

► Falling In Love With The “Wrong” Man: Relationships Between Men And Women In The Mill On The Floss And The Waterfall

Profa. M. A . Carla Portilho*

UFF When we consider discussing the relationships between men and women in the novels *The Mill on the Floss*, by George Eliot (1860), and *The Waterfall*, by Margaret Drabble (1971), it is almost inevitable to concentrate on the relationships that the main characters, Maggie Tulliver and Jane Gray, respectively, develop in their lives – especially in their love lives. Although this topic will be my main focus here, I would like to start exactly by showing a different approach to the subject.

Judith Newton, for example, considers the relationships between the Dodson sisters and their husbands in *The Mill on the Floss* from a social and economical point of view (NEWTON, 1981). She starts by pointing out that from the beginning of the novel George Eliot shows the community as complex and moving, representing the shock between the new forces of capitalism and the disappearing agrarian society, and the consequent change that was taking place. This change meant an advance for middle-class men in general, as they started having more opportunities to accumulate money and achieve status and power. It was a step back for middle-class women, however, who lost the defined economic role they had in the agrarian times, and consequently their voice in the family and society.

She shows both Mr. Glegg and Mr. Pullet as men of the pre-industrial society, Mr. Tulliver as a man in transition between the old and the new, and Mr. Deane clearly as a man of the industrial future. Their wives also reflect this transformation. Both Mrs. Glegg and Mrs. Pullet enjoy some status as “women of a former age”, who were allowed to keep and invest their own money. Mrs. Glegg particularly, as she is an economic partner to her husband, has a certain influence over the other members of the family. Mrs. Tulliver, on the other hand, is already representative of the new industrial society, in which women play a more passive role in relation to their husbands. According to Judith Newton, it is important for Mr. Tulliver to be superior to his wife because of his own vulnerability in the competitive capitalist world. Finally, Mrs. Deane is the typical upper-middle-class wife of the future, completely powerless and dependent.

Women who marry men like Deane enjoy greater wealth than women who marry men like Glegg, but with their greater wealth they enjoy less status and power, or even influence, in relation to their husbands and their kin. (NEWTON, 1981: 130)

George Eliot portrays the unequal situation of men and women, but we do not feel that these women are oppressed until we come to Maggie and her relationships with Tom Tulliver, her brother, Philip Wakem and Stephen Guest.

By contrasting Tom’s and Maggie’s growing up forces one becomes aware that the unequal divisions of economic function and power are imposed on men and women by the community, thus supporting the idea that gender roles are socially constructed, that no one is born to act like a man or a woman, but rather learn their roles from society. Judith Newton points out that Tom derives a sense of self-identity, self-worth, and therefore, of self-justification, from the fact that his destiny as a male is settled (NEWTON, 1981: 140). Even when the family loses everything he is still the provider who must find a job and pay his father’s debts. Maggie, on the other hand, according to their society, only has an identity while she is a child – as she grows up she must become somebody’s wife or a dependent sister.

The limitations imposed on women are clearly exemplified when Maggie visits Tom at school, and Mr. Stelling discourages her:

'Girls can't do Euclid, can they, sir?'

'They can pick up a little of everything, I dare say,' said Mr. Stelling. They've a great deal of superficial cleverness, but they couldn't go far into anything. They're quick and shallow.'

(...) As for Maggie, she had hardly ever been so mortified. She had been so proud to be called 'quick' all her little life, and now it appeared that this quickness was a brand of inferiority. It would have been better to be slow, like Tom. (ELIOT, 1994: 151)

Both Maggie and Tom subvert the roles that were expected from men and women. Maggie fits the masculine world better because of her intelligence, and Tom fits the feminine world better exactly because he lacks it. Being more intelligent than Tom, but not allowed to use her capacity, Maggie responds to this limitation with a very natural rebellion, which is generally directed at herself, as in the episode in which she cut her hair short. "She sat as helpless and despairing among her black locks as Ajax among the slaughtered sheep." (ELIOT, 1994: 63). Maggie's resistance and rebellion cut her off from the affection and approval of the women. This is so because women are generally responsible for perpetuating tradition, which, in this case, means making Maggie conform to the restrictions imposed on her. The men do not dislike her because of her cleverness, but they do discourage her, as she represents a threat to their authority.

