2 “Whom She Belongs To”: Gender, Genre, and “Immovable Roots” in George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss

While Melville’s Moby-Dick explores oceans of transcendental homelessness, George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss (1860) dutifully attends to the home and the hearth. The novel is set in the English provinces of the late 1820s to 1830s and focuses on the lives of the Tulliver family, owners of Dorlcote Mill on the banks of the Ripple, a small tributary to the river Floss. The Tullivers have lived here “for generations” (217; bk. 3, ch. 9), and on one level The Mill on the Floss is about the family’s relation to the physical place that, for them, signifies home. At the same time, the novel focuses on the Tullivers’ relationships to their relatives, and to the larger community of St. Ogg’s. More specifically, the text examines the interdependence between home as a physical place and home as a complex network of social relations, as well as the factors that may enhance or diminish one’s sense of home. These factors include class and gender stereotypes, and the latter make it especially difficult for Maggie, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver, to maintain a sense of true belonging.

Importantly, the novel’s exploration of social prejudice is paralleled by a searching critique of literary conventions, styles, and genres – including the Bildungsroman (or novel of formation), the use of irony and nostalgia, and the vicissitudes of tragic theory in its Aristotelian form. In relating such stylistic and generic inquiries to the material problems of home and belonging, Eliot’s novel suggests that literary culture ought not be imagined as a rarefied aesthetic realm that can be understood in isolation from ideological and political struggles. The novel thus rejects any clear-cut separation between social and discursive modes of dispossession. Highlighting instead that discourse itself is a material product of social relations, The Mill on the Floss intimates that the quest for a just and inclusive society depends, at least in part, on a community’s repertoire of fictions of home. In doing so, it focuses less on the problem of transcendental

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1 I would like to thank Simone Heller-Andrist and Christa Schönfelder for their comments on an early draft, as well as Sarah Chevalier and Anja Neukom-Hermann for feedback on the final version of this chapter.

2 According to Susan Meyer, “[v]arious temporal references in The Mill on the Floss make it clear that the novel is set in the rural England of the late 1820s to 1830s” (148).
homelessness, and more on the role of societal forces in determining the limits of our freedom to belong.

**Home and the Bildungsroman**

Critics have long discussed *The Mill on the Floss* as a novel of formation or *Bildungsroman* (e.g. Buckley 97 and Jost 106), and of all novelistic genres the *Bildungsroman* is perhaps most inextricably intertwined with the question of home. Home is, for instance, quite literally the genre’s starting point:

[T]he hero sets out from home in order to travel and see the world, and records his right and wrong turns. He falls in love, and has his first sexual experiences before finding, and eventually marrying, his ideal companion. He thus gains knowledge of the world, and his experiences modify his *Weltanschauung*. (Gemmeke 32)

Leaving his childhood home, the (male) protagonist will have to learn the ways of the world, and this experience will ultimately turn him into a mature and useful individual richly deserving of domestic bliss. By the end of his quest, the hero will, in other words, have learnt to reconcile his individual desires with the demands of society: “[E]xperiencing both defeats and triumphs, [he] comes to a better understanding of self and to a generally affirmative view of the world” (Hardin xiii). Indeed, as Franco Moretti points out, in the process of true *Bildung* the hero fuses external compulsion and internal impulses “into a new unity until the former is no longer distinguishable from the latter” (*Way of the World* 16). Desire and duty may jar at first, but any such discord will eventually be dissolved.

The only reason why such a dialectical fusion of societal imperatives and individual desire is conceivable is that the genre envisages *Bildung* itself as a kind of homecoming:

[I]n *Bildung* one gives oneself over to something other than oneself, and by this process of giving over, becomes more fully oneself. Giving oneself over to something other is a going out to the other, so that *Bildung* involves the notion of leaving home [...] and going out into a new place that is strange and unfamiliar. As one comes to understand this other place, as it becomes familiar, *it comes to be a new home*. [...] It seemed strange simply because we did not recognise ourselves in it. (Coyne and Snodgrass 224; emphasis added)

*Bildung* allows the protagonist to recognize himself in what at first seemed an alien world, and the prototypical *Bildungsroman* narrativizes the “dialectical harmony” of such an experience of homecoming (Castle 8; see also Lukács 138; Slaughter 111). As harmony is the key term in the ideal version of *Bildung*, the...
hero’s ultimate acceptance of society’s demands must never be motivated by compulsion, fear, or disillusionment, but instead ought to result from his genuine identification with society’s norms (Moretti, *Way of the World* 16).

Many critics recognize, however, that in practice the genre often falls short of this harmonic ideal, as witnessed by the many classic *Bildungsromane* that end neither in joyous affirmation nor with calm acceptance, but rather on a note of reluctant, at times painful, compromise. Indeed, for some critics, the genre’s historical development follows a downward trajectory from early optimism to increasing gloom. Franco Moretti, for instance, posits that the truly optimistic phase of the genre, with its “beautiful balance” between the benefits and constraints of modern socialization, lasted only until the mid-nineteenth century, when “the atmosphere darkens” (*Way of the World* vi – vii). The case of *Great Expectations* (1860–1861) arguably constitutes a good example of this increasingly ambivalent atmosphere, as Dickens famously wrote two markedly different endings for his novel: a first one, where the protagonist’s desire for his beloved remains forever unfulfilled (481–482); and a second version, where Pip can finally clasp Estella’s hand, seeing “the shadow of no parting from her” (480; ch. 20). Dickens’s first instinct was, in other words, to end on a pessimistic note, and it took a conscious effort of authorial revision to construct a somewhat more hopeful conclusion. And yet, even this second ending remains curiously ambiguous, as there are two entirely different ways of reading the phrase “the shadow of no parting”: either as affirming that Estella and Pip will live happily ever after (i.e. ‘no future parting is foreshadowed’), or as intimating that their common future will inevitably be cold and dreary (i.e. ‘the fact that there will be no parting casts a shadow over their lives’). This is, to be sure, still far from despair – but it is not “dialectical harmony,” either.3

There is good reason, then, for a more cautious assessment of the *Bildungsroman* as a genre, and accordingly Marianne Hirsch speaks of the protagonist’s eventual accommodation to, rather than his affirmation of, the society in which he lives (“Novel of Formation” 298). Less optimistically still, Jeffrey L. Sammons’s definition of the genre incorporates the possibility of the protagonist’s utter failure ever to find a sense of being at home in the world:

> It does not much matter whether the process of *Bildung* succeeds or fails, whether the protagonist achieves an accommodation with life and society or not. [...] There must be a sense of evolutionary change within the self, a teleology of individuality, even if

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3 In fact, Dickens himself seems to have recognized this ambivalence, for from the 1862 Library Edition onward, the final sentence appeared in a slightly different, less ambivalent form: “I saw no shadow of another parting from her” (Rosenberg 500–501).
the novel, as many do, comes to doubt or deny the possibility of achieving a gratifying result. (41)

Sammons, in other words, is willing to consider as a Bildungsroman even a novel in which individual gratification ultimately remains irreconcilable with life in society – a novel, in short, that takes very much the same pessimistic stance as Sigmund Freud’s Civilization and Its Discontents. Accordingly, for Sammons, the key requirement for a Bildungsroman is not a happy outcome, but merely that Bildung – which he defines as “the early bourgeois, humanistic concept of the shaping of the individual self from its innate potentialities through acculturation and social experience to the threshold of maturity” – play a central part in the hero’s quest (41). In this less sanguine view, the protagonist’s leaving home still constitutes the genre’s starting point, yet a regained sense of belonging may ultimately prove sadly elusive (Gemmeke 38).

Such an austere account of the genre fits well with Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss, for the novel’s heroine, Maggie, undoubtedly fails to harmoniously fuse her own desires with the demands and imperatives of her family and society at large. Even when Maggie is still a child, her relatives express misgivings and disapproval: Mr. Tulliver fears that his daughter is “[t]oo ’cute [i.e. acute, clever]” for a woman, and his wife bemoans both Maggie’s unruly behavior and her brown skin, which “makes her look like a mulatter” (12; bk. 1, ch. 2). Aunt Pullet similarly frowns at her niece’s dark complexion, suspecting that looking “like a gypsy” will stand in Maggie’s way later in her life (58; bk. 1, ch. 7). Deborah Epstein Nord rightly notes that Maggie’s relatives thus conflate her “anomalous femininity” with a sense of racial otherness (103), and to some extent this explains why, after a particularly severe scolding, little Maggie decides to run away and join a group of gypsies – an act that she sees as “the only way of escaping

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4 Two brief excerpts may serve to exemplify Freud’s position: “If civilization imposes such great sacrifices not only on man’s sexuality but on his aggressivity, we can understand better why it is hard for him to be happy in that civilization” (Civilization and Its Discontents 73; “Wenn die Kultur nicht allein der Sexualität, sondern auch der Aggressionsneigung des Menschen so grosse Opfer auferlegt, so verstehen wir es besser, dass es dem Menschen schwer wird, sich in ihr beglückt zu finden”; Das Unbehagen in der Kultur 226). “Since civilization obeys an internal erotic impulsion which causes human beings to unite in a closely-knit group, it can only achieve this aim through an ever-increasing reinforcement of the sense of guilt” (Civilization and Its Discontents 96; “Da die Kultur einem inneren erotischen Antrieb gehorcht, der sie die Menschen zu einer innig verbundenen Masse vereinigen heisst, kann sie dies Ziel nur auf dem Wege einer immer wachsenden Verstärkung des Schuldgefühls erreichen”; Das Unbehagen in der Kultur 243).
opprobrium, and being entirely in harmony with circumstances” (88; bk. 1, ch. 11). The episode thus constitutes a variant of the Freudian family romance:

[This alternate version] involves the fantasy not of social aggrandizement and aspiration, but of lowly or stigmatized birth. The desire to rival and defeat the parent can also express itself as the wish to escape from the bonds of obedience and conformity through the discovery of a secret non-English, non-white (to the extent that Englishness is defined as white) self. (Nord 12)

Feeling constricted and unhappy at home, in short, little Maggie makes a desperate attempt to venture out and find her place in the world.

Accordingly, Maggie’s flight to the gypsies is more than merely a semi-comical episode about childish fantasies and youthful sorrows. Rather, given the symbolical status of Romani in 19th-century British culture, we must see Maggie’s attempt to associate with gypsies as decidedly ominous. Deborah Epstein Nord has shown that, for many nineteenth-century writers (including George Eliot), gypsies symbolized the absence of a clearly defined homeland and therefore the lack of a “propitious future” (7). More generally, C. A. Bayly describes the nineteenth century as a period that saw a worldwide onslaught on nomadic forms of life – both in colonial territories and in long-established, independent states (Bayly 436–440; see also Maier 30). The British government in India, for example, idealized the settled (and tax-paying) peasant and, in 1871, introduced the Criminal Tribes Act in order to increase its control over itinerant and nomadic groups (Kerr 100; Osterhammel 225). Maggie’s dark hair and her attempt to find a new home amongst the ‘unsettled’ gypsies thus associate her with a people that, for Eliot’s contemporaries, tended to symbolize backwardness, dispossession, and ruin. The link between Maggie and gypsies can thus be seen as having the same function as her mother’s repeatedly expressed fears that Maggie’s wild nature will one day lead her to drown (e.g. 12 and 87; bk. 1, ch. 2 and ch. 10): foreshadowing that the novel must end in disaster, and that Maggie will fail to find a true home in the world.

_A Woman’s Place_

To a large extent, the conflict that leads to Maggie’s failure revolves around her relationship with her brother Tom. As a little girl, Maggie once says that she loves Tom “better than anybody in the world” (27; bk. 1, ch. 4), and she later tries to explain the well-nigh incestuous intensity of her attachment by the fact that her earliest memory is the image of Tom and herself standing hand in hand by the river Floss (249; bk. 1, ch. 1). At the same time, it is evident early on in the novel that Tom’s clear-cut, rigid view of what is right and what is wrong con-
conflicts sharply with Maggie’s impulsiveness and intellectual curiosity. Nevertheless, as long as they are children they manage to avoid estrangement even when Tom’s righteousness erupts into anger, for “Maggie and Tom were still very much like young animals, and so she could rub her cheek against his, and kiss his ear in a random, sobbing way, and there were tender fibres in the lad that had been used to answer to Maggie’s fondling” (34; bk. 1, ch. 6). If childhood is at one point compared to Eden in Eliot’s novel (155 and 159; bk. 2, ch. 7), then this is not because it is entirely free of conflict, but because it still holds the promise of forgiveness for Maggie.

