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

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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).