

**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE MILL ON THE FLOSS BY**  
**GEORGE ELIOT**

**A Minor Research Project Report In English**

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**Submitted by**  
**Name: SIMRAN KUMARI**  
**CLASS : B.A III YEAR**  
**ROLL NO: 210055301675**

**INTERNAL EXAMINAR/SUPERVISOR**  
**PROFESSOR MONIKA BHATNAGAR**

## **SELF-DECLARATION BY CANDIDATE**

I **SIMRAN KUMARI** daughter of , **SHASHI KUMAR JHA** do hereby declare that the Minor Project Report entitled ‘**CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE MILL ON THE FLOSS BY GEORGE ELIOT**’ which is being presented as partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of **BACHELOR OF ARTS** , submitted to Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut, is an authentic record of my own work carried out during a period from **JAN 24** to **JUNE 24** under the supervision of **PROFESOR MONIKA BHATNAGAR, DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**, Meerut College, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh .

The matter presented in this project report in full or part, has not been submitted by me for the award of any other degree elsewhere.

**Name : SIMRAN KUMARI**

**Roll No.: 210055301675**

**EnrollmentNo.:21114286**

**CLASS: B.A III YEAR**

## **CERTIFICATE**

It is certified that the minor project entitled, "**CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE MILL ON THE FLOSS BY GEORGE ELIOT**", project code **A040604R** submitted for the award of degree of **BACHELOR OF ARTS** to Ch. Charan Singh University, Meerut, is a bonafide work carried out by **SIMRAN KUMARI** bearing Roll No. **210055301675** and Enrollment No. **21114286** under my supervision and guidance. The above said project has not been submitted to any other University for any degree.

This is further certified that, **SIMRAN KUMARI** has worked for the prescribed period and completed her attendance in the **DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**, Meerut College, Meerut.

**DATE:.....**

**PLACE:.....**

**PROFESOR MONIKA BHATNAGAR**

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
MEERUT COLLEGE, MEERUT**

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**SIMRAN KUMARI**

**Roll No: 210055301675**

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## INTRODUCTION

*The Mill on the Floss* is a novel by English author George Eliot, first published in three volumes on 4 April 1860 by William Blackwood and Sons. The first American edition was published by Harper & Brothers, Publishers, New York.

Plaque in Gainsborough, Lincolnshire, noting it as the model for St Ogg's: "one of those old, old towns which impress one as a continuation and outgrowth of nature, as much as the nests of the bower-birds or the winding galleries of the white ants; a town which carries

the traces of its long growth and history like a millennial tree, and has sprung up and developed in the same spot between the river and the low hill from the time when the Roman legions turned their backs on it from the camp on the hillside, and the long-haired sea-kings came up the river and looked with fierce, eager eyes at the fatness of the land."

Spanning a period of 10 to 15 years, the novel details the lives of Tom and Maggie Tulliver, siblings who grow up at Dorlcote Mill on the River Floss. The mill is at the confluence of the Floss and the smaller River Ripple, near the village of St Ogg's in Lincolnshire, England. Both the rivers and the village are fictional.

*The Mill on the Floss* is an example of a *bildungsroman*, or a novel that traces its protagonist's development from childhood to adulthood. The novel is also an example of Victorian literature, as it was published in 1860, and contains themes related to women and a complicated plot with several side stories.

The story follows Maggie Tulliver, a bright girl whose older brother, Tom, is less intellectual. Maggie eventually gets to know and like Tom's schoolmate, Philip Wakem, who is disabled, but Tom disapproves of their relationship. Maggie's father engages in a lawsuit that he loses, while Wakem's father supports his opponent. Mr. Tulliver's lawsuit causes his health to suffer, and he eventually dies. Maggie visits her cousin, Lucy, and gets involved with her friend, Stephen Guest, who asks Maggie to run away with him. They spend the night in a boat that has drifted on the water, and Maggie is treated as a fallen woman as a result. In the end, she dies while trying to rescue her brother, Tom, from a flood. Nevertheless, this story has many elements of the *bildungsroman*, as it shows a girl's growth to womanhood.

