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WOMEN IN LITERACY AND LIFE ASSEMBLY

National Council of Teachers of English

Volume XV • 2006-2007

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*A Journal of the Women in Literacy and Life Assembly of the
National Council of Teachers of English*

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Maggie Tulliver, Her Communities, and the Search for "Self"

By Cynthia Crane

A major point of contention for literary critics when examining the writings of George Eliot has been her treatment of women in the communities in which they live. Eliot's depiction of a duplicitous community and its importance in her novels particularly puzzles critics. Sometimes she seems to believe the familial and societal community is instructive and positive. At other times, and more often, the community is destructive.

In her essay "Leaves from A Notebook," Eliot proposed a definition of community as supportive and healthy: "Community of interest is the root of justice; community of suffering the root of pity; community of joy, the root of love" (Pinney, p. 449). Yet this definition is in sharp contrast to Maggie Tulliver's community in *The Mill on the Floss*. In this novel, Eliot is not rejecting community as an ideal; rather, she presents and comments on the disastrous results of a woman living in a nonsupportive community by depicting how the pettiness and perverseness of an unhealthy community causes the repression and breakdown of the nonconformist. The larger community's rigid and unforgiving social norms become subconsciously internalized by the individual members of Maggie's family. As Eliot states in the novel: "[T]he tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within" (p. 514); rather, inner acceptance of the tragic begins from without in the external environment. Because there can be no true sharing of suffering or joy, Maggie is trapped within deleterious relationships that exhibit the falseness of her immediate community.

In order to dramatize the overwhelming destructiveness of the community, Eliot structures Maggie's dilemma and quest for fulfillment in an elliptical pattern. Her hometown of St. Ogg's represents the vortex, and Maggie is continually moving away from and back toward it, essentially, spinning her wheels. Her searches eventually end with her death indirectly caused by the female communities in St. Ogg's. In her youth, Maggie is initially shunned by the female members of her mother's family who strictly adhere to

the patriarchal value system that Maggie continually defies. This establishes the pattern of self-fulfilling ruination and unhappiness that leads Maggie through the male dominated worlds of education and religion, only to return to be rejected by the larger female community of St. Ogg's.

The circle begins in the home with Maggie's mother and her aunts, the main oppressors in her life. Eliot felt the home should be a sanctuary and a place for growth, but in *The Mill on the Floss* Maggie's home harbors condemnation, gossip, and death; spontaneity and individualism are purposely denied. Most importantly, within this intimate community there is a lack of positive female role models and mentors for Maggie, and this is the major cause of her eventual downfall. The women in Maggie's family do not see themselves as individuals, but as roles that fit into a well-defined system. The Dodson women do not care about others outside their family; however, even the worst of the Dodsons is better than someone who is not kin, yet, they are not totally satisfied with their own family either: "[N]o individual Dodson was satisfied with any other individual Dodson" (p. 97). Neither the private nor the public community is untouched by their scrutiny.

Eliot is saying that this stifling community, harmful to women, is not indicative of just this time period, but is generational. The Dodson women are repeating history without ever questioning why: "[T]heir moral notions, though held with strong tenacity, seem to have no standard beyond hereditary custom" (p. 362). Maggie's spiritual and intellectual superiority to her surroundings leaves her an outcast. The fact that her gifts are ignored, wasted, and even held up for ridicule is the crime repeatedly committed by the female community.

Maggie's mother, one of the Dodson clan, plays a crucial role in configuring her daughter's tragic life. She follows the tradition of the nagging, undemonstrative mother who favors her son over her daughter. Eliot believed this particular mother image, personified by Mrs. Tulliver, was frightening.

Eliot characterizes Mrs. Tulliver as “dull-witted” (p. 62), a bit “weak-like” (p. 68), “mild-peevis” (p. 109), and unimaginative (p. 111) in contrast to her passionate, impulsive, and lively daughter (p. 121). Within the familial community, it is clearly Maggie’s misfortune to be extraordinary and to have a dissatisfied, inadequate mother who prefers an ordinary daughter. Mrs. Tulliver believes in the Dodson credo: “The right thing must always be done towards kindred: the right thing was to correct them severely, if they were other than a credit to the family” (p. 365). Unfortunately, by her mother’s standards, Maggie is never a credit to the family. When Maggie is a child, Mrs. Tulliver attempts to force onto her the proper societal expectations for a woman: attractive appearance and solicitude. However, because Maggie lacks this conventional ladylike demeanor, she can never hope to conform.

