The Individual and Community in the Early Novels of George Eliot

Jedinec a komunita v raných románech George Eliotové

Juraj Horváth

vedoucí práce: Prof. Martin Procházka

Praha 2007
Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci vypracoval samostatně s využitím uvedených pramenů a literatury.
Contents

Introduction: "The Dependence of Men on Each Other and the Sense They Have of a Common Interest in Preventing Injury."...3

Chapter I: "Extension of Sympathy through Suffering" - Adam Bede

   I.1 The Hayslope Community ........................................... 7
   I.2: Adam Bede .................................................................. 9
   I.3: Hetty Sorrel ............................................................. 12
   I.4: Arthur ........................................................................ 23
   I.5: Mr Irwine .................................................................... 29

Chapter II: "If the Past is not to Bind Us, Where can Duty Lie?"

   II.1: Maggie’s Conflicts .................................................. 36
   II.2: The Escape .............................................................. 38
   II.3: The past as a Bond ................................................... 45
   II.4: "St Ogg’s Passes Judgment" ........................................ 50

Chapter III: "The Remedial Influences of Pure, Natural Human Relations" - Silas Marner ..................................................... 61

   III.1: Potentiality and Actuality ........................................... 65
   III.2: At the Rainbow ....................................................... 67
   III.3: The Girl with Golden Curls ........................................ 69
   III.4: Godfrey Cass ................................................................ 74
   III.5: The Confession .......................................................... 77
   III.6: Two Fathers .............................................................. 79

Conclusion: "The Greatest Benefit We Owe to the Artist is the Extension of Our Sympathies" ............................................. 80

Résumé: ............................................................................. 83

Bibliography: ........................................................................ 85
Introduction: "The Dependence of Men on Each Other and the Sense They Have of a Common Interest in Preventing Injury." 1

The 3 novels my work focuses on are usually labelled as "Regional Novels" or "Novels of Reminiscence" or simply "early works". They famously build on Eliot's reminiscences of her native Warwickshire, with its geography and dialect adding the often praised "local colour". The characters also, as the critics frequently point out, are traceable to the sources in George Eliot's life: Adam Bede as a tribute to her father, Tom Tulliver inspired by her brother Isaac and Silas Marner as a childhood recollection.

Definitely, the novels are all set in very traditional small-scale closely-knit communities, farmer villages or small towns, which were on the decline during the Victorian Era. There is, no doubt, an element of sentimentality and regret for the past that is being wiped out by the aggressive progress of civilization in the nineteenth century. However, a genius of George Eliot's format, however, could not have been content in a conservative regret for the "good old times". She grasped her position between two eras very clearly and was able to recreate the process imaginatively. As Cross writes in George Eliot's Life:

"her roots were down in the pre-railroad, pre-telegraphic period - the days of fine old leisure - but the fruit was formed during an era of extraordinary activity in scientific and mechanical discovery. Her genius was the outcome of these conditions." 2

The idea of this basic split between two eras I think offers us a very valuable tool in our analysis of Eliot's work. It describes

---

1 "Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt" In: Essays, p.419
2 Pinney, Thomas: Authority of the Past in George Eliot's Novels, In: Creeger, p. 38
not merely two stages of scientific and technical progress, but, most importantly for Eliot, two sets of values. With increasing technological progress, the spatial and social mobility is increased, which brings a disruption of the traditional communal values like neighbourhood or keeping one's word.

Suzanne Graver, in her book *George Eliot and Community* tries to describe the competing set of values using a pair of concepts originating in a work of nineteenth century German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies. Tönnies distinguishes between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*: we could translate the concepts into English by referring to "Community" as opposed to "Society". *Gemeinschaft* is the traditional neighbourhood, where everybody knows everybody, where people have virtually no private sphere, where it is so difficult, if not impossible to hide anything from the community. Suzanne Graver writes: "In traditional community, the three pillars of kinship, neighbourhood, and common practices and beliefs are mutually supporting, together creating a cohesive society."3 In the *Gesellschaft* set of values, on the other hand, there is only one Sovereign: His Majesty Individual. This is a body of people as we usually know it nowadays: a rather freely composed group of individuals, often with very little in common, anonymous, mobile and liberal.

In my work, I will use the labels of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* as names for sets of values rather than political and social order. The social and political bodies in our novels are, with the possible exception of *The Mill on the Floss*, typically *Gemeinschafts*. But still, as I would like to argue, there are some strong traits of the *Gesellschaft* worldview.

---

3 Graver, p. 125
The worldview defining the Gesellschaft is Idealism: as I have tried to explain in my chapter on Adam Bede, idealism means a self-centred disregard for other people with their wants and their needs. Ludwig Feuerbach, one of the authors introduced to England by Eliot’s translation of his work The Essence of Christianity, writes on so-called “religious mind” that it “does not distinguish between subjective and objective - it has no doubts; it has the faculty, not of discerning other things than itself, but of seeing its own conceptions out of itself as distinct beings.” This comment is perfectly applicable to the idealist world-perception in our novels: Hetty Sorrel, Arthur Donnithorne and Adam Bede, Maggie Tulliver and her brother Tom (although each comes over quite differently), to name just the best-developed characters. This sort of egoism and moral blindness is, in George Eliot’s moral vision, natural, even if detrimental to the community. The resulting struggle for power between an individual and the community is one of the dominant themes of Eliot’s novels. The basic Antithesis can perhaps be described in the following way: the Individual/Egoist strives to re-create the world “in their image, after their likeness” to use the words of the Bible, whereas the community is essentially conservative, trying to stick to its usual ways, sanctified by years of practice.

Community, on the other hand, a closely-knit body of people, makes individuals (sometimes painfully) aware of Reality. Because the Egoists need to function as part of the community: live with their neighbours, live in their families etc., they have to open their eyes to the communal values and in doing so at least modify their self-centredness. Community brings about “The Moment of Disenchantment“ as Barbara Hardy

444 Paris, Bernard J.: George Eliot’s Religion of Humanity In: Creeger, p. 21
analyzed it in her essay of this name\(^5\). As I will try to show, the power of the community over an individual resides in the - to Eliot's view - undisputable fact that man is a social being. The community makes the individual aware of the existing social web of interests that form the community and emphasizes the importance of the bonds that people have to each other within that body. Ultimately, the influence of the community can be perceived as a guarantee of normality and prevention of leaps in the progress. Eliot was very conservative in her view of social progress. In her famous essay *Natural History of German Life* she writes: "What has grown up historically can only die out historically, by the gradual operation of necessary laws."\(^6\) She opposed revolutions at any level as being disruptive to the gradual process of evolution. George Levine writes: "she was a romantic organicist, opposed to revolution, disturbed at any sudden tear in the social fabric."\(^7\) In her view, only a gradual evolution with careful attention to organic continuity and resulting historical unity is able to prevent a feeling of uprootedness and loss of orientation.

In my analyses of the individual works, I have focused on the relationship and influence community, or being with other people generally, has on the characters of the novels.

In her first novel, *Adam Bede*, Eliot shows, in a rather schematic and easy-to-follow way, the moral progress Adam has to go through. Adam enlarges his moral vision and sympathy for the weaknesses of others through suffering. He has to change from the stern and proud Puritan which he is at the beginning, to a person much more similar to people like Bartle Massey and Mr Irwine. Adam has to learn that there are things outside his

---

\(^5\) Hardy, Barbara: *The Moment of Disenchantment in George Eliot's Novels*, In: Creeger, p. 55

\(^6\) Essays, p.287

\(^7\) Levine, George: *Introduction: George Eliot and the art of realism*, In: Levine, p. 2
control, which he cannot simply fix by extra work or physical violence. Similarly, Arthur Donnithorne's lesson is the clear lecture of his own weakness and fallibility, which he is given by the unfortunate affair with Hetty, the local milkmaid - an affair that ends up in tragedy.

In *The Mill on the Floss*, we watch little Maggie grow into a beautiful young woman, but also, more importantly, we watch the growth of her awareness of other people and their feelings. Maggie, a very passionate child and later young woman has to learn that following one's impulses is disruptive to the communal bonds of common history that tie her to the dear people of her past.

Finally in *Silas Marner*, the only one of the 3 novels that does not have a touch of a tragedy to it, I will try to demonstrate the beneficial effects a life in a community has on an individual and I will also analyze the workings of the subtle process by which Silas, an alien, finds his way into the community of Raveloe after 15 years of dehumanizing isolation.

**Chapter I: „Extension of Sympathy through Suffering“ - Adam Bede**

„Extension of sympathy through suffering“ was one of George Eliot's main moral themes. Suffering, to Eliot, was one of the most effective - if not the only one - way of individual moral progress.

In the introductory chapter I have established the notions of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft as useful tools to analyze the set of values within a given social body. In this chapter, I would like to offer an interpretation of the novel using these concepts.
I will try to define what progress means in these terms: typically for Eliot, moral progress means enlarging of moral vision. In *Adam Bede* it means overcoming the Gemeinschaft x Gesellschaft Antithesis by incorporating the values of both side by side. Suffering should serve as means of making the individual aware of the people around him/her – of their Gemeinschaft.

The competing sets of values on the personal level can be translated into philosophical terms by labelling people as "idealists" and "realists". In the technical language of philosophy, to be an Idealist means to believe in the existence of things only as "phenomena", ideas of an individual consciousness. To an idealist, there are no such things as "things-in-themselves", but merely the data of an individual mind. The basic postulate of a Realist, on the other hand, is the existence and accessibility of things outside the mind. To illustrate the positions, one may say that to a realist, we really see trees and stones with their qualities, whereas to an idealist there are no such things, merely, say, "my mental image of a particular tree standing outside my window" – to an idealist, it does not make much sense to ask whether there is such a thing as a "real" tree. Idealism, thus, is a basic position of the modern Gesellschaft: by making the individual perceptions of things all-important, thus placing the individual consciousness into the centre of the world, it stresses the importance of the individual to a degree, where they are in danger of forgetting the others with their needs and rights: it made the individual turn egoist, if not solipsist. As Bernard Paris puts it: in idealism "self is seen as the centre of the world and the world as an extension of the self."\(^8\) The effect of such approach within a community is clear: an egoist/idealist tends not to give enough thought to

---

\(^8\) Paris, In: Creeger 26
others living around and thus endangers the very foundations of communal living. The suffering teaches the egoist to be aware of the existence of REAL things, relations and people outside their individual minds, which have to be taken into consideration when acting. All of these being, of course, the values of Gemeinschaft.

I.1 The Hayslope Community

Let us begin by looking for some dominant features of the Hayslope Gemeinschaft. As I have pointed out in the Introduction, there are 3 pillars of Gemeinschaft: kinship, neighbourhood and common practices and beliefs.

Kinship is the basic tie which must be always observed and respected: the Poyser take the orphaned Hetty, Martin’s niece, to live with them, and when her sin comes to light, they feel it to be a spot on their name. Jonathan Burge would like his daughter Mary to marry Adam as means of promotion of his business. Mr Irwine, though a parson and strictly-speaking not a member of the community, looks after his sick sister at the expense of his own private happiness. And Adam himself, is in fact the only source of the family income, his father being and alcoholic and brother Seth the less skilled workman, to name just the most obvious instances of the importance of the family linkage. The family members always feel themselves to be responsible for each other and the blood-link is the strongest and most natural bond that keeps the community together at a very basic level.

The individual families, then, on a level one step higher, form a neighbourhood: a group of people related spatially and historically. One may think of the micro-political geography of
Hayslope in terms of the above mentioned family units and their relationships: Adam, thinking about the unpleasant situation his father’s alcoholism has brought for the family, reminisces of the time when it was enough to say „I am Thias Bede’s lad“9 to be immediately identified within the community. We are introduced to the community of neighbours gathered on the Common Green for Dinah’s preaching and we learn not only the official names of the minor characters, but also the names by which they went among the locals: and so we are introduced to „Old Joshway“, „Chad’s Bess“, „Timothy’s Bess“, „Wiry Ben“ and „Feyther Taft“. The community give each of its members by a name based on common history - the neighbours identify each other either by their origin or by a characteristics based upon common interaction.

Speaking about common history and interaction, one feature of the community has to be emphasized: Gemeinschaft is a unity of unequals. Class and rank play a very important role in the structure of the community. Graver, quoting Tönneis, writes: „As Tönneis explains, „the essence of the Gemeinschaft“ is „the unity of unequal beings“ bound together through „rights and duties ...authority and service “.10 The social structure in Hayslope is strictly given by a micro-hierarchy headed by the old Squire Donnithorne. This structure, however, does not only apply to the more obvious differentiation between noblemen and working men, but also within the working-men community itself: the meticulous attention given to the seating at the table at Arthur’s party and the strict order of speeches give us a sense of the essentially hierarchical world-view of the common people. When Mrs Poyser has „her say out“, she gives voice to this point

9 Adam Bede, p. 50
10 Graver, p. 98
of view: "I know there's them as is born t' own the land, and them as is born to sweat on 't...and I know as it's christened folks's duty to submit to their betters as fur as flesh and blood 'ull bear it;" Mrs Poyser's famous episode is not an act of rebellious character. It may be read as an act of rebellion, but as Ian Milner comments, "she can flash out in anger against old Squire Donnithorne...despite [her] deep-rooted identification with the patriarchal way of life." This hierarchical division is the core of Hetty's tragedy since her affair with Arthur does not respect this given social stratification of the world. Henry Auster comments:

"Adam Bede is...full of minute observations of rustic behaviour and peasant mentality and consciousness of rank that contribute to the realistic level of presentation. The gathering in the church for Thias Bede's funeral, like the birthday, brings all the segments of the community together but at the same time shows the local social gradations in action: the farmers, labourers, and craftsmen form distinct little groups, united in restrained deference to the Squire and Mr.Irwine and in their participation in the service. Class, of course, plays a central part in the plot; as we are repeatedly told, the naïveté and irresponsibility of Arthur and Hetty reside precisely in their violation of the social distance between them and reluctance, especially Hetty's, to admit the impossibility of the liaison."

Finally, if we move yet one level up, there are the common practices, keeping the community together: the communal life in Hayslope takes shape mostly at this level. The church-going on Sunday, the burial of Adam's father, Arthur's coming-of-age

---

11 Adam Bede, p. 346
12 Milner, p. 19
13 Auster, p. 113
party, to name only the most obvious examples of the communal rituals. Before Dinah's preaching, almost the whole village is present, however, the locals stand aside, with a well-marked distance from the Methodists:

"all took care not to join the Methodists on the Green, and identify themselves in that way with the expectant audience, for there was not one of them that would not have disclaimed the imputation of having come out to hear the 'preacher-woman,' - they had only come out to see 'what war a-goin' on like.'"¹⁴

Clearly, the Hayslope locals saw themselves as a community: here they stand like a phalanx of familiarity and shared values to face the unknown and alien practices of the Methodists.

