She has none of Tom's arrogant self-righteousness. She is easily convinced that she has done wrong, despite the injury

this causes to her sensitive soul. She is somewhat vain about her cleverness, but as this is never recognized by the people around her, it never turns into conceit.

For Maggie, as for Tom, the bankruptcy is one of the most important events of her life; but it affects her in a different way. While it is a goad to Tom's ambition, it drives Maggie to renunciation of the world which treats her so harshly. At first this takes the form of simple helping around home and giving up of childish self-indulgence; but the discovery of Thomas à Kempis gives method and meaning to her renunciation. Nevertheless hers remains basically a childish revolt, a hope of avoiding pain by giving up pleasure.

Maggie's concern for other people is the thing which breaks her free from this self-imposed exile. She begins to see Philip Wakem out of pity for him, and he reawakens her desire for life. This desire is one of the two most important threads in Maggie's character. It is a desire to have "more of everything," and it corresponds to the other characters' desire for property. Only Maggie and Philip show it in this form, as a longing for music, art, and life.

Maggie's wish to avoid hurting people finally comes in opposition to her desires. Her failure to resolve that conflict leads her to the point of having to choose whom she will hurt. She sees it as a conflict of duty and passion, but that is only part of the problem. In her case it becomes difficult to tell just where duty lies. At this crisis she reacts as she did to the bankruptcy: she banishes herself. Her reaction is consistent with what has been seen of her since childhood. It represents the fruit of the moral system she has been building for herself, a system based on the good of others. She carries it through with great determination, even when she finds that, as before, she has not foreseen many of the consequences.

Character Analysis Tom Tulliver

On his first appearance, he already presents most of the characteristics he will have as a man. That is not to say that Tom does not change: he changes greatly as he matures. But the man is readily visible in the boy.

As a boy Tom is already strict with his sister, and fully convinced that it is for her own good. He is equally convinced that he can do no wrong. He sets his own standards of conduct, and so long as he maintains them he feels no pangs of conscience. And he always maintains his own standards. The fact that these often give pain to others — chiefly Maggie — is no concern of his.

His father's bankruptcy is the central event in Tom's life. Before it, he is a boy. After it, he is a man. The change is abrupt, but it is thoroughly convincing, for only a slight shift in values, and a slight increase in self-confidence, is involved. Tom the man is the same person. He is unimaginative but very clear-sighted. He always considers the possible, and will not look beyond that. Where, as a boy, he had little use for Maggie's imaginative games, now he easily gives up his own dreams of "cutting a fine figure." When the means are removed, the dream goes also.

In some ways Tom seems to have inherited the worst of both sides of his family. He has the Dodson strictness and respect for property, but not the strong feeling of kinship. He has his father's hard-headedness, his belief in himself, and his tendency to remember grudges; but he has none of his father's warmth and generosity. He cannot comprehend the nature of his father's charge to "care for the little wench." He sees "care" in terms of money and property, as would his mother's family, rather than thinking of love and kindness.

Only at the very end, when it is already too late, does Tom come to see that he has overlooked a large part of life. But that recognition brings him to a momentary reunion with Maggie before they die together.

Character Analysis The Dodson Sisters

Mrs. Glegg, Mrs. Pullet, Mrs. Deane, and Mrs. Tulliver are recognizably members of the same family, even without their own constant reminders of that fact. All of them give allegiance to the same code for living, a code based on respect for property and strict maintenance of tradition. But each of the four has personal traits which mark her out from the others. With Mrs. Pullet it is her extreme care for personal possessions and her mild hypochondria and interest in the diseases of other persons. Mrs. Tulliver has the same attitude toward her personal treasures coupled with greater-than-ordinary stupidity. Hers is a mind which runs on a single track. Mrs. Deane is less definitely characterized, but commands respect through the superior wealth and position of her husband. Mrs. Glegg is the one most interested in property, but she pays little attention to her personal goods. Her mind runs more to cash. She is by far the most strict in her observance of the traditional rites and customs. She sets the standards for the rest of the family, who follow as best they can. She is an arrogant woman, but not without virtues of her own. Her shrewdness is always put to good use; and she is the only one, in the end, to whom kinship remains more important than the opinions of society. If she represents the Dodson code at its worst — egoistic, grasping, and uncharitable — she epitomizes the best side as well.

The Dodson code is slightly exaggerated for comic effect. Yet all the sisters remain human; they are not caricatures. The code which underlies their actions presents a standard of human conduct. However erroneous it may seem at times, it nevertheless offers a consistent and believable reference point for the actions of that side of Maggie's family.

Character Analysis Stephen Guest

He is alone among the major characters in being essentially described, rather than *shown* to be what the author wishes him to be. By description he is handsome, witty, and a powerful personality. However, he appears as a bit of a fop, a fine young gentleman who will be of account through his father's fortune, if at all. Stephen suffers from having to be the chosen object of the love of the main character in the novel. He cannot be developed at the expense of that character, and consequently he tends to be underdone.

