

Beteckning: _____



Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

More than Siblings?

- A study of the incestuous relationship between
Maggie and Tom in George Eliot's *The Mill on the
Floss*

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Because of the many similarities between the life of Eliot and the lives of Maggie and Tom Tulliver in *The Mill on The Floss*, Eliot's novel has been understood as an autobiographical novel. The aim of the essay is to, by using a psychoanalytical perspective, examine if the fictional characters could be said to be engaged in an incestuous relationship even though they do not engage in a sexual relationship. Though their relationship never becomes sexual, there are factors which could support a claim that brother and sister are engaged in a non-sexual incestuous relationship.

Keywords: George Eliot, Incest, Maggie Tulliver, Siblings, The Mill on The Floss, Tom Tulliver

During the 19th century incest was a common theme in novels (see Polhemus 1990, p 176). Why incest was such a common theme is unknown. Perhaps because incest was prohibited and considered to be wrong, or maybe some of the authors have had similar experience from their life and writing was a way of working through the trauma it caused. But it can perhaps also be that books which dealt with the incest issue sold better than other books. In some novels brother and sister are not involved in a sexual relationship, but their relationship with each other imply that brother and sister share incestuous desires, and in other texts, incest has actually occurred. However, most of these novels end in tragedy.

George Eliot (a pseudonym for Mary Ann Evans), one of literature's great writers, like many other authors, did not write an autobiography. As Rosemarie Bodenheimer notes, "Writing autobiography looked risky: it might create a dangerous propensity to reread her novels in ways she believed she had not intended" (Bodenheimer 238). The risk in this case could be that her relationship to her brother Isaac would be misinterpreted by the readers, and that was a risk she was unwilling to take. Instead of writing a autobiography, Eliot thought of her books as one. Whenever she was asked when a autobiography would be written she would answer "The best history of a writer is contained in his writings-these are his chief actions." (Bodenheimer 239). Because of the many similarities between Eliot's life and the lives of Tom and Maggie Tulliver, it is not difficult to understand the statement "*The Mill on the Floss* has always been understood as the last of the fictions to be generated directly from her provincial childhood" (Bodenheimer 193).

The relationship between brother and sister in *The Mill on the Floss* has a central role to play in the story. Maggie's actions and the statements she makes give the reader reasons to believe that their relationship is stronger than a normal relationship between brother and sister. Maggie loves her brother more than any other man on earth. Even though she meets other men, and even engages in relationships with them, no other man can replace Tom. Her

love for Tom sometimes goes to the extreme and gives the reader an indication that things are more than they seem to be. Tom is not as loving as Maggie is. He is from early years the head of the household and the family provider. He is not as affectionate as Maggie is and does not show his feelings as clearly as she does. But even he makes statements that could be interpreted as more than normal love between brother and sister.

The purpose with this essay is to examine if the fictional characters could be said to be engaged in an incestuous union. The possible incestuous relationship between brother and sister will be studied from a psychoanalytical perspective in order to come to a conclusion on whether or not Maggie and Tom could be said to have more than a normal brother-sister relationship. This essay will try to provide a background which covers the definition of incest and answer the questions: Are there any factors that could increase the risk of incest occurring? If there are such factors, what are they and are they portrayed in *The Mill on the Floss*?

This essay will discuss Maggie and Tom's relationship and why they had the relationship they had. As mentioned previously, there are reasons to believe that *The Mill on the Floss* is, if not all, partly taken from the life of Eliot. Further, other similarities between the lives of the fictional characters and Eliot will be discussed briefly.

As secondary sources I will use books and studies that deal with the subject of incest. This essay will deal with factors that are portrayed in *The Mill on the Floss* and which increase the risk of incest occurring. Questions and factors such as when in life incest is most likely to occur, if siblings plan their life as a normal couple, if and how power relations between siblings play a role in incest occurring, if separation between siblings plays a part, if jealousy matter, how incest influence on the choice of future partner and if there is a risk of future psychological problems will be covered. Further, factors which are not portrayed in the novel but which are important in order to understand incest will be dealt with.

