Importantly, to say that the new, industrial-capitalist order threatens the older social order is not to idealize the latter. See, for instance, Raymond Williams, who describes English history as “a story of growth and achievement, but for the majority of men it was the substitution of one form of domination for another: the mystified feudal order replaced by a mystified agrarian capitalist order, with just enough continuity, in titles and in symbols of authority, in successive compositions of a ‘natural order’, to confuse and control” (39).

On the notions of negative and positive liberty see, for instance, Isaiah Berlin’s “Two Concepts of Liberty.”

The Politics of Genre and Style Brought Home

Maggie’s conflict cannot be solved within the realist parameters of the English Bildungsroman, and accordingly The Mill on the Floss ultimately abandons the world of realism for the realm of tragic wish-fulfillment and dreamlike dissolution. The prototypical Bildungsroman tells the story of someone who, after leaving home, manages to reconcile his or her own desires with the demands of society – someone who finds a place in the world, albeit at the cost of compromise. Whenever such a (more or less harmonious) homecoming becomes entirely impossible, we approach the tragic realm of ‘unbelonging’ that is characterized by a breakdown of both the social and the transcendental order. As Terry Eagleton points out, this tragic realm tends to be associated with “virile warriors and immolated virgins”; it confronts us with scapegoat figures who incarnate “the inner contradictions of the social order” and thus symbolize an entire society’s failure in their own defeat (Sweet Violence ix and 280).

This idea that inner, hidden contradictions are exposed in tragedy also explains why Andrew Bennet and Nicholas Royle associate the tragic as such with psychoanalytic theory: both make the unconscious public (109). Freud himself

30 Importantly, to say that the new, industrial-capitalist order threatens the older social order is not to idealize the latter. See, for instance, Raymond Williams, who describes English history as “a story of growth and achievement, but for the majority of men it was the substitution of one form of domination for another: the mystified feudal order replaced by a mystified agrarian capitalist order, with just enough continuity, in titles and in symbols of authority, in successive compositions of a ‘natural order’, to confuse and control” (39).

31 On the notions of negative and positive liberty see, for instance, Isaiah Berlin’s “Two Concepts of Liberty.”
famously argued that the interpretation of dreams is “the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious” (Five Lectures 33), and the fact that the tragic catastrophe in Eliot’s novel constitutes a departure from realism into a land of semi-incestuous, death-driven wish-fulfillment is thus merely a more than usually striking example of the secret affinity between tragedy, dreams, and the unconscious.32

Importantly, in The Mill on the Floss the critical exploration of tragedy and other literary concepts is linked explicitly to the novel’s thematic focus on home and dispossession. For instance, in a chapter entitled “What Had Happened at Home,” the narrator describes Mr. Tulliver’s loss of Dorlcote Mill, his beloved home, as a “tragedy” both for himself and for the family (as well as the servants) who depend on him (162–163 and 212; bk. 3, ch. 1 and 8). Similarly, as we have seen, the narrator believes that fashionable irony thrives only in the comfortable homes of the privileged who depend, for their comfort, on those who suffer from want and dispossession. Even the novel’s concern with popular romances, where the dark-haired heroine must always end unhappily, is in fact directly related to the events in Maggie’s own home, for both her parents and other relatives echo these prejudices in their misgivings about Maggie’s ‘gypsy-like’ dark hair. Literary conventions and stereotypes thus reinforce, and perhaps also create, social prejudices that, in turn, have real repercussions in domestic life. In short, we can say that The Mill on the Floss relates all its three major literary critical concerns – the critique of tragedy, of irony, and of popular romances – to problems of domesticity, home, and belonging, and thus to key themes of the Bildungsroman.

In doing so, Eliot’s novel presents a vision of home – that supposedly safe and private space – as permeated and shaped by fundamentally public forces. It also presents home as a gendered space owned by patriarchs who see the world mainly in terms of property relations. Reverend Stelling’s decision to teach, for instance, is not based on any desire on his part to contribute to the progress of civilization; he simply needs the money to finance his and his wife’s rather expensive lifestyle (113; bk. 2, ch. 1). Moreover, we have seen that Mr. Tulliver only decides to send Tom to a tutor because he wants to prevent the son from becoming his rival by one day claiming the mill as his own. Similarly, Mr. Tulliver fears that Maggie’s intelligence lowers her value as a marriageable commodity. Like Lawyer Wakem, Mr. Tulliver thus (at least occasionally) regards women as

32 “Die Traumdeutung ist in Wirklichkeit die Via Regia zur Kenntnis des Unbewußten, die sicherste Grundlage der Psychoanalyse und jenes Gebiet, auf welchem jeder Arbeiter seine Überzeugung zu gewinnen und seine Ausbildung anzustreben hat” (Freud, Über Psychoanalyse 32).
a piece of property, which suggests that belonging, for women, all too often means
being owned by the male head of the household, rather than feeling at home in
the family or the wider community.

