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The Construction and Re-construction of Female Beauty in The Mill on the Floss

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Introduction

The idea of feminine beauty, its distinctive features and its appraisal, has been persistent throughout history, although periodically unstable and variable. The definition of feminine beauty, however, is arguably socially constructed as well as gender specific and desirable physical appearance is differently defined for males and females. There is, additionally, a strong presumed relationship between feminine beauty and a woman's character. The socially constructed ideals of feminine beauty and the notion of femininity are integrated and, as feminist critics argue, serve as an ideal aesthetic for women. Consequently, desirable physical appearance is highly dependent on social standards and beauty norms that predictably attach great importance to, for example, the loveliness of a woman's eyes, hair- and skin color, and physical shape.

Against this background, and with a critical approach informed by previous studies done within this subject area, the main focus of this essay will be on social norms that women were required to comply with during the Victorian era. The preferred physical features and the socially accepted behavior of females will be highlighted as well as how the outer self of individuals might be valued when behavior norms are violated. The choice of the historical period is motivated by its strongly appointed feminine beauty norms among the members of the superior social class, where undesirable physical form, to a certain extent, "dehumanizes" individuals who are not of social merit and are therefore not appreciated fully.

This condition was observed in literary works, especially among female authors who were paving the way for a reassessment of a woman's importance and independence. Amongst other literary works, George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* emphasizes the social condition of women, where beauty norms of the upper class are essential. The social treatment of the novel's heroine, Maggie, whose characteristics go against these highly held norms, is the narrative's primary concern. First and foremost, the analysis of this essay will be placed on

the physical features and character of Maggie. The changing social appraisal of Maggie's inner- and outer self during her childhood and adolescence will also be examined. In addition, the possible reasons for this transformation will be discussed based on the changing social structure of the period as well as Maggie's ability to adjust to such changes.

The aim of this essay is, through the analysis of Maggie's nature, to elucidate why female beauty is decisive in determining a woman's social status as well as why ideals of beauty are normative rather than intrinsic. From the arguments in the following discussion, it will be concluded that in a patriarchal society, where social class is of significance, beauty norms require the self-destruction of certain individual qualities in order for women to be socially accepted.

In Eliot's text, the critique against Maggie's appearance is predominantly uttered by female characters belonging to her family circle. It will be emphasized that although the beauty ideals are inserted by men and function as the provider of a power of attorney over the opposite sex, women are also active participants in the evaluation of female beauty by internalizing these ideals and expressing disapproval of those who dissociate themselves from these ideals. It will also be argued that the external appearance of women is a telling reflection of their moral value and their inner nature expressed through their actions; the Victorian ideals of female beauty therefore comprise well-behaved and self-possessed women. As a child, Maggie's inner and outer self lack these requirements bringing forth great criticism from society against her.

As an adult, Maggie's appearance becomes, however, accepted by her own gender and even attractive in the eyes of certain male characters. In this essay, it will be suggested that this transition is caused by the reconstruction of female beauty norms and the change in Maggie's behaviour; her process of maturity transforms her to a more submissive and a less outspoken individual.

Plot summary of the novel

The Mill on the Floss, a literary work by George Eliot (1819-1880), is told from an anonymous first-person perspective. The novel deals with different conceivable difficulties in life in England during the Victorian era, such as tragedy, grief and personal as well as financial struggle. The book is remarkable for its clear representation of the ideals of upper class society as well as the power it holds on the lives of different individuals. The narrative is mainly based on the lives of the Tullivers, where Maggie and Tom, who are sister and brother, are two central characters. The siblings have a very close yet utterly complex relationship throughout the novel. Maggie has difficulties in fulfilling the requirements of her family due to the fact that her actions and rebellion violate the normative behaviour for her sex. Even though Maggie is portrayed as the heroine of the novel, during her childhood the criticism of her unusual appearance, uttered by different female characters (her mother and her aunts), sets a deep mark on her life. The dark complexion of her skin, her dark hair and her dark eyes are constantly being disapprovingly referred to; nevertheless, during Maggie's adulthood these features lose their negative connotation.

Previous research

The critical texts of Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* comment on the character of Maggie from different perspectives. *The Mill on the Floss – a Norton Critical Edition*, edited by Carol T. Christ, contains several critical articles where Maggie is in focus. Amongst others, Leslie Stephen's article "The Heroine of *The Mill on the Floss*" highlights Maggie's unconscious being, considered different than others during her childhood where her intelligence is unappreciated. However, regarding the importance of beauty in *The Mill on the Floss* and the crucial remarks about Maggie's appearance, none of the *Norton Critical Edition* articles

specifically focus on the transformed valuation of Maggie's outer self as a significant element in the novel.

On the other hand, the ideals of feminine beauty, their complex of problems and their social purpose have been examined by different scholars. Books as well as articles have been published on this subject. For example, *Fashion and Eroticism – Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* by Valerie Steele emphasizes both the ideals of outer- and inner beauty, their importance and the power they hold on women. Steele also gives a detailed description of feminine beauty during the Victorian Era, the historical period when *The Mill on the Floss* was written, and argues that Victorian women adjusted to the ideals of beauty because of their inferiority in society.