There will also be a brief overview of the history of incest and of the taboos and prohibition which occurred in English history at the time the book was written. In these books and studies psychologists and anthropologists like Edvard Westermarck and Robert M Polhemus, both well-respected in their field of work, share their results on the subject of incest. This essay will compare what is found in this material with the lives of Maggie and Tom and draw parallels in order to better understand the novel.

This essay will also make use of books that deal with the life of Eliot and her writings. One such example is Rosemarie Bodenheimer's book *George Eliot, Her Letters and Fiction*. The author of this book has, through the letters of Eliot, drawn a picture of Eliot's life. In her book an explanation is offered to some of the ideas she had for her works of fiction. Bodenheimer also writes about the relationship between Eliot and her brother Isaac and how that could have affected the manner in which the author constructed the characters in *The Mill on the Floss*. There are problems with constructing a picture of someone only by reading that person's personal letters though, as Bodenheimer writes "As letter readers, then, we are always in double jeopardy: we are invaders of privacy and creators of plots where none were intended" (Bodenheimer 19).

Another book that is of much interest is Polhemus' *Erotic Faith*. Polhemus discusses in this book the sexual theme that is in *The Mill on the Floss* and how the many signs of Maggie and Tom's incestuous relationship can be interpreted at the same time as he draws parallels to Eliot's life. Further Ruby R Redinger's book *The Emergent Self* will be used in order to reach a conclusion on whether or not Maggie and Tom's relationship is to be considered an incestuous one.

Incest has different definitions depending on which psychologist or anthropologist one refers to. "Incest is the infraction of the taboo upon sexual relations between any two members of the nuclear family except husband and wife, that is, between parents and children

or any sibling pair” (Stanley 71). This is just one of the definitions of incest, and it is just as the others debated among anthropologists. Why is it just between core members, who are the core members, does this definition include half-siblings as well, what is meant with “sexual relations” etc? Regardless of which definitions one chooses to make use of, it will not be an absolute one.

In every culture known to man, incest has been present. The Gods in Greek mythology engaged in incestuous acts. The powerful Zeus raped his mother, Rhea and engaged in a relationship with his sister, Hera, and finally copulated with his own daughter. Even Zeus himself was born from an incestuous union (see Masters 10). In Egypt, incest was forbidden for the common man, although “the Egyptian royalty engaged in brother-sister marriages without discernible damage to their stock“ (Masters 18). The Romans forbid incest. They thought of it as unnatural “and they disapproved such unions, too, on the ground that the family’s range of social relationship would be narrowed” (Masters 25). The Christians also forbid incest on the same basis as the Romans. At some time even sixth cousins were forbidden to marry, a decision which proved to be very unpopular among the Christian population. The decision, which was taken by the church, had an opposite effect than that which was intended (see Masters 27).

Although incest is known to have existed in all known civilizations, our knowledge about incest is limited. There are mainly two reasons for this; the first one being “the limited opportunities for empirical research” (Shepner 4) and the second being the fact that there is no society to study where incest does not occur. Most of the research that has been done has been directed to finding out how and why incest prohibition came into existence. Much interest has also been given to why incest is avoided. People who share much time together are likely to feel attracted to each other in some way. But in most families incest does not occur, and this is discussed vigorously among anthropologists.

While some psychologists and anthropologists claim that sexual feelings between family members are unusual, there are others that claim that “erotic experiences between brother and sister in early childhood are exceedingly common” (Santiago 170) and even that “incest often fails to occur not because it is undesired, but because neither has the courage to reveal the desire to the other” (Masters 65). By far, the most common cases of incest occur between father-daughter, and then between brother-sister. Least of the reported cases are between mother-son. In the absolute majority of the incest cases between father-daughter and siblings, the male was the initiator (see Shepner 128). Anthropologists and psychologists have discussed why this pattern is seen in all societies but no explanation has been sufficient. Instead the research has concentrated on finding out why some engage in incestuous relationships, while others do not.

