

That Besetting Sin: How George Eliot Punishes Her Ambitious Female Characters

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the

English

Program

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

December 2009

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ABSTRACT

George Eliot was not a typical woman of the Victorian era. She lived openly with a man who was not her husband despite familial and societal disapproval. Eliot was also an ambitious woman, one who would become one of the greatest authors of her time. Yet in spite of—or because of—her unique lifestyle, Eliot punishes her female characters that pursue their own ambitions. Those who meet or attempt to meet her rigorous standards of female behavior—service to others and resignation to fate—are permitted some measure of happiness in the end.

Hetty Sorrel of *Adam Bede* and Gwendolen Harleth of *Daniel Deronda* are Eliot's spoiled girls. Their greatest ambition is to marry into wealth and live a life of luxury and freedom. This ambition is furthest from Eliot's ideal, and Hetty and Gwendolen are harshly punished. Dinah Morris of *Adam Bede* and Dorothea Brooke of *Middlemarch* are George Eliot's martyrs. They begin closest to Eliot's standard, and therefore, though they are punished for pursuing their ambitions, they are rewarded with happiness at the end of their respective novels. Maggie Tulliver of *The Mill on the Floss* is, much like Eliot herself, too clever for her simple country existence and unable to find her place in society. While Eliot was able to find love and success in her own life, Maggie Tulliver is never able to find a vent for her passionate nature, and after repeated discouragements and punishments, she is killed in a flood.

Eliot was the exception to the rule with regard to female ambition in Victorian society, and her own successes were not without their sacrifices. She illustrates this in her work by exacting punishment on her ambitious female characters.

INTRODUCTION

In a letter to her aunt, Mrs. Samuel Evans, written on March 5, 1839, Mary Ann Evans—later to become George Eliot—writes, “I feel that my besetting sin is the one of all other most destroying, as it is the fruitful parent of them all,—ambition, a desire insatiable for the esteem of my fellow-creatures. This seems the centre whence all my actions proceed” (Eliot 24). Though Evans was speaking of her religious beliefs at the time, she would eventually achieve what few women of her time could claim—a career as a novelist and a place in the canon of Victorian literature. Evans’ “besetting sin” would lead her to the love of her life, George Henry Lewes, the successful publication of seven novels and many other literary works and the esteem of many of her “fellow-creatures,” including Queen Victoria herself.

During the Victorian era, much debate was given to “The Woman Question”—that is, the role of women in the modern world. It was feared that allowing women to work outside the home would destroy the moral fiber of Victorian society. According to Tim Dolin, “At stake, it was widely believed, was nothing less than the social stability and moral well-being of the entire nation” (71). He continues, “To advocate higher education for women, allow them entry into full-time paid work in the professions or in business, permit them financial freedom and property of their own or the power to take legal action or enter Parliament, represented a threat to the entire social system” (73). This is not to say that there were not women—perfectly moral, ‘womenly’ women—who worked outside the home. “‘New Women’ did find employment as schoolteachers, nurses, shop assistants, clerics, civil servants and even doctors by the end of the century,” Nan H. Dreher notes (3). Dolin remarks, “The vast majority of women actually did work outside

the home, in factories and sweatshops, or as servants, governesses, teachers, or nurses” (71).

Marriage and family, however, was to be first and foremost in a woman’s life. As Philippa Levine writes:

Marriage, for the nineteenth-century woman, was perhaps the single most profound and far-reaching institution that would affect the course of her life. For the woman who did not marry, whether by choice or by chance, spinsterhood marked her as one of society’s unfortunates, cast aside from the common lot of the sex (150).

Dreher comments, “Those women who did not marry ‘failed in business,’ and paid work was ‘in default of a legitimate business for life.’ The respectable alternative for single women, the governessing profession, was oversupplied and underpaid” (3).

To become George Eliot, Mary Ann Evans would go against everything Victorian society expected of her, and she would have to pay a price. Her relationship with George Henry Lewes led to her estrangement with her two sisters, Fanny and Chrissey, and her brother Isaac, with whom she was very close as a child. Because Lewes was not able to divorce, Eliot could not legally marry him, though they lived as husband and wife. Upon learning of this, Isaac Evans ended his relationship with his sister, and according to Gordon Haight, “Under his pressure Fanny and Chrissey on the same day sent letters breaking off all communication with their lost sister. From her family Dear Polly (as Eliot was known), in whom the domestic affections were so deeply ingrained, was now a complete outcast” (233). The relationship between Eliot and Lewes also caused scandal

among their friends and acquaintances, a circumstance Eliot had anticipated. In a letter to her publisher, John Chapman, Eliot writes:

I have counted the cost of the step that I have taken and am prepared to bear, without irritation or bitterness, renunciation by all my friends. I am not mistaken in the person to whom I have attached myself. He is worthy of the sacrifice I have incurred, and my only anxiety is that he should be rightly judged (Haight 162).

Having been thus punished for pursuing a path that was unconventional for Victorian woman, is it any wonder that Eliot takes out her frustrations on the women who populated her novels? Toward her female characters who wished to be more than ornamental or who hoped to elevate their circumstances, Eliot seems particularly punishing. Those who showed evidence of that “besetting sin” were made to suffer for their ambitions.

Dinah Morris and Hetty Sorrel of *Adam Bede*, Maggie Tulliver of *Mill on the Floss*, Dorothea Brooke of *Middlemarch* and Gwendolen Harleth of *Daniel Deronda* are the most ambitious of Eliot’s female characters, and they are all punished in some way for their ambitions. Hetty Sorrel and Gwendolen Harleth are the spoiled girls of Eliot’s novels. Their ambitions include wealth and status to be gained through advantageous marriages. Dinah Morris and Dorothea Brooke are Eliot’s martyrs. Both women wish to live for others—Dinah through her work as a Methodist preacher and Dorothea as the helpmate of a scholarly husband. Maggie Tulliver is perhaps the most like Eliot herself. She is a country girl with a longing for something more—a longing Eliot fulfilled through

her career and her relationship with Lewes. For Maggie, however, this sort of happy ending is not possible, and she is killed in a flood.

Despite her own lifestyle, which went against the norms of Victorian society, Eliot prefers that women conform to conventional behaviors, an attitude that draws fire from contemporary feminists. As Paula Cohen writes:

Critics have long been baffled by the way in which her life appears to deviate from the lives she permitted her heroines. Her heroines never aspire to do the kind of work or achieve the kind of success of their creator; not one ever considers living with a man to whom she is not legally married, as Eliot did (115).

Zelda Austen remarks:

The feminist's insistence that literature show women as more than bride, wife, and mother is admirable, but it can't be applied to novels that were written when most women were either brides, wives, mothers, or dependent spinsters—unless George Eliot had written exclusively about herself (552).

However, not only must an Eliot heroine conform to the Victorian ideals of marriage and family, they must strive to be something more. As Linda C. Hunt notes:

George Eliot's admirable women characters are not only intelligent; they yearn for 'masculine' knowledge, and, perhaps more important, Eliot feels very strongly that women must transcend their narrowness—that they need a 'wider vision' (the phrase recurs in her novels). She wants women

to remain at home but nonetheless have a broad view of the social good
(141)

Laura Morgan Green comments, “Eliot can valorize the self-taught, intellectually ambitious woman, as long as she does not challenge the primacy of family ties” (94). And Allison Booth remarks, “Eliot’s ideal woman’s role might be called the domestic public servant: a woman ministering to human need in the marginal realm of charity or social causes, whereby, for example, the hospital can be seen as the household sickroom ‘multiplied’” (30).

Thus, Eliot’s ideal woman is intelligent and aware of the greater good, but pursues both knowledge and social causes without upsetting traditional marriage and family life. Within her novels, those female characters who come closest to this ideal, such as Dinah Morris and Dorothea Brooke, are punished least, while those who cannot conform are most severely punished.

With talent and the support of a loving partner, George Eliot achieved the type of success which is rare and admirable more than a century later. Yet Eliot recognized that she was a unique case and that not everyone could make the sacrifices she made and achieve what she achieved. Austen notes:

While a George Eliot might defy Middlemarch and pay all her life suffering the stony rejection of her family as well as social exile, hundreds of other girls could not and did not have the talents of a George Eliot to take them out of that medium. They could not even know that any other was possible (554).

It was not easy to be a woman in Victorian Britain and even more so for ambitious women who yearned for education and careers. Eliot punishes her ambitious female characters because she is a realist and knows from her own experience the tribulations that await those who try to break the mold. As Austen writes:

George Eliot's art is committed not to herself or women like herself except insofar as they must learn, as Dorothea does, how to modify their importunate desires according to the limitations of the real world and the needs of other "supreme selves" with equivalent appetites (560).

The answer, then, is resignation, submission and service to others. For those characters who try to achieve this—Gwendolen, Dinah and Dorothea—there is some sort of reward. For those characters who cannot conform—Hetty and Maggie—there is the ultimate punishment, death.

CHAPTER 1

THE SPOILED GIRLS

Hetty Sorrel of *Adam Bede* and Gwendolen Harleth of *Daniel Deronda* are George Eliot's spoiled girls. They are beautiful and aware of their own beauty. They are treated somewhat indulgently by their family and friends, and they each have a sense of entitlement—they deserve rich husbands who will pamper them and shower them with all the worldly goods they could desire. They are ambitious—but they do not seek fulfillment in a career or service to others. They don't wish knowledge or a sense of purpose. Their ambition is to marry rich.

Eliot does not have much sympathy for women who marry for money, and she punishes Hetty and Gwendolen for their ambitions. As Allison Booth writes, "Her doctrine, if it had to be expressed in a sentence, teaches the sin of egotism and the virtue of self-denying fellow-feeling," (5). Eliot's spoiled girls must be taught the error of their ways through hardship and suffering. Gwendolen achieves a wealthy husband in Henleigh Grandcourt, only to discover that he is emotionally abusive, and she suffers from his cruel behavior as well as her guilt at breaking a promise to Grandcourt's mistress not to marry him. Hetty is more cruelly punished. Not only does she not get her man, Arthur Donnithorne, but she is put on trial for infanticide after she abandons her newborn child and is sentenced to hang for her crime. Eliot spares Hetty from the gallows, but she dies on her return journey after being transported.

Patricia Beer writes, “George Eliot surely has a real affection for her heroines, often perhaps, as in the case of Gwendolen, more than the readers can summon up. Yet she says dreadful things about them” (195). Linda Hunt concurs, remarking that Eliot’s spoiled girls

are among her most powerful creations. She sees their failure in moral terms but renders them as human beings deserving central importance in her novels, people who have their own point of view, whose failure to achieve loving self-abnegation is the result of the interplay between their own moral choices and external circumstances (149).

Indeed, Hetty and Gwendolen are of such central importance in *Adam Bede* and *Daniel Deronda* respectively that the novels would not exist without them.

Adam Bede tells the story of two women with very different ambitions. Dinah Morris and Hetty Sorrel are not related by blood but are both found in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Poyser at the beginning of the novel. Dinah, who is discussed in the next chapter, wants simply to preach and minister to the poor. Spoiled girl Hetty’s ambitions are much worldlier. She wants a rich husband to take her away from the drudgery of working on her uncle’s farm and shower her with luxuries. Though Hetty is a penniless orphan, dependant on the charity of her uncle and his wife, she is beautiful, with a beauty “which seems made to turn the heads not only of men, but of all intelligent mammals, even of women” (*Adam Bede* 85). It is her beauty which has given Hetty her sense of entitlement. In chapter 9, Eliot notes that “Hetty was quite used to the thought that people liked to look at her” (*Adam Bede* 100) and that she dreamed of “bright, admiring glances from a

handsome young gentleman with white hands, a gold chain, occasional regimentals, and wealth and grandeur immeasurable” (*Adam Bede* 99).

