Narcissistic Rage in *The Mill on the Floss*

George Eliot began *The Mill on the Floss* in January 1859, shortly after the completion of *Adam Bede*. Her first reference to it is a journal entry on the twelfth: "We went into town today and looked in the Annual Register for cases of inundation." According to Gordon Haight, she "copied . . . several passages, mostly of 1771, describing ships driven on to flooded fields, bridges washed away, and a family rescued from the upper storey of their house—all of which appear in the final pages of the novel" (Biography 302). By the end of March, she described the novel to her editor John Blackwood as one "as long as *Adam Bede*, and a sort of companion picture of provincial life" (Letters 3:41). Dorlcote Mill was drawn from her memory of Arbur Mill near her birthplace, but it took some searching to find a suitable river (one capable of a catastrophic flood) on which to base her story. After a search in Weymouth in early September, she and Lewes finally decided on the Trent, in Lincolnshire, during a later trip out of Gainsborough (Haight, Biography 305). Besides the details for the setting of her mill and river, Eliot found it necessary to consult a lawyer for details for her characters’ lawsuit (Letters 3:180). As in the case of *Adam Bede*, however, the novel grew primarily out of a combination of memory and imagination: "My stories grow in me like plants," as she expressed it early in the process of writing her second novel (3:133).

Eliot tells the story of her leading character Maggie Tulliver in the context of a presentation of her provincial family life, with particular emphasis on her relationship with her brother Tom. One twentieth-century critic, Jerome Thale, referring to Eliot’s use of "the sociologist’s way of looking at things," observes that unlike earlier novelists who presented details "incidentally, as part of the realistic picture," she pres-
ents them as “causally connected to the formation of the characters.” He praises the “rich surface texture” and “abundance” of concrete detail that “convinces us that this world must be real” (“Sociology” 128, 129). U. C. Knoepflmacher emphasizes the scope of Eliot’s novel, which he calls “unquestionably the most ambitious of the seven works of fiction belonging to George Eliot’s first phase of development.” He writes that “within three years, [the author] had moved from her rustic ‘scenes’ to a pastoral epic, and now she hoped to achieve an even greater scope and depth by writing a new kind of novel, a tragedy for her times in which she would try to relate the fate of individual characters to the forces of historical change” (Novels 162, 163).

As in the case of Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss was enormously successful. It was published on April 4, 1860; Blackwood wrote Eliot before the end of May that “all the reviews and notices of the book with exception of those of one or two obscure newspapers have been most favourable” and that the sales were “highly satisfactory” (Letters 3:296, 297). Despite the general acceptance of The Mill on the Floss, however, there were some notable criticisms, which foreshadow the criticisms of many twentieth-century critics. Although E. S. Dallas’s review in the Times was on the whole positive, his reference to the portrayal of the “odious Dodson family” (Maggie’s maternal relatives) in their world of “pride, vain-glory, and hypocrisy, envy, hatred and malice, and all uncharitableness” (Draper 57) provoked Eliot to respond that “I have certainly fulfilled my intention very badly if I have made the Dodson honesty appear ‘mean and uninteresting’. . . . So far as my own feeling and intention are concerned, no one class of persons or form of character is held up to reprobation or to exclusive admiration. Tom is painted with as much love and pity as Maggie, and I am so far from hating the Dodsons myself, that I am rather aghast to find them ticketed with such very ugly adjectives” (Letters 3:299). Edward Bulwer Lytton’s April 1860 letter to Blackwood, also predominantly positive, contains criticism of the portrayal of Maggie’s “position” toward her suitors Phillip and Stephen as not following from Eliot’s characterization of her. Bulwer sees Maggie as treacherous to Phillip in allowing Tom to humiliate him in the scene in the “Red Deeps.” Moreover, he believes that the involvement with Stephen is “a position at variance with all that had before been Heroic about [Maggie]. The indulgence of such a sentiment for the affianced of a friend under whose roof she was, was a treachery and a
meanness according to the Ethics of Art, and nothing can afterwards lift the character into the same hold on us" (8:262). His remarks caused Eliot to respond through Blackwood that while she could accept as just the criticism that Maggie is too passive in relation to Phillip in the scene with Tom in the “Red Deeps,” she held that “Maggie’s position toward Stephen is too vital a part of my whole conception and purpose for me to be converted to the condemnation of it. . . . If the ethics of art do not admit the truthful presentation of a character essentially noble but liable to great error—error that is anguish to its own nobleness—then, it seems to me, the ethics of art are too narrow, and must be widened to correspond with a widening psychology” (3:317-18). These early criticisms, taken together with Eliot’s responses, suggest a disparity, increasingly noted by modern critics, between what Eliot intended to portray, and what actually comes across to the reader.

I will argue that the pattern of indirect expression of aggression that I have observed in the characters in Adam Bede also emerges in the actions of the protagonist of The Mill on the Floss. In Eliot’s portrayal, Maggie’s unresolved childhood rage, which results from her sense that she is devalued by her family and society, is transformed into her adult misuse of sexual power in her relationships with the male characters, Philip, Stephen, and Dr. Kenn. The author also rationalizes Maggie’s behavior with men, at the same time that she turns her into an idealized heroine in the last section of the book. Eliot’s apparent inability to see the aggression in her character’s actions seems to derive from her identification with her autobiographical heroine, and very likely reflects the patterns of her own relationships with men in her life as a young adult. Eliot’s portrayal also shows how childhood interactions with immediate family members can shape lifelong interactions between an individual and her society.

Psychoanalytic literary critics have discussed the closeness between Maggie and her brother Tom, who, as Laura Comer Emery suggests, serves as a substitute in Maggie’s life for her rejecting mother and her weak father (17, 23). Emery’s Freudian analysis stresses Maggie’s need to identify with Tom, a male, in a family which devalues females. Bernard Paris’s Horneyan analysis emphasizes Maggie’s morbid dependence on Tom: Maggie, the “self-effacing person,” is drawn to Tom, the “arrogant-vindictive person . . . because [she] needs to be protected by and to
live vicariously through someone who can master life aggressively” (170). Both Paris and Emery emphasize Maggie’s childhood fear of being openly aggressive toward Tom because she needs him so much. Paris observes that “[Maggie] suppresses awareness of her vindictive drives and acts them out only in indirect or disguised ways” (171). Emery notes further that Eliot portrays as accidental some of Maggie’s aggressive actions toward Tom: letting his rabbits die when she has promised to take care of them while he is away at school (Mill 82), and upsetting his pagoda and knocking against his wine (147, 155) during a visit with their relatives (Emery 25-26).

Maggie’s excessively close attachment to Tom reflects her underlying need to be accepted by her parents; yet at the same time, her recurring aggression toward him enacts her anger at her parents’ rejection. Emery explains that because Maggie feels rejected by her mother, she “remains ‘hungry’ for love, and . . . her loving retains the quality of narcissistic need” (16). The intensity of her attachment to Tom, along with her repeated expressions of aggression toward him, reflect this hunger for love. Maggie’s later relationships with other men also combine the need for attachment with the need to express aggression, as she attempts to revive her childhood sense of closeness to Tom. Yet her involvements with Philip, Stephen, and Dr. Kenn only cause Tom’s rejection of her and cannot satisfy her voracious need for his love.

