

Aggression or Regression: A Comparative Study of Heroines in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Pride and Prejudice*

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ABSTRACT

The basic formula in the English Victorian novel seems to be an individual standing against the world (of the Victorian society). George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1833) are two excellent examples of intellectual heroines standing against social expectations. This paper, as a comparative study, shows that in the former written by a romantic and modern novelist, the heroine drowns which signifies her self-renunciation and submission to the expectations of the society as well as her revenge of a body being shaped by Victorian ideologies. In the latter written by a conservative and realist writer, the heroine begins a process of education and transformation just to resolve her conflict in marriage. The paper concludes that in such novels the intellectual woman has to either submit to survive, or is wiped out which implies both the heroine's self-destruction of a Victorian body (aggression) or her drowning in the waters of ideology (regression).

Keywords: Maggie Tulliver, Elizabeth Bennet, ideology, Victorian society, renunciation

INTRODUCTION

Not unrelated to the well-known Victorian ideology of the rational man's superiority over woman's emotional inferiority, was the conflict Victorian female characters of considerable mental capacity faced: those with a man's mind and a woman's might; a conflict definitely felt by such female novelists as Jane Austen (1775-1817) and George Eliot (1819-1880). Austen was self-divided: on the one hand she felt fascinated with feeling and imagination, and on the other she could not accept it as feminine. The conservative Jane Austen then decided to resolve the conflict (of her characters) and her own anxiety of the "desire for assertion in the world and retreat into the security of the home—speech and silence, independence and dependency" (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000, p. 162). Believing in the Hegelian view that history was progressive and towards betterment, Austen could find no better resolution than marriage in her realist novels where her female characters change just to become fit for their expected Victorian gender roles.

Accordingly, the Austen heroine needs morality which, in Correa's words, "consists in her [the heroine's] misfortunes and vicissitudes [...] brought

about as a consequence of social convention" (2000, p. 66). Anderson believes that, in Austen, "happiness or suffering depends on moral action, not accident" (1975, p. 372), and Tomlinson states that "however spirited and independent by nature the heroines of many nineteenth-century novels may be, their position in life forces them into a kind of idleness and subject" (1978, p. 115). From these statements it is well understood that Austen educates her heroines into social morality, experience and decorum so that they can meet the male society's demands and expectations. Remaining silent and observant of a male community where usually a male character takes the trouble of educating the heroine, seems "necessary for [...] submission" which "reinforces women's subordinate position in patriarchal culture" (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000, p. 154).

Despite the fact that Austen was a critique of her society—she had to publish her works anonymously—and a feminist writer, the criticism does not seem strong in her, and the feminism of the novels not explicit. Criticism in Austen's successor is a different story. Mary Ann (or Marian) Cross who published under the name of George Eliot, was a romantic novelist who would defend individualism in her novels. Comparing her with the realist Austen, Eliot

can be named a modern novelist and a more serious critique of the society. George Eliot's words in *Felix Holt* are noteworthy: "no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life" (as cited in Correa, 2000, p. 280). This implies that Eliot was well aware of the social world of Victorian expectations of gender roles, sexual codes and familial ties supporting the main ideologies that would leave the heroine with no chance, whatsoever, to remain an individual or survive at all. A more exact definition for society seems necessary before approaching the main stream of the discussion.

Ingham provides us with the following definitions: "as (rightfully) groups of patriarchal families" (1996, p. 19); a "competing and conflicting linguistic coding" (ibid.); "a necessary struggle for existence" (1996, p. 12) and finally "a machine and human beings as its parts" (ibid.). Correa's definition is similar: "the networks of gossiping neighbors" (2000, p. 279) and a network can be a stifling circle. From the society's perspective, marriage is fortune; a "complex engagement between the marrying couple and society—that is, it means not only "feelings" but "property" as well. In marrying, the individual marries society as well as his mate, and "property" provides the necessary articles of this other marriage" (Ghent, 1961, p. 102). This represents the ideological function of marriage in the Victorian novel however, marriage finds totally different forms in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). This study is an attempt to show how the basic nineteenth-century-novel formula of individual versus society works in the mentioned novels, and conclude that the heroine has to either submit to the societal expectations (if she wants to survive) or die. Maggie drowns, and Elizabeth marries Darcy—after a conventional power play—to resolve her conflict. Maggie's drowning is, of course, open to different layers of meaning and interpretation, for it is a more complex and ambiguous ending than Elizabeth's resolution in sexual appetite and a seemingly happy and prosperous marriage.