Maggie's life was therefore marked by renunciation from her very childhood and adolescence, but up to this moment, her renunciation was not optional. She could not go to school because those were the constraints a woman of her time suffered, a consequence of her social and economical situation, never a voluntary choice. It is interesting to notice, however, that society represses not only women's desires, but men's as well. Tom had to repress everything he felt in order to pay his father's debts.

As Maggie grows older her desire is transformed, and she yearns for all that has been denied to her by her situation. It is then that Philip Wakem plays an important role in her life, as he stimulates her intellectually, and respects her as an intelligent person. Philip falls in love with her, which led to comments as this one made by Kristin Brady:

The problem with Philip's worship is not so much that he openly condescends to Maggie (as Stephen Guest will later), but rather that he regards her as an object, a work of art he desires to possess. (BRADY, 1992: 99)

The idea that he sees Maggie as an object is to my view very arguable, because he valued her from the first time they met, if not as an equal, at least as a human being who was able to think for herself and who was entitled to her own opinions. She was not the beauty ideal of her time, and although she was an attractive woman, when he talks about her eyes he says that they speak, not that they are beautiful. But, as Dorothea Barret puts it, "no matter how intellectually and spiritually appropriate Philip might be for Maggie, Maggie also has sexual needs that cannot be fulfilled by Philip." (BARRET, 1991: 61). These needs make it easier to understand why she fell in love with Stephen Guest, according to Antonia Byatt:

(...) Stephen and Will have what the other men in their novels (Philip, Causabon, even Lydgate) notably lack: they have a direct, instinctive, powerful sexual presence, and in matters of Sex they are driven to know what they desire and to develop love from desire. Both Stephen and Will behave well to the women they come to love, though both are in positions where their love is substantially prohibited by custom, social property, good taste. They are sexually honest, and they communicate their sexual feelings clearly to the women they love, and they develop morally through contact with them. (BYATT, 1980: 27)

One reason why Maggie could not fit in the marriage market was because she could arise men's sexuality. She was not the Victorian ideal of the Angel in the house. In terms of Victorian culture, women

who arose men's sexuality were considered either mad or prostitutes. We can draw a parallel here with Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which Rochester despises Antoinette/Bertha exactly because she confronted him with his own sexuality (RHYS, 1997). That is why we can intuit that no good would come from a marriage between Maggie and Stephen Guest, who was Maggie's cousin Lucy's fiancé. Stephen was not really in love with her, he was sexually attracted. He would never have respected her as a woman, just as he would not have respected her desire. She would forever be the object of his desire, not the subject of her own.

Maggie's refusal to marry Stephen even after the elopement is then a different form of renunciation from the one in her childhood. She does not give up her quest for independence or her own ideas. She is pleased in his presence and glad to be admired, but she could never renounce her own self to be his wife. She would have married him if she could accept being a commodity. In fact, as a commodity, she would have married either Stephen or Philip. Her renunciation made her stronger because it showed a decision to have autonomy and independence, not to conform to what the community said. She does not give in to Stephen's argument to marry him:

'Good God, Maggie!' said Stephen, rising too and grasping her arm. 'You rave. How can you go back without marrying me? You don't know what will be said, dearest. You see nothing as it really is. (ELIOT, 1994: 491)

Maggie's renunciation could in fact be a way of choosing Tom instead of Stephen. Her love for Tom was unconditional, although his love for her depended on her behavior. As far as she did what he wanted, she "belonged" to him – Tom had all the power in the relationship because he loved less (BARRET, 1991: 57).

From this point of view, Maggie's death was also an act of renunciation and independence, not a way of silencing her and making her conform to the demands of society. It was noble and tragic exactly because it was chosen by herself – she committed suicide, she did not die because she was ill. Her death was optional and subversive, it made her stronger.

Maggie's sacrifice was then a sacrifice to herself, to her own ideas, not to the community. By committing suicide she became once again the subject, as she was when she was a child, a role that would not be possible for her as an adult, as women did not have autonomy.

It is possible to find some points of identification between Maggie Tulliver and Jane Gray, the main character in *The Waterfall*:

These fictitious heroines, how they haunt me. Maggie Tulliver had a cousin called Lucy, as I have, and like me she fell in love with her cousin's man. She drifted off the river with him, abandoning herself to the water, but in the end she lost him. She let him go. Nobly she regained her ruined honour, and, ah, we admire her for it. (DRABBLE, 1971: 153)

Jane, like Maggie, suffered the social constraints of her time. Maggie had more limitations imposed on her by society. Jane was a poet, she lived on her own, she was an independent woman. They did share, however, the psychological strain involved in desiring the "wrong" man.