Maggie’s expression of aggression follows the pattern of the Prodigal Son story, which is told in a series of pictures on the wall at Luke’s (the head miller’s) cottage nearby, where she has gone for comfort after she learns that Tom’s rabbits are dead. Maggie’s behavior follows a cyclical pattern of impulsive and/or aggressive action and flight, followed by guilt and reparation. After she lets the rabbits die, she tries to persuade Tom to forgive her, but he rebuffs her, and she runs upstairs to the attic. When the family notices that Maggie is missing, Mr. Tulliver sends Tom to look for her. Maggie, seeking reparation, “rushes[s] to him and [clings] round his neck,” and Tom finally kisses her and offers her a piece of cake (91). On another occasion, when Mrs. Tulliver’s visiting relatives make negative comments about Maggie’s skin and hair, she seeks revenge by running upstairs and cutting her hair (120). She soon feels sorry for what she has done, and when she returns to face her relatives’ inevitable reactions, she seeks reparation by running to her father: she “hid her face on his shoulder and burst out into loud sobbing” (125). When
Maggie pushes the family’s model female, Lucy, in the “cow-trodden mud” (164) as a way of getting back at Tom, Lucy, her mother, and her aunts, she runs off to the gypsies. One of the gypsies finally takes her home, and Mr. Tulliver once again rescues and comforts her (180). Thus Maggie’s aggression in all three incidents follows the pattern of aggressive action and flight, followed by guilt and finally, reparation with the father (figure).

The cyclical pattern of Maggie’s expression of aggression reflects the underlying low self-esteem that results from her family’s ongoing devaluation of her. Maggie’s is a “narcissistic rage”: a chronic and disproportionate anger in response to any incident perceived as a narcissistic injury—any incident that attacks her already weak sense of self, or that repeats the pattern of rejection by her parents and society. When Tom goes away to school, Maggie, the female, stays at home, receives inferior educational opportunities despite her superior intelligence, and is even expected to care for Tom’s rabbits. When Maggie is with her relatives, they criticize her and look upon Lucy as an example of femininity; even her beloved Tom ignores her in favor of Lucy. These situations provoke her underlying sense of outrage and result in her aggressive actions.

According to Heinz Kohut, mature aggression is direct, proportionate, and under the control of the ego; it dissipates as soon as the cause of the provocation is removed. Narcissistic rage, however, is not dissipated by aggressive action; the rage continues to return until the underlying problem of low self-esteem is resolved (Kohut, “Thoughts” 388)—hence Maggie’s continuing cycles of rage and reparation. Kohut refers to an early work on aggression (Alexander, 1938) which, by way of explaining human aggressive responses, presents the “schema of a self-perpetuating cycle of psychological phenomena.” The paper describes “the dynamic cycle of hostility—guilt—submission—reactive aggression—guilt, etc.” (Kohut, “Thoughts” 380). This cycle can be applied to Maggie: she behaves aggressively, she feels guilty, she submits to her father or Tom; then she gets angry at her inferior status and reacts aggressively again. Kohut also describes the fight/flight pattern of narcissistic rage: “The narcissistically vulnerable individual responds to actual (or anticipated) narcissistic injury either with shamefaced withdrawal (flight) or with narcissistic rage (fight)” (379). In all three of the above examples, Maggie, ambivalent about expressing hostility, responds with both “fight” and “flight”: after she lets the rabbits die, she runs to Luke’s house, and
then upstairs to the attic when Tom refuses to forgive her; when her relatives criticize her, she runs upstairs to cut her hair; after she pushes Lucy in the mud, she runs to the gypsies. Later in life she repeats the pattern when she goes away from her family and "ostentatious[ly]," as Emery puts it (25), refuses to let Tom support her after her father dies, and finally, when she runs away with Stephen. Her pattern of running away is bound up with her pattern of expressing aggression.

Elizabeth Ermarth, Michael Steig, and Wendy Woodward are among the critics who have discussed the effects on Maggie of her rigid, provincial society. Ermarth discusses the sexist social norms that Maggie has internalized and which have caused her to be "self-effacing and dependent, buying her identity at the price of her autonomy" ("Maggie" 592). Steig shows how the anal traits of the society, represented by the older generation of Dodsons (Mrs. Tulliver's relatives), have affected Maggie's "shame," "self-doubt," and "fantasy of dominance" (49). Woodward shows how Maggie is ostracized from the rigid community of women at St. Ogg's because she is "bold and 'unwomanly'" (47). Among such critics, however, none seems to have fully considered the effect of the family's status in the community on Maggie's self-esteem. The sense of personal disgrace that marks Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver's lives at the outset becomes self-fulfilling in them as they move toward their financial fall and later in Maggie as she finds ways to disgrace herself.

Mrs. Tulliver begins with a low position in her own family: she is compared unfavorably to her sisters, and "is always on the defensive towards [them]" (227). There are many references to Mrs. Tulliver's inferiority: Mr. Tulliver has picked his wife because she is "a bit weak" (68); he is proud to have "a buxom wife conspicuously his inferior in intellect" (73); she is the "feeblest" member of the Dodson family (97). Mrs. Tulliver's own sibling rivalry comes out in her worries that Maggie cannot compare to her sister's daughter Lucy: "It seems hard as my sister Deane should have that pretty child" (61). She is always concerned about the impression Maggie will make on her sisters. When Maggie dips her head in a basin of water "in the vindictive determination that there should be no more chance of curls that day," Mrs. Tulliver warns Maggie that the aunts won't love her, and then adds her fears for herself: "Folks 'ull think it's a judgment on me as I've got such a child—they'll think I've done summat wicked" (78).
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Maggie is said to resemble Mr. Tulliver’s sister, who suffers the disgrace of marriage to a poor man and has the burden of raising eight children in poverty. Both she and Maggie are said to take after Mr. Tulliver’s mother. Mr. Tulliver wants to take care of his sister, just as he wants Tom to take care of Maggie (116). The implication is perhaps that her aunt’s existence is what awaits Maggie: marriage to a poor man. As the unappealing daughter of the lowest in status in the family, she could not expect more. One important source of Maggie’s rage, then, in addition to that which she feels toward the rejecting members of her nuclear family, is her low position in a rigid society which allows very little room for upward mobility, especially for women.

Maggie’s low position in society is made worse by her father’s financial fall. Eliot emphasizes the Tullivers’ sense of disgrace following the loss of the lawsuit to Wakem. Mr. Tulliver suffers a physical collapse, and Maggie and Tom are devastated: “Tom had never dreamed that his father would ‘fail’: that was a form of misfortune which he had always heard spoken of as a deep disgrace, and disgrace was an idea that he could not associate with any of his relations, least of all with his father. A proud sense of family respectability was part of the very air Tom had been born and brought up in” (267). The Dodson family proves to be unsupportive and judgmental. They, like Tom, feel disgraced because “one of the family [has] married a man [who] has brought her to beggary” (294). Both Tom and Maggie are angry with their relatives’ reactions, but since Tom shares some of their feeling of blame toward his father, “he felt nothing like Maggie’s violent resentment against them for showing no eager tenderness and generosity” (308). Maggie is openly angry with her mother and Tom whenever they seem to be joining the relatives in blaming her father. She “hated blame” and only wants to remember how her father “had always defended and excused her” (284).