However, it is precisely the abrupt and brutal nature in which childhood ends for Maggie and Tom that also destroys this bond of forgiveness. When their father loses a lawsuit over property rights (concerning irrigation works and the legitimate share of water power: 129; bk. 2, ch. 2), the proud man and his family suddenly find themselves bankrupt. Soon, many of the Tullivers’ most cherished belongings are to be put up at auction, and it is this traumatic experience of dispossession that propels Maggie and Tom into the adult world of “remembered cares” (159; bk. 2, ch. 7). John Wakem, the lawyer who defeated Mr. Tulliver in court and whom the miller regards as evil incarnate, eventually buys the Tullivers’ old mill. Wakem, relishing the opportunity to humiliate the old owner under the guise of a “benevolent action” (208; bk. 3, ch. 7), offers Mr. Tulliver the opportunity to stay on as manager of the mill – and thus as a dependent of the very man he loathes: “one o’ them fine gentlemen as get money by doing business for poorer folks, and when he’s made beggars of ‘em he’ll give ’em charity” (220; bk. 3, ch. 9). Formerly a version of the independent, land-owning English yeoman, Mr. Tulliver is now reduced to being a mere employee, and he never fully recovers from the blow. In consequence, the responsibility to earn enough money to restore the lost home to the family falls almost entirely to Tom, who is at the time only sixteen years old. Mr. Tulliver, however, also urges Tom to write in the family bible that he will never forgive Wakem for what he has done to his father. It is a command that Tom executes “with gloomy submission” (220; bk. 3, ch. 9), and which expels him forever from the realm of forgiveness that he had shared with his sister before the sudden end of their childhood.

Maggie herself, meanwhile, is not only dismayed by her father’s hatred of Wakem, but also suffers from the new “dreariness of a home where the morning...
brings no promise with it” (163; bk. 3, ch. 1). The family’s material dispossession exacerbates Maggie’s sense of spiritual unbelonging – a link that the novel symbolically highlights through the forced sale of her ‘spiritual capital’: her beloved books (197; bk. 3, ch. 6). At the same time, we saw in the discussion of Captain Ahab and Pip in chapter one that recognition of shared suffering may foster a feeling of mutual belonging. And indeed, Maggie finds a precarious sense of being at home in the presence of a fellow sufferer. Philip, lawyer Wakem’s sensitive son – whom Maggie first met when he was Tom’s schoolfellow in happier days – has a hump because of “an accident in infancy” (134; bk. 2, ch. 3). As a consequence Philip feels that he is an outcast with no one to “tell everything – no one who cares enough” (246; bk. 5, ch. 1). Earlier in the novel, Eliot’s narrator suggests that “the gift of sorrow” is that it may serve to strengthen the “bond of human fellowship” (159; bk. 2, ch. 7), and when Maggie meets Philip again she finds herself responding to his pain. Admittedly, at first she is hesitant to accept Philip’s offer of friendship, knowing that she would have to keep it a secret because both her father and Tom would forbid any association with the Wakem family. However, deciding that there is “such a thing as futile sacrifice for one to the injury of another” (247; bk. 5; ch. 1), Maggie ultimately agrees to meet Philip again. With each new meeting their friendship deepens, and in time Maggie even accepts Philip’s professions of love, despite the fact that she remains uncertain as to the true nature of her feelings towards him (271–274; bk. 5, ch. 5).

Importantly, it is Tom who breaks up Maggie and Philip’s relationship because of his inflexible notions of familial duty and, in particular, female respectability. When Tom finds out about Maggie and Philip’s secret meetings, he angrily confronts his sister, threatening to tell Mr. Tulliver that Maggie is “a disobedient, deceitful daughter, who throws away her own respectability by clandestine meetings with the son of a man that has helped to ruin her father” (278; bk. 5, ch. 5). Tom then forces Maggie to lead him to Philip, and his reproaches to the latter, too, are explicitly patriarchal: “Do you pretend you had any right to make professions of love to her, even if you had been a fit husband for her, when neither her father nor your father would ever consent to a marriage between you?” (280). Maggie, disgusted at Tom’s contemptuous treatment of both Philip and herself, vehemently reproaches her brother for his self-righteous attitude: “[Y]ou have always enjoyed punishing me – you have always been hard and cruel to me” (282). Tom, however, proves inexorable, and instead asks Maggie why she chooses to show her love through selfishness and deceit rather than by trying to improve their family’s situation. Maggie’s answer once again focuses on gender as the decisive factor: “Because you are a man, Tom, and have power,
and can do something in the world” (282; bk. 5, ch. 6). Maggie thus explicitly frames her conflict with Tom in terms of the limitations she encounters as a woman, which relates their personal conflict to broader questions of societal prejudice.

In a similar vein, critics have long pointed out that a gender bias lies at the heart of overly optimistic assessments of the Bildungsroman as a literary genre. If we have so far used the masculine pronoun to refer to the prototypical hero of a Bildungsroman, then this is because the conventional story of a sturdy individual venturing out to explore the world constitutes – at least in a nineteenth-century context – a decidedly masculine ideal. For Susan J. Rosowski, such masculine quests find a feminine counterpart in what she calls the “novel of awakening”:

The novel of awakening [...] also recounts the attempts of a sensitive protagonist to learn the nature of the world, discover its meaning and pattern, acquire a philosophy of life, but she must learn these lessons in terms of herself as a woman. [...] The protagonist’s growth results typically not with “an art of living,” as for her male counterpart, but instead with a realization that for a woman such an art of living is difficult or impossible: it is an awakening to limitations. (313)

Where the Bildungsroman emphasizes the male protagonist’s quest for independence, the novel of awakening focuses on the limits to freedom in the lives of women. Precisely because the limitations imposed on women are greater, Gregory Castle argues that novels of awakening “may be a better index of the subversive potential of the genre” than the texts featuring a male protagonist (21).

According to Jane McDonnell, the subversive potential of novels of awakening arises, in particular, from the way in which they highlight the conflict between, on the one hand, the ‘male’ values of personal development and self-determination, and, on the other, “the ideals of renunciation and self-sacrifice so often demanded of nineteenth-century women” (379). In the final two books of The Mill on the Floss, for instance, Maggie falls in love with Stephen Guest, heir to a local business and banking concern and fiancé of Maggie’s cousin Lucy. At first, both Stephen and Maggie try to resist each other’s mutual attraction, but they ultimately relinquish, with Stephen appearing to Maggie as a

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6 For a related argument on the use of the Bildungsroman as a “genre of demarginalization,” see Joseph R. Slaughter (135).

7 See also Fredric Jameson, who suggests that women, “not yet fully absorbed into capitalism and the vehicles of unpaid labor, are more likely narrative occasions for revolt and resistance than men” (The Antinomies of Realism 147).
“stronger presence that seemed to bear her along without any act of her own will” (376; bk. 6, ch. 13). Maggie elopes with Stephen and soon finds herself on a boat, floating down the river Floss. After a spell of fitful sleep, punctured by disturbing dreams, however, Maggie’s struggle with her own conscience resumes, and she forces herself to leave Stephen and return home:

I can’t believe in a good for you, that I feel – that we both feel is a wrong towards others. We can’t choose happiness either for ourselves or for another: we can’t tell where that will lie. We can only choose whether we will indulge ourselves in the present moment, or whether we will renounce that, for the sake of obeying the divine voice within us – for the sake of being true to all the motives that sanctify our lives. (387; bk. 6, ch. 14)

It is important to note that Maggie’s fateful decision is simultaneously conventional and brave, for while such an act of female renunciation would have been expected by Victorian readers, in Eliot’s novel it also constitutes a reassertion of the protagonist’s agency against her passive submission to her male partner’s desire for a sort of escapism: to elope and, as Stephen puts it, “never go home again” (377; bk. 6, ch. 13).

And yet, Maggie is not rewarded for her painful act of renunciation by any semblance of poetic justice. Instead, she is ostracized by her home community in a way that, once again, highlights how gender difference impacts on one’s chances to establish a sense of belonging. After Maggie’s return to St. Ogg’s, her behavior is widely judged as shameful – particularly by the ‘respectable’ women of the community, who could have forgiven her if Maggie had returned home married to Stephen, as a ‘legitimate’ member of (patriarchal) society, but who now ironically blame Maggie for her “unwomanly boldness and unbridled passion” (397; bk. 7, ch. 2). By contrast, public opinion regards Stephen’s conduct as admittedly blameworthy, but also as understandable, even natural, in a young man. Eliot’s contemporaries were, in other words, confronted with a novel whose heroine does precisely what, as a woman, she ought to do (i.e. resist the temptations of sexual desire), but who is not, in the end, rewarded for her act of renunciation. This outcome flies in the face of the Victorian expectations that Oscar Wilde brilliantly satirizes in The Importance of Being Earnest, in which Miss Prism sums up the moral of a three-decker novel she once wrote: “The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means” (273; 2.52–53).

Marianne Hirsch has suggested that the Bildungsroman is an essentially didactic genre (“Novel of Formation” 298), and if it is true that the protagonist’s Bildung in such texts is only a stand-in for the more important process of educating the audience, then in the case of The Mill on the Floss the awakening that matters
most may be the reader’s: a growing awareness of the gendered nature of social injustice, as well as of the limits of poetic justice as a reliable doctrine for moral guidance.

**Tom’s Education: Generational Conflict and Masculine Bildung**

The picture is even more complex than this, however, for as Susan Fraiman suggests, *The Mill on the Floss* in fact juxtaposes a male and a female Bildungsroman: the story of Maggie’s awakening, and the narrative of her brother’s self-advancement (140–141). Working his way up the social ladder, Tom becomes a respected partner in the local business and banking concern Guest & Co., and ultimately manages to restore to the family the lost mill and its position in society. At the same time, Fraiman rightly emphasizes that Tom remains unmarried and eventually drowns locked in an embrace with his younger sister, which constitutes a narrative refusal truly to validate his individual development (140). Indeed, far from becoming a well-rounded individual, Tom develops into a tragically one-dimensional man. Mr. Tulliver’s dying wish was for Tom to “get the old mill back” (291; bk. 5, ch. 7), and accordingly Tom feels bound at all costs to return to the place that symbolizes home and respectability. To do so, however, Tom will have to suppress his “strong appetite for pleasure,” for only by living a life of “abstinence and self-denial” can he ever hope to save the amount of money that is needed to pay the family debt and buy back the old mill (252; bk. 5, ch. 2). Tom’s long-term cultivation of self-denial in turn explains why, towards the end of the novel, he assures his uncle Deane that he always wants to have plenty of work because there is nothing else he cares about much—a statement that even his “business-loving” relative considers “rather sad” (323; bk. 6, ch. 6). Moreover, when Tom finally ‘succeeds’ and moves back to Dorlcote Mill, we never see him derive any pleasure from owning the old home; though the mill eventually belongs to Tom, for some unfathomable reason he finds that he himself no longer feels that he truly belongs there.

In part, this is because Tom follows his father’s explicit commands to the letter while failing to grasp the spirit of his words (and, indeed, the father’s actions, which frequently run counter to his own precepts). Mr. Tulliver’s views may be as rigid as Tom’s, but he is far less dogmatic when it comes to acting on his beliefs. This is evident, for instance, in how Mr. Tulliver treats his sister. After a quarrel with his wife’s elder sister, the proud miller decides to settle all his debts

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8 In a similar vein, Jerome Buckley considers *The Mill on the Floss* as a “contrapuntal Bildungsroman” (97).

9 Philip Fisher similarly argues that, by the end of the novel, what Tom holds “is the symbol of the past, not its substance” (533).
with Aunt Glegg and her husband. To do so, however, he must reclaim the money he has lent to his own sister Gritty, “who had married as poorly as could be” (52; bk. 1, ch. 7). Though initially he seems determined to reclaim what is his due, Mr. Tulliver ultimately cannot bring himself to take the money from his sister, for he suddenly realizes that Maggie, too, might one day depend on her brother for help (71; ch. I.8). On his deathbed, Mr. Tulliver accordingly urges Tom to take care of both Mrs. Tulliver and Maggie (291; bk. 5, ch. 7). For Tom, however, taking care of someone seems to comprise material security only, as becomes clear towards the end of the novel, when he assures his sister that he will always give her money if she is in need, while at the same time making it clear that, as a ‘fallen’ woman, she will no longer be welcome in his home (392–393; bk. 7, ch. 1). In thus neglecting Maggie’s emotional needs, Tom violates the spirit of his father’s dying wishes even as he attempts most scrupulously to obey them.