I.2: Adam Bede

The character of Adam has often been read as the embodiment of the Hayslope community and its Gemeinschaft values. However, if we take a closer look, we find that there are, in fact, two social faces to Adam Bede: on one hand, there is his obvious side as Mr.Hayslope, loving and respected young member of the community, while on the other hand, there is a very Egoistic Adam that comes to light under a closer investigation.

On one hand, Adam presents all the above-mentioned community values: looks after his old mother and alcoholic father and supports his brother Seth. His family has a history in Hayslope and Adam reminisces of the days when he was a little

¹⁴ Adam Bede, p. 21
boy when it was enough to say „I’m Thias Bede’s lad“ to be recognized within the community. Adam, as it is common in a Gemeinschaft, is very deferential to authority: „The word ‘gentleman’ had a spell for Adam, and as he often said, he ‘couldn’t abide a fellow who thought he made himself fine by being coxy to ‘s betters.“ Ian Milner writes: „Adam Bede is the supreme embodiment in the novel of the sense of community, of rootedness in a familiar pattern of socially graded relations. His way of life, settled moral code, the touch of peasant conservatism, his habitual social deference: all confirm him in this.“ But there is, I believe, more to Adam’s character than just an idealized presentation of the Gemeinschaft values.

First of all, Adam is in fact the most progressive of all Hayslope people: in the local sense, his family owns no land, that means he is not bound to it. He makes his living with his hands and his head. He attends evening courses to learn to read, write and count and for his qualities, he makes what we would call today „a career“ – he becomes the supervisor of the squire’s woods. Adam possesses certain intelligence, docility and openness, which enable him to be mobile in a way, which would never be possible for people like, say, Martin Poyser. These features, however, are characteristics of the Gesellschaft – and Adam is, at least in the early part of the novel, driven by the dominant feature of the Gesellschaft, which is Egoism.

Adam’s character is introduced to the reader in a trivial conflict with Wiry Ben, one of the carpenters in „the roomy workshop of Mr Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder“: Adam’s brother Seth – something of a daydreamer – has

---

15 Adam Bede, p. 50
16 Adam Bede, p. 163
17 Milner, p. 18
18 Adam Bede, p. 7
forgotten to put panels into the door he was just making and Wiry Ben - the local clown - teases him for it. Adam, who hates the sight of his favourite Seth being teased, grabs Ben under his neck and holds him against the wall. „I shan’t loose him, till he promises to let the door alone,“ said Adam. „Come, Ben, lad,“ said Seth in a persuasive tone, „don’t let’s have a quarrel about it. You know Adam will have his way. You may’s well try to turn a wagon in a narrow lane. ...“ The whole situation is typical of Adam: Ben is a harmless clown, Seth has made a stupid mistake and feels himself, that he has deserved the teasing, and yet, Adam will intervene with brutal force to put things right. Seth’s remark „you know Adam will have his way“ is symptomatic – Adam is principled, but stubborn and strict – and everybody around him knows it.

Adam’s strictness and pride is also demonstrated in the relationship to his father: as I have pointed out earlier, the link of blood is one of the most important and cherished bonds of the Gemeinschaft. And Adam does a lot for his family: he does his father’s work, makes a living for his mother, helps his brother Seth, who is not so skilful in his trade. But if we contrast Adam’s relationship and behaviour towards the family with that of Mr Irwine, we will immediately discover profound differences in their approaches. With respect to their families, the two are in quite similar situations: Miss Irwine suffers from a nervous disease and Adam’s father is an alcoholic. They both have had to more or less sacrifice their lives to the family, as they both are the only sources of income for the families. Mr Irwine has not married, because he has his mother and sisters to look after, and Adam’s mother Lisbeth depends on him in a quite similar way. And yet, there is a world of difference in their behaviour and

19 Adam Bede, p. 9
approach to their situations: Whereas Adam looks after his family out of feeling of duty, Mr Irwine has sacrificed his life out of love and a sense of belonging. Adam thinks to himself: "They that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of those that are weak, and not to please themselves"...Nay, nay, I'll never slip my neck out o' the yoke, and leave the load to be drawn by the weak 'uns. Father's a sore cross to me, an' is likely an's likely to be for many a long year to come."

Clearly, Adam does, what he does for his family out of a feeling of painful duty: hence words as "yoke", "load" and "sore cross". There is a strong and bitter feeling of self-sacrifice on Adam's part, which, on the other hand, brings with itself a feeling of pride: pride of being a "strong 'un" on whom the "weak 'uns" depend for their happiness and even sheer existence. Compare this to Mr Irwine's love and tenderness for his sisters, who, "as any person of family within ten miles of Broxton could have testified, were such stupid uninteresting women!" Mr Irwine, for his family's sake remained, you see, at the age of eight-and-forty, a bachelor, not making any merit of that renunciation, but saying, laughingly, if any one alluded to it, that he made it an excuse for many indulgences which a wife would never have allowed him. Eliot, in one of the instances where her narrator is perhaps over-explicit, tells us that Mr Irwine was "not making any merit of that renunciation" - but even without this comment, the difference between Adam and Mr Irwine is quite clear: while Mr Irwine is perfectly settled and happy with his family arrangements, Adam threatens his mother: "I shall overrun these doings before long. I've stood enough of 'em."

---

20 Adam Bede, p. 50-51
21 Adam Bede, p. 67
22 Adam Bede, p. 69
23 Adam Bede, p. 43
Adam's feeling of duty towards his family is self-imposed and so he knows that he can simply change his will someday and stop doing what he is doing for them, whereas Mr Irwine looks after his family out of love and respect for his mother and sisters, with "no self-scourging sense of duty" and so while they live, his leaving them on their own is out of the question.

People like Adam - acting only on rational impulses, or people, who, like some of the Methodists, feel themselves to be under God's guidance, are in danger of slipping into pride, which stems from the unshakable belief in the superiority of their principles. Mr Irwine says of Adam that "he has independence of mind enough for two men - rather an excess of pride, if anything." Adam's "independence of mind" here means that he believes very strongly in his principles, which he strictly follows.

This strength of principle, however, in a mind not large enough, often means intolerance and a very limited view of human nature. Adam does not see - or at least has a strong tendency to overlook or ignore - other, non-rational, components of the human nature. Let us now return to the first scene in the workshop: the church clock strikes six o'clock and

"[b]efore the first stroke had died away, Sandy Jim had loosed his plane and was reaching his jacket; Wiry Ben had left a screw half driven in, and thrown his screw-driver into his tool basket; Mum Taft, who, true to his name, had kept silence throughout the previous conversation, had flung down his hammer as he was in the act of lifting it; and Seth, too, had straightened his back, and was putting out his hand towards his paper cap. Adam alone had gone on with his

---

24 Adam Bede, p. 69
25 Adam Bede, p. 102
work as if nothing had happened. But observing the
cessation of the tools he looked up, and said, in a tone of
indignation,
"Look there, now! I can't abide to see men throw away their
tools i' that way, the minute the clock begins to strike, as if
they took no pleasure i' their work, and was afraid o' doing
a stroke too much." 26
This quote shows the essence of Adam's strictness: he wants to
"have his way", which means: he wants everybody to behave and
think according to the same principles as he does. In this
particular episode, he receives two quite reasonable answers to
his reproach: one comes from Mum Taft: "Ay, ay, Adam, lad, ye
talk like a young un. When y' are six an' forty like me, istid o' six an' twenty, ye wanna be so flush o' workin' for nought." 27
Another response is from Wiry Ben: "Lave a chap aloon, will 'ee.
... Ye may like work better nor play, but I like play better nor work;" 28 Adam's limitation of the moral vision at this stage of his personal development a great deal of inflexibility in his understanding of other people, who may have other ways and approaches to things, which are perfectly legitimate, even if very different from his own views. The missing feature is tolerance: the awareness of the fact that people perhaps are not perfect, but that in spite of their imperfections, they are worth the sympathy. To an idealist, man is most of all a rational being and if there are other parts of his/her nature, which can come into conflict with the rational element, they can be and they ought to be brought under rational control. Thus, when Arthur – with a weight of just this kind on his conscience, rationally understanding that the whole affair with Hetty can not be any

26 Adam Bede, p. 12-13
27 Adam Bede, p. 13
28 ibid.
good to her, while at the same time being sexually attracted to her - asks Adam if he ever has such internal struggles, Adam answers: „Well,“...“no. I don’t remember ever being see-saw in that way, when I’d made my mind up, as you say, that a thing was wrong.“

One of the lessons there are for Adam yet to learn, is that a man consists of more parts than just the rational one: Arthur has perfectly well „made up his mind that a thing was wrong“, yet the dominance of the rational element is simply not strong enough to take control of the sexuality. In their argument in the wood, which ultimately ends in a fight, after Adam sees Arthur kissing Hetty, Adam reproaches Arthur:

„Why, then, instead of acting like th’ upright, honourable man we’ve all believed you to be, you’ve been acting the part of a selfish, light-minded scoundrel. You know, as well as I do, what it’s to lead to, when a gentleman like you kisses and makes love to a young woman like Hetty, and gives her presents as she’s frightened for other folks to see.‖

This speech shows clearly - among other things - the limitations of Adam’s understanding of the world: the idea that perhaps Arthur is suffering as well, precisely because there is the above-mentioned struggle takes place in his inside, that Arthur’s will is simply not enough rationally-dominated, seems never to have entered Adam’s mind. Adam himself only does things, which he can rationally justify - and therefore he supposes Arthur must be in perfect control of his actions as well, cold-bloodedly seducing a simple village girl. The „extension of sympathy“ among other things, means an awareness that there are other elements within human nature, alongside the rational element.

29 Adam Bede, p. 166
30 Adam Bede, p. 299
which sometimes are simply too strong to be controlled by it. Such awareness would definitely prevent Adam from being too strict with Wiry Ben, his father or Arthur Donnithorne. This is a feature of Adam's which Henry James complained about: "My chief complaint with Adam Bede himself is that he is too good. ... He lacks spontaneity and sensibility, he is too stiff-backed. He lacks that supreme quality without which a man can never be interesting to men, - the capacity to be tempted." 31

Another dominant feature of idealism, which finds expression in the first sentence of Adam's speech quoted above, is the importance of individual's own interpretations. Adam's reproaches Arthur for not being what "we've all believed you to be". Let us leave aside the question of whether this reproach is justified or not, the sentence points to something more important: to an idealist pre-supposing the non-existence of the things-in-themselves (extra-mental or "real things", to avoid the technical language) all that there is, are the mind's own interpretations. Since we cannot find out what a thing IS, we have to take it to be what we THINK it is. The world does not consist of things, but of our perceptions, interpretations. The individual thus runs a risk of losing touch with reality, (of course, to an idealist, there is, strictly speaking, no Reality,) against which one could check one's interpretations and either confirm or refuse them. One of the very powerful illustrations of this problem appears when Adam tears Arthur's locket (of course he does not know it is Arthur's) from Hetty's neck at the dance at Arthurs coming-of-age feast. Hetty's alarm at the incident at first raises Adam's jealous suspicion: "Had Hetty a lover he didn't know of?" 32, but later, as he walks home, he

31 Henry James: The Novels of George Eliot, In: Haight, p. 49
32 Adam Bede, p. 287
makes up his own set of interpretations, "an ingenious web of probabilities" as Eliot’s narrator calls it, which chases away any suspicion and out of which Hetty comes in full innocence. The danger displayed here is, that the individual mind has a very strong tendency to shape its interpretations according to its own interests: Adam loves Hetty and so he cannot believe anything wrong against her, just like when Mr Tulliver of The Mill on the Floss hates Wakem, the lawyer, he supposes Wakem also buys his mill out of spite and hatred. In a phrase of Mrs Poyser’s, the idealists are "welly like a cock as thinks the sun’s rose o’ purpose to hear him crow."33

This phrase, in fact, expresses the whole problem of the idealists, as George Eliot saw it: the idealists are too self-centred and too self-important to realize that there is a world of things outside of them. A world, in which things have their places and in which they obey certain laws outside the realm of control of the individual mind.

The following passage comes from Chapter 42, called "The Morning of the Trial" and I think it more or less summarizes all the principal effect Adam’s suffering has had on his personality.

"Deep, unspeakable suffering may well be called baptism, a regeneration, the initiation into a new state. The yearning memories, the bitter regret, the agonised sympathy, the struggling appeals to the Invisible Right – all the intense emotions which had filled the days and nights of the past week, and were compressing themselves again like an eager crowd into the hours of this single morning, made Adam look back on all the previous years as if they had been a dim, sleepy existence, and he had only now awaked to full consciousness. It seemed to him as if he had always before

33 Adam Bede, p. 204
thought it a light thing that a man should suffer; as if all that he had himself endured, and called sorrow before, was only a moment's stroke that had never left a bruise. Doubtless a great anguish may do the work of years, and we may come out from that baptism of fire with a soul full of new awe and new pity."  

First of all, let us have a look at the suffering itself. Adam has, as the passage states, been through many sufferings before: the trouble with the father, the death of his father, his disappointment in Hetty and Arthur, his fight with Arthur, his superior in rank and a childhood friend, and seeing Arthur suffer. Why is this particular instance different? George Creeger asks himself the same question:

"towards both men Adam is unforgiving, and even when he repents of his severity, the repentance is futile because it reflects no genuine increase in his capacity for sympathy. The reason is that Adam is not fully involved emotionally with either his father or Arthur. Because this is so, he can neither participate in their plight nor understand it. What is necessary for Adam...is that he get "his heartstrings bound round the weak and erring, so that he must share not only the outward consequence of their error, but their inward suffering".  

I think the difference between the two sorts of suffering becomes clear when we bear in mind the previous discussion of idealism: I think the whole effect of the "baptism of fire" can be stated in terms of that discussion. This particular instance of suffering has made Adam painfully aware that his idealistic conceptions do not apply. That there is, after all, a Reality,

---

34 Adam Bede, p. 428
35 Creeger, George R.: An Interpretation of Adam Bede, In: Creeger, p. 101
which one has to humble him/herself to. Adam did what he could - he did his duty: he did his best as a workman, he has courted Hetty, he has had angry words with Arthur - even a fight (which - under normal circumstances - is even a thing beyond the realm of the possible,) and yet: the Reality had its own cruel way. A way which Adam could not control. The whole situation, in fact, gives Adam a painful and acute sense of personal failure: his estimate of the human nature has been wrong - there are, after all, some strong tendencies in it, which are outside of rational control. It is not only the sexual passion of Arthur and Hetty, but it is also a lesson, which Adam learns in person when he feels the uncontrollable jealousy, rage and hatred against Arthur. He does go through the experience of a passion, which escapes all rational control.