Maggie’s “Valley of Humiliation” (Book IV), however, her own reaction to the family’s fall, sets the stage for the beginning of a new cycle. During the monotonous period of time when Tom is working to pay off the family debt and Maggie is at home taking care of her sick father, she falls into the despair which is described in the three chapters of Book IV. Chapter 1 provides the context for her despair by emphasizing the oppressiveness of life in a society which holds up respectability as its chief virtue. In chapter 2, Maggie, unable to count on her ailing father’s customary warmth to distract her from her predicament, is becoming
weighed down by her family's disgrace. Her father is unresponsive to "her little caresses" (371) and seems preoccupied with Maggie's "poor chance for marrying, down in the world as they were" (372). In chapter 3, Maggie turns to books for comfort, although she is easily distracted by her sorrow. She has fits of anger and hatred "towards her father and mother who were so unlike what she would have them to be—towards Tom, who checked her and met her thought or feeling always by some thwarting difference" (380). Then she reacts to her own anger with "wild romances of a flight from home in search of something less sordid and dreary:—she would go to some great man—Walter Scott, perhaps, and tell him how wretched and how clever she was, and he would surely do something for her" (381). Her real father would inevitably interrupt her fantasy and complain, for example, that she had failed to bring his slippers. In desperation, Maggie finally discovers Thomas à Kempis and begins to try to apply his ideas to her situation: "Renunciation seemed to her the entrance into that satisfaction which she had so long been craving in vain" (384). As time goes on, her mother notices and approves her new submissiveness; her father, also approving the change, but still worrying about her prospects for marriage, shifts his plaint to: "There'll be nobody to marry her as is fit for her" (388). Thus in chapter 3 Maggie repeats her pattern: she feels angry toward her family for her inferior position in society, she flees (in fantasy), she feels guilty (when her father interrupts her fantasy) and then regains her parents' approval with her newfound submissiveness, brought on by her misguided attempts to apply Thomas à Kempis to her life.

After the Thomas à Kempis incident, there is little mention of Maggie's anger, and there are no accounts of overtly aggressive action on her part. At this point in the story Maggie begins to act out her rage in her relationships with men. Her childhood aggression is transformed into her young-adult misuse of sexual power. Neither Philip nor Stephen is a suitable or appealing choice for Maggie, but she becomes involved with them as a means of hurting them and others around her. Yet just as Eliot portrays Maggie's aggressive actions toward Tom as accidental, so she portrays her heroine's actions toward other men as innocent. Furthermore, by the end of the novel, Eliot idealizes Maggie on the grounds of her struggles of conscience over her involvements with the two men.

Maggie's long period of renunciation has prepared her for a new cycle: her sense of inferiority, exacerbated by her father's financial fall, his
illness, and her own self-deprivation and recent growth into "early womanhood" (393), are motivating factors in the action that follows. Maggie's expression of aggression takes the form of pursuing a relationship with Wakem's son, Philip. By becoming involved with him, Maggie expresses her anger toward her family for their inadequacies, and toward Tom, who has forbidden her to speak to Philip (279). Moreover, although she has never acknowledged any feelings of anger toward Philip for his father's role in Mr. Tulliver's failure, she typically acts out her resentment indirectly.

The foundation for the friendship is laid when Maggie meets Philip as a child on a visit to Tom's school. Maggie feels "growing interest" in Philip, despite his and Tom's antagonism toward each other, because he is so "clever," and because she has "rather a tenderness for deformed things" (252). During the visit, Philip becomes Maggie's replacement for Tom, whose troubles with his studies had "made him more like a girl than he had ever been in his life before"; his "boyish self-satisfaction" had been replaced by "something of the girl's susceptibility" (210). When Philip becomes a student at the school, his academic successes add to Tom's ongoing need to prove himself as a fighter. Finally Tom bribes the school drillmaster into lending him his sword, which he plans to "tie around his waist" and show off to Maggie as his own. But when the time comes, "his wrist trembles" as he lowers the sword, drops it on his foot, and wounds himself (255)—a symbolic castration, as Emery suggests (19), which reveals his sense of inadequacy. Soon after, Maggie, needing a male to complete her sense of identity, "turns toward Philip, and identifies not with what she would like to be, but with something that resembles her own need" (Emery 19). His humpback represents her own low self-image. In chapter 6, "A Love Scene," which immediately follows the scene in which Tom is injured, Maggie expresses her feelings toward Philip in relation to her need to be loved by Tom: first she tells him that she doesn't think she could love him better than Tom, "But I should be so sorry . . . for you" (259); then she corrects her allusion to his deformity by saying that she wishes he were her brother; finally she concludes, "I think you're fonder of me than Tom is" (260). The relationship that develops later in their young-adult years follows from Maggie's ongoing need to be loved by Tom at the same time that she needs to express aggression toward him.

Maggie meets Philip again a few years later on one of her solitary
walks in the “Red Deeps.” Although Philip initiates their conversation, Maggie, glad to see him despite the rift between their families, responds warmly. Yet although Eliot assures her readers of Maggie’s innocence, her behavior toward Philip is actually flirtatious. When Maggie, who has grown into “early womanhood” (393), asks Philip if she is like what he expected, Eliot comments, “The words might have been those of a coquette, but the full bright glance Maggie turned on Philip was not that of a coquette. She really did hope he liked her face as it was now, but it was simply the rising again of her innate delight in admiration and love” (395). Philip tells her she is much more beautiful than he expected, which Eliot intimates is a surprise to Maggie, who, during her renunciation, has “abstained[ed] from the looking-glass” (396). Maggie then tells Philip that she must not see him again (396), but Philip plays on her sympathies and finally says, “I should be contented to live, if you would let me see you sometimes” (398). Maggie, beginning to wonder whether she might do him some good in seeing him, wavers, and then postpones the decision by submitting to his suggestion that he come to the woods as often as he can until he meets her again on one of her walks. By failing to prevent his meeting her again, she chooses to pursue the relationship. She lets Philip appear to make the decision in which she actually participates. Meanwhile, she inwardly plans to tell him the next time they meet of her determination not to keep seeing him.

