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).