However, Hetty’s beauty could be dangerous and hides her lack of feeling, as the women she interacts with are more inclined to notice. Mrs. Poyser tells her husband “that she firmly believed ‘the naughtier the little huzzy behaved, the prettier she looked’” (*Adam Bede* 86), and “She’s no better than a peacock as ‘ud strut about on the wall and spread its tail when the sun shone if all the folks i’ the parish was dying: there’s nothing seems to give her a turn i; th’ inside” (*Adam Bede* 162). Mrs. Pomfret, with whom Hetty studied the duties of being a ladies’ maid, notes that though Hetty “gets prettier and prettier every day,” “she’ll get neither a place nor a husband any the sooner for it. Sober well-to-do men don’t like such pretty wives” (*Adam Bede* 140). She does not care for her work in her uncle’s dairy, nor does she seem to have any affection for baby Totty, whom she has cared for from infancy or for the uncle and aunt who have taken her in. Dorothea Barrett, however, defends Hetty’s indifference:

There is actually no reason for the dairy-worker to love the dairy as the dairy-owner does, for Totty’s baby-sitter to love her as her mother does, or for a penniless relation tolerated in the home as an act of charity and source of cheap labour to love that home in the way a daughter of the family would (45).

Nonetheless, as Susan Rowland Tush notes, Eliot “makes Hetty’s moral inferiority a universally accepted conclusion long before Hetty herself ever commits any overt transgressions” (36). Especially when contrasted with the puritanical Dinah, as she is

throughout the novel, Hetty comes up short in every category: she is vain, shallow and unquestionably spoiled.

Though she studies to become a ladies' maid, Hetty realizes that the only way she can achieve the luxuries she desires is through marriage and that her beauty has power over men. "Like all really vain women, she uses her beauty to gain power over others even if she has little or no feeling for them," Jean E. Kennard notes (113). Hetty recognizes that she draws the attention of men, and young Luke Britton, Mr. Craig and Adam Bede are all listed as her admirers before she becomes involved with son of the local squire, Captain Arthur Donnithorne. Of the men who admire her, she does not object to Adam's attentions, as she recognizes that Adam is "'something like' a man" (*Adam Bede* 100), but she has her sights set on more than simply being the wife of "a poor man ... who would not be able ... to give her even such luxuries as she shared in her uncle's house" (*Adam Bede* 102-103). As the impoverished ward of her uncle, Hetty is not in a position to be choosy about her suitors, and her aunt and uncle Poyser consider Adam to be an excellent match for her, but this does not stop Hetty from dreaming.

Hetty's dreams soon become centered around Donnithorne, who becomes enamored of her on a visit to her uncle's farm. In her naïveté, Hetty believes that her beauty can be her ticket to the life she longs for—Donnithorne will marry her and give her all the luxuries she desires. Because Donnithorne comes to the Hall Farm to speak to her and watches her at church, Hetty believes that she can have him as easily as the gardener Mr. Craig or Adam Bede. Donnithorne, for his part, is attracted to Hetty's beauty, and though he is warned by his friend Mr. Irwine that he should not pay special attention to Hetty, he does not have the self-control to resist meeting her.

Though Adam Bede accuses Donnithorne of taking advantage of an innocent young girl when he catches him with Hetty, Tush notes, “Hetty is not an innocent victim; her vanity and worldliness are obvious from the very first description of her” (44-45). She continues, “There is never a suggestion that Hetty has any desire for Arthur exclusive of what he can do for her. Moreover, her inability to see Arthur as a separate being with separate desires helps make it possible for her to believe that he will share her fantasy about their future” (Tush 45). Kennard agrees, remarking, “Hetty’s ambition, her yearning for a better life, has none of the nobility we associate with George Eliot’s later heroines. Her desire is to be a lady, to have wealth and status, and she sees Arthur Donnithorne as the means to that life” (113). Hetty knows what she wants, and she sees no obstacle to obtaining it.

Yet her ambitions are dashed with Adam’s discovery of her kissing Donnithorne, and Donnithorne complies with Adam’s request to end the relationship. With this letter, Hetty gets her first taste of disappointed ambition—despite her beauty, which Donnithorne had previously found impossible to resist, he will not marry her. As Donnithorne writes, “if I were to do what you one day spoke of, and make you my wife, I should do what you yourself would come to feel was for your misery instead of your welfare. I know you can never be happy except by marrying a man in your own station” (*Adam Bede* 348). This goes against everything Hetty has thought or imagined. As she thinks to herself when she is admiring herself in her bedroom mirror, “He would want to marry her and make a lady of her; she could hardly dare to shape the thought—yet how else could it be?” (*Adam Bede* 157). Donnithorne’s rejection of her is not just a blow to Hetty’s ambitions, but to her self-confidence as well. Patricia Beer notes:

If Arthur Donnithorne had contented himself with merely undermining Hetty's morale, with flirtatious treatment of her as an enchanting little kitten (which incidentally is exactly honest Adam Bede's view of her as well), he would have destroyed her peace of mind but not all her worldly prospects and eventually her life, as he does by seducing her. Hetty is not the spotless victim of Adam's imagination but she is unusually vulnerable, being protected by neither common sense nor the ability to love, and has no real chance of escape from a man like Donnithorne (206-207).

Despite the emotional pain she has endured from the breakup of her romance with Donnithorne, Hetty's punishment for her ambitions of marrying about her station is only just beginning. As she makes plans to marry Adam, she discovers that she is pregnant with Donnithorne's child. Her first instinct is to commit suicide, though Eliot remarks in chapter 31 that this is not what would be expected of Hetty:

But Hetty's was not a nature to face difficulties—to dare to loose her hold on the familiar and rush blindly on some unknown condition. Hers was a luxurious and vain nature—not a passionate one—and if she were ever to take any violent measure, she must be urged to it by the desperation of terror (*Adam Bede* 351).

Though Hetty is desperate and terrified by her situation, she lacks the nerve to drown herself in the secluded pond. She does not fear death, but rather public opinion: “they might find her—they might find out why she had drowned herself” (*Adam Bede* 382). Since death is not an option, Hetty decides to run away in search of Donnithorne. In the midst of her wanderings, she gives birth and abandons her baby. Kennard notes, “Hetty

has very little understanding of what is happening to her” (113), and she is bewildered and terrified when she is arrested and charged with infanticide.

As Patricia Beer notes of Hetty, “Her character, as established by George Eliot in the first three-quarters of the book, is not that of a potential killer. She is cold-hearted and has fixed views of what she wants of life, which is to be a lady and wear fine clothes” (204). When Hetty does not get what she wants, she finds herself desperate, despairing and in damning circumstances. An unsympathetic court horrified by “the unnaturalness of her crime” (*Adam Bede* 456) finds Hetty guilty, and she is sentenced to be hanged. This is cruel punishment indeed. Hetty’s ambition was to gain the love of a rich man, and she succeeds in attracting Arthur Donnithorne. But instead of marriage and a life of leisure and luxury that she desires, she gets an unwanted, unplanned pregnancy. Hetty is not even emotionally equipped to handle her situation. She repeatedly denies that she was even pregnant and shows little emotion at her trial, sitting and staring at her hands and occasionally trembling in fear. Her mental block would likely earn her an insanity plea in modern times, but in the country court of the late 18th century, when *Adam Bede* is set, her lack of emotion is seen as coarse indifference and another sign of her guilt. Beer writes, “After her flight from Hayslope, which her advancing pregnancy seems to her to make essential, she is in a state of diminished responsibility, which in a more medically informed age would have acquitted her completely” (204).

Kennard comments:

George Eliot attributes Hetty’s disasters in part to her lack of education and experience. She tells her reader to remember that Hetty is quite uneducated, a simple farmer’s girl. But Hetty is not excused on these

grounds; others almost as uneducated, among them Adam himself, are seen to be of stronger moral character. Hetty's lack is spiritual (113).

Despite her jail cell confession to Dinah Morris and the spiritual guidance Dinah offers, Hetty still does not achieve any sort of growth or maturity though she faces certain death. Even Dinah admits, "her poor soul is very dark and discerns little beyond the things of the flesh" (*Adam Bede* 477). As she rides with Dinah to the gallows, Hetty is still the childish, shallow girl she was when she first caught Arthur Donnithorne's eye. "In the course of the book," Beer writes, "Hetty passes from dream world to nightmare with no intervening period of wakefulness, and though perhaps we cannot join Adam in putting the blame entirely on Arthur Donnithorne, to hang Hetty as a murderess seems as inappropriate as executing a cat for killing its kitten" (205).

Though she is spared death by hanging through Donnithorne's timely arrival with a partial pardon, Hetty does not get chance to mend her selfish ways. Hetty is transported and dies on her return home after the completion of her sentence. As Beer comments, "She is disposed of before she can return to embarrass everybody, with no more than a stilted comment from Dinah . . . and regret from Arthur Donnithorne that he cannot salve his conscience with some sort of handout" (206). Kennard adds, "We are never asked to accept Hetty as mature, merely as punished for her past" (114). This, perhaps, is why Eliot chooses to sentence Hetty to death—she learns no lessons and does not undergo any fundamental change in character. Her soul is beyond even the capabilities of Dinah to save.

Like her first novel *Adam Bede*, Eliot's last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, written 17 years later, explores the choices made by a spoiled girl and the consequences that result. *Daniel*

Deronda is a novel with two main story lines. The title character, Deronda, learns about his Jewish roots and eventually devotes himself to the study of Judaica. However, a good portion of the novel is dedicated to Gwendolen Harleth, her pursuit of a wealthy husband, and her unfortunate marriage.

Gwendolen is born to the life that Hetty Sorrel dreams of—she is a gentlewoman of a good family, albeit one that has fallen on hard times financially. Gwendolen is the center of her family, and all her life, people have dedicated themselves to making her happy. Her mother “clung chiefly to her eldest girl, who had been born in her happier time” (*Daniel Deronda* 17), and she was “the pet and pride of the household, waited on by mother, sisters, governess and maids, as if she had been a princess in exile” (*Daniel Deronda* 17). As a result, she has a sense of entitlement—she has always been given her own way; thus she always expects to get her own way. As Jean E. Kennard describes her:

She is presented as a conceited girl who has ‘a sense of superior claims’ and is continually bored with what life offers her. She has a command, a presence, a combination of beauty and physical grace, which draws attention to her and makes even her mother treat her as ‘a queen in exile.’ She has a strong will, insisting on her own comfort even to the extent of refusing to fetch her mother’s painkilling medicine in the middle of the night (131-2).

Gwendolen is more reluctant in her ambition than Hetty. Though she is determined to acquire a rich husband, she pursues this ambition mainly because there are few other options for her. Gwendolen’s true goal is happiness and independence, and though she does not anticipate finding happiness in marriage, she believes that it will offer her more

opportunities to be independent than, for example, becoming a governess. Indeed, after observing her mother's unhappiness with her second marriage, Gwendolen is skeptical that marriage is the key to her happiness at all, and happiness is what she insists upon: "I am determined to be happy—at least not to go on muddling away my life as other people do, being and doing nothing remarkable. I have made up my mind not to let other people interfere with me as they have done" (*Daniel Deronda* 22). Those around her expect her to make a "brilliant marriage" (*Daniel Deronda* 30)—she is beautiful and charming and not so impoverished that she appears to be a fortune hunter. However, she is less interested in marriage than she is in the negotiations: "To be very much sued or hopelessly sighed for as a bride was indeed an indispensable and agreeable guarantee of womanly power; but to become a wife and wear all the domestic fetters of that condition, was on the whole a vexatious necessity" (*Daniel Deronda* 31).

