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MORAL CONFLICT IN GEORGE ELIOT'S *THE MILL ON THE FLOSS*

Conflict is defined in the *Longman Dictionary of Psychology and Psychiatry* as the “clash of opposing or incompatible emotional or motivational forces such as drives, impulses, or wishes”. In psychoanalytic terms, conflict is a “struggle taking place between conscious and unconscious forces especially, id, ego and superego” (170). In literature and in real life humans encounter many kinds of internal and external conflicts. Conflict is considered to be the essence of a drama, as it gives depth and intensity to the plot, which according to Aristotle, is the soul of the drama. It may be internal, within the heart of a person, as in Hamlet, (“to be or not to be”) or external, between people –emotional, physical or ideological conflict. An internal conflict is a good test of a character’s values. Does the character give in to temptation or rise above it? Does the character even bother to struggle? The internal conflicts of a character and how they are resolved are good clues to the character’s inner strength. Internal conflict adds meaning and complexity to the external conflict, but it's the external conflict that forces a character to make, internal choices and changes.

George Eliot presents in her novels actions which usually concentrate into a crisis that manifests itself in a drama. My paper explores the internal drama enacted within the souls of the protagonists in Eliot’s novels with special focus on Maggie Tulliver, the central character of *The Mill on the Floss*. How does one’s, family, society, religion and philosophy influence one’s personality, thoughts and actions would be analyzed through the character of Maggie. *The Mill on the Floss* presents with deep psychological realism the drama of moral conflict enacted within the human soul. Moral conflict involves, as is described in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the “moral philosophy which is concerned with what is morally good and bad, right and wrongThe ethics or morality of a person or group, consists not only in what they habitually or customarily do but in what they think it is fitting, right, or obligatory to do” (“Ethics”,578).This type of conflict concerns egocentric impulses, good or bad, with an opposing environment and the antagonistic forces take many forms.

As a literary device conflict is used by many writers to create a complex situation, a dilemma, which needs to be resolved by a process of choice-making. The choice made by the characters reflects their personality. In *Sons and Lovers* D.H Lawrence used the element of conflict to present two fundamental needs of a person namely, emotional and physical, through the protagonist Paul Morel. Miriam Leivers with her moral earnestness responds to a spiritual need in him, while Clara Dawes who is five years older to him arouses and fulfills a physical passion. The conflict in Paul's mind between physical and the spiritual inclinations brings to fore deep psychological and emotional turmoil. In *The Mill on the Floss*, conflict is used at various levels both external and internal: the conflict between the life-style and ideals of the Dodsons and Tullivers, between the personalities of Tom and Maggie, Tom and Philip, the conflict between the ideals and values adhered by the family and community at large and Maggie's individuality. Internal conflict within the heart of a character is most potently used by Eliot to present Maggie's emotional turmoil in her relationship with Philip Wakem and later with Stephen West. D.H.Lawrence made use of conflict in a similar manner in *Sons and Lovers* to present Paul's dilemma. However unlike Paul, Maggie's conflict is of a moral nature. She faces deep moral crisis in deciding between marrying Stephen or to adhere by her moral values. A person undergoing moral conflict suffers from qualms of conscience and guilt as the concept of good and bad, right and wrong forces itself. The choice between one's personal desires and moral duty gives rise to a lot of mental and emotional conflict. Moral purpose was the keynote of the literature of Victorian age. Both prose and poetry, departed from the purely artistic standard of art for art's sake, and to be actuated by a definite moral purpose. Tennyson, Browning, Carlyle, Ruskin-were the teachers of England, with the conscious moral aim to uplift and to instruct. Even the novel breaks away from Scott's romantic influence, and first studies life as it is and then points out what life may and ought to be. Whether the fun and sentiment of Dickens, the social miniature of Thackeray or the psychological studies of George Eliot, we find a definite purpose to reveal the underlying truth of human life.