He finds that his interpretations have been wrong: the recognition that one has been a fool to believe one’s own interpretations and perceptions and that the Reality has all the time been completely different, is certainly a very humbling blow to Adam’s proud rationality of the earlier chapters. He has to realize - perhaps most importantly - that there are things outside his control. He cannot set everything right again by extra amount of work as he does when he makes the coffin instead of his father or by physical violence, as when he holds Wiry Ben under his neck. Adam has to learn that he cannot always „have his way“. Ultimately, the person who emerges from this baptism is a different Adam: or, rather, an Adam with an enlarged moral vision. Adam less proud, more tolerant towards the failures of others. The real test to this „new Adam“ is his encounter with Arthur: the two meet at the exact spot of their fight, this time, however „the figure before him (= Arthur; my note) touched him with the signs of suffering. Adam knew
what suffering was - he could not lay a cruel finger on a bruised man. He felt no impulse that he needed to resist." This time, it is not a question of an effort to bring a passionate impulse under rational control: "Trouble's made us kin." says Adam to Mr Poyser - and the same applies with Arthur. Adam has known suffering and does not want to breed it. He has experienced his own fallibility and has thus understanding and sympathy for the failings of others.

I.3: Hetty Sorrel

Hetty is perhaps the most primitive of the idealists in the book. Her motives are the most obvious and her features the least ambiguous of all the characters of *Adam Bede*, that also means, however, that some of the features of idealism appear in her character more pointedly and plastically than in others.

Hetty is alien to Hayslope not only by birth, but also by her set of values. Hetty is an orphan living with her relatives - the Poysers. She is not a native to Hayslope and Eliot's narrator, in one of her splendid scientific similes, describes Hetty's character: "There are some plants that have hardly any roots: you may tear them from their native nook of rock or wall, and just lay them over your ornamental flower-pot, and they blossom none the worse. Hetty could have cast all her past life behind her and never cared to be reminded of it again." Hetty lives with the Poysers, but she has hardly any bonds with the community: Mrs Poyser comments: "She's no better than a peacock, as 'ud strut about on the wall and spread its tail when

---

36 *Adam Bede*, p. 466  
37 *Adam Bede*, p. 464  
38 *Adam Bède*, p. 153
the sun shone if all the folks i' the parish was dying." 39 Of course she likes being admired by young men, including Adam - but it is not because of the perspective of future marriage. Hetty does not care for children or a family - as Mrs Poyser so often complains. She only enjoys the power the admiration gives her over her admirers. The narrator describes her feelings about Adam's courting her: "She knew that this Adam, who was often rather stern to other people, and not much given to run after the lasses, could be made to turn pale or red any day by a word or a look from her." 40 There is no trace in her feelings, of any sort of sympathy for or even interest in Adam's feelings. Hetty uses Adam as an object of her vanity and a proof of her power. It is no wonder, in fact, that Hetty, who has absolutely no voice, no power within the community, holds on to this sort of influence - about the only one she may ever have.

George Creeger writes: "Hetty's hardness is that of childish or at best adolescent egocentricity: all people and events have value or significance only as they impinge upon the narrow circle of her own life; failing that, they are of no importance." 41 This moral blindness is best demonstrated in her total failure to grasp the peril into which the affair with Arthur brings her. In her absolute pre-occupation with her own self, she is blind to the simple fact that the affair has absolutely no positive future and, moreover, that she is the one who risks absolutely everything in it. She stubbornly holds on to her own fictitious idea that Arthur will elope with her and marry her clandestinely. "He would want to marry her, and make a lady of her...how else could it be? Marry her quite secretly, as Mr James, the Doctor's assistant, married the Doctor's niece, and

39 Adam Bede, p. 154
40 Adam Bede, p. 97-8
41 Creeger, In: Creeger, p. 96
nobody ever found it out for a long while after, and then it was of no use to be angry." There is certainly a large amount of naivety and inexperience about the social structures in Hetty’s thinking (notice that Arthur, who has imbibed the social hierarchy with his gentleman’s education, does not for a second even dream of marrying Hetty). She does not realize the real width of the class difference that there is between her and Arthur, which is, of course, much greater than between the Doctor’s assistant and the Doctor’s niece. I think, however, in this case it is more than just Hetty’s lack of knowledge and experience of the world: I think Hetty is guilty of the same idealistic self-centredness as Adam. She is focused on her own self with her own wishes to such an extent, that she fails to see that there is a Reality: an order of things, which will not change in order to answer those wishes, like when Adam’s face changes colour. She thinks Arthur just needs to marry her before aunt Lydia finds out and does not see the full consequences of such act: The tragic consequence of Hetty’s limited vision is her failure to see that, after all, it is SHE who is the one in danger: she being a woman, she having no real social status, she having nowhere else to go.

There is a passage in Chapter 18 called “Church”, where a burial service for old Thias Bede is described and where Hetty suffers from a disappointment that Arthur did not turn up. I think this passage depicts all the essential features of Hetty’s egoism:

“Anger lay very close to disappointment, and soon won the victory over the conjectures her small ingenuity could devise to account for Arthur’s absence on the supposition that he really wanted to come, really wanted to see her again. And

42 Adam Bede, p. 150
by the time she rose from her knees mechanically, because all the rest were rising, the colour had returned to her cheeks even with a heightened glow, for she was framing little indignant speeches to herself, saying she hated Arthur for giving her this pain - she would like him to suffer too." 43

This passage shows Hetty's idealistic anger with the reality for not behaving according to her wish: that is why her disappointment turns into anger. She wants to see Arthur, but he did not come, although Hetty is sure that he "really wanted to see her again". Hetty - throughout the whole affair - has very little idea about the struggle Arthur goes through. An idea that Arthur perhaps avoids her, does not even present to her as an option. Since she wants to see him, she pre-supposes - that he certainly wants to see her. This is the sort of projection typical for idealists. The little aside about Hetty's religious practices, when "she rose from her knees mechanically, because all the rest were rising", displays not only Hetty's behaviour in church, but within the community as well. Hetty does what her aunt tells her, makes butter or looks after the children, but she does it only because she was told to do it. There is nothing in her motivation that would come from the heart: she cares for the children as little as for the butter, or anything else - because her heart is too pre-occupied with her own self. That particular instance - an instance when all the community is kneeling in penitence and the parson is "pronouncing the solemn 'Absolution'" 44, is the least appropriate to wish anyone ill, and yet, because to Hetty her own thoughts and feelings were all that there is, regardless to the situation, she wishes that Arthur would suffer. I have already pointed out that one of the things

43 Adam Bede, p. 199
44 ibid.
Adam learns in his suffering, is that it is no "light thing that man should suffer"45 and having had the experience of suffering himself, he cannot wish it to others. Hetty, who has had no experience of suffering is still self-centred enough to wish such things to others. In her vanity and self-centredness, she has no fellow-feeling with others. This is the lesson there is for Hetty to learn in suffering. In his suffering, Adam develops a fellow-feeling for the suffering fellow-men. "And there is but one way in which a strong, determined soul can learn it - by getting its heart-strings bound round the weak and erring, so that he must share not only the outward consequence of their error, but their inward suffering."46 Eliot's narrator teaches. This quote depicts the essence of the whole idea of "extension of sympathy through suffering". One can only suffer for other people - the people he/she loves. And this is something Hetty does not have the capacity for: she is not able to love: she likes Adam around, because it gives her a feeling of power over this powerful man, and she is attracted to Arthur, because she sees him as means of improving her social situation.

Hetty - more than any other character - has to learn about the benefits of other people's closeness to her. "[W]hat could Irvine do for him that he could not do for himself?"47 Arthur asks himself as he fails to bring himself to confess his affair to the parson. It is the answer to this question that Hetty has to learn. It is not only her being rather unloving about little Totty - the real problem shows itself more clearly in situations like the one at the end of Chapter 15, called "The Two Bed-Chambers", where Hetty is contrasted with Dinah. At the very end of the chapter Dinah comes to Hetty's bedroom with an offer

45 op.cit.
46 Adam Bede, p. 210
47 Adam Bede, p. 170
of friendship, help and support, but Hetty slams the door to her face: "Why can't you let me be?" In suffering, however, Hetty begins to understand – as she returns from her journey to see Arthur – alone, tired, and desperate – she dreams of the Hall Farm not only because of its warmth and stores of food, but also because of Mrs Poyser: her perhaps sharp and scolding, but loving aunt. She misses the sense of a home – the sense of belonging somewhere, which she always enjoyed in Hayslope, even though her attitude to the community has always been rather cold. Henry Auster writes:

"George Eliot, who regards a lack of interest in reality as symptomatic of egoism, illustrates the nature of her characters in *Adam Bede* by the way they respond to their surroundings. Hetty and Arthur...are egoists. And we see this not only in their dim superficial awareness of the moral and social laws that govern life, but also in their impercipient of the environment. Thus Hetty does not simply take the Hall Farm with its congenial vitality and harmony, for granted but is wholly blind to it until fear, remorse and suffering teach her to see." Hetty learns, through suffering to see the importance of community – of people around her, who can make her feel comfortable and support her in her trials. Ultimately, it is Dinah, who makes her open her heart and confess her sin. If it were not for Dinah’s closeness, Hetty would never be able to ask Adam for his forgiveness and, in turn, forgive Arthur.

---

48 *Adam Bede*, p. 160
49 Auster, p. 118
I.4: Arthur

Henry James commends the character of Arthur as "a very fair image of frank-hearted, well-meaning, careless, self-indulgent young gentleman." Arthur Donnithorne is a young gentleman – the only nephew and heir of the old Squire. He is a member of traditional landed gentry, his family has had a long tradition in Hayslope. So has Arthur, in fact, he often mentions old memories of childhood with Adam Bede, he is loved and respected by all the tenants. "We've pretty nigh all on us known you when you war a little un, an we've niver known anything on you but what was good an' honourable." says Martin Poyser at Artur's birthday feast and all the farmers look with expectation forward to the time when young Arthur should replace the old Squire. And Arthur himself looks forward to this new task: he is full of innovative plans and can hardly wait to become the model squire he fancies himself to become one day. Arthur thinks about the squireship in the following way:

"I don't believe there's anything you can't prevail on people to do with kindness. For my part, I couldn't live in a neighbourhood where I was not respected and beloved; and it's very pleasant to go among the tenants here, they seem all so well inclined to me, I suppose it seems only the other day to them since I was a little lad." Henry Auster comments: "unlike Adam, whose thoughts, when they turn, as they constantly do, to his work and plans, are precise, concrete, and practical, Arthur is charmed by a vision of himself as the adored and competent squire." Auster's

50 Henry James, In: Haight, p. 50
51 Adam Bede, p. 264
52 Adam Bede, p. 169
53 Auster, p. 125
dominant feature is susceptibility: "other men's opinion, you know, was like a native climate to Arthur's feelings: it was the air on which they thrived the best, and grew strong!" the narrator tells us. Arthur's feeling grows stronger in a direct proportion to what other people feel: when he hears other people praise Hetty's beauty, he fancies her even more and when Mr Irwine does not notice he is in distress, then the moral threat perhaps is not so serious, after all, and had he not disappointed Adam's opinion of himself, perhaps he would never see the whole affair with Hetty in so serious light. "It was not possible for Arthur Donnithorne to do anything mean, dastardly, or cruel." is Arthur's firm belief. What is most important to him is that he is and stays a respectable gentleman and a good chap in the eyes of all his tenants. And thus, he cannot confess to Mr Irwine, because he would have to disappoint the idea that he is the perfectly well-meaning and absolutely honest Arthur which everybody (including himself!) believes him to be. Therefore he has to go on pretending his innocence and listening to words of praise and respect from the Hayslope people. Adam's reproach in the wood that Arthur is not what the people have believed him to be, is not unjustified.

To say Arthur was a wicked calculating "scoundrel", as Adam calls him, trying to act the part of an honest fellow, is perhaps too harsh: Arthur has had his struggles and reasonings with himself, but he finds himself to be in a kind of vicious circle - he has created in everybody's head - again, including his own - an idea of himself as an honest man. The problem is, that now everybody really expects him to be an honest man - including himself. At a point quite late in the novel, we are told

---

54 Adam Bede, p. 274-5
55 Adam Bede, p. 123
a little incident from Arthur's childhood, which depicts his character features:

"When he was a lad of seven, he one day kicked down an old gardener's pitcher of broth, from no motive but a kicking impulse, not reflecting that it was the old man's dinner; but on learning the fact, he took his favourite pencil-case and a silver-hafted knife out of his pocket and offered them as a compensation."  

Arthur really is quite impulsive: he often just follows his first impulse and thinks only afterwards: he kicks over the gardener's meal, "not reflecting" - similarly, he finds Hetty attractive and does not reflect about class-differences, the danger there is (especially for her). Later, when he realizes that he has done some wrong, he tries to "make all offences forgotten in benefits". The benefits he offers, however, are benefits in his eyes, blinded by idealistic self-centredness: in the present case, he takes a working man's dinner and offers "his favourite pencil-case" as a compensation. Arthur is not able to see that the pencil case perhaps has value for him, but hardly any for the gardener.

The lesson Arthur has to learn is that even though he may find it difficult to believe, even he can do wrong, which cannot be smoothed by any presents or benefits. He has to correct the image of himself: he has to realize that even he can do wrong and that even if no other person knows about his wrongdoing, it still remains a wrong, which breeds other wrongs. He comes to realize these things on the morning after his fight with Adam:

"if there had been a possibility of making Adam tenfold amends - if deeds of gift, or any other deeds, could have

---

56 Adam Bede, p. 312-313
57 ibid.
restored Adam's contentment and regard for him as benefactor, Arthur would...never have been weary of making retribution. But Adam could receive no amends; his suffering could not be cancelled; his respect and affection could not be recovered by any prompt deeds of atonement. He stood like...an embodiment of what Arthur most shrank from believing in - the irrevocableness of his own wrongdoing."  

I.5: Mr Irwine

Mr Irwine - after the characters of *Scenes of the Clerical Life*, another figure in the gallery of Eliot's rather unorthodox, but profoundly humane parsons, the people to apply to in difficulties: Mr. Irwine is the person Arthur seeks out in his temptation (even if he eventually does not find the courage to confess), when Maggie returns "disgraced" to St.Oggs, she makes Mr.Kenn her (in fact her only) confidant and it is Farebrother in *Middlemarch* that prevents Lydgate from going on gambling when his relationship with Rosamond is at its lowest point, just to mention a few instances. The common characteristics of all these characters is the breadth of their moral vision and looseness of their religious principles. None of them is very strict or fond of fiery preaching - and they mostly have or had some moral flaws themselves: Mr.Irwine is "a lazy fellow" interested in dogs and horses, Farebrother of *Middlemarch* plays cards for money. However, it is precisely this experience with moral struggle - a struggle with temptation often lost, which makes the parsons who they are: tolerant, broad-minded and generous people. The experience of their own

---

58 Adam Bede, p. 313
59 Adam Bede, p. 65
fallibility, which the stern people like Adam Bede or Tom Tulliver have not been through, makes them much more relaxed in judging other people’s moral flaws.

