THREE CULTURAL MYTHS IN THE MILL ON THE FLOSS

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ABSTRACT

George Eliot's novel *The Mill on the Floss* is considered to contain most elements of the unconventional author herself. Earlier feminist critics blamed it failed to provide solutions for women in their bewilderment of female quest, while this article holds that by disclosing women questions during the Victorian age, George Eliot answers the question for women's tragedy in their journey for growing up and self-fulfillment. This paper analyses how Maggie was trapped in the three cultural myths—the myth of sex difference, the myth of virginity, and the myth of self-sacrifice. Then it appeals for later women to remove the conventional masks and break the mirror of the cultural myths that imprison and destroy them in their journey of self-realization.

KEYWORDS

cultural myths, sex difference, virginity, self-sacrifice, *The Mill on the Floss*.

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been generally agreed upon that *The Mill on the Floss* is George Eliot's greatest novel of her earlier works. Published in 1860, *The Mill on the Floss*, as the original title George Eliot had in mind "sister Maggie" shows, is in the main the record of the bildung of a female hero from childhood to young womanhood. It contains the most elements of autobiography of the author herself. However, it occupies a profoundly uneasy position among feminist literary critics. When comparing the fates of Eliot's heroines with the story of George Eliot herself, for whom the confrontation of her feminine aspirations with the real world of men had a triumphant issue, Virginia Woolf says, George Eliot has never ceased to puzzle readers, especially feminists looking for a sister in one who was determined to fulfill her aspirations for love and vocation by putting her heroines in tragedy, or in a compromise that is more melancholy [1]. Maggie's repudiation of Stephen Guest and returning to St. Ogg's is viewed as an act of "self-denial" and self-imposed repression [2]. Shirley Foster even goes further to blame George Eliot as unforgivable as she reveals an unexpectedly conservative attitude towards female roles while herself leads an unconventional live with her abandonment of religious belief, her union with a married man, and her writing career under the male name George Eliot [3].

In fairytales and Bildungsroman novels, the hero departs from home, slays the dragon on the journey of quest, and returns with triumph. Then why did most heroes in biography or Bildungsroman novels arrive in triumph, while the heroines' quests in the Victorian novels ended in tragedy or compromise? According to Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the dragon to be slain is the monster of the status quo, a system of assumptions that go largely unquestioned by the culture [4]. These assumptions are embodied in myths, which oversimplify the nature of the social, physical, and metaphysical world and hide the truth about the hero's identity. If the male heroes' quests are more recognized, encouraged, or even praised by the society, the heroines' question of the status quo are regarded as abnormal and unfeminine as the dragon for a female hero is more hidden and internalized. In realist novels, Pearson and Pope point out, for a female hero. The dragon was fear; fear of what other people might think; fear of being different; fear of being isolated; fear of

the herd she belongs to [5].

George Eliot reveals several cultural myths in her novels that are most likely to destroy or imprison the female hero, and to prevent her from discovering either her true identity or a home in the world. In *The Mill on the Floss*, there are at least three that are most significant to handicap Maggie Tulliver's quest and heroism. The assumptions—the dragons that she must challenge in order to free herself—are the myth of sex differences, the myth of virginity and the myth of self-sacrifice.

2. THE MYTH OF SEX DIFFERENCE

Before we begin the discussion, let's see the following dichotomy:

- 1) Activity/ Passivity
- 2) Sun/ Moon
- 3) Culture/ Nature
- 4) Day/ Night
- 5) Father/ Mother
- 6) Head/ Emotion
- 7) Intelligible/ Sensitive
- 8) Logos/ Pathos [6]

The above dichotomy is base on the sex-difference between man and women. From the moment of birth, when the first conventional question is asked regarding the gender of the child, a boy is encouraged to develop qualities of the left half, while a female is constantly bombarded with social images, rewards, and punishments designed that she does not develop any quality associated with the other half of humanity. The myth of this difference disperses in all aspects of human life.

Religiously and morally, men are responsible for God, while women for men. In the bible, Adam was created by God; and Eve was created from a rib of Adam. Adam claimed that he had the right to name the woman because she came out from his body. The message is that women, from their birth, are the followers and companies of men; they are dependant on men. Such kind of religion is, and has always been, used to keep women in their place.

Another point in the Bible we should pay attention to is that, if human falls women are the scapegoats for all the evil. After Adam and Eve had stolen the forbidden apple in the Garden of Eden, God punished Eve by increasing her pain in childbearing and making Adam rule over her. Adam was also punished, having to work hard to earn a living. However, Millett argues that, this punishment was deceiving, because the man was in fact granted the power to rule over the woman and engaged in the fields that were closely connected with human civilization while the woman was excluded from any activity that indicated she was a divine human being rather than an average animal [7].