Regarding the social construction of feminine beauty and its purpose, *Ideals of Feminine Beauty – Philosophical, Social, and Cultural Dimensions*, edited by Karen A. Callaghan, emphasizes that beauty norms are socially constructed and hold great power on the development of individuals' identities. Callaghan points out that the term beauty characterizes goodness, pleasure, truth and purity; the value of outer appearance is determined by the behaviour of women and to what degree their behaviour corresponds to social expectations. Furthermore, with the aim of maintaining traditional relationships between the sexes, there is a need to create acceptable and unacceptable forms of beauty.

In "Beauty and Order", Robert W. Jones states that the norms of beauty are created by both genders, by men with the aim of maintaining their control and by women because of the competition for social status within a patriarchal society. It is noteworthy, as Jones claims, to point out that it was believed that true femininity could only be expressed through women's physical beauty and not through their intelligence.

Maggie's childhood and the importance of beauty

Although not so visible and manifest, the significance of female beauty in *The Mill on the Floss* is a recurring theme, particularly its importance for the female gender. This is undoubtedly observable in Maggie's position which evokes much negative attention because her physical features diverge from the norms of the upper class society. The discussion below highlights the strong disapproval of Maggie's inner- and outer qualities as well as the underlying causes of this disapproval. Furthermore, as will be seen from the arguments, the connection between beauty and personality and how they are socially treated in relation to each other, is emphasized.

The criticism of Maggie's appearance

The dissatisfaction of Maggie's outward being includes her unusual facial features, her undesirable hair and the dark complexion of her skin. Through comments aimed at her from certain female characters, Maggie's appearance is portrayed as unattractive in relation to the period's ideals of beauty. Moreover, her physical qualities are disapprovingly judged in contrast to her cousin Lucy who in the novel symbolizes beauty and Maggie's traits are instead associated with Gypsies.

Maggie's facial imperfection becomes, to a greater extent, noticeable in the presence of Lucy, whose features are highly valued. The following passage illustrates the exact opposites of the cousins and the reaction they cause.

It was quite unaccountable that Mrs Deane, the thinnest and sallowest of all the Dodsons, should have had this child, who might have been taken for Mrs Tulliver's any day. And Maggie always looked twice as dark as usual when she was by the side of Lucy.

She did today when she and Tom came from the garden with their father and their uncle Glegg. Maggie had thrown her bonnet off very carelessly, and coming in with her hair rough as well as out of curl, rushed at once to Lucy, who was standing by her mother's knee. Certainly the contrast between the cousins was conspicuous, and to superficial eyes was very much to the disadvantage of Maggie, though a connoisseur might have seen 'points' in her which had a

higher promise for maturity than Lucy's natty completeness. It was like the contrast between a rough, dark, overgrown puppy and a white kitten. Lucy put up the neatest little rosebud mouth to be kissed: everything about her was neat – her little round neck, with the row of coral bead; her little straight nose, not at all snubby; her little clear eyebrows, rather darker than her curls, to match her hazel eyes which looked up with shy pleasure at Maggie, taller by the head, though scarcely a year older. Maggie always looked at Lucy with delight. 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 sceptre in her hand...only the queen was Maggie herself in Lucy's form. (58)

Evidently, the perfection of Lucy's appearance possesses great value, which throws Maggie into the shadow and puts Maggie in a position of powerlessness. Moreover, Maggie's wish to be a queen in Lucy's form signals an inner awareness of beauty's position of power within the upper class circle. Maggie's realization of her corporeal shape lacking social prestige awakens an inner self-disapproval and a desire for Lucy's qualities.

Irrespective of the superiority of Lucy's outward beauty, Maggie's appearance is attention-grabbing for its strongly rejected depiction even though no specific defects with it are highlighted, except the fact that it is unusual. Examining the quoted passage above, it is rather obvious that Maggie's facial features diverge from beauty norms and are therefore rejected. Valerie Steele asserts that the face was fundamental in determining feminine beauty during the Victorian era and highlights that the Victorians valued "smooth, pink and rounded cheeks, fairly large eyes, small, straight noses and little rosebud mouths" (118). Eliot uses identical terminology in her description of Lucy's facial features, which in my opinion demonstrates Eliot's desire to question the stereotypical notion of beauty. I believe that Eliot's juxtaposition of Maggie's and Lucy's appearance illustrates the unreal and the unnatural ideals embedded in beauty norms which are ultimately unattainable.

Based on this juxtaposition, it can be argued that Lucy's traits commensurate with the period's ideal of feminine beauty and are therefore highly valued, while Maggie's lack of corresponding physical features automatically becomes a strong indication of non-femininity

with lower social value. Furthermore, as Steele underlines, examining female beauty from a traditional point of view, long, curly hair was a strong symbol of virginity. During the Victorian period, virginity was also closely related to innocence and spiritual purity. Therefore, the notion of virginity referred to the pure actions of an individual as well as sexual purity, prized qualities in Victorian England.