The dominant characteristics of Mr Irwine is his care for the good of the community: when the Hayslope parish clerk Joshua Rann comes to complain that Will Maskery, a Methodist, has abused the parson, calling him “an idle shepherd” and a “dumb dog”, Mr Irwine’s reaction is:

“Let evil words die as soon as they’re spoken. Will Maskery might be a great deal worse fellow than he is. He used to be a wild drunken rascal, neglecting his work and beating his wife, they told me; now he’s thrifty and decent, and he and his wife look comfortable together. If you can bring me any proof that he interferes with his neighbours, and cerates any disturbance, I shall think it my duty as a clergyman and a magistrate to interfere. But it wouldn’t become wise people, like you and me, to be making a fuss about trifles, as if we thought the Church was in danger because Will Maskery lets his tongue wag rather foolishly, or a young woman talks in a serious way to a handful of people on the Green. We must “live and let live”, Joshua, in religion as well as in other things.”

Clearly, what Mr Irwine most cares about is the community: he is perfectly willing to swallow a personal offence in the interest of the public good. He understands his position of a public authority and is not willing to interfere on the personal level. Will Maskery, in his new-found religious fervour, perhaps allows himself to offend the local authority, but what is more important in the eyes of the parson is that his new faith helped him to become a more orderly member of the community. To Mr

---

60 Adam Bede, p. 61
Irwine, the importance of religious practice does not consist in
the spiritual side of it, but rather in the communal one: the
Church-going on Sunday in Hayslope is almost purely a social
occasion, where the wives can chat and the farmers can meet and
talk "a little about 'bis'ness"61 and Mr Irwine himself
"thought the custom of baptism more important than its
doctrine, and that the religious benefits the peasant drew
from the church where his fathers worshipped and the
sacred piece of turf where they lay buried, were but
slightly dependent on a clear understanding of the Liturgy
or the sermon."62
To Mr Irwine - like to George Eliot - the religious practice was
much more important than the theology which it presents: it is
the sense of a tradition, continuity and belonging which it
awakens in the locals, which is important. It is the common
practice, which is one of the pillars of the Gemeinschaft.
Mr Irwine then makes an interesting point about the
Church, which demonstrates some of his realist views: The
institution of the Church, he says, is not endangered because of
a Methodist preaching or because an over-zealous man called the
parson names. Mr Irwine does not believe in the idealist idea of
world-view revolutions. As I have pointed out when discussing
Adam and his moralizing, the idealists believe that to change
one's perception of a thing means to change the thing itself.
Here we can see one of the differences between the approaches
of realism and idealism: Mr Irwine often talks about things
being "naturally so" or he says that something is "a law of
nature". "What has grown up historically can only die out
historically, by the gradual operation of necessary laws."63 Eliot

61 Adam Bede, p. 194
62 Adam Bede, p. 70
63 op.cit.
was firmly convinced. For an idealist, there are no such laws: what we call laws of nature, are only laws of our own mind projected into the phenomenal world. A realist, on the other hand, believes that things do have their own ways independent of the perceiving consciousness. In the same way, the Church cannot be endangered when "a young woman talks in a serious way to a handful of people on the Green." This attitude is in fact the core of Mr Irwine's sympathizing flexibility regarding people's moral flaws: "he held it no virtue to frown at irremediable faults" the narrator tells us and adds later: "if I were closely questioned, I should be obliged to confess that he felt no serious alarms about the souls of his parishioners, and would have thought it a mere loss of time to talk in a doctrinal and awakening manner to old 'Feyther Taft,' or even to Chad Cranage, the blacksmith." Contrast this approach to that of Adam from the beginning of the novel, where he is ready to resort to physical violence in order to "have his way." Mr Irwine knows there is an order of things, which undergo their own processes outside of human control - there are no revolutions, only slow, gradual progress: hence the mistrust to the project of "those lean cobblers, who think they can regenerate mankind by setting out to preach in the morning." 

On the whole, Realism is the attitude of the Gemeinschaft. We often hear Mrs Poyser say things like: "There's One above knows better nor us." or her "There's no knowing what may happen before Lady Day: -" Realism, in this very crude and unreflected form, simply means that it is not always up to us to

\[64\] op.cit.
\[65\] Adam Bede, p. 69
\[66\] Adam Bede, p. 70
\[67\] op.cit.
\[68\] op.cit.
\[69\] Adam Bede, p. 203
\[70\] Adam Bede, p. 351
be in control of things - that things of the world have their courses which they will take regardless to our agreement with them. Neither do the village people - in a realist fashion - believe in revolutions: be they personal or political. There is an instance at the beginning of the book, which looks like a new beginning: during Dinah's first preaching in Hayslope, we watch Bessy Cranage - Chad's Bess - one of "that unsoaped, lazy class of feminine characters with whom you may venture to eat 'an egg, an apple, or a nut"71- under the influence of the preaching "wrenching her earrings from her ears, she threw them down before her, sobbing aloud."72 A number of pages later, however, at Arthur's feast, we encounter the same Bessy as before the preaching and Mrs Poyser comments to Dinah: "There's that Bessy Cranage - she'll be flaunting i' the new finery three weeks after you're gone, I'll be bound: she'll no more go on in her new ways without you, than a dog 'ull stand on its hind-legs when there's nobody looking."73 From a realist perspective, if it is natural to Bessy to be vain or to a dog to walk on four legs, there is not much point in trying to change these natural dispositions.

Chapter II: "If the Past is not to Bind Us, Where can Duty Lie?"
- The Mill on the Floss

The Mill on the Floss (1860), probably the best-known of Eliot's novels, is a story of Maggie Tulliver, a little girl and later a young woman, who cannot come to terms with the people around her. She feels constantly misunderstood by her brother, 

71 Adam Bede, p. 31
72 Adam Bede, p. 32-33
73 Adam Bede, p. 477
her family, by the people of her community. Ian Milner writes: "At the core of The Mill on the Floss there is a fundamental conflict of values. ... Its ultimate source lies in the tension between Maggie and the society in which she is placed." In this chapter, I would like to analyze the relationships between Maggie and the people around her and point out the forces, which keep Maggie in St Ogg's, in spite of the oppressive feeling of being an outsider. Part of the reason, no doubt, is that she cannot leave because she is a woman: but that is not the whole of it, nor is it the most important reason. Eliot, to a great disappointment of feminist critics, is very careful not to make Maggie's sex the sole reason of her difficulties. In a typically Eliot fashion, her effort is to find universal answers to universal questions, which would not be limited to people of a specific social group, sex or historical period.

The basic conflict of the novel is a conflict between Maggie and her community. Maggie has a number of character traits which are simply incompatible with the expectations of the people around her. The constant struggle for power between an individual (Maggie) and community (her family, her relatives, the people of St Ogg's etc.) is the driving force of the story. The individual tries to impose her ways, whereas the community tries to stick to its. This is, approximately, the mechanism, which breeds the difficult situations for the characters, especially for Maggie. Can she live outside her community? If not, she has to adapt. Why? The Mill on the Floss can be read as a dramatized search for answers to these basic questions.

74 Milner, p. 22
II.1: Maggie’s Conflicts

The character of Maggie Tulliver is, famously, but perhaps not very importantly, the most autobiographical of George Eliot’s characters. We watch Maggie grow from her childhood to early adulthood. This is important, because George Eliot believed strongly in the importance of precisely this period for the whole life. Her novels are populated with young men and women, because she believed in a very strong potential for moral reforms, which deteriorates with age (as the example of Mr Tulliver shows).

Maggie, a girl of nine, has chronic problems to please her elders. She does not look after her clothes, she is not keen on patchwork, she does not keep away from the river, she is not fond of her aunts and uncles – on the whole, Maggie is quite a “contrary” child, as the Dodson sisters call it.

The prominent feature of Maggie’s is her impulsiveness: Maggie, being very keen on the world and people, very often rushes into action without thinking of its consequences, and then, more often than not, she has to regret it. When Tom goes away to school, he relies on Maggie to look after his rabbits, but she completely forgets her charge and leaves the rabbits to die. When he comes back and finds out about the rabbits, he recounts all Maggie’s recent “offences” in his anger and she is genuinely sorry:

“Last holidays you licked the paint off my lozenge box, and the holidays before that you let the boat drag my fish-line down when I’d set you to watch it, and you pushed your head through my kite, all for nothing.”

“But I didn’t mean,” said Maggie; “I couldn’t help it.”
"Yes, you could," said Tom, "if you'd minded what you were doing."  

For a reader of *The Mill on the Floss*, it is not too difficult to decipher what Maggie’s "I couldn’t help it" and Tom’s "Yes, you could, if you’d minded what you were doing" mean. Maggie’s impulses are simply too strong for her to master them, and Tom blames her for not keeping them under a rational control. Later on in their lives, once again in that powerful scene when Tom finds out about the secret meetings between Philip and Maggie, the following little exchange takes place in the course of the argument between brother and sister: "You never do wrong, Tom," said Maggie, tauntingly. "Not if I know it," answered Tom with proud sincerity." Tom urges Maggie to behave more rationally and less instinctively - hence the choice of words like "mind" and "know" in the two quoted dialogues. On the whole, Tom is much better at judging things rationally, which makes him, in the eyes of the community, much less "contrairy". He thinks much more than Maggie of the future consequences of his actions and this practical ability to see ahead enables him to be very focused in his long-term effort to buy the mill back. Maggie’s impulsiveness, following her immediate feelings, is, to Tom’s understanding only a source of trouble: she makes herself ridiculous in front of her aunts and uncles when she, in a sudden attack of rage, cuts her hair short; she is ungrammatically rude to her relatives when they come to hold "The Family Council" after Mr Tulliver is gone bankrupt, not to speak about holding a clandestine relationship with the son of her father’s arch-enemy and, finally, ruining her reputation and

---

75 *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 36  
76 *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 342
hurts her cousin's feelings in her elopement with Stephen Guest, on both of which I would like to comment later.

The difference between the brother and the sister can in fact be labelled as the difference between the Dodson and the Tulliver principle: Maggie and her father, on one hand, are typical representatives of the Tulliver principle - they are impulsive, want to have their way and often do not think about the consequences of their actions. I have already talked about Maggie above and Mr Tulliver, in spite of his life of experience is similarly swept along by his passions. He whips Wakem almost to death, in a violent attack of rage, even though, pragmatically seen, the thrashing cannot help him in his position and can only make matters worse. He stubbornly insists on going to law, because he feels that the tradition of his family on the Floss entitles him to arbitrate about the water rights. On the positive side of Mr Tulliver's passionate nature is the affection he has for his sister, Mrs Moss - the Mosses owe him money, but he just cannot be strict enough with the poor sister to demand the money back, even if he is in a quite desperate financial situation himself. In thinking about Mr Tulliver alongside with Maggie, it is possible to see, I think, the importance of childhood for George Eliot. Mr Tulliver dies embittered, self-pitying, and blaming the world ("this world's too many for me"). Maggie's father, in a typical idealist fashion, fails to see the Reality: to see that the world of his values is already gone, or, rather, that it has been transformed into a world of Wakem, irrigation schemes and trade. This issue really has to do with egoism mentioned in the previous chapter. Mr Tulliver is simply too self-centred to see the Reality as it is:

78 The Mill on the Floss, p. 261
"He sees any obstacles and difficulties - law, creditors, bankruptcy - as acts of personal hostility and as fundamental disruptions of reality." 79 His moral vision is not broad enough to perceive, in this "very Darwinian novel" 80, that it is up to him to adapt or to perish. Maggie, of course, has also her difficulties with coming to terms with her world, but she at least has a chance. Young age has the time and capacity, flexibility, for a moral reform.

The Dodsons, compared to the Tullivers, are perhaps not very intelligent, but they are cool-headed, patient and pragmatic. "Besides Mr. Tulliver, the Dodsons look very grown-up." 81 Tom's efforts to gain the Mill back by slowly working off the debt are the best example of this characteristic. Tom sacrifices, or perhaps is forced to sacrifice, his young life to work in order to save money for buying the mill. It is perhaps too harsh to say that "as he grows older, he does not mature" 82, but we feel that Maggie's self-justifying reproach "Sometimes when I have done wrong it has been because I have feelings that you would be better for if you had them." 83 is not quite unjustified. On the other hand, it is no doubt true that "this severity towards others is, in Tom, the basis upon which he can build a narrow but, in the circumstances, effective and even laudable immediate purpose in life." 84 In the Dodson hierarchy, two values stand on the top: duty and tradition. The Dodsons themselves believe in the existence of the Dodson principle: As Eliot's narrator tells us: "There were particular ways of doing everything in that family ... and the only bitter circumstance

79 Thale, In: Draper, p. 134
80 Hardy, Barbara: Life and Art in The Mill on the Floss, In: Draper, p. 181 (Hardy)
81 Thale, In: Draper, p. 134
82 Thale, In: Draper, p. 135
83 The Mill on the Floss, p. 347
84 Lee, R.H.: The Unity of The Mill on the Floss, In: Draper, p. 144
attending this superiority was a painful inability to approve the condiments or the conduct of families ungoverned by the Dodson tradition."\textsuperscript{85} They will keep their best bed sheets in locked in their wardrobes and their best porcelain in the cupboard, not putting it to use. When her family gets into financial difficulties and loses the mill, the major worry of Mrs Tulliver's is the fact that she will be forced to sell her china and her linen with her maiden name embroidered on it will get sold all over the country. The Dodson aunts always make life difficult for little Tom and Maggie: they are strict, they scold the children and they are never affectionate. There is, however, one instance when the most Dodson of all aunts, Mrs Glegg, surprises us: it is after Maggie's return from Mudport - Maggie elopes with Stephen and returns, contrary to public expectation, unmarried. This, of course, ruins her reputation in St Oggs - she becomes the infamous woman, the outsider. In this situation, to reader's great surprise, aunt Glegg is one of the few people that stands by Maggie's side. The support Maggie gets from her aunt, however, is on par with the support Adam Bede gives his family.

Adam supports his old parents and less skilful brother, but still he would use words like "cross" and "yoke" - his support does not come from heart, but from the head. In the same way, Mrs Glegg defends Maggie out of a feeling of duty towards her "kin" and says "in the tones of a benevolent despot", as Ian Millner calls it: "I won't throw ill words at her - there's them out o' the family 'ull be ready enough to do that. But I'll give her good advice; an' she must be humble."\textsuperscript{86} Mrs Glegg is far too strict and rational to be sympathizing: she may have the right

\textsuperscript{85} The Mill on the Floss, p. 43-44
\textsuperscript{86} The Mill on the Floss, p. 500
tactics in defending Maggie when "St Ogg’s passes judgment", but she will never be the person to come to in grief.