# GEORGE ELIOT



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**MARY ANN EVANS**, known by her pen name **GEORGE ELIOT**, was an English novelist, poet, journalist, translator, and one of the leading writers of the Victorian era. Her real name was Mary Ann Evans but she used a male pen name, as female authors were believed to be writing only lighthearted novels in those days and she wanted to be taken seriously as well as break that stereotype. She authored seven novels, known for their realism and psychological insight. Her books were mainly appreciated for their descriptions of rural society, and she believed that there was much interest and importance in the mundane details of ordinary country lives. She is best remembered for 'Middlemarch', which was not just her masterpiece, but also one of the greatest novels in the history of English fiction. She worked as a translator as well, which exposed her to various German religious, social and philosophical texts, elements of which shown up in her fiction. She was not religious, but she held the belief that religious beliefs and tradition maintained a social order and morality. Eliot has

been placed by literary critic Harold Bloom as one of the greatest writers of the West. She wrote seven novels: **Adam Bede (1859), The Mill on the Floss (1860), Silas Marner (1861), Romola (1862–1863), Felix Holt, the Radical (1866), Middlemarch (1871–1872) and Daniel Deronda (1876)**. Like Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy, she emerged from provincial England; most of her works are set there.



## OVERVIEW

*The Mill on the Floss*, published in 1860, is a novel by George Eliot that follows the **Tulliver siblings, Maggie and Tom**, through their tumultuous lives in rural England. The novel explores themes of gender and class, as well as the tension between individual desires and societal expectations. Eliot drew on her own experiences growing up in rural England to write *The Mill on the Floss*, and the novel is often considered to be her most autobiographical work.

## CONTENT

*The Mill on the Floss* narrates the struggles of a girl and her family in the early years of Queen Victoria's reign over England. At that time, women's roles were strictly limited to housework and child rearing, and so girls—especially girls of Maggie's social class—were given only rudimentary educations. Maggie's story constitutes a protest against this kind of restriction; the reader is shown from the start that Maggie possesses a rich imagination and a keen mind but is supplied with no challenges or outlets for them. As a girl, she chafes constantly against the restrictions that are imposed upon her, preferring to read any books she can get her hands on to sewing her sampler, and always dirtying her clothes and disarranging her hair in her efforts to keep up with Tom. Worse, her sensitive and affectionate nature makes extremely painful to her the disapproval her extravagant flights of imagination, impatient desires, and “wild” behavior draw upon her from her mother, and especially from Tom, whom she adores. As a young woman, she achieves a certain serenity, despite her limiting occupation as a sewing teacher in a girls' school, but her desire for a wider life erupts into love for Stephen Guest, and the old conflict between passion and duty becomes very serious.

The novel presents Maggie's life in three periods: as a child of nine, as a girl of fourteen, and finally as a young woman of nineteen. In each period, the conflicts between her passions and her loyalty to family, and between her great potential and her society's restrictions are most clearly delineated in the relationships she forms with the boys or men whom she loves: Tom, Philip, and Stephen. Each of these three relationships follows the pattern of transgression (by Maggie), harsh judgment (of Maggie), and extreme remorse (within Maggie). With Tom, the judgment and punishment are confined to the two of them, but later, with Philip, the entire family unites against her when the clandestine friendship is discovered. Finally, the entire society of St. Ogg's condemns her for her relationship with Stephen, even though she has refused to elope with him.

Interwoven with Maggie's story are the struggles of her father against "the lawyers" and Tom's struggles under a tutor who does not understand or respect him. In the last phase of the novel, Mr. Tulliver has died, so Maggie's story with Stephen is counterpointed by Tom's efforts to support his mother and sister, and to make a successful business career for himself. In all the stories, Eliot's message is clear: A fitting education would have prevented many of these characters' troubles.