In the novel’s beginning, Mrs. Tulliver continually criticizes Maggie’s appearance and dreamy nature. Maggie is not loved or praised for herself; rather, she is harshly chastised by her mother for not being other than herself: “I’m sure the child’s half a idiot i’ some things . . . ‘ull sit down on the floor i’ the sunshine an’ plait her hair an’ sing to herself like a Bedlam creatur” (p. 60). Maggie is referred to as a “mulatter” because of her brown skin, which her mother insists never ran in her family, and she feels it is hard luck that she conceived only one girl “an’ her so comical” (p. 60). Mrs. Tulliver consistently marks Maggie with injurious labels that stick until Maggie’s death. Thus, without emotional support and encouragement, Maggie cannot hope to advance except by rejection.

Eliot uses Mrs. Tulliver’s unfeeling behavior to illustrate the absence in Maggie’s family of a model for independence and growth. As a mother, Mrs. Tulliver plays the role of divider rather than unifier. Even at the novel’s end when mother and daughter should be nurturing each other and rebuilding their lives together, Mrs. Tulliver must still “reconcile” herself to tending Maggie’s hair. After all, Maggie is not her “pet child” (p. 369), and she still views her daughter as a “small mistake of Nature” (p. 61), who “in general, would have been much better if she had been quite different” (p. 369).

Mrs. Tulliver uses Lucy, her sister’s child, as a source of comparison that works against Maggie. Mrs. Tulliver prefers Lucy to Maggie. Lucy, exemplifying the perfect woman-child of the time, is beautiful, demure, and obedient. However, Eliot makes a point to show

Maggie’s superiority over her: “Certainly the contrast between the cousins was conspicuous and to superficial eyes was very much to the disadvantage of Maggie, though a connoisseur might have seen ‘points’ in her which had a higher promise for maturity than Lucy’s natty completeness” (pp. 116-117). Even Maggie feels that Lucy has the tools needed to survive in her community. What Lucy possesses is conventionality, which is what St. Ogg’s requires from a woman, and what Maggie inherently lacks. Perhaps Eliot knew that her readers would not accept a Maggie totally departed from the norm of Lucy; nevertheless, Eliot makes a statement by maintaining Maggie’s autonomy and individuality.

Although Mrs. Tulliver separates Lucy and Maggie in her own mind, they are much closer to reaching a mutual bond than any other female characters in the book. But it happens too late. After Maggie and Stephen leave on their boat trip together (which later sabotages both women’s lives), Lucy visits Maggie and says, “you are better than I” (p. 643). Lucy realizes how provincial her outlook has been by believing she was the sole woman around whom the world revolved. The condescension Maggie later endures from the community indicates to Lucy that her insular world is not necessarily accommodating and pain free. Because of Maggie’s risk-taking and rebellious attitude, Lucy recognizes that her cousin is a well-rounded, developed woman.

Unfortunate for Maggie, her two maternal aunts, Mrs. Pullet and Mrs. Glegg, reinforce her mother in adhering to female norms, sometimes with greater tenacity. As with her mother, Maggie’s relationship with her aunts is marked by abortive acts of defiance as she attempts to assert herself and claim her own place in the family. Maggie is given support by her paternal aunt, Gritty Moss, but Eliot does not offer Gritty as a suitable mentor for Maggie. Gritty once had a portion of Maggie’s potential, but because she chose not to fight for it, she ended up marrying into a bad situation, and having children in excess, bringing them up in poverty.

Lacking proper role models in the home, Maggie’s answer is to move away from the feminine circles into masculine spheres because men have power and can “do something in the world” (p. 450). Eliot says men grapple “with more substantial obstacles” and gain “more definite conquests” than women (p. 405). Maggie sees none of these possibilities in the women’s lives around her. Thus, with hopes of escaping her purgatory, she tries various

methods of growth within the male world. Hoping to gain acceptance, she pursues the central ideas embodied in education, religion and marriage, thereby venturing out into the male world, only to be rejected and forced back into her stagnant life in the prescribed female community.

Maggie never finds a role for herself because the male world ignores her obvious capabilities. Her chances of achieving success in the male domain are hopeless, as is stridently confirmed by patriarchal voices such as Mr. Wakem's: "We don't ask what a woman does – we ask whom she belongs to" (p. 542).