George Eliot's whole life and career were permeated by moral passion. Cut off from the usual outlets for religious emotion by the rationalism to which she adhered from the early years at Coventry, she poured out her whole soul at the shrine of duty, and her novels reveal an absorbing interest in the problems of conduct. Her chief function as a writer was the interpretation of the world in terms of morality. She was concerned with great moral struggles beneath the surface of an existence which to the casual observer would seem dull and commonplace. Her central theme

was habitually the conflict between the higher and the lower life –duty and inclination. The insistence was on that the passions stood in need of a confronting rationality. R.P. Draper observes that for George Eliot moral choice was “ the central and most important feature of human life, but she recognizes that the making of choices take place in a context which includes conditioning elements beyond the individual’s control, and psychological elements , embedded in the past , of which the individual is not fully aware”(19). This is clearly manifested in the moral conflict Maggie faces in her relation with Philip and more agonizingly during her elopement with Stephen Guest and the difficulty she faces in resolving the conflict.

The Mill on the Floss spans a period of ten to fifteen years and delineates the lives of Tom and Maggie Tulliver, siblings growing up at Dorlcote Mill on the river Floss near the village of St.Ogg’s in Lincolnshire, England. The story revolves round the central character Maggie, her stormy relationship with her brother Tom, her friendship with Philip Wakem, a hunchbacked, sensitive and intellectual person, and her romantic relation with Stephen Guest, a vivacious young socialite in St. Ogg’s and assumed fiancé of Maggie’s cousin Lucy Deane. Maggie, an intelligent girl, earnestly seeks freedom and knowledge and has rich sympathy, but her ideas are incompatible with traditional ones, even her brother, Tom ridicules her free instinct, considering that she is impractical. Afterward Mr. Tulliver goes bankrupt because of a lawsuit, henceforth Tom is busy with repaying debts, and Maggie loses her father’s love and former happy days. Her two love experiences also encounter hindrance of social morals. The novel involves many autobiographical details and it reflects Eliot’s close childhood relationships with her father and her older brother Isaac.

In the person of Maggie Tulliver, Eliot presents a woman at the crossroads of tradition and change. As a child Maggie is a suppressed rebel, imaginative at heart, with an intellectual craving for books and for knowledge. She is both unruly and emotionally vulnerable, constantly harassed by adult demands for a feminine conformity which is alien to her nature. Eliot presents Maggie as more imaginative and interesting than the rest of her family and sympathetically in need of love. Maggie’s mother and aunts continually express disapproval with her rash behavior, uncanny intelligence, and unnaturally dark skin, hair, and eyes. Yet it is only her brother Tom’s opinion for which Maggie cares. She grows in an environment where her natural instincts for knowledge, her need for appreciation and for love are suppressed and unquenched.

The childhood conflicts between Maggie and her mother, and between Maggie and the Dodsons, illustrates the beginning of her troubles. She rebels against their values and takes refuge in the world of dreams. When Maggie quarrels with her mother, she goes to the attic and avenges herself on the wooden doll. Since her father always favours her, he takes her side against her aunts. Tom takes a neutral position, which is in accordance with his philosophy that everyone should suffer the consequences of one's actions. Once he has made up his mind, he does not change it and he favours punishment. Maggie does not act according to reason as Tom does, but according to intuition, emotion and heart. Tom's pragmatic and reserved nature clashes with Maggie's idealism and fervor for intellectual gains and experience. Maggie loves her brother unconditionally while Tom's love for her is governed by his own standard of approval and he clearly tells her that he would not love her if she would turn into a "nasty", "disagreeable" and "conceited" thing. Maggie yearns for Tom's love but is made to feel "mortified" and humiliated by his rude remarks (154).

The conflict between the brother and sister is progressively intensified when Maggie's feelings of guilt and her diffidence come as a consequence of her impulsive actions. When they go to Garum Firs, Tom forsakes her for their cousin Lucy, and as a consequence Maggie throws Lucy in the mud. These childhood events reflect the conflict that grows in Maggie, and are fore-shadowing of later events. As Maggie approaches adulthood her spirited temperament brings her into conflict with her family, her community, and her much-loved brother Tom. Still more painfully, she finds her own nature divided between the claims of moral responsibility and her passionate hunger for self-fulfillment. Maggie's was a conflict, as the narrator describes "between the internal impulse and outward fact, which is the lot of every imaginative and passionate nature" (275- 6).

