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Portrayal of Tender Brother-Sister Relationship in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*

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George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) is one of the prominent women novelists of Victorian Age. While dealing with various social and moral questions of her era, she perfected the genre of psychological realism in her novels. She used novel as an instrument for enlarging human sympathies by making the readers imagine and feel the misfortunes, pains and sorrows of others. Some of her well-known works include *Adam Bede*, *Romola*, *Middlemarch*, *Daniel Deronda*, and *The Mill on the Floss*. *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), one of her most popular novels, has all the elements of a poignant tragedy. The plot of the novel centres around the variegated experiences of its protagonists, Maggie Tulliver and Tom, her brother, from their childhood upto their tragic untimely death by drowning in the river Floss's flood. The novel brings out a unique brother-sister relationship in which the sister, Maggie's love for her brother continues to remain strong even after growing up and shapes her future life. The objective of this paper is to study this tender relationship.

Mr. Edward Tulliver is the owner of Dorlcote Mill in St. Ogg's. His family consists of his wife and two children, Tom and Maggie. Maggie is a clever but impetuous child. She is very close to her brother, Tom. She understands that Tom is not good at studies. She has great regard for his practical knowledge and ability to make and mend things. As an innocent child, she has a simple vision of her future life. She says:

“When he (Tom) grows up, I shall keep his house, and we shall always live together. I can tell him everything he doesn't know.”
(*The Mill on the Floss*, p. 29)

The first few chapters of the novel truthfully bring out Tom and Maggie's bickering, their petulant moods and the poignancy of Maggie's sufferings in the face of her brother's tendency to dominate her. While Tom was away from home, he had asked Maggie to take proper care of his pet rabbits. But Maggie's forgetfulness and negligence results in their death. Maggie is quite agitated as she knows that Tom will be very angry with her. She always tries to keep him happy by behaving according to his wishes. But often she does something wrong and invites Tom's wrath. Tom thinks that she is naughty and does not easily forgive her. While he is sulking, Maggie's life becomes miserable. The thought that she had never meant to be naughty to Tom but he keeps being cruel to her troubles her. Whenever Maggie breaks into sobs and clings to him, Tom's intention to punish her breaks down and he warmly responds to her affection. Actually he is very fond of his sister though he considers her a bit silly. He intends always to take care of her.

Maggie's quarrel with Tom during their visit to Aunt Pullet at Garum Firs results in her running away from the house. Tom, Maggie and Lucy, their cousin, are building card-houses. Tom and Lucy are able to build perfect pyramids of houses but Maggie's houses fall frequently. When Tom laughs at her, she retorts that she knows many things which he doesn't. Tom declares that he likes Lucy better than her. This results in Maggie's upsetting

Tom's wonderful pagoda. So Tom starts acting very coldly towards her. He is being very friendly with Lucy though. Maggie cannot bear it any longer and, in a fit of jealousy, pushes Lucy in a cow-trodden mud pond. Maggie does not wish to return home now. She decides to run away and live with the Gypsies. It seems to her the only way to escape the painful present. She wishes that Tom should never see her again. There is a terrified search for Maggie in her absence. Her mother fears that she has drowned. She is recovered by Mr. Tulliver after a few hours.

After Tom finishes his elementary education, Mr. Tulliver sends him to Mr. Stelling, a clergyman, for additional education. Tom is miserable during his stay at Mr. Stelling's house. He misses Maggie very much and yearns to have her with him. He realises the worth of his sister's affection in her absence and is ready to overlook her naughtiness now. When Maggie visited him for a few days, it was a great solace to him. Maggie expressed her wish to study with him at Mr. Stelling's house but Mr. Tulliver's financial restraints did not allow this. During Maggie's second visit, she is introduced to Tom's fellow student, Philip Wakem, son of her father's enemy, Lawyer Wakem. Philip's being a hunchback aroused Maggie's tenderness for him. His cleverness also impressed her. When Tom injured his foot with a sword, Philip spent all his time out of study hours with Tom and Maggie. He comforted Tom by telling him stories of his liking. This endeared him to Maggie very much. Philip also started liking Maggie. Once he asked her:

“If you had a brother like me, do you think you should have loved him as well as Tom?” (*The Mill on the Floss*, p. 170).