Accepting this definition of virginity, demonstrably the personality and actions of Lucy correspond to this definition while Maggie's character and behavior go against it. The terminology used by Eliot when introducing Lucy is indeed positively charged e.g. "Lucy looked up with *shy pleasure*" (my emphasis), while the vocabulary applied to the description of Maggie has a negative connotation, e.g. "Maggie had thrown her bonnet of *very carelessly*" (my emphasis). This consciously selected linguistic usage of Eliot illustrates that beauty norms did not only apply to physical appearance but also personality and behavior. The connection between physical appearance and individual's behavior will be explored in greater depth below; however it is noteworthy to emphasize how desirable facial features are also representative of certain types of behavior.

Throughout Maggie's childhood, the outer beauty of the female body is the essential element in establishing the personal value of women. This can clearly be noticed in the marked judgments of Maggie's outer self where she is the target of criticism. Her mother and her aunts in particular are very observant. On the occasion when all of the family members are gathered to have dinner together, the following discussion regarding Maggie's hair and her dark complexion arises between her aunts and her mother:

'I think the gell has too much hair. I'd have it thinned and cut shorter, sister, if I was you; it isn't good for her health. It's that as makes her skin so brown. I shouldn't wonder. Don't you think so, sister Deane?' 'I can't say, I'm sure sister', said Mrs Deane, shutting her lips close again and looking at Maggie with a critical eye. 'No, no' said Mrs Tulliver 'the child's healthy enough – there's nothing ail her. There's red wheat as well as white, for that matter, and some like the dark grain best. But it 'ud be as well if Bessy 'ud have the child's hair cut, so as it 'ud lie smooth'. (59)

Based on these comments, it is evident that the prevailing discontent causes a strong desire among the aunts to alter Maggie's outer appearance. Apparently, even though Mrs. Tulliver, Maggie's mother, offers some defense of Maggie's dark complexion, it emerges to be undesired and therefore criticized, which in my opinion has its roots in brown skin being representative of the low rank in the current social hierarchy during this historical period. That the mother is taking the role of a protector lies in the fact that she married into a lower class where brown skin is common; her statement that "some like the dark grain best" rises from her voluntary contracting a marriage with a man of dark complexion, a man of lower rank which she also became a member of.

Moreover, the beauty norms of the upper class, which Maggie's aunts are members of, are very much influenced by class standards. Nancy Mandell describes beauty as "a monolithic image" meaning that the members of superior social classes in society are those who construct beauty ideals and create prejudices of otherness (114). Robert W. Jones develops this notion further by drawing attention to the fact that if different classes are not in power of shaping social structure, the structure will continue to be unbreakable (179). Therefore, light skin and curly blond hair are highly valued by Maggie's aunts because they uphold the values of the upper class where the ideals of beauty are created by men, the superior gender, who are in control of its social structure. As Steele states: "The ideal complexion was rather pale, but with light pink cheeks" (119). Maggie's appearance deviates from these norms and therefore causes great disappointment among her family members.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that the ideals of beauty, even though constructed by men, are internalized by women. Karen A. Callaghan emphasizes that women, especially middle- and upper-class women, influence and contribute to sustaining the ideals of beauty by accepting and not questioning the definition of beauty (24). Callaghan's statement explains the women's role, Maggie's aunts' role, in the enforcement of beauty norms;

however, it fails to clarify why women decide not to reject these norms even though they are adversely affected by them. In my opinion, women's inferiority made it impossible to object to their social position where social inclusion was only achievable through the adjustment to the already existing norms.

In the discussion of the Victorian ideals of feminine beauty, Steele increases our understanding for why Maggie's own gender, especially the women in her family, has such a critical attitude towards her outward self: "From a practical point of view, to be as beautiful as possible was important for the Victorian women, because to a considerable extent it was through her appearance that she won 'admiration and affection'" (105). Against Steel's statement, I would argue that the criticism of Maggie functions as a method of successfully improving her outward being and thereby facilitates Maggie's struggle for social status. In the hierarchical society of men, women's social position is determined by their outer appearance, the minor part of an individual's whole which officiates as the power to attract the opposite sex and is therefore of great significance for marriage. As a child, Maggie has not developed an awareness of social structures and their power over individuals, but her mother and her aunts are aware of the prevailing interplay between social status and beauty and therefore act as her guardians.

At the same time as Maggie's unattractiveness is being illustrated through a comparison with Lucy, it is furthermore being reinforced by comparing her skin tone to the undesirable complexion of Gypsies. In addition, constant complaints of her straight, dark hair result in Maggie making the decision to cut her hair short, hoping to receive a positive reaction from her family. Unfortunately, the opposite happens and to Maggie's disappointment her aunts become even more critical of her.