The novel ends with Maggie's final conflict: Unable to find work because of her spoiled reputation, and thus resolving to leave St. Ogg's, she receives a passionate letter from Stephen begging her to come away and marry him. Knowing that giving in to these desires would cause her to betray both Lucy and Philip, she resolves to refuse Stephen and burns his letter. Just then, the river, swollen from a violent storm, floods the town. Maggie rows to the millhouse to save Tom, but they are drowned under a massive piece of machinery that the river brings down upon them

## **THE MILL ON THE FLOSS THEME**

### **THEME OF LOVE**

Love goes hand in hand with suffering, which is pretty much par for the course in *The Mill on the Floss*. Love goes hand in hand with suffering here. Love in particular causes people pain, and it is always a matter of choice. Characters, especially Maggie, always have to choose between love for their family, romantic love, loving others, loving the self. Love is a matter of time too – who someone loves first, loves longest, and loves best is always an issue. Maggie in particular is consumed with a need for love in all its forms. Love is everything to Maggie.

### **THEME OF FAMILY**

Family is at the core of *The Mill on the Floss*. Most of the book's characters are somehow related, and the sibling relationship between Tom and Maggie is arguably the most important one in the book. Family is something inescapable, with positive and negative results, for the characters here. As frustrating and as painful as family relations often are, they are ultimately binding and unavoidable. Family duty is a powerful guiding principle here as well, to the point where it often completely overshadows individual desires. This book even

questions whether people do, or can, exist outside of their families, and whether or not it's possible to have an identity separate from the family.

## **THEME OF CHOICES**

Choices are rarely black and white in *The Mill on the Floss*. Though certain characters like to force people to choose between two arbitrary alternatives (we're looking at you, Tom), choices are rarely that easy. Choices are much more like a tangled web of competing options, none of which are absolutely right or absolutely wrong. Choice is also never without consequences, often very painful ones. In the end, characters have to decide not only what choice to make but also what factors to consider in making a choice. Do characters favor family in their decisions, or themselves? The past or the present, friendship or romance? Choices are endless and are infinitely complicated.

## **THEME OF HOME**

Home may be where the heart is, but in *The Mill on the Floss* it's also where the self is. Home isn't really just a place. And it's not something sappy like family either. Well, not entirely. Home is an entire network of familiar people, places, objects, and memories that enable a person to really be herself. Both Maggie and her father refuse to leave their homes, after all, saying that they would no longer be themselves if they left. For Maggie especially, home becomes a concept to which she clings, containing her family, her past, and herself.

## **THEME OF SUFFERING**

Suffering, particularly of the emotional variety, seems to be the one universal constant in *The Mill on the Floss*. Suffering isn't just expected by everyone, it's even welcome by some of them. Maggie and her masochistic tendencies, or her tendency to seek out and even embrace her own suffering, comes to mind. Since everyone in this book suffers, what distinguishes people is how they deal with suffering, both their own and the suffering of others.

## **THEME OF COMPASSION AND FORGIVENESS**

Compassion can be very hard to come by in *The Mill on the Floss*. Most characters seem more inclined to hold grudges, plot revenge, maintain prejudices, and spread rumors. The feelings of other people are often not considered. Yet, people lacking in compassion aren't presented as evil or even all that bad in this book. Compassion and the ability to forgive other people are hard qualities to maintain. And a lot of characters rationalize their lack of compassion and forgiveness. Tom sees his loyalty to his father as a good reason to maintain a grudge against the Wakems, for instance. Compassion and forgiveness are depicted as qualities worth fighting for, however.

## **THEME OF SOCIETY AND CLASS**

Mr. Tulliver probably sums up society best by calling it "puzzling." The society of St. Ogg's can be very confusing and even contradictory. Though the society here operates on strict rules, it is also prone to some pretty outlandish and harmful assumptions. Society can be also be quite cruel in *The Mill on the Floss*. Gossip and prejudice and judgmental attitudes seem to dominate. And a society this watchful can be a dangerous place too, where any action can be taken the wrong way. This confusing mess of rules and rumors is also one of the book's chief antagonists. Society allows and even encourages many characters to behave badly towards others.