Shepner notes that Westermarck claims that siblings are inhibited from copulating with each other. The thesis, which alleges that siblings have an instinct to avoid incest has been discussed and criticized by scientists, but no one has proven Westermarck’s findings to be wrong. (see Shepner 114). Westermarck investigated why incest does not occur among siblings among the Kibbutzniks, which are communities where people live collectively in Israel. His findings show that even if the Kibbutznik siblings spent their whole youth together, they would not engage in sexual relationships with each other. Marriage between second generations Kibbutznik, who have been brought up together, does not occur, even if there is no taboo against such behaviour. This would according to Westermarck mean that there is some kind of inhibition among at least siblings that prevents sexual relations with a sibling to occur.

The result was as though the boys and girls in the kibbutz peer groups and the bride and groom in the sim-pua marriages were real siblings. When such children reach adolescence, they become sexually indifferent to each

other...The theoretical significance of these natural experiments is enormous.

Sibling incest is preculturally avoided by a biopsychical mechanism. This

mechanism is triggered by a statistically prevalent social situation

characteristic of the species. (Shepner 67)

This meant that social-culture variables were rejected as the definitive causal factors of incest regulation. Even if they could, people in general would not commit incest (see Shepner 69).

Mother-son incest is it seems, just as brother-sister incest, inhibited (see Shepner 115).

Males who remain with their natal group are inhibited from mating with their

mothers by the reverberance of the role of infant in their adult

relationships...the mother's superior dominance is a key part of the

relationship, for if the son can successfully challenge his mother's dominance,

the inhibition is broken and he will mate with her. (Shepner 108)

Psychologists even claim this kind of inhibition to be stronger than the one between siblings,

“Mother-son incest is inhibited by a pattern almost universal among mammals, a pattern not easily interfered with. *Sibling incest* is inhibited by a pattern that is not necessarily universal and is *more easily disrupted*” (Shepner 115, my italics).

As is mentioned above, most cases of incest occur between father and daughter. This is a special kind of incest as it is the only form that is genetically beneficent. In such cases the male, or the father, is the only one who genetically benefits from an incestuous relationship (see Shepner 97). Due to the fact that one does benefit from such relationships there is no inhibition between father and daughter. Instead society has prohibited sexual relations between father-daughter by law.

Incest is not a common crime. Still much time has been spent on trying to answer why societies have prohibited incest. The infrequency of incest behaviour can result from a range of causes. One of them is the prohibition, “cultural rules which may appear in all forms of social norms” (Shepner 34). The others are prevention and inhibition. Shepner’s claim has been lively debated but no absolute answers have been presented. Scientists seem to agree that the biggest reasons for prohibition is that the “incest prohibitions originated because they benefited the family or society as a whole” (Shepner 39), but not all seem to share the belief that incest is destructive: “There is nothing *essentially* harmful about sexual intercourse with a close relative. The behavior is damaging, partly or entirely, because it is so strongly prohibited” (Masters 195). Statements like these seem to be regarded as pure nonsense by many scientists.

So what triggers incest, and what are the effects of such unions? K Krafft-Ebing concluded, “It is not possible to find a pathological basis for the act which so deeply wounds not only the ties of blood, but also the feeling of civilized people” (Santiago 152). Although we cannot for sure say what triggers the final step toward incest, there are some things that can increase the risk of incest occurring.

Between siblings, Kinsey found that “Incestuous contacts occurred most frequently between brothers and sisters before adolescence and rarely afterwards” (Santiago 153). Children who engage or want to engage in an incestuous relationship with a sibling can many times plan their life together as if they were married. When this plan fails they can often feel depressed (see Sanitago 45).

A brother is usually stronger and more powerful than his sister of comparable age; he therefore “has the ‘dose’ of dominance and aggression needed to mate with her” (Shepner 114). The brother can, when he is attracted to his mother (The Oedipus complex), reflect his feelings for his sister instead and create a situation where he acts as her father and carer. This

behaviour can result in an incestuous union between siblings, with the brother acting as the initiator (see Santiago 170).

