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 rephrasing 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.