At the same time, it would be unfair to suggest that Mr. Tulliver’s actions are always guided by lofty ideals, and indeed in at least one crucial respect he acts very selfishly towards his own son. When, early on in Eliot’s novel, Mr. Tulliver explains why he wants to send Tom to a tutor, he admits that one of his motives is to keep the boy from becoming his rival:

> Why, if I made him a miller an’ farmer, he’d be expectin’ to take to the mill an’ the land, an’ a-hinting at me as it was time for me to lay by an’ think o’ my latter end. Nay, nay, I’ve seen enough o’ that wi’ sons. [...] I shall give Tom an eddication an’ put him to a business, as he may make a nest for himself, an’ not want to push me out o’ mine. (15; bk. 1, ch. 3)

In this passage, Mr. Tulliver does not envision the family home as a “refuge from the competitive, insecure, amoral world of the market” (Howarth 169). Instead, he portrays it as a contested piece of property that the patriarch must protect even from his own son. Tom’s education is thus not intended by his father to further the son’s spiritual growth, but instead can be seen as Mr. Tulliver’s conscious attempt to curb Tom’s ambition to become a miller by thwarting or ‘re-directing’ his talents.

There is, then, an important element of generational conflict to The Mill on the Floss, as suggested among other things by the narrator’s differential use of
names in the novel. Generally speaking, Eliot’s narrator refers to the older characters by their family names: ‘Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver,’ ‘Aunt and Uncle Glegg,’ or ‘lawyer Wakem.’ Indeed, even attentive readers may be forgiven for failing to remember, say, that Mr. Tulliver’s first name is Jeremy, as it is mentioned only once and in passing (17; bk. 1, ch. 3). Moreover, while Mrs. Tulliver’s first name – Elizabeth, or Bessy – occurs much more frequently (three and seventy-nine times, respectively), in all cases except one this happens in one of three particular contexts: (a) other characters use the name Bessy in passages of direct speech; (b) the name Bessy appears in indirect speech; and (c) the narrator calls Mrs. Tulliver Bessy in passages that are focalized through Mrs. Tulliver’s husband or relatives (examples for each of these cases: 46–47; bk. 1, ch. 7). This stands in marked contrast with the narrator’s virtually exclusive use of first names for Maggie, Tom, and Philip even when they are not seen through the eyes of other characters. At first sight, the effect of this subtle, but nevertheless clear distinction seems relatively obvious, for by putting us, as it were, on a first-name basis with the younger characters while at the same time retaining a polite distance from their elders, the narrator arguably prompts us to identify more closely with the former rather than with the latter.

This, however, is only part of the picture, for, in addition to age or generation, another factor determining the narrator’s use of first as opposed to family names is a character’s social status and degree of economic independence. This is most readily apparent in the case of two characters who belong to an older generation than Maggie and Tom, but who both have long formed part of the Tulliver household as faithful servants to the family. Reflecting the fact that these servants are dependents, the narrator does not hesitate to refer to them by their first names, Kezia and Luke, even when they are not seen through the eyes of other characters (e.g. 211 and 213; bk. 3, ch. 8). The underlying logic at work here is that of the nineteenth-century household, which Fredric Jameson describes as “an ambiguous category”:

[The household] does not preserve the blood jealousies of the older clans but yet is not technically purely familial either, in the sense of some later extended family.

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10 The ideas presented in this and the following paragraph derive from class discussions in the Bachelor-level seminar “Bildungsroman vs. Coming of Age: Victorian and Contemporary Versions of a Genre,” which I taught at the University of Zurich in the spring semester 2013. The discussion itself was based on input by one of the seminar participants, Simay Altan, who first brought the narrator’s differential use of proper names to my attention.

11 The same is true, incidentally, of Tom’s childhood friend Bob Jakin (e.g. 255; bk. 5, ch. 2).
Rather, these households very much include servants [...]. (The Antinomies of Realism 102)

In this particular social context, identity and honor are determined by an individual’s position within a master’s household. We can therefore say that, just as the common designation of slaves as ‘boys’ or ‘girls’ expresses their permanently subordinate position (Blackburn 11), so the narrator’s use of first names for Kezia and Luke signals their ‘lower’ and dependent status, irrespective of these characters’ age. However, while in one sense this aligns the two servants with the younger characters in Eliot’s novel, the key difference is that, in theory, someone like Tom ought at one point to gain honor and independence by assuming his father’s position as master of the household – and it is precisely this ‘natural,’ patriarchal succession that Mr. Tulliver proves himself desperate to prevent by sending Tom to school in order to learn a trade other than milling.

And yet, it is one of the many bitter ironies in The Mill on the Floss that Tom’s schooling turns out to be doubly inadequate even from Mr. Tulliver’s problematic point of view. For one thing, Mr. Tulliver originally wanted Tom to learn more about the practical world of business and less about things that lie “mostly out o’ sight” (20; bk. 1, ch. 3). However, following the ill-founded advice of a friend, Mr. Tulliver sends Tom to Reverend Stelling, who provides the boy with the kind of classical education cherished by humanist proponents of Bildung, but largely irrelevant to a future Victorian tradesman. Tom’s business-loving uncle Deane is later quick to point this out to the frustrated nephew:

Your Latin and rigmarole may soon dry off you, but you’ll be but a bare stick after that. Besides, it’s whitened your hands and taken the rough work out of you. And what do you know? Why, you know nothing about book-keeping, to begin with, and not so much of reckoning as a common shopman. (190; bk. 3, ch. 5)

Contrary to his intention, Mr. Tulliver has thus failed to provide Tom with an education that would enable his son to “make a nest for himself.” Moreover, Mr. Tulliver will eventually lose his beloved mill to lawyer Wakem and must then depend on Tom to restore it to the family. In a painfully ironic twist of fate, the son whom he regarded as a rival and threat to his property thus eventually becomes the miller’s only hope to regain the lost home.

Importantly, however, despite these inauspicious circumstances, there are hints in Eliot’s novel that Tom’s education at Reverend Stelling’s could have initiated a genuine process of Bildung. For instance, when Tom realizes that he is unable to master his academic subjects, the boy experiences for the first time that awakening to limitations that Susan J. Rosowski sees as typical of female protagonists. Tom had hitherto taken for granted that “all girls were silly” (35;
bk. 1, ch. 5), whereas he would, “when he was a man, be master of everything” (111; bk. 2, ch. 1). Now, Tom suddenly suspects that he may be “all wrong somehow” (113), and these doubts nullify “his boyish self-satisfaction,” rendering him “more like a girl than he had ever been in his life” (118; bk. 2, ch. 1). However, if it is possible for a boy to become “more like a girl” simply because his education is ill-suited to his talents, then this also suggests that women’s supposedly inferior nature is in fact the product of a societal structure that thwarts rather than fosters their development. Tom’s experience of self-doubt could, we may therefore speculate, have led him to a deeper understanding not only of himself, but also of the constructed nature of gender difference.

Sadly, however, the seeds of this insight fall on thorny ground, for as Philip Fisher rightly contends, far from making Tom a better human being, his education ultimately “crushes and obscures his best traits” (540). When Maggie visits Tom at Reverend Stelling’s and enthusiastically proclaims that she could master both Latin and Geometry, Tom finds his own prejudices confirmed rather than challenged by the male teacher:

“Girls can’t do Euclid; can they, sir?”

“They can pick up a little of everything, I dare say,” said Mr. Stelling. “They’ve a great deal of superficial cleverness; but they couldn’t go far into anything. They’re quick and shallow.” (126; bk. 2, ch. 2)

While Tom delights in having his sense of superiority restored, Maggie is understandably dismayed at the thought that her readiness of mind should be the very sign of female inferiority – not least because it seems to confirm her father’s fears that female intelligence can only lead to trouble (16; bk. 1, ch. 3). Indeed, Mr. Tulliver believes that Maggie’s sharp wits compromise her value as a marriageable commodity, for he is certain that she will “fetch none the bigger price” for being clever (12; bk. 1, ch. 2). In this regard, Mr. Tulliver notably agrees with his arch-enemy, lawyer Wakem, who defines the social role of woman with brutally aphoristic precision: “We don’t ask what a woman does – we ask whom she belongs to” (345; bk. 6, ch. 8) – an undoubtedly accurate statement, given that under the doctrine of coverture married women of the period had no legal identity independent of their husbands (e.g. Griffin 9). Teachers, fathers, and lawyers: where the status of women is concerned, the Victorian patriarchs in The Mill on the Floss are evidently in perfect agreement. In such an environment, it is little wonder that Tom’s ‘girlish’ self-doubts fail in the long run to challenge his belief in male supremacy, for as Eliot’s narrator suggests in a different context, “we are all apt to believe what the world believes about us” (65; bk. 65, ch. 8).
“Immovable Roots”: Bildung and the Limits of Self-Determination

Both Tom and Maggie’s stories thus focus on the problem of inadequate education. While Tom only reluctantly reconciles “himself to the idea that his school-time was to be prolonged and that he was not to be brought up to his father’s business” (111; bk. 2, ch. 1), Maggie would be thrilled at the opportunity to stay at Reverend Stelling’s. However, the boy Tom has to stay where he is, while Maggie, because she is a girl, is sent to “Miss Firniss’s boarding school in the ancient town of Laceham on the Floss” (154; bk. 2, ch. 7). The place name “Laceham” provides us with some clues as to the kind of schooling Maggie can expect there: not geometry or Latin, but weaving decorative cloth (‘lace’ and ‘hem’). Significantly, the narrator tells us virtually nothing about Maggie’s time at Miss Firniss’s boarding school – a gap in the story that highlights how irrelevant this type of schooling is for Maggie in terms of Bildung (i.e. the development of one’s innate potential). Jane McDonnell notes that unsatisfactory education is in fact a common theme in the Bildungsroman, and we could therefore conclude that The Mill on the Floss simply forms part of a larger movement for educational reform, leading to a system of schooling that would allow each individual, irrespective of gender, fully to develop his or her potential for true Bildung.

The story of Philip Wakem intimates, however, that changes in educational policy alone are not sufficient. We have seen that The Mill on the Floss incorporates two related but different Bildungsromane: the ‘female’ story of Maggie, and the ‘male’ story of her increasingly one-dimensional brother Tom. To these two plots, which explore the social inadequacies of institutionalized education, the story of Philip’s development adds a third narrative, one that is crucial for the novel’s critique of the inherent problems of the ideal of Bildung. Importantly, Maggie herself adheres to such a classical ideal of wide-ranging and ‘well-rounded’ intellectual formation, insisting that it is “a sort of clever stupidity only to have one sort of talent.” Philip, however, believes himself “cursed with susceptibility in every direction,” implying that the sheer breadth of his interests merely serves to dilute and disperse his intellectual faculties (266; bk. 5, ch. 3). Moreover, though Philip may be the intellectually most well-rounded individual in Eliot’s novel, his physical “deformity” marks him as an outsider and makes it impossible for him to feel at home in the community of St. Ogg’s (277; bk. 5, ch. 5). In other words, in the case of lawyer Wakem’s son at least,

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12 Given that Eliot’s German was excellent, the name Firniss may be intended as a reference to the German word Firnis, which can be translated as ‘varnish’ or ‘lacquer.’ This in turn would strengthen the suggestion that the type of education reserved for girls focused mainly on surface accomplishments.
wide-ranging *Bildung* does not automatically lead either to personal fulfillment or to social success.