Despite her pursuit of a husband, Gwendolen actually appears to be asexual. Though she enjoys the "womanly power" of being pursued by her cousin Rex Gascoigne and her eventual husband Henleigh Grandcourt, "she objected, with sort of physical repulsion, to being directly made love to" (*Daniel Deronda* 60). Eliot's description of Gwendolen in the first part of the novel makes Gwendolen seem strikingly like Diana the huntress of Greek and Roman myth—she hunts with the men against her family's wishes, she wins the gold star at the Archery Meeting, and "there was a certain fierceness of maidenhood in her" (*Daniel Deronda* 60). Like a goddess, she is content with being worshipped, but she finds distaste in being romanced. Allison Booth remarks, "Gwendolen's greater likeness to a pagan goddess than a Christian martyr parallels her endeavor to be a ruler rather than a subject" (Booth 257).

Though Grandcourt suspects Gwendolen of infidelity (or at the very least, impropriety) with Daniel Deronda after their marriage, Gwendolen never shows any sign of being attracted to Deronda. She looks upon him instead as a spiritual advisor—he fills the role of priest, not lover. Gwendolen goes to him for confession and acts of contrition instead of romantic trysts. As Dorothea Barrett notes, “George Eliot suggests that Daniel is not capable of sexual interaction” (169). She continues, “Both Gwendolen and Mirah first encounter Daniel in a long mutual look, but neither woman blushes, as the narrator takes pains to tell us. Daniel’s effect is not sexual” (169).

Gwendolen also does not enjoy the company of women, mainly because “women did not give her homage” (*Daniel Deronda* 100). As Linda Hunt notes:

When Gwendolen comes to Offendene, she takes a dim view of her own sex. ... While she is strongly attached to her mother, she treats her with a combination of infantile selfishness and marked disdain. Gwendolen is convinced that she will manage marital matters better than did her mother whose two marriages were unhappy, and feels thoroughly superior to Mrs. Davilow’s suffering. She has no interest in being part of female society (158).

She continues, “Seeing the powerlessness of women and their tendency to be victims, Gwendolen arrogantly refuses to identify with her sex” (159). Nevertheless, as Booth comments, “In spite of parading as huntress ... Gwendolen unconsciously understands her role as huntsman’s prey or explorer’s prize” (257). Kennard concurs, “In spite of her fear of sexuality, Gwendolen is finally forced to attempt to satisfy her ambitions through marriage, though she initially yearns for success outside it” (132). Especially when faced

with her family's financial failure, there is no other option for Gwendolen except obtaining a rich husband.

Gwendolen's ultimate ambition is to marry well but to retain her independent personality: "She meant to do what was pleasant to herself in a striking manner; or rather, whatever she could do so as to strike others with admiration" (*Daniel Deronda* 31).

Booth notes, "Though men objectify (Gwendolen) either as an animal to be tamed ... or a creature who turns men to animals ... she figures herself as masterful subject" (258).

Gwendolen has been raised to believe that she is extraordinary, and to be an ordinary wife with an ordinary life is simply unacceptable. Linda Hunt comments, "She is unable to imaginatively transcend the social forms pertaining to women, so there is no actual basis for her unique expectations" (159). To her, marriage is a necessary evil, something that she must endure to get the independence she desires. To that end, she gains the admiration of the wealthy Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt, seen by her family and neighbors to be an excellent match, by excelling at the archery match and by ignoring him. Grandcourt appeals to her more than her scorned lover Rex Gascoigne in that "he is not ridiculous" (*Daniel Deronda* 96).

Nonetheless, she rejects Grandcourt after meeting his mistress, Lydia Glasher, and promising her that she will not wed Grandcourt. This is no hardship for her, since Gwendolen does not find Grandcourt attractive or very interesting and had already resolved to reject him before concluding "that the life of an unmarried woman who could not go about and had no command of anything must necessarily be dull through all degrees of comparison as time went on" (*Daniel Deronda* 98).

Things begin to go wrong for Gwendolen when she discovers that her family is ruined—all that awaits her on her return from abroad is a life of poverty and deprivation. With her family's financial reversal go all her hopes of a good marriage, independence and having her own way. She must turn her thoughts to providing for herself and her family. Her uncle obtains two possible situations for her as a governess for a bishop's family or as an instructor in a high class school, neither of which appeals to Gwendolen. If she must earn a living for herself, she decides that she would like to be an actress, a career that would allow her to be admired and adored from afar as she likes. Herr Klesmer thwarts this plan, however, when he explains to her the hard work and scant rewards awaiting a beginning actress, as well as the lack of success she would likely encounter as an untrained, undisciplined novice. As Hunt notes, though new opportunities for women had opened up by this time, Eliot does not include these options for Gwendolen:

When her family suffers financial reverses, Gwendolen has two choices: she must either marry or become a governess. New employment possibilities for women are ignored and so is any suggestion that answers to Gwendolen's plight not yet available may become so in the future through social change (Hunt 166-7).

In Grandcourt's eyes, poverty becomes Gwendolen. She rejected him when she still had the potential to attract other rich suitors, but a penniless girl, however pretty she may be, does not have the same opportunities to mix in society as one with some money, and few men would be willing to take on a wife who has nothing to offer but a pretty face.

With her family's bankruptcy, Gwendolen has everything to gain by marrying Grandcourt, which is what he counts on. As Barrett comments:

Gwendolen's desire to protect and provide for her mother differs from a man's desire to protect and provide for his family only in that Gwendolen has not been given the education and is not given the opportunity to do so in a healthy and satisfying way. She can and does provide for her family by selling herself to Grandcourt—and this is the only solution left open to her after she has been more or less told by Klesmer that such talents as she possesses are marketable only on the marriage market (167).

Patricia Beer notes:

The financial considerations that impel Gwendolen into marrying Grandcourt are felt to be inexorable. Genuinely the only alternative for her is to take a post as governess with Mrs. Mompert, the Bishop's wife, and this is made to seem as impossible to us as it does to her, though we may perhaps feel that Mrs. Mompert might have been the greater sufferer had the arrangement gone through (191).

Though she has vowed not to accept Grandcourt because of his mistress and children, he offers her escape from poverty, rescue for her family, and the hope of fulfilling her ambition of independence and admiration. Indeed, she declares her independence as soon as they are engaged:

“I notice when people are married the husband is not so much with his wife as when they are engaged. But perhaps I shall like that better, too.”

She laughed charmingly.

“You shall have whatever you like,” said Grandcourt.

“And nothing that I don’t like?—please say that; because I think I dislike what I don’t like more than I like what I like,” said Gwendolen, finding herself in the woman’s paradise, where all her nonsense is adorable (*Daniel Deronda* 227).

Gwendolen’s marriage to Grandcourt ultimately fulfills her ambitions (so she thinks). As Barrett notes, “Grandcourt sees Gwendolen as a commodity to be acquired and used for her sexual and ornamental value; Gwendolen sees Grandcourt as a commodity to be acquired and used for his monetary and prestige value” (163). Gwendolen makes a match that gives her greater social status and admiration, and she believes that she has chosen a man whose wealth and temperament will allow her to pursue whatever interests she desires. She gets what she wants—and is punished for it.

Gwendolen has committed two crimes for which she is punished: she has succumbed to mercenary desires and has married not for love but for money, and she has broken the promise she made to Lydia Glasher, who does not hesitate to remind Gwendolen that she has gone back on her word. In a letter to Gwendolen, Lydia Glasher curses her and vows punishment. However, Gwendolen is quick to punish herself and feels horribly guilty at breaking her promise. Gwendolen has a strong conscience, and when she believes she has done wrong, she imposes penance upon herself. However, the enormity of the wrong she perceives that she has committed upon Lydia Glasher and her children is beyond her ability to punish herself. She is also filled with self-loathing for having broken her vow.

A solution presents itself in her chosen husband and their life together. Patricia Beer remarks:

After a courtship where Gwendolen is made to feel she is complete mistress of the situation, a complete reversal of the balance of power takes place, so that within a few weeks she not only comes to obey Grandcourt but to fear him. His stranglehold over her is something we almost physically feel, as she herself does (187).

Dorothea Barrett comments:

Gwendolen moves from a pleasant anticipation of mounting to the uncomfortable realization of being mounted. This is a double-edged metaphor: on the level of power struggle, Gwendolen is unpleasantly surprised to find herself dominated where she had hoped to dominate; on the level of sexual symbolism, the sexual aversion we witness in her repulse of Rex becomes sexual terror as she realized that Grandcourt's coldness does not, as she had thought, exempt her from sexual obligations in marriage but rather obliges her to be subjected to cold, power-seeking, and loveless sex (162).

Gwendolen is filled with hate and revulsion for Grandcourt following her receipt of Lydia Glasher's letter. She is reminded that her husband abandoned a woman that he had ruined, along with his children. Grandcourt perceives her revulsion and her fear of him, and he quickly becomes master of her. As Booth notes, "Grandcourt's perfect demeanor and respectability mask the misogynist brutality condoned by genteel practices" (258). He chose Gwendolen for the pleasure of breaking her spirit, or as Gwendolen notes, "He delights in making the dogs and horses quail: that is half his pleasure in calling them his. It will come to be so with me; and I shall quail. What else is there for me? I will not say

to the world, ‘Pity me’” (*Daniel Deronda* 386). Beer comments, “Grandcourt wants the fun of dominating a spirited girl who is to be a kind of supernumerary and more complex horse or dog” (Beer 193). Gwendolen’s ambition of being the ruling force in her marriage crumbles. Eliot makes note of this: “... the poor thing’s belief in her power, with her other dreams before marriage, had often to be thrust aside now like the toys of a sick child, which it looks at with dull eyes, and has no heart to play with, however it may try” (*Daniel Deronda* 374). Grandcourt keeps her in check through subtle verbal and emotional abuse, and Gwendolen, who once had such belief in her own power, submits to his abuse because she believes she deserves it for breaking her vow. As Eliot writes, “Her confidence in herself and her destiny had turned into remorse and dread; she trusted neither herself nor her future” (*Daniel Deronda* 389).

Gwendolen’s chosen penance for wronging Lydia Glasher is to remain her marriage, but she feels that it is more than she could bear. “At one point she seriously contemplates leaving Grandcourt,” Beer notes, “but dismisses the idea on entirely practical grounds” (191). “Morally repugnant,” as Kennard notes, “is ... just what Gwendolen begins to find him under the suffering her marriage brings. She gradually begins to change, a change which is revealed chiefly in conversations with Deronda. She admits her selfishness and begins to act more generously towards her mother and sisters” (133). She turns to Deronda, believing that he can help her. Though he does pity Gwendolen and wants to help her, his absorption in the fate of Mirah Lapidoth and his eventual discovery of his Jewish background leave him unable to give Gwendolen the complete guidance she desires. Gwendolen’s hatred and fear of Grandcourt begins to consume her, and her thoughts turn darker; she fantasizes about murdering her husband. It is in this mood that

she goes out in the yacht with Grandcourt, and he drowns after being struck from the boat. Gwendolen hesitates to save him at first, then, when it is too late, throws herself into the water after him. “Having ‘chosen’ badly in marriage,” Richard Kaye remarks, “Gwendolen finds liberation through a brutal split-second decision that borders on manslaughter” (140).

Unlike Eliot’s characterization of Hetty Sorrel, it is evident that Gwendolen has it in her to be a killer. As Patricia Beer notes, “George Eliot makes it clear from the first paragraph of *Daniel Deronda* that there is evil in her. Daniel feels it as he watches her at the gaming table; Mr. Vandervoordt likens her to a snake” (200). Eliot writes that in a fit of temper, Gwendolen once killed her sister’s canary. Hunt’s explanation of Gwendolen’s act of killing the canary is that “Gwendolen’s murderous impulse is an expression of her anger at the restrictions women endure and her determination not to be part of such a victimized group” (160). As the abused wife of a sadist, Gwendolen’s hesitation in rescuing Grandcourt can be seen as another impulse to not be a victim and to escape the restrictions put upon her. Kennard comments, “It is the recognition of the will to destroy in herself and her desire to conquer it that truly begins Gwendolen’s spiritual rehabilitation” (133).