Maggie replied:

“No, not better; because I don't think I could love you better than Tom.” (*The Mill on the Floss*, p. 170).

Maggie's reply is an indication of things to come. Her strong bond with her brother comes to affect her future behaviour. S. Rengachari comments that Maggie can only pity Philip on account of his physical deformity; but she cannot bring herself to love him whole-heartedly as she loves her brother deeply and her intense attachment to him shows that it is inconceivable for her to live without that love. (Rengachari, xix)

At the age of thirteen, Maggie is studying at a boarding school in Laceham. She is called home as Mr. Tulliver is critically ill. He has lost his lawsuit with Lawyer Wakem over the use of river Floss. Maggie sees her father in an unconscious state. She is told that he has fallen from his horse. Maggie visits Tom and informs him about the unfortunate incidents at home. Tom declares his intention of taking revenge upon Mr. Wakem. He also forbids Maggie from speaking to Philip. Mr. Tulliver has become bankrupt and the mill is to be auctioned. All the uncles and aunts gather together for a family council but offer little help. Maggie loses her cool and shouts at them. Tom is thinking of taking up a job to support the family. He reprimands Maggie for her harsh words:

“You ought not to have spoken as you did to my uncles and aunts – you should leave it to me to take care of my mother and you, and not put yourself forward.” (*The Mill on the Floss*, p. 214).

Thus Tom insists that Maggie should mind what he says and leave the family affairs to him.

Mr. Tulliver recovers from his illness. He begins to work as Mr. Wakem's manager in the mill. Both Mr. Tulliver and Tom try their best to pay off the debt as soon as possible.

Maggie finds the atmosphere at home grim. Her father has gone into a sullen incommunicative depression. Maggie got no response to her gestures of affection from Tom anymore. He was weary and abstracted in the short intervals when he was at home. He did not mind what she thought or felt. They were no longer playfellows together. Maggie's intense need of affection and the lack of it in her life led her to the path of asceticism. Bob Jakin, a childhood friend of Tom's, gave Maggie Thomas Kempis's book *The Imitation of Christ*. It influenced a spiritual awakening in her. She began to live a life of pious self-denial. She wanted to help in clearing the family debt. So she went to a linen-shop in St. Ogg's to ask for sewing work. Tom did not like this and while scolding her, he said:

"I don't like my sister to do such things. I'll take care that the debts are paid, without your lowering yourself in that way." (*The Mill on the Floss*, p. 266).

The narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* says:

"Surely there was some tenderness and bravery mingled with the worldliness and self-assertion of that little speech; but Maggie held it as dross, overlooking the grains of gold, and took Tom's rebuke as one of her outward crosses." (*The Mill on the Floss*, p. 266).

Maggie thought to herself that in spite of her great love for Tom, he was very hard on her and strove to be contented with that hardness.

Maggie is brought out of a life of deprivation and penance when she happens to meet Philip during one of her walks in the woods near the Dorlcote Mill. He expresses his earnest wish for her friendship. At first, Maggie is reluctant as she knows that her father and brother will not accept it. But Philip convinces her and they continue to meet secretly for a year. They stop meeting after Tom confronts Philip, insults him by referring to his deformity and makes Maggie swear not to meet Philip again. Philip has already confessed his love for Maggie. Regarding Maggie's love for Philip, Joan Bennett remarks:

"Philip has won Maggie's love both because, as a cripple, he commands her pity and because his keen and well-furnished mind wins her respect." (Bennett, 113)

The intellectual life that Philip offers attracts Maggie towards him. But Tom reminds her of her duty towards her father. He suggests that the shock of knowing about his daughter's clandestine meetings with his enemy's son may prove to be detrimental to Mr. Tulliver's health. Though Maggie detests Tom's insulting allusions to Philip's deformity, she bows down to his will. As her heart bleeds for Philip, she feels extremely bitter towards her brother. But soon their father dies and the brother and sister reconcile in the moment of their common grief.