It is significant in this context that Philip does not suffer from a *congenital* ‘deformity.’ The fact that Philip’s hump is due to an accident (134; bk. 2, ch. 3) rules out any suspicion, on the part of the readership, that Eliot might have intended Philip as an example of the fearful consequences of hereditary degeneration. Such racialist fears, though not yet widespread in 1860, were nevertheless growing amongst Eliot’s contemporaries (Pick 178–179). If Philip had been born a ‘deformed creature,’ then it would be possible to interpret his failure to succeed in life as a kind of biological or eugenic inevitability. The purely contingent nature of Philip’s ‘deformity,’ in contrast, highlights the inherent limits of the notion of self-determination that lies at the core of ideals of *Bildung,* for if one’s ability to reach an ideal depends just as much on accident as on one’s innate potential, then perhaps the ideal itself is in need of qualification. Put bluntly, we can say that through the story of Philip, Eliot’s novel explores to what extent ‘deformity’ can render *Bildung* (in the sense of successful formation) difficult if not impossible. *The Mill on the Floss* thus complements the twin-narrative of Maggie and Tom’s inadequate *Bildung* with what we may call Philip’s ‘novel of deformation.’ In each of these three cases, the mental or spiritual ideal of *Bildung* is qualified by the problem of embodied existence: sexual difference with Maggie and Tom, and physical disability in the case of Philip. In short, Eliot’s novel critiques, or at least questions, *Bildung*’s lofty idealism with a sober reminder of bodily limitations.

In addition, the notion of self-determination is circumscribed in *The Mill on the Floss* by the lasting impact of one’s past and, more specifically, one’s experiences as a child. We have already seen that the prejudices of relatives and teachers affect, and in many ways stunt, the development of both Maggie and Tom. Similarly, Philip’s accident took place when he was still an infant, which means that he grew up with the experience of seeing people shrink from him “only because he was deformed” (247; bk. 5, ch. 1). Moreover, in a passage worth quoting at length, Eliot’s narrator argues explicitly that one’s childhood sets the boundaries of self-determination:

> [Tom experienced] the happiness of seeing the bright light in the parlor at home [...]; the happiness of passing from the cold air to the warmth and the kisses and the smiles of that familiar hearth, where the pattern of the rug and the grate and the fire-irons were “first ideas” that it was no more possible to criticise than the solidity and extension of matter. There is no sense of ease like the ease we felt in those scenes where we were born, where objects became dear to us before we had known the labor of choice, and where the outer world seemed only an extension of our own personality;
we accepted and loved it as we accepted our own sense of existence and our own limbs. Very commonplace, even ugly, that furniture of our early home might look if it were put up to auction; an improved taste in upholstery scorns it; and is not the striving after something better and better in our surroundings the grand characteristic that distinguishes man from the brute, or, to satisfy a scrupulous accuracy of definition, that distinguishes the British man from the foreign brute? But heaven knows where that striving might lead us, if our affections had not a trick of twining round those old inferior things; if the loves and sanctities of our life had no deep immovable roots in memory. (127; bk. 2, ch. 1)

The narrator here suggests that, as children, we are not required to lead a self-determined existence – we do not yet know “the labor of choice” – and therefore we feel perfectly at ease in the “early home.” To strive after “something better and better” may be in one sense what makes us human, but there is also an undercurrent of violence to this ideal of implacable progress, which for the narrator tends to hinge on a racist distinction between the supposedly progressive “British man” and the backward, primitive, “foreign brute.” Countering such destructive fantasies of boundless (self-)invention and improvement, the narrator emphasizes that we can never entirely determine ourselves because our affections and convictions have “deep immovable roots” – roots not in blood or soil, but “in memory.”

Both Marx and Freud would, of course, agree that complete self-determination is in fact an illusion, and that the explanation for this lies in one’s past. Marx stated his case most famously in “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” published in 1852 (only a few years earlier than Eliot’s novel):

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited. Tradition from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. (32)

While it is possible at any point in time for men – and women – to choose their course of action, Marx emphasizes that they can never select freely the context

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13 Note that Eliot’s argument is strikingly similar to Margaret Morse’s claim that “[f]eelings and memories linked to home are highly charged, if not with meaning, then with sense memories that began before the mastery of language” (63) – i.e. in early childhood.

14 “Die Menschen machen ihre eigene Geschichte, aber sie machen sie nicht aus freien Stücken, nicht unter selbstgewählten, sondern unter unmittelbar vorgefundenen, gegebenen, überliefernten Umständen. Die Tradition aller toten Geschlechter lastet wie ein Alp auf dem Gehirne der Lebenden” (Marx, Der achttzehnte Brumaire 115).
of that particular choice. And, importantly, one of these contexts that lies entirely beyond our range of choice is the early childhood home: the place and the community where we grow up, and which can never be ‘self-selected.’ In a dialectical view of history, the ‘starting point’ called home necessarily remains part of everything that follows, albeit in what Hegel would call a ‘sublated’ form (in German, aufgehoben: the point of origin is at the same time canceled, kept in store, and lifted to a higher level; see J. Hillis Miller 28). Likewise, Sigmund Freud argues that the past establishes the limits of self-determination. Beyond these limits, Freud suggests, lies the realm of the unconscious, which is shaped crucially by our childhood experiences, and which makes it impossible for us ever to attain complete mastery over ourselves.

Like Freud and Marx, The Mill on the Floss is hostile to postmodern dreams of infinitely malleable, fluid identities – but not necessarily in a conservative or reactionary sense. Postmodern dreams of boundless self-fashioning appear problematic, for instance, in the light of recent findings regarding the long-term effects of malnutrition in the fetal stage and during childhood, which not only impair individuals’ health, cognitive abilities, and labor productivity over the course of their lives, but which also heighten the chance that such individuals will lack the necessary resources to take sufficient care of their children: “It is therefore in no way fanciful to see the influence of the health and welfare of grandparents in the bodies of their grandchildren and the effect may be even longer lasting” (Floud et al. 37). Our own life is thus shaped by the lives of our ancestors – and not in the sense of ancestral spirits or fateful heredity, but in terms of the contingent yet long-lasting effects of detrimental living standards. Moreover, as Terry Eagleton maintains, change and flexibility are not inherently progressive or oppositional qualities:

A faith in plurality, plasticity, dismantling, destabilizing, the power of endless self-invention – all this, while undoubtedly radical in some contexts, also smacks of a distinctly Western culture and an advanced capitalist world. [...] Capitalism may be upbraided for many defects, but a lack of dynamism is hardly one of them. (Sweet Violence xi)\(^{15}\)

We may quite rightly insist that identity is neither simply given nor eternally fixed. At the same time, however, there would also be something callous about

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15 See also Fredric Jameson, who argues that the “ambiguity of postmodernism as a philosophy” lies in the fact that “its progressive endorsement of anti-essentialist multiplicity and perspectivism also replicates the very rhetoric of the late-capitalist marketplace as such” (Archaeologies of the Future, 163) – a replication that Jameson finds “exceedingly suspicious” (ibid., 165).
telling someone like Mr. Tulliver that his “clinging affection for the old home as [...] part of himself” (217; bk. 3, ch. 9) is merely an instance of reactionary nostalgia.

Indeed, as Terry Eagleton points out elsewhere, the idea that unstable identities are always subversive and thus desirable is a claim “which it would be interesting to test out among the socially dumped and disregarded” (After Theory 16). Philip Fisher’s remark that a “break in continuity is the death of what is meant by the self in The Mill on the Floss” has to be seen precisely in this context (522), for without a certain amount of material stability, it becomes extremely difficult to sustain a reasonably stable sense of self. Mr. Tulliver’s attachment to the past may thus have much to do with an underlying sense of economic insecurity – at least according to Eliot’s narrator, who contrasts the old miller’s fear “that the country could never again be what it used to be” with the optimism of Mr. Deane, who is “attached to a firm of which the returns were on the increase,” and who “naturally took a more lively view of the present” (64; bk. 1, ch. 7). If, in short, The Mill on the Floss insists perhaps too much on the importance of “immovable roots,” we should not forget that it does so against a backdrop (or at least the fear) of material dispossession that, in turn, highlights the fragility of the place we call home.

**Nostalgia, Mourning, and Ironic Distance: Novelistic Immaturity**

Accordingly, we should read the novel’s generally nostalgic mood not exclusively as a form of sentimental indulgence, but also as an implicit critique of social injustice and thus as a potential basis for resistance. The nostalgic mood of The Mill on the Floss is established in the very first chapter, through the narrator’s dreamy remembrances of how Dorlcote Mill and its surroundings “looked one February morning many years ago” (8; bk. 1, ch. 1; see Boumelha 20):

> Just by the red-roofed town the tributary Ripple flows with a lively current into the Floss. How lovely the little river is, with its dark changing wavelets! It seems to me like a living companion while I wander along the bank, and listen to its low, placid voice, as to the voice of one who is deaf and loving. I remember those large dipping willows. I remember the stone bridge. (7; bk. 1, ch. 1)

This is not the detached, analytic tone one would expect from a “Study of Provincial Life” – the subtitle of Eliot’s later novel Middlemarch – but the nostalgic voice of a narrator who longs for a time “when joys were vivid” (127; bk. 2, ch. 1). Instead of dismissing such nostalgic longings as sentimental, Kimberley K. Smith emphasizes their potential “as a mode of resistance” (523). Smith shows that the term nostalgia, which was coined in 1688 by the Swiss physician Johan
Hofer to denote a potentially fatal condition of homesickness, underwent a process of radical redefinition (509–510):

[N]ostalgia evolved from a disease into an emotion [...]. The concept broadened and complicated: Once defined simply as a desire to return home, to a specific place, nostalgia was gradually being conceptualized as a longing to return to a former time – and usually a time that was only imagined to be better. (512; original emphasis)

Eventually, Smith continues, nostalgia was reduced to a sometimes painful, occasionally pleasant, but in either case unreliable, private emotion that is inevitably unrelated to any real political harm (519). For Smith, such a view of nostalgia mirrors a progressivist distrust towards any form of resistance to change, and is therefore “integral to the emotional regime of industrial capitalism” (522) – for if those who resist change are always and everywhere ‘merely being nostalgic,’ then their political objections can be conveniently disregarded.  

Accordingly, when reading the conclusion of The Mill on the Floss, we must not simply dismiss the novel’s tone as nostalgic, but instead examine how such nostalgia contributes to the text’s critique of Bildung and the genre of the Bildungsroman. The key for doing this lies in the problem of mourning, which according to Franco Moretti can have no more than episodic significance in the classical Bildungsroman because it “does not contribute to Bildung” (“The Comfort of Civilization” 132). Indicating a refusal to let go of the past, mourning constitutes an obstacle to the protagonist’s smooth, evolutionary development – and, implicitly, to his or her ‘progress.’ Accordingly, while in the final chapter of The Mill on the Floss Eliot’s narrator at first seems to argue that time has the power to heal all wounds, it soon becomes clear that this is not in fact the case:

Nature repairs her ravages – repairs them with her sunshine, and with human labor. The desolation wrought by that flood had left little visible trace on the face of the earth, five years after. [...] 

Nature repairs her ravages, but not all. The upturned 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. To the eyes that have dwelt on the past, there is no thorough repair. (422; “Conclusion”)

The Mill on the Floss does not, then, end on a confident note of progress, but with the image of two men – Philip and Stephen – who continue to visit Maggie’s

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16 Alison Blunt likewise argues that the widespread antipathy towards nostalgia may blind us to its “liberatory potential” (14). See also John Kirk, who emphasizes that there are “forms of nostalgic memory [...] which can be enabling” (606; original emphasis).
Svetlana Boym distinguishes between two types of nostalgia: restorative nostalgia, which "attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home," and reflective nostalgia, which, at best, "can present an ethical and creative challenge" (xviii): "Reflective nostalgia does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place called home [...]. This type of nostalgic narrative is ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary. [...]. The past is not made in the image of the present or seen as foreboding of some present disaster; rather, the past opens up a multitude of potentialities, nonteleological possibilities of historical development" (50). See also Kevin Goodman on Romantic nostalgia, which she regards as an attempt "to register the growing pains of historical existence" (196).