He never quite measures up to Maggie's love. Stephen loves Maggie against his will and his judgment. There can be no doubt of the reality of his love, but he has not the self-sacrificing nature of Maggie and Philip. By contrast with them he appears selfish. Yet he cannot be considered a cad, for his love brings him real suffering.

Character Analysis Lucy Deane

She is in most ways a contrast to Maggie. As a child she is all the things Maggie is not: she is quiet, well-behaved, neat, and not over-intelligent. She is "pretty little pink-and-white Lucy," and this remains the basis of her adult character. However, as an adult Lucy takes on considerably more depth. Her reactions and her thoughts are secondary to Maggie's, and as a result they are played down. But she has human reactions and human complexity. Lucy's complexity can be easily overlooked because it is of such a subdued kind, especially in Maggie's presence.

Character Analysis Philip Wakem

He is drawn in more intricate detail than are Stephen and Lucy; he is treated almost as fully as Maggie and Tom. He is perhaps more complex than either of those two. From the first Philip is seen to be talented, kind-hearted, and sensitive. He draws well without lessons; although Tom insults him, he has sympathy for Tom's injury and understands his fear of being crippled; he alone shares Maggie's intense desire for a full life. Indeed, in most ways he appears to be a good match for Maggie. Yet there is something always wrong with Philip. That something is not exactly his

deformity, but it is connected with it. The real problem is that Philip is so completely unmanly. There can be no doubt that the author intends this effect; she frequently contrasts Philip's weakness to Stephen's strength and remarks on his feminine sensitiveness. It is this which makes Maggie's temporary love for Philip such an uneasy relationship.

Philip's virtues should not be overlooked. In the end he displays true nobility of character. He makes a sacrifice as great as Maggie's, although less dramatic. And his depth of understanding of other persons is unmatched in the novel: his remarks throw light on many of the other characters. Yet his virtues remain inseparable from his one great weakness.

Themes

The Claim of the Past upon Present Identity

Both characters and places in The Mill on the Floss are presented as the current products of multi-generational gestation. The very architecture of St. Ogg's bears its hundreds of years of history within it. Similarly, Maggie and Tom are the hereditary products of two competing family lines—the Tullivers and the Dodsons—that have long histories and tendencies. In the novel, the past holds a cumulative presence and has a determining effect upon characters who are open to its influence. The first, carefully sketched out book about Maggie and Tom's childhood becomes the past of the rest of the novel. Maggie holds the memory of her childhood sacred and her connection to that time comes to affects her future behavior. Here, the past is not something to be escaped nor is it something that will rise again to threaten, but it is instead an inherent part of Maggie's (and her father's) character, making fidelity to it a necessity. Book First clearly demonstrates the painfulness of life without a past—the depths of Maggie's childhood emotions are nearly unbearable to her because she has no past of conquered troubles to look back upon with which to put her present situation in perspective. Stephen is held up as an example of the dangers of neglecting the past. Dr. Kenn, a sort of moral yardstick within the novel, complains of this neglect of the past of which Stephen is a part and Maggie has worked against: "At present everything seems tending toward the relaxation of ties—toward the substitution of wayward choice for the adherence to obligation which has its roots in the past." Thus, without a recognition of the past with which to form one's character, one is left only to the whims of the moment and subject to emotional extremes and eventual loneliness.

The Importance of Sympathy

The Mill on the Floss is not a religious novel, but it is highly concerned with a morality that should function among all people and should aspire to a compassionate connection with others through sympathy. The parable of St. Ogg rewards the ferryman's unquestioning sympathy with another, and Maggie, in her final recreation of the St. Ogg scene during the flood, is vindicated on the grounds of her deep sympathy with others. The opposite of this sympathy within the novel finds the form of variations of egoism. Tom has not the capability of sympathizing with Maggie. He is aligned with the narrow, self-serving ethic of the rising entrepreneur: Tom explains to Mr. Deane that he cares about his own standing, and Mr. Deane compliments him, "That's the right spirit, and I never refuse to help anybody if they've a mind to do themselves justice." Stephen, too, is seen as a figure that puts himself before others. His arguments in favor of his and Maggie's elopement all revolve around the privileging of his own emotion over that of others', even Maggie's. In contrast, Maggie's, Philip's, and Lucy's mutual sympathy is upheld as the moral triumph within the tragedy of the last book. Eliot herself believed that the purpose of art is to present the reader with realistic circumstances and characters that will ultimately enlarge the reader's capacity for sympathy with others. We can see this logic working against Maggie's young asceticism. Maggie's self-denial becomes morally injurious to her because she is denying herself the very intellectual and artistic experiences that would help her understand her own plight and have pity for the plight of others.