The inhibition that prevents incestuous relationships between siblings can be broken if siblings are separated a longer period of time: “All types of incest are likely to occur when near-relatives are reunited after a lengthy separation, especially if the separation occurred in the childhood of one or both of the participants” (Masters 82).

Santiago writes that sleeping arrangements should be done so that a brother and sister preferably do not share bedroom, and absolutely do not share the same bed. Siblings who share beds are at higher risk of engaging in an incestuous relationship: “When a brother and sister share a bedroom, it invites sex play. When they share the same bed, it practically guarantees it” (171).

There are examples of incest occurring after the daughter has been sexually active with someone outside of the family: “a number of cases of fathers (and brothers) who became involved in incest only after it was established that the daughter (or sister) was behaving promiscuously with others. This “Why shouldn’t I get what everybody else was getting?” behaviour, (Masters 81) is typically seen in people who have jealousy issues.

Children who engage in incestuous relations are unable to move on as adults. Several studies show that both women and men, as adults, search for a partner who resembles their brother or sister (see Santiago 160). Herman (1981), quoted in Shepner’s book, reports that females often run away and/or engage in relations with unrelated males (see Shepner 129). These males are very often older and they often represent the father or brother. R. Masters writes in his book that “It is also clear that a variety of clinical problems, among them compulsive religiosity, celibacy and certain of the sexual deviations, notably homosexuality and fetishism, are strongly related to an unsuccessful solution of the incestuous wishes toward the parent” (181).

Several case studies have shown that both the initiator and the “victim” can develop psychological problems during the time of incest or after the incestuous relation has ended. Angela Tsun has investigated incestuous relations in Hong Kong, China. She says that “Victims of child sexual abuse are found to be at high risk of mental health problems such as depression” (72). Tsun further claims that victims often feel guilt and suffer from poor self-esteem because of the damaging relationship. Her study shows how girls are unable to resist their brothers as they are the only ones who are there for the girls, “My anxiety was gone whenever I saw him home and when he caressed and comforted me” (73). The victims would feel a sense of powerlessness and even try to refuse intercourse, but it did not help. Tsun also found that many of the girls who have been victims of incest have been neglected by their mothers. This is believed to be a risk of incest occurring as the girls may search for security and attention among their brothers or father. Even though the girls are searching for security it does not mean that the girls were looking for sexual relations (see Tsun 73).

Parents must not let the child (mainly boys) see them having intercourse, otherwise the child “will not be able to comprehend them and will, therefore, misinterpret them... [and this] forces a sibling to perform it with him and this will be followed by mutual guilt feelings” (Santiago 171). The risk of incest increases dramatically when the persons involved are isolated from society, “Isolation will induce people to commit incest. Incest ‘pays’ if there are no available alternative mates” (Shepner 129). Riemer (1936) argues that incest, primarily between father and daughter, is most likely to occur on isolated farms which are “not part of the wider social system of communities” (Shepner 129). There are also cases where the father feels rejected by his spouse and instead develops sexual interest in their children (see Masters 1963, p 82, Shepner 1983, p 120).

If brother and sister differ more than four years in age the inhibition that exists will be broken and the risk of incest occurring will increase (see Shepner 115). The inhibition can

also be broken if parents interfere in children's sex play (see Shepner 115). In the following section this essay will deal with the life of Eliot and why *The Mill on the Floss* is said to be her autobiography.