Even Stephen Guest, who in many ways is the proponent of a younger, more
‘advanced’ generation of men, has no doubts that a woman’s role in life is defined
through and by her relation to men. For instance, in the scene where we first
meet Stephen, he asks Maggie’s cousin Lucy to “sing the whole duty of woman”
from Handel’s The Creation (297; bk. 6, ch. 1), and is thus immediately associated
with a view of women in terms of their duty to men – a view sanctioned by
official religious discourse. In a later scene, Stephen angrily “bursts forth” that
a bazaar organized by the women of St. Ogg’s takes “young ladies from the duties
of the domestic hearth”:

I should like to know what is the proper function of women, if it is not to make reasons
for husbands to stay at home, and still stronger reasons for bachelors to go out. If this
goes on much longer, the bonds of society will be dissolved. (327; bk. 6, ch. 6)

The Father, the Teacher, the Lawyer, the Preacher, and even the young Capitalist
thus all agree that belonging, for women, has little to do with a sense of ease,
emotional attachment to people and places, or a modicum of control over their
own lives. Consequently, it is not difficult to understand why Maggie urgently
wishes for an occupation that would allow her to “get my own bread and be
independent” (e.g. 402; bk. 7, ch. 2) – that would, in Virginia Woolf’s terms, allow
her to have a room of her own.

What makes matters even more difficult for Maggie is that, despite the in‐
justices of a patriarchal society, there is much about her home to love and
cherish: her father can be affectionate (as in the treatment of his sister,
Mrs. Moss; 64–72; bk. 1, ch. 7) and often takes Maggie’s side when others berate
her; her mother may not really understand her, but always tries to protect her
from harm; and Maggie is treated with genuine kindness not only by Philip, but
also by Tom’s boyhood friend Bob, who helps the Tullivers after they lose their
mill (bk. 3, ch. 6), and who even takes Maggie into his home when most people
in St. Ogg’s treat her as an outcast because of her ‘failed’ elopement with Stephen
Guest (bk. 7, ch. 1). In spite of patriarchal injustice, home thus means more to
Maggie than merely pain and restriction; it also holds the promise of fulfillment,
intimacy, and kindness – the positive freedom that comes from belonging to
others, as opposed to a negative liberty that is defined through the absence of
interference. It is true, of course, that the image of a carefree childhood, a time
when Maggie and her brother “clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the
daisied fields together” (422; bk. 7, ch. 5), is a nostalgic idealization. But it is also
true that such moments of harmony do, at times, occur in *The Mill on the Floss* (as when Tom, at one point, tries to console little Maggie by kissing her and offering her a piece of cake – 34; bk. 1, ch. 5) – at least before Mr. Tulliver’s embittered command of revenge thwarts the impulse toward forgiveness that characterized Tom in his younger years. At the end of Eliot’s novel, Maggie must choose between this imperfect, but familiar home, and the vague promise of a ‘nomadic’ future with Stephen. It is very well possible that returning home is the wrong choice for Maggie (Eagleton, *The English Novel* 178), but this is in some ways beside the point, for the real tragedy is that she is forced by circumstances to make the choice at all.

One may, then, justifiably criticize *The Mill on the Floss* for its failure to see that one can, in fact, feel perfectly at home in a nomadic existence – whether it is a way of life inherited from one’s forebears (as in the case of the gypsies), or whether it is freely chosen (as in the case of contemporary upper-class nomads who enjoy shuttling back and forth between the world’s metropolitan centers). Yet Eliot’s novel rightly emphasizes that nomadism is not a matter of positive, free choice for everyone. It is, as we have seen, not that for Maggie, who refuses the seductively modern choice of a ‘rootless’ existence and opts instead for a ‘pre-modern’ adherence to the familiar home. It is not necessarily so for the children of today’s transnational elite, some of whom, according to recent studies, feel that they do not really belong anywhere (e.g. Blunt and Dowling 218–219). And nomadic existence is certainly not a free choice for those who suffer what J. Douglas Porteous and Sandra E. Smith refer to as domicile: “the deliberate destruction of home by human agency” (12). In nineteenth-century Britain, it was still possible to imagine that those who abandoned their homes did so freely, although for the poor this ‘freedom’ in fact often consisted in a desperate attempt to avoid economic hardship or even famine, as was the case in Ireland during the 1840s (Daunton 47; Harvie 506). The first half of the twentieth century, however, would come to be dominated by the more directly enforced mass migrations precipitated by genocidal, total war (Manning 164). From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, in short, the threat of homelessness and exile became an increasingly real prospect for Europeans (as it had long been for the colonized and the enslaved). It is against this backdrop that we should read both the great Victorian domestic tragedy of *The Mill on the Floss*

---

33 See Dirk Hoerder, who notes that migrants “made and make decisions ‘free’ under the constraints of economic conditions that leave no room for life-projects or even survival. Their ‘home’ may be a society that is unfair and unsupportable, that does not permit sustainable lives” (474; original emphasis).
as well as the masterpieces of Modernist fiction – including Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*. 