Maggie’s aggression is not only evident in the choice of Philip against her family’s wishes, but also in the portrayals of her interactions with him. Her cycles of giving Philip hope and then rejecting him reveal the latent cruelty in her behavior. For example, in the passage in Book V, chapter 3, “The Waver ing Balance,” Maggie tells Philip that they cannot meet again (425); Philip responds by asking her to talk for half an hour before they part. Then when he takes her hand, “Maggie felt no reason to withdraw it” (425). Thus she declares that she will not see him again, but then immediately gives in to his advances. Then Philip flatters her by asking to study her face one last time so that he can finish her portrait; he elicits her sympathy and her own discontent about her lot by expressing bitterness about his deformity (426); finally, he argues vehemently against her practice of self-deprivation (427). Maggie, still seeing the relationship in terms of her need for Tom, says, “What a dear, good brother you would have been” (427). By the end of the conversation, in which Philip continues to argue against her determination to renounce
him, Maggie finally gives in to his suggestion that he continue to walk in the woods and meet her "by chance" (429). It is clear in this passage that Maggie wants to continue seeing Philip ("her heart leap[t] at this subterfuge of Philip's" [429]), yet "even to Maggie he was an exception: it was clear that the thought of his being her lover had never entered her mind" (430)—that is, his deformity stands in the way of his attractiveness to Maggie. Although Philip's interest in Maggie is clear to the reader, Eliot claims Maggie's innocence of his intentions; so Maggie continues to lead him on, although her rejection of him is inevitable.

A year later they are still meeting. Philip finally declares his love and asks Maggie whether she loves him. She replies, "I think I could hardly love any one better: there is nothing but what I love you for" (435). Later in the conversation when Philip asks if she is forcing herself to say she loves him, she repeats the thought: "I don't think I could love any one better than I love you. I should like always to live with you—to make you happy" (437). But she also says she will never do anything to wound her father, and adds that it is impossible for them ever to be more than friends. Philip continues to try to get her to clarify her feelings, but by this time Maggie is feeling that she must return home: "The sense that their parting was near, made her more anxious lest she should have unintentionally left some painful impression on Philip's mind. It was one of those dangerous moments when speech is at once sincere and deceptive—when feeling, rising high above its average depth, leaves floodmarks which are never reached again" (437). Philip asks, "We do belong to each other—for always—whether we are apart or together?" And Maggie responds, "Yes, Philip: I should like never to part: I should like to make your life very happy" (437). Philip, however, aware of the ambiguity of her answer, is "waiting for something else—I wonder whether it will come" (438). Maggie stoops to kiss him and has "a moment of belief that if there were sacrifice in this love [because of Philip's deformity]—it was all the richer and more satisfying" (438). Her feeling for Philip is more a need to be "worshipped" (426) than the kind of love that Philip wants.

Tom inevitably discovers their meetings, and Maggie promises not to see Philip again without Tom's knowledge (446). He confronts and insults Philip (447–48). After they leave Philip, Tom asks her, "Pray, how have you shown your love that you talk of either to me or my father? By disobeying and deceiving us. I have a different way of show-
ing my affection.” Maggie’s response, “Because you are a man, Tom, and have power, and can do something in the world” (450), reveals a motive for pursuing the friendship: her sense of powerlessness as a female. Shortly after the discussion with Tom, Maggie inwardly acknowledges her relief that the relationship is over (451). The implication in this passage and those cited above is that she does not want to be seriously involved with Philip. After she becomes involved with Stephen, she quickly loses interest in Philip: she “shivers” at Lucy’s offer to contrive a way for her to marry Philip (498); she is “touched not thrilled” when Philip sings to her in the presence of Lucy and Stephen (533). Although Maggie and Philip share many interests, her feeling for him never gets beyond her need to be admired; he plays on her sympathies when he persuades her to see him, and she continues to submit to his suggestions to meet. Yet despite Philip’s declarations of love, she never actually declares hers. Relieved when Tom breaks up the relationship, she lets him verbalize what she represses. Through her brother, she vicariously lives out her own unacknowledged feelings of aggression toward Philip, whose father has ruined hers.

The relationship is not all Maggie’s fault; Philip has sought her out and pressured her into declaring her love. His motives interact with hers. He feels bitter about his deformity (398, 430), discouraged about his painting, and “had never been soothed by [a] mother’s love” (431). Perhaps a relationship with Maggie could also be seen as an expression of his (and his father’s) power over the Tullivers. In any case, the story of the relationship between Maggie and Philip is suspended when Mr. Tulliver dies and Maggie and Tom are reconciled. When Maggie asks Tom’s forgiveness, “they clung and wept together” (465). Maggie completes her cycle: by becoming involved with Philip she takes revenge on Tom, her family, and the Wakems; “weary of her home” (436), she flees her family by habitually meeting him at the Red Deeps; she feels guilty afterward, especially after her father’s death; finally, she is reconciled to Tom.

Maggie’s next period of submissiveness follows during her lonely, monotonous two years as a teacher after her father’s death. By the time she visits Lucy in Book VI, she is ready for a new cycle. She meets Stephen, Lucy’s intended fiancé, and soon finds herself tempted to run away with him. Although he seems to many critics to be an unlikely object of her affections, the reasons for her involvement with him be-
come clear if the relationship is seen in the context of Maggie’s recurring cycles of submission and rage.

Book VI, which traces the relationship with Stephen, emphasizes Maggie’s low position in the society at St. Ogg’s, especially in contrast to Stephen, who represents the established society, or, as Suzanne Graver puts it in her sociological study of Eliot’s novels, the “good society.” Unlike Maggie, the daughter of a failure, Stephen is in the privileged position of being the son of the owner of “the largest oil-mill and the most extensive wharf in St. Ogg’s” (469). Lucy’s father and Tom both work for him. Stephen feels superior to all the people around him: he speaks with “supercilious indifference” of Mr. Tulliver (471); he makes fun of Mrs. Tulliver’s “conversational qualities” (472); he refers to Tom as “not a brilliant companion” (473); he has even chosen Lucy “because she did not strike him as a remarkable rarity” (477). He is conscious of her inferior position as “the daughter of his father’s subordinate partner; . . . he had had to defy and overcome a slight unwillingness and disappointment in his father and sisters—a circumstance which gives a young man an agreeable consciousness of his own dignity” (478). Stephen’s sisters, too, “associated chiefly on terms of condescension with the families of St. Ogg’s, and were the glass of fashion there” (512). For Maggie, it is supposed to be “a great opportunity” (512) to be included in the parties of such a group.

One of the earlier conversations between Maggie and Philip reveals the motivation for her later involvement with Stephen. When Maggie tells Philip she would like to read a book in which the dark-haired lady triumphs, Philip jokes, “Perhaps you will avenge the dark women in your own person, and carry away all the love from your cousin Lucy.” Maggie, insulted, denies that she is “odious and base enough to wish to be her rival” (433), and insists that “it’s because I always care the most about the unhappy people. . . . I always take the side of the rejected lover in the stories.” Then when Philip asks her if she would ever have the heart to reject a lover, she responds: “I think perhaps I could if he were very conceited; and yet, if he got extremely humiliated afterwards, I should relent” (434). Stephen is the kind of conceited person that Maggie tells Philip she would be able to reject. The infatuation for Stephen is bound up with her hostility toward him and others around her. By running away with him, she repeats the pattern of the gypsy incident: angry with her family and jealous of Lucy, she pushes her in
the mud, runs away to the gypsies, where she fantasizes that she is
queen—"in Lucy's form" (Emery 38), and then returns to be rescued by
her father.