Mary Ann Evans was born at South Farm, Arbury, 22 November 1819. She was the youngest of three children. As a child Eliot was closest to her father and her brother Isaac, although she had a good relationship with her sister Chrissey as well (see Haight 5). She came from a respected family and she had the education suitable for a young lady her age. In adolescence, Eliot was separated from her brother as he went in school far from home. While Eliot still was in her teens her mother passed away and she had to return home to care for her father. During that time she interested herself in theology and she wrote and published texts that were considered to be radical. After the death of her father in 1851 she travelled around Europe. She later met the novelist George Henry Lewes with whom she spent most of her remaining life. Her relation with Lewes was controversial as he already was married and had two sons. He never divorced his wife as no law would permit that. Eliot's relationship with Lewes made her brother Isaac reject her as he believed her to be a disgrace to the family name. Their relation would forever be "frosty". It was Lewes who inspired Eliot to write books and she soon published her first novel *Scenes of Clerical life* which she signed with her pseudonym (see Redinger 330-33). Eliot continued writing and she produced some of the most read books of the 19th century, among them *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*. Lewes and Eliot had many blissful days but they never had any children of their own. Their relationship ended when Henry Lewes died in 1878. Two years later Eliot married John Cross, an American banker and a close friend of her and Lewes'. Their marriage only lasted a couple of months before Eliot passed away on December 22, 1890.

All through their life, Eliot and her brother Isaac had a special relationship. In their adolescence they were affectionate to each other, just like Tom and Maggie in *The Mill on the*

Floss: “The dominating passion of her childhood was love for her brother Isaac... No doll or childish toy could hold her interest if Isaac was near” (Haight 5). Just as with Tom and Maggie, school parted the siblings, which affected Eliot as he was her best friend. Because of the many similarities between the lives of Eliot and Maggie, *The Mill on the Floss* has been understood as an autobiography of Eliot’s life: “For more than a century, *The Mill on the Floss*, in its spirit and details, has been approached and read as an autobiographical novel, and much of its interest lies in the light it sheds on the shaping of Eliot’s creative life” (Polhemus 169). Unfortunately this statement can never be proven.

It seems as if Eliot was afraid of writing a real autobiography as the relationship with her brother could be misunderstood (see Bodenheimer 238). Isaac broke contact with his sister due to her relationship with Lewes, but he still had a great effect on Eliot’s life: “[T]he psychic pattern which was to direct her course throughout life was formed almost exclusively by her relationship with her mother, her father, and-most observably-with Isaac” (Polhemus 168). Her relation with Lewes is quite similar to the one that Maggie and Stephen Guest have in the novel. This has also been interpreted as taken from her life.

Because *The Mill on the Floss* has been understood as an autobiographical novel several questions have arisen: was Eliot in love with her brother, and if she was, was this her way of working through the trauma that she in that case may have suffered from? By having knowledge of what kind of life Eliot had, we may also view the novel in a different light and also understand the novel better than we otherwise would have.

The Mill on the Floss is set sometime around the 1820s upon the River Floss near the village of St. Oggs in the United Kingdom. The story is about the siblings Maggie and Tom Tulliver and their lives. In early years Maggie had strong feelings for her brother. She had, as a little girl, already made plans to live with her brother and to keep his house as an adult. And he felt the same way. For Maggie, no one was like Tom. He was the central figure in her life,

the one that she loved better than anyone or anything else. When Tom goes away to study at Mr. Sterling's school Maggie becomes heartbroken. She fantasises of the next time she will see him and what that would be like. Tom, at the same time as he misses his sister and struggles with all the homework he has, makes friends with Phillip Wakem, the son of his father's enemy. They become good friend as Phillip helps Tom with his homework. When Maggie comes to Kings Lorton's to visit her dear brother Tom, she is introduced to Phillip and an attraction develops between the two. Years later, when the relation between the Wakem and the Tulliver family is even worse than before, Maggie becomes involved in a secret relationship with Phillip.

At the same time the Tullivers go bankrupt because of the Wakems. Tom soon finds out about Maggie and Philip's relation and he demands she put a stop to it. The relation between the siblings goes from bad to worse. Several more years pass, during which Mr. Tulliver dies after just having paid off his debt to the Wakems. Lucy, Maggie and Tom's cousin, invites Maggie to her home where she is introduced to Lucy's fiance Mr. Stephen Guest. The two of them become attracted to each other and engage in a secret relation. The matter is further complicated because of Philip's close friendship to Lucy and Mr. Guest. Philip and Maggie are reintroduced and so is their love. But Maggie is uncertain and runs away with Stephen on a boat to Mudport to get married. Upon arrival in Mudport she rejects Stephen's proposal and goes back home where she lives as an outcast for a short period of time. She goes back home to beg for Tom's forgiveness but he rejects her and says that she will never again be under his roof. Both Lucy and Philip forgive Maggie. Lucy forgave her in a moving reunion and Philip through a letter. Shortly after the river floods and Maggie, who finds a boat, rows to Tom's home to save him. When Tom gets himself seated the boat capsizes and "Brother and sister had...[went down] in an embrace never to be parted— living through again in one supreme

moment, the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together” (Eliot 467).

