

Victorian Research Seminar April 13: *The Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot

Luke and Lanie

Close Read the Opening

- Read first two pages aloud
- The Floss as a character > How lovely the little river is with its dark, changing wavelets! It seems to me like a living companion while I wander along the bank and listen to its low placid voice, as to the voice of one who is deaf and loving (9).
- Establishes the significance of water in the novel; think about questions of foreshadowing and rereading
- **Nithya's Crit Sum of Freedgood and Schmitt** > By stumbling over each detail in a slow and ungainly way, reading denotatively highlights some of the buried archives within texts that can be read alongside it.
- A reality effect of sorts?

Close Read the Ending

- Close reading of epigraph and conclusion > In their death, they were not divided.
- How does Eliot view the novel as an aesthetic whole? Try comparing Eliot to [Reade](#), for example. ++ Together in death, yet apart in life ++ Gives away some of the ending on title page (and in Chapter 2): > You'll tumble in and be drowned some day, an' then you'll be sorry you didn't do as mother told you (16). ++ Parallels to [biblical passage about Saul and Jonathan](#)

Metaphor

- What is Eliot saying about metaphor by indicating the function of changing the metaphor? > It is astonishing what a different result one gets by changing the metaphor! (147)
- What are some other examples of thinking about metaphor in the novel?

Familial Relations

- What effect does the immediate Tulliver family's interactions with their extensive extended family have on the centralization of Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver and Tom and Maggie to the plot?

- How does the difference between Mrs. Tulliver's relationships with Maggie and with Tom cultivate our understanding of Tom and Maggie's respective roles in the novel? > However, if Tom's to go to a new school, I should like him to go where I can wash him and mend him (12) > But I'm sure the child's half a idiot i' some things, for if I send her up-stairs to fetch anything she forgets what she's gone for (15)
- Tom seeks to save the family; Maggie undermines it (Philip)

Gender

- Maggie's education undermines her femininity > ... a woman's no business wi' being so clever; it'll turn to trouble, I doubt (20). > 'The History of the Devil, by Daniel Defoe; not quite the right book for a little girl,' said Mr. Riley (21).
- What constitutes the ideal Victorian mother? Wife? Daughter? ... according to Eliot and the other authors we've read
- How does Maggie compare to this ideal? How does Lucy? > 'And your plain sewing is so beautiful, Maggie,' said Lucy, 'that I think I shall beg a few specimens of you to show as fancy-work. Your exquisite sewing is quite a mystery to me - you used to dislike that sort of work so much in the old days.' (393)
- **Yumi's Close Reading** > This passage seems like one example of the text instructing the reader in how to close-read realist detail, while simultaneously training them to "close-read" the people they encounter in real life in much the same way.

Education and Dialect

- Mr. Tulliver's dialect suggests the limitations to his class mobility > ... what I want, is to give Tom a good eddication: an eddication as'll be a bread to him. ... I should like Tom to be a bit of a scholard (11).
- Compare/contrast Tulliver siblings with [OMF Hexam siblings](#)
- How does education contribute to the success and/or downfall of the Tulliver family?
- Book within a Book: intertextuality ++ Maggie's constant reading (i.e. *The History of the Devil* by Daniel Defoe)

Narrator Style

- Why use two narrators of seemingly different styles? What would [Dorrit Cohn](#) say about the narrative style in *MOTF*? ++ Why is Sophie the character who possess both narrative styles?

- Narratorial intrusion > Ah, my arms are really benumbed. I have been pressing my elbows on the arms of my chair and dreaming that I was standing on the bridge in front of Dorlcote Mill as it looked one February afternoon many years ago. Before I dozed off, I was going to tell you what Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver were talking about as they sat by the bright fire in the left-hand parlour on that very afternoon I have been dreaming of.
- question of time and setting

Break

Race

- **RJ's Crit Sum of Hack** > Harper and later writers, according to Hack, return to passages from *The Spanish Gypsy* for its 'call for the uplifting of a downtrodden, stigmatized race,' solidifying the claim that Eliot's portrayal of an oppressed gypsy people creates possible parallels with the oppressed African Americans committed to empowering themselves as a unified race (270).
- The Spanish Gypsy
- How does the role of marginalized groups in Victorian literature go on to shape later minority social commentators? ++ Relate back to Freedgood and Schmitt. How does reading *MOTF* from a different perspective change our reading of the novel?
- According to Hack, black people accept Eliot more than Stowe due to her recognition of racial identity and a call to help marginalized races > ... although invocations and adaptations of Eliot's work typically eschew the ultimate form this commitment takes in *Daniel Deronda* – the establishment of a separate homeland – they tend to cluster nonetheless around aspects of Eliot's oeuvre that emphasize racial identity, solidarity, and exclusivity, including a plot Eliot pioneers that is not present in Stowe (266).

Country vs. city

- How do we understand the relationship between these two worlds? Is it characterized by animosity, respect, neither, both?
- Mr. Tulliver's relationship with Mr. Riley > But them fine-talking men from the big towns mostly wear the false shirt-fronts; they wear a frill till it's all a mess, and then hide it with a bib; I know Riley does. And then, If Tom's to go and live at Mudport, like Riley, he'll have a house with a kitchen hardly big enough to turn in, an' niver get a fresh egg for his breakfast, an' sleep up three pair o' stairs. . . (14) > Mr. Riley: a gentleman with a waxen complexion and fat hands, rather highly educated for an

auctioneer and appraiser, but large-hearted enough to show a great deal of bonhomie towards simple country acquaintances (17).

- **Corey's Crit Sum of Eliot** > Recognizing the ambiguities of abstract words, she problematizes terms like "the People" or "the masses" to reveal how little is actually known about "real" country life, then lambasts the distorting influence of romances and calls instead for an art that effectively guides sympathy to "true" ends. After establishing the connection between German and English peasants, Eliot moves into discussion of Riehl's methods, philosophy, and works, which capture the "incarnate history" of society and are thus offered as prime examples of what literature should aim for. > The essay returns to romance novelists by accusing them of "transfer[ing] their own feelings to ploughmen and woodcutters, and giv[ing] them both joys and sorrows of which they know nothing" (62). > Language is unstable: 'one word stands for many things, and many words for one thing...'
- How does this relate to [Foucault's](#) idea of naming/classification and natural history? > But that same Nature has the deep cunning which hides itself under the appearance of openness, so that simple people think they can see through her quite well, and all the while she is secretly preparing a refutation of their confident prophecies.

Social Classes and Class Mobility

- **Gaby's Seminar Paper: A Provincial Advancement in Representations of Subjectivity** > *The Mill on the Floss's* central character, Maggie Tulliver, is Eliot's attempt to show what it would really be like if the literary class's subjectivity were present in a character of that class. > ... Eliot aims for 'truer' representations of working class people as psychologically and culturally complex subjects regardless to their exposure to 'literary' upper class values.
- This paper again raises questions about language and word associations. In addition, it raises questions about the validity of personal experience and organization in the novel. How might [Bakhtin](#) apply to this argument?
- Recall Freedgood and Schmitt's assertion that it is possible to separate "useful" and "technical" language. Is separating these two categories of language useful or pertinent to novels that delve into social issues? Why or why not?