This is not to suggest that nostalgia ought to become a privileged discourse in our relation to the past. We should, however, be aware that to dismiss nostalgia out of hand means to surrender a potent resource for social critique. Nostalgia is, first and foremost, an experience of homelessness, and as such an indication of discontent with the present:

[W]e should recognize that remembering positive aspects of the past does not necessarily indicate a desire to return there. Remembering the past should instead be seen as a way to express valid desires and concerns about the present – in particular, about its relationship (or lack of relationship) to the past. (Smith 523; original emphasis)

Nostalgia expresses desires and values that, in themselves, are neither necessarily sentimental nor illegitimate; after all, one reason for shying away from examining the past is, as Eliot’s narrator puts it, that “mankind is not disposed to look narrowly into the conduct of great victors when their victory is on the right side” (207; bk. 3, ch. 7) – i.e. one’s own. To dismiss any kind of longing for the past as ‘mere nostalgia’ may thus encourage, in both others and ourselves, an unwarranted sense of “ironic detachment” from both past injustice and present harm (Smith 515).17

In The Mill on the Floss, ironic detachment is in fact quite explicitly portrayed as a privilege that the dispossessed cannot afford. In a lengthy passage that is itself supremely ironic (Raymond Williams 172), Eliot’s narrator satirizes the

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belief that using irony implies a lofty transcendence of one’s limited, subjective point of view:

In writing the history of unfashionable families, one is apt to fall into a tone of emphasis which is very far from being the tone of good society, where principles and beliefs are not only of an extremely moderate kind, but are always presupposed, no subjects being eligible but such as can be touched with a light and graceful irony. But then good society has its claret and its velvet carpets, its dinner-engagements six weeks deep, its opera and its faëry ball-rooms; rides off its ennui on thoroughbred horses; [...] gets its science done by Faraday, and its religion by the superior clergy who are to be met in the best houses – how should it have time or need for belief and emphasis? But good society, floated on gossamer wings of light irony, is of very expensive production; requiring nothing less than a wide and arduous national life condensed in unfragrant deafening factories, cramping itself in mines, sweating at furnaces, [...] or else, spread over sheepwalks, and scattered in lonely houses and huts on the clayey or chalky corn-lands [...]. This wide national life is based entirely on emphasis – the emphasis of want, which urges it into all the activities necessary for the maintenance of good society and light irony; it spends its heavy years often in a chill, uncarpeted fashion, amidst family discord unsoftened by long corridors. (238; bk. 4, ch. 3)

Irony, the narrator insists, is not an ideologically neutral device, but suffused with implicit value-judgments; an “unsoftened” hut is far less hospitable to “light irony” than a comfortable, wealthy home furnished with “velvet carpets.” Indeed, given the depth of social injustice (“deafening factories,” “the emphasis of want”), good society’s well-tempered beliefs appear curiously exorbitant (or “extremely moderate,” in the narrator’s elegantly oxymoronic phrase). Accordingly, it would be a profound mistake to think that holding strong beliefs necessarily indicates blind fanaticism, whereas a properly ironic distance goes hand in hand with intellectual subtlety and independence.18

In addition, the narrator’s argument also challenges the idea that irony is necessarily subversive, for it is difficult to imagine that the tone of “good society”

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18 The historian E. P. Thompson makes a similar observation on the relationship between religious enthusiasm and social standing in his The Making of the English Working Class: “The rational Christianity of the Unitarians, with its preference for ‘candour’ and its distrust of ‘enthusiasm’, appealed to some of the tradesmen and shopkeepers of London, and to similar groups in large cities. But it seemed too cold, too distant, too polite, and too much associated with the comfortable values of a prospering class to appeal to the city or village poor. Its very language and tone served as a barrier” (31). For a particularly entertaining account of the relationship between class and irony, see Terry Eagleton’s remarks on “a certain kind of English patrician” (Across the Pond 39).
constitutes a counter-hegemonic discourse. The narrator’s point is thus not far from an observation Franco Moretti makes when noting irony’s centrality in the history of the modern novel. How, Moretti wonders, could a stylistic device that has enjoyed almost unrivalled dominance in novelistic aesthetics simultaneously constitute a grave threat to the social order (Way of the World 97)? Rather than seeing the device as subversive, we should regard irony as a stylistic correlative to what Moretti posits as the great theme and political disposition of the Bildungsroman: compromise (Way of the World 10). This becomes more readily apparent if we examine Moretti’s definition of compromise: “We can speak of compromise when conflicting principles have indeed reached an accord, but without having lost their diversity. They remain heterogeneous, and the agreement intrinsically precarious” (Way of the World 69). In agreement, but only precariously so – unified, yet remaining heterogeneous: it is a definition of compromise, but also a perfectly good description of how irony manages momentarily to unite fundamentally irreconcilable meanings: what Catherine Gallagher calls a characteristically modern “spirit of ‘ironic’ assent” (347).

Admittedly, The Mill on the Floss’s critique of irony is complicated by the fact that its narrator at the same time employs the device. There is irony, for instance, in the narrator’s description of the “fashionably drest [sic] female in grief” as a “striking example of the complexity introduced into the emotions by a high state of civilization” (48; bk. 1, ch. 7). There is irony, too, in the narrator’s attitude towards little Maggie, who, after running away from home to join the gypsies, mistakenly believes that she was really “gaining great influence over them,” and that the gypsies would want her to become their queen (92; bk. 1, ch. 11). And there is irony, to give a third and final example, in the narrator’s comments on the supposedly staggering backwardness of the past depicted in the novel:

All this, you remember, happened in those dark ages when there were no schools of design; before schoolmasters were invariably men of scrupulous integrity, and before the clergy were all men of enlarged minds and varied culture. In those less favored days, it is no fable that there were other clergymen besides Mr. Stelling who had narrow intellects and large wants, and whose income, by a logical confusion to which Fortune, being a female as well as blindfold, is peculiarly liable, was proportioned not to their wants but to their intellect, with which income has clearly no inherent relation. (139–140; bk. 2, ch. 4)

The surface meaning of the passage is that the narrator’s present is superior to the past, yet the idea that nowadays all schoolmasters are upright men, and all members of the clergy persons of enlarged minds and varied culture, is trans-
parently excessive and, therefore, highly suspicious.\(^{19}\) Moreover, if taken at face value, the link made in the passage between “female” and “logical confusion” would sit uneasily with the novel’s general gender politics. In short, there is good reason to believe that the narrator’s comments are not in fact intended to praise the present, but instead to ridicule those who subscribe to an overly optimistic progressivism.

And yet, it is important to recognize that ironic distance towards a particular ideology is not in fact the same as repudiating it. We have already examined some reasons why irony is not necessarily subversive, and Slavoy Žižek even suggests that “ideological identification exerts a true hold on us precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical with it” (The Plague of Fantasies 27). Accordingly, we might read The Mill on the Floss’s use of irony as evidence of just how firmly the novel is committed to the liberal ideology of progress from which it ostensibly distances itself. After all, the narrator states quite clearly that suffering simply “belongs to every historical advance of mankind” (223; bk. 4, ch. 1; emphasis added). Suffering is, in other words, regrettable – but also an inevitable aspect of progress, which itself remains eminently desirable. Moreover, even according to the narrator’s own theory of irony, the novel’s use of the device would in fact mark The Mill on the Floss as yet another product of that ‘good society’ that depends on exploitation and widespread want. From either perspective, the novel seems curiously at odds with itself: satirizing the very ‘good society’ from which it has itself emerged, and embracing an idea of progress that, at the same time, it critiques through its pervasive mood of nostalgia.

Crucially, however, there is one respect in which Eliot’s novel increasingly abandons the respectable stance of ironic distance, namely in relation to its protagonist, Maggie. We have already seen that, when still a child, Maggie at times serves as the butt of the narrator’s irony. However, as the novel’s heroine matures, the narrator identifies more and more uncompromisingly with her spiritual and emotional plight. Indeed, for F.R. Leavis it is precisely this lack of ironic distance towards Maggie’s soulful yearnings that constitute the one great flaw of The Mill on the Floss:

There is nothing against George Eliot’s presenting this immaturity with tender sympathy; but we ask, and ought to ask, of a great novelist something more. ‘Sympathy and understanding’ is the common formula of praise, but understanding, in any strict sense, is just what she doesn’t show. To understand immaturity would be to ‘place’ it, with however subtle an implication, by relating it to mature experience. (485)

\(^{19}\) On excessive praise as a classic strategy to create ironic effects, see Colebrook, *Irony* 10.
For Leavis, Eliot’s novel of education remains scandalously immature because it does not moderate its protagonist’s emotional intensity through properly ironic distance. In a similar vein, Virginia Woolf complains that the narrator’s humor “controls” Maggie only as long as she is still a child, whereas this superior ironic poise is lost as the novel’s protagonist matures — and it is this that separates it from Middlemarch, which Woolf has famously called “one of the few English novels written for grown-up people” (“George Eliot” 168–169). What upsets both Leavis and Woolf, in short, is that the narrator of The Mill on the Floss progressively — or, to their mind, regressively — abandons the mature tone of ‘good society,’ opting instead for a very unfashionable, emphatic identification with the adolescent heroine’s struggle.

However, before analyzing in more detail some vital components of Maggie’s struggle, we should perhaps rephrase the argument up to this point in terms of two different levels of critique: the mimetic or referential, and the literary or intertextual. On the one hand, we have seen that The Mill on the Floss constitutes a far-reaching critique of Victorian gender norms and their adverse effects on women and, at least to some extent, on men as well. As this kind of critique is linked to the state of affairs in the real world, we may — for lack of a better term — call it mimetic or referential. Eliot’s novel highlights symbolically the extent to which Victorian gender norms are sustained by central pillars of the bourgeois order: fathers (Mr. Tulliver), preachers and educators (Reverend Stelling), as well as lawyers (Wakem). Importantly, the novel does not depict these patriarchs as a monolithic and unified front of oppression; rather, the text depicts them as engaged in deep conflict but nevertheless agreeing on one key issue: the inferiority of women as intellectually limited commodities that belong to the head of the family. The novel thus also portrays the family home as an institution that is deeply implicated in the reproduction of social injustice, even as it acknowledges the deep bonds of affection between father and daughter, or sister and brother. Moreover, like so many a Bildungsroman, it exposes important flaws in the educational system, and as such advocates social change.

Such referential critique is, however, complemented in the novel by what we might term literary or intertextual critique. This includes, for instance, the way in which The Mill on the Floss challenges some key tenets of the Bildungsroman as a genre by refusing to focus on Stephen Guest and instead juxtaposing three unsuccessful plots of formation: Maggie’s, Tom’s, and Philip’s, none of whom will find a true home in this world. In combining these three plots, the text highlights the limits to self-determination, and thus qualifies an overly optimistic conception of human agency inherent to classical ideals of Bildung. Moreover, the novel questions the political innocence of irony as a stylistic de-
vice, and to some extent at least rejects what it portrays as a class-based stance. The strongest expression of this incomplete but significant repudiation is the narrator’s increasing rejection of ironic distance from Maggie, which has led critics to accuse Eliot’s novel as a whole of unseemly immaturity. Similar accusations could be leveled against the narrator’s nostalgic tone, if one were to analyze nostalgia as merely a regressive yearning for an idealized childhood home. However, the novel cautions us against such a simplistic assessment of the nostalgic impulse, and instead pits it against a narrative of implacable progress in order to highlight the latter’s emotional as well as social costs. If this last point threatens to collapse the distinction between referential and intertextual critique, then this is not a coincidence, but instead one of the novel’s key arguments: that social critique ought not limit itself to what we might call the world’s content, but must also pay attention to its style and its discursive arrangements of oppression. To put things somewhat differently: one’s loss of home may derive from material deprivation or from one’s lack of a proper place in the symbolic order – and, not infrequently, from a combination of the two.

Maggie’s Dreams: Awakening and Romance

It is with these considerations in mind that we must now analyze Maggie’s struggle, as an emotional conflict that arises from her desire to honor past duties and, at the same time, to strive towards future fulfillment; she wishes to develop as a ‘free’ individual without relinquishing the ancestral home that stands in the way of that very development. Maggie’s passionate response – as a young woman who has lost the material security of home (and the social status associated with it) – to the writings of the late-medieval mystic Thomas à Kempis needs to be seen in this context. In à Kempis’s ascetic philosophy, Maggie believes to have found a way of resolving the dilemma between individual desire and social limitations:

[H]ere was a sublime height to be reached without the help of outward things; here was insight, and strength, and conquest, to be won by means entirely within her own soul […]. It flashed through her like the suddenly apprehended solution of a problem, that all the miseries of her young life had come from fixing her heart on her own pleasure […]; and for the first time she saw the possibility of shifting the position from which she looked at the gratification of her own desires – of taking her stand out of herself, and looking at her own life as an insignificant part of a divinely guided whole.