The nature of infatuation has been explored by psychoanalysts, al-
though according to a review by David S. Werman and Theodore J.
Jacobs, there is relatively little literature on the subject. One study
stresses that such an attraction is "based on resemblance to a fantasy
which, for both sexes, derives from the 'original love object'—the
mother" (447). Another asserts that "falling in love represents an attempt
to undo the original separation from mother, as well as subsequent
separations" (448). A third says that "people who become infatuated
have an incapacity for establishing [constant relationships with others]:
infatuation is a repetition compulsion whose origins are in developmenta
defaults" (448). Werman and Jacobs build on these and other studies in
stating their belief that infatuation has its roots in the earliest years of
life. Its "shifting and inconsistent nature reflects the experience of the child
prior to the formation of [love] object constancy" (453) and suggests "the
existence of difficulties in the mother-infant relationship that contribute
to the development of critically important aggressive conflicts in the
child"; this accounts for the latent hostility in infatuations. They can
occur normatively during adolescence, a time when oedipal conflicts are
revived at the same time that the individual is struggling for a sense of
identity. They can also occur repeatedly during a person's life, or in
some people, only during a particularly stressful time: "[An infatuation]
may come about when an individual is in a crisis of defensive regression,
subsequent to severe stress, intense anxiety, or during times of depres-
sion" (455). An infatuation "typically condenses both narcissistic and
oedipal wishes" (456).

Maggie's infatuation for Stephen comes about as a cyclical reaction to
her underlying narcissistic rage against her family and society; it also
comes about during a time of special stress and depression: Maggie has
suffered the death of her father, has grown bored with her teaching
position, and is suddenly in a social setting in which she is continually
reminded of her low status.

In a conversation with Lucy in chapter 2 of Book VI, Maggie ex-
presses her discontent by comparing herself to a bear confined in a cage.
She says she often hates herself "because I get angry sometimes at the
sight of happy people" (481). She feels that she has slipped back "into
desire and longing" (482). When she goes for a ride in the boat with Stephen and Lucy, “She felt lonely, cut off from Philip—the only person who had ever seemed to love her devotedly, as she had always longed to be loved” (491). Renewed anger at her relatives adds to her feelings of discontent. When her mother and aunt make remarks about her brown skin, Maggie laughs, but feels “impatient” (493). When Tom expresses his distrust of her, “she rebelled and was humiliated at the same time.” She tries to be reconciled to him at the end of the conversation, and he does kiss her, but has to rush off to a consultation with his uncle Deane (504–6). Her anger appears in flashes in her relationship with Stephen: after he takes her for a walk in the garden (521) and after he kisses her arm at the dance (561).

Maggie’s first meeting with Stephen recalls the first meeting with Philip in the Red Deeps. Maggie is aware that Stephen thinks her attractive; in this case she pretends to rebuff his compliment. Once again, Eliot denies her heroine’s flirtatious behavior: when Maggie mentions that she has had to earn money by plain sewing, Eliot comments, “but if Maggie had been the queen of coquettes she could hardly have invented a means of giving greater piquancy to her beauty in Stephen’s eyes” (487).

True to the pattern established in her relationship with Philip, Maggie makes her choices about Stephen indirectly—by allowing Stephen to appear to be making the decisions. When it becomes clear that neither Lucy nor Philip will be able to go along on the planned boat ride, Maggie says to Stephen, “We must not go” (588). Yet when she asks Stephen to tell the man who is waiting for them with the boat cushions, Stephen says, “What shall I tell him?” And “Maggie made no answer.” Stephen then says, “Let us go” at the same time he rises and takes her hand, thus relieving her of the burden of openly making the decision for herself.

Maggie’s feeling for Stephen, however, is different from what she had experienced with Philip. The relationship with Stephen satisfies her underlying need to feel attached to a stronger person. When she and Stephen return from the first boat ride, Maggie’s foot “slips,” “but happily Mr. Stephen Guest held her hand and kept her up with a firm grasp. . . . It was very charming to be taken care of in that kind graceful manner by some one taller and stronger than oneself. Maggie had never felt just in the same way before” (492). Again, just before the last boat ride, Maggie feels “that she was being led down the garden . . . by this
stronger presence that seemed to bear her along without any act of her own will" (588). Maggie experiences the sense of union with a powerful love object that is part of the fantasy of infatuation.

Werman and Jacobs emphasize the "intense, irrational, and dream-like" state of infatuation (450). After the first evening with Stephen, Maggie feels "the half-remote presence of a world of love and beauty and delight, made up of vague, mingled images from all the poetry and romance she had ever read, or had ever woven in her dreamy reveries" (495). When they walk in the garden, they are "in the same dreamy state as they had been in a quarter of an hour before" (521). At the dance, Maggie says that the flowers seem to be part of "an enchanted land" (560). When they go away in the rowboat, they are enveloped in an "enchanted haze" (589). Finally, on the Dutch vessel, "Stephen's passionate words made the vision of such a life more fully present to her than it had ever been before; and the vision for the time excluded all realities" (594).

Infatuation is a condensation of the narcissistic wish for the infant's blissful sense of union with the mother and the oedipal wish to marry the parent of the opposite sex; it thus provides for a female a means of being united in fantasy with both parents at the same time. Maggie's fantasies when she is with Stephen recall her blissful childhood moments with Tom, her substitute for both parents, at the "Round Pool" when they would imagine that "they would always live together and be fond of each other." As a child Maggie thought of sitting by the pool as "a very nice heaven." She would "look dreamily at the glassy water" and feel as though nothing could "mar her delight in the whispers and the dreamy silences" (93). The scene at the Round Pool, "deep . . . almost a perfect round, framed in with willows and tall reeds," a symbolic womb (Emery 10), suggests Tom's and Maggie's ongoing need to be together with their lost love object, their mother—a need temporarily met for Maggie later in the dreamlike infatuation for Stephen. And because the "triangle between Stephen, Lucy, and Maggie is a recasting of the Oedipal triangle" (Emery 37), Maggie is also able to be temporarily united in fantasy with her father when she and Stephen elope.

Maggie's interactions with Stephen repeat the pattern of her cruelty to Philip. She encourages and rejects him in cycles. At the dance in Book VI, chapter 10, Maggie and Stephen walk together feeling "that long grave mutual gaze which has the solemnity belonging to all deep human
passion.” When they pause to look at some flowers, Stephen, overwhelmed by the strength of their feelings, suddenly takes Maggie’s arm and “shower[s] kisses on it.” Maggie, reacting with “rage and humiliation,” refuses to have anything to do with him for the rest of the evening because she feels “Stephen thought more lightly of her than he did of Lucy” (561–62). In their next scene (chapter 11), Stephen comes to see her while she is staying at her aunt’s house and tries to persuade her to marry him. Maggie seems on the verge of giving in to her impulses, but just as “his lips are very near hers,” Maggie “opened her eyes full on his for an instant, like a lovely wild animal timid and struggling under caresses, and then turned sharp round towards home again” (569–70). When they are alone in the boat together, Maggie fails to notice that they have drifted past the village where they had planned to stop. When Stephen tries to persuade her to marry him before they return home, Maggie feels “angry resistance.” She accuses him of wanting “to deprive me of any choice. You knew we were come too far—you have dared to take advantage of my thoughtlessness. It is unmanly to bring me into such a position” (591). The pattern repeats itself again after they board the “Dutch vessel,” where Maggie paces “up and down the deck leaning on Stephen,” yet soon realizes “that the condition was a transient one, and that the morrow must bring back the old life struggle” (594–95). The next day she tells Stephen she cannot marry him, and finally Stephen, worn out and exasperated, says, “Go, then—leave me—don’t torture me any longer—I can’t bear it.” Even then, Maggie “involuntarily . . . leaned towards him and put out her hand to touch his,” but this time Stephen, not wanting to be hurt again, “[shrinks] from it as if it had been burning iron” (606).