This is also shown in *The Mill on the Floss*. After the affairs between Maggie and Stephen, it is Maggie who is accused and exiled by her family and society. As for Stephen, "he was rather pitiable than otherwise: a young man of five and twenty is not to be too severely judged in these cases – he is really very much at the mercy of a designing bold girl [8]. Hence in such a society only women could be seen as guilty of sexual behavior. Thus, Maggie alone must be punished, and she does suffer deep agony until at last she is drowned, while Stephen remains in the Netherlands and later comes back and gets married with Lucy.

Economically and vocationally, in the patriarchal economy of 19th century England, women could inherit little from their parents, as father's property mostly went to the eldest son. Therefore, a woman was made economically dependant, on father before she was married and on husband after marriage. Although Mr. Tulliver is far fonder of Maggie than Tom, he never has a mind of leaving the mill to Maggie, no matter how highly he thinks of her intelligence and how badly he dotes on her. The same is true to Mrs. Tulliver. She always means to leave her most favorite cloths to Tom, although it becomes impossible in the end. In their mind, women have little to do with the Possession of money, especially large money. This kind of conception even influences the little Tom. When Maggie wants to give her money to him (to buy some rabbits, because Tom's rabbits have all die but at this time Tom still knows nothing about it) Tom replies, "*What for? I don't want your money, you silly thing. I've got a great deal more money than you, because I'm a boy. I always have half-sovereigns and sovereigns for my Christmas boxes, because I shall be a man, and you only have five-shilling pieces, because you're only a girl*"

Educationally and intellectually, women are considered to be inferior as a whole. Anna Jameson declared that the intellect of woman bears the same relation to that of man as her physical organization; it is inferior in power; and different in kind [9]. Some Victorian physicians and anthropologists even validated that women's inferiority could be demonstrated in almost every analysis of the brain and its functions. They maintained that, like the lower races, women had smaller and less efficient brains, less complex nerve development [10].

In the Victorian England, women had nothing to do with the sciences such as mathematics, biology, and law. It was the privilege of men to go into a school and study these sciences and be expected to become a philosopher or a lawyer. In her childhood, Maggie's very bud of aspiration for knowledge is smothered. Though Mr. Tulliver is proud of his daughter's cleverness, he thinks it useless for a woman to be too clever, because "an over-cute woman's no better nor a long-tailed sheep – she'll fetch none the bigger price for that." In his opinion, a girl is for marriage, and cleverness in woman will enable her to doubt man's superiority. So, he declares that "a woman's no business wi' being so clever; it'll turn to trouble." On the other hand, his hope for Tom is different. Tom is the future bread-winner. So, education is more important for boys. It is because this reason that Mr. Tulliver sends Tom instead of Maggie to an expensive school to be "a sort o' engineer, or a surveyor, or an auctioneer, and vallyer", in spite of the acknowledged fact that Tom shows no tendency of being a scholar.

Tom, whom Maggie loves best, is brought up and imbued with such cultural myth that qualities associated with men are judged to be superior to their feminine counterparts. He simply denies superiority of any kind in Maggie. He is proud of being a boy and sure of his superiority. He regards his own practical knowledge as true knowledge, and Maggie's from book as "stuff". In deed, he is of the opinion that "Maggie was a silly little thing; all girls were silly – they couldn't throw a stone so as to hit anything, couldn't do anything with a pocket-knife, and were frightened at frogs."

When Maggie visits Tom at Mr. Stelling's and offers to help Tom with his Euclid, her confidence is again thwarted by their conviction that girls' intellect are inferior in power and different in kind, "*You help me, you silly*

little thing!" said Tom, in such high spirits at this announcement, that he quite enjoyed the idea of confounding Maggie by showing her a page of Euclid. "*I should like to see you doing one. of my lessons! Why, I learn Latin too! Girls never learn such things. They're too silly.*"

That evening, Mr. Stelling's assertion to the same issue resonate Anna Jameson's judgment that girls' intellect is "inferior in power and different in kind", "*They can pick up a little of everything, I daresay,*" said Mr. Stelling. "*They've a great deal of superficial cleverness: but they couldn't go far into anything. They're quick and shallow.*"

The problem Maggie faces is the same one Charlotte Bronte encountered when her *Jane Eyre* was published under the pseudonym Currer Bell. Some critics found it hard to give this novel proper evaluation as they were not sure whether Currer Bell was a male or female. At last some agreement was reached that if the novel had been written by a man it was a marvelous achievement, but if written by a woman it was scandalous [11]. The problem is not whether Maggie is clever; what matters is who is clever. If it is Tom, it would be good. But if it is Maggie, it is abnormal and thus superficial.