Tom and Maggie have a close yet complex bond which continues throughout the novel. The conflict between Tom and Maggie reflects on hereditary conflict between the Tullivers and the Dodsons that symbolically represents the values of the heart and reason respectively. The novel analyzes with deep psychological insight Tom and Maggie's relationship and their childhood experience in a conflicting world and the influence of this atmosphere of conflict on their character formation. Tom's denial of love contrasts with Maggie's strong need for love. Maggie is shown as a creature "full of eager, passionate longings for all that was beautiful and glad...with a blind unconsciousness of this mysterious life and give her soul a sense of home in it" (237). Maggie's great desire for appreciation and approval of her brother and Tom's brusque response to her

affections becomes the cause of her “inward strife” which also influences most of the actions taken by her in the novel (427).

F.B.Pinion points out that when Maggie’s greatest need to be loved, especially by her brother remains unfulfilled, she “escapes into a world of make-believe, and the link between her inner world and the outer is broken”. (110). Maggie is clever than Tom, but leaves school, as the narrator points out, “with a soul untrained for inevitable struggles, quite without that knowledge of the irreversible laws within and without her, which governing the habits, becomes morality, and developing the feelings of submission and dependence, becomes religion” (287). The collision between Maggie’s desire for self gratification and her sense of moral duty towards others in different situations not only brings forth the tension and drama in the novel but also establishes the triumph of principle over feeling, as in *Adam Bede*, George Eliot described the dreadful result of giving feeling the victory. At the centre of the novel is, as pointed out by Draper “Maggie’s attachment to her family and the conflicting demands made on her romantically impulsive nature and growing intelligence. She loves her environment and yet is at odds with it. ” (234). Eliot uses realism to illustrate the moral and psychological problems that result from the conflict between the character’s will and the pressures from the outside.

The moral conflict in *The Mill* comes to surface at the most crucial and pivotal moments of choices in Maggie’s life. These moments are moments of temptation which promise a life full of pleasure and happiness for her. Her choice in these critical moments has important consequences and unravels the underlying moral cast of a potential rebel. One such conflict emerged in her relationship with Philip Wakem, a crippled boy and the son of Mr Wakem, who was the professional rebel of Mr.Tulliver. In her childhood Maggie had developed an instinctive liking for Philip and was drawn towards him because “as a cripple he commands her pity and because his keen and well-furnished mind wins her respect” (Bennett, 113) .In the company of Philip, Maggie found moments of repose and comfort. Philip also fulfilled her longing for brotherly love which Tom failed to give her. However this relationship was stifled due to the growing enmity between the Tullivers and the Wakems. Various family crises including the loss of the lawsuit with the lawyer Wakem over the use of the river Floss, bankruptcy and the consequent illness of Mr Tulliver, added further to the growing emotional unrestfulness within Maggie.

Maggie had to find a way in which she could live in the world of suffering which follows Tulliver’s ruin. Tom and Maggie have to leave school and start working. The loss of the mill brings out the

opposition between Maggie's former world of dreams and her later world of suffering. The "golden gate" of Maggie's girlhood close behind her and she went forth into her "new life of sorrow" and entered the "thorny wilderness" with the coming of her adolescence (196). She also lost touch with her father, who was her only support, because of his growing "insensibility" due to his illness. He was the only person who had "always defended and excused her" against all oppositions, but now he too was in a sort of a "living death" (208). During these difficult times of her growing up, looking for some explanation of her "hard, real life", she comes across the book *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a` Kempis given to her by Bob Jakins, a childhood friend of Tom (285). The religious writings recommend abandoning one's cares for oneself and focusing instead on unearthly values and suffering of others. She reads the lessons of renunciation and thinks it the key to a happy life. She discovers peace in self-renunciation and starts leading a life of deprivation and penance. Under the influence of religious fervor, Maggie stifles her desire for books, knowledge, music and all that her intrinsic nature demanded. She imposes on herself an outward barrier to curb all passion.