(237; bk. 4, ch. 3)

Maggie finds herself doubly deprived: as a woman refused the benefits of education, and as a daughter suffering from the family’s very material downfall.
This explains why the notion of “means entirely within her soul” must seem so appealing, as it involves neither intellectual nor material resources; it is a matter of the soul, not of the mind or the body. Maggie, in other words, hopes to solve these conflicts by discursively reframing her needs as merely “the gratification of her own desires,” and as insignificant in the larger scheme of things. It is precisely the emphasis of want that leads Maggie to embrace an emphatic belief, in the hope that this will help her recover the “sense of home” that she has been unable to find in the “world outside the books” (194; bk. 3, ch. 5).

Significantly, it is Philip who ends Maggie’s mystic dream of cheerful resignation by challenging its underlying assumptions about the nature of longing and desire. Ascetics like Thomas à Kempis assume that desire binds us to a fallen world to which we do not truly belong, and that therefore desire itself is the main obstacle to our quest for a lasting, transcendent home. Philip, however, questions Maggie’s belief that denying her longings is the path to true belonging:

> It seems to me we can never give up longing and wishing while we are thoroughly alive. There are certain things we feel to be beautiful and good, and we must hunger after them. How can we ever be satisfied without them until our feelings are deadened? I delight in fine pictures; I long to be able to paint such. I strive and strive, and can’t produce what I want. That is pain to me, and always will be pain, until my faculties lose their keenness [...]. (246; bk. 5, ch. 1; original emphasis)

Longing may mean suffering, Philip admits, but it is also essential to a fulfilling and truly human life. The German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, who claims that God is nothing but an outward projection of humankind’s own essential nature, and whose Das Wesen des Christenthums (The Essence of Christianity) Eliot herself had translated into English in 1854, makes a case very similar to Philip’s:

> I feel feeling [...] as belonging to my essential being, and, though the source of all sufferings and sorrows, as a glorious, divine power and perfection. What would man be without feeling? It is the musical power in man. (The Essence of Christianity 63; ch. 5)\(^{20}\)

The only way to avoid suffering, Feuerbach argues, would be entirely to quench our feelings – that divine, “musical power in man” which defines what it means to be truly human.

\(^{20}\) “[Ich] empfinde die Empfindung [...] als zu meinem Wesen gehörig, und, obwohl als die Quelle aller Leiden, Schwächen und Schmerzen, doch als eine herrliche, göttliche Macht und Vollkommenheit. Was wäre der Mensch ohne Empfindung? Sie ist die musikalische Macht im Menschen” (Das Wesen des Christenthums 102–103).
What underlines this philosophical connection is that Feuerbach’s musical metaphor repeatedly resurfaces in *The Mill on the Floss*. For instance, there are echoes of Feuerbach’s metaphor in what Philip says to Maggie shortly after his attack on ascetic self-denial:

I think there are stores laid up in our human nature that our understandings can make no complete inventory of. *Certain strains of music affect me so strangely; I can never hear them without their changing my whole attitude of mind for a time, and if the effect would last, I might be capable of heroisms.* (248; bk. 5, ch. 1; emphasis added)

Like Feuerbach, Philip here associates music both with our deepest feelings and our most heroic or divine powers. Moreover, listening to Philip’s pleas, Maggie herself feels as if “music would swell out, [...] persuading her that the wrong lay all in the thoughts and weaknesses of others, and that there was such a thing as futile sacrifice” (247; bk. 5, ch. 1). Similarly, toward the end of the novel, Philip assures Maggie in a moving letter that she has been, to his affections, “what light, what colour is to my eyes – what music is to the inward ear” (407; bk. 7, ch. 3). The musical imagery here becomes linked to the appreciation of light and colour, and hence with the “delight in fine pictures” that Philip had mentioned earlier on. In this way, the novel associates desire and longing with a thirst for the beautiful, the good, and the true – with, in short, the classical ideal of Bildung as a culture of the self that is entirely incompatible with an ascetic philosophy of self-denial (Boumelha 26–27).

Philip thus in one sense (re-)awakens Maggie’s desires for knowledge and culture, and we may note in passing that his last name is, tellingly, Wakem (‘wake ’em’). At the same time, however, *The Mill on the Floss* portrays desire itself as related to that dissolution of the conscious self that is characteristic of sleep and dreams. For instance, at one point we find little Maggie, who continually thirsts for the knowledge that can be gained from reading, “dreaming over her book” (15; bk. 1, ch. 3). Similarly, when she later runs off to join a group of gypsies, the experience at first seems to her as if “rehearsed in a dream” (91; bk. 1, ch. 11) – and we have seen that the episode as a whole can be read as a version of the Freudian family romance. Moreover, romantic love and sexual fulfillment, too, are associated with dreams, for the idea that she could ever have a lover seems to Maggie “like a dream – only one of the stories one imagines” (272; bk. 5, ch. 4). Significantly, towards the end of the novel, Maggie must literally wake up from “vivid dreaming” before she can bring herself to decide against an

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21 See Levine for a more sustained discussion of the relationship between *The Mill on the Floss* and Ludwig Feuerbach’s ideas.
velopment with Stephen Guest (381; bk. 6, ch. 14). Susan J. Rosowsksi’s description of the ‘female Bildungsroman’ as typically revolving around a woman’s awakening to limitations thus proves particularly accurate for *The Mill on the Floss*, in which Maggie’s dreamlike desires clash, time and again, with the limitations imposed by reality.\(^{22}\)

And yet, while this may suggest that the novel attempts to expose the insubstantiality of dreams by portraying them as the binary opposite of a realistic outlook on the world, the text in fact explores the complex interrelatedness of the “triple world of Reality, Books, and Waking Dreams” (225; bk. 4, ch. 2). We have seen, for instance, that books do inspire some of Maggie’s dreams and desires. At the same time, however, Maggie is also very well aware of the unrealistic conventions of popular romances, where the “blond-haired young lady” invariably triumphs over the “dark woman” (270; bk. 5, ch. 4). Northrop Frye’s claim that “romance is nearest of all literary forms to wish-fulfillment and dream” (186) is, therefore, not exactly true for Maggie, who is herself one of those dark women whose desires continually end up thwarted in popular romances. Accordingly, Maggie formulates her dreams in direct opposition to conventional romances, voicing the hope that she herself might one day be able to avenge all these “dark unhappy” heroines (270; bk. 5, ch. 4). Philip, who is passionately in love with Maggie, teasingly assures her that she could easily win a handsome young man away from a pretty, blond-haired woman such as her cousin, Lucy – and this is, of course, precisely what will happen in Eliot’s novel. Maggie eventually wins Stephen Guest’s love from pretty, blond-haired Lucy and, in this way, fulfills her daydream fantasy of revenge. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie’s dreams and desires thus not only take shape in relation to both everyday domestic reality and the imaginary worlds described in books; they also have an uncanny way of coming true, and of shaping the course of her own life.

**The Tragedy of Wish-Fulfillment**

This realization may in turn help us understand the novel’s much-discussed, dream-like ending, in which Maggie and her brother Tom drown in a flood, and which is highly problematic when read in realist terms of narrative coherence and probability. Henry James, for instance, is one of many critics who have been uncomfortable with the novel’s dramatic conclusion, and highly suspicious of its artistic merits: “As it stands, the dénouement shocks the reader most painfully. Nothing has prepared him for it; the story does not move towards it; it casts no

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\(^{22}\) In a similar vein, Tom, is “awakened” from his “boyish dreams” when he learns that Mr. Tulliver has lost his lawsuit against lawyer Wakem (158; bk. 2, ch. 7).
shadow before it” (465). In a similar vein, F.R. Leavis suggests that the novel’s ending belongs to “another kind of art” than the preceding sections; the flood in which Tom and Maggie perish constitutes a “dreamed-of perfect accident,” but has “no symbolic or metaphorical value” (488; my emphasis). Less judgmentally, Jane McDonnell remarks that The Mill on the Floss moves from a realistic portrayal of Maggie towards a more supernatural mode of representation typical of such genres as the fairy tale or romance (400).

While Penny Boumelha agrees that the novel’s ending abandons the realist mode, she is one of the few critics who also notes the crucial, metafictional effect of such a “flagrantly fantasied and contrived” conclusion:

It acknowledges and makes unusually visible the formal-cum-ideological impasse that the novel has reached by virtue of its concentration on the development of a woman for whom no meaningful future […] can be imagined. It breaks out of this impasse only by sweeping the novel out of its realist mode altogether. (29)

According to Boumelha, the ending of Eliot’s novel serves to expose “the restricted possibilities of the world as it could be imagined by realism,” and the shift to a world of fantasy and wish-fulfillment thus constitutes a critique of classic realism’s unacknowledged limitations (32–33). By flaunting the contrived nature of its conclusion – the flood arrives at the very moment of Maggie’s utmost despair, when she wonders “how long it will be before death comes” (417; bk. 7, ch. 5) – The Mill on the Floss problematizes its status as fiction and highlights the link between generic conventions, narrative closure, and ideology. More specifically, Eliot’s novel dismantles a central convention of the English Bildungsroman: its valorization of childhood, commonly expressed in endings that depict the protagonist’s fairytale-like return to his or her original home. As Franco Moretti has pointed out, the hero’s childhood is not only granted an emblematic prominence in the English Bildungsroman; in contrast to continental

23 See the subtitle of U.C. Knoepflmacher’s 1968 study George Eliot’s Early Novels: The Limits of Realism.

24 Terry Eagleton agrees that metafiction is an important aspect of Eliot’s fiction: “It is with Eliot that realism in the English novel becomes theoretically self-conscious” (The English Novel 168). Kristie M. Allen also puts forward a reading of the ending as productively disruptive: “The novel’s conclusion, thus, becomes a formal forging of new channels of ideas about the taken-for-grantedness of culture, the mind’s processes of repetition, the cumulative moral effects of habit, and the kinds of self-reflective consciousness required to manifest our best selves” (847). Similarly, Jordan Baker posits that at the end of The Mill on the Floss “we find ourselves subject to a logic alien to the typical protocols of the realist novel” (229)
examples of the genre, the protagonist’s most significant experiences also tend to be “those which confirm the choices made by childhood ‘innocence’” (Way of the World 182; emphasis added):

Can you picture a child reading Wilhelm Meister, The Red and the Black, Lost Illusions? Impossible. But Waverley and Jane Eyre, David Copperfield and Great Expectations: here we have the ‘great tradition’ of children’s literature (and our era, less intimidated by sex, can easily add Tom Jones). […] Could it in fact be that, deep down, these novels are fairy tales? (Way of the World 185)

In the fairytale world of the English Bildungsroman, Moretti points out, siblings often “magnetically attract the negative values of the narrative universe,” as part of a broader tendency towards moral polarization into clear-cut rights and wrongs (Way of the World 186). If continental heroes are happy to leave (and even deliberately defy) their childhood homes, the youthful journeys of English protagonists are portrayed as enforced exile: “a long and bewildering detour” from the cherished stability of the original home (Way of the World 203).25 The basic structure of the English Bildungsroman is, in short, regressive, and the often unlikely or even blatantly unrealistic plot twists needed to manufacture a happy ending – the rediscovery of long-lost relatives, or Rochester’s voice supernaturally calling out to Jane Eyre over the distance of several miles – reveal the extent to which the endings of such novels are concerned, not with reality, but with poetic justice and wish-fulfillment. And of course, almost all of this is true for The Mill on the Floss, too: the sibling who attracts the negative values of the fictional universe (i.e. Tom); the protagonist’s aversion to the idea of having to leave the childhood home; and the restoration of an ‘innocent’ childhood perspective through the reconciliation of Tom and Maggie, brought about by the flagrantly fantasized flood that concludes the novel. There is only one problem with this argument in connection with The Mill on the Floss: its ending

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25 In Goethe’s Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre, for instance, young Wilhelm is not at all unhappy to leave his childhood home: “Seines Vaters Haus, die Seinigen zu verlassen, schien ihm ein Leichtes” (37); the English translation runs: “It seemed to him the easiest thing in the world to leave his family and his father’s house” (Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship 16). Similarly, the protagonist of a Bildungsroman by Stendahl is more than eager to venture forth into the world: “Pour Julien, faire fortune, c’était d’abord sortir de Verrières; il abhorrait sa patrie” (Le rouge et le noir 45; ch. 5); the English translation runs: “For Julien, making his fortune meant first and foremost getting out of Verrières; he loathed his native town” (The Red and the Black 26; ch. 5). Compare this to, say, Dickens’s David Copperfield, the fifth chapter of which is entitled “I am sent away from Home” (73).
may be just as fantasized as all the others – but it is not truly a happy one. How can we make sense of this fantasy of doom?