Jane was married to a man she did not love, trapped in a relationship that brought her no fulfillment. Her marriage to Malcolm is a cold one, as she makes clear when she states, "There isn't much heat in this house, we never had much." (DRABBLE, 1971: 21). In the beginning he had seemed a safe person to be with, but as their relationship deteriorated he ended up one day banging her head against the wall and abandoning her when she was pregnant with their second child.

It is in this state of fragility that Jane welcomes James Otford into her life. After her daughter is born, her cousin Lucy and her husband James start going over to help her out with the baby. Jane and James fall

in love in the womblike environment of her bedroom and start developing an illicit relationship.

Jane's relationship to James is quite different from the one she shared with Malcolm. Their affair has elements of the tragic romance, as they spend most of their time confined in their love, away from the rest of the world. Their setting is usually Jane's house, and when they start going out, it takes them some time to adjust to the idea of going far, of leaving the safety of the house. Jane, especially, is constantly afraid that real life will spoil the perfection of the love she shares with James. Their love is certainly stronger and more devastating exactly because of its forbidden and adulterous nature.

An important aspect of their relationship is that Jane is only born sexually through James. He is the one who brings about a change for the better in her sexual life, who delivers her as a woman. In doing so, he creates a bond of even greater dependence between them.

He wanted her, he too had sweated for this deliverance, he had thought it worth the risk: for her, for himself, he had done it. Indistinguishable needs. Her own voice, in that strange sobbing cry of rebirth. A woman delivered. She was his offspring, as he, lying there between her legs, had been hers. (DRABBLE, 1971: 151)

The Waterfall subverts the tradition of the tragic romance, however, because Jane and James are not punished for their adulterous love. We have a glimpse of destruction when they decide to travel together to Norway and have the car accident. But they do not die. On the contrary, after they survive the accident they have a chance to transcend the isolation of romantic love – they can be out in the open and live their love in a more mature way, more independently from each other than before.

But they do not die, and Drabble emphasizes that the crash was not the consequence of their reckless passion, nor was it a moral retribution. It was a freak combination of a loose brick, a blown tire and a convergence of cars. (HANNAY, 1991: 37)

It is true, nonetheless, that, to be romantic, their love needs to be hidden. Once their liaison is known, something is missing, something changes in their relationship. "Her passion exists largely because it violates social codes and (...) removing that violation would destroy the passion." (HANNAY, 1991: 44). Jane longs for the kind of love that real life does not provide. "I kept repeating to myself that line from Romeo and Juliet that says: 'These violent delights have violent ends – I could not get it out of my head.'" (DRABBLE, 1971: 177). We understand then that Jane, in her narrative, had an option to give a tragic end to their story, one that would be filled with poetic justice.

Once James fully recovers, however, their love must undergo radical changes, as now they have both played mirroring, complementary parts in the story. Jane has been cared for by James and has cared for him in her turn. She has needed and given assistance, and they have both been dependent on each other. As they make their pilgrimage to Goredale Scar at the end of the novel, they are opening a new phase in their lives, accepting that love may not be perfect, that they do not have to be isolated from the world in order to protect it. As Joanne Creighton states it:

Jane has changed to the extent that she is able by the end of the novel to carry on contentedly with her life as she could not before: cleaning her house, nurturing her children, visiting her in-laws, writing and publishing poetry, talking with her literary friends, seeing James occasionally, expecting to see Malcolm sometime. (CREIGHTON, 1991: 116)

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* Sobre a autora

Carla Portilho é especialista em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa e Mestre em Literaturas Hispânicas dos EUA pela Universidade Federal Fluminense (Niterói, RJ), com dissertação intitulada "Contra-escrituras chicanas: revisitando mitos e subvertendo gêneros". Atualmente é doutoranda em Literatura Comparada na mesma universidade. É autora do verbete "intérprete" do Dicionário de Figuras e Mitos Literários das Américas, projeto coordenado pela Prof^a Dr.^a Zilá Bernd (UFRGS), a ser publicado em 2006.