It seems now that Gwendolen’s ambitions are truly fulfilled—she is rid of her abusive husband and should inherit his estates and wealth since he left no legitimate heir. However, again her ambitions are thwarted. She is wracked with guilt over Grandcourt’s death, though Deronda notes that she could not have saved him. Again, Gwendolen turns to Deronda for guidance—he urges her to use her life for good—to become “one of the best of women, who make others glad that they were born” (*Daniel Deronda* 736). As

Dorothea Barrett comments, “In *Daniel Deronda*, (Eliot) destroys the coercive man and insists that the only path to change in Gwendolen is personal evolution with the guidance of an ideal, personified in Daniel” (158). Gwendolen’s “good” marriage has destroyed her confidence, and she is back where she started, at Offendene with her mother. Her new goal is to live simply and for others as Deronda has suggested. Barrett remarks that

Daniel’s guidance helps Gwendolen through her crisis, but the metamorphosis it affects in her is not all positive. It diminishes her, as marriage diminishes Dinah and Dorothea. The Gwendolen of the opening scenes might have been vain, manipulative, deluded, and selfish but she was also powerful and monumental (172).

At the end of the novel, this spoiled girl is broken by the fulfillment of her ambition.

Hetty Sorrel and Gwendolen Harleth are selfish characters with selfish ambitions. They are more concerned for their own wealth and happiness than they are for their fellow man. Gwendolen, at least, is transformed by the punishment she undergoes. After experiencing cruelty at the hands of Grandcourt, Gwendolen makes more of an effort to be kind to her sisters and her mother, and she strives to live for others, as Daniel Deronda has suggested, and to be a better woman. As a result, she is allowed to live in relative peace at home again with her mother. Though Hetty, too, receives counsel from a spiritual advisor—Dinah Morris—she does not take Dinah’s words, urging her to turn to God in times of trouble, to heart. Instead, when she discovers her pregnancy, she looks to Donnithorne to save her, not God. Indeed, when Hetty is on her way to the gallows, though she clings to Dinah and the spiritual salvation she represents, it is man—Donnithorne—who is her savior. He brings her a pardon and a temporary reprieve from

death. But there is no redemption for Hetty. She never comes to an understanding that other people have lives and feelings and needs as well, and her world begins and ends with herself. Thus, she receives the ultimate punishment from Eliot: death.

CHAPTER 2

THE MARTYRS

Methodist preacher Dinah Morris of *Adam Bede* and the passionate Dorothea Brooke of *Middlemarch* are George Eliot's martyrs. They believe that they are meant for a higher purpose and are willing to sacrifice their personal desires in the service of others. Both women are admired by their family and friends but are also thought to be too odd or different—they don't quite fit in. While the women who surround them are hoping for good marriages, Dinah and Dorothea have other ideas. Dinah quietly rejects the idea of marriage. She has a calling to be a preacher, and she believes that marriage would interfere with her duty to God. Dorothea does not want to marry the type of man her family and Middlemarch society expect her to, personified in the character of Sir James Chettam. Instead, she wishes to devote herself, mind and body, to an intellectual. It is her ambition to serve another John Milton or Richard Hooker. Dinah and Dorothea are altruistically ambitious, but this does not help redeem them. It is not normal even for good Victorian girls to want to serve people outside of their own homes—they are meant to be of service to their husbands and families—and Eliot metes out punishment accordingly.

Dinah and Dorothea are very similar women in very different circumstances. One could just as easily picture Dorothea preaching to the poor out on the green as Dinah, and had she found herself independently wealthy, Dinah might have spent her time designing cottages and trying to better the poorer people around her, just as Dorothea did. Their

lives are outwardly not very similar, but they are “sisters under their skins.” Dinah could even be seen as something of a “rough draft” of Dorothea since *Adam Bede* was written 13 years before *Middlemarch*. Dinah is more reserved than Dorothea—Dinah would never have outbursts of temper like Dorothea occasionally does with Casaubon—and is perhaps a bit too perfect. Dorothea’s temper and barely restrained passion make her more interesting than Dinah, who is always in control and completely pure. This is evidence of how Eliot’s writing matured between writing *Adam Bede* and *Middlemarch*. Dorothea is more fleshed out, more human than Dinah, who is practically otherworldly in her goodness.

The people around Dinah and Dorothea see them in similar ways. The people of Hayslope liked Dinah, not just because they respected her uncle, but because they saw that she was genuine and did genuine good among the people. She was a source of comfort to Lizbeth Bede when her husband died, and she was useful to her aunt Poyser. But at the same time, people didn’t think she should be traveling through the countryside and preaching. It wasn’t proper, and she was considered odd because of it, as well as for being a Methodist. The people of Hayslope dismissed her ambitions and shook their heads over her, but she was respected for her own sake. Dorothea, too, wants to help the poor, but no one takes her seriously. Her uncle is condescending, and Sir James Chettam only takes interest in her plans for the cottages because he wants to marry her. Celia wishes Dorothea was more frivolous and feminine since Dorothea can’t even summon interest in their mother’s jewelry. She gets frustrated with Dorothea’s constant self-denial and abstinence. No one can understand what Dorothea sees in Edward Casaubon, though her uncle concedes that Dorothea might prefer the quiet life Casaubon leads. The people

of Middlemarch see her as an eccentric with odd habits, but they assume she'll "grow out" of them or that when she marries, she'll become "normal."

Dinah and Dorothea's ambitions are along the same lines: they both want to help others. They're both considered to be odd and eccentric for having these ambitions. They shouldn't want to help others. They should be thinking about marriage and babies and keeping house because that was what Victorian women were supposed to do.

Though Dinah and Dorothea are both punished for their ambitions, Eliot seems to have more sympathy for them than she does for spoiled girls Hetty Sorrel and Gwendolen Harleth. Laura Morgan Green notes that Dinah and Dorothea are among Eliot's "most socially effective heroines," meaning that they fulfill Eliot's ideal that women should be self-sacrificing and devote themselves to the service of others. As Green writes, "She celebrates ... their exclusion from institutions of cultural influence, as a kind of purity, and the compensation that she supplies is nostalgic—the reward of martyrdom" (73). Indeed, both Dinah and Dorothea suffer for their ambitions, though Eliot ultimately gives each a happy, if not especially fulfilling, ending.

Dinah Morris shares the stage in *Adam Bede* with spoiled girl Hetty Sorrel and stands in contrast to coquettish, selfish Hetty. As Kimberly Reynolds and Nicola Humble remark:

In adult fiction, women writers tended to use one member of the pair to represent domestic ideals and the other to embody worldliness and sexual experience. The former is generally successful and rewarded with marriage and motherhood while the latter fails with the loss of her virtue (35).

Hetty is the “failure” of the two women, falling victim to an unplanned pregnancy, committing infanticide and being convicted of murder. Dinah is rewarded for her virtue and her service to the poor. Though Dinah eventually does become a wife and mother, as *Adam Bede* begins, her only goal is to continue her ministry among the people of Hayslope and Snowfield.

Dinah is the only one of George Eliot’s ambitious women to have her dream fulfilled at the outset, yet to the people of Hayslope and to 19th century readers, she is a curiosity. Susan Rowland Tush remarks, “Although there were female preachers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, in conventional religious fiction, women were relegated to the role of prized convert, never religious leaders in their own right” (26). A large crowd gathers to hear her preach, at her first appearance in chapter 2 of *Adam Bede*, yet more are there to gawk at the Methodist woman than to hear the word of God. Even the traveler passing through Hayslope stops to listen when “curiosity to see the young female preacher proved too much for his anxiety to get to the end of his journey” (*Adam Bede* 15). Dinah is given some deference initially because her aunt’s husband, Poyser, is a well-respected farmer in Hayslope. As Mr. Casson says, “Poyser wouldn’t like to hear as his wife’s niece was treated any ways disrespectful, for all he mayn’t be fond of her taking on herself to preach.” (*Adam Bede* 20).

However, once Dinah begins speaking, her simple yet earnest way of preaching wins the respect, if not the conversion of the crowd. She has a way of addressing her audience that makes them stop and listen. As the traveler observes, “...she had thoroughly arrested her hearers. The villagers had pressed nearer to her, and there was no longer anything but grave attention on all faces” (*Adam Bede* 26). Christine L. Krueger remarks:

Dinah's sermons, extemporaneous prayers, and dialogue are among some of the best extant examples of evangelical preaching rhetoric; her language so closely resembles that found in women preachers' letters, memoirs, and biographies that one historian of Methodism treated George Eliot's character as a real person (251).

Dinah believes what she says, and she truly wants to do God's will in the world and to help the poor people among whom she lives and works. The traveler notes, "She was not preaching as she heard others preach, but speaking directly from her own emotions and under the inspiration of her own simple faith" (*Adam Bede* 27). Her goal is to continue with her ministry.

Dinah's conflict comes from her belief that marriage and ministry do not mix. In the early chapters of *Adam Bede*, Dinah rejects Seth Bede's proposal for this very reason. As she explains to him:

My heart is not free to marry. That is good for other women, and it is a great and a blessed thing to be a wife and mother; but 'as God has distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every man, so let him walk.' God has called me to minister to others, not to have any joys or sorrows of my own, but to rejoice with them that do rejoice, and to weep with those that weep. ... My life is too short, and God's work is too great for me to think of making a home for myself in this world (*Adam Bede* 34-35).

She tells him that she has gone to her Bible for guidance, as was the Methodist practice, and each time she meditated on the idea of marriage, her Bible has pointed her

another way. “I desire to live and die without husband or children,” Dinah says. “I seem to have no room in my soul for wants and fears of my own, it has pleased God to fill my heart so full with the wants and sufferings of his poor people” (*Adam Bede* 35).

In the traditional Victorian marriage, there would be no room, too, for Dinah’s extraneous pursuits. As Philippa Levine notes, “For the woman who did enter wedlock, marriage spelled, simultaneously, a loss of freedom in both political and financial matters, perhaps domestic drudgery and frequent pregnancy” (150). If she married, Dinah would have to submit to the wishes of her husband—indeed, the Bible told her as much: “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything” (Ephesians 5: 22-24). As Paula Marantz Cohen notes, “This basic inequality (men and women in the family) was, of course, an accepted part of the nineteenth-century ideology of ‘separate spheres,’ which dictated that the woman was the emotional helpmate of the man ... as well as his legal subordinate” (21).

Nonetheless, Dinah has all the qualities of a good wife and mother in addition to her natural aptitude for preaching. Kimberly Reynolds and Nicola Humble note, “Dinah Morris, for all that she wanders unescorted (except by God) in her capacity as Methodist preacher, is the only young woman who could possibly clean and cook to old Mrs. Bede’s satisfaction” (35). Dinah’s Aunt Poyser tells her that “there’d be plenty ready to have you, if you’d only leave off that preaching” (*Adam Bede* 79) though she has no confidence that Dinah would actually do so. “I know it ‘ud be just the same if I was to talk to you for hours,” she says, when Dinah explains that she “can no more help

spending my life in trying to do what I can for the souls of others, than you could help running if you heard little Totty crying at the other end of the house” (*Adam Bede* 80).

Dinah is firm in her beliefs and utterly convince she is doing the will of God. As Susan Rowland Tush comments, “George Eliot ... very carefully establishes Dinah’s religious credentials long before showing her heroine’s romantic interests” (27).