Maggie starts working as a teacher in a village. At the age of nineteen, she returns to St. Ogg's to visit Lucy, her cousin. She is introduced to Stephen Guest, Lucy's handsome and rich suitor. When Maggie finds out that Philip is friends with them and is a regular visitor to Lucy's house, she requests Tom to allow her to see Philip. Tom says that he is determined to consider Lawyer Wakem as his enemy according to his father's wish. So, if Maggie thinks of Philip as her lover then he will sever all his ties with her. Maggie still feels the dread of alienation from her brother. She comforts Tom by saying that she will think of Philip only as a friend. She renews her close friendship with Philip. Philip talks to his father about his wish

to marry Maggie. Surprisingly Mr. Wakem consents to his proposal. Lucy informs Maggie about this and suggests that there is no obstacle in her union with Philip. But Maggie refuses to accept this proposal as it goes against Tom's wish. She decides to leave St. Ogg's. She wants to wait and see if Tom changes his mind. She tells Lucy:

“...I can't divide myself from my brother for life. I must go away and wait.” (*The Mill on the Floss*, p. 398).

Maggie's life takes a new turn when Stephen falls in love with her. She also becomes hopelessly attracted to him against her wish. Stephen's ceaseless attention and flattering words gratify her pride. Her innate desire to be loved makes it difficult for her to refuse Stephen though she knows that it is wrong. Stephen prevails upon her to elope with him and Maggie gives in temporarily. But soon she regains her senses and separates with Stephen. Her actions become known to St. Ogg's society and she faces social ostracism.

Maggie meets Tom and tries to explain everything. As a social outcaste, she feels that her brother is her only refuge. She repents her actions and wishes to be severely criticised by Tom. An angry and disgusted Tom tells her that she has disgraced their family name. He renounces her saying that he loathes her character and her conduct. He accuses her of being deceitful and declares that she will never come under his roof. S. Rengachari observes that Maggie proves a riddle to Tom who regards her as a volatile creature hovering over the extremes and devoid of judgement and self-command. Due to her unpredictable disposition and a hidden elemental force in her, that will explode any set opinions or preconceived theory about her, Tom never feels anything certain about her. (Rengachari, xvii)

Maggie takes lodging with Mr. and Mrs. Jakin. She begins to work as Governess for Dr. Kenn, the clergyman's children. She is forgiven by Lucy as well as Philip. She gets a chance to meet her estranged brother only when the river Floss starts flooding. Maggie realises that Tom may be in need of help and manages to reach his house in a boat facing a violent storm and the flooding river. Tom realises the great risk she has taken to save him and the brother and sister are reconciled finally only to meet a watery grave. Commenting on Maggie's death trying to save her brother, Laurence Lerner observes that Maggie's final union with Tom is the victory of love over estrangement and it is an experience of pure self-fulfilment for her. (Lerner, 167)

Love and approval of her brother was the most important thing in life for Maggie in her childhood. It did not change much even after she grew up. She was not prepared to accept Philip as her lover at the cost of losing her brother's affection. After her father's death, she had started living on her own working as a teacher. So it was not as if she required Tom's approval due to her financial dependence on him. According to R. H. Lee, Maggie's love for Tom is based upon an ineradicable sense of the past, of the sanctity of what has made her what she is; and she loves him because he is associated with all her past. (Lee, 149) Thus Maggie depends upon Tom emotionally. The thought of his not being there in her life is unbearable for her. After every rash action of hers, she returns to Tom to be reconciled to him. She is conscious of Tom's unjust and unreasonable behaviour at times. She is angry and bitter towards him. The need for Tom's affection, however, overpowers all these feelings. When Floss starts flooding, all Maggie's thoughts are about Tom's safety. She does not think about the danger to her own life even for a single moment. When Tom realises the great peril through which she has passed to rescue him, all he can do is address her as 'Magsie', his childhood term of endearment for her. Her supreme self-sacrifice convinces him of her deep attachment to him. Unfortunately, both of them drown in the river.

George Eliot has presented a tender brother-sister relationship in all its complexity realistically in *The Mill on the Floss*. Through her great sacrifice, Maggie is able to atone for her mistake of eloping with Stephen and disgracing her family name. Tom, however, does not get a chance to make up for his harshness towards Maggie during the most troubled period in her life.

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