Using Slavoj Žižek’s Lacanian framework as an analytical tool, we can say that Eliot’s novel ‘traverses the ideological fantasy’ that structures the English Bildungsroman, and in doing so confronts the generic tradition’s traumatic kernel. Here is how Žižek defines fantasy:

Fantasy conceals the fact that the Other, the symbolic order, is structured around some traumatic impossibility, around something which cannot be symbolized [...] – so what happens with desire after we ‘traverse’ fantasy? Lacan’s answer, in the last pages of his Seminar XI, is drive, ultimately the death drive: ‘beyond fantasy’ there is no yearning or any kindred sublime phenomenon, ‘beyond fantasy’ we find only drive, its pulsation around the sinthome. (Sublime Object of Ideology 138–139; original emphasis)

For Lacan, fantasy serves to hide a traumatic kernel, and if we traverse it we will be confronted with the pulsation of the death drive around the so-called sinthome, which Žižek defines as “a knot, a point at which all the lines of the predominant ideological argumentation [...] meet” (The Ticklish Subject 206). This is a potentially liberating encounter, for Žižek suggests that if we untie the sinthome, then the efficiency of the corresponding ideological edifice is suspended (ibid.). Given that, for Žižek, ironic distance is one of the key ways in which we can “blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy” (Sublime Object of Ideology 30), we may therefore speculate that abandoning irony may be one way to confront the traumatic kernel of ideological fantasies.

If we now apply this theoretical framework to Eliot’s novel, then we can say that The Mill on the Floss manages to traverse the regressive fantasy of childhood that lies at the core of the English Bildungsroman precisely through its progressive abandoning of ironic distance, which is why the – expected and conventional – fairytale happy ending turns into a sublime depiction of a pulsating, semi-incestuous death drive:

Tom, looking before him, saw death rushing on them. Huge fragments, clinging together in fatal fellowship, made one wide mass across the stream.

“It is coming, Maggie!” Tom said, in a deep, hoarse voice, loosing the oars, and clasping her.

The next instant the boat was no longer seen upon the water [...] B]rother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted [...]. (422; bk. 7, ch. 5)

Maggie is reunited with Tom, who in the course of the narrative has come to embody the Law of the Father, and both are obliterated in what one could call
26 See, for instance, how Elisabeth Bronfen summarizes Freud’s account of the psychological dynamics of fantasy: “[F]antasies try to jettison their origin but only find themselves drawn back to the repressed other scene from which they emerged” (209).

27 For a similar argument, see Meyer 129. Note that the narrator of Eliot’s *Middlemarch* constructs a “home epic” for Dorothea Brooke, the heroine of that novel (*Middlemarch* 511; “Finale”; emphasis added – see Marotta 416).

a literal ‘stream of unconsciousness’: a fantasized *Liebestod* in the flood unleashed by Maggie’s death drive. Once we foreground this submerged psychological drama, it seems almost too fitting that, in the course of the novel, Eliot’s narrator incorporates references to two of psychoanalysis’s favorite tragic narratives: Sophocles’s *Oedipus* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (110 and 325; bk. 1, ch. 13 and bk. 6, ch. 6).

More than merely referring to these tragedies in passing, however, the narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* in fact launches a systematic analysis of the genre of tragedy and its relation to the story of Maggie and her family. Early on in the novel, Maggie already suspects that Tom’s character and actions might make the “future in some way tragic” (15; bk. 1, ch. 3). Later, the narrator compares Maggie to the tragic hero of Sophocles’s play *Ajax* (56; bk. 1, ch. 7) and even points explicitly to Aristotle’s discussion of tragedy in his *Poetics* (85; bk. 1, ch. 10). At another point, the narrator challenges received ideas about the genre, relating this critique to more general problems of novelistic representation:

Mr. Tulliver, you perceive, though nothing more than a superior miller and maltster, was as proud and obstinate as if he had been a very lofty personage, in whom such dispositions might be a source of that conspicuous, far-echoing tragedy, which sweeps the stage in regal robes, and makes the dullest chronicler sublime. The pride and obstinacy of millers and other insignificant people, whom you pass unnoticingly on the road every day, have their tragedy too; but it is of that unwept, hidden sort that goes on from generation to generation, and leaves no record – such tragedy, perhaps, as lies in the conflicts of young souls, hungry for joy, under a lot made suddenly hard to them, under the dreariness of a home where the morning brings no promise with it, and where the unexpected discontent of worn and disappointed parents weighs on the children like a damp, thick air, in which all the functions of life are depressed; or such tragedy as lies in the slow or sudden death that follows on a bruised passion, though it may be a death that finds only a parish funeral. (163; bk. 3, ch. 1)

Against the classic Aristotelian dogma, the narrator maintains that tragedy is not confined to those whom one could call “lofty”; it may also afflict “insignificant people,” who suffer from everyday conflicts and “the dreariness of a home where the morning brings no promise.” *The Mill on the Floss* is thus best un-
derstood as an attempt not only to stage, but explicitly to conceptualize a novelistic version of domestic tragedy.

In the course of this exploration of the genre of tragedy, the narrator takes particular issue with the idea of the tragic flaw (hamartia), understood as a defect of character. Various critics have recently rejected the traditional understanding of hamartia as an inherent flaw in the hero’s character. Jennifer Wallace, for instance, argues that the Aristotelian notion of hamartia is “less about a character defect than about an error in judgment which led to a wrong decision or a wrong course of action” (118–119). It is this very idea – that hamartia refers to an error of judgment – which explains why John Drakakis and Naomi Conn Liebler maintain that hamartia is related to the notion of dilemma, defined as “the positioning of protagonist, represented community and audience alike between two choices of equal value both politically and morally” (9). If a character is faced with two choices of more or less equal value, then an “error in judgment” is of course far more likely to occur. Accordingly, Drakakis and Liebler insist that what may appear to be an innate character flaw in fact often has its roots, “not in the inner psychological life of the protagonist, but in the larger domain of culture” (8). Intriguingly, much the same stance is taken by the narrator in *The Mill on the Floss*:

[Y]ou have known Maggie a long while, and need to be told, not her characteristics, but her history, which is a thing hardly to be predicted even from the completest knowledge of characteristics. For the tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within. “Character,” says Novalis, in one of his questionable aphorisms—“character is destiny.” But not the whole of our destiny. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, was speculative and irresolute, and we have a great tragedy in consequence. But if his father had lived to a good old age, and his uncle had died an early death, we can conceive Hamlet’s having married Ophelia, and got through life with a reputation of sanity, notwithstanding many soliloquies, and some moody sarcasms toward the fair daughter of Polonius, to say nothing of the frankest incivility to his father-in-law.

Maggie’s destiny, then, is at present hidden, and we must wait for it to reveal itself like the course of an unmapped river; we only know that the river is full and rapid, and that for all rivers there is the same final home. (325; bk. 6, ch. 6)

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28 Domestic tragedy had already appeared on the English stage in the early eighteenth century in plays such as George Lillo’s *The London Merchant*, which was first performed in 1731 (Sanders 302 and Johann N. Schmidt 215; see Helgerson 13–76 for an account of its prehistory). Perhaps the most celebrated eighteenth-century example of tragedy in the English novel is Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa: or, The History of a Young Lady*, published in 1748 (Eagleton, *Sweet Violence* 201–202).
For Eliot’s narrator, tragedy is not usually the direct consequence of a protagonist’s inherent, tragic flaw, but the result of a fatal misfit between character and circumstances. If, that is to say, the classical Bildungsroman assumes that we can recognize ourselves in, and identify with, the wider world as our natural home (i.e. as a place in harmony with our selves), then tragedy focuses on dissonance and the possibility of breakdown. We can therefore read the ending of The Mill on the Floss, which constitutes such a blatant break with the novel’s realist mode, not only as a critique of the doctrine that tragedy arises “entirely from within,” but also as highlighting tragedy’s impulse towards a violent disruption of what is conceived as the ‘proper’ order.

A tragic novel, then – yet at the same time a novel ending in wish-fulfillment? Can a narrative really be called a tragedy if the outcome fulfills the protagonist’s deepest, death-driven, incestuous desires? Perhaps we must not only accept that it can, but even posit that such knowledge in fact deepens the tragic experience because it highlights the overwhelming pressures on the protagonist’s self. In the course of Eliot’s novel, we have come to see that Maggie may well be overly impulsive – but she is also intelligent, sensitive, and generous. Surely it deepens rather than dilutes the tragedy that such a person should find herself in a situation where her only remaining wishes are to be reunited with, and at the same time to take revenge against, her own brother, who has so often treated her with the harshest contempt. Maggie is “so young, so healthy” (415; bk. 7, ch. 5), yet by the end of the novel this only means to her that death is still a long time to come: she is doomed to live, and thus to experience further pain. So yes, Maggie’s death in the flood at the end of the novel, locked in an erotically charged embrace with her brother, is a fantasy scenario that allows her to fulfill her conflicting desires. But it is deeply tragic that things should have come to such a pass: that this is indeed the only thing left for Maggie to desire. In The Mill on the Floss, Maggie’s desire for “homecoming and reconciliation” can only be fulfilled by death and destruction (Fisher 522) because her society provides “no home, no help for the erring” (417; bk. 7, ch. 5). Nicholas Howe is therefore right when he suggests that thinking about home and homelessness has everything to do with how one defines “a just and decent society” (11). The tragic wish-fulfilment of Eliot’s novel surely constitutes a plea for social change, even if it does not – is perhaps unable to – envision the precise nature of this change.

Capitalism and the Specter of Nomadic Existence

Indeed, despite a commitment to social reform, Eliot’s novel seems afraid of any real historical change. More precisely, The Mill on the Floss is pervaded by a fear...
of the epochal changes that, in the course of the nineteenth century, were transforming the nature of family and home:

By 1860, when George Eliot’s novel first appeared, industrialization had transformed the nation [... T]he construction of railroads and other kinds of infrastructure had caused the razing of entire neighborhoods and a concentration of population in a small number of districts. The contrast between overcrowded, unhealthy urban centers and the open country, which represented the ideal of England, fostered sentimental longings for older, traditional ways of life. The competitive spirit fostered by the industrial system was viewed as infiltrating private lives, corrupting common feelings by aspirations to advance one’s own status, even at the risk of abandoning domestic responsibilities. [...] In a work force that was moving from villages to cities, following employment opportunities as they developed, kinship ties had become tenuous, even to the point of giving way to more advantageous commercial connections. (Kilroy 119)

By the mid-Victorian period, which “marks the beginning of the greatest migration of peoples in history” (Hobsbawm, Age of Capital 193; see also Manning 149), the ties to the place where one had grown up – the childhood home so central to The Mill on the Floss – had lost much of their former meaning. There may therefore be something escapist about the fact that the novel is set in the early decades of the nineteenth century, when the notion of immovable roots perhaps seemed less problematic than it did in 1860, when Eliot’s novel was published.29 Moreover, Deirdre David points out that Maggie possesses qualities that align her with the “pre-industrial era” (603), and this lends symbolical significance to the fact that she and her brother Tom are killed by a piece of “machinery” carried towards them by the novel’s apocalyptic flood (421; see also Fisher 521, Kreisel 99–100). Just when it seems that the old values of kinship and belonging have been reaffirmed, just when brother and sister are finally reunited, a machine – that most widely recognized symbol of the industrial age – kills off the two characters who, in their different and conflicting ways, refused to relinquish the ancestral home.

The novel’s nostalgic longing for stable roots is thus only one of the ways in which The Mill on the Floss expresses deep misgivings about the extent to which the changes of the nineteenth century can be seen as progress rather than as destructive forces. Similar worries about a newly emerging, rootless society

29 Or, to be more precise, from the point of view of the 1860s, it was easier to imagine that the notion of immovable roots had seemed less problematic in earlier times. In other words, the point is not that early-nineteenth-century society was truly more stable; rather, the point is that Eliot and her contemporaries could plausibly imagine the past as simpler and less disrupted.
were to remain a concern in English fiction well into the early twentieth century, as we can see in E.M. Forster’s *Howards End* (1910). In Forster’s novel, the narrator fears that the course of modern societal development will eventually reduce humanity “again to a nomadic horde” (154; ch. 17):

> London was but a foretaste of this nomadic civilization which is altering human nature so profoundly, and throws upon personal relations a stress greater than they have ever borne before. Under cosmopolitanism, if it comes, we shall receive no help from the earth. Trees and meadows and mountains will only be a spectacle, and the binding force that they once exercised on character must be entrusted to Love alone. May Love be equal to the task! (256–257; ch. 31)

The age of urbanization and mass-migration, in this view, constitutes not progress, but a kind of regression to a more primitive, nomadic past. In such a ‘nomadic age,’ where the home is no longer rooted in a specific place, “Love” – or, as Maggie would put it, “the wayward choice of […] passion” (381; bk. 6, ch. 14) – may remain the only binding force in people’s lives.