The risk of incest occurring is at its highest point before adolescence. Large parts of *The Mill on the Floss* are set before Maggie and Tom’s adolescence and many scenes that could be interpreted as incestuous take place during that time.

It is very clear that mainly Maggie has feelings for her brother that are to be considered as extreme, even if her brother shares some of these feelings. In accordance with Santiago’s claim that siblings who plan their life together could be at risk of engaging in an incestuous relationship, Maggie, in *The Mill on the Floss* expresses such desires as this quotation will show: “I love Tom so dearly, Luke— better than anybody else in the world. When he grows up, I shall keep his house, and we shall always live together” (Eliot 26). Robert Polhemus argues that Eliot was being very personal here in that she as a little girl had fantasized of growing up with her brother (177). He argues that Tom wanted a housemaid while Maggie wanted security, revealing the power relation that was between brother and sister.

The little man wants a servant, dominance, and someone to nurture and torment. Maggie wants secure relationship and a structure of feeling and identity transcending the self: but there is also a hint that she-and all she represents-seeks and expects some kind of punishment and discipline for not being born male. (177)

Throughout their lives, Tom has always been the one closest to Maggie. But he has also been the person most feared by Maggie, “Her brother was the human being of whom she had been most afraid from her childhood upwards” (Eliot 433). Juliet Mitchell explains how a stronger brother can use his power to weaken the sister in order to abuse her:

The boy, by being stronger and more valued, hopes to regain his omnipotence so threatened by the sibling that has arrived from nowhere and through which the girl dreads feeling confirmed in her weakness and lack of social value through the same experience. (71)

The female can many times have ambitions to succeed in whatever she is doing, but the brother will oppress her, making her feel useless or less valuable than he is and making her feel vulnerable without him (see Mitchell 71). Polhemus explains:

Maggie's love for Tom is born from the need for complementarity, from self-sacrificing desire, and especially from admiration for power of various kinds. Maggie loves Tom for his potential...He is the right sex, can do things she cannot, can go where she cannot; he is bigger, more mature. No wonder Eliot makes her a tomboy. In her imagination, to be with him offers escape from female impotence. (176)

Mitchell explains in her book how the initiator, usually the brother, can make his sister feel insecure about herself and their relationship when he wants to dominate his sister. In the *Mill on the Floss* Tom did the same thing by switching from being a loving brother to making her believe that he hated her. That made her feel unsecure about his feeling and she had to please him in any way he wanted so that he would take her "under his arms" again. In this quotation Eliot shows how much Maggie had to have Tom's approval, "Oh Tom, please forgive me—I can't bear it—I will always be good— always remember things— do love me— please, dear Tom" (33).

Polhemus argues that one of the biggest problems Eliot had to deal with when she wrote the book was how to portray the erotic and incestuous feelings between Maggie and Tom without actually mentioning them. He believes that she solved her problem by finding a metaphorical way. In one episode Tom wants to impress Maggie by showing her his skills with the sword that he had borrowed from a war veteran:

Slowly he let down the scabbard on the floor, lest it should make too much noise, and then said, sternly, "I'm the Duke of Wellington! March!" stamping forward with the right leg a little bent, and the sword still pointing towards Maggie, who, trembling, and with tear-filled eyes, got upon the bed, as the only means of widening the space between them... The sword had fallen, with its edge on Tom's foot... In another minute she was sobbing with joy... -it seemed as if all happiness lay in his being alive. (Eliot 160-61)

Polhemus claims that this episode could be looked at in thirteen different ways. One way is to regard the scene as Tom's desire for sexuality and another is to regard Tom as one who wants to "force his will upon her" (181). Regardless of how one interprets this scene, Eliot portrays an erotic picture between brother and sister, a picture where the brother tries to impress the sister by demonstrating his power and frightening her.