Maggie’s low self-esteem prevents her from disentangling herself from her old patterns of behavior. She is at the mercy of a repetition-compulsion which causes her to reenact her sense of injury by repeatedly injuring others. By getting involved with Stephen, Maggie hurts everyone around her—Stephen, by repeatedly encouraging and rejecting him; Lucy, her long-term rival, by taking away her intended fiancé just when Lucy is being kind to her; Philip, by failing to be clear about “the position they must hold towards each other,” thus continuing to lead him on (527); Wakem, who finally consents to let Philip marry her, and then suffers embarrassment when she goes away with Stephen (632); Tom, whose happiness over regaining the mill is destroyed by her flight
with Stephen, and who, it is implied, is already hurting from his own loss of Lucy to Stephen (501). Finally, she hurts all her other relatives, who will suffer from the disgrace she brings on the family.

Yet Eliot’s portrayal of the flight with Stephen emphasizes the nobility of Maggie’s decision not to marry him. Maggie is implicitly praised as she parts from Stephen for not thinking about “what others would say and think of her conduct” on the grounds that “love and deep pity and remorseful anguish left no room for that” (606). Maggie’s superiority to the rest of the community is implied through the words of Dr. Kenn, who lets her know after her return how harshly the community is judging her: “The persons who are the most incapable of a conscientious struggle such as yours, are precisely those who will be likely to shrink from you; because they will not believe in your struggle” (626). At the end of the conversation with Dr. Kenn, his thoughts shift to the narrator’s commentary in the last two paragraphs of chapter 2, Book VII, in a defense of Maggie’s struggle: “Moral judgments must remain false and hollow, unless they are checked and enlightened by a perpetual reference to the special circumstances that mark the individual lot” (628).

The relationship with Stephen, like the one with Philip, is not all Maggie’s fault. Stephen repeatedly seeks her out and finally pressures her into leaving with him. His “inward vision of her which perpetually made part of his consciousness” (559) is evidence that he is suffering from infatuation himself. Like Philip, Stephen’s motives interact with Maggie’s. His involvement with her can be seen as an outgrowth of his feelings of superiority over those around him—an expression of power over the Tullivers, Lucy, Philip, and even his own father.

Book VII opens with Tom as master at Dorlcote Mill; he has fulfilled the family’s wish to own it again; but his success is spoiled by Maggie’s disgrace upon her return from the failed elopement with Stephen. From Tom’s point of view, it is a disgrace worse than death (611): “You have disgraced us all—you have disgraced my father’s name. You have been a curse to your best friends” (612). Maggie attempts to repent and be reconciled to him, but Tom’s refusal is final: he does not even want her under his roof. Mrs. Tulliver comes to her rescue, however, and they go to Bob Jakin’s house together. Maggie goes through a period of extreme guilt in the form of (belated) anxiety for Stephen, Lucy, and Philip (621). While she claims a desire for financial independence (622), she thinks of Dr. Kenn, the Anglican clergyman she met at Lucy’s bazaar, and “the
momentary feeling of reliance that had sprung in her when he was talking with her.” She determines to see him, despite her knowledge that he is grieving over the recent death of his wife (623). She attempts reparation through her confession to him, a new father figure.

Maggie’s Aunt Glegg offers her shelter at her house, but Maggie, insisting on her “independence,” takes a position with Dr. Kenn instead, thus again establishing a connection with a strong male. But in chapter 5, “The Last Conflict,” Dr. Kenn, who has grown sensitive to the local gossip and feels he should avoid even the “appearance of evil,” has asked her to leave and offered to find her a position in another town. Maggie suffers an overwhelming sense of abandonment: “There was no home, no help for the erring” (646).

On the third day of her despair she receives another letter from Stephen, who is still pleading for her love. She wavers, and then burns the letter, but puts off writing him “the last word of parting” until the next day (649). Maggie is caught in a cycle which only death can bring to an end. Conveniently, just as she wishes for death, she feels the flood water at her feet.

The flood ending has been the primary focus of the large quantity of modern literary criticism on *The Mill on the Floss*. Bulwer Lytton anticipated later critics by suggesting in his 1860 letter to Blackwood that “the Tragic should be prepared for and seem to come step by step as if unavoidable. But that is not the case here” (Letters 8:262). Eliot herself acknowledged in response to Bulwer’s criticism that she also felt that “the tragedy is not adequately prepared”—a “defect” which she felt resulted from her “love of my subject in the two first volumes,” which “caused a want of proportionate fullness in the treatment of the third,” and “which I shall always regret” (3:317). Rosemary Mundhenk is among the modern critics who have suggested that the problem with the flood scene is that it does not resolve Maggie’s internal struggle; the ending is a repetition rather than a resolution of what has preceded it (20–30). Barbara Hardy describes the ending of the novel as too abrupt a movement from “particularity” to “fantasy” (*Mill* 172), and Peter Garrett as an inappropriate shift from a “realistic” to a “symbolic” mode (45).

Psychoanalytic interpretations of the ending of the novel, where Maggie and Tom drown together in a final embrace, emphasize Maggie’s need to be reunited with Tom, whom no other man can replace. David
Smith, describing the relationship between Maggie and Tom as incestuous, sees the flood scene as the symbolic consummation of their passion. Emery sees many levels of meaning: the flood represents the outpouring of Maggie’s repressed rage toward Tom at the same time it fulfills oedipal and oral wishes (to be reunited with both father and mother, for whom Tom is a substitute), and finally, the wish to return to the womb (to be at one with her mother and Tom), which is simultaneously a wish for death (23). Tom is the focus of Maggie’s infantile attachments, from whom she is unable to separate. Her unmet need to be accepted by her parents creates her hunger to be attached to symbols of them (first Tom, and then other men) in later life.

Kohut explains that narcissistic rage is “aggression mobilized in the service of an archaic grandiose self and that it is deployed within the framework of an archaic perception of reality” (“Thoughts” 385). In other words, in the person who suffers narcissistic rage, the self-image is inflated, at the same time it is merged with one or more images of others. The most violent forms of narcissistic rage, Kohut writes, arise in individuals in whom “the maintenance of self-esteem—and indeed of the self—depends on the unconditional availability of the approving-mirroring functions of an admiring self-object, or on the ever-present opportunity for a merger with an idealized one” (386). Maggie’s sense of self depends on her perception of herself as attached to Tom, the symbolic substitute for her parents—hence her ongoing need to seek reparation with him. The flood ending brings Maggie and Tom permanently back together through death.