## **THEME OF MEMORY AND CHILDHOOD**

Although *THE MILL ON THE FLOSS* covers about fifteen years in the lives of its protagonists, siblings constantly hearkens back to their childhood. In the novel, seemingly trivial incidences in those early years later take on new significance.

Maggie's conflict with Tom and her desire for his love and acceptance, for instance, is a thread that continues, is a thread that continues from their early lives at Dorlcote mill, through their school years.

## **HISTORICAL REVEIEW**

*The Mill on the loss* is set in the 1820s, in the period following the Napoleonic wars. In the wake of Britain's triumph, many of the inhabitants of St. Ogg's—a fictional town in Lincolnshire, a region in the northeast of England—feel confident about the British empire and its predominance in the world. At the same time, however, there are some suggestions of social and political unrest. Characters like Mr. Tulliver, Mr. Riley, and Mr. Deane make frequent reference to the “Catholic Question,” which is a reference to the Roman Catholic Relief Act (1829). This piece of legislation finally made it legal for Catholics to openly practice their faith, vote, and sit in Parliament, after centuries of disenfranchisement in England (a Protestant country since the sixteenth century). Although this was regarded as a step forward for religious tolerance, some characters in *The Mill on the Floss* worry that civil liberties for Catholics will lead to rebellion and dissent, suggesting that anti-Catholic prejudice was still deeply held in provincial areas like St. Ogg's. In addition, *The Mill on the Floss* is widely regarded as George Eliot's most autobiographical novel. Maggie Tulliver is often seen as an avatar for Eliot, who also grew up as a bookish and intelligent girl in a rural community, a farm in Warwickshire, that didn't support her literary ambitions. Maggie's volatile relationship with Tom recalls Eliot's relationship with her brother, Isaac. Isaac disapproved of Eliot living with a man (George Henry Lewes) outside of marriage. He and Eliot were estranged for many years as a result, just as Tom rejects Maggie after her botched elopement with Stephen Guest.

### **OTHER BOOKS RELATED TO *THE MILL ON THE FLOSS***

*The Mill on the Floss* is a bildungsroman—literally a “novel of education”—a book that centers on a young person's transition into adulthood. The bildungsroman was a very popular genre in nineteenth-century European

literature. Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850) and Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759), are prominent examples. With its focus on the coming of age of a young girl, Maggie Tulliver, *The Mill on the Floss* recalls other classic bildungsroman focused on female protagonists, like Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). In particular, Brontë's Jane closely resembles Eliot's Maggie: both women are bookish, passionate, have a rich interior emotional life, and struggle with the restrictions placed on women's behavior and choices in nineteenth-century Britain. In focusing on the unique challenges facing a woman's coming of age, Brontë and Eliot subvert the traditional bildungsroman narrative by reminding readers that a woman's growth into adulthood often involves a conflict between her intellectual ambitions and her prescribed social role.

## OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION

Upon completion of the *The Mill on the Floss*, I realized that I had just finished something monumental—a staggeringly amazing literary achievement. This novel, written by ‘**George Eliot**’ (**Mary Anne, or Marian Evans**), and first published by **Blackwood and Sons in 1860**, could have just as easily been titled, “*Pride and Prejudice*” had not that title been put to use already. Some days after finishing this book, I am coming to the conclusion that Eliot may, in fact, represent the absolute pinnacle of writing in the Victorian Age. This is not, in any way, shape, or form, a “Silly novel by a Lady Novelist” (see Eliot’s essay “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” *Westminster Review*, October 1856). This novel is not of the “mind-and-millinery,” “rank-and-beauty,” or of the “enigmatic” species. This is a novel in the finest tradition of Realism, and I can’t help but think that it must have served as some form of inspiration for the later naturalism of Thomas Hardy. This book should really be required reading for parents and brothers and sisters. The story of the young Maggie Tulliver, and her relationship with her older brother Tom and her parents is compelling, and is one that we can all relate to on so many levels. It warns us that actions, things said, or beliefs instilled upon the young can have profound implications for years to come. I suppose in some respects that *The Mill on the Floss* can also be considered to be the bildungsroman of Maggie Tulliver as Eliot clearly focuses on the psychological and moral growth of Maggie, her main protagonist, from when she was a little girl until she has become a young-adult. It is the ability (or inability) of Maggie to adapt to changes in her own life, and the lives of those she loves around her, that provides the main premise of the narrative.