'She's more like a Gypsy nor ever,' said aunt Pullet in a pitying tone; 'it's very bad luck, sister, as the gell should be so brown – the boy's fair enough. I doubt it'll stand in her way i' life to be so brown'. (65)

Evidently, there is a very strong yet negative comparison between Maggie and Gypsies where the complexion of their skin is emphasized. Maggie's brown skin, which is similar to the Gypsies', diverges from the ideals of the upper class where pale skin is favored and brown skin lacks value. Hence, it is Maggie's decision to cut her hair short, an unfeminine action and a sign of rebellion, which awakens such a strong reaction and causes this to be associated with Gypsies. This suggests that Gypsies also represented uncivil behavior, an indicator of ugliness. As Amit Yahav-Brown points out: "gypsies are thought of as less than fully human, deficient in reason, and unworthy of full membership in society"(3). Yahav-Brown's statement explains the juxtaposition of Gypsies and Maggie by highlighting Gypsies' social position in society. Maggie herself is perceived by others as "unworthy of full membership" in the superior class because of her failure to fulfil the decisive requirement for gaining social status.

Furthermore, Yahav-Brown states that in British literature, including *The Mill on the Floss*, the aim of introducing Gypsies is to emphasize only temporary things. This is certainly true, but I would additionally argue that in Eliot's work the presence of Gypsies is of great importance regarding Maggie's appearance as well, a frequent phenomenon. Gypsies are referred to only in connection to Maggie with the aim of highlighting the exclusion of her own social group on the basis of her divergent nature. Using this perspective, it is evident that Eliot, through the character of Maggie, powerfully demonstrates how a female's behaviour and character determine her social status, her possibilities and limitations.

Finally, the presented evidence of Maggie's appearance shows that the "deviations" in her facial features lie outside the typical upper-middle-class female beauty norms which result in Maggie becoming a representative for unattractiveness. Her dark, straight hair and her dark complexion are indicators of ugliness which contribute to the exclusion from her own social class.

The criticism of Maggie's personality

Along with the criticism of Maggie's physical features, the disapproval of her personality is also strongly emphasized in different situations. Her temperament, along with her actions, parallels the ugliness in her physical appearance. In combination, these flaws make her fall short of her society's gender norms.

Against this background, Maggie's appearance is on several occasions differently valued depending on whether she behaves or misbehaves. For example, when Maggie, together with her mother, Tom and Lucy, pays a visit to her aunt Pullet, the following acknowledgment regarding her nature emerges:

...and by the time 'Hush, ye pretty warbling choir' had been played, her face wore that bright look of happiness, while she sat immovable with her hands clasped, which sometimes comforted her mother with the sense that Maggie could look pretty now and then, in spite of her brown skin. (91)

Evidently, Maggie's stillness and quietness are markers of good behavior and therefore accentuates the prettiness in her face. This outwardly visible cuteness brings forth a much stronger appreciation of Maggie's features. Even though the dissatisfaction with Maggie's brown skin and its unattractiveness have been central, as it was concluded in my previous discussion, her good behavior compensates for her lack of beauty. Physical features and personality, then, are equally at play when determining the beauty of an individual. Callaghan too emphasizes this connection and underlines that physical appearance of women reflected the inner characteristics which were shown through the behavior of individuals. Undeniably, Maggie's ability to behave properly makes her charming even if her outer features are unattractive, which in my opinion provides evidence for the fact that even behavior is of equal importance as is physical appearance in determining one's beauty.

The shifting status of Maggie's character traits, from unattractiveness to attractiveness and vice versa, is also noticeable in situations when Maggie misbehaves. On one occasion, when

Maggie's father receives a visit from Mr. Riley, in order to discuss Tom's education,

Maggie's behavior is disapproved by her mother when she addresses Mr. Riley.

'That's nonsense!' said Maggie, tossing her head haughtily and turning away with tears springing in her eyes. She began to dislike Mr. Riley; it was evident he thought her silly and of no consequence.

'Hush, Maggie; for shame of you, asking questions and chattering,' said her mother. 'Come and sit down on your little stool and hold your tongue, do. (21-22)

Obviously, Maggie's language usage is inappropriate when addressing an adult male. Despite the fact that Maggie is only a child and at the moment miserable as well, her mother does not offer her any comfort whatsoever but instead passes harsh judgment on her behavior.

Callaghan draws attention to the fact that "to control women is to define women's moral worth, that is, their goodness or badness" (114). Based on Callaghan's statement, Maggie is undeniably exposed to the same social classification of the female gender where women are compartmentalized based on their outward- and inward selves.

Noteworthy, Maggie's behavior is not disapproved primarily on the basis of her impolite usage of language when addressing Mr. Riley. Her questioning of Mr. Riley's authority and her outspokenness in the presence of a man are actions strongly forbidden for a woman and go against the notion of femininity. Furthermore, Maggie's childhood experience displays the importance of women achieving the requirements of feminine norms even at an early age.