DISCUSSION

The Mill on the Floss (1860) is known as George Eliot's most autobiographical novel. The novel is a sociological study of an ideological conflict between the heroine's feelings and the society's expectations. In the beginning part of the novel, the intellectual Maggie is introduced as the mistaken child of nature which is no surprise for the reader who sees the resistant, strong-willed Maggie of magnificent personality in a sordid society. Maggie possesses the

mind of a man and the might of a woman which distinguishes her from other characters and many of her relatives. It does not seem difficult for the reader to guess a tragic outcome for the heroine in such a biased and narrow-minded community as St Ogg. St Ogg, other than being biased and narrow-minded, is a materialistic society where Maggie the embodiment of "knowledge, imagination, feeling and morality" (Eagleton, 2005, p. 164) meets her tragic destiny. Maggie represents the "onward tendency of human things" (New, 1985, p. 195), and not being able to perform her angel-in-the-house role that is expected of her, becomes alienated from the human community. It is the society that drives her to the depths of water where she can experience silence.

Maggie desires to read books and, therefore, her love for Philip is intellectual. However, Maggie, for whom love is not different from martyrdom, turns Philip's offer down in an act of self-renunciation. Maggie's desires are either renounced by herself or repressed by the society:

he [Philip] was raising his hat to her [Maggie]; while his father, catching the movement by a side-glance, looked sharply around at them both. Maggie hurried away from the window and carried her work up-stairs; for Mr. Wakem sometimes came in and inspected the books, and Maggie felt that the meeting with Philip would be robbed of all pleasure in the presence of the two fathers. (*MF*, p. 241)

Maggie's conflict of cultivating a different self—either more aggressive to oppose male dominancy, or regressive to escape the dominance of patriarchal Victorian ideologies of the time—is shown in her dual attitude towards her head. Maggie "cuts off her luxuriant dark hair as a child, hoping that her cleverness will shine more clearly" (Dreidre, 1994, p. 604). This implies that she thinks about cultivating an aggressive self, and wishes to challenge the discursively-made duality of male intellectualism and female sensibility. The act of cutting her hair can also signify her frustration with her femininity and intelligence, or her subconscious cultivation of a regressive self that thinks about survival within the confines of a biased community. Accordingly, in the attic, where she keeps a fetish wooden doll, Maggie beats her doll against the wall to punish its head which shows how much she is frustrated with her own head/intelligence. Moreover, Maggie's hatred of being treated as an object—a wooden doll—and being identified with her wooden doll, do not seem difficult to be found in the novel where Maggie dislikes rule and regulation.

The struggle for self-discovery, and the desire for self-expression find the form of self-restraint in Maggie. Although she loves Stephen who is also a lover of freedom and a hater of artificial convention, she prefers to renounce her desire, and retain her fidelity to the male manifestation of the society—her father and the seemingly ever-present beloved brother Tom who, by treating her as an object, tries to control her. The familial tie in the form of Maggie's love for Tom, and Tom's affection for Maggie, win over her sexual attraction to Stephen the result of which is self-sacrifice. By refusing Stephen, Maggie "had made up her mind to suffer" (*MF*, p. 416), for she knows that Tom has power and can do something in the world. Maggie's confrontation with the paralyzed Philip Wakem, is a kind of self-confrontation and self-consciousness perhaps to create a different self; either more aggressive or regressive. Maggie sympathizes with Philip which is against Tom's wishes and creates a sense of guilt in her, and shows passionate feelings towards Stephen Guest. Both the guilt she feels inside and the haunting image of Tom make Maggie ignore the intellectual sympathy existing between her and Philip. Maggie feels the lack of physical passion between the two which she feels she can experience with Stephen. However, she renounces the passion and decides to reach self-realization and experience joy the climax of which comes in drowning. To put it more clearly, Maggie who prefers passion and spirituality to obligation and materialistic ethics, changes the passionate feeling to a battle of sexes and refuses to elope with Stephen implying both the desire to control a male figure and the entangling power of family tie as a net from which it is impossible to release herself.