Thus it is all the more disconcerting for Dinah when she realizes she has fallen in love with Adam Bede. When she first discovers her feelings for Adam, she rushes from the room weeping and turns to prayer, or, as her little cousin Totty remarks, “Dinah was saying her prayers and crying ever so” (*Adam Bede* 502). For the first time, Dinah finds herself reluctant to do what she feels is her duty. She tells her Aunt Poyser and Adam that she must return to Snowfield and her ministry there, but she tells Adam, “I know it is a vain thought to flee from the work that God appoints us” (*Adam Bede* 503). When Adam declares his love for her, Dinah still resists, calling her love for him “a great temptation,” and reiterating that “the command was clear that I must go away” (*Adam Bede* 530). As Tush notes, “Like many of her more zealous religious predecessors, Dinah fears earthly, romantic love as an impediment to her love for God” (24). Dinah is convinced that “since my affections have been set above measure on you, I have had less peace and joy in God. I have felt as it were a division in my heart” (*Adam Bede* 531).

Tush and Krueger both suggest that what Dinah fears most is not division from God but the loss of independence. Her preaching has given her freedoms that the average woman of the time did not enjoy: she could travel alone and at her leisure and she could speak freely to men and women alike of any station. Tush notes that

if Dinah's demand for independence were not couched in her religious belief, the radical nature of her independence in a Victorian heroine would be more immediately apparent. As it is, Dinah's adherence to her religion acts as a camouflage for her emancipation, which allows her more freedom of choice than any other of George Eliot's heroines. Dinah has a professional 'career,' and because this career is devoted to God, she has autonomy from any human authority (32-33).

Krueger comments, "When Dinah at first refuses to marry Adam Bede, whom she does love, she casts her argument in terms of duty versus desire. But Dinah's language suggests that her desire for Adam threatens her desire for authority, rather than her conventionally feminine duty" (260). She adds, "Dinah uses her vocation as an argument against domestication, the imposition on her freedom of allegedly 'natural, lawful affections'" (261). Tush agrees and notes, "Even after Dinah knows that Adam does love her, her greatest objection to marrying is still that it will tie her down" (33).

Dinah is resolute and returns to her work in Snowfield, yet after only a few short weeks of separation, when Adam comes to her, her feelings have changed. "It is the Divine Will," she tells Adam. "My soul is so knit to yours that it is but a divided life I live without you" (*Adam Bede* 554). She tells him that his presence gives her "a fullness of strength to bear and do our heavenly Father's Will that I had lost before" (*Adam Bede* 554). Dinah and Adam are married soon after, and Dinah receives her punishment for being ambitious: the Methodist Conference forbids preaching by women, so Dinah must give up her ministry. As Krueger explains:

The Conference of 1802 debated the question of women preaching. The result was a resolution ‘that it is contrary to both Scripture and prudence that women should preach or exhort in public.’ As a deterrent to further disobedience, the Conference decided to exclude from Methodist meetings all women who continued to preach. This is the step which curtailed Dinah Morris’s preaching in *Adam Bede* (75).

Jean E. Kennard expresses disappointment in Dinah’s marriage and abandonment of her work. “The problem with Dinah’s conversion and subsequent marriage to Adam is that she appears so fully human when we see her as preacher. Her preaching is natural to her and her constant effort is toward alleviating other’s pain,” she comments.

Suddenly, at the end, Dinah abruptly reverses her position and abandons her objection to being ‘enslaved to an earthly affection.’ She gives up preaching—it is convenient that the Methodist conference chooses this moment to forbid women to preach—and marries Adam (Kennard 116).

Dinah, who is the purest of George Eliot’s heroines, seems to find satisfaction in her role as wife and mother, so her punishment is not as severe as that which befalls her cousin Hetty Sorrel or *Daniel Deronda*’s Gwendolen Harleth. As Tush remarks, “George Eliot uses Dinah’s character to demonstrate the need for personal fulfillment in this world rather than waiting for rewards supposedly found in the next” (22-23). She adds, “As Dinah ultimately realizes and explains to Adam, her life, rather than being limited by her love, is expanded” (25). Dinah is even able to continue her work somewhat, as Krueger notes, “Rather than continuing her attempt to penetrate a public discourse, Dinah turns, like some of her historical counterparts, to indirect, subversive rhetorical techniques. She

continues to engage in private, hidden practices, ‘talking to people a bit in their houses’ (262). Thus, though she cannot maintain the career she had before her marriage, Dinah is rewarded with her happy ending.

Like spoiled girls Hetty Sorrel and Gwendolen Harleth, *Middlemarch*’s Dorothea Brooke’s ambition is to marry wealthy. However, unlike Hetty and Gwendolen, Dorothea is not looking for financial wealth but intellectual wealth. She pictures herself as ministering to someone with a great mind, such as the theologian Richard Hooker or the poet John Milton. She envisions herself as a secretary and muse, making life easier for her chosen scholar and aiding in his research and studies. But like Dinah Morris, Dorothea is a genuinely good person and is well liked by her family and friends, though they think she is odd. She is too intense for a woman and has too many opinions of her own. As Lloyd Fernando notes, “Her behavior does not conform to the accepted conventions regarding the well-brought-up young woman. She is not satisfied with the only two avenues open to her: charitable activity or marriage” (42). Nevertheless, Dorothea is determined to give both options her best attempts. She takes great delight in ministering to the poor—she has set up a school for young children in Tipton, and she spends her free time designing cottages for her uncle’s renters. And she has no objections to the idea of marriage so long as she can marry on her own terms, which means rejecting Sir James Chettam, who Middlemarch society expects her to marry. Dorothea does expect to marry eventually—indeed, the thought of not marrying probably had never occurred to her.

In Victorian society, women were expected to marry. As Philippa Levine writes, “Women who did not marry—those whom the Victorians, with characteristic linguistic

inelegance, dubbed ‘surplus women’—were seen as doomed to an unhappily penniless and lonely existence, unenriched by the social cachet and putative material comforts of the marital state” (151). Though Dorothea would not be penniless and lonely if she did not marry—she had a comfortable inheritance coming to her and would likely spend her days tending to Celia’s children—she saw marriage as a means of obtaining some measure of freedom where she could pursue an extended education and perhaps put into motion some of her social improvement schemes like her cottages. “The really delightful marriage,” according to Dorothea, “must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it” (*Middlemarch* 10).

Dorothea has settled upon her ambition—to serve an intellectual in whatever capacity she can, and she finds her subject shortly, when the Rev. Edward Casaubon comes to dine at Tipton Grange. By the end of the first evening of their acquaintance, Dorothea has decided “that Mr. Casaubon was the most interesting man she had ever seen” (*Middlemarch* 18) and she can already picture herself fulfilling his needs as he explains, “I want a reader for my evenings; but I am fastidious in voices, and I cannot endure listening to an imperfect reader. . . . But I find it necessary to use the utmost caution about my eyesight” (*Middlemarch* 17-18).

In Casaubon, Dorothea finds someone she can talk to about “certain themes which she could speak of to no one whom she had before seen at Tipton” (*Middlemarch* 25). As she wishes, his knowledge far exceeds her own: “he thinks a whole world of which my thought is but a poor twopenny mirror. And his feelings too, his whole experience—what a lake compared with my little pool!” (*Middlemarch* 25). Casaubon takes interest in Dorothea as well, noting to her “that he felt the disadvantage of loneliness, the need of

that cheerful companionship with which the presence of youth can lighten or vary the serious toils of maturity” (*Middlemarch* 26). As she begins to believe that Casaubon may propose, Dorothea sees all her ambitions coming to fruition, and delights in the idea that the paths of knowledge were opening up before her.

Though Casaubon is not the husband her friends and family would choose for her, Dorothea’s chosen husband is not completely unconventional. Kimberley Reynolds and Nicola Humble remark, “Dorothea’s choice of Casaubon, though surprising to her family and friends, is certainly in a familiar tradition of father-daughter styled marriages in Victorian literature” (17). Her uncle, Mr. Brooke, has his reservations about the match and attempts to dissuade her or at least postpone a marriage, pointing out that Casaubon is 27 years older than Dorothea and not in the best health. However, he also notes that Casaubon has a good income and says tells Dorothea, “You are not fond of show, a great establishment, balls, dinners, that kind of thing. I can see that Casaubon’s ways might suit you better than Chettam’s” (*Middlemarch* 41). In the end, the choice is Dorothea’s, and she is adamant in choosing Casaubon. As Susan Rowland Tush writes, “Even Sir James as an unofficial rejected lover, and something less than a paragon of intellect, recognizes Dorothea’s dignity of choice. Whatever mistakes this heroine makes, it is not from external coercion but rather by her own prerogative” (130).

Dorothea is firm in her decision to marry Casaubon, but even before the wedding takes place, Eliot foreshadows Dorothea’s eventual unhappiness. In preparation for her marriage, instead of picking out trousseau, Dorothea asks Casaubon if it should be helpful to him that she learn Latin and Greek. When he tacitly agrees, she plunges into study but is shocked and dismayed to discover that she does not have a natural aptitude

for the languages and struggles to learn. She is disappointed yet again when she visits her future home at Lowick. Though Casaubon's home is everything she could desire, his estate is well maintained, and "She felt some disappointment, of which she was yet ashamed, that there was nothing for her to do in Lowick" (*Middlemarch* 78). She consoles herself by thinking that she can still tend to Casaubon and that there might be duties awaiting her that she was not yet aware of.

Dorothea seeks an occupation in her marriage—acting as a secretary of sorts for Casaubon and as the benevolent mistress of his estate. As Tush comments, "Dorothea knows real boredom, for, as she explains to Lydgate, she 'has very little to do'" (155). Though she is a wealthy woman, Tush notes, Dorothea is not able to use her money as she would wish: "What she would like to do with her money is to 'make other people's lives better,' which, although sounding easy enough, proves not to be so" (155). Jean E. Kennard remarks that "Marriage to Casaubon is the only outlet offered for (Dorothea's) curious mind," and this is not ideal: "Of course, Dorothea's willingness to satisfy her ambitions through any man is a second best choice. Like so many women of her generation, and a few in ours, she has been taught that glory for a woman was to be a reflected beam of her husband's" (Kennard 124).

Dorothea believes that she has achieved her ambition when she marries Casaubon, but she is mistaken, and her punishment begins almost immediately. The Casaubons are still on their honeymoon when Dorothea starts to realize that Casaubon is not the man she imagined him to be, though Eliot points out that the fault is Dorothea's and not Casaubon's: "no man was more incapable of flashy make-believe than Mr. Casaubon: he was as genuine a character as any ruminant animal, and he had not actively assisted in

creating any illusions about himself” (*Middlemarch* 195). She has misunderstood Casaubon completely, and he cannot sympathize with her. As Kennard notes, “Dorothea has invented the Mr. Casaubon she marries . . . she is not perceptive enough to recognize that he, too, is the center of his own world” (125). Tush agrees, remarking that “From Casaubon’s first appearance the reader knows that Dorothea’s idealized version of him is an illusion” (119).

As Dorothea reevaluates her new home and her marriage, she realizes that her ambitions of being a partner and helpmate to Casaubon may never come about, especially not as she first imagined her married life to be. When they are discussing the progress of Mr. Casaubon’s studies during their stay in Rome, Dorothea expresses her desire to work for Mr. Casaubon and to assist him more when they return home. He acknowledges that she can help him sort his notes, and Dorothea, anxious to find her purpose in life, pushes him to begin work on his key to all mythologies, unaware that this is a sore spot with Casaubon. Feeling attacked, Casaubon speaks sharply to Dorothea, telling her, “you may rely upon me for knowing the times and the seasons, adapted to the different stages of a work which is not to be measured by the facile conjectures of ignorant onlookers” (*Middlemarch* 200-201). Angry in turn, Dorothea reiterates that she only wanted to help him, noting that, “You showed me the rows of notebooks—you have often spoken of them—you have often said that they wanted digesting. But I never heard you speak of the writing that is to be published. Those were very simple facts, and my judgment went no farther” (*Middlemarch* 201). As Kennard comments:

Casaubon believes that women are gifted with ‘the capability of an ardent self-sacrificing affection’ and should be subordinate to their husbands.