Noticeably, just as Maggie is exposed to the criticism of her aunts regarding her outward appearance in the discussion above, her inner self is disapproved by her mother. Whether it is the inner or the outer being of Maggie that is given condescending judgments, it is apparent that these opinions are made by women. From my point of view, Maggie's mother endeavors to raise Maggie's level of consciousness regarding the practice of acceptable forms of femininity, which in Maggie's opinion is unrealistic. Callaghan's statement regarding women's contribution to maintaining the ideals of beauty, which I referred to in the discussion above, can as well be applied in explaining women's role in social behavior norms.

From my perspective, women's function in the construction of beauty and behavior norms is one and the same; they help to maintain the female gender norms by striving to reach them and by criticizing those who refuse them. Noteworthy though, the reason why women voluntarily take this role is caused by their conscious awareness of their inferiority, where social power is only gained through a female's adjustment to the gender norms set by patriarchal society.

Additionally, a specific type of behavior determines a woman's degree of femininity which in itself creates a particular image of a woman. This image then represents a woman's "goodness", her conformity to female behavior norms, or "badness", her deviation from these norms. Maggie's behavior goes against these pre-set gender norms. When Maggie acts as a disobedient child, she is perceived as unfeminine and therefore rejected.

Maggie's adulthood and the importance of beauty

The attractiveness of female body continues to be of essential importance even during Maggie's adulthood. However, the beauty norms of upper class society undergo a momentous alteration during this period. Physical features that were earlier rejected become accepted and esteemed. These changes in beauty ideals alter the perception and appreciation of Maggie's nature and make her even desirable. The discussion below highlights the transformation of Maggie's facial features and the social acceptance of her dark complexion. It is also emphasized what kind of interplay occurs between Maggie's physical appearance and her personality as well as how both become appreciated.

The acceptance of Maggie's appearance

Although the dark complexion of Maggie's skin and her facial features earlier received grave criticism from her own gender, these features become accepted during her adulthood. However, it is noteworthy to underline that even though Maggie's appearance is no longer disapproved, it is rarely referred to as beautiful.

The brown skin tone of Maggie's body remains to be disliked by her mother and her aunts; nevertheless, the strong negative connotation of dark complexion has diminished and is no longer an indicator of ugliness. At one point, when Maggie and Lucy are preparing for a party, Maggie's aunt Pullet and her mother are in their company. Comment on dark complexion takes place in following discussion:

'Oh, never mind that, aunt; pray send us the dress,' said Lucy. 'I don't mean Maggie to have long sleeves, and I have abundance of black lace for trimming. Her arms will look beautiful.' 'Maggie's arms *are* a pretty shape,' said Mrs Tulliver. 'They're like mine used to be – only mine was never brown; I wish she'd had our family skin.' 'Nonsense, aunty!' said Lucy, patting her aunt Tulliver's shoulder, 'you don't understand those things. A painter would think Maggie's complexion beautiful.' 'Maybe, my dear,' said Mrs Tulliver submissively. 'You know better than I do. Only when I was young a brown skin wasn't thought well on among respectable folks'. (392)

Even though no direct verbal criticism is levelled against Maggie's appearance by the two observers (her mother and her aunt), it is not acknowledged as beautiful. Whereas Maggie's facial features were disapproved by these female characters during her childhood, they are not even mentioned when she is an adult. The only observation made is regarding the *pretty* shape of Maggie's arms, a positive comment from her mother because they are similar to the shape of her own arms. On the basis that femininity was of significant importance for the social position of women, had Maggie's mother passed censure on Maggie's traits that resemble her own, this would indicate a lack of self-confidence and uncertainty of her own femininity. When Mrs Tulliver expresses a strong approval of Maggie's bodily figure, she is in effect strengthening the image of her own femininity.

What further emerges from the statement uttered by Lucy is that brown skin no longer has the power of making individuals unworthy membership of the upper class. What is the reason behind this change in aesthetics? What kind of social changes have occurred? It is apparent that there has been a social revaluation of what is considered desirable skin color, which is an advantage for Maggie. This changed ideal of skin color is discussed by Valerie Steele. According to her, the positive attention given to light complexion became derided in the middle of the 18th century since it was associated with imperfections in health and therefore lost its attractiveness. Even though the plot is set in 19th century, Steele's statement helps to explain why Maggie's brown skin no longer is linked to ugliness, but it does not give a deeper understanding to why there has been such an inversion regarding Maggie being excluded from her own socially superior circle to being allotted membership in it. In my opinion, the fact that pale complexion became a marker of unhealthiness also changed upper-class ideals, where women no longer endeavored to be fair-skinned since it did not represent beauty. On the basis that the construction of social norms primarily gains its presence among the superior class, it is very likely that the revaluation of skin color has emerged in the same class circle.

Moreover, the belief that dark complexion indicates low-class membership disappears along with this change since it becomes positively valued among upper-class members, which makes it possible for Maggie to be included in her own social rank. Since light complexion no longer exclusively represents beauty, her skin color is no longer an obstacle that prevents Maggie from expressing her own femininity. To a considerable extent, social acceptance of dark complexion enhances Maggie's femininity, but her growing passiveness and obedient behavior, which were even more important for women, make Maggie beautiful in the eyes of her beholders.