A good illustration showing contrast between the Dodson and Tulliver principle comes from the chapter called "The Family Council", where the family "come together ... to advise and consult about what’s to be done in this disgrace as has fallen upon the family". The aunts and uncles gather to discuss how they may help the Tullivers. The discussion is typically Dodson: coldly rational, merchant-like reasonings about individual articles in the Tulliver household and their price. No sign of compassion for their sister and her family. Maggie, very disappointed and frustrated by this lack of feeling, has on of her passionate outbursts: "Why do you come, then, ... talking and interfering with us and scolding us, if you don’t mean to do anything to help". The narrator adds: "Tom was vexed; it was no use to talk so." Tom perceives the situation in a completely different way from Maggie. He is aware of the peculiarity of the situation: he clearly sees the distribution of power. The Tullivers have gone bankrupt and they have to rely on the goodwill of their relatives. Tom’s mind is set on getting out of the financial difficulties and he is able and willing to suppress his personal feelings in order to achieve this goal. In a very similar way, later on, when he starts working, he is so focused on saving up the money to buy the mill back, that he virtually forgets about his own life. Maggie’s, on the other hand, is too much passion-dominated: to her, her own immediate and powerful feelings are just too strong to handle. In an analogy to her father’s whipping of Wakem, Maggie does not make the slightest attempt to argue rationally or criticize in a productive

87 The Mill on the Floss, p. 208
88 The Mill on the Floss, p. 215
89 ibid.
way - not that it would make much sense in the Dodson milieu - her emotions just burst out of her heart, in a very Tulliver fashion, with completely no regard to the circumstances.

The dominant driving force of the story is derived from the peculiar mixture in Maggie's character: on one hand, she rushes into her actions headlong, guided by strong impulses, but on the other hand, her intelligence allows her to see the effects of her actions quite clearly and brings her to regret, often strengthened by Tom's reproaches. Eliot's narrator characterizes Maggie in the following way: "Maggie rushed to her deeds with passionate impulse, and then saw not only their consequences, but what would have happened if they had not been done, with all the exaggeration of an active imagination." 90

In this way Maggie's character constantly oscillates between outbursts of passion and periods of regret. Barbara Hardy uses the notion of oscillation to describe Maggie's attempts to come to terms with the world around her: "At each step of apparent progress, when Maggie says most confidently, 'I have made up my mind', she is shown, very quietly, as moving back on her word." 91 Maggie's nature, in spite of her many efforts, is and stays rather inflexible and reform-resistant. If we apply the pair of concepts from the previous chapter, the Gemeinschaft x Gesellschaft distinction is not as schematic as in Adam Bede. In my opinion, both Tullivers and Dodsons stand on the Gemeinschaft side, the Dodsons, however, being much more flexible and ready to accept the rapidly progressing Gesellschaft set of values. The Tulliver principle is essentially inflexible, unable to adapt, and that is why I think it has to perish at the end.

90 The Mill on the Floss. p. 65
91 Hardy, In: Draper, p. 184
II.2: The Escape

Young Maggie, unable to meet the expectations of her community, in agreement with her passionate nature, resorts to an radical solution and tries to resolve her difficulties by running away from them. One of these escapes is physical, when Maggie tries to get away from her family and start a new life with the gypsies, and the other is a spiritual one, when she tries to benumb her personality following Thomas à Kempis.

First, Maggie, still a child, after one of her excesses, when she throws her cousin Lucy into a puddle of mud in an attack of jealousy, tries to run away from her family and seeks out the gypsies. Typically for Maggie, she has her head full of fictitious notions about the gypsies and so she suffers quite a blow, when she encounters the reality. The gypsies are dirty and with not much to eat and they also steal from her. Maggie comes with the idea of becoming the gypsy queen, but she is disappointed to find that "the gypsies didn't seem to mind her at all, and she felt quite weak among them"\(^{92}\) and so she is eventually very happy to be back home in the evening. The recognition of the warmth of the household hearth in contrast to the present discomfort of alien environment evokes the situation of Hetty Sorrel of *Adam Bede*. Both girls leave their communities, where they feel uncomfortable and only when their feet get wet, they recognize how comfortable it really was back at home. Both girls are on the quest for sympathy and comfort and they both have a vivid idea of their rescue in their mind, but none of these ideas are in any degree realistic: Hetty believes that Arthur will marry her and Maggie thinks she will immediately win the respect of

\(^{92}\) *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 110
the knowledge-hungry gypsies. Both idealistic conceptions are doomed by the ruthless Reality. What was it that made Maggie feel so uncomfortable with the gypsies and why was she eventually so happy to be back in the family from which she only a few hours ago was so eager to escape? Apart from the completely mistaken ideas Maggie had about the life of the gypsies - which is Eliot's say against the novels of her time, unrealistically idealizing the gypsies, the rustics and the simple people in general - it was also her being unprepared for what we call in modern terminology "the cultural differences". Maggie expects the gypsies to be very interested and fond of learning and she expects that they would respect her for her cleverness, because these are the values that are esteemed in her community. This is her first encounter with a culture which does not think and work like her own: these people speak a different language, do not care much for Columbus, they are dirty, dress differently and do not have tea. Maggie's feeling of weakness stems from the sense that she is not "one of them", which the gypsies show her by speaking a language she does not understand and by behaving to her differently than they do to their compatriots. Moreover, the values which she knows from home - good food, esteem for education, politeness - simply do not apply among the gypsies and Maggie therefore does not know what to expect. As a result of her encounter, "[h]er ideas about the gypsies had undergone a rapid modification ... From having considered them very respectful companions, amenable to instruction, she had begun to think that they meant perhaps to kill her as soon as it was dark, and cut up her body for gradual cooking."93 At the end of the day, Maggie decides that the gypsy that brings her home is a kind man and no cutthroat,

93 The Mill on the Floss, p. 112
nevertheless, she is happy to be back home (it is again interesting to watch how Maggie’s perception changes from one extreme to the other in an immediate response to her own feelings). Maggie’s attempt to escape fails, because she realizes, that the only world she understands is the one in which she has lived ever since she was born. This is, needless to say, a very Gemeinschaft-kind of feeling. The Mill on the Floss does not thematize the sense of local rootedness to the extent of Adam Bede, however, the bonds to the place which the people have is always present in Eliot novels. A very large part of Mr Tulliver’s frustration on losing the mill comes from the persistent idea that he has lost the place of his forefathers. The place to which Tullivers always belonged: „Dorlcote Mill’s been in our family a hundred year and better, and nobody ever heard of Pivart meddling with the river, till this fellow came and bought Bincome’s farm out of hand before anybody else could so much as say ‘snap’.“ Mr Tulliver’s feeling that „this world’s been too many for me” stems from the fact that he realizes that the world around him is no longer his world. The turn from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft has already started and he is not able to adapt. As I have pointed out earlier, Mr Tulliver does not have the capacity to come to terms with this new world. The episode with the gypsies makes Maggie realize that there are values and ways of her community, which make her feel comfortable by their familiarity and that it is her task to adapt to her community if she wants to continue living within that familiarity.

The revolution, however, does not take place - as it never does in Eliot’s novels and after some time, Maggie is being her old passionate self. Another attempt to escape her community

---

94 The Mill on the Floss, p. 155
and the problems she has cohabitating with it comes some years later in Maggie’s life, when she is about 15. This time it is an effort to escape into an internal exile, under the influence of Thomas à Kempis’ book *The Imitation of Christ*, bought to her by an old friend Bob Jakin. “Know that the love of thyself doth hurt thee more than anything in the world...If thou seekest this or that, and wouldst be her or there to enjoy thy own will and pleasure, thou shalt never be quiet nor free from care.” Thomas à Kempis writes and Maggie is fascinated:

“Here, then, was a secret of life that would enable her to renounce all other secrets - here was a sublime height to be reached without the help of outward things - here was insight, and strength, and conquest, to be won by means entirely within her own soul, where a supreme Teacher was waiting to be heard.”

Kempis teaches that the root of all worldly unhappiness is following one’s own will. One can reach a peace of mind when one ceases to want and strive for the things of this world. Under the influence of these teachings, Maggie revolutionizes her life: she puts away her books and reads only Kempis and the Bible, she takes up needlework and - in an effort to forsake her own will - becomes very submissive to the wishes of others. “Her mother felt the change in her with a sort of puzzled wonder that Maggie should be “growing up so good”; it was amazing that this once “contrairy” child was become so submissive, so backward to assert her own will.” In this way, after constant conflicts with the people around her, Maggie tries to change her life. She renounces everything which she used to like, because she now sees it as the source of her conflicts: she tries to

---

95 *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 289
96 *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 290
97 *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 294
suppress her own character in search of a harmonious and happy life side-by-side with her community.

The problem of Maggie’s new self-denying approach proves to be, that it is simply impracticable within a community. Community is a network of people and people’s interests, often conflicting ones, and if one tries not to impose one’s own will, but be guided by the will of others, one must necessarily fail when one is forced to act under two conflicting obligations. The situation is, in fact, similar to that of Dinah Morris, the Methodist preacher of Adam Bede: She is a person living for others, suppressing her own will and trying to help others and she is the person, whom the Poysers seek in their trouble with Hetty as a comforter. She, however, fails to be with them when they most need her, because she is - following her duty - preaching to a Methodist community somewhere far-off. The question which needs and which duties are to be obliged and which are to be rejected is an extremely difficult one - and one that actually ruins Maggie’s well-meant effort. The conflict of interests is in a miniature way pre-indicated in an everyday scene, when Mrs Tulliver, seeing that Maggie is willing to suppress her own will, desires her to have the hair curled. Maggie, „in spite of her own ascetic wish to have no personal adornment, was obliged to give way to her mother about her hair, and submit to have the abundant black locks plaited into a coronet on the summit of her head.‟98 In this way Maggie’s doctrine of a total suppression of the self and resignation towards any worldly interests comes into a conflict with her mother’s wish and Maggie finds herself in one of the many no-win situations of her life: if she obliges her mother, she has to repress her doctrine and if she does not, she represses the

98 ibid.
doctrine of self-suppression all the same. On this small scale we can see the difficulty which there is essentially in any moral choice according to George Eliot. Joan Benett writes: "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 caused to be forced to choose between two alternatives, either of which would cause suffering."99 Maggie is forced to realize that the obligations and bonds she has to people around her simply prevent her from the ascetic life, which she intended to live. Her attempt to escape from the conflicts which she has with her community by simply leaving it behind, is shattered fatally - she simply is not in the position to live a life that is perhaps possible behind monastery walls, but in her world there are just too many people with too many interests around her and it is not possible for her, as a member of this community, to simply withhold herself from the network

II.3: The past as a Bond

The issue of satisfying conflicting demands is later raised on a larger scale and in a more pointed form in the question of Maggie's relationships with Philip and Stephen. Last time Maggie saw the lawyer's son as a little girl at Mr Stelling's, where her brother Tom was sent to get "eddication". Since then, however, a number of things happened which there are now standing in the way of their friendship: Mr Tulliver has lost an arbitration against Wakem, whereby he has lost the mill. He, as a typical idealist, believing that the world is centred about his self, takes the result of the lawsuit personally and blames Wakem for all his misfortunes and has given his old hatred a

---

99 Bennett, Joan: A Moral Dilemma Unresolved, In: Draper, p. 114
mark of an Anathema by cursing Wakem on the frontpage of the family Bible. Maggie, however, cannot help liking Philip as an old acquaintance and when she accidentally meets him during her walk in the Red Deeps, she is glad of it. When she agrees to see Philip regularly, she certainly means it in complete innocence: he is a lonely young man, an old soul-mate, and she feels genuinely sorry for him. And, perhaps most importantly, Maggie, for her part, sees no justification behind the breach of relations between herself and Philip, imposed upon her by Tom and her father: „It was certainly very cruel for Philip that he should be shrunk from, because of an unjustifiable vindictiveness towards his father...The idea that he might become her lover...had not occurred to her.‟ And so they go on meeting each other in the Red Deeps until the day when one of her aunts accidentally sees Philip rambling there and raises a suspicion in Maggie‟s brother. Tom comes to their meeting – which was to be the last, in fact – dragging Maggie by her wrist, abuses poor Philip and forbids Maggie to ever see the lawyer‟s son again without his knowledge and Maggie is forced to give Tom her promise.

„Now, then, Maggie, there are but two courses for you to take; either you vow solemnly to me, with your hand on my father‟s Bible, that you will never have another meeting or speak another word in private with Philip Wakem, or you refuse, and I tell my father everything; ...“

„Tom,“ she said, ... „don‟t ask me that. I will promise you to give up all intercourse with Philip...- to give it up as long as it would ever cause any pain to my father. . . . I feel something for Philip too. He is not happy.‟
Clearly, there is no third way for Maggie: this situation is a painful either...or... and she has to choose. It is either obliging the family or Philip – and Maggie, of course, chooses the family. It is not difficult to see why: she depends on the family materially, of course, but also, perhaps more importantly, emotionally. „Ah, Maggie...you would never love me so well as you love your brother.“ Philip once tells her. „Perhaps not ... but then, you know, the first thing I ever remember in my life is standing with Tom by the side of the Floss,” Maggie replies. Once again, we witness how Maggie cherishes the family-bonds. Tom is able to blackmail Maggie into obedience by threatening to tell their father about the affair, because he knows that hurting her father’s feeling is precisely what Maggie wants to avoid at all costs. The undisputable strength of the family-bond is the factor that makes Tom win the upper hand in the affair – in spite of Maggie’s passionate resistance to his self-righteousness and her pity for Philip. The idea of Maggie’s leaving the family and going to live with Philip is not even presented.

The issue of being bound to one’s community by a common history is taken up once again – this time much more explicitly in Maggie’s elopement with Stephen. Maggie – for reasons generally unclear to critics - falls in love with a rich young man Stephen Guest, who in fact is the acknowledged lover to Maggie’s cousin Lucy. Stephen, on his part, is fascinated by the beautiful, somewhat wild and very intelligent stranger Maggie Tulliver, now about 17 years old. The central episode of their affair comes around by an absurd play of circumstances, which turn a planned boat-trip of four friends into a tete-a-tete of Maggie and Stephen with fatal consequences: the chapter is

102 The Mill on the Floss, p. 307
called "Borne Along by the Tide" and the two float downstream on their boat, not paying attention to where they are and so it happens that they pass all the possible landing-places. In an analogical way, Stephen urges Maggie that they let themselves be born by the emotional streams within themselves, ignoring their surroundings. Ian Milner sums up: "For Maggie the tide expresses the suspension of self-examination and abandonment to sensuous impulse. Committed to her "great temptation" she pretends that "the tide was doing it all - that she might glide along with the swift, silent stream, and not struggle any more". But the voice of the moral self breaks in."  