Joseph Shepner writes that children who are separated during their adolescence are at greater risk of having an incestuous union. Maggie and Tom are separated twice during their young years, first when Tom goes to regular school and later when he is sent away to Mr. Sterling. For Maggie this means that her best friend and the one she loves the most is taken away from her. Although the separation can increase the risk of incest, it does not mean that it has done so in the case of Maggie and Tom.

Children of Oedipus takes up the subject of intimacy between siblings. Siblings, as mentioned, who share the same bedroom and the same bed are at a higher risk of developing a sexual relationship. Of course it is not the bed or the bedroom that increases the risk of incest from occurring but the intimacy. Several times Eliot portrays the intimacy between brother and sister. An intimacy that could be considered, by the reader, to be erotic. Polhemus argues that the following quotation shows that “this girl craves touch and the bonding of physical intimacy, which she associates with the brother” (177).

Maggie and Tom were still very much like young animals, and so she could rub her cheek against his, and kiss his ear in a random...he actually began to kiss her in return...and they ate together and rubbed each other's cheeks and brows and noses together while they ate, with a humiliating resemblance to two friendly ponies. (Eliot 34)

In the novel Maggie is rejected several times by her brother. First it was because of her relation with Philip Wakem, and later her relationship with Mr. Stephen Guest. Polhemus argues that it is strange that Tom acts this way. He with his high standards should be happier than anyone else that his sister has found partners from respected families, even if Philip is an enemy. He also argues that Eliot was again being personal.

Tom's unrelenting anger towards her makes no sense except as revulsion against sex. Who actually condemns Maggie? Only her brother and “the world's wife”...the other characters...all forgive her...In other words, Tom's rejection is based on incestuous jealousy and taboo against sex, and on an actual case of disapproval of immoral sexual behavior by Victorian standards. (Polhemus 188)

The jealousy that Tom feels coincides with Master's "why-should't-I-get-what everybody-else-get" theory. Tom wants his sister as Philip and Mr. Guest have her.

Tsun's case study came to the conclusion that children from incestuous relations could be in danger of developing psychological problems such as depression and low self-esteem as adults (see Tsun 72). As adults they may search for a partner that resembles their sibling in some way. Philip knew how strongly Maggie felt for Tom. In one episode Philip wants Maggie to declare her feelings for him. He asks if Maggie could ever love him as she loves her brother, and Maggie replies: "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 while he held my hand; everything before that is dark to me" (Eliot 276). Polhemus argues that this was Maggie's first memory of love: "No words could make clearer the permanent fixation on the brother. The first memory holds the subjective link between love and water, with all its protean connotations in the mother tongue of our imagination" (178). Maggie simply romanticizes the moment with Tom.

Despite the fact that Phillip is hunchback, Maggie chooses Philip and Mr. Guest because of their resemblance to Tom. Both are older than she is and both are well educated with ambitions to be someone important. They show her the love that Maggie wanted Tom to show her. But even as she gets the love she wanted for so long, she cannot give her brother, and the love of her life, up. In this quotation Maggie expresses her feelings about Philip:

Yes, Lucy— I would choose to marry him. I think it would be the best and highest lot for me— to make his life happy. He loved me first. No one else

could be quite what he is to me. But I can't divide myself from my brother for life. (Eliot 392)

For Maggie no other man can be as Tom. Her feelings for Tom spoil her relationships with potential husbands: "For Eliot Maggie's is a representative life. The early relationship is so strong that it stimulates erotic feelings, floods them with guilt, and paralyzes other relationships" (Polhemus 186). In contrast to Maggie, Tom never met a girl. It is quite surprising due to the fact that he had made himself a small fortune and was well respected after having paid off his father's debt to the Wakems. Due to his achievements he could probably have had many girls to choose from but he chose not to engage with any. This can be explained with Master's claim that celibacy could be related to the earlier incestuous relation. Tom's celibacy could of course also be explained with the fact that his ambitions to succeed in life left little time to meet a potential partner.