Maggie finds consolation in religion and learns to remain submissive, nevertheless she still experiences, as the narrator reveals "some volcanic upheavings of imprisoned passions, her own life still a drama in which her part has to be played with intensity" (288). The passivity and self-renunciation lead Maggie to an irresolvable conflict, because her nature is an emotional one. The sharp contrast with Maggie's childhood when she reacts like a rebel is made more salient by Maggie's passivity under the influence of religion. K.M.Newton in *George Eliot: Romantic Humanist* points out that Maggie's period under the influence of a` Kempis "corresponds somewhat to Romola's period under the influence of Savona and Catholicism. Both are unsatisfactory because they are adopted as rigid moral frames to suppress all strong feeling in the interest of moral action and also to escape the inner turmoil created by conflicting feelings"(108).

The suppressed upheavals in Maggie's heart come to fore and her renunciation is tested when Philip reappears in her life after a gap of several years, and urges her to meet him occasionally. The thought of meeting Philip in secret hurts her conscience, as meeting him would be against the will of her father and brother who had forbidden her to have any connection with Philip. She undergoes deep emotional conflict when meeting Philip at the Red Deeps as for her this action "so near doubleness would act as a spiritual blight" (304). At the same time she also felt that the "wrong lay in the faults and weaknesses of others, and that there was such a thing as futile sacrifice

for one to the injury of another". She feels sorry for Philip, knowing that her father's vindictiveness is unjustifiable. To meet Philip secretly was to betray her family and not to meet him was to inflict pain on Philip for whom, as he said, Maggie was "the only thing to be glad of life" (303). Moreover it would deprive her of the world she longed for "away from all that was harsh and unlovely" (324). Psychoanalytically Maggie's conflict can be described as "approach-avoidance conflict" which involves strong tendencies both to approach and to avoid the same goal. Approach – avoidance conflicts are sometimes referred to as mixed blessing dilemmas because some negative and some positive features must be accepted regardless of which course of action is chosen (Coleman, 111).

In the chapter titled "The Wavering Balance" Maggie's conflict is reflected in the two voices in her mind. In her relation with Philip she felt "the sweet music of the world where she might have books, converse, affection-she might hear tidings of the world from which her mind had not yet lost its sense of exile" and the other voice, the "monotonous warning"-that, by "forsaking the simple rule of renunciation, she was throwing herself under the seductive guidance of illimitable wants"(324) . In their walks together at the Red Deeps, she explains to Philip that she had found "great peace" in the last few years of her renunciation and "even joy in subduing my own will". Philip argues "vehemently" with Maggie and tells her that she was "shutting" herself in "narrow, self-delusive fantasies, which is only a way of escaping pain by starving into dullness all the highest powers" of her personality (326). He urges her to get rid of "the veil of dull quiescence", over her "wit and bright imagination". Philip persuades Maggie to abandon the self-imposed barriers to her intrinsic desires .He argues with her that "no one has strength given to do what is unnatural. It is mere cowardice to seek safety in negations. No character becomes strong in that way" (327). Philip gradually wins her resistance by means of sublimation; he offers her books, music and art. Later on Philip makes more explicit his love for Maggie, who is led by impulsive nature to promise that they would "belong to each other –for always-whether we are apart or together" (334). Maggie's renunciation is a way of conforming to her dreary, monotonous life and contrasts with her yearnings for a life full of learning and freedom.

Philip tries to convince Maggie that the enmity between their fathers should not come between their friendship and argues that "it is not right to sacrifice everything to other people's unreasonable feelings...I would give up a great deal for my father; but I would not give up a friendship or –or an attachment of any sort, in obedience to any wish of his that I didn't

recognize as right” (302). As Maggie continues to meet Philip secretly, against her father’s wishes, her internal struggle seems to shift. Maggie’s conflict was between her duty towards others and fulfillment of self-desire. She expresses this in her reply to Philip as she says that” [Often] when I have been angry and discontented it has seemed to me that I was not bound to give up anything...I could think away all my duty. But no good has ever come of that-it was an evil state of mind .I’m quite sure that whatever I might do, I should wish in the end that I had gone without anything for myself, rather than made my father’s life harder to him”(302). One can discern the moral strain in Maggie’s personality which is strongly reflected later in her decision to reject Stephen.