Stephen formulates the issue in terms of what is natural vs. what is unnatural: he wants to persuade Maggie to elope with him. Following one's instincts, Stephen argues, is perfectly natural and therefore good and forsaking the natural inclinations is, by the same token, unnatural and hence wrong. Stephen urges Maggie to follow her strong feelings, whereas Maggie tries to resist him by referring to the obligations she has to others:

"O it is difficult - life is very difficult! It seems right to me sometimes that we should follow our strongest feeling; - but then, such feelings continually come across the ties that have made others dependent on us - and would cut them in two. If life were quite easy and simple, as it might have been in paradise, and we could always see that one being first towards whom . . . . I mean, if life did not make duties for us before love comes, love would be a sign that two people ought to belong to each other. But I see - I feel it is not so now: there are things we must renounce in life; some of us must resign love."  

---

103 Milner, p. 25  
104 The Mill on the Floss, p. 450
The whole discussion is one of responsibility: of the extent to which one must mind the web of people and their interests around him/her. Suzanne Graver writes: „This conflict between „two irreconcilable requirements“ – on of which speaks to „our individual needs,“ the other „to the dire necessities of our lot“ – is for George Eliot quintessential to tragedy. She writes, „tragedy consists in the terrible difficulty,“ if not the impossibility, of creating „an adjustment...between the individual and the general.“ 105 Stephen advocates an approach, in which what matters most is the tie between him and Maggie, regardless to the feelings of other people: „If you do love me, dearest,... it is better – it is right that we should marry each other. We can’t help the pain it will give.“ 106 Clearly, should Stephen and Maggie get married, a number of people would be hurt: Lucy, Philip, perhaps Tom. Stephen claims that these people’s feelings are not Stephen’s and Maggie’s responsibility – and Maggie’s response to it presents a point that modern critics and readers may have difficulties digesting. There is no legal obligation between Philip and Maggie, and Stephen is technically not engaged to Lucy. The moral issue of the flight with Stephen is extremely important, because apart from that, the relationship is perfectly possible - it does not disrupt any social norms, like the relationship between Arthur Donnithorne and Hetty Sorrel of Adam Bede, neither is it against any strong personal repulsions among the people close to her, like Maggie’s relationship with Philip Wakem. Stephen Guest is a rich young man of Maggie’s social class, even if in wealth perhaps a couple of levels above her. Everybody in St.Ogg’s, in fact expects them to get married clandestinely. Robert Liddell, commenting on

105 Graver, p. 194
106 The Mill on the Floss, p. 448
Maggie’s affair with Philip, makes a valid comment applicable to her elopement with Stephen as well: "it is not a simple temptation like that of Arthur Donnithorne, that should be rejected out of hand. It seems to take the form of a 'conflict of duties' – the pull on either side is so strong that the reader will not find it easy to say where the true duty lay." ¹⁰⁷ In this case, however, it is purely Maggie’s strong moral sense that prevents her from following her immediate attractions and marrying Stephen. Maggie, after she has been through a lifetime of following her passionate impulses, which, more often than not, meant disappointing people’s expectations, opposes Stephen:

"It is not so, Stephen - I’m quite sure that is wrong. ...if we judged in that way, there would be a warrant for all treachery and cruelty - we should justify breaking the most sacred ties ... If the past is not to bind us, where can duty lie? We should have no law but the inclination of the moment." ¹⁰⁸

Henry Auster comments on Maggie’s moral dilemma: "At the time of her decision on board of ship to leave Stephen, the fact that Maggie is powerfully drawn to him and the sexual, emotional and material gratification that he represents is necessary to make her temptation genuine and her triumph almost perverse and agonizingly poignant. The motive force of the triumph is her individually deduced and felt moral vision." ¹⁰⁹ The moral lesson Maggie has learned is that each member of the community has certain obligations towards the other members. These obligations are based on the common past: "the real tie lies in the feelings and expectations we have

---
¹⁰⁷ Liddell, p. 60
¹⁰⁸ The Mill on the Floss, p. 475
¹⁰⁹ Auster, p. 161
raised in other minds."\textsuperscript{110} One has a responsibility towards other people, which is based upon the expectations of these others and which it is his/her duty to take and act upon. These expectations are the bond which keeps the community together: if everyone just followed their instincts, the people would not know what to expect of each other and, consequently, the community would be non-existent, just like Maggie did not manage to join the gypsies.

\textbf{II.4: "St Ogg's Passes Judgment"}

Maggie returns to St.Ogg's unmarried and as "St Ogg's Passes Judgment", Maggie's strong moral reasons for not marrying Stephen are completely misunderstood by the local people and Maggie becomes, once again in her life, an outcast. At the very beginning of the story, when Maggie is still a girl of nine or so, Mr Riley comes to give Mr Tulliver advice concerning Tom's "eddication". Mr Riley keenly discusses Maggie's books on the occasion and in one of the books there is a picture of a witch-test, which little Maggie comments on:

"O, I'll tell you what that means. It's a dreadful picture, isn't it? But I can't help looking at it. That old woman in the water's a witch - they've put her in to find out if she's a witch, and if she's drowned - and killed, you know - she's innocent, and not a witch, but only a poor silly old woman. But what good would do her then, you know, when she was drowned? Only, I suppose, she'd go to heaven, and God would make it up to her."\textsuperscript{111}

On her return to St Ogg's, Maggie is, in fact, in yet another no-win situation of moral choice analogous to the one of the woman

\textsuperscript{110} \textit{The Mill on the Floss}, p. 449

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{The Mill on the Floss}, p. 18
on the picture: had she married Stephen Guest, that would mean degrading herself to an animal level, following her carnal inclinations. As it is now, her moral sense had triumphed, in the eyes of her community, however, she is disgraced. "Only, I suppose, she'd go to heaven, and God would make it up to her" seems to be the only consolation and hope Eliot can offer to Maggie for following her moral sense. In spite of some critical attempts to interpret The Mill on the Floss as a struggle of a brilliant individual Maggie Tulliver against the suffocating Gleichschaltung of the St.Ogg's society, I think this sort of reading does not quite respect the nature of George Eliot's work. Maggie certainly does have her problems coming to terms with the standards of her community - and after the family gets into material difficulties by losing the mill, she is perhaps quite unhappy. But still, as we have seen, to simply leave St.Ogg's is not really an option. Maggie is too deeply rooted in her community and its culture: we have seen how difficult it was for her as a little girl with the gypsies and behind her decision to leave Stephen, apart from the moral sense discussed above, there is at least one more valid reason: the familiarity of St.Ogg's and the comfort resulting from this familiarity. After her return, Maggie explains to Dr. Kenn, her only confidant and the person with "the most mature and enlightened conscience in the book":

"I have no heart to begin a strange life again. I should have no stay. I should feel like a lonely wanderer - cut off from the past."

Maggie, like Mr. Tulliver before, simply feels that she belongs to St.Ogg's. Just like she will never love anyone more than Tom, because he plays a part in her earliest childhood memories, she will never be able to live away from the Floss for

---

112 Liddell, p. 69
113 The Mill on the Floss, p. 496
the same reason. Henry Auster, discussing this question contrasts Maggie and Philip: "In spite of her rebelliousness as a child, in spite of the town's final rejection of her, Maggie is not depicted as a conscious and wilful outcast. Unlike Philip, for example, who from the beginning despises the provincialism of St.Ogg's and is consistently spurned by the town, Maggie feels completely at home in the region." 114

In yet another microscopic scene introducing serious moral issues on a diminished scale, the very first issue we hear discussed concerning Maggie Tulliver, is that of her hair. Her natural hair is a little unconventional, which is a great weight on her mother's mind. The discussion of trivialities in this little episode pre-indicates Maggie's serious moral struggles in the future. Mrs Tulliver complains:

"...her hair won't curl all I can do with it, and she's so franzy about having it put in' paper, as I've such work as never was to make her stand and have it pinched with th' irons."

"Cut it off - cut it off short," said the father, rashly.

"How can you talk so, Mr Tulliver? She's too big a gell, gone nine, and tall of her age, to have her hair cut short; an' there's her cousin Lucy's got a row o' curls round her head, an' not a hair out o' place."

...Maggie's hair, as she threw off her bonnet, painfully confirmed her mother's accusation: Mrs Tulliver, desiring her daughter to have a curled crop, "like other folks's children," had had cut it too short in front to be pushed behind the ears; and as it was usually straight an hour after it had been taken out of paper, Maggie was incessantly

114 Auster, p. 152-3
tossing her head to keep the dark heavy locks out of her gleaming black eyes"^{115}

This discussion between Mr and Mrs Tulliver, pre-indicates on a trivial level the serious moral questions that are dealt with in the novel. Firstly, Maggie has natural hair of a quality that does not answer to the standard of her community. What exactly is wrong with Maggie’s hair? She does not have the hair „like other folks’s children”. Parallelly, Maggie’s character does not correspond to the social standards: Maggie does not like patchwork, she mutilates her dolls, she is fascinated by books – none of these features are thought of as fitting for a little girl. Her mother, a good Dodson – and „the religion of the Dodsons consisted in revering whatever was customary and respectable”^{116} – tries to change the natural quality of Maggie’s hair from straight to curly, in order to make it more conventional. The example of cousin Lucy’s hair is called upon as a demonstration that the desired change is perfectly possible. There are, however, two obstacles to Mrs Tulliver’s attempt – Maggie would not keep her place, and even when her mother succeeds, Maggie’s hair „was usually straight an hour after it had been taken out of paper“. Again, there are analogies with Maggie’s moral struggles: she is not willing to adapt herself to the norms of her community and even if she does, the change is so much in contradiction to her natural character, that it can not be permanent. Finally, when Mrs Tulliver takes active steps and cuts Maggie’s hair „desiring her daughter to have a curled crop”, the attempt makes Maggie uncomfortable, but fails to achieve the objective. Analogically, when the community tries to change Maggie’s character by force, they can only hurt but not

\[^{115} The \textit{Mill on the Floss}, p. 13\]
\[^{116} The \textit{Mill on the Floss}, p. 273\]
reform her. Even to Mr Tulliver's impatient reply, trying to get rid of the tedious discussion altogether there is a parallel in Maggie's future life: Mr Tulliver suggests to resolve the problem by abolishing the problem itself - funnily enough, that is what the desperate Maggie does herself later - but Mrs Tulliver finds this solution socially even less acceptable than any of the other suggestions. Later, when Maggie cannot please anyone around her, do what she might, she tries the same remedy: following Thomas a Kempis, she tries to get rid of her character altogether and in the same way, this solution is socially unacceptable. This miniature scene once again presents Eliot's view of tragedy as a no-win situation and if we think about Maggie's story, there certainly is a point in Suzanne Graver's point that "a tragedy has not to expound why the individual must give way to the general; it has to show that it is compelled to give way; the tragedy consisting in the struggle involved, and often in the entirely calamitous issue in spite of a grand submission". Bearing the tragic cul-de-sac in which Maggie has put herself at the end - typically for Eliot - by sticking to her hard-won moral principles, I think the apocalyptic flood is the only way of concluding the book; even if the ending, as Henry James points out, is aesthetically inadequate and, as Barbara Hardy complains, the moral issues stay unresolved. They stay unresolved because I think Eliot's final point is that the questions Maggie is facing are essentially irresolvable.

117 Graver, p. 195
Chapter III: „The Remedial Influences of Pure, Natural Human Relations“118 - Silas Marner

„Silas Marner is one of the most effective renderings of the experience – characteristically modern – of man’s alienation.“119 Ian Milner writes. The novel is a story of re-socialization, evaluation of the importance of social relations in one’s life. In this chapter I would like to take a closer look at the change Silas goes through and how and why does the change take place at all. The basic theme of Silas Marner has a lot in common with that of The Mill on the Floss: the main characters search for their place in their communities. From a certain point of view, however, Silas Marner is The Mill on the Floss turned inside out: whereas Maggie has to find a modus vivendi within a community, which is – in spite of frequent antagonisms – essentially hers, Silas has to find a new life in a community which is totally alien to the form of life he has lived before. I think we have seen by now more than once how very important this distinction is in Eliot’s view of the Gemeinschaft.

Silas Marner, published in April 1861, „a story which came across [Eliot’s] other plans by a sudden inspiration“120 is a novel describing about 30 years in the life of Silas Marner, the weaver, a newcomer to Raveloe. Silas, expelled from his working-class Methodist community in Lantern Yard, seeks a new start among the farmers of Raveloe. The Raveloe people, quite conservative as Eliot’s villagers usually are, do not accept Silas very heartily and Silas is a complete outsider for at least 15 years of his life with them. One day, however, on a New Year’s Eve, a little baby with golden hair comes to him from nobody knows where.

118 George Eliot’s letter to John Blackwood, her publisher, quoted in D.Carroll’s Introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of the novel, p.xii
119 Milner, p. 45
120 Eliot’s letter to Blackwood, her publisher, quoted in Introduction, p.viii
Silas decides to keep the child and looks after it and by means of the child, he also wins admittance into the Raveloe community. In this chapter, I would like to analyze Silas' gradual acceptance by the community - point out the role the child plays in the process and extract the mechanisms of the change in Silas' character, which were triggered off by his gradual re-socialization.

Silas has been expelled from his old community at Lantern Yard, where he has been innocently charged with theft. He does not have any family and so his coming to Raveloe is as accidental as it would have been to any other place. He comes to Raveloe as a complete outsider: discussing *Adam Bede*, I have mentioned 3 "pillars" of the Gemeinschaft. Three phenomena that serve as a glue in the village communities. They were kinship, neighbourhood and common practices and beliefs. Silas Marner has none of these links that would enable him to enter the Raveloe community: first of all, Silas or his family have no history in Raveloe. George Eliot opens her novel by a description of a wandering weaver, which expresses the importance of man's roots in place and in time in the Gemeinschaft point of view: "No one knew where wandering men had their homes or their origin; and how was a man to be explained unless you at least knew somebody who knew his father and mother?" 121 In these terms, the Raveloe people have difficulties "explaining" Silas: He is a craftsman, they are farmers; he is a Methodist, they are lukewarm Anglicans; the men enjoy their pint at the Rainbow, he does not drink. Like Maggie among the gypsies in *The Mill on the Floss*, the cultural difference is a barrier, which causes mistrust and suspicion. Like Maggie expects the gypsies to cut her throat and eat her

121 *Silas Marner*, p. 5
any minute, so the local boys have a sort of almost religious awe of this short-sighted newcomer: "If they merely glanced in his window he would fix on them a "dreadful stare" such as "could dart cramp, or rickets, or a wry mouth" at any of them. The village shepherd was not sure whether the weaver's trade "could be carried on entirely without the help of the Evil One." The mistrust is based on Silas' complete otherness, the locals have no possibility to relate to any of Marner's practices: he does not go to church or to the Rainbow. However, Marner, as the only weaver in the village, is needed, and so the people tolerate him, but keep their contact with him to an inevitable minimum: "the old linen-weaver in the neighbouring parish of Tarley being dead, his handicraft made him a highly welcome settler...Their sense of his usefulness would have counteracted any repugnance or suspicion which was not confirmed by a deficiency in the quality or tale of the cloth he wove for them." In the eyes of the community, Silas is thus degraded to a mere tool. It is offers them a pragmatic advantage to have someone of his trade, but he is never accepted as a member of the community. The degradation and lack of human contact dehumanize Silas himself:

"there were the calls of hunger; and Silas, in his solitude, had to provide his own breakfast, dinner and supper...and all these immediate promptings helped, along with the weaving, to reduce his life to the unquestioning activity of a spinning insect. He hated the thought of the past: there was nothing that called out his love and fellowship toward the strangers he had come amongst; and the future was all dark, for there was no Unseen Love that cared for him."
Silas, isolated from his community, gradually turns into an insect-like automaton: his only activities are to feed himself and to work. Like an insect, he has no past – or, rather, he hates the idea of it – he has no present among the "strangers" by whose side he is forced to live, and, consequently, with the loss of his faith, he loses the hope of any future. Hope is, of course, one of the important themes of Silas Marner.