Dorothea finds this self-sacrifice cold and unrewarding; Casaubon has little time for her even on their honeymoon and resists allowing her to help in his work (124-6).

Marital harmony is even more elusive when the Casaubons return to Lowick. The home that Dorothea had once looked upon as needing no improvement at all now seems a dead and shrunken landscape. She does manage to get Casaubon to allow her to assist in his work, though he is reluctant: “she had succeeded in making it a matter of course that she should take her place at an early hour in the library and have work either of reading aloud or copying assigned her” (*Middlemarch* 281). However, as Kennard remarks, “Ironically, it is the very intelligence she hoped to satisfy in this marriage that makes her perceive Casaubon’s faults as a scholar” (126), and thus, even this work that she had hoped to do is unsatisfying.

Though she is unhappy in her marriage, Dorothea struggles to make it work as best as she can. As Tush notes, “Dorothea will attempt to make the best of her marriage, not because she is consciously aiming at being a paragon of religious perfection but because it is her nature” (133). The onset of Casaubon’s health problems brings forth a purpose for Dorothea—she must become his nurse, keeping him from strenuous activity, too much study or any anxiety. “According to the official model,” Reynolds and Humble write:

Dorothea should now become the ‘angel in the house’; her refined sensibilities should temper her husband’s rougher nature and provide him with a haven of peace and virtue into which to retreat from the hurly-burly of the world. ...Dorothea attempts a variation of this role in her

ministrations (both academic and medical) to her husband, and finds it ultimately barren (17).

Dorothea struggles with her duties as a wife even as Casaubon's health worsens. Casaubon attempts to extract a promise from Dorothea to complete his work—the key to all mythologies—when he dies, and Dorothea despairs because she knows it cannot be completed and she has no wish to try. Fortunately for her, Casaubon dies before she can give him an answer, and she is free again.

Like Dinah, Dorothea is fundamentally good. Before her marriage, she occupies her time trying to make life more comfortable for the farmers who rented from her uncle and succeeds in attracting Sir James Chettam's interest in her cottages, thus helping to improve the lives of some of the poorer people among whom she lives. She shows compassion toward Tertius Lydgate when he is ruined by his involvement with Bulstrode. And despite her disappointed ambitions, Dorothea tries to be the best wife she can be to Casaubon. Thus, she is ultimately rewarded after Casaubon's death when she marries Will Ladislaw, whom she truly loves.

Dorothea's marriage to Will is a source of contention, not just for her family and friends who believe Dorothea is making another marital misstep, but for readers and critics who also do not think that Will is good enough for Dorothea and that Dorothea should not have had to settle for being a wife and mother. Eliot herself writes in the finale of *Middlemarch*:

Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother. But no one stated exactly

what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done—not even Sir James Chettam, who went no further than the negative prescription that she ought not to have married Will Ladislaw (*Middlemarch* 836).

Zelda Austen suggests that

Feminist critics are angry with George Eliot because she did not permit Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* to do what George Eliot did in real life: translate, publish articles, edit a periodical, refuse to marry until she was middle-aged, live an independent existence as a spinster, and finally live openly with a man whom she could not marry (549).

Patricia Beer says that Dorothea's marriage to Ladislaw is only slightly less than tragic: "In terms of melancholy rather than tragedy the worst fate of all is surely that of Dorothea, happy wife of Will Ladislaw and happy mother of his children. How little she settles for" (179). Jean E. Kennard allows that "Dorothea Brooke, who after suffering for choosing the wrong suitor, Casaubon, marries the right suitor Will Ladislaw, is one of the few heroines in the nineteenth century fiction allowed to go on to happiness after the wrong choice" (121), but even she notes:

The structure and imagery of the novel argue for seeing this marriage as the fulfillment of Dorothea's dreams, but we have surely been invited to see Dorothea as having a nobility, an intensity, that should not have been satisfied by Will Ladislaw nor indeed by becoming a copy of anyone else (128).

Nevertheless, Will Ladislaw is the man Dorothea loves, and any success he has is likely due to her passion, support and encouragement. Rather than the scholar she once

dreamed of and found in practice to be less than an ideal match, she winds up with politician who can right wrongs where she cannot: “Dorothea could have liked nothing better, since wrongs existed, than that her husband should be in the thick of a struggle against them, and that she should give him wifely help” (*Middlemarch* 836). As Susan Rowland Tush remarks, “Dorothea herself is aware that, contrary to normal nineteenth century marriages, hers to Will will give her more freedom than she could have had as a widow. Dorothea paradoxically gains more control over her life by remarrying than by remaining single” (Tush 145). Tush explains that to George Eliot, this was the only possible realistic outcome for Dorothea:

George Eliot, a realist in more than just her fiction, must have realized that the only other publishable ways to end a Victorian heroine’s saga besides marriage, were death (like Maggie Tulliver) or perpetual chastity (like Romola de’Bardi). These possibilities seem even less satisfactory for Dorothea than her less than perfect final marriage, especially since her obviously sexual marriage to Will counters her sterile marriage to Casaubon (147).

One would think that as a wealthy woman, Dorothea would have more freedom to pursue her own interests than Dinah Morris, who divided her time between her aunt and uncle’s farm and work in a factory town. However, it is Dorothea who is trapped by convention, while Dinah has the freedom to pursue her ambition as a preacher. Dorothea can only envision freedom to pursue her ambitions through marriage, and ultimately obtains the sort of freedom she desires in marriage to Will Ladislaw. Dinah, on the other hand, sees marriage as an obstacle to her ambition and resists it, even as she is in love

with and longs for Adam Bede, until she convinces herself that it is God's will that she marry. Marriage alters Dinah's ambition, and the decision of the Methodist Conference to ban women from preaching only affirms Dinah's new place as wife and mother.

Though *Adam Bede* and *Middlemarch* end happily for Dinah and Dorothea, it is frustrating for modern readers to see such dynamic and ambitious women settling for the seemingly simple pleasures of marriage and family. Today, Dorothea would not need to marry for knowledge; she could pursue her education in whatever field she wished. Dinah, too, could follow her evangelical pursuits among the spiritually poor of her own country or anywhere in the world. Both women would not have to choose between marriage and a career but could have both if they wished, or follow their dreams without marrying. But Dinah and Dorothea—and to a certain extent Eliot herself—were trapped by the time in which they lived. As Austen writes, “The conclusion one might draw from these fictions is that the heroine does better to accept her lot, submit to the yoke of marriage, and curb her desires rather than continue willful, aspiring, unconventional, and impatient of restraint” (551).

CHAPTER 3

POOR MAGGIE TULLIVER

Maggie Tulliver of George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* cannot be categorized as either a martyr like Dinah Morris and Dorothea Brooke or a spoiled girl like Hetty Sorrel and Gwendolen Harleth. Of all Eliot's ambitious characters, Maggie never comes to an understanding of what her ambition is. She is aware that there is something more to life, and she has the urge and intelligence to want to make something of herself, but she finds herself thwarted at every turn. She has the compassion and the self-sacrificing attitude to be a martyr like Dorothea Brooke and Dinah Morris, but lacks the conviction of her beliefs. She desires knowledge like Dorothea, but is rebuffed. And like Gwendolen Harleth and Hetty Sorrel, the wrong man ruins Maggie's life.

There are many similarities between Maggie Tulliver and Mary Anne Evans. Indeed, Gordon S. Haight's well-known biography of George Eliot begins by pointing out the similarities between the Evans family and various characters in *Mill on the Floss*. Like Maggie, Mary Anne Evans was especially close to her older brother and was the pet of her father. Evans also had ambition that eventually would lead to her estrangement from her family. Mary Anne Evans weighed the consequences of pursuing love and career at the cost of family ties and deemed the cost of her actions acceptable, achieving fame as George Eliot and living as the wife of George Henry Lewes. Maggie Tulliver, on the other hand, seems to represent the road not taken for George Eliot—if Mary Anne Evans had made different choices, she may have met the same fate as Maggie.

Maggie pursues several different avenues in trying to determine her ambition and is punished with each attempt. As Jean E. Kennard writes, “Maggie Tulliver, the heroine in *The Mill on the Floss*, is the first of George Eliot’s sensitive and intelligent women frustrated by their environments” (116). Had Maggie lived in other times, her desire for self-fulfillment would be natural and she would be encouraged to explore her options. But Mr. Tulliver, who is Maggie’s greatest champion, observes to his neighbor, Mr. Riley, “She understands what one’s talking about so as never was. And you should hear her read—straight off, as if she knowed it all beforehand. And 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” (*The Mill on the Floss* 13). Mr. Tulliver is proud of Maggie’s cleverness, yet he worries—and rightly so—that it will come to no good for Maggie. As Mr. Deane says to Tom later in the book, “If you want to slip into a round hole, you must make a ball of yourself” (*The Mill on the Floss* 260), and Maggie is a square peg in her spherical world. As Linda C. Hunt observes, “In *Mill on the Floss*, George Eliot was able to allow herself a female protagonist, and she directly confronts the theme of a bright girl’s sufferings in a society which devalues girls and which insists on a limited conception of female character” (136).

Maggie’s frustrations begin in her youth at Dorlcote Mill. As a child, she focuses her budding ambition in two areas: service to the men in her life and education. Throughout her life, Maggie devotes much of her energy to the men she loves, beginning with her father and her older brother Tom, and later, Philip Wakem and Stephen Guest. However, her devotion is never rewarded in the way she wishes, particularly with Tom, whom she idolizes. Tom tolerates her and enjoys her worship of him, but sees her as an inferior and

imperfect person who must be punished. Tom is like Henleigh Grandcourt without the sadistic tendencies. Maggie is to be trained, like a puppy or a horse. Every time Tom chooses to bestow a favor upon Maggie, he makes sure she realizes his magnanimousness, like when he comes home from school and brings her a fishing line of her own: "Wasn't I a good brother, now, to buy you a line all to yourself? You know, I needn't have bought it if I hadn't liked" (*The Mill on the Floss* 33). However, when he learns that his rabbits are dead because Maggie forgot to care for them in his absence, he takes away the favor he has bestowed, telling Maggie he doesn't love her and that he won't take her fishing after all. Despite Maggie's anguish at having upset him, Tom shows no pity or mercy upon her. She has done wrong and must be punished for it. This is the entire nature of the relationship between Tom and Maggie, and it undoubtedly warps Maggie.

Maggie is also very devoted to her father, and when she is a child, Mr. Tulliver is the only member of Maggie's extended family to appreciate and defend her. However, Mr. Tulliver is also perplexed by Maggie, saying, "The little un takes after my side, now: she's twice as 'cute as Tom. Too 'cute for a woman, I'm afraid" (*The Mill on the Floss* 7). Susan Rowland Tush remarks, "Although Mr. Tulliver always defends Maggie, he does not fully understand her character or his own feelings about her being female" (93). He does not think it natural for a girl to be as clever as Maggie and is afraid of what might become of her as a result. Following Mr. Tulliver's bankruptcy, however, his relationship with Maggie changes. While he is ill, Maggie is his greatest comfort, and he is never more at rest than when his "little wench" is with him. But once his health recovers enough for him to return to work, Mr. Tulliver sees Maggie as a source of

anxiety instead of comfort—he sees her blossoming womanhood and thinks that he has spoiled her chances for a good marriage. And marriage is seen as the only option for Maggie, as it was for many women of the Victorian era. In her famous book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, written nearly 70 years before Eliot would write *Mill on the Floss*, Mary Wollstonecraft laments, “. . . men, in their youth, are prepared for professions, and marriage is not considered as the grand feature in their lives; whilst women, on the contrary, have no other scheme to sharpen their faculties” (77). Though Maggie would like to do something to alleviate her father’s suffering, she does not have the resources, and when she does try to make a little money by sewing, she earns the disapproval of Tom, who tells her, “I don’t like my sister to do such things. I’ll take care that the debts are paid without your lowering yourself in that way” (*The Mill on the Floss* 331). As Richard A. Kaye writes of Maggie’s life following the Tullivers’ bankruptcy, “For Maggie, familial and communal bonds allow for permanence and survival but also bitterness, despair, and suffocated longings. Eliot depicts Maggie’s Edenic state of childhood as fading, as memories replace actualities” (119).