This fear of an uprooted, nomadic civilization in fact also pervades little Maggie’s escape to the gypsies, which soon turns into an experience of almost gothic terror:

> Her ideas about the gypsies had undergone a rapid modification in the last five minutes. From having considered them very respectful companions, amenable to instruction, she had begun to think that they meant perhaps to kill her as soon as it was dark, and cut up her body for gradual cooking; the suspicion crossed her that the fierce-eyed old man was in fact the Devil, who might drop that transparent disguise at any moment, and turn either into the grinning blacksmith, or else a fiery-eyed monster with dragon’s wings. (95; bk. 1, ch. 11)

On the one hand, Deborah Epstein Nord is surely right in insisting that Maggie’s excessive hopes and fears in this episode must be read as ironically exposing her childish “myopia and delusions” (16). On the other hand, it would be difficult to argue that Eliot’s novel secretly propagates the gypsies’ nomadic way of life as a desirable alternative to the Tullivers’ respectable, settled existence. Rather, the narrative emphasizes the gypsies’ comparative poverty (“We’ve got no tea nor butter”; 93; bk. 1, ch. 9), suggesting that one ought, perhaps, to pity, but certainly not emulate such a ‘rootless’ existence.

Similarly, *The Mill on the Floss* foregrounds the threats of rootlessness and nomadism in Maggie’s relationship to Stephen Guest. For Maggie, abandoning her family and her home community to elope with Stephen would mean “for ever [to] sink and wander vaguely, driven by uncertain impulse” (382; bk. 6,
ch. 14). Even Stephen’s last name in fact emphasizes that Maggie cannot expect to find a stable home with him, for a ‘guest’ is, by definition, a person who is not staying in his or her own home, but only ever in someone else’s. Moreover, Stephen is the prospective heir of Guest & Co., “a great mill-owning, ship-owning business [...], with a banking concern attached” (54; bk. 1, ch. 7), and thus a proponent of the very industrial-capitalist order that threatens to erode the ideal of home that Maggie (and, arguably, Eliot’s novel) desperately tries to uphold.\(^30\) Put more abstractly, the novel confronts Maggie with the choice between, on the one hand, a negative, personal kind of freedom from interference by the home community (i.e. asserting her right to be with Stephen, over and against the wishes of relatives, friends, etc.), and, on the other, the positive freedom of belonging to a community and participating in its daily life (i.e. remaining accepted and included).\(^31\)

**The Politics of Genre and Style Brought Home**

Maggie’s conflict cannot be solved within the realist parameters of the English *Bildungsroman*, and accordingly *The Mill on the Floss* ultimately abandons the world of realism for the realm of tragic wish-fulfillment and dreamlike dissolution. The prototypical *Bildungsroman* tells the story of someone who, after leaving home, manages to reconcile his or her own desires with the demands of society – someone who finds a place in the world, albeit at the cost of compromise. Whenever such a (more or less harmonious) homecoming becomes entirely impossible, we approach the tragic realm of ‘unbelonging’ that is characterized by a breakdown of both the social and the transcendental order. As Terry Eagleton points out, this tragic realm tends to be associated with “virile warriors and immolated virgins”; it confronts us with scapegoat figures who incarnate “the inner contradictions of the social order” and thus symbolize an entire society’s failure in their own defeat (*Sweet Violence* ix and 280).

This idea that inner, hidden contradictions are exposed in tragedy also explains why Andrew Bennet and Nicholas Royle associate the tragic as such with psychoanalytic theory: both make the unconscious public (109). Freud himself

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\(^{30}\) Importantly, to say that the new, industrial-capitalist order threatens the older social order is not to idealize the latter. See, for instance, Raymond Williams, who describes English history as “a story of growth and achievement, but for the majority of men it was the substitution of one form of domination for another: the mystified feudal order replaced by a mystified agrarian capitalist order, with just enough continuity, in titles and in symbols of authority, in successive compositions of a ‘natural order’, to confuse and control” (39).

\(^{31}\) On the notions of negative and positive liberty see, for instance, Isaiah Berlin’s “Two Concepts of Liberty.”
famously argued that the interpretation of dreams is “the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious” (*Five Lectures* 33), and the fact that the tragic catastrophe in Eliot’s novel constitutes a departure from realism into a land of semi-incestuous, death-driven wish-fulfillment is thus merely a more than usually striking example of the secret affinity between tragedy, dreams, and the unconscious.\(^{32}\)

Importantly, in *The Mill on the Floss* the critical exploration of tragedy and other literary concepts is linked explicitly to the novel’s thematic focus on home and dispossession. For instance, in a chapter entitled “What Had Happened at Home,” the narrator describes Mr. Tulliver’s loss of Dorlcote Mill, his beloved home, as a “tragedy” both for himself and for the family (as well as the servants) who depend on him (162–163 and 212; bk. 3, ch. 1 and 8). Similarly, as we have seen, the narrator believes that fashionable irony thrives only in the comfortable homes of the privileged who depend, for their comfort, on those who suffer from want and dispossession. Even the novel’s concern with popular romances, where the dark-haired heroine must always end unhappily, is in fact directly related to the events in Maggie’s own home, for both her parents and other relatives echo these prejudices in their misgivings about Maggie’s ‘gypsy-like’ dark hair. Literary conventions and stereotypes thus reinforce, and perhaps also create, social prejudices that, in turn, have real repercussions in domestic life. In short, we can say that *The Mill on the Floss* relates all its three major literary critical concerns – the critique of tragedy, of irony, and of popular romances – to problems of domesticity, home, and belonging, and thus to key themes of the *Bildungsroman*.

In doing so, Eliot’s novel presents a vision of home – that supposedly safe and private space – as permeated and shaped by fundamentally public forces. It also presents home as a gendered space owned by patriarchs who see the world mainly in terms of property relations. Reverend Stelling’s decision to teach, for instance, is not based on any desire on his part to contribute to the progress of civilization; he simply needs the money to finance his and his wife’s rather expensive lifestyle (113; bk. 2, ch. 1). Moreover, we have seen that Mr. Tulliver only decides to send Tom to a tutor because he wants to prevent the son from becoming his rival by one day claiming the mill as his own. Similarly, Mr. Tulliver fears that Maggie’s intelligence lowers her value as a marriageable commodity. Like Lawyer Wakem, Mr. Tulliver thus (at least occasionally) regards women as

\(^{32}\) “Die Traumdeutung ist in Wirklichkeit die Via Regia zur Kenntnis des Unbewußten, die sicherste Grundlage der Psychoanalyse und jenes Gebiet, auf welchem jeder Arbeiter seine Überzeugung zu gewinnen und seine Ausbildung anzustreben hat” (Freud, *Über Psychoanalyse* 32).
a piece of property, which suggests that belonging, for women, all to often means being owned by the male head of the household, rather than feeling at home in the family or the wider community.

Even Stephen Guest, who in many ways is the proponent of a younger, more ‘advanced’ generation of men, has no doubts that a woman’s role in life is defined through and by her relation to men. For instance, in the scene where we first meet Stephen, he asks Maggie’s cousin Lucy to “sing the whole duty of woman” from Handel’s *The Creation* (297; bk. 6, ch. 1), and is thus immediately associated with a view of women in terms of their duty to men – a view sanctioned by official religious discourse. In a later scene, Stephen angrily “bursts forth” that a bazaar organized by the women of St. Ogg’s takes “young ladies from the duties of the domestic hearth”:

I should like to know what is the proper function of women, if it is not to make reasons for husbands to stay at home, and still stronger reasons for bachelors to go out. If this goes on much longer, the bonds of society will be dissolved. (327; bk. 6, ch. 6)

The Father, the Teacher, the Lawyer, the Preacher, and even the young Capitalist thus all agree that belonging, for women, has little to do with a sense of ease, emotional attachment to people and places, or a modicum of control over their own lives. Consequently, it is not difficult to understand why Maggie urgently wishes for an occupation that would allow her to “get my own bread and be independent” (e.g. 402; bk. 7, ch. 2) – that would, in Virginia Woolf’s terms, allow her to have a room of her own.

What makes matters even more difficult for Maggie is that, despite the injustices of a patriarchal society, there is much about her home to love and cherish: her father can be affectionate (as in the treatment of his sister, Mrs. Moss; 64–72; bk. 1, ch. 7) and often takes Maggie’s side when others berate her; her mother may not really understand her, but always tries to protect her from harm; and Maggie is treated with genuine kindness not only by Philip, but also by Tom’s boyhood friend Bob, who helps the Tullivers after they lose their mill (bk. 3, ch. 6), and who even takes Maggie into his home when most people in St. Ogg’s treat her as an outcast because of her ‘failed’ elopement with Stephen Guest (bk. 7, ch. 1). In spite of patriarchal injustice, home thus means more to Maggie than merely pain and restriction; it also holds the promise of fulfillment, intimacy, and kindness – the positive freedom that comes from belonging to others, as opposed to a negative liberty that is defined through the absence of interference. It is true, of course, that the image of a carefree childhood, a time when Maggie and her brother “clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together” (422; bk. 7, ch. 5), is a nostalgic idealization. But it is also
true that such moments of harmony do, at times, occur in *The Mill on the Floss* (as when Tom, at one point, tries to console little Maggie by kissing her and offering her a piece of cake – 34; bk. 1, ch. 5) – at least before Mr. Tulliver’s embittered command of revenge thwarts the impulse toward forgiveness that characterized Tom in his younger years. At the end of Eliot’s novel, Maggie must choose between this imperfect, but familiar home, and the vague promise of a ‘nomadic’ future with Stephen. It is very well possible that returning home is the wrong choice for Maggie (Eagleton, *The English Novel* 178), but this is in some ways beside the point, for the real tragedy is that she is forced by circumstances to make the choice at all.

One may, then, justifiably criticize *The Mill on the Floss* for its failure to see that one can, in fact, feel perfectly at home in a nomadic existence – whether it is a way of life inherited from one’s forebears (as in the case of the gypsies), or whether it is freely chosen (as in the case of contemporary upper-class nomads who enjoy shuttling back and forth between the world’s metropolitan centers). Yet Eliot’s novel rightly emphasizes that nomadism is not a matter of positive, free choice for everyone. It is, as we have seen, not that for Maggie, who refuses the seductively modern choice of a ‘rootless’ existence and opts instead for a ‘pre-modern’ adherence to the familiar home. It is not necessarily so for the children of today’s transnational elite, some of whom, according to recent studies, feel that they do not really belong anywhere (e.g. Blunt and Dowling 218–219). And nomadic existence is certainly not a free choice for those who suffer what J. Douglas Porteous and Sandra E. Smith refer to as domicile: “the deliberate destruction of home by human agency” (12). In nineteenth-century Britain, it was still possible to imagine that those who abandoned their homes did so freely, although for the poor this ‘freedom’ in fact often consisted in a desperate attempt to avoid economic hardship or even famine, as was the case in Ireland during the 1840s (Daunton 47; Harvie 506). The first half of the twentieth century, however, would come to be dominated by the more directly enforced mass migrations precipitated by genocidal, total war (Manning 164). From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, in short, the threat of homelessness and exile became an increasingly real prospect for Europeans (as it had long been for the colonized and the enslaved). It is against this backdrop that we should read both the great Victorian domestic tragedy of *The Mill on the Floss*

33 See Dirk Hoerder, who notes that migrants “made and make decisions ‘free’ under the constraints of economic conditions that leave no room for life-projects or even survival. Their ‘home’ may be a society that is unfair and unsupportable, that does not permit sustainable lives” (474; original emphasis).
as well as the masterpieces of Modernist fiction – including Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway.*