Walter Allen observes that Eliot portrays in her novels characters who are in opposition to people like the Dodson sisters in the *Mill* and can be described as ‘free-spirits’, a phrase used by C.B.Cox in his book of that name, “characters for whom, as for George Eliot herself, traditional morality, however admirable is not enough”. Such characters “can be satisfied with no moral code that does not express their sense of the potentialities within them” (92-93). Their great representatives are Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* and Maggie Tulliver in the *Mill*. Allen also points out that for the ‘free spirits’ duty is not that plain and “may even appear as a choice between duties that seem to conflict, it is the more awful, and the obligation to follow it the more imperative.” It was in Allen’s view, the “thoroughness and cautiousness of [Eliot’s] investigations into the problems of conduct as they face the ‘free spirit’, who must be responsible to [themselves] in the absence of traditional and religious sanctions felt as binding, that George Eliot’s great moral authority in the nineteenth century rested”(93-94).

Maggie’s life seems to her as a series of conflicts. The narrator expresses this in saying that Maggie “used to think that (in her renunciation) in that time that she had made great conquests, and won a lasting stand on serene heights above worldly temptations and conflicts” (345). However with her renewed relation with Philip, she found herself again in the “thick of a hot strife with her own and other’s passions... and her heart bled for Philip”. Maggie is afraid to hurt Philip’s feelings, and is also fearful to face the responsibility of her action, because to be sincere with Philip is to be deceptive towards her father. And so when she is discovered by Tom and she decides to end her meetings with Philip she was “conscious of a certain dim background of relief in the forced separation from Philip and surely, it was because the sense of a deliverance from concealment was

welcome at any cost” (345). The relief Maggie feels in her separation from Philip comes from a feeling of having overcome “selfish-desires” and an “evil state of mind” (302,325). Thus, Philip and Maggie’s relation undergoes a deadlock and is held in a precarious suspension. On the one hand Maggie feels relieved from the feelings of sin by concealment, her other half, still, pines for companionship with Philip, with these conflicting feelings she passes from the “valley of humiliation” and a state of “wavering balance” to enter, the domain of “The Great Temptation”.

Maggie’s moral conflict intensifies as she is launched into the social world of St. Oggs, through her cousin Lucy’s influence. Lucy has a handsome and rich suitor Stephen Guest and they are friends with Philip Wakem. When she encounters Stephen her situation has become especially dangerous her future she thought “was likely to be worse than her past, she had slipped back into desires and longing”. She found “the image of the intense and varied life she yearned for, and despaired of, becoming more and more importunate” (370). Due to their mutual attraction Maggie and Stephen spend long hours conversing and playing music. In the company of Stephen, Maggie felt “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” (380). These feelings in her are bound to attack her, and as the narrator reveals, “repression of the passions is no solution for Maggie and may even be more dangerous since the bottling-up of feeling may lead to its breaking out all the more powerfully, overcoming her conscious resistance. Yet one has a sense of uneasiness in looking at her – a sense of opposing elements, of which a fierce collision is imminent” (299). The opposing elements in her personality are her strong desires which collide with her equally strong moral values.

K.M. Newton observes regarding Maggie’s emotional turmoil that “she lacks a sense of control built into feeling itself, blind obedience to her rigid doctrine of resignation could eventually make her more vulnerable to strong impulse” and the impending conflict becomes inevitable with the “development of her sexual nature, which puts the greatest strain on her. All of her most impulsive feelings urge a passionate relationship with Stephen West and a Kempis’s philosophy already under-mined is quiet inadequate in this situation”. And here we find Philip’s prediction for Maggie coming to be true when he said for her-“you will be thrown into the world some day, and then every rational satisfaction of your nature that you deny now will assault you like savage appetite” (302).