Domestically and martially, when we talk about the marriage in Victorian age, we may well remember the famous saying in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*: It is universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must in want of a wife [12]. Here Jane reveals us the different life goals for men and women – while men are to pursue a good fortune, women are to seek a wealthy husband. All a woman's education and up-bringing are designed for this goal. She must, in other words, be "feminine", and restrict herself to a woman's place.

It is evident that people round Maggie Tulliver in St. Ogg's share the same opinion. At least her parents and her brother do. Maggie is naughty. She likes to play out with her brother and shows no interest in sowings, which worries her mother a lot. Mrs. Tulliver is a dimwit, gentle and good-looking, who thinks a good girl should be quiet and docile. She wants Maggie to stay at home and do trivial housework. It is exactly because she herself once fulfilled these assumptions that her husband "picked her from her sisters – because she was a bit weak, like; for I wasn't a-goin to be told the rights o' things by my own fireside.

This separate-but-equal myth not only causes fragmentation in the self; it actually masks a radical imbalance of power between men and women, which turns the myth to the separate-but-unequal doctrine.

When women are sheltered by a man-god, they are taught to repress, to hate, and to fear precisely those qualities that society identifies with heroism – adventurousness, independence, self-actualization, and inquisitiveness – because they are considered to be male qualities. When they are safe under the protection of men, they are also deprived of the rights to freedom, which can be seen from Tom's promise as well as threat, I'm always kind to you; and so, I shall be: I shall always take care of you. But you must mind what I said. Cultivated in such ideology, Maggie has always regarded Tom as the sun-god in her life. She imagines that when a lion is roaring at her, Tom will always fight for her.

3. THE MYTH OF VIRGINITY

Having been told she is defective to men, a woman is encouraged to be perfect rather than heroic. The pre-fallen, preconscious, purely innocent virgin is the first model a young girl is expected to emulate. The virgin is expected to be not only chaste, but selfless. The virgin exists outside of time and process, without an ego. This virgin can be seen in the high mimetic form as in the Virgin Mary or in the low mimetic form as depicted in Patmore's paean to married bliss, *The Angel in the House*,

*Her disposition is devout
Her countenance angelical;
The best things that the best believe
Are in her face so kindly writ
The faithless, seeing her, conceive
Not only heaven but hope of it.*

The wife, in Patmore's vision, offers a haven of domestic peace and security:

*On settled poles turn solid joys,
And sunlike pleasures shine at home* [13].

That is the most pervasive ideologies of the society of St. Ogg's. To be truly feminine, a woman must fulfill the beneficent functions which nature has assigned to her—sacrifice, self-effacement, moral purity, and service. There is such an angel in the house in the novel, Lucy. Lucy Deane is a fairly conventional Victorian female character: sweet, pretty, and passive.

Such a good girl is always envy to the eyes of a mother with a “naughty” daughter as Maggie. Mrs. Tulliver feels it a pity that Lucy were not her child, “Lucy Deane's such a good child – you may set her on a stool, and there she'll sit for an hour together, and never offer to get off. I can't help loving the child as if she was my child.”

Always perfectly groomed and utterly docile, Lucy grows up to be an ideal choice of wife,

This slim maiden of eighteen was quite the sort of wife a man would not likely to repent of marrying – a woman who was loving and thoughtful for other women, not giving them Judas-kisses with eyes askance on their welcome defects, but with real care and vision for their half-hidden pains and mortifications, with long ruminating enjoyment of little pleasures prepared for them.

Meanwhile, Lucy is not perfect enough to override men's confidence of their masculinity and superiority. Stephen Guest chooses her because,

She did not strike him as a remarkable rarity. A man likes his wife to be pretty: well, Lucy was pretty, but not to a maddenly extent. A man likes his wife to be accomplished, gentle, affectionate, and not stupid; and Lucy had all these qualifications.

Such a brilliant model provides a sharp contrast to Maggie, and this contrast, to conventional eyes, is very much to the disadvantage of Maggie. She always looks twice as dark as usual when she was by the side of Lucy and her independent, impetuous nature is always scolded as willful and naughty.

Though such an angel is not a threat to men's self-esteem, it certainly makes up the main source of the female hero's self-denial, diffidence, even self-destruction as an alternative. She is doubly unqualified not being an angel—compared with the male, she is inferior; compared with the model angel, she is inadequate. Maggie always thinks she is ugly and admires Lucy a lot, [Lucy] knows and does all sort of charming things, and is ten times prettier than I am. She dreams of being forever innocent and admired, like Lucy,

She was fond of fancying a world where the people never got any larger than children of their own age, and she made the queen of it just like Lucy, with a little crown on her head and a little scepter in her hand – only the queen was Maggie herself in Lucy's form.