Practical Knowledge Versus Bookish Knowledge

The Mill on the Floss, especially in the first half of the novel, is quite concerned about education and types of knowledge. Much of the early chapters are devoted to laying out the differences between Tom's and Maggie's modes of knowledge. Tom's knowledge is practical: "He knew all about worms, and fish, and those things; and what birds were mischievous, and how padlocks opened, and which way the handles of the gates were to be lifted." This knowledge is tangible and natural—it brings Tom in closer association to the world around him. Meanwhile, Maggie's knowledge is slightly more complicated. Other characters refer to it as "uncanny," and her imagination and love of books are often depicted as a way for her to escape the world around her or to rise above it—"The world outside the books was not a happy one, Maggie felt." Part of the tragedy of Maggie and Tom Tulliver is that Tom received the education that Maggie should have had. Instead

of Maggie blossoming, Tom is trapped. When Tom must make a living in the world, he discovers that his bookish education will win him nothing: Mr. Deane tells Tom, "The world isn't made of pen, ink, and paper, and if you're to get on in the world, young man, you must know what the world's made of." Tom soon returns and takes advantage of his skills for practical knowledge, making good in the newly entrepreneurial world. Tom's practical knowledge is always depicted as a source of superiority for Tom. From his childhood on, Tom has no patience for Maggie's intellectual curiosity. The narrowness of Tom's miseducation under Mr. Stelling seems somewhat related to the narrowness of Tom's tolerance for others' modes of knowledge. Yet Eliot remains clear that Maggie's intellectualism makes her Tom's superior in this case—"the responsibility of tolerance lies with those who have the wider vision."

The Effect of Society Upon the Individual

Society is never revealed to be a completely determining factor in the destiny of Eliot's main characters—for example, Maggie's tragedy originates in her internal competing impulses, not in her public disgrace. Yet, Eliot remains concerned with the workings of a community—both social and economic—and tracks their interrelations, as well as their effect upon character, as part of her realism. The Mill on the Floss sets up a geography of towns and land holdings—St. Ogg's, Basset, Garum Firs, Dorlcote Mill—and describes the tone of each community (such as the run- down population of Basset). The novel tracks the growth of the particular society of St. Ogg's, referencing the new force of economic trends like entrepreneurial capitalism or innovations like the steam engine. A wide cast of characters aims to outline different strata in the society—such as the Dodsons, or the Miss Guests—through their common values, economic standing, and social circles. In the first part of the novel, Eliot alludes to the effect these communal forces have on Maggie's and Tom's formation. Toward the end of the novel, the detailed background of St. Ogg's society functions as a contrast against which Maggie seems freshly simple and genuine.

Symbols

The Floss

The Floss is a somewhat difficult symbol to track, as it also exists for realistic effect in the workings of the novel. On the symbolic level, the Floss is related most often to Maggie, and the river, with its depth and potential to flood, symbolizes

Maggie's deeply running and unpredictable emotions. The river's path, nonexistent on maps, is also used to symbolize the unforseeable path of Maggie's destiny.

St. Ogg

St. Ogg, the legendary patron saint of the town, was a Floss ferryman. One night a woman with a child asked to be taken across the river, but the winds were high and no other boaters would take her. Only Ogg felt pity for her in her need and took her. When they reached the other side, her rags turned into robes, and she revealed herself to be the Blessed Virgin. The Virgin pronounced Ogg's boat safe to all who rode in it, and she sat always in the prow. The parable of Ogg rewards the human feeling of pity or sympathy. Maggie has a dream during her night on the boat with Stephen, wherein Tom and Lucy row past them, and Tom is St. Ogg, while Lucy is the Virgin. The dream makes explicit Maggie's fear of having neglected to sympathize with those whom she hurts during her night with Stephen (and also, perhaps, her fear that they will not sympathize with her in the future). But it is Maggie, finally, who stands for St. Ogg, as she rows down river thinking only of Tom's safety during the flood in a feat of "almost miraculous, divinely-protected effort."

Maggie's eyes

Eliot depicts Maggie's eyes as her most striking feature. All men (including Philip, Bob Jakin, and Stephen) notice her eyes first and become entranced. Maggie's eyes are a symbol of the power of emotion she contains—the depth of feeling and hunger for love that make her a tragic character. This unique force of character seems to give her power over others, for better or for worse. In Book First, Maggie is associated with Medusa, the monster who turns men to stone by looking at them. Maggie's eyes compel people, and different characters' reactions to them often reflect the character's relationship with Maggie. Thus, Philip, who will become Maggie's teacher, in a sense, and first love, notices that her eyes "were full of unsatisfied intelligence, and unsatisfied, beseeching affection." Bob Jakin, who views Maggie as superior to him and a figure of whom to be in awe, reports that Maggie has "such uncommon eyes, they looked somehow as they made him feel no how." Finally, Stephen, who will exploit the inner struggle that Maggie has felt for the entire novel, notices that Maggie's eyes are "full of delicious opposites."