In his isolation, Silas turns to hoarding money he makes by his weaving as the sole interest of his life. The money is his only company and counting it every night and adding to it pound by pound becomes the most important and most enjoyable activity of Silas' life. It turns into a purpose in itself: "He had seemed to love it little in the years when every penny had its purpose for him; for he loved the purpose then." 125 In a fetishist manner, he begins to believe that his money, like his loom, have a consciousness and awareness of him and when he indulges every day in his only pleasure – counting his money – his touches are like caresses. Money has replaced the void in his heart left by the loss of human contact. Silas sees his coins as having "familiar faces" 126 which he loved to looked at "to enjoy their companionship" 127, he sees his water-pot as "lending its handle to him" 128. Silas, in the aridity of his social life, replaces the human contact by personified things. As Henry Auster put it: "Even during the stupor of fifteen years, as he drags out a lonely existence, Silas dimly casts about for an emotional centre, and attaches his devotion to the most likely inanimate things: "his brown earthenware pot," his work, and his gold." 129

125 Silas Marner, p. 17
126 Silas Marner, p. 19
127 Ibid.
128 Ibid.
129 Auster, p. 203
III.1: Potentiality and Actuality

As Auster reminds us, even at this stage of Silas' dehumanization, we get little glimpses of affection now and then, which keep the reader aware of Silas' slumbering humanity. One such instance is his effort to help Sally Oates, the cobbler's wife, using his knowledge of healing herbs. Sally suffers from a heart disease and Silas knows how to help her. Typically in Eliot's vision, Silas is moved to help the woman by a recollection of his own mother, who suffered from the same disease. However, Silas' gesture blows into his face, for the prejudice of the community is too strong to be broken at this stage. His act of charity is interpreted as an evidence of miraculous powers and the dread of the weaver is only increased. Eliot's narrator comments: "Thus it came to pass that this movement of pity towards Sally Oates, which had given him a transient sense of brotherhood, heightened the repulsion between him and his neighbours, and made his isolation more complete." 130

Another instance, in which we get a glimpse of Silas' hibernating affection is an episode with Silas' old brown water-pot. After fifteen years in Raveloe, Silas breaks his water-pot. The one that has been one of his companions in his solitude - Silas builds for the pot a little tombstone, as for a dead friend: "The broken pot could never be of use to him any more, but he stuck the bits together and propped the ruin in its old place for a memorial." 131 Eliot's narrator mentions this episode as a "little incident...which showed that the sap of affection was not all gone" 132 from Silas' heart. Silas feels the same need to love, to have somebody to live for, as all people normally have. Being a

130 Silas Marner, p. 19
131 Silas Marner, p. 21
132 Silas Marner, p. 20
stranger isolated in his new community, he had to find a substitute in fetishistic worship of things. This makes Marner's loss of money a much harder blow than sheer loss of life-long savings would have been. Eliot's narrator summarizes:

"It has been a clinging life; and though the object round which its fibres had clung was a dead disrupted thing, it satisfied the need for clinging. But now the fence was broken down - the support was snatched away. Marner's thoughts could no longer move in their old round, and were baffled by a blank like that which meets a plodding ant when the earth has broken away on its homeward path." 133

George Eliot, as I have pointed out several times before, did not believe in revolutions: political, personal or other. These two instances are motioned to demonstrate, that not even Silas - in his half-spider condition - has been changed beyond recognition of his old self. His new situation has perhaps subdued some of his features and brought forward some others, but he did not become a completely new man: he did not lose his good heart and pity for people's suffering, in spite of the existing mistrust between Silas and the Raveloe people. To speak the language of philosophy, some of Silas' character traits have been subdued into potentiality, but incidents do happen now and then, which call these forth into actuality. Silas is never lost to humanity: even when his isolation is most complete, "his life narrowing and hardening itself more and more into mere pulsation of desire and satisfaction that had no relation to any other being" 134, there is still hope that his social situation changes and he will return to his own old affectionate self. Eliot was a great moral optimist: throughout her novels, there is not a character

133 Silas Marner, p. 76
134 Silas Marner, p. 20
that would be doomed and lost. Even the situation of Hetty Sorrel, the child-murderer of *Adam Bede*, is never seen as desperate - even she is given new hope in the cell-scene with Dinah Morris. To Eliot’s moral vision, there always existed a chance of moral reform, theoretically made possible by the above-mentioned doctrine of actuality and potentiality. In my reading, one of the most important messages of *Silas Marner* is the demonstration of the importance human contacts play in bringing the goodness and humanity of a human being forth out of potentiality into actuality. In order to make this happen, however, there must be an established link between the individual and community. Normally, as we have seen in *Adam Bede*, this link is given by the individual’s history, parentage, common practices and shared views. Silas, however, has none of these - his link to the community comes to him in exchange for the loss of his money: the loss, on one hand, helps to bring him closer to the people of Raveloe: it is a situation they know and can relate to. On the other hand, it is, of course, the little girl he looks after: the child free from all mistrust and prejudice on one side or the other, helps to bring Silas back to the community, to re-humanize him.

**III.2: At the Rainbow**

Silas’ first step out of his isolation and towards the community is caused by the loss of his money. After his money is taken from him, Silas - for the first time in fifteen years - seeks human contact. In a stormy night, soaking wet, he comes to the Rainbow, partly because he has a suspicion that the theft has been committed by one of the locals, Jem Rodney, but also, perhaps more importantly, because he feels he needs to rely on
the community with its authorities to gain his money back: „Marner’s ideas of legal authority were confused, but he felt that he must go and proclaim his loss; and the great people in the village – the clergyman, the constable, and Squire Cass – would make Jem Rodney, or somebody else, deliver up the stolen money.” Silas comes to the Rainbow, to everybody’s astonishment – the mistrust and even certain awe are dissolved in curiosity and the locals listen to Silas’ story. The narrator describes his feelings as he tells the men about his loss:

„This strangely novel situation of opening his trouble to his Raveloe neighbours, of sitting in the warmth of a hearth not his own, and feeling the presence of faces and voices which were his nearest promise of help, had doubtless its influence on Marner, in spite of his passionate preoccupation with his loss. Our consciousness rarely registers the beginning of a growth within us any more than without us: there have been many circulations of the sap before we detect the smallest sign of the bud.”

In this unexpected way, Silas begins to perceive the benefits of human contact. Silas comes to seek authority, that has the power to find the thief and is able to enforce the return of his money. What he does find, however, to his own surprise, is the comfort and warmth amongst his neighbours. Even though his mind is preoccupied by the loss of his money, the hospitality and comfort he finds among his neighbours are not lost upon him. The narrator’s enigmatic comment in the last two sentences points in the direction discussed above: in spite of his degeneration as a social being, Silas still is a social animal. The growth mentioned in the narrator’s comment is his re-discovery

135 Silas Marner, p. 44
136 Silas Marner, p. 57
of the community and its comforts. Silas' social sense is not quite dead yet – it has only gone into potentiality, which slowly begins to pulsate again in the Rainbow surrounded by his neighbours. And the mistrust the neighbours may have had against Marner gets dissolved in a simple human pity which they feel towards a fellow-man in grief:

"The slight suspicion with which his hearers at first listened to him, gradually melted away before the convincing simplicity of his distress: ...as Mr Macey observed, 'Folks as had the devil to back 'em were not likely to be so mushed' as poor Silas was."\(^{137}\)

"Trouble's made us kin."\(^{138}\) says Adam Bede to the Poysers after Hetty has been exiled. In a similar way, Silas' suffering and the simple pity the Raveloe locals feel for the poor man breaks down barriers of prejudice and mistrust which have existed between them for 15 years.

### III.3: The Girl with Golden Curls

The fairy-tale element of the novel is foregrounded, when Silas – after one of his cataleptic fits, which have always marked important events of his life – finds a little golden-haired girl on his hearth. The child, to the reader and to the short-sighted Marner is a symbolic return of his heap of money. This turning-point of the story takes place on the New Year’s Eve, which emphasizes the mythical feature even further. Silas decides to keep the child, which he sees as a compensation for his lost gold: "it's a lone thing – and I'm a lone thing. My money's gone

\(^{137}\) ibid.

\(^{138}\) *Adam Bede*, p. 464
I don’t know where - and this is come from I don’t know where." 139

By means of the child Silas is accepted into the community: "That softening of feeling towards him which dated from his misfortune, that merging of suspicion and dislike in a rather contemptuous pity for him as lone and crazy, was now accompanied with a more active sympathy, especially amongst the women." 140 The process takes place in three basic ways. On one hand, the weaver ceases to be the alien of strange trade, strange ways and strange beliefs - now, even more than after his loss, he is perceived as a person whose experience is very much like that of the other people. The weaver is no longer the mystical suspicious being perhaps in connection with evil powers: now he looks after the child, he becomes "a person whose satisfactions and difficulties could be understood." 141

Analyzing Maggie’s episode with the gypsies, I have already pointed out how very important the certainty of the shared set of values was for the feeling of security within the community. The discovery that the gypsies did not much care about factual knowledge was very discomforting to little Maggie. Now we see the process reversed: the fact that Marner has to look after a child places him in a sort of soul-brotherhood with the locals. The experience of childcare is something everybody is very familiar with and can well relate to.

Secondly, of course, Silas’ isolation is broken down in the process of rediscovering of the world with the child: "Unlike the gold which needed nothing, and must be worshipped in close-locked solitude - which was hidden away from the daylight, was deaf to the song of the birds, and started to no human tones -

139 Silas Marner, p. 118
140 Silas Marner, p. 120
141 Silas Marner, p. 130
Eppie was a creature of endless claims and ever-growing desires, seeking and loving sunshine, and living sounds, and living movements; making trial of everything, with trust in new joy, and stirring the human kindness in all eyes that looked on her." 142

Silas has found a new meaning in life – the objects of his fetishism taken from him, he has to re-discover the world around him, in this way copying Eppie's process of learning. David Carroll writes: "Eppie comes to free Silas from the bondage of his man-made web and reintroduce him to the vital complexity of the web of life." 143 The new meaning brings with it thoughts about the future and hope, virtually gone from Marner's life in his insect-like state: "Eppie was an object compacted of changes and hopes that forced his thoughts onward." 144 The epigraph of the novel is a quote from Wordsworth's poem Michael:

"A child, more than all other gifts
That earth can offer to declining man,
Brings hope with it, and forward-looking thoughts."

This is what we see in process here: Silas, whose life once concentrated only on his mechanical work and who was hardly aware of the world around him, now, thanks to Eppie, starts to have the "forward-looking thoughts". Do we witness a revolution here? Lilian Haddakin, writing about Wordsworthian influences in Silas Marner writes: "She [George Eliot - my note] is Wordsworthian ... in her insistence on the great power of memory to help the working of the affections and to bind the life of the individual into a unity. ... Indeed, it is ... the power of memory that enables the 'forward-looking' situation to

142 Silas Marner, p. 125
143 Carroll, David: Reversing the Oracles of Religion, In: Draper, p. 200
144 ibid.
develop, for Silas momentarily identifies the newly-found Eppie with his long-dead little sister – an identification as crucial...as the more conspicuous gold-and-curls identification.”\textsuperscript{145} As already pointed out many times, George Eliot is essentially an evolutionist: the change has to be continual and gradual. This "new life" that Silas starts after the discovery of the child is, strictly-speaking, not a new beginning: Silas is very careful to interpret all the events that happen in context of his past. Thus he helps Sally Oates, because her suffering reminds him of his mother; he names the child Eppie after his dead little sister and, of course, accepts the child as a sort of replacement for his lost gold. To Eliot, human life necessarily forms a unity. Henry Auster writes to this point: "for Silas Marner (as in a way for Maggie Tulliver), regeneration comes through a resurgent memory and a revived sense of continuity with his life of long ago."\textsuperscript{146}

Finally, Silas finds in Eppie a reason to come into contact with the locals. The simple fact that Silas is a man, inexperienced in childcare makes it necessary to leave his isolation and find help and advice among the people. Apart from that, however, Silas consciously does everything to prevent the child from being looked upon as a stranger: he lets her be christened and sends her to the local school. He even changes his own ways in order to be more “normal” in Raveloe and takes up smoking, although he does not especially enjoy it and starts going to church: “By seeking what was needful for Eppie, by sharing the effect that everything produced on her, he had himself come to appropriate the forms of custom and belief which were the mould of Raveloe life.”\textsuperscript{147} Coming back to the

\textsuperscript{145} Haddakin, Lilian: \textit{Silas Marner}, In: Hardy, p. 68
\textsuperscript{146} Auster, p. 202
\textsuperscript{147} \textit{Silas Marner}, p. 142
above-mentioned pillars of Gemeinschaft can help us summarize Silas’ re-socialization brought about by the child: only with Eppie, Silas becomes a neighbour in Raveloe. Before, the contact with the community stood on a purely commercial basis. Silas was a useful tool, which can do the weaving for them, nothing more. Now he is forced to deal with the people a lot more: he needs help with the childcare, his child needs to go to school, he started going to church with her etc. As for common practices, I have commented on those already: those are the everyday little things that he has to do for Eppie and which everybody knows. This turns the alien weaver into a familiar member of the community. Under the influence of Dolly Winthrop, the local wife who helps Silas with the housekeeping, even his religious views are reformed. We can summarize with David Caroll: “The ‘message’ the child brings is the all importance of natural human affections, and Silas is perceptive because his affection has survived the fifteen years of isolation.”