Eliot stresses education as one solution to these women's dull, domestic lives, and Maggie exemplifies the woman who is curious and brave enough to try this possible solution. Throughout the novel, Maggie attempts to receive an education, but she is only partially successful. Neither men nor women want Maggie educated, as development of a girl's mind was against social custom. Maggie's father confirms this belief when he notices that Maggie is "allays at her book! But it's bad – it's bad . . . a woman's no business wi' being so clever; it'll turn to trouble, I doubt" (p. 66).

After Maggie unsuccessfully tries to enter the male world of education and books, she turns away from the intellect and toward religion, yet another patriarchal stronghold. She experiences a religious conversion after which she begins denying herself anything pertaining to her betterment, especially self-education. Her friend Philip brings her out of this self-denying religious state. Maggie, who has no passion for Philip, is drawn to Stephen who is betrothed to Lucy. He is the one who brings her full circle, out of the patriarchal world and back into the women's world of St. Ogg's. Only this time, she is oppressed by a much larger and more powerful group of women than the uncaring female Dodsons.

Stephen and Maggie spend the night together on a boat, but nothing sexual happens between them. Stephen tries to convince Maggie to marry him, but she thinks only of home. He says, "How can you go back without marrying me? You don't what will be said, dearest. You see nothing as it really is" (p. 605). At this point, the reader must consider agreeing with Stephen, as Maggie seems to be hypnotized by her past, which hardly was fulfilling. Maggie thinks about home "where her mother and brother were – Philip – Lucy – the sanctuary where ancient relics lay – where she would be rescued from more falling . . . but among her thoughts what others

would say and think of her conduct was hardly present" (p. 606). By stating the opposite of the truth—Maggie's home is a sanctuary—Eliot clearly wants us to see that Maggie's communities are indeed fraudulent, and that Maggie is undone. Maggie returns to St. Ogg's without Stephen only to find herself in purgatory, back in the feminine world of gossip and hatred. Eliot makes it obvious that gossip can make or break a woman's reputation, and it destroys Maggie. Eliot states: "[P]ublic opinion is always of the feminine gender – not the world, but the world's wife" (p. 619).

Having returned from her searching in the male world, Maggie now faces the larger society of women who are determined to enforce and perpetuate the patriarchy. Eliot writes:

Maggie had returned without a *trousseau*, without a husband – in that degraded and outcast condition to which error is well known to lead; and the world's wife, with that fine instinct which is given her for the preservation of society, saw at once that Miss Tulliver's conduct had been of the most aggravated kind. Could anything be more detestable? (p. 620)

Of course, Eliot wants us to answer a resounding, "Yes." Eliot disagrees with the "women's world;" she believes every individual should be judged for him or herself. General methods and rules do not govern human nature. Eliot says, "[M]oral judgments must remain false and hollow, unless they are checked and enlightened by a perpetual reference to the special circumstances that mark the individual lot" (p. 628).

Eliot is not only posing questions to society in general but also challenging the women readers in her time to look at themselves and ask what role they are playing in their communities. Without women helping each other to break out of their prescribed roles, things will remain the same in St. Ogg's. Eliot states:

The women of St. Ogg's . . . had their favourite abstraction, called society, which served to make their consciences perfectly easy in doing what satisfied their own egoism – thinking and speaking the worst of Maggie Tulliver and turning their backs upon her. (p. 637)

At the end, when the flood comes and kills both Maggie and Tom, the reader cannot help feeling relieved

that Maggie's life is over. It could hardly get more destitute. Maggie is still searching for a full life at the end, and a community that can nourish her when she says "Where is the way home?" The ending comes full circle—from the oppressive female family to the male world to the women's world and back. St. Ogg's survives and is rebuilt, but Maggie is dead. With her life of seeming nonconformity destroyed, St. Ogg's will continue on its path.

George Eliot was saying that if women were more responsible for each other, they might not automatically accept the male version of a woman's role in society, and by losing some of its pettiness their communities might strengthen. In that case, with support, a future heroine like Maggie might succeed. George Eliot laid the groundwork for other writers to advance the heroine from where she left her into higher possibilities. Although it has taken over a century, today's readers are finally seeing Eliot's hopeful visions for fictional heroines and for women's lives turned into reality.

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