even as a little girl, Maggie Tulliver is considered “contrary” and un-ladylike by her relatives. She speaks out of turn, reads too much, and engages in acts of rebellion like cutting off her **hair**. Her behavior is often contrasted unfavorably with that of her cousin, **Lucy Deane**, a model of perfect Victorian femininity. Lucy is sweet, obedient, and conventionally pretty, all of which are qualities valued in women in Victorian society. As Maggie and Lucy grow up, they experience womanhood in very different ways. While Lucy conforms to the social expectations of her gender, Maggie struggles against the restrictions placed on women’s lives and choices and becomes a social outcast as a result. The contrast between the fates of these two women suggests that Victorian society tends to both idealize women and harshly punish transgressions against the predominant social and sexual order.

Maggie’s passion, intelligence, and unconventionality are a poor fit for the narrow requirements and roles allotted to women in Victorian society. She is unable to reconcile herself to the passivity expected of women, and her acts of

rebellion against those conventions lead to social alienation. *The Mill on the Floss* suggests that Maggie is unable to find creative, intellectual, and sexual fulfillment because of the limited choices available to women in her community.

The highest purpose of *The Mill on the Floss*, as in all Eliot's novels, was to inspire sympathetic understanding for people in the lower classes and with a lower level of education, with different outlooks, temperaments, and backgrounds in general. Only with such understanding, Eliot believed, could the social problems of intolerance and prejudice—and all the injustices that result from them—begin to be resolved. She sets about achieving this purpose first of all in her characterizations. She gives the reader in minute social and psychological detail the thoughts and motivations of a panoply of different characters, from the coldly intellectual Lawyer Wakem (who nevertheless has a meltingly tender love for his son) to the irascible miller Mr. Tulliver, and from the narrow and simple Mrs. Tulliver to the warmly intelligent and passionate Maggie. This range of characters is typical of Eliot's novels, and it has the underlying effects of expressing the fullness of all individualities and of pressing upon readers the idea that all of them, including girls and women, deserve respect, liberty, and understanding.



## CONCLUSION

- The narrator jumps back in to tell us that St. Ogg's and the surrounding area quickly recovered after the flood. Tom and Maggie were the only victims.
- The mill was rebuilt.
- Tom and Maggie were buried together and the narrator tells us that two men often visited their tomb.
- One man had a female companion, years later.
- The other man always came by himself.
- We can assume this is Stephen with Lucy, and Philip.
- On the tomb, the names of Tom and Maggie were written along with a line: **"In their death they were not divided."**
- It mainly tell us about the strong affection and pure love between a brother and a sister.
- Brought up at Dorlcote Mill, Maggie Tulliver worships her brother Tom and is desperate to win the approval of her parents, but her passionate, wayward nature and her fierce intelligence bring her into constant conflict with her family. As she reaches adulthood, the clash between their expectations and her desires is painfully played out as she finds herself torn between her relationships with three very different men: her proud and stubborn brother, a close friend who is also the son of her family's worst enemy, and a charismatic but dangerous suitor. With its poignant portrayal of sibling relationships, *The Mill on the Floss* is considered George Eliot's most autobiographical novel; it is also one of her most powerful and moving.

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