Under Dolly’s influence, Silas’ religious views move away from the bitterness which he has had in his heart since the disappointment of drawing lots at Lantern Yard. Marner leaves Lantern Yard with a shattered belief: “there is no just God that governs the earth righteously, but a God of lies, that bears witness against the innocent.” He has a doctrine of a malevolent God, who has taken his happiness away from him. But now, after 15 years, he comes into contact with Dolly, who preaches Quietism: “if anything looks hard to me, it’s because there’s things I don’t know on;” This simple wisdom allows Silas to look back at his life and give the individual stages,

---

148 Carroll, In: Draper, p. 197
149 *Silas Marner*, p. 14
150 *Silas Marner*, p. 145
which were perhaps not easy, good sense and endow his "forward-looking thoughts" with hope:

"you're i' the right, Mrs Winthrop, you're i' the right. There's good i' this world - I've a feeling o' that now; and it makes a man feel as there's a good more nor he can see, i'spite o' the trouble and the wickedness. That drawing o'the lots is dark, but the child was sent to me: there's dealings with us - there's dealings." 151

Silas has learned to accept his fate - which brings us back to the realist x idealist discussion in Adam Bede. We have seen how Adam has to learn not to carry the world upon his shoulders, but rather rely on the cosmic order and perhaps a benevolent God, in a way Mr Irwine or Mrs Poyser do. In a similar way, Silas had to learn from the simple Dolly to trust the benevolent ordering of the world and events in "the ordered universe in which George Eliot insists we all live". 152

III.4: Godfrey Cass

Godfrey, the son of the local Squire, is the other main character of the novel. To Henry James he is even "by right the hero of Silas Marner" 153. Godfrey, disregarding to the class difference, has clandestinely married a village girl, who even gave birth to his child. This, needless to say, would ruin all his prospects, had it come to light. In this way, unlike Silas, whose exile is an external one, Godfrey is internally isolated, guarding his secret sin. The process Godfrey has to go through is analogical to Silas' moral revival, which allows David Carroll to write: "The stories which make up Silas Marner are thus seen to

151 ibid.
152 Carroll, In: Draper, p. 193
153 Henry James, In: Haight, p. 47
be two versions of the same theme." ¹⁵⁴ In a similar way that little Eppie helps Marner out of isolation, Godfrey has Nancy Lammeter to serve as his moral salvation. She prevents Godfrey from becoming another Dunstan.

Godfrey, as people generally do, prefers life in comfort of the Squire's house to digging up moral issues, especially if they reside miles away, as his wife Molly does. He is, however, not the morally strongest man: he is rather passive, hoping for "some unforeseen turn of fortune, some favourable chance which would save him from unpleasant consequences." ¹⁵⁵ His passive procrastination makes him an easy prey, easily blackmailed by his self-indulging brother Dunstan into doing things he would normally never do. One of the most important moral teachings of George Eliot throughout her career was that "[t]he yoke a man creates for himself by wrong-doing will breed hate in the kindliest nature; and the good-humoured, affectionate-hearted Godfrey Cass was fast becoming a bitter man." ¹⁵⁶ This is, once again, a familiar motive in Eliot's novels: "our deeds determine us as much as we determine our deeds" ¹⁵⁷ she writes in Adam Bede. Her point about sin is that once one begins doing - perhaps very small - sinful acts and tries to hide them, one has to play the game on and it is only a question of time, when it brings one to committing greater sins. When Godfrey's wife is discovered, lying under a bush in snow, he comes in his dancing-shoes to take a look, to make sure that the woman is dead. He sincerely wishes for it:

"'Is she dead?' said the voice that predominated over every other within him. 'If she is, I may marry Nancy; and then I

¹⁵⁴ Carroll, In: Draper, p. 195
¹⁵⁵ Silas Marner, p. 73
¹⁵⁶ Silas Marner, p. 32
¹⁵⁷ Adam Bede, p. 315
shall be a good fellow in future, and have no secrets, and the child - shall be taken care of somehow.' But across that vision came the other possibility - 'She may live, and then it's all up with me.' 

The situation is, on one hand, very similar to that of Arthur Donnithorne: a young squire's son has an affair with a simple village girl and tries to hide the fact from the community. His effort to keep the sin a secret then forces him to further sins: Arthur lies to Adam about the nature of the affair, Godfrey is blackmailed to stealing his father's money etc. Similarly to Silas', Godfrey's personal qualities are partly subdued into potentiality by his difficult situation. Others, on the other hand, are called forth by his internal suffering. He suffers not because he is sorry for the ruined girl's life - he suffers because he knows he has to keep the affair a secret, which makes him very vulnerable. In Eliot's moral view, secrecy is automatically connected with sin: when Adam reproaches Arthur in the wood and Arthur tries to make the affair look light, Adam says: "You know it couldn't be made public as you've behaved to Hetty as y' have done". Similarly, when Tom comes to meet Philip, dragging Maggie by her wrist and she argues with him, he replies simply by asking: "If your conduct, and Philip Wakem's conduct, has been right, why are you ashamed of its being known?" The community is a body of people linked together by mutual needs, bonds, respect etc. An individual and his/her actions are always judged with respect to this social web. There would be nothing wrong with the Arthur-Hetty affair in itself, apart from the fact that a person is always defined also by their role in the community. Arthur cannot be perceived apart from

158 Silas Marner, p. 117  
159 Adam Bede, p. 300  
160 The Mill on the Floss, p. 347
his squireship, just like Hetty is a milkmaid. Thus, the wrong of such affairs resides in the disruption it brings to the structure of the community. Here we have to look for the source of power that Dunsey has over his elder brother and it is also here, in this enforced secrecy, that we can see the progression of Godfrey's moral wickedness.

III.5: The Confession

Of course the obvious difference between Godfrey and Arthur lies in the fact that the woman lying in the snow is dead. Godfrey is offered a chance of a new beginning, just like he has wished it. The woman is dead, the child is being taken care of, Dunsey has disappeared – Godfrey marries his love Nancy and lives a happy, if childless, life of a village Squire. Fortunately, similarly as Silas' affection has survived the 15 years of isolation, Godfrey's "natural kindness had outlived that blighting time of cruel wishes, and Nancy's praise of him as a husband was not founded entirely on a wilful illusion."161 Their childlessness is the only blotch on their happiness and they both have their own ways of coming to terms with it. Nancy, who is rather rigid in her principles, sees it as an act of Providence and is therefore opposed to adoption: "To adopt a child, because children of your own had been denied to you, was to try and choose your lot in spite of Providence."162 Godfrey, on the other hand, sees their childlessness as a retribution for his past sins. Henry Auster writes: "Although his first wife's death and Silas's devotion to Eppie save him from disgrace and enable him to marry Nancy, he comes to regard his childlessness as a

161 Silas Marner, p. 158
162 Silas Marner, p. 156
punishment for his "vicious folly" and disingenuousness." When Dunstan's body and Marner's gold are discovered in the Stone Pits, he realizes the one great moral of the story and confesses that Eppie is his own child: "Everything comes to light, Nancy, sooner or later. When God Almighty wills it, our secrets are found out. I've lived with a secret on my mind, but I'll keep it from you no longer. I wouldn't have you know it by somebody else, and not by me". Is Godfrey's confession necessary? His wife is dead without any trace left, Dunstan, the only other person who knew about the affair, has just been discovered drowned, the child is being taken care of. Robert Liddell writes: "It looks as if George Eliot is trying to elevate Godfrey on to the higher moral standard, and for no reason at all to provide him with a moral conflict - perhaps because there is no other in the book." I think to answer this, one needs to bring together the principles mentioned in Godfrey's little speech just quoted: first of all, we have already seen how secrecy in a Gemeinschaft set of values is connected with sin. More than once we also witnessed the comfort and enlightening a confession offers. But perhaps the most important role is played by George Eliot's profound belief in the Dolly Winthrop-style religion, relying on the benevolent Providence which will turn all evil into a blessing and which will make sure that any sin will - even if sometimes by somewhat acrobatic means - think of Raffles and Bulstrode in Middlemarch - come to light. As the narrator of Silas Marner puts it: there is an inevitable "orderly sequence by which the seed brings forth a crop after its kind." I think if Lidell points at Godfrey's dilemma as

---

163 Auster, p. 197
164 Silas Marner, p. 162
165 Liddell, p. 78
166 Silas Marner, p. 74
unconvincing saying that "Godfrey's trivial 'prevarications' are no more than any of us might indulge in without uneasiness of mind to decline an invitation or to get rid of a bore" he is presenting a typically modern Gesellschaft point of view, on par with holding against Maggie's moral dilemma the fact that she was in no way bound to Philip, neither was Stephen bound to Lucy.

III.6: Two Fathers

The two plots come together after Godfrey's confession in a powerful high-point of the story as Godfrey comes with Nancy to claim the daughter. The conflict can be re-stated in similar terms as we have used in the analysis of Maggie's moral conflict in the previous chapter: On one side, there is the common past which has built a strong tie between Silas and Eppie: "Your coming now and saying 'I'm her father" doesn't alter the feelings inside us. It's me she's been calling her father ever since she could say the word." The theme of The Mill of the Floss - past as a bond between people is brought up again and Silas' reply is only a variation to Maggie's "you know, the first thing I ever remember in my life is standing with Tom by the side of the Floss" as a reason why she will always love her brother. Silas feels that this emotional bond should overrule any paternal claim. David Carroll writes: "Godfrey is trying to go back sixteen years to the moment when he rejected Eppie, and carry on from there. But the growing dependence of Silas upon her love has come to overlay and cancel Godfrey's claim." On the other hand, however, we have seen many times how

---

167 Silas Marner, p. 170
168 The Mill on the Floss, p. 307
169 Carroll, In: Draper, p. 213
important the blood ties are in the Gemeinschaft set of values. Nancy, the bearer of the community values in *Silas Marner* reflects: "She felt that it was a very hard trial for the poor weaver, but her code allowed no question that a father by blood must have a claim above that of any foster-father." I suspect even Silas sees the weight of the blood-tie and therefore he remains silent for the rest of the scene and leaves the decision up to Eppie. She, however, is not for a moment tempted and sticks to her foster-father. In this way, Eliot's moral point is brought home: we have seen Silas - who I think is an Everyman in this case - seek for the fulfilment of his "clinging nature" first in God, then in work, his gold, his earthware pot - each of these things have been taken away from him. Eppie, however, stays. She stays out of her own decision, thus emphasizing that the only valid and long-term relationships which can satisfy the human nature are relationships with other people.

**Conclusion: "The Greatest Benefit We Owe to the Artist is the Extension of Our Sympathies"**

"It is so very rarely that facts hit that nice medium required by our own enlightened opinions and refined taste!" writes George Eliot in an ironic answer to "one of her lady readers" in her Chapter 17 "In Which the Story Pauses a Little" the famous manifesto of her realism. Realism to Eliot meant, on one hand the aesthetic commitment to be truthful to her subject, "without trying to make things seem better than they were; dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity." This dread of falsity has, apart from this aesthetic dimension a moral dimension as well: George Levine writes:

---

170 *Silas Marner*, p. 171

171 *Adam Bede*, p.178
"...realism is a mode that depends heavily on reaction against what the writer takes to have been misrepresentation. ... It is rarely, and certainly was not for George Eliot, simply accuracy in representation of things as they are, although it is always that, too. ... It is also and necessarily a kind of authenticity, an honest representation of one's own feelings and perceptions;" 172

We have seen the danger which misrepresentation or disregard of reality presents for the bonds between people within a community. We have seen how the egoists of her novels have to open their eyes to Reality, which then enlarges their moral visions and helps them become more open and sympathizing. It is the same kind of eye-opening experience her novels should present for her readers. In her famous essay *The Natural History of German Life* she wrote:

"Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow men beyond the bounds of our personal lot." 173

Thus, art should help the readers to enlarge their moral visions in very much the same way as we saw it happen to Eliot's novel characters. Art should induce us to broaden our view beyond our immediate selves and enlarge our sympathies with the mankind. The Realist art should help the reader become a better, more humane, person, analogously to the humanizing processes we have seen the characters of Eliot's novels go through. A few lines above the quote just cited, in the same essay she writes, that "the greatest benefit we owe to the artist...is the extension of our sympathies." 174 Realism as she understood it, offers "a picture of human life [which] surprises even the trivial and the

---

172 Levine, p. 7
173 Essays, p. 271
174 Essays, p. 270
selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment."\(^{175}\) In Eliot's view, writing novels was a very morally serious enterprise - an educational project. F.R. Leavis in his *Great Tradition*, the book credited with restoring Eliot's reputation, quotes Henry James in his review of Cross' *Life*: "for her, the novel was not primarily a picture of life, capable of deriving a high value from its form, but a moralized fable, the last word of a philosophy endeavouring to teach by example."\(^{176}\)

Realist art should help us, the readers, go through a similar process Adam Bede has to experience through suffering: he has to enlarge his mind, become more sympathizing with failures of his fellow-men. The modern word would be "tolerant": George Eliot writes in her letter from 1857 of her "growing conviction that we may measure true moral and intellectual culture by the comprehension and veneration given to all forms of thought and feeling."\(^{177}\) Tolerance, based upon expanded moral vision presents to Eliot a measure of the progress of an individual culture. Reading realist novels is one such experience leading to this step out of self-centredness towards sympathy and tolerance.

\(^{175}\) ibid.

\(^{176}\) Leavis, p. 40

\(^{177}\) quoted in: Graver, p. 49
Résumé

In my work I focus on George Eliot’s 3 early novels: Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss and Silas Marner. I have analyzed the relations between the individual and community using the pair of concepts Gemeinschaft (community) and Gesellschaft (society). I have not used the concepts to label the stages in the evolutionary progress of mankind, but rather as labels of sets of characteristics. The Gemeinschaft set of values includes the traditional values like keeping one’s word, respect to elders, deference to class, family ties etc. The Gesellschaft, on the other hand, is in my reading foremostly defined by self-centredness and egoism. The symptom of these qualities in Eliot’s view was a day-dreaming lack of interest in reality. The community awakens the self-centred individuals to a sense of extramental reality and sympathizing moral breadth of vision. In spite of the cruel means this process is brought about, it ultimately makes Eliot’s characters more sympathizing, wiser and more humane.

Résumé

vlastností byl podle Eliotové nezájem o skutečnost způsobený zahleděností do sebe sama. Komunita nutí sebestředné jedince uvědomovat si realitu a vede je k rozšíření jejich morálního obzoru. Tímto z nich dělá, přes občas příkré prostředky jimiž k onomu vybuzení dochází, lidi soucitnější, moudřejší a v posledku více lidské.
Bibliography:

George Eliot's Texts:


Critical Texts


Hardy, Barbara, ed.: *Critical Essays on George Eliot*, Barnes & Noble, New York, 1970


Milner, Ian: *The Structure of Values in George Eliot*, Universita Karlova, Praha 1968