In the power play, though Stephen and Lucy marry at last, Maggie even manages to put damage to Stephen's and Lucy's engagement. Maggie kills what she likes; she takes revenge for losing what she likes, and she has to forget both Philip and Stephen as long as she is caught within the nets of social milieu and family. Bissell defines Maggie's action that becomes "a symbolic denial of the validity of utilitarian ethics. If she had obeyed her natural desires and had married Stephen, she would not, it is true, have brought the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people" (1968, p. 165). Maggie is a unique character, for unable to break with the past, she transcends her community with her romantic view and faith in the power of renunciation.

Frustrated with her quest for a lost joy, Maggie seems helpless with the limitations the society imposes on her. Maggie cannot be changed to an unromantic figure, or a commodity, or a wooden doll. Much

reminiscent of Portia in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* who cannot show a man's mind and a woman's might, Maggie gathers her power by deciding to make a decision, to suffer, and to end herself (by drowning).

Maggie's Drowning

Tom, who is really lesser than Maggie in intellect, feels that his masculinity gives him authority, superiority and dominance over Maggie which is why he frequently oppresses her. Maggie's brother is associated with the mill crushing Maggie (associated with water); he consoles her, criticizes her and desires to make her an apt figure for the society. Maggie then can be looked at as the water that erupts, flows and finally breaks Tom the mill. The brother and sister drown while holding each other:

The boat reappeared—but brother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted [...] The tomb bore the names of Tom and Maggie Tulliver, and below the names it was written—"In their death they were not divided."
(*MF*, pp. 422-423)

It is very likely that from the very beginning Eliot had Maggie's drowning in mind. The event is, undoubtedly, an excellent manifestation of who Maggie is. Ironically enough Maggie who comes to Tom's rescue, causes her brother's death. This can signify Maggie's unconscious revenge of the discourse of familial ties as well as the superiority of the male members of the family. Eagleton believes that "the judgment of society is both endorsed and rejected, just as Tom is both embraced and wiped out" (2005, p. 177). Maggie's drowning can also be interpreted as her attempted suicide or Freudian death-wish when she decides to wipe herself out in the depths of the sea where she can be well out of reach of the Victorian ideologies of men's superiority and female submission. She, first, destroys Tom that represents such Victorian ideologies of male superiority and intellectuality versus female inferiority and emotionality, and then destroys her body—shaped by the dominant discourses of her time—to take revenge of a society that seeks the silence of its female figures.

The Freudian death-drive in Maggie is obvious in her words: "I am in love with moistness, and envy the white ducks that are dipping their heads into the water here among the withes, unmindful of the awkward appearance they make in the drier world above" (*MF*, p. 8). The first-person narrator definitely remembers a girl in love with moistness, watching the river: "A wide plain, where the broadening Floss hurries on between its green banks to the sea, and the loving tide,

rushing to meet it, checks its passage with an impetuous embrace” (*MF*, p. 7). Gilbert and Gubar believe that Eliot well understood that “such female fascination with decline is a means of obtaining power” (2000, p. 485). Maggie’s fascination with water and drowning empowers her to refuse to be contained and commodified by St Ogg. Maggie is intellectual enough to realize that “the only expression for an intelligent female self is renunciation of that self” (Dreidre, 1994, p. 607).

Maggie finds her liberation in drowning where she can defy ideology and take revenge by wiping out a body she feels is becoming filled or shaped with Victorian ideologies or social expectations of renunciation. According to Dreidre ideology is “a symptom of diseased culture and society” (1994, p. 598). Thus it does not seem wrong if water with its uncontrollable shaping force is taken as a signifier for ideology. A less ideological look at water would see it as “the sacrament which symbolically asserts man’s dependence on nature; the flood serves to remind man of this” (as cited in Levine, 1994, p. 500). Water is both beginning and end; it is both ideology and destroyer of ideology, for it is under water that Maggie remains untouched by ideology and history.