Her relationships with her father and brother are not enough to satisfy Maggie’s undefined ambition. She harbors hopes that an education could give her the fulfillment she needs, but that dream, too, is dashed. Mr. Tulliver notes that Tom is not as clever as Maggie, yet it is Tom, as the male child and heir, who is sent for schooling to make something better of himself, and he decides to send Tom to be tutored by the Rev. Stelling. Maggie is later sent to Miss Firniss’ boarding school with her cousin, Lucy Deane, but Eliot does show the reader any of Maggie’s experiences there, and Maggie does not seem to get much out of her education. As Kennard remarks, “The early

chapters of the novel, which dramatize Maggie's childhood at the Dorlcote Mill and in the surrounding Warwickshire countryside, portray Maggie as a girl whose limited world provides no outlet for female intelligence" (117).

At the Rev. Stelling's, Tom struggles with Latin and geometry, and when Maggie comes to visit him, he expects to display his superiority by showing her how difficult his studies are. However, upon arriving, Maggie promptly offers to help him and displays her own knowledge of language, to Tom's amazement and disgust. Though she has not read *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, she logically concludes that if she wants to know, "I should look inside and see what it was about" (*The Mill on the Floss* 164). Maggie cannot comprehend Tom's Euclid, however, when he hands her the book. Tom is triumphant that Maggie is "not so clever as you thought you were" (*The Mill on the Floss* 166), though Maggie retorts that if she had been taught the book from the beginning, she would not have any problem understanding Tom's lesson. She is more comfortable with Tom's Latin grammar book, "for she delighted in new words" (*The Mill on the Floss* 166), but is again scolded by Tom because she sensibly refers to the English key at the back of the book. "Any donkey can do that," Tom tells her (*The Mill on the Floss* 167).

Maggie enjoys her visit to the Stellings, and sure that she could be as good a student as Tom—likely better—she asks the Rev. Stelling if she might stay and learn from him instead of Tom. Maggie is once again ridiculed by Tom, who tells her, "Girls never learn such things. They're too silly" (*The Mill on the Floss* 163). The Rev. Stelling, unfortunately, affirms Tom's view, telling Maggie and Tom that women have "a great deal of superficial cleverness, but they couldn't go far into anything. They're quick and

shallow” (*The Mill on the Floss* 170). Tom delights in this answer, but Maggie, who had been told all her life how quick she was, “had hardly ever been so mortified” (*The Mill on the Floss* 170). This virtue that she had thought she had was now revealed to be a “brand of inferiority” (*The Mill on the Floss* 170). However, Tom learned more during Maggie’s visit than he had before because Maggie’s curiosity and imagination led her to question the Rev. Stelling, which allowed Tom some sort of context for his geometry and Latin. As for Maggie, though she has picked up some Latin and Euclid during her visit, she also learns that, according to the educated men of the time, women aren’t meant to be educated in the same way as men.

As Wollstonecraft observes, “The grand source of female folly and vice has ever appeared to me to arise from narrowness of mind; and the very constitution of civil governments has put almost insuperable obstacles in the way to prevent the cultivation of female understanding” (71). One of the first feminists, Wollstonecraft led the charge for improved education for women in the latter part of the 18th century, and during the Victorian era, much thought and discussion was given to “The Woman Question”—that is, the proper place of women in society and what rights they may be entitled to. At the time Eliot set *Mill on the Floss*, the Rev. Stelling’s dismissal of Maggie’s ambition for education would not have been an uncommon sentiment. Jacqueline Banerjee remarks:

Vituperation rather than guidance is offered to ‘difficult’ (i.e. intelligent) young girls in Victorian novels; cruel and unusual punishments, not rewards, are regularly meted out to older ones who want something more than to conform to the expected (i.e., domestic) pattern. Their wits have to be blunted, subdued; their ambitions crushed (38-39).

Even George Eliot herself, who published *Mill on the Floss* in 1860, conformed to the traditional view. As Linda Hunt writes:

By the eighteen-sixties she (Eliot) was explicitly affirming in her letters the conventional view of women as self-effacing, dependent, and best able to find fulfillment in domestic and maternal duties; she saw her own life as an exception to the general rule as far as domesticity and maternity were concerned, but cultivated the qualities of character she considered to be inherently feminine (139)

Though she yearns for knowledge, being excluded from the type of education Tom receives may not be as bad as Maggie believes. “Although Maggie views Tom’s educational opportunities as a privilege from which she, by virtue of her gender, has been excluded,” Laura Morgan Green notes, “Eliot suggests that Maggie is unwittingly privileged in being excluded from an educational practice whose effect on Tom is entirely narrowing and stultifying” (78). Indeed, Tom finds his schooling of absolutely no use once Mr. Tulliver becomes bankrupt and he must work for his living. Additionally, his belief that Maggie, as a woman, is an inferior being is reinforced by the Rev. Stelling, justifying his reasoning that Maggie is full of faults and must be punished for them.

When Mr. Tulliver becomes bankrupt, Maggie turns to her old schoolbooks for refuge, but still finds something lacking: “Even at school she had often wished for books with *more* in them; everything she learned there seemed like the ends of long threads that snapped immediately” (*The Mill on the Floss* 323). Maggie is convinced that education is the key to escaping the drudgery of her life, if she only had access to it. She believes that if she can just find the right books, she can find “some explanation of this hard, real life”

or “if she could have had all Scott’s novels and all Byron’s poems, then perhaps she might have found happiness enough to dull her sensibility to her actual daily life” (*The Mill on the Floss* 323). As Eliot writes, “If she had been taught ‘real learning and wisdom, such as great men knew,’ she thought she should have held the secret of life; if she had only books, that she might learn for herself what wise men knew!” (*The Mill on the Floss* 324). Linda C. Hunt remarks:

Maggie feels that the impoverished education she receives in a girl’s school is one reason for her inability to cope with the vicissitudes of her life, but in a foreshadowing of the way the feminist implications of Dorothea’s experience will be muted in *Middlemarch*, George Eliot broadens her critique of female education to an attack on educational theories and practices for both sexes (136).

After all, Tom’s education is perhaps even more useless than Maggie’s. Jean E. Kennard notes, “The question of education dominates one section of the novel, and George Eliot makes clear the faults of the prevailing system which is as inadequate to the needs of practical minded boys like Tom as to those of intellectual girls” (117-18).

Following her father’s bankruptcy, Maggie’s next attempt at fulfillment is self-sacrifice, learned from a copy of Thomas à Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ* obtained from the cheerful peddler Bob Jakin. Frustrated by her lack of education, Maggie throws herself into self-denial and sacrifice, thinking that renunciation of her pleasures is the secret to happiness. Maggie essentially puts together her own religion as a means of finding fulfillment in her simple life and duties, and for a while, she manages to bring about an

acceptance of her difficulties. As is her nature, Maggie throws herself into her new way of thinking with great exuberance. As Eliot writes:

From what you know of her, you will not be surprised that she threw some exaggeration and willfulness, some pride and impetuosity, even into her self-renunciation; her own life was still a drama for her in which she demanded of herself that her part should be played with intensity (*The Mill on the Floss* 331).

Hunt remarks, “George Eliot is aware that Maggie rather enjoys thinking of herself as a martyr, a fact which makes her prone to unnecessary excesses” (145). Nevertheless, through self-sacrifice, Maggie’s character is refined. Her wild nature is gentled to the point where Mrs. Tulliver, who had always seen Maggie as a thorn in her side, is amazed “that this once ‘contrary’ child was become so submissive” (*The Mill on the Floss* 332). Peter New comments, “There is in fact a real development in Maggie here, despite its incompleteness. She does discipline her self-pity and replace it with sensitive concern for her mother and father; and the effect on herself is manifest” (185).

This is the sort of development Eliot believes women should strive for—to put others first. It is the advice that Daniel Deronda gives Gwendolen Harleth following the death of her husband: to live for others and to “be among the best of women, such as to make others glad that they were born” (*Daniel Deronda* 699). It is the way of life that Dinah Morris and Dorothea Brooke live. As Patricia Beer notes:

The whole concept of renunciation, as entertained and practiced by women, is one which George Eliot analyses very carefully. It takes place in two stages: at first the unsatisfactory nature of a woman’s life leads her

to renunciation in an unrealistic and almost pleasurable way; later experience also leads her to it, but this time it is painful (180).

Eliot seems to believe that refinement of character comes through suffering, and this is what happens to Maggie at this point in the novel.

Despite the gentling effect her self-denial has on her, Maggie goes about her regimen of renunciation for the wrong reasons—she believes that it will bring her happiness, when, in Eliot’s view, she should be considering the happiness of others. Contrary as it may seem, self-sacrifice is rather easy for Maggie. As Kennard writes:

The attractions of this path for Maggie are clear enough. First, it is romantic and self-dramatizing ... Second, she can do it for herself ... Third, it is within the bounds of virtuous activity allowed to females and she therefore does not have to be a clever woman whom nobody will like (118).

Maggie gets satisfaction from her new lifestyle, and for once in her life, her activities are not ridiculed or derided by her family, Tom in particular. Kennard notes, “She selects the one path which will meet (Tom’s) requirements and fulfill some of her own; indeed it is the path, though divested of its religious overtones, which Tom chooses for himself later in the novel” (118-19). Therefore, Maggie is not punished for her pursuit of this ambition, but because her motives were not entirely pure, Maggie is not rewarded for her martyr-like behavior either.

By sacrificing her ambitions for education and satisfying herself with an austere lifestyle, Maggie also sacrifices a portion of herself, which is what Philip Wakem objects to. Drawn to Philip when she met him at the Rev. Stelling’s home, Maggie meets him

again when she is entirely caught up in her program of self-denial and recalls how much she enjoyed his company. However, their friendship, which was frowned upon before due to Mr. Tulliver's hatred of Philip's father, is now even more taboo since Mr. Tulliver's lawsuit against Wakem led to his bankruptcy. Nevertheless, Maggie rekindles her friendship with Philip for two reasons: she enjoys his company, and she convinces herself (with Philip's help) that their relationship could ease the tensions between the two families. Her new ambition is to pursue her friendship with Philip while trying to maintain her new self-sacrificing lifestyle.

Philip Wakem is the only character in *Mill on the Floss* to truly recognize Maggie's potential and to encourage it, thus he is appalled at her practice of self-denial and abstinence from pleasure. He immediately begins to plant seeds of doubt in Maggie's mind, telling her, "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?" (*The Mill on the Floss* 342). When she refuses to borrow the book he offers her, Maggie tells Philip, "It would make me in love with this world again, as I used to be; it would make me long to see and know many things; it would make me long for a full life" (*The Mill on the Floss* 346). Philip attempts to persuade her by saying, "But you will not always be shut up in your present lot; why should you starve your mind in that way? It is narrow asceticism; I don't like to see you persisting in it, Maggie" (*The Mill on the Floss* 346). Eventually, Maggie agrees to meet with Philip, and over time, Philip renews in Maggie that ambition for something other than her small lot in life by offering her books and intelligent conversation. As Peter New writes, "Through Philip her longings for expansion of her intellectual and aesthetic horizons can be fulfilled ... Most

immediately, Philip provides for her, in this romantically named place (the Red Deeps), an escape from the mundane dreariness of renunciation” (186).