Undeniably, the disapproval of Maggie's brown skin is still present among her aunts and her mother but not as strongly. Mrs Tulliver's passive approval of Lucy's statement strengthens the fact that the ideals of beauty have changed. The public consciousness of this alteration appears to be present primarily in Maggie's generation, while the generation of her mother adheres to the judgment of female beauty anchored in the beauty norms of their own time.

In addition, it ought to be emphasized that Lucy refers to aesthetic beauty when she praises Maggie's complexion, which is not a pure coincidence. Noticeably, pictorial art has great significance and is an influential factor on social perspectives on feminine beauty. Arguably, the acceptance of dark complexion firstly emerged in painting and gradually this aesthetic spread in society. The expansion of modern aesthetics had its start during the same time when Eliot wrote *The Mill on the Floss*, the historical period during which primitivism developed as well. Modernist aesthetes changed the concept of beauty; a new feminine type was introduced in art where earlier omitted features of a woman's body became the symbol of attractiveness (see Casteras). This transformation, subsequently, changed the social appraisal of femininity.

Nevertheless, the change of beauty ideals is not the primary explanation to why the association with ugliness of Maggie's nature diminishes. Even though, as Lucy states, Maggie's brown skin is desirable and represents attractiveness, her facial features, which during her childhood were critically judged, are unchanged. On the grounds that the alteration of Maggie's attitude towards femininity and her adjustment to its behavioral ideals arises, her beauty slowly blooms in the eyes of her critics. As an adult, Maggie's awareness of the interaction between desirable femininity and the social position of women has enlarged and even though Maggie's inner objection against gender stereotypes is as strong, her ignorance of feminine ideals of beauty has defused. She deliberately eludes disappointment of the observers who earlier expressed great dissatisfaction with her previous ignorance. This is evident in the situation when her mother expresses a strong wish for fixing her hair; even though Maggie has an inner conflict with herself she becomes passive in order to please her mother.

The mother was getting fond of her tall, brown girl, the only bit of furniture now on which she could bestow her anxiety and pride; and 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 after the pitiable fashion of those antiquated times. (299)

Regardless of the fact that Maggie's mother disapproved Maggie's brownness when she was a child, her previous dissatisfaction is no longer as strong and is replaced by pride. This transformation is caused by Maggie's submission to her mother even though it goes against Maggie's personal principles. The received permission to transform Maggie's straight hair into curls does not primarily give her mother the possibility to strengthen her daughter's femininity; it further highlights Maggie's sacrifice to adjust to feminine beauty norms. From her mother's point of view this is a matter of course and therefore increases the attractiveness of Maggie's appearance.

However, even though Maggie intimately has “her own ascetic wish to have no personal adornment”, the strong awareness of her unusual and therefore undesirable appearance is present within her. In a conversation with Philip, who is a dear friend, Maggie confirms the criticism of her outer self during her childhood by admitting her lack of beauty and comparing herself to Gypsies.

‘Oh dear,’ said Maggie, smiling and flushed with pleasure, ‘what a queer little girl I was! I remember myself with my hair in that way, in that pink frock. I really *was* like a Gypsy. I dare say I am now,’ she added after a little pause. (306-307)

Maggie’s verbally expressed acknowledgment of her appearance corresponding to that of Gypsies, both when she was a child and when she is an adult, demonstrates that she not only compares herself with an ethnic group which during the Victorian era was unworthy of social membership, but she also regards herself rather as a member of Gypsies than of her own social class. Clearly, the constantly present criticism of Maggie’s appearance during her childhood has made her become her own harsh critic. Her independent expressiveness has not diminished, which paradoxically makes her attractive to male characters, as will be seen in the discussion below.

Even though Maggie has no demands for personal adornment, by letting her mother curl her straight hair, Maggie’s inner desire to adjust to the female beauty norms is realized. This desire might be unconscious but there is no doubt that it is present in Maggie’s mind. Furthermore, Maggie’s unconscious wish does not directly make her reshape her inherited appearance, but it indirectly contributes to her making the decision of letting someone else, namely her mother, improve it, a norm which Maggie herself has internalized. The improvement of her outer self makes the expected feminine ideals outwardly more visible in Maggie’s body.

Moreover, Maggie’s gained knowledge of strongly interwoven relationship between beauty and femininity influence her personal understanding of the world as well. After the

family's financial collapse, she gains increased insight into the hierarchical structure of society and decides to abandon any aspiration for personal happiness with the aim of increasing the contentment of others. There is an observable transformation of her personality and her actions caused by this decision.