The complication of the situation is compounded by Philip Wakem's friendship with Lucy and Stephen. Philip and Maggie are re-introduced, and Philip's love for her is rekindled. Lucy intrigues to throw Philip and Maggie on a short rowing trip down the Floss, so that Maggie could be alone with Philip and plans for a probable future marriage with him. But Stephen unwittingly takes the place of Philip who having become aware of Maggie and Stephen's attraction feels too sick to come. Maggie and Stephen find themselves floating down the river, negligent of the distance they have covered. Drifting on the Floss along with Stephen Maggie felt that "gliding along the swift, silent stream" was a "fatal intoxication". Stephen proposes they board a passing boat to the next city, Mudport and get married. He entreats Maggie to break all the 'mistaken ties', and marry him, which was a great temptation for her. She had never felt the way she did in the company of Stephen. However, when Maggie recovers from temptation, she remembers loyalties and attachments she cannot surrender. She undergoes deep moral conflict and struggles between her love for Stephen and her duties to Philip and Lucy. It was a conflict between love and duty, more relevantly between a powerful sensuous nature and an equally strong impulse towards asceticism and renunciation. Maggie tries to convince Stephen that their love is forbidden by Stephen's engagement to Lucy and by her loyalty to Lucy and Philip. This conflict is between feelings that are a product of natural impulses and feelings that are an integral part of one's past, and had been present earlier in Maggie's relationship with Philip, who exhorted her to give way to her natural feelings, when he remarked that, "no one has strength given to do what is unnatural" but Stephen asserts this much more strongly (327). Maggie's love for Philip was platonic in nature and he fulfilled her intellectual and spiritual needs, while Stephen arose in her the sexual aspect of her personality. F.B.Pinion conjectures that "perhaps the Philip-Stephen dichotomy of love had some influence on D.H.Lawrence in planning *Sons and Lovers*, the open-endedness of which might be considered in critical contrast to the overwhelming resolution of *The Mill on the Floss*" (121).

Stephen does not feel any moral qualms about their relation and in fact considers that powerful feeling and nature should be given priority in taking decisions. He persuades Maggie to break away from the "unnatural" bonds with Philip and Lucy and compares to this their own relation which has "come upon us without our seeing : it is natural , see how the tide is carrying us out – away from all those unnatural bonds that we have been trying to make faster round us, and trying in vain and most powerfully : we have proved that the feelings which draws us towards each other is too strong to be overcome : that natural law surmounts every other; we can't help what it clashes

with”(440). Like Philip but with much greater force, Stephen is calling on Maggie to follow her natural impulses, but for Maggie duty and faithfulness are also natural and she argues that “the real ties lie in the feelings and expectations we have raised in other minds. Else all pledges might be broken, when there was no outward penalty. There would be no such thing as faithfulness” (441). Maggie’s conflict is between her natural side of feeling, her sexual impulses, and those other feelings with their roots in her “long deep memories of early discipline and, effort of early claims on her love and pity” (429).

After her elopement with Stephen in the boat, Maggie experiences an identity crisis because her sense of continuity of self is threatened. She realized that “the irrecoverable wrong that must blot her life had been committed: She had brought sorrow into the lives of others-into the lives that were knit up with hers by trust and love... She had rent the ties that had given meaning to duty, and had made her an outlawed soul; with no guide but the wayward choice of her own passion” (462). What stops Maggie from accepting the love of Stephen is that she could not accept a relation which seemed to her to conflict with the values and duties which belonged to her past. The decision confronting Maggie in her crisis with Stephen is, as Lee points out, “one of responsibility or irresponsibility towards her past” (157). In a similar vein, Draper contends that the incidents of Maggie’s childhood “foreshadow the conflicts of young womanhood not in a deterministic sense, but as a part of continuous pattern of growth which carries developing aspiration and deepening loyalties into the more conscious moral choices which she has to face in the adult world”(18).

In her debate with Stephen, both before she goes off with him in the boat and afterwards, Maggie asserts that she must remain true to values such as faithfulness and loyalty towards others if she is to possess a sense of wholeness of self. The feelings of guilt and repentance overpower her and she realized that she “could not take a good for herself that had been wrung out of others’ miseries” and explains to Stephen that for her “[f]aithfulness and constancy mean something else besides doing what is easiest and pleasantest to ourselves”(466). With “timid resolution” she tells Stephen that “it has never been my will to marry you: if you were to win consent from the momentary triumph of my feeling for you, you would not have my whole soul” (467). K.M Newton contends that “in making Maggie’s conflict a sexual one, Eliot is setting the strongest natural feelings against another set of feelings which call on her to resist. For those egoistic romantics who believed in the liberation of impulse, one discovered one’s strongest natural feelings, but Eliot rejected this philosophy on human and social grounds. For her, the individual should resist impulsive and

natural feelings if they could not be reconciled with his sense of whole self” (114). Authentic moral choice is therefore an action or decision that emanates from Maggie’s sense of whole self.