The chief task of the virgin is not to learn all she can about the world, but to be protected from physical, emotional, and intellectual knowledge, from even the appearance of experience. Thus, in service of the virginity myth, women have been discouraged from seeking the experiences necessary to be a knowledge and vocation seeker. A female character's guilt may make her accept even unreasonable criticism or punishment. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Any deviation from the ideal of virginal perfection convinces Maggie that she is inferior and worthy of punishment and suffering. Every time she develops a self and opinions, she repents and convicts that she is wrong. This guilt leads her to commit herself to the myth of self-sacrifice.

4. THE MYTH OF SELF-SACRIFICE

To be a totally innocent virgin, would be to be utterly unknown, particularly to one's self. The myth of self-sacrifice is an extension of the virginity myth: women embody nurturance, loving, and selflessness. Gorthe's Makarie in the novel *Wilhelm Meister's Travels* summarizes the self-sacrifice of women:

She ... leads a life of almost pure contemplation ... in considerable isolation on a country estate ... a life without external events – a life whose story cannot be told as there is no story. Her existence is not useless. On the contrary ... she shines like a beacon in a dark world, like a motionless lighthouse by which others, the travelers whose lives do have a story, can set their course. When those involved in feeling and action turn to her in their need, they are never dismissed without advice and consolation. She is an ideal, a model of selflessness and of purity of heart [14].

She has no story of her own but gives advice and consolation to others, listens, smiles, sympathizes. Her work is to make a man's home happy; she must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise, John Ruskin again advises, wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation.

Furthermore, the prejudice regarding women converts the women's duty of self-renunciation into a most criminal self-extinction, in which a woman must kill herself—to smother their aspiration, their goal, their self, to chip away at anything important to be an independent human being. But if she refuses to do so, she is undesirable and subject to social exile, hardship, and death. Thus, women are caught in a double bind: if they cannot be perfect women, they are banished and killed; but if they manage to be perfect, they lead a life in death,

Maggie has the option of angelic innocence, which leads to death, or witchlike self-preservation, which leads to social rejection. As a child she is told she is unattractive. When her unruly hair is criticized, she cuts it off, and is then ridiculed for being more unattractive and silly than ever. She is ridiculed because of her inappropriate love of learning. Her vivacious spirited nature, moreover, is often compared negatively with the passivity and good manners of her perfect cousin Lucy.

When her family loses its money, Maggie's options are even further circumscribed, and her major problem is a total lack of intellectual or emotional stimulation. At this point in her life, she comes across Thomas a Kempis in her brother's schoolbooks, and reads,

“Know that the love of thyself doth hurt thee more than anything in the world.... If thou seekest this or that, and wouldst be here or there to enjoy thy own will and pleasure, thou shalt never be quiet no free from care: for in everything somewhat will be wanting, and in every place there will be some that will cross thee....if thou wilt have inward peace, and enjoy an everlasting crown.... If thou desire to mount to this height, thou must set out courageously; and lay the axe to the root, that thou mayst pluck up and destroy that hidden inordinate inclination to thyself, and unto all private and earthly good.”

Thomas a Kempis's creed, with its stress on resignation and rejection of self-will, is a spiritualized version of traditional female behavior. Maggie takes this religious philosophy of self-denial as a solution to the dilemma between her earthly desire and the circumscribed environment. From then on Maggie is contented with being neglected, passive, and obedient. Her dedication to this tenet makes her more womanly, giving her face a tender soft light. She took Tom's rebuke as one of her outward crosses and takes up patchwork that she had before no patience to do. This new inward life of hers now shines out in her face with a tender soft light that gives her some beauty, which even her mother feels with a sort of puzzled wonder. She can never understand that Maggie should be growing up so good; it was amazing that this once contraire child was becoming so submissive, so backward to assert her own will.

5. CONCLUSION

In fairytales, the mythic hero typically encounters a force in the world that threatens to bring destruction or imprisonment. Whatever form the dragon assumes, it represents the vicious aspect of the hostile world that must be overcome in order for the hero to gain a free, whole, and joyful life. The dragon that prevents the female hero from self-fulfillment is more an internal force than an external one. The inner dragon is an internalization of the outer society's negative messages about her self-worth. In *The Mill on the Floss*, the dragon of culture myths—the myth of sex difference, the myth of virginity, and the myth of self-sacrifice—confirms the status quo and makes her afraid to go beyond the understanding of her potentials. These conspires to make Maggie content with being a heroine only – that is, a secondary, supporting character in a man's story, who is unworthy and unable to do anything other than self-destruct for the sake of others. Therefore, it is especially essential for female hero to recognize the confinement of the repressing patriarchal society and try hard to slay the cultural myths of passivity, purity, and virginity. Whether they succeed or not, they cease to believe in what the patriarchal society tells them.

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