Eliot’s friend Sara Hennell thought The Mill on the Floss “unfinished” because of “[Eliot]’s intense sympathy with Maggie. . . . In every word of the book . . . she could hear [Eliot]’s voice of ten years before” (Haight, Biography 335). Many twentieth-century critics have also seen Eliot’s overidentification with Maggie as a flaw in the novel. Leavis refers to “a tendency toward the direct presence of the author” (33) and to Maggie’s “lack of self-knowledge shared by George Eliot” (43). Paris, essentially agreeing with Leavis (165–66), writes that Eliot “succeeds brilliantly” in the characterization of Maggie, but “fails to interpret her correctly” (186). Hardy refers to the problem of “underdistance” of the narration toward the ending (Mill 173) and to the relationship between personal need and artistic shaping at each stage of the novel (179). Emery
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refers to a particular point at the beginning of chapter 13 in Book VI, when Maggie and Stephen drift off together, where “the narrator’s point of view [merges] with Maggie’s” (49).

The autobiographical nature of the novel is well known. Jane McDonnell is among the critics who have noted parallels between the Maggie-Tom relationship and the relationship between Eliot and her brother Isaac (381), who, although close in early childhood, had grown increasingly distant and finally cut off all communication with her in 1857, when she had finally told him of her liaison with G. H. Lewes. I would add that there are also parallels in the patterns of Maggie’s and Mary Ann Evans’s young-adult relationships with other men—relationships which involved dependence on men unavailable for marriage.

Following the March 1841 move with her father to Coventry before Isaac’s marriage, Mary Ann seems to have replaced her evangelical enthusiasm, including her enthusiasm for her friendship with her former teacher, Maria Lewis, with a new enthusiasm for scientific studies and a different group of friends, along with a heightened susceptibility to infatuations for men. Judging from her letters at the time, she had suffered anxiety over Isaac’s approaching marriage because of her fear that a new sister-in-law might supersede her as housekeeper at Griff. She wrote Lewis in May 1840 that “there seems a probability of my being an unoccupied damsel” (*Letters* 1:50); in October she was still in a state of uncertainty about what would happen to her when Isaac married (68). Once the decision to leave Griff with her father was made, however, she seemed to regard the move itself with mild annoyance. She wrote at the time that “we are undergoing one of the chief among the minor disagreeables of life—moving” (85). Yet afterward, she felt something more like grief. Besides missing her “lack of a free range for walking which I so enjoyed at Griff,” she found “what I did not fully anticipate, a considerable disturbance of the usual flow of thought and feeling on being severed from the objects so long accustomed to call it forth. There is the same cope . . . clouds . . . verdure . . . but I have never yet enjoyed that communion with them, viewed from my present position, that long familiarity rendered spontaneous in my early home” (93). Perhaps the move from her childhood home at Griff, occurring in conjunction with Isaac’s marriage, came to symbolize the loss of her childhood, and created in her a need for new attachments to which she could transfer the strong feelings of her childhood. In any case, she responded with alacrity
to a new set of friends, particularly including Charles Bray, whom she met with his wife in November 1841. Bray’s abandonment of the evangelical enthusiasm of his youth and current interest in scientific matters seems to have fueled her own increasing doubts about her faith—although, as Haigh observes, “the change in her religious views . . . would have [happened] in any case” (Biography 39). Haigh also writes that “it is impossible to overestimate the importance of Mary Ann’s introduction to the Brays, which led quickly to a warm, life-long friendship” (44). Mary Ann’s enthusiasm for Charles was observed by her old friend Maria Lewis, who, according to Marghanita Laski, “was shocked to see them walking arm in arm, ‘like lovers’ she said” (28). Ina Taylor, viewing Charles Bray as the “Don Juan of Coventry,” also writes that Mary Ann “was completely enamoured of [him]” (46).

Another instance of Mary Ann’s shifting attachments occurred during this stage of her life, in 1843, following the “Holy War” with her own father. She was invited to the home of the sixty-two-year-old scholarly Dr. Robert Brabant after his daughter Rufa’s marriage to Charles Hennell, one of her Coventry group of friends. While Mary Ann, who “was to be a second daughter to him,” was visiting at his home, the two became involved in an intimate friendship, characterized on Mary Ann’s side by rapturous devotion: “We read and walk and talk together, and I am never weary of his company,” she wrote Cara Bray (Haight, Biography 49). Dr. Brabant’s wife, however, possibly urged on by her sister, who also lived with the family, soon became jealous and insisted that she be put out of the house before the previously agreed upon end of her stay (50).

While she was working on the Strauss translation in 1845, Mary Ann took a trip to Scotland with the Brays, but had to return home almost immediately because her father had broken his leg the night of her departure. From that point on, his health seems to have declined; it became increasingly necessary during the years until his death in 1849 for Mary Ann to focus her attention on caring for him and the household, although she did contribute articles to the Coventry Herald during this time (61). During the last year of her father’s life, as Cara wrote to Sara Hennell, “poor [Mary Ann], alone with him, has the whole care and fatigue of nursing him night and day with . . . constant nervous expectation [of his death]” (Letters 1:272). During this time her moods vacillated widely: at times she seemed extremely depressed (264, 265)
and at times almost elated at the opportunity to be with him in his suffering (283, 284). Yet more than anything she dreaded losing him. The strain showed in a letter she wrote to the Brays shortly before his death: “What shall I be without my Father? It will seem as if a part of my moral nature were gone. I had a horrid vision of myself last night becoming earthly sensual and devilish for want of that purifying restraining influence” (284).

After Mary Ann’s father’s death in May 1849, the Brays suggested a trip to the Continent, where they helped her get settled in a pension in Switzerland. On her own she found a home for the winter in Geneva, in the household of François D’Albert Durade, a forty-five-year-old painter. Although Mary Ann formed what turned out to be another lifelong friendship with both him and his wife, she seems to have been especially attached to him. She wrote the Brays in October that she had already come to love him “as a father and brother” (Letters 1:316-17). Her description of his “deformed spine—the result of an accident in his boyhood,” calls to mind Philip Wakem, whom the character Maggie also loved as a brother. Mary Ann also became fond of Mme. d’Albert, whom she called “Maman,” and by February of 1850 described as “just the creature one loves to lean on and be petted by.” As Haight remarks, however, “she leaned even more on Maman’s little husband” (Biography 77). When the time came for Mary Ann to return to England in March, Durade accompanied her to London, although he could “ill afford it,” as Laski observes (34).

Her return to England to be reunited with her relatives was less happy than expected. Apparently she felt unwelcome at Isaac’s: “It was some envious demon that drove me across the Jura to come and see people who don’t want me” (Letters 1:335), she wrote to Sara; and although she felt Chrissey “much kinder than any one else in the family,” she also felt “delighted that I am of no importance to any of [my relatives], and have no motive for living amongst them” (336). For several months she lived with the Brays. It was during this time that she wrote her first article for John Chapman, the publisher of the Westminster Review. In mid-November of 1850 she delivered the article to his house (and publishing business) in London, where she then stayed on for two weeks as a boarder.

