elopement 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

\(^{22}\) 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).23 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.24

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

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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). Christie 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

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 Leichenes” (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
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 unexpectant 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-

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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).
derstood as an attempt not only to stage, but explicitly to conceptualize a novelistic version of domestic tragedy.28

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)

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).