Probably the most controversial scene in *The Mill on the Floss* is the one where brother and sister die in an embrace:

The boat reappeared— but brother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted— living through again in one supreme moment, the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together. (Eliot 467)

This last scene has been the object of many discussions. Why did Eliot write this tragic ending instead of a happy one? What does she mean? Does she intend to confirm the sexual desire that is between brother and sister? It is argued by some that "The "supreme moment" marks the climax, and in contexts suggests the mood of orgasm" (Polhemus 189). It is as if Maggie

and Tom have waited their whole life for this moment where they would forever be together and nothing could separate them. Polhemus notes that:

This last embrace is *Liebestod* that combines the drive for sexual fulfilment with the enduring, lifelong influences of blood kinship, moral justification in eternity, and the end of the restriction of individual, separate consciousness that death promises. (189)

Polhemus further argues that Eliot in some way confirmed the incestuous craving that is in the book by ending the book with a flood that kills both brother and sister: “Eliot’s psychological makeup drew her to create a flood that would merge both moral imperative and incestuous longing” (190).

This essay has shown that there are plot features in *The Mill on the Floss* that could, by anthropologists and psychologists, be considered to be incestuous. We have relational elements like very strong love between siblings, power relations where one tries to dominate the other, the separation in young years, the difficulty with moving on as adults, the jealousy that Tom feels etc. Even if there are features that increase the risk of incest it does not mean that the book has an incestuous theme or that the fictional characters are engaged in an incestuous relation. We as readers can have opinions about the work of Eliot, but in the end it is only the author who knows what kind of relation Maggie and Tom had. I personally believe, after having read and reflecten on the life of Eliot, that *The Mill on the Floss* is her autobiography and that there is an unconscious incestuous relation between brother and sister. The many similarities between her life and the life of Maggie cannot be denied.

In particular Maggie shows her love in an extreme way. She craves for Tom’s attention her whole life. People may argue that there is nothing unusual that a girl wants her brother’s

attention, and usually I would agree. But this is not a normal case. Maggie's feelings could, according to me, be compared with someone in love.

Polhemus gives a clear picture of how we can interpret the different scenes in Eliot's book. He has his theories of what Eliot wanted to tell her readers and he establishes ground for these theories. On the other hand these theories are one man's work and should be read suspiciously and with caution. Polhemus' claim that "the supreme moment" marks an orgasm makes much sense as the whole novel gains closure and an explanation for why Maggie wanted her brother the way she did. Could it be that Eliot wanted to tell us, her readers, that everything that starts has an end point, and that "the supreme moment" was the end of this novel? Or could it be that only Polhemus draws this parallel?

One of the questions that is unanswered in the novel is why Tom never finds himself a partner. Is it because of his hectic schedule or is it because he can not find a girl like Maggie? One might think that it is a trivial question but it is a question that would explain many things had it been answered by Eliot. One may also ask oneself why Eliot did not answer that question.

The scene where Tom tries to impress his sister with the sword is one of the most important when one tries to find out if the fictional characters had incestuous feelings for each other. Why did he show her the sword? According to Polhemus it was because he wanted to impress his sister. That seems fully comprehensible. Just like any other boy in love, Tom wanted to be the big and powerful boy that girls so often are attracted to. He wanted to scare Maggie but at the same time show her that he could protect her and in that way have her for himself.

I have, while writing this essay, many times wondered if Eliot wanted her readers to consider her book a love story between siblings. I have also considered why Eliot wrote this book. Was it a way for her to tell the world about something that may have happened to her?

Was it a way for her to work through her own experience? And there are reasons to assume this was the case. Regardless the reason she may have had, the story about Maggie and Tom has fascinated people for more than a century, and it will continue to fascinate readers centuries to come.

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