Philip’s reasons for meeting with Maggie are selfish, though he sees himself as “her guardian angel,” “persuading her out of her system of privation” (*The Mill on the Floss* 348). He is in love with Maggie, and hopes to gain her affections through their clandestine meetings. Though she loves Philip, Maggie loves him like the brother she wishes Tom could be, and thus she is surprised by Philip’s declaration of romantic love. But before she can give any sort of real thought to love and romance—an ambition that had never occurred to her up to this point—and specifically, loving Philip, their meetings are discovered by Tom. Though Maggie was able to enjoy Philip’s company and the education he gave her for a year, their idyll comes to an end when Tom discovers their secret meetings and puts an end to it, making Maggie swear on the Bible that she would not meet Philip again. Thus, Maggie is punished again for her pursuit of friendship and the potential for love.

Maggie pursues the ambition of romance again following an absence of several years from St. Ogg. After her father’s death, Maggie goes to work in a school, because though Tom has saved enough to pay Mr. Tulliver’s debts, he does not have enough to support his mother and Maggie the way he wishes. Eliot does not write of Maggie’s time away from St. Ogg, but in conversation with her cousin Lucy Deane, Maggie tells her, “One gets a bad habit of being unhappy” (*The Mill on the Floss* 421), indicating that she does not enjoy her work. Maggie comes to stay with Lucy for a while and meets Lucy’s suitor and likely fiancé, Stephen Guest. Maggie and Stephen are attracted to one another from the moment they meet.

Stephen Guest comes from a life completely unknown to Maggie. He is the son of a wealthy man and has been bred for leisure. Unlike Maggie, with her restless stirrings of unformed ambition, Stephen has no ambition other than to be comfortable, amuse himself and enjoy pleasant people and surroundings. Maggie is an unknown quantity to Stephen as well—her energy and beauty make her unlike any of the other girls of St. Ogg, including her own cousin, Lucy Deane, who everyone expects Stephen to marry. He is instantly infatuated with Maggie, and Maggie is drawn to him as well, at first because of the novelty of having a handsome young man pay attention to her. As Eliot describes, “Maggie felt herself for the first time in her life receiving the tribute of a very deep blush and a very deep bow from a person towards whom she herself was conscious of timidity. This new experience was very agreeable to her” (*The Mill on the Floss* 424-5).

Though Maggie has grown up to be quite beautiful, she has never given much thought to courtship. Since Tom discovered and put an end to the meetings with Philip Wakem and Mr. Tulliver died not long after that, Maggie had not had the opportunity to imagine herself as the heroine of a romance with Philip or any other man. Teaching at a girls’ school would not give her the chance to meet and socialize with eligible men, so this visit with Lucy is the first time Maggie is truly able to allow herself to consider romance. For a love-starved girl, the attention and admiration of a handsome, wealthy man is pleasant and intoxicating. Soon after meeting Stephen Guest, Philip Wakem reenters Maggie’s life, and she finds herself in the center of a love triangle. Though she loves Philip, his presence does not create the electricity that she feels when Stephen is present. As Dorothea Barrett notes, “No matter how intellectually and spiritually appropriate Philip might be for Maggie, Maggie also has sexual needs that cannot be fulfilled by Philip”

(61). Jean E. Kennard agrees, writing, “Maggie does not romanticize Philip; their relationship is based on openness, trust, and common interests. It is Maggie’s misfortune that she cannot love him enough to resist the temptations of the wrong suitor, Stephen Guest” (119).

Maggie realizes that pursuing a relationship with Stephen would be a betrayal of her cousin Lucy and of Philip Wakem, to whom she is tacitly engaged. Yet she cannot resist him. Eliot suggests that Maggie’s feelings for Stephen are a form of rebellion. As Dorothea Barrett notes, “Being exceptional, and therefore socially unacceptable, is enough to drive one mad. The fear of madness and the pain of alienation produce violent eruptions in Maggie from time to time” (57), and Philip says something like this when he tells Maggie, “You will be thrown into the world some day, and then every rational satisfaction of your nature that you deny now will assault you like a savage appetite” (*The Mill on the Floss* 373). Maggie has stifled her wants and needs and emotions for so long that she cannot entirely control herself when confronted with the admiration and romance that Stephen Guest offers. Richard A. Kaye remarks:

Maggie’s attraction to Stephen is not simply a minor complication of plot or a youthful peccadillo; like her impulsive decision as a girl to escape from home in order to live with a tribe of gypsies, Maggie’s awareness of Guest as a ‘great temptation’ arises from a suppressed but deep rebellious spirit (127).

She is carried along on a tide of feeling, just as she and Stephen are carried away when they go boating, leading to their tragic and aborted elopement.

Though Maggie does not elope with Stephen, her reputation is ruined, Tom shuns her and she is an object of scorn and shame in St. Ogg's. This is by far the worst punishment yet that Maggie must undergo—her latest attempt at finding a place for herself in the world leaves her in utter ruin. As Wollstonecraft describes, Maggie's future seems very bleak indeed:

A woman who has lost her honour, imagines that she cannot fall lower, and as for recovering her former station it is impossible; no exertion can wash this stain away. Losing thus every spur, and having no other means of support, prostitution becomes her only refuge (92).

Though Maggie does not turn to prostitution in her despair, there is no other avenue she can pursue in St. Ogg's, and to make a life for herself, she realizes she must leave everything she loves and begin again somewhere far away.

But Eliot does not seem to know what to do with Maggie when the relationship is aborted. Maggie does not marry Stephen because doing so would hurt Philip and Lucy, and is left with the ruins of her reputation. There is nothing left for her in St. Ogg's, and she is filled with despair at the prospect of leaving everything she knows and loves in order to start over. A letter from Stephen reiterating his passion for her causes Maggie more anguish, though she vows to bear the pain until her death. With everything lost to her, Maggie wishes for death to end her suffering, crying out, "I will bear it, and bear it till death ... But how long it will be before death comes! I am so young, so healthy" (*The Mill on the Floss* 587-8), and no sooner does she finish that speech than the floodwaters are already lapping at her feet. With no other way to deal with Maggie, Eliot brings death swiftly, and Maggie receives the ultimate punishment — not, perhaps, for the ambition of

love and her relationship with Stephen, but because there is simply no place for an ambitious girl in the world Eliot has created. As Banerjee comments, “Many factors are involved in Maggie’s and her author’s final submission to the fantasy of an eternal brotherly embrace, but the lack of opportunity to satisfy and capitalize on her intellectual potential is an important one” (38). Maggie never truly determines what she wants from life. She continually yearns for something more and tries in vain to fill the void in her life with devotion to her father and Tom, education, self-renunciation, and romance. Therefore, Maggie is punished as severely as spoiled girl Hetty Sorrel and loses her life.

Every attempt at finding her way in the world turns out wrong for Maggie. She is denied an education and ridiculed for thinking she could successfully pursue the same studies as Tom. Though her efforts at a life of self-denial are fruitful for a while, Philip Wakem makes her realize that she is merely stifling her ambitions and that that practice is ultimately unhealthy. When Maggie’s thoughts begin to turn to romance and fulfillment through love, she is separated from Philip by Tom. Her unfortunate attraction to Stephen Guest is painful to Maggie because Stephen is all but engaged to her cousin Lucy, and Maggie herself has promised Philip that if it is at all possible, she would marry him. Her aborted elopement leads to a seemingly final estrangement from Tom and ruins all her chances for a place in St. Ogg society. Having put her heroine through all this, Eliot ends her book by killing Maggie in a flood.

As noted previously, *Mill on the Floss* is often considered the most biographical of Eliot's works. Eliot's brother Isaac shunned her as determinedly as Tom shuns Maggie when Eliot entered into a scandalous relationship with George Henry Lewes. With *Mill on the Floss*, Eliot illustrates a world where there is no vent for “that besetting sin” of

ambition, and unlike Eliot herself, Maggie cannot run off and pursue a literary career.

Susan Rowland Tush notes, “As so many critics have noted, neither Stephen nor Philip offers Maggie a complete and fulfilling relationship. However, it is perhaps more likely that the world which George Eliot intentionally creates in *Mill* is simply too limited to meet all of Maggie’s needs” (99). Tush continues, “George Eliot’s intention was probably to show that her own world was too limited for the bright but difficult Maggie Tulliver, a fact that the young Mary Anne Evans had no doubt discovered” (106). Perhaps, though, death is not punishment for Maggie. In her grave, with Tom at her side, Maggie’s restless longings are finally at peace.

CONCLUSION

In *The Mill on the Floss*, a young Maggie Tulliver took out her frustrations with her family and her childish hurts on a wooden doll in the attic—her “fetish, which she punished for all her misfortunes” (*The Mill on the Floss* 26). Eliot takes out her frustrations on a society that stifled female creativity and ambition by inflicting suffering and punishment on her ambitious female characters. As Linda C. Hunt writes:

... her (Eliot's) personal experiences had given her a visceral awareness of the oppressiveness of the Victorian feminine ideal, which made a woman feel unnatural if she wanted more than domesticity, and she felt strong personal outrage at society's deprecations of women (133-4).

Eliot clearly recognized the rough road women had to trod during the Victorian era. As Mary Wollstonecraft wrote 45 years before Queen Victoria was crowned, “To rise in the world, and have the liberty of running from pleasure to pleasure, they (women) must marry advantageously, and to this object their time is sacrificed, and their persons often legally prostituted” (77). For much of Eliot's lifetime, women were not even recognized as individual legal entities. Tim Dolin explains:

Women became *femes covertas*, or covered women, and were absorbed into their husband's legal identity upon marriage ... For that reason women could not obtain a divorce until the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act established divorce courts and gave women (very limited) access to divorce (72).

Though Hunt notes, “The latter part of the nineteenth century saw increasing educational and employment opportunities for women” (165), the Victorian era was a frustrating time to be a woman, and Eliot reflects this in her writing.

Hunt remarks:

Because Eliot is a more talented novelist, and perhaps because of a personal sense of outrage at her own inability to conform to the demands of the social order, she depicts in more detail and with more power the social context which can have such a stifling impact on an intelligent woman; yet the resolutions of Eliot’s novels do not point in the direction of social reform but instead recommend endurance, resignation, and the growth in sympathy which can come from suffering (137).

Eliot’s treatment of her female characters reflects this. Those like Dinah Morris, Dorothea Brooke and Gwendolen Harleth, who endure hardship with some measure of dignity, are relieved of their suffering and, in the case of Dorothea and Dinah, given happy endings with husbands and children to care for. Hetty Sorrel, lacking sympathy and resignation of her fate, is punished with death. Poor Maggie Tulliver, who has tried endurance and resignation and still remains oppressed, is punished—and perhaps also rewarded—with death.

As for Eliot herself, Dolin argues that had Mary Anne Evans lived a conventional life, George Eliot may not have existed: “Had Marian Evans not met and fallen in love with George Henry Lewes, and not resisted the extreme pressure on a middle-class woman to behave respectably, the novels of George Eliot might never have been written: *would* never have been written” (40). Though she achieved love and success by unconventional

means, Eliot's novels were cautionary tales for other Victorian women. As Zelda Austen notes, "The conclusion one might draw from these fictions is that the heroine does better to accept her lot, submit to the yoke of marriage, and curb her desires rather than continue willful, aspiring, unconventional, and impatient of restraint" (551). Hampered by the strictures of Victorian society and without the genius that Eliot possessed, ordinary Victorian women, in Eliot's view, would do well to do as Eliot said (and wrote), not as she did.

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