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-
flicts 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

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5 Similarly, in their reading of Eliot’s novel as “a family tragedy,” Jayne Elisabeth Archer, Richard Maggraf Turley and Howard Thomas argue that “[a]rable livings were being consumed by the transformation of agriculture into agri-business” (722) – a process they regard as “symptomatic of a widespread and irreversible disengagement from the land” (708).
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...
“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