Marian’s experience at the Chapmans’ home repeats, perhaps with added intensity, the pattern of her earlier emotional involvements with
married men. The fact that Chapman, a "notorious philanderer," to use Haight's words, already had not only a wife, but a mistress in his household, created a conflict between Marian and the other two women which precipitated her premature departure (Biography 85, 86). The relationship between Chapman and Marian has been the subject of much speculation among gossips and biographers, but most agree that at the very least, it involved a mutual infatuation; whether or not the infatuation actually developed into a sexual relationship is unknown. Devoting a whole volume to the story of their relationship, Haight concludes that "there is little question that she was guilty of some indiscretion [during her initial stay at his house], which was probably magnified by the exacerbated feelings of the other ladies" (GE & JC 22). Although she returned to his household at the end of 1851 to work for him as assistant editor for the Westminster Review, it was only possible because they had agreed earlier to a "solemn and holy vow which henceforth will bind us to the right," as Chapman expresses it in his June 5 entry in his diary (GE & JC 175). McDonnell is among the critics who suggest that the infatuation for Chapman "may have influenced [Eliot's] depiction of Stephen Guest" (381).

While Marian was working for Chapman, she met Herbert Spencer, with whom she established another lifelong friendship. Biographers have emphasized all that the two friends had in common. They were the same age and had both come to London from the Midlands to earn their living as writers. Furthermore, as Haight explains, "Both were engaged as assistant editors of liberal periodicals and lived with their employers, exactly opposite each other in the Strand" (GE & JC 48). They also shared many common interests, and began frequently to attend concerts and go on walks together. No doubt because they were such good friends, and because they were both single, people began to think of them as engaged. Marian wrote the Brays in April 1852, however, that "We have agreed that we are not in love with each other" (Letters 2:22), although she also wrote in May that "my brightest spot next to my love of old friends, is the deliciously calm new friendship that Herbert Spencer gives me. We see each other every day and have a delightful camaraderie in everything" (29). Apparently Spencer had no interest in marriage, although biographers believe that Marian pursued him. Her letter to him in July (written, according to Haight, after his rejection of her love) reveals the intensity of her feeling for him at the time: "I want to
know if you can assure me that you will not forsake me, that you will always be with me as much as you can and share your thoughts and feelings with me. If you become attached to some one else, then I must die, but until then I could gather courage to work and make life valuable, if only I had you near me" (8:56–57). Two weeks later, however, she was able to write, "It would be ungenerous in me to allow you to suffer even a slight uneasiness on my account which I am able to remove. I ought at once to tell you, since I can do so with truth, that I am not unhappy. . . . If, as you intimated in your last letter, you feel that my friendship is of value to you for its own sake—mind on no other ground—it is yours" (8:61). Although one biographer, Ruby Redinger, questions the idea that Mary Ann could have "swung with such intensity from man to man to man [Chapman to Spencer to Lewes] (210)," it fits her ongoing pattern (no doubt exacerbated by the death of her father and her sense of homelessness upon her return to England from the Continent) of susceptibility to infatuations, which can indeed shift easily and rapidly from one temporarily idealized love object to another.

Marian also met G. H. Lewes while she was working for Chapman at the Westminster Review. Lewes was a good friend of Herbert Spencer's, and the two sometimes stopped in together to visit Marian. Haigh records that "on one of these visits [apparently in the fall of 1852], when Spencer rose to leave, Lewes signified that he was going to stay; this, said Spencer [in a letter in 1884], was the beginning of their intimacy" (Biography 128). By November 1852, she referred to one of Lewes's chats in a letter to the Brays. At the same time that she was getting to know Lewes, she was becoming increasingly discontented with her work at the Review; she longed to free herself of the burden of working with Chapman, whose business was struggling. By October 1853 she had changed her lodgings—a move which most biographers believe marked the beginning of her union with Lewes. Although Lewes had been happily married to Agnes Jervis, with whom he had had four sons, the couple eventually suffered the consequences of their belief in free love. They had been estranged since October 1851, after Agnes had born his friend Thornton Hunt's child and become pregnant with a second. The fact that Lewes had accepted the first illegitimate child as his own (thus condoning his wife's adultery) prevented him, according to the limitations of English law at the time, from obtaining a divorce later (132). In July 1854, when he and Marian decided to take a trip to the Continent
together, the couple left for Germany by boat, where, in Haight’s words, “Like Maggie and Stephen Guest aboard the Dutch vessel, Marian paced up and down the deck, leaning on George’s arm” (148). Marian’s series of infatuations with married men had culminated in her choice of Lewes, with whom an elopement would inevitably precipitate a scandal. The sequence of relationships suggests that Eliot’s “dependence on the arm of man” (Haight, Biography 52, quoting Edith Simcox) was combined with aggression in the form of defiance toward society’s values.

Eliot’s choice of the forbidden Lewes can be seen as a self-perpetuation of her childhood and adolescent sense of alienation from family and society. Although Eliot did not often allude directly in writing to such feelings, a few references in letters of her friends to mutual acquaintances reveal that she had talked with them about her unhappiness with her family. In March 1842, during the Evans’s “Holy War,” Cara Bray wrote Sara Hennell that “poor Miss Evans . . . says not one of her family seems to care what becomes of her” (Letters 1:130). In December 1854, shortly after the elopement with Lewes, Charles Bray wrote George Combe that “[Marian’s] own relations . . . have never noticed her—never appreciated her” (8:131). Years later, in 1869, Emily Davies recorded a conversation with Eliot about The Mill on the Floss: “I asked if she had known actual people like the Dodsons, and she said ‘Oh, so much worse.’ . . . She considers that in the Mill on the Floss, everything is softened, as compared with real-life. Her own experience she said was worse” (8:465). Eliot’s earlier denial of any intention of portraying either the Dodsons or Tom negatively in her statement to Dallas that “no one class of persons [in The Mill] . . . is held up to reprobation or to exclusive admiration,” probably reflects the depths of her own unacknowledged negative feelings toward her own relatives, on whom her characters were based. Her real-life love for Lewes, however, seems to have successfully replaced her disappointing childhood attachments. Moreover, the relationship seems to have provided the mutually reinforcing, nurturing environment that Eliot needed for her creative gifts to unfold.

Eliot’s failure to see Maggie as readers see her seems to derive from her own faulty self-perception. I would suggest that in The Mill on the Floss, George Eliot projects the idealized self-image of her youth onto her character Maggie Tulliver. By rationalizing Maggie’s behavior with
Philip, Stephen, and Dr. Kenn, Eliot justifies her own pattern of behavior, including her choice of Lewes, and defends herself against her family's and society's judgment. Her failure to separate her own life from her heroine's results in a work of art flawed by decreasing control over the narrative as the novel approaches its deus ex machina ending.