In *Modernizing George Eliot*, K.M. Newton emphasizes on the role of moral philosophy in Eliot’s fiction and argues that the moral dilemma faced by Maggie in her relation with Stephen in “The Great Temptation” chapter strongly reflects the influence on George Eliot of the works of the moral philosopher, Immanuel Kant. Kant’s works on moral choice like *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* are directly concerned with the moral dilemma that is at the centre of Eliot’s novels. Newton points out that *The Mill on the Floss* can be illuminated if Kant’s moral principles regarding duty and moral choice and his view that a true moral act or decision is one which is rationally chosen by the will and which may involve acting contrary to one’s strongest feelings and inclinations are taken into account. According to Newton Maggie “takes a moral decision-founded on her sense of duty towards others which for her has the status of a moral law-to reject the love of Stephen Guest because each of them has other ties. It is clear that if these ties did not exist Stephen Guest is the man she would choose to marry. But it is her conscious and rational moral decision to reject him even though this is in conflict with her strongest feelings” (43).

Maggie rejects Stephen upon arrival in Mudport and makes her way back to St. Ogg’s, where she is treated as an outcast, rejected by Tom and the society of St Ogg’s. She finds refuge in Bob Jakin’s home. Lucy and Philip forgive her but the “Last Conflict” had yet to come in the form of Stephen’s letter, wherein he pleads with Maggie to let him come to her. She feels, suddenly, that “her temptation has only just begun”. She suffers intensely from having given up Stephen and is overwhelmed with guilt for having injured her cousin and brought shame and misery upon her family. She also felt strong feelings of pity for Stephen and fears that her choice may have been a selfish one. It was the thought of causing him pain that had been an important factor in undermining her resistance to him when they were on the boat. The narrator explains that “this yielding to the idea of Stephen’s suffering was more fatal than the other yielding, because it was less distinguishable from the sense of other’s claims which was the moral basis of her resistance” (458). But Stephen’s letter forces her to face this problem once again. Joan Bennett observes regarding Maggie’s difficulty of making a moral choice that George Eliot’s “conception of moral choice required that her heroine should be faced with a dilemma out of which there was no happy issue. She was forced to choose between two alternatives, either of which would cause

suffering....Her motive would be to cause as little unhappiness as the circumstances would allow and this would involve her in the difficulty that, George Eliot believed, is in the nature of such choices. The difference between right and wrong was not to be clear-cut; no preconceived principles should determine what the heroine had to do. That must depend upon Maggie's own perception of all the circumstances relevant to her act" (114).

The joy Stephen's love offers Maggie feels even more powerful than it did when she first renounced it, and she is so pained by the despair in his letter that she wants more than anything to relieve him of it. She comes very close to telling him to come, but holds out, instead burning his letter deciding to write to Stephen the next day "the last word of parting"(502). She thus chooses, as Levine points out, "the higher responsibility despite the loss of the possibility of self-fulfillment" (119). The conflict in Maggie's heart which brings forth great emotional turmoil coincides with nature's turmoil in the form of the flood in the Floss. The flood acts as a powerful symbol of Maggie's "tumult of emotion" (504). Maggie's first thought on the arrival of the flood is the concern for her brother and mother, and "without a moment of shudder of fear, she plunged through the water" and took the boat towards the mill. The novel ends with Maggie and Tom's death by drowning, "in an embrace never to be parted" (509).

The novel can be seen as a process of Maggie's moral growth gained through her experiences of moral conflicts and the choices she made under these circumstances. George Levine regards Maggie's final action of attempting to rescue her brother Tom from the flood as the "last stage in the progress of her growth". Levine also points out that "[b]eginning in mere egoism and rebellion, [Maggie] moves on to the incomplete sympathy –as a result of family pressures–of her asceticism; the suffering which she endures intensified that sympathy and produces in her a surer vision of reality so as to make her capable of a deliberate act of renunciation with Stephen". Her rescue of Tom however is seen by Levine as the "first spontaneous moral action" (120). Just before her death Maggie is able to resolve her moral conflict by overcoming her temptation and upholding her moral values.

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