Hanging diligently over her sewing, Maggie was a sight anyone might have been pleased to look at. That new inward life of hers, notwithstanding some volcanic upheavings of imprisoned passions, yet shone out in her face with a tender soft light that mingled itself as added loveliness with the gradually enriched colour and outline of her blossoming youth. 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 becoming so submissive, so backward to assert her own will. (299)

Unquestionably, Maggie's inner self, along with her behavior, has been adjusted to the patriarchal expectations of her own gender. In addition, this alteration causes a revaluation of Maggie and makes her more socially acceptable. Maggie's complexion, hair and facial features have been central factors in determining her worth in the past. However, these factors lose their importance in the process of change in Maggie's personality. Callaghan points to the fact that "morally flawless women are physically flawless" (120), which is a powerful explanation to why Maggie's undesirable and strongly criticized physical features become acceptable by those who once criticized her, especially her mother. While Maggie's moral behavior and actions went against the expected behavior of women, Maggie's appearance was also disapprovingly perceived. Her ability to act in harmony with society's norms dominates her adult behavior. Her inner passions, even though beginning to surface, are now restrained. Consequently, her behavior no longer lacks moral content and her appearance no longer lacks beauty either.

As I have established, the positive revaluation of dark complexion removes one impediment from being defined as attractive. In addition to this change, Maggie's personal attitude towards beauty ideals has been altered; the awareness of female attractiveness being important for the social position of women has increased. This transition is visible outwardly

and positively received which causes a growing appreciation of Maggie's surface features even though no actual physical changes have occurred.

The praise of Maggie's appearance

At the same time as Maggie's appearance and personality become accepted by the female members of her family, they also become attractive and beautiful in the view of certain men; the same facial features that once made Maggie unappealing are admired by males.

The seductiveness of Maggie's eyes is frequently emphasized because of their unusualness. When Maggie is introduced to Stephen, a handsome person of high station who is in love with her cousin Lucy, the extraordinary quality in her eyes awakens a great personal interest within him. Even though Maggie has directly demonstrated a strong opposition to Stephen's manners and views, an action which goes against the behavior norms for female gender, his admiration for Maggie is undiminished.

He would make himself disagreeable to her, quarrel with her perhaps. Quarrel with her? Was it possible to quarrel with a creature who had such eyes – defying and deprecating, contradicting and clinging, imperious and beseeching, full of delicious opposites? To see such creature subdued by love for one would be a lot worth having – to another man. (418-419)

Stephen's positive reception of Maggie's eyes is evident; however, the physical features of her eyes such as size, form or colour, are never mentioned in detail. The expressed appreciation of Maggie's eyes indicates rather Stephen's strong acceptance of Maggie's personality which is present in her eyes. As I have mentioned earlier, Maggie's submissiveness and her restraint make her now acceptable to her own gender; however, even though her independent personality is not shown outwardly, it is still perceptible in her eyes. Stephen's thoughts about Maggie's eyes being "full of delicious opposites" refer in fact to Maggie's personality which establishes his uncritical attitude of this duality. Callaghan emphasizes the fact that women who will not or can not live up to beauty standards become

automatically excluded for the reason that they are perceived as rebellious (9). This certainly explains the criticism of Maggie by her own gender, but it makes it even harder to understand why Maggie's rebelliousness receives such a strong appreciation by someone of the opposite sex.

My explanation of the prevailing appreciation of Maggie's personality lies in the fact that there is a strong desire, particularly from Stephen, to master Maggie's rebelliousness. By this I mean that Stephen's affection for Maggie is not based on the contradiction in her personality being attractive; this contradiction rather arouses his curiosity and he accepts the challenge of her vitality. Stephen's desire "to see such creature subdued by love for one would be a lot worth having – to another man" (419) indicates his wish to seduce Maggie and thereby gain control over her, which in my opinion would strengthen his masculine authority.

Unquestionably, Stephen's longing for Maggie's love is strong, but the underlying cause for this hunger is to gain power over Maggie despite her deviation from feminine norms.

Stephen's reflection about Maggie's actions and behaviour reveals rather a profound inquisitiveness of Maggie's personality instead of a strong attraction of her outward being. Nevertheless, one can not with certainty state that Maggie's unusual appearance and manners attract him in a way that a woman is expected to attract a man. From Stephen's viewpoint, Maggie is undeniably a woman with superior qualities; although, it is not evident whether he expresses an approval or a disapproval of Maggie's character.

Generally, Stephen admitted, he was not fond of women who had any peculiarity of character, but here the peculiarity seemed really of a superior kind; and provided one is not *obliged to marry such women*, why, they certainly make a variety in social intercourse (391, my emphasis).

Stephen's acknowledgement of the fact that he didn't feel any devotion to women with distinctive qualities makes it possible to establish that his attraction for Maggie is synonymous to curiosity. Clearly, Stephen regards Maggie's manners superior in contrast to other women; however, it is only for the reason that Maggie ventures to assert things

unexpected and even unacceptable for her gender, which puts Stephen in a position where his male dominance is threatened. Maggie's opposition and questioning of Stephen's expressiveness draws his attention to her "unfeminine" actions and awakens a desire to prove his masculinity in their verbal duel. Moreover, the fact that Stephen points out that a woman who expresses her superiority is not worthy of marriage, highlights the fact that Maggie's divergent personality only gains temporary attraction because of its contradictory nature; but in the course of time this incongruity becomes rejected because it does not fit into the norms of social intercourse where women are not allowed superiority.