Maggie who appears as a Medusa-like figure submerged in the waters of feeling takes her sweet revenge by destroying a passionate girl being shaped by an impassionate society. This ending has been a major critical concern. For example, Stevenson (1966) refers to B. J. Paris’s “Towards a Revaluation of G. Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1956) where the writer rejects ideological inconsistency of the last two books. Bissell believes that Maggie’s resolution “can bring no approval from the community and only a troubled peace to her own conscience” (1968, p. 165). Mary Jacobus believes that *The Mill on the Floss*’s ending implies “subversion of dominant discourse, a reaching beyond the analytic and realistic modes to ‘metaphors of unbounded desire’” (as cited in Dreidre, 1994, p. 605). The ambiguous drowning is, definitely, open to different layers of meaning: an expression of the heroine’s strength and an expression of the society’s that will not let the heroine express her intelligence.

Resolution in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*

Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is a comic novel of social manners. As Anderson believes that “the luminosity of [the novel] resides in its central love” (1975, p. 368), central to the novel is the relationship between Elizabeth the heroine and Darcy. The characters of the novel are under the gaze of an

all-knowing, perceptive, ironic narrator, and live in a world that is both limited and exerts limitation. It seems easier to resist intrusions by the narrator in *The Mill on the Floss* rather than the narrator of *Pride and Prejudice* who imposes things on the reader in the name of fixed truths. The world of the novel is also “rational and social” where “minds operate in certain social circumstances” (Ghent, 1961, p. 100).

The world of *Pride and Prejudice* is the world of an important conflict, i. e., the conflict between private and public; individual and society and, the last but not the least, love and property. The novel as a realist one is controlled by a central voice, and the language is so recycled that a resolution does not seem out of reach. The hierarchy of discourses is kept by the central voice while a dominant ideology is imposed upon the reader. This needs further clarification.

Mr. Bennet believes Elizabeth has “something more of quickness than her sisters” (*PP*, p. 5). Elizabeth is as sharp, bright, witty, and imaginative as Maggie. Elizabeth is attractive and outspoken; a complicated character who is a rebel against the society and its biased expectations. The same as Maggie, she declines her lover Darcy identified with society, patriarchy, aristocracy, and money. Elizabeth stays a rebel, an individual respecting her own feeling more than respecting what the society expects her to do—to marry a rich gentleman. According to Anderson, “the possibility of Elizabeth rejecting Darcy’s proposal is established by the end of the first volume” (1975, p. 368). Ideologically speaking, it is obvious that Elizabeth cannot stand against the society, and has to either submit or perish. It is interesting that the heroine enters the process of beginning to like and then love a rich man. As a realist novel, the novel creates room for the reconciliation of money and love. Darcy is introduced as an aristocrat who expects Elizabeth to love and expect him. Mrs. Bennet tells her daughter

‘I can think of nothing else! Ten thousand a year, and very likely more!’

’Tis as good as a Lord! And a special license. You must and shall be married by a special license. But my dearest love, tell me what dish Mr. Darcy is particularly fond of, that I may have it tomorrow. (*PP*, p. 316)

The intellectual Elizabeth finds herself in a battle with the aristocrat Darcy and a mother ideologically shaped. The Victorian society expects Elizabeth to be in want of a man who is rich. The second sentence of the novel is noteworthy:

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the

minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters. (*PP*, p. 3)

This implies that a young man is seen and evaluated as not different from property which the society takes as a fixed piece of truth. To this ideology, the ideology of family tie—the Bennets, the Gardiners, Elizabeth and Darcy, Jane and Bingley, Lady Catherine and Collins—must also be added the result of which is the increasing interest and awareness (in each other). The process of Elizabeth's change begins.

Elizabeth must be shaped, educated, contained and transformed. Darcy, though less witty than Elizabeth as Tom was to Maggie, is the right person to educate her with the ways of the world. Elizabeth is not as heroic and tragic a character as Maggie was, and the turn in the novel shows a female figure in a power play unable to resist the shaping forces that make her realize that she does love, indeed, Darcy. Elizabeth, first a hater of Darcy, finds herself in love with him as a desirable figure which shows how powerful property and position are. As a hater of Darcy, Elizabeth knows herself to be superior, and remains proud and prejudiced. However, her meeting of the societal expectations begins the process of her maturation and development as a transformed lady who knows that as an individual and without a rich man, the chance of survival—experiencing happiness—would be too slim. The following lines that show Elizabeth's humiliation and submission, and how different Maggie's and Elizabeth's self-realization is, are insightful:

She grew absolutely ashamed of herself.—Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think, without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd. 'How despicably have I acted!' She cried.—'I, who have prided myself on my discernment!—I, who have valued myself on my abilities!

Who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless or blameable distrust.—How humiliating is this discovery!—Yet, how just a humiliation!—Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly.—pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment, I never knew myself. (*PP*, p. 177).

Submission appears in the ideological form of accepting Victorian female ignorance which paves

the way for the final transformation that is needed to make Elizabeth a suitable wife for Darcy. The society expects her to marry the well-to-do Darcy and offer a resolution to the romantic story of the unromantic conflict of individual and society. The complexity of marriage and inner conflicts is made simple by a drastic change that occurs within the characters that see themselves ignorant of many things. The happy resolution of marriage is not far away.

No doubt Elizabeth should be the creation of the conservative, realist Jane Austen. Her marriage resolves everything and puts everything in the proper place, while in Eliot the heroine continues the battle to either express herself or take revenge where there is no chance of expression. Maggie's quest of self-knowledge and realization, then, is totally different from Elizabeth's that ends in sexual appetite and, ironically enough, the self-realization of her ignorance and being far behind Darcy her only chance of survival. Again ironically, Darcy stops/holds Elizabeth while Maggie refuses to become silenced by marrying either Philip or Stephen. Neither Elizabeth nor Maggie can remain free from societal expectations, nor oppose them, therefore the former grows in becoming a social member, and gives up to the social milieu to guarantee economic survival, and the latter decides to grow in autonomy. Their destinies, though, are not different: the heroine as a rebellious individual does not exist anymore.

CONCLUSION

Women have always felt the burden of their intellect upon their weak shoulders in patriarchal societies that welcome regressive, silent and marginal members. The Victorian novel shows, just too well, how the society as a complex mechanism puts everything in the proper place. The probable end for any ideological conflict is absolutely death/silence. Perhaps the alert reader is reminded of Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895) where Jude and Sue decide to seek refuge in the societal expectations which empty Sue of her vitality and kill Jude for his aggression and transgressions of Victorian discourses which shows that every individual/subject is an individual against the world. George Eliot's genius lies in the magnificent end she decided on for her novel:

Great God! There were floating masses in it, that might dash against her boat as she passed, and cause her to perish too soon. What were those masses?

For the first time Maggie's heart began to beat in an agony of dread. She sat helpless—dimly conscious that she was being floated along—more intensely conscious of the anticipated clash. However, the horror was transient: it

passed away before the on-coming warehouses of St Ogg's: she had passed the mouth of the Ripple, then: *now*, she must use all her skill and power to manage the boat and get it if possible out of the current. She could see now that the bridge was broken down: she could see the masts of a standard vessel far out over the watery field. But no boats were to be seen moving on the river—such as had been laid hands on were employed in the flooded streets.

With new resolution, Maggie seized her oar, and stood up again to paddle; but the now ebbing tide added to the swiftness of the river, and she was carried along beyond the bridge. (*MF*, p. 420)

The two heroines at last belong. What liberates Elizabeth is her realization that female submission is necessary for female survival. Maggie is liberated by taking revenge; Eliot had always wanted to take revenge of conventions, and like her character, Eliot wanted “not to reject the past and its beliefs [...] but to derive her binding authority from them” (New, 1985, p. 227). The deterministic overtones in Eliot's and Austen's novels reveal the fact that the chance of heroines standing against societal pressures seems too slim. Maggie's high level of consciousness determines a course different from Elizabeth's. This shows that Maggie's bond and close relationship with the male figures of the novel is not deep but sentimental, full of tension, temporary, and for existence within the confines of an assertive, materialistic, cramping community that determines the fate of this existence. The exploration of such relationships confirms the fact that Maggie and Elizabeth as intellectual heroines find themselves in desperate need of heightening their awareness and adopt either a regressive stance and destroy the cultivated self-consciousness, or adopt an aggressive one just to oppose public-consciousness.

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