Furthermore, even though Maggie's physical appearance is admired by certain male characters, her personality does not always have a positive connotation. When Philip, a pitied person with a deformity, expresses his love for Maggie in the presence of his father, even though Maggie's beauty is clearly acknowledged by his father, Philip receives a few words of warning regarding Maggie's character.

‘She’s not the sort of woman your mother was, though, Phil’, he said at last. ‘I saw her at church – she’s handsomer than this – deuced fine eyes and fine figure, I saw; but rather dangerous and unmanageable, eh?’ (438-439)

Similar to the strong attraction expressed by Stephen for Maggie's eyes, admiration for her eyes is mentioned by Philip's father but with a warning. With the emphasis on Maggie's dangerous nature, Philip's father also expresses a disapproval of the same trait that catches the attention of both Philip and Stephen, her rebelliousness. Moreover, the indication of Maggie being beautiful with "fine figure" is a conclusive piece of evidence that the outer appearance of Maggie corresponds to feminine ideals of beauty, which has the purpose of providing the opposite sex with satisfaction. Callaghan emphasizes the function of beauty and states that "feminine beauty is defined as primarily for men's pleasure" (9). Based on this argument, it is indisputable that the approval of Maggie's outer being from the male perspective reveals its attractiveness in gender terms. Thus, it is of significance to emphasize that the attractiveness

of Maggie's outer self has a powerful connection to sexuality; in the process of her maturity, her body has naturally taken on the shape of a woman who is sexually attractive to a man.

Additionally, the outward appearances of Philip and Stephen ought to be discussed as well in regards to the change of Maggie's social position. The fact that Maggie finally, despite her long-promised love for Philip, gives herself to Stephen is not a pure coincidence. I argue that Eliot not only highlights the significance of female beauty, she also emphasizes the importance of male attractiveness by contrasting Stephen's and Philip's inward qualities and their outward features.

Maggie's avoidance of Philip's love for many years, despite her admiration of his inner qualities, has its root in the feud between their families. Her choice to yield to Stephen's demands despite her strong awareness of this action is immoral because of his relationship with her cousin Lucy, demonstrates the power that beauty holds on individuals, independent of their gender. Maggie's maturity and her personal transformation prove that masculine beauty becomes significant for women when the personal awareness of feminine beauty norms emerge. Her attraction to Stephen's handsome appearance is much stronger than her appreciation of Philip's inner qualities despite his deformity; "it was rather that she felt the half-remote presence of a world of love and beauty and delight" (393-94) in Stephen's company, while the appeal in Philip "was more strongly to her pity and womanly devotedness than to her vanity or other egoistic excitability of her nature" (420).

When the admiration of Maggie's appearance becomes self-evident, she feels that "she was no longer an unheeded person, liable to be chid, from whom attention was continually claimed and on whom no one felt bound to confer any" (410). Awareness of her own beauty, along with the distinctions between Stephen's outer qualities and Philip's inner qualities as well as her personal assessment of these qualities, suggests that when being socially schooled to fit into the norms of society, it is very likely that one's personal set of values and actions

will be governed by these norms. Maggie's adjustment to social norms and the praise of her physical appearance influence her appreciation of Philip's and Stephen's traits differently; her personal standards of beauty regarding others has shifted from highly valuing the inner qualities of Philip to desiring the outer qualities of Stephen.

Conclusion

The presented evidence for beauty norms in connection to Maggie's nature in the discussion discloses the construction and re-construction of female beauty as well as its significance in the social production of the identity of individuals. It is further demonstrated how physical appearance, personality and behaviour are interwoven and become the body on which aesthetic judgment is passed.

Female beauty or lack of it is a measurement of female value, the value that has crucial consequences for women in their struggle for superior positions in a patriarchal society. Maggie's contradictory nature and her divergence from beauty norms lower her personal value. Clearly, it is of equal importance for females to self-adjust their bodily traits as it is to possess an innate "natural" beauty.

When the admiration for Maggie's appearance unexpectedly emerges during her adulthood, it is not only for the reason that her "beauty" is in accordance with the present ideals for her gender. Unquestionably, these ideals gradually incorporated earlier disapproved physical features and to state that primarily this change causes the high regard of Maggie as a young woman would be a vague and doubtful way of reasoning. Her attractiveness is certainly as well the result of a personal effort to adjust to feminine ideals by altering her outward behaviour and restraining her inward rebelliousness.

Consequently, *The Mill on the Floss* highlights the complexity of problems that emerges when the conscious awareness of society's norms is shaped and the existence of individuals is

held captive by these norms. Maggie's immoral decision to grant Stephen permission for a romantic involvement, despite her knowledge of the pending consequences, shows how beauty norms govern personal actions. Maggie finally succeeds to sever herself from society's superficial norms and becomes true to a higher moral integrity; she abandons her future with Stephen and returns home where she is doomed to suffering and unhappiness for her immoral behaviour. Eliot concludes her novel with the death of her heroine which might indicate that women who transgressed